

An Atheist Chaplain and a Death Row Inmate's Final Hours

Devin Moss spent a year ministering to convicted killer Phillip Hancock. Together, they wrestled with one question: How to face death without God.

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“God, that chicken.” Devin Moss has a voice that rumbles, low and slow like distant thunder, but this morning it was softer, more contemplative. His hands gripped the steering wheel of his rental car. He was dressed head to toe in white linen, his body glowing in an almost celestial way, as he drove toward the Oklahoma State Penitentiary.

Moss, a chaplain, had spent the year working as the spiritual adviser to Phillip Hancock, a death row inmate in Oklahoma. The morning of the November execution had arrived. The prison had brought Hancock the wrong last meal the night before, white meat from Kentucky Fried Chicken instead of dark.

“That chicken, I know,” echoed Sue Hosch, an anti-death penalty activist seated in the passenger seat beside Moss. “I couldn’t believe it.”

Hancock, convicted of two murders he committed in 2001, was scheduled to be executed at 10 a.m. With three hours to go, his lawyers were still hoping that Oklahoma’s governor would grant him clemency, as the state parole board had voted to recommend three weeks earlier.

State lawyers and family members of the victims had continued to push for Hancock’s execution. State officials had reminded the parole board that one of the victims was only 38 when he died, and was of “great assistance” to his parents. The death of the other victim, they said, deeply affected his younger brother, who could not sleep after the loss.

Moss was driving to the prison to be with Hancock. After more than a hundred conversations, their relationship — death row inmate and the man charged with caring for his soul — had come down to this morning.

Moss thought of the outrage Hancock had shared with him. “The good Christians are going to strap me to a crucifix and put a nail in my vein?” Hancock had asked. “Do they really think that their God approves of them?”

Moss also thought of Hancock’s alternately plaintive, sometimes witty quips. When Moss asked, “How are you?” Hancock answered, “I’m still here.”

The gray Oklahoma skies opened into a drizzle. Moss wondered what he had to offer Hancock in these final hours, when ordinary wisdom seemed to fail and prayers, in this case, were irrelevant. Heaven, hell, salvation: He had talked about it all with Hancock, but neither of them really believed in anything but people. What humans were capable of doing, for themselves and to one another. Both men were atheists.

Devin Moss, like Hancock, grew up a Christian but later rejected belief in God. Moss became an atheist and a chaplain, and counseled Hancock as he faced execution.

There is an adage that says there are no atheists in foxholes — even skeptics will pray when facing death. But Hancock, in the time leading up to his execution, only became more insistent about his nonbelief. He and his chaplain were both confident that there was no God who might grant last-minute salvation, if only they produced a desperate prayer. They had only one another.

The two spoke at least once a week, and sometimes multiple times a day. Mostly, they talked over the phone, and provided recordings of these conversations to The Times. Sometimes it was in person, in the prison's fluorescently lit visitor room, over bags of Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

During their visit the day before his execution, Hancock had seemed mostly fixated on his final meal, that one bucket of dark meat chicken.

Moss stopped his car in front of the three-story building on the prison grounds where he would spend the next hours waiting. He got out and stood still for a moment. He considered the possibility that Hancock had hope for survival, not through divine intervention but through the state's Gov. Kevin Stitt — who two years ago said he claimed “every square inch” of Oklahoma for Jesus Christ — could still grant clemency. He had just under three hours.

But if the hour of death came to pass, what would the chaplain do? Moss felt viscerally the absence of any higher power on the prison compound that morning.

“It's well known that people that really believe, that really have faith, die better,” he said. “How can we help people die better that don't have supernatural faith?”

The opposite path

In prison, they have a name for people who find God after they are locked up: “Jailhouse Jesus.” History is rife with examples including, famously, Malcolm X, who found faith in prison and left to be a minister of the Nation of Islam.

[Scholars who examine the phenomenon](#) find that in prison, faith can be a comfort. People are searching for a new identity beyond “criminal,” a sense of empowerment, the vocabulary to ask for forgiveness and the feeling of control over their future. Religion answers all these calls: The new identity is that of a convert. The power is in being an agent of God. The route to forgiveness runs through belief, or proselytizing. And past sins become just steps on the path to God.

Hancock, 59, had the opposite path. He had entered prison as a Christian, with an appetite for reading, learning and debate that he shared with many imprisoned believers. Along the way, he became an atheist.

As a child, in Oklahoma City, he went with his parents to a Methodist Church. He and his friends often left services and went to a nearby car salvage lot to smoke weed and cigarettes. In the summer, Hancock went to a Baptist Bible school, where he recalled being judged for his family's freewheeling religious practices.

