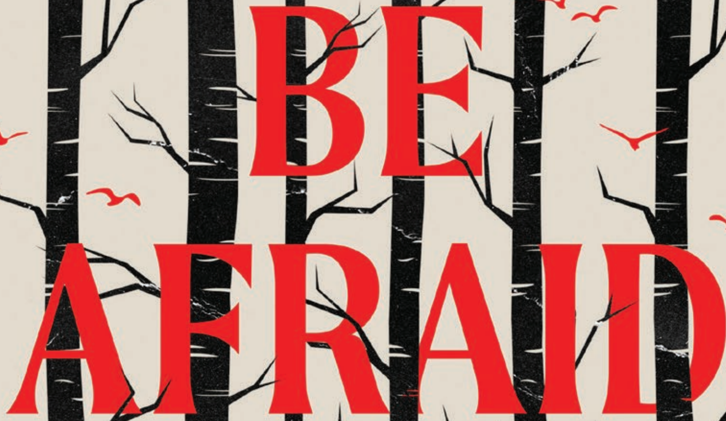
DISCOVERING GOD IN POP CULTURE

BE AFRAID



What Horror Reveals About Facing the Darkness

KUTTER CALLAWAY

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1

FEARING RIGHTLY

WHAT'S THE EARLIEST MEMORY you have of being afraid? I don't mean startled, like when someone jumps out and yells "boo" and you scream, then laugh. I mean truly afraid. That bone-deep, breath-stealing, body-paralyzing kind of fear that keeps you awake at night, eyes wide open, scanning every shadow for something lurking.

I remember that moment for me. The year was 1987. I was eight years old, spending the summer at my grandparents' house in Snyder, Texas. I didn't know it at the time, but *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* had been filmed not far from there, in a location that looked eerily like my Meme and Pappy's tiny West Texas town. It wasn't just the geography that was unsettling—the wide-open nothingness stretching in all directions, the kind of place where no one would hear you scream. It was the heat. The relentless, suffocating, sweat-slick heat. It clung to your skin like guilt. Even the air felt haunted. Add a few rattlesnakes, a scorpion or two, and maybe the Grady twins from *The Shining*, and you get the general vibe.

The only real refuge from all that evil—natural and supernatural—was indoors, parked in front of the TV, with a window-unit A/C rattling like it might break free from the wall at any moment. And there I was, wide-eyed and innocent, somehow convincing my grandparents to let me stay up late and watch that week's made-for-TV horror movie. The feature was "inspired by a true story," which is always code for "This will mess you up for life." The premise was simple, terrifying, and, for an eight-year-old, entirely plausible: A dirty, dented Dodge Charger pulls up to a group of unsuspecting kids. The passenger door

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swings open. An arm reaches out, snatches a child, and then slams the door shut. The car peels off into the dusty distance. The child is never seen again.

In my imagination, the kidnapped kids were all taken to the same place—a basement under some perfectly ordinary house smack in the middle of town. The kind of house no one would suspect. Picture the basement from *The Black Phone*, or better yet, the cellar from *The Evil Dead*. I actually don't know how the movie ends because I didn't make it past the first abduction. I was done. I turned off the TV, but I couldn't turn off the fear. I struggled to sleep for weeks.

To this day, I still get a chill when I'm alone on a quiet street. And don't even talk to me about dark, unfinished basements. That trip to my grandparents was supposed to be just another easygoing summer. Instead it became the moment I first encountered real, soul-shaping fear. And I haven't been the same since.

Fear: An Origin Story

Everybody's story is different. Yours might not involve a dark basement and a Dodge Charger. Maybe your particular fear has something to do with evil clowns. Or masked killers. Or demonic possession. But one thing unites all of us: Our fears have an origin.

Somewhere along the way—whether in a movie theater, a moment of personal crisis, or late at night under the covers—we learned what it means to be afraid. And if horror films truly tap into our deepest anxieties, then understanding them requires us to reflect on those origin stories, those first terrifying moments when we came to realize the world was not as safe as we had once believed. For me, that moment was at my grandparents' house in Snyder, Texas. For others, it's something else entirely.

