

Self-Examination in the Deep End of the Jury Pool

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April 8, 2015

On April 13, 2013, a pressure-cooker bomb at the finish line of the Boston Marathon killed three and left hundreds injured. The city spent the next few days in a state of paralysis as suspected bombers Tamerlan Tsarnaev and his younger brother Dzhokhar Tsarnaev fled police and engaged in a bloody shootout resulting in the death of Tamerlan and capture of Dzhokhar. I remember watching these events in horror; I remember being at work when the explosion happened and telling a coworker to look at the news. We all had friends, family, and colleagues present at the marathon, and there was an immediate and intense sense of panic as I tried to compose myself and contact people I knew to make sure they were safe. I never expected that a year and a half later, I would receive a federal jury summons calling me to service in a case that would end up being the trial of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

It was November 2014 when I received my summons, asking me to report to the John Joseph Moakley Courthouse in Boston. My date was set for January 6, 2015, and, of course, I had no idea what case I was being summoned for. I went about my daily business as usual not thinking much of it; I've been called for jury service several times and was used to the routine. As the date got closer, friends would joke, "I bet you're on the bombing case," and when the first hints of the jury selection schedule began to come out, it finally hit me that it might actually be so.

The day came and I reported to the courthouse for 8 AM. I turned in my cellphone, moved through the metal detectors, and filed my way upstairs along with a growing throng of people, impressed by the efficiency of the staff. A few news crews had been parked outside of the building when I arrived, and once I saw the size of the room I was sent to I knew this was it. Over two hundred potential jurors took their seats while members of the media sat on the other side of a glass wall, chewing on every detail of this human aquarium. Soon, a court clerk would enter and tell us that yes, this was the jury pool for the Tsarnaev case, and that we would be filling out an extensive questionnaire to help narrow down the potential candidates.

We were introduced to Judge George A. O'Toole Jr., who entered the room followed by both the prosecution and the defense teams with Tsarnaev himself in tow. There was a palpable air of discomfort in the room as Tsarnaev silently took his seat at the front of the room. My own thoughts jumped rapidly: This is real, and this is serious. This case won't be over quickly. If I'm chosen, it would be an honor. If I'm chosen, it would be a burden. How will people I know react when it's all over and I tell them about it? How will people I don't know react if I write about it publicly?

As I sat and thought, I watched Tsarnaev. I assumed he was guilty, and felt the fear of that week nearly two years ago rush back, but I didn't see a monster. I saw a small figure that looked to me more like a child who either didn't care or didn't understand the gravity of what brought him to this point. He looked disconnected and unremorseful. I felt a personal sense of sadness for a world that could produce this kind of man and I half wished he'd looked either downtrodden

or proud; either way would have made it more comfortable, more human. Let him be a villain or let him be remorseful. Instead, his blankness was a bucket of cold, nihilistic water, a reminder of the meaningless and empty acts of violence that permeate our society.

Judge O'Toole gave a brief and formal speech before he, the attorneys, and Tsarnaev departed. We were handed our hundred-question questionnaires to fill out over the next couple of hours, and as I wrote my answers I reflected on my own self and character as the shade of discomfort sat stagnant in the air.

The questionnaire ranged from standard issue prompts to much more personal questions. What's your name? Date of birth? Do you know anyone on this witness list? Describe any history of crime in your family. Talk about your relationship with your siblings, if you have any. Talk about your religion. What news sources do you use? How do you feel about the death penalty? There were even a few that genuinely surprised me, such as one that asked whether I felt we were letting too many immigrants into the country.

The questions posed were sometimes invasive, yet understandable. As I answered them, I felt as if I was on trial for my own character. We were told that the only possible sentences if a guilty verdict was found would be life in prison or death, and that this decision would be made by the jury, not the judge. Learning this felt like an enormous weight, as I asked myself, "Can I do this? Can I play God in this man's life?"

The questions about siblings made it clear to me that Tsarnaev's defense would argue that, although clearly involved, it was his older brother's influence and manipulation that led to Dzhokhar's role in the bombing. I wrote that I have one brother, eight years older, and the ways in which he influenced my life. I learned to love a great deal of movies and music through him. I learned compassion as we both helped take care of my ailing grandmother. I described negative influences as well; my parents and brother would argue often and loudly in his teenage years, and it shook me up enough that I felt the best way to get through life was to outright avoid any conflict with my family. It left me distant, and it's something I'm still dealing with today, in spite of my love for them.

I discussed my religious upbringing and its influence in my life. I was raised Catholic, but no longer go to church. I find a great deal of value in the stories of Jesus, as I do with any number of other philosophical figures. As I grew up, I found less and less value in the idea of church as an organized practice, but more value in the idea of universal love and compassion, even for one's enemies. I sometimes fail, as do we all, and I wish I didn't feel the anger I sometimes do when I feel personally slighted or attacked. I wish I didn't get frustrated when people say something massively tasteless and wish both could discuss issues rationally and calmly. I spent a long time on these questions as I asked myself what I truly felt and valued, and I concluded by stating that a lack of love and understanding is a root cause of suffering in this world. I didn't know how the court would judge that.

I answered that I was opposed to the death penalty and that I would have an extremely hard time ever voting for it as a punishment. I answered in favor of life imprisonment as a potential punishment. I knew that stating this honest fact would have a few consequences: By favoring imprisonment, I would be less likely to be chosen for the jury. By voicing this opinion in such an emotionally resonant case, I would alienate friends and family. I'm certain that some reading this now are unhappy to see it. In spite of capital punishment being found unconstitutional in Massachusetts in 1984, there's been an audible call for blood from plenty of people I wouldn't otherwise expect it from. We all want justice, but all I wanted was for Tsarnaev, if found guilty, to be kept far away from anyone he could hurt again, and for all facts of the case to be stated plainly and truthfully. I'd rather see my city heal than kill.