“They'd inform me why all the Methodists were going to burn in hell, because we smoke, we drink, we dance, we're impious and profane and we lie, cheat, steal,” Hancock said in an interview with The Times. “We're just all abominate.”

Hancock frequently felt his faith was being tested. When he was a child, according to his own memories and those of his mother, the two of them fled home to escape Hancock's father, now dead, who they said was physically abusive.

Hancock's younger brother, David Craig, was born with his umbilical cord wrapped around his neck, leaving him with cerebral palsy. Hancock cared for his little brother and recalled getting into fights when older boys taunted him. Sometimes, Hancock said he looked at the crucifix in his bedroom and wondered if his faith was misplaced.

Image

Hancock as a young child, holding his younger brother, David Craig.

Still, in 2001, Hancock called himself a Christian. He wasn't devout, but he was a believer.

One night in late April of that year, according to case documents, Hancock went to the home of Robert Lee Jett Jr. Jett had been supplying drugs to Hancock's then girlfriend, who was staying with Jett while she and Hancock were fighting over her drug use.

Hancock and Jett got into an argument, along with Jett's friend, James Vincent Lynch. During the dispute, Hancock wrested away Jett's pistol. He then shot and killed both men. After killing them, Hancock evaded capture for a year, until he was booked into the county jail on an unrelated charge.

At the time of the killings, Hancock attributed his survival to God.

"This is something that my stepdad used to tell me — he used to say, 'God knows what you need before you need it,'" Hancock said during a phone call in May with Moss. "I walked out of the house thinking God had intervened on my behalf to deliver me from the hands of violent men."

During Hancock's trial, prosecutors argued that he did not commit the murders in self-defense. Hancock fired multiple shots, at a distance from the two men. Hancock had also been convicted of manslaughter in 1982, when he shot an acquaintance in a dispute. In that case, he also claimed the shooting was in self-defense and served just under three years in prison.

In 2004, an Oklahoma jury found Hancock guilty of two counts of first degree murder and sentenced him to death.

Hancock entered Oklahoma State Penitentiary, or Big Mac, as it is known. The maximum security prison is set on 1,556 acres in McAlester, with more than 800 people housed in a sprawling white structure surrounded by fences topped by double strands of razor wire. It serves as a backdrop to the opening pages of "The Grapes of Wrath," and it is where some 206 people have been executed since 1915.

In prison, Hancock started to receive visits from missionaries, a common occurrence. He met proselytizers who told him they had personally raised people from the dead, or witnessed mass graves come back to life, which Hancock called "hooey and hokum."

He started to view these proselytizing visitors as insurance agents, selling insurance not for life but for the afterlife. "We've got a special this month on afterlife insurance," Hancock liked to joke.

Hancock began reading ravenously so that he could debate the missionaries. He read the Bible, often quoting stories that depict God as violent, like that of the vengeance on the Midianites. He read "Bible Myths and Their

Parallels in Other Religions,” which debunks biblical stories. He particularly enjoyed “A Manual for Creating Atheists,” by the philosopher Peter Boghossian.

Image

Hancock in 2011. He was convicted of killing two men. The parole board voted to spare his life. The governor did not agree. Credit...Oklahoma Department of Corrections

Over his early years in prison, Hancock had come to feel abandoned by God.

Then, in 2007, a court denied the appeal of his death sentence. Hancock had a revelation: “I decided, it makes more sense to me to hate a God that does not exist than to be slave to one,” he said. “The weight of the world came off of me. Because I wasn’t concerned about this maniacal, narcissistic, omnicidal psychopath.”

He began to embrace the thrill of cross-examining visiting missionaries. “I force them through gentle persuasion, through the Socratic method, to make them question for themselves why they believe what they think that they believe,” he said.

He said he took care, though, to argue with empathy. He did not want to destroy what he called a “delusion” that these missionaries might need on their own deathbeds.

But for Hancock, coming to identify as an atheist brought a difficult question: What could sustain him day by day — through rage and grief and fear of his looming execution — without faith in a power mightier than the people who had decided to end his life?

Memento Mori

The chaplain, Moss, 48, grew up in Hailey, Idaho, and jokes that he was born with an existential crisis: Instead of coming out of the womb saying “wah,” he came out saying “why?”

His parents tried to raise him to be devout. He went to a private Christian school, part of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God. At school, in the 1980s, Moss and his classmates participated in rapture drills, akin to earthquake or fire drills. A teacher blew a whistle, one child ran to get a drum kit and another got a recorder, and then the class played worship songs.