Take my Brehm Film codirector, Elijah Davidson. When he was just three or four years old, his parents let him watch *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. They didn't think twice about it—until the ark of the covenant opened and the Nazis' faces began to melt. Elijah says he buried his

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head into the couch cushions, trying to escape the scene but unable to look away. His mom still remembers the terror that swept across his tiny face. She'd grown up as a child who was often afraid, and she had hoped to spare her kids the same fate.[1]

After hearing Elijah's story, I started asking others a similar set of questions: What's your earliest memory of being afraid? Can you remember the first time a movie or TV show scared you? One of the first people I asked was Josh Larsen, cohost of the podcast *Filmspotting* and author of *Fear Not!*[2] As a kid in the late seventies and early eighties, Josh watched edited-for-TV versions of *Psycho* and *The Shining* with his cousins—usually in a dimly lit basement, late at night, after Sunday evening church services. The adults were upstairs talking. The kids were downstairs watching murder unfold on screen. Josh remembers feeling safe while surrounded by cousins . . . until he got home and had to face the darkness of his own bedroom alone. Then the movie scenes returned in full force. It wasn't just the films themselves; it was the context. He was young, unsupervised, and overwhelmed. He also told me about visiting an out-of-state family with a neighborhood friend. One night, left in the care of older cousins, they watched *Friday the Thirteenth*. Josh was so scared he got out of bed and woke up his friend's parents—complete strangers—just to feel safe again. He didn't know them, but they were grown-ups. And that was enough.

For anyone keeping track at home, let's see whether we have all the ingredients we need. Bone-chilling basements? Check. Older cousins? Check. Absentee parents? Check. Add any horror movie to the mix, and you've got a recipe for childhood terror.

Film professor Craig Detweiler had a similar experience.[3] He remembers watching *Night of the Living Dead* alone in a dark house late at night. He was young, the film was playing on TV, and everything

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[1]Elijah Davidson, in discussion with the author, June 2023.

[2]Josh Larsen, *Fear Not! A Christian Appreciation of Horror Movies* (Wipf & Stock, 2023).

[3]Craig Detweiler is also the author of numerous books on theology and film, including *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* (Baker Academic, 2008), and *Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Baker Academic, 2003).

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around him—the thunder outside, the creaking walls—seemed to echo what was happening on screen. The line between fiction and reality blurred. "I was shaken," he told me, "but probably in a good way."[4]

That phrase caught my attention. Scared in a good way? I'm always a little fascinated when I hear people like Josh and Craig talk about their childhood movie traumas with a sense of appreciation, even fondness. Because when I think back on my own early fears, there's nothing good about them. If anything, I feel like I barely survived those experiences. And I'm still not sure I've recovered.

Maybe that's the difference. Maybe people like Craig and Josh have simply found better ways to narrate their fear, framing it not as trauma but as transformation. Or maybe, as they've aged, time has given them the kind of perspective that softens the edges of fear. Regardless, I wasn't convinced that all kids experience fear that way. So, I decided to test that theory—by asking some actual kids.

From the Mouths of Babes

To get a second opinion on whether fear can ever be good, I turned to the experts: kids. Take my ten-year-old nephew, for example. After watching *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* outdoors one summer evening, he was convinced it was a horror movie. He wasn't joking. Giant ants. Giant bees. The possibility of getting shrunk and stuck in the grass. The premise alone was enough to set his imagination spinning. As he tried to explain his fear to me, you could hear him working it out in real time—both afraid and strangely thrilled by it all.

There's something illuminating about that. Even if he didn't have the vocabulary for it, he was already trying to name the tension between fear and fun, terror and excitement. My oldest daughter, Callie, now a seasoned horror veteran in her own right, once had a complete meltdown at the mere sight of a cardboard cutout. She was six. We were on our way to a Father's Day screening of Pixar's *Inside Out*. Tickets in hand, popcorn ready, excitement in the air. That is, until we

[4]Craig Detweiler, in discussion with the author, March 2023.

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got to the theater lobby and she laid eyes on the life-size promo of the red, square-shaped character Anger. To her, he looked like a demon. She panicked.

No matter how much I pleaded with her—explained that it wasn't a scary movie, reminded her it was made by the people who brought us *Up* and *Toy Story*—she wasn't having it. She crouched in the corner of the theater and refused to go inside. So we did what any decent father and daughter would do in that moment: We went home, plopped on the couch, and ate our candy in peace. Like father, like daughter.

It wasn't a made-for-TV horror movie about child abductions, but it didn't matter. That day I watched fear manifest in her little body before we even reached our seats. It was primal, uninvited, and overwhelming. And its origin? A Pixar movie. Which is exactly why, when I got the chance to sit down with Pete Docter—the writer and director of *Inside Out*, *Up*, *Monsters Inc.*, *Soul*, and other emotionally devastating family films—I didn't ask him how he crafts heartwarming stories. I asked him why Pixar insists on making movies that are so emotionally intense they sometimes scare the pants off children.

Pete didn't hesitate. He admitted he was a highly sensitive kid himself, and almost all movies felt intense, even innocuous ones. He remembers seeing *Buck Rogers* at a drive-in and feeling overwhelmed. Then came *The Rescuers,* a film that got under his skin with its swampy kidnappings and dark undertones. "There's something about movies," he said, "that just made everything feel so much more real."[5]

It wasn't just the stories. It was empathy. Pete's hyperattunement to other people's emotions made every cinematic moment hit harder. He told me about a colleague of his at Pixar—Lee Unkrich, the director of *Toy Story 3* and *Coco*—who saw *The Shining* when he was twelve. Pete said, "If I had seen that movie at that age, I would've gone insane." Pete knew his own limits, and he knew that not all kids are wired the same. One of the films that left Pete most unsettled was *Dawn of the*

[5]Pete Docter, in discussion with the author, September 2022.