I won't tell anyone they're wrong or immoral for this reaction. It saddens (and, when stated most extremely, horrifies) me but part of compassion is being able to sympathise with the emotional state of even people we disagree with vehemently. I hope for the same respect.

Though the process lasted only a couple of hours and I was out by noon, I felt completely exhausted by it. It was emotionally trying, both my own self-reflection and the time spent in the presence of Tsarnaev, and I knew it would be extremely hard to keep all of this to myself. I kept a brief and private journal of my thoughts so that I could later write this.

I was allowed to tell my family and coworkers that yes, I was a potential candidate for the Tsarnaev trial, and that if chosen, the trial could potentially last a few months. I spent a lot of time asking myself how I could provide for my home and family if I were taken out of work to spend weeks driving into Boston for less than minimum wage, worrying for weeks on end about how I'd make it all work out. At the same time, I was hopeful, for I felt I would be doing a great honor if chosen, and would remain impartial and open-minded to any argument even as the idea of the death penalty morally repulsed me.

A week later, I would call the court and receive an automated message letting me know that no decisions had been made and that I was to call back in another week. This would become routine, and continue for over a month. At first, the calls were a source of stress; by the end, they were just a normal part of my weekly life. In this time, I didn't follow any news, either regarding the trial or the world at large. I like to stay up to date on current events, so this was hard, yet surprisingly liberating after the first few days. I felt isolated, but at the same time, it was refreshing to not have to witness the impotent sniping of the American political machine or the constant reverent mourning and celebration of the misery of civilization that the 24 hour news cycle feeds on. I only read about the weather, and with record snowfall and all the trouble that came with it, that was more than enough.

Finally, after weeks of calling, I received a new message: I was to report to the courthouse Friday, February 13th, where I would meet with Judge O'Toole to decide my fate. The mixture of honor and sick anxiety that I felt the first time I stepped into the jury pool returned after weeks of mundane waiting. This was a week in which snow had crippled the area, an ice dam caused water to leak through my walls, and I was woken up from a deep sleep two nights in a row by a

malfunctioning smoke alarm. Finding out that I'd spend Friday the 13th at the courthouse was a funny way for this kind of week to end.

At 5 AM on the 13th, I started getting myself together for a drive into Boston, a city still packed with snow. On arrival, I go to the same room as last time, but with a much smaller crowd of only 20 potential jurors, including myself. Due to public transportation being wrecked by the weather, people scheduled to arrive at 8 AM show up as late as 9:30, but the court staff was very understanding; I'm sure it was rough on them too. It's less tense this time, as people joke about the drive and collectively groan about how they weren't notified until the night before that they'd be attending today.

After a quick talk, we were escorted into a smaller room where we waited to talk to the judge one on one. The trip to the second waiting room took us up an elevator and through a series of twisting, samey hallways for what feels like a very long time. While walking this labyrinth, I began going over everything I wrote on the questionnaire, wondering if I'll be asked to explain my answers further. I feel, again, that I'm participating in a judgment of my soul and character that is unlike anything I commonly feel. I took my seat in purgatory and waited.

The final waiting room is smaller and more comfortable, and while there isn't enough room at the long, dark table for all of us, there are at least enough nice chairs to go around. Coffee and water are available; it would be a perfect table for a long stretch of donuts.

We're called individually by the court clerk to leave the room and visit the judge. The candidate next to me was fidgeting nervously while others made light of the situation. I'm called in after about half of the group has already gone.

In the hallway, I'm alone with a court staffer who explained to me that I won't be meeting with the judge today. Confused and frustrated, and asked if I'm dismissed from service. I'm told that nothing's certain yet, and I left the building escorted by another staffer. After hours of hyped up anxiety, I'm back on the road home.

After this day, I felt certain that I won't be chosen, and mostly put it from my mind while still avoiding the news and any discussion of the case. I was ordered to call back on Wednesday the 18th, and when I did, I got a recording that completely caught me off guard: "You are a potential juror before the honorable Judge O'Toole." I'm asked to call back later. Until now, every message had been noncommittal and without mention of the judge or my standing. Yes, of course I was a potential juror. We all were. But hearing the shift from the usual "you are ordered to call back next Tuesday" to this one about potential is enough to catch my attention. Did I somehow make it through to the next phase without meeting the judge, or is the whole proceeding delayed further?

I settled into ritual once again, calling back regularly, until Wednesday, March 4th. On this day, the Tsarnaev trial begins, and I am officially dismissed.

As I write this, it's now April 8th, a little over a month since the trial began, and deliberations are complete. The few of us who made it all the way to the end of this long selection process have found Dzhokar Tsarnaev guilty on all counts, with his fate to be decided soon. Given his defense's admission that Tsarnaev was involved, the visual evidence shown, and a note from Tsarnaev himself, the result is unsurprising and justice is done. I'm shocked that it's over so quickly, as we were told in the jury pool that the trial could last up to four months. Part of me expected it to be even longer, in spite of the evidence. I'm impressed that it wrapped up so quickly.

As the jury debates Tsarnaev's final fate, I felt now was the proper time for me to air my experiences as a potential juror in this trial. For all the worry it brought me, it was a worthwhile experience that taught me both about the selection process in high profile federal cases and about myself. I don't often take time to sit down and think about myself this way; while I absolutely love deep analysis of fiction, I don't ever really analyze myself. I'm disheartened by the amount of bloodlust I've seen regarding a potential execution, but we all deal with tragedy in our own ways, and I hope that whatever happens, we can move on and heal with dignity.