Constantly curious, Moss started asking thorny questions about biblical tales like the story of Jonah and the whale. “Wait, so he lived in the belly of the whale?” Moss asked. “I don’t know if that’s possible? And for how many days?”

Adrift after high school, Moss joined the Marines. During boot camp, he took Catholic confirmation classes because they gave him an excuse to get away from his drill sergeants.

Later, in a film degree program at the University of Texas at Austin, he wrote scripts about existentialism. He studied Friedrich Nietzsche, Baruch Spinoza, Joseph Campbell and Buddhist philosophers. He realized the existentialists made more sense to him than the Christian teachings of his youth. And he eventually concluded that he did not believe in God, though he still sought a sense of spiritual purpose.

He decided to make a podcast about spirituality and death called “The Adventures of Memento Mori,” referring to the Latin phrase: [“Remember you must die.”](#) During a podcast interview, a Buddhist chaplain, the Rev. Trudi Jinpu Hirsch-Abramson, told Moss: “You’d make a good chaplain.”

The remark stuck with him. He learned that there was a theological seminary in Chicago launching a new program for humanists. Moss enrolled at the Meadville Lombard Theological School in 2019, taking classes on ethics, Buddhism and creating inclusive communities. He did a residency as a chaplain at Bellevue Hospital in New York during the pandemic and graduated in June 2022.

He did not know what kind of job a freshly graduated atheist chaplain could land. But the opportunity arrived quickly when the American Humanist Association heard from a team of lawyers whose client on death row in Oklahoma wanted a chaplain who did not believe in God.

“Hello sir. How are you doing?” Moss wrote in a letter to Hancock in early 2023. “It would be an honor to be by your side in spiritual support for these next months — be it a prayer, meditation, an existential ponder, a cry and even a joke. I want you to know that you are not alone.”

Moss included his phone number in the letter so that Hancock could reach him. The calls were recorded, as a robotic voice announced at the beginning, and capped at 20 minutes.

During one of their first calls together, last February, Hancock explained to his new spiritual adviser the conundrum that he faced: “I want more than anything to believe in something other than this,” Hancock said. “I just can’t do it though, lacking evidence.”

‘Show me something real’

It was clear to Moss that his spiritual care client was seething with frustration at his sentence.

“I tend to get adrenaline rushes when I think about this because I’m so angry,” Hancock told Moss in February 2023. “They’ve stolen my life from me.”

Hancock shared with his chaplain some of the poems and songs he turned to for comfort, like the poem “If” by Rudyard Kipling (“If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs and blaming it on you”) and a song by Slipknot that includes the line, “Everybody has to die.”

“Everybody does die,” Moss agreed. “But you’re different in the sense that there’s a day on the calendar.”

Hancock was adamant about the way he wanted to face his death. “If it comes down to it, I’m maintaining my dignity,” he said. “I’ll make them ashamed to be scared when it’s their turn to die. They’ll say, ‘We’ve got to hold our heads high, like Hancock.’”

Hancock had one request of his spiritual adviser. It was drawn from a set of Bible verses, Philippians 4:7-8.

“Show me something real,” he said to Moss. “Tell me something true.”

As Hancock shared stories from his childhood, Moss tried to get a sense of his character. “Were you the class clown growing up at all?” he once asked.

“I’m reluctant to sit here and say what I am or how I am,” Hancock replied. “Because usually when people tell you that they’re a certain way, a lot of times they’re not.”

Image

Crosses are painted red at Clark Memorial United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City after the execution of death row inmates.

Sometimes they discussed philosophy; Hancock liked to quote Plato, Pyrrho and Buddhist thinkers. (“Everything’s ‘maybe’ with the Buddhists; it seems like it all boils down to ‘maybe,’” Hancock said, to which Moss replied: “It’s a wise maybe.”) They explored biblical stories — Noah’s flood, Cain and Abel, Samson and Delilah.

“What’s interesting, Phil, is how much the Bible and Christianity and the Old Testament influences you,” Moss said.

“That stuff is ancient wisdom that was commandeered by people with less than innocent intent,” Hancock replied.

From time to time, Moss wondered aloud what exactly Hancock was seeking in these meandering discussions: “Why did you feel it was necessary to get a spiritual care adviser for this part of your life?”

Hancock explained that his initial motive was simple. Because of a [Supreme Court ruling](#) in 2022, which said [death row inmates had the right to be with their spiritual advisers during the execution](#), Moss would be able to be in the execution chamber.

Hancock wanted someone by his side to ensure nothing went awry. He talked worriedly about [Oklahoma’s 2014 botched execution of Clayton Lockett](#), who after his injections began to writhe, declaring that his body felt like it was “on fire.” He had a heart attack in the execution chamber.