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Dead. He saw it as a teen and couldn't eat for two days. "That was not fun for me," he said. "That was a lot."[6]

And that's the thing. Whether it's *Dawn of the Dead*, *The Shining*, *Night of the Living Dead*, or *Inside Out*, the kinds of movies that scare us—and the reasons they do—are wildly diverse. But the emotional impact? That tends to be universal. Some fears are highly personal, rooted in a particular memory or psychological makeup. Others seem more hardwired, more primal. The kind of fear that needs no introduction. Such as, say, the fear of ghosts.

Running from Bears and Ghosts

As the nerdy psychological scientist I am, I typically consult the research when trying to understand why some of these fears are so common, especially when they involve things such as ghosts and the undead. One of my favorite branches of research is cognitive psychology, which studies how humans perceive and interpret the world and how our thoughts are inseparably tangled up with our emotions. According to leading researchers in this area, certain fears are not only common but adaptive. They help us survive.

Take snakes, for example. Pretty much every culture has some version of snake phobia built in. But not, say, kitten phobia. That's not an accident.[7] Or think about what happens when you hear a strange bump in the night. Most people don't calmly conclude, "Must be the wind." No, we jump to danger—ghost, intruder, demonic entity, clown with a grudge.[8] And from an evolutionary standpoint, that makes a lot of sense. If we assume something is there and we're wrong, well,

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[6]Docter, interview. Incidentally, Lee Unkrich is such a *Shining* superfan that he's written a book on the film, runs a website called The Overlook Hotel, and even funded a documentary about its most obsessed fans. You can see his homage in *Toy Story*, in which the carpet in Sid's house matches the pattern from the Overlook Hotel.

[7]Stefanie Hoehl, Kahl Hellmer, Maria Johansson, and Gustaf Gredeb, "Itsy Bitsy Spider . . . : Infants React with Increased Arousal to Spiders and Snakes," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017), www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01710/full.

[8]Justin L. Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds* (Templeton, 2011).

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that's a little embarrassing, but no big deal. If we assume nothing's there and we're wrong—that's a horror movie.

Our brains are wired to err on the side of fear. They are biased in ways that generate what are called false positives, and it's kept our species alive for millennia. When you hear a twig snap in the woods, your body floods with adrenaline, even if it turns out to be just a squirrel. Why? Because *it might not be*. Fear, in this way, is a gift. It kicks our body and brain into survival mode. It doesn't wait for careful analysis. It prepares us to flee, to fight, to freeze—whatever it takes to get out alive.

But fear isn't just instinctual. It's also interpretive. Our experiences, memories, expectations, and personalities all color what we fear and how we respond. That's why William James, the father of American psychology, once asked, "Do we run from a bear because we are afraid, or are we afraid because we run?"[9] In other words, fear isn't just something that happens to us. It's also something we make—a feedback loop between body and mind.

This is exactly what happens in a well-crafted horror film. The lighting shifts. The music swells. The camera slowly pushes in on a door you know shouldn't be opened. Your heart rate spikes. Your body tenses. You flinch. You're running from a bear, even though you're just sitting on your couch. And when a horror film really lands—when it evokes that deep, anxious dread that clings to your skin long after the credits roll—it's not because you believe it's real. It's because your body does.

Your physiological systems are reacting the same way they would if an actual threat were present. You're not afraid because you've been told to be. You're afraid because your whole being has entered the chase. In other words, we don't run because we're afraid. We're afraid because we're running.

And that's what makes me think: Maybe the horror we experience when watching *Halloween* or *The Exorcist* isn't just about masks,

[9]William James, "What Is an Emotion?," *Mind* 9, no. 34 (1884): 188-205, https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/emotion.htm.

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demons, or violence. Maybe it's deeper than that. Maybe what makes these stories so potent isn't the gore or the spectacle but the way they tap into something fundamental about being human. They remind us of the moment we first realized that the world isn't safe. That the darkness isn't just metaphorical. That evil, whether supernatural or ordinary, might actually be real.

The best horror filmmakers don't just aim for shock. They aim for recognition. They reach deep into the emotional substrate of human experience—what scares us, what shapes us—and hold it up to the light. And for so many of the people I've spoken to, the root of those emotions, the origin of their fears, can be traced back to moments their body remembers in vivid detail.