Hancock said he liked the idea of having Moss next to him at the end. “You’re a wonderful person, as far as I can tell,” he said. “I mean, you’re absolutely charming. I like you man. You’re a nice person. I think you’re sincere.”

When their phone conversations drifted into retracing Hancock’s legal case, Moss tried to push them back into the realm of the spiritual. “I want to see if there are opportunities and areas that you find peace or joy or some sort of light,” Moss said. “Is there anything?”

Hancock explained that he found a sense of purpose in his battle for clemency, for survival. “I’m not done yet, like I said — I love life,” he said. “I’m going to fight to the bitter end of this.”

“It’s exactly what Virgil said to Dante,” Hancock said. “In order to get out of this, you have to go through it.”

Moss began visiting in person starting in July. The two sat together, with Hancock’s friend Hosch, the anti-death penalty activist, for four hours in the visitation room, surrounded by other inmates spending time with their wives and children.

Moss felt like he had spent months swimming in Hancock’s pain and anger, but sitting opposite one another was different — taking in Hancock’s skinny frame, draped in a maroon prison jumpsuit, his head covered in scars and his nose that had been broken in several places. Their laughter felt more genuine when they were just inches apart.

Hancock was touched that Moss had flown from Brooklyn to McAlester to see him. Hancock explained that after their first visit, wondering how he appeared in person to his chaplain, he had been thinking about a lyric from the Butthole Surfers: “You never know just how you look through other people’s eyes.”

Moss stopped feeling so anxious about what he was offering Hancock. He listened, as Hancock ate vending machine cheeseburgers and drank cans of Mountain Dew. It became clear to Moss that Hancock did not believe

in God, but he did believe in what people can do for each other. He seemed to believe, in particular, in the relationship he was building with Moss.

In August, Moss decided that he would sublet his Brooklyn apartment and move to Oklahoma for the month leading up to the execution so that he could visit the prison more easily. The time they spent together in person felt more human — the eye contact, the stretches of time uninhibited by the 20-minute phone limit.

“Hey Devin, man, you’re blowing me away,” Hancock said when he heard about the chaplain’s plans. “You’re showing me something I haven’t seen from — I don’t recall anybody really coming through like this.”

They kept revisiting the legal case, too, because Hancock and his lawyers were busy preparing for a clemency hearing when they would ask the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board to consider new evidence that Hancock had acted in self-defense. They presented testimony from Hancock’s ex-girlfriend that she had asked Jett to “take care of” Hancock.

The state argued he still deserved the death penalty. “Hancock is before you now, over two decades on from the double murder of Jett and Lynch, still asserting his legal innocence, still claiming he acted in self-defense,” the office of the attorney general wrote to the board. “But the evidence doesn’t back that up.”

State officials said that Hancock’s actions during and after the murders conflicted with his claim that he acted in self-defense and feared for his life. They noted that he “calmly drove away from the scene” and did not go to a doctor or call the police.

“The losses of Robert Jett Jr., and James Lynch were a tragic setback to both their families,” lawyers for the state said.

Still, the board voted, 3-2, to recommend clemency. Gov. Stitt would make the final decision, and he had up until the scheduled hour of the execution to respond.

Moss worried that recordings of his phone conversations with Hancock might influence the ultimate decision; all the tape could be available to the governor, who attends an Assemblies of God church (the same denomination that Moss was raised in). Moss voiced his concern to Hancock, but both felt they did not want fear to confine their discussions.

Moss sometimes posed deeper, cerebral questions, the sort he had initially envisioned that he would explore as a chaplain, like where humans should find their moral compass.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” Hancock said in a mid-November phone call, explaining his view of ethics with a biblical passage. “That’s it in a nutshell. That’s it. You don’t have to have all these other things, you don’t have to believe in certain things — that God has been and always will be.”

“What do you think happens when a person dies?” Moss asked another time.

Hancock assured his chaplain he found morsels of comfort in his nonbelief. “Nonexistence didn’t bother me before I existed,” he said. “I don’t think it’s going to bother me after I’m dead.”

The final visit

The execution was set for Nov. 30 at 10 a.m.

The night before, Moss ironed his white pants and white shirt. If the execution went forward — and it still was not clear that it would — he wanted to look like a spiritual authority while standing at Hancock’s side. He wanted Hancock to understand he had a buddy with him, but that it was also a person who had a deeper role to play, someone who had touched his soul.

That morning, Moss wrote out in a notebook what he planned to say to Hancock in their final minutes together. Hancock, no longer able to make phone calls, was in his cell listening to music from the heavy metal band Slayer, one of his favorites.

Moss arrived at the prison at 7:35 and entered the room where he would wait for a decision from the governor. The minutes moved in a torturous crawl. Soon it was 8:30, then it was 9 a.m. The lawyers and prison staff were waiting together, some making small talk about the rain.

Around 10:10, an aide for the governor called. The execution was to move forward, quickly. Over on death row, the inmates gave Hancock a send-off — kicking their doors and filling the prison with the rumbling sound of a makeshift goodbye.

Because of the delay, Moss had to cut short his final minutes with Hancock. He had been told that they would be together for 20 minutes, but instead they got only about 10. “Phil’s been shorted again,” he thought, remembering the fried chicken.

Moss was shuttled to H-unit, where the execution chamber was located. He entered the sparse room where Hancock lay strapped to a gurney, wearing a gray shirt and with a white sheet covering the lower half of his body. Moss was struck by how tiny the space was, and the tightness of the straps slung over the gurney.

He rested a hand on Hancock’s knee and recited the words that he had written in his notebook: “We call the spirit of humanity into this space,” Moss said. “Let love fill our hearts. We ask that in this transition into peaceful oblivion that Phil feels that love, and although this is his journey that he is not alone. We invoke the power of peace, strength, grace and surrender. Amen.”

Image

The notebook Moss brought to the execution chamber. He struggled to write his final words to Hancock.

He thanked Hancock for the knowledge he had shared — the expansive vocabulary, the expertise on scripture and religion and, of course, the endless jokes, of which about seven out of 10 had landed. “Seven?” Hancock interrupted, tilting his head up. “Out of 10?”

“Man,” said the prison’s chief of operations, who was standing nearby with another corrections officer. “That’s a pretty good percentage.”

Moss turned to his final words for Hancock. “In the beginning of this, when I asked what you really wanted out of a spiritual care adviser, it was Philippians chapter 4,” he said. “Show me something real, show me something true.”

Moss looked at the face he had come to know well. “What is real is that you are loved,” he told his friend. “What is true is you are not alone.”

The curtain in front of Hancock’s gurney rose at 11:13, revealing the witnesses — Hosch, two of Hancock’s lawyers, the state’s attorney general and an official from his office, as well as five members of the media, who provided a detailed account of the execution.

Hancock said, jokingly: “Where my enemies at?”

To Moss, his voice was the same as always, buzzing with energy. It was time for his final words. He thanked his legal team and told the attorney general, who was seated in the front row with his legs crossed, that he had been “hoodwinked.” He told his witnesses that he had acted in self-defense, and still hoped to be exonerated after his death.

“I don’t want anyone out there crying for me,” he added, addressing Hosch: “You, Sue — I don’t want you doing that.”

At 11:15, Hancock was given a three-drug lethal injection: midazolam for sedation, vecuronium bromide to halt respiration and potassium chloride, which stops the heart. As his eyes closed and his chest rose and fell, liquid moving through the I.V., Moss stood at his feet, hoping his friend could hear him. “You are loved,” Moss said over and over. “You are not alone.”

At 11:23, Hancock was unconscious. When his chest stopped moving and his face appeared to lose color, the prison doctor called his name, listened to his heart, opened both his eyes and inspected them under a light. At 11:29, Hancock was pronounced dead.

Image

After the execution, Moss and Hosch wrote letters to Hancock and threw them in a fire in place of a funeral, which was not held.

After death

Even after all the words they had exchanged, about existence and mortality and human cruelty, Moss hadn’t been prepared for the finality of this moment. The conversation between the two had seemed, sometimes, as though it would never end; there were no conclusions, only more threads to unspool.

Looking at Hancock’s body, Moss surprised himself by murmuring a spontaneous prayer, which came out involuntarily, like a sneeze. He prayed that whatever came next for Hancock, that he would be dealt a better set of cards.

The families of the victims, Jett and Lynch, spoke in the prison’s media room right afterward. “I am grateful that justice has been served according to God’s will,” said Lynch’s niece, reading a message from her mother. “I can only hope that he chose to get his soul right with God before his window of opportunity closed for eternity.”

Outside the execution chamber, the drizzle had turned into sheets of rain. Moss sat in his car and began to cry.

In his hand was the paper where he had written down his final message to Hancock. There were the instructions he had written to himself: “Call the spirit of humanity into this space.” And there was a sentence fragment he’d crossed out, following the word spirit: “Of the divine.”

Moss had gone back and forth on how to approach those last moments. He knew he wanted his final words to his friend to honor what both of them believed to be true, as he said driving away from the prison: “God has nothing to do with this.”