Sinister Sensations

Whether it's ghosts, basements, or demonic forces, few filmmakers know how to tap into our deepest fears quite like my friend Scott Derrickson. Sure, you may know him from his blockbuster work on *Doctor Strange* in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. But before he was conjuring portals and multiverses, Scott cut his teeth on horror. He made his debut with *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, a film that blurred the line between spiritual horror and courtroom drama. More recently, he wrote and directed *The Black Phone* and *The Black Phone 2*, a chilling story of abduction, psychic connection, and survival anchored by powerful performances from Ethan Hawke, Mason Thames, and Madeleine McGraw.

But for many fans of the genre, Scott's *Sinister* is the crown jewel. With its blend of found footage, slow-burn dread, and disturbing revelations, the film has consistently ranked among the scariest movies of all time. In fact, according to a widely circulated study based on biometric data, *Sinister* provokes more sustained anxiety than nearly any other horror film.[10] (Pro tip: If you're a parent, maybe don't watch it alone after your kids go to bed.)

[10]"The Science of Scare: The Scariest Movies According to Science," MoneySuperMarket, October 21, 2024, www.moneysupermarket.com/broadband/features/science-of-scare.

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What makes Scott's work stand out isn't just the scares. It's the thoughtfulness behind them. He's one of the most intelligent and articulate horror filmmakers I know, and he's always been incredibly generous with his time and insight. After a screening of *Sinister*, I asked him what first drew him to the genre. He told me that, even as a kid, he was fascinated by gothic imagery. Around Halloween, he used to build haunted houses in his basement and charge neighborhood kids admission. "I liked scaring people," he said. "It was fun. It felt like something I understood."[11]

Scott also made an interesting observation about Halloween itself. Unlike Christmas or Thanksgiving—holidays rooted in family, tradition, or gratitude—Halloween is a celebration of fear. And perhaps more surprisingly, it's primarily for children. "Adults don't really celebrate Halloween," he said. "But kids do. And they get it. They instinctively know that dressing up as the things that scare them is a way of confronting those fears, of taking control."[12]

It's not just play. It's ritual. It's catharsis. That's what horror offers. Not just adrenaline but release. As Scott put it, quoting the late Wes Craven, "Horror films don't create fear. They release it."[13] Let that sink in. The power of horror isn't just in generating fear—it's in giving us a space to express, externalize, and process the fears we already carry. It's a kind of emotional purge.

For some, that release feels thrilling. For others, it feels clarifying. Either way, horror allows us to confront what we might otherwise suppress. It doesn't create fear out of thin air. It shows us how much we've been holding in. And perhaps, at its best, it invites us to finally let go.

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[11]Scott Derrickson, in discussion with the author, June 2022.
[12]Derrickson, interview.
[13]Derrickson, interview.

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The Beginning of the End

We'll return more than once to the question of what it means for our fears to be released, because that longing to be free from fear doesn't just show up in scary movies or childhood memories. It's baked into the human condition. In fact, the Christian tradition traces that impulse all the way back to the very beginning—not just the beginning of our personal stories but the origin of humanity itself.

According to Proverbs, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 9:10 NIV). But when the very first humans appear on the scene, something goes wrong. They eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—driven by desires they barely understand—and suddenly everything changes. When God comes looking for them in the garden, the man hides. And when asked why, he replies, "I was afraid because I was naked" (Gen 3:10 NIV).

Afraid. Not repentant. Not ashamed. Afraid. What if the rupture in Eden wasn't simply about disobedience? What if it was about *misplaced fear*? Maybe Adam and Eve's mistake wasn't that they were afraid. It's that they feared the wrong thing. They weren't afraid of God. They were afraid of being exposed.

In that sense, the problem wasn't fear itself. It was *misdirected fear*—a fear that no longer led them toward wisdom but away from it. You might not look to the Garden of Eden to make sense of your own story. But whether that narrative speaks to you or not, the point is this: The fears we wrestle with in life—and in horror films—don't appear out of nowhere. They have a source. They have a shape. They have a history. And that history belongs not just to us as individuals but to us as a species.

There are very few things that all humans in all places and all times share in common. But fear? Fear might be one of them. And not just generic fear, either. Beneath the anxiety, beneath the dread, beneath the flickering shadows and jump scares, lies a deeper, more primal terror—one we rarely speak aloud, even though it haunts everything we do: We are all going to die. As the young Sigmund asks

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the neurotic Bob in *What About Bob?*: "Are you afraid of death?" To which Bob replies, with sudden clarity, "Well, yeah! I mean—we're all gonna die! . . . What else is there to be afraid of?"[14]

Confronting the Babadook

Of course, naming our fears is one thing. Confronting them is something else entirely. There are moments when I think I'm ready, when I feel brave enough to face the things that haunt me, to trace my fears back to their source in an attempt to loosen their grip on my life. But if I'm honest, there are just as many moments when I'd rather bury them deep and pretend as if they're not there. Because that's the thing about fear. It doesn't go away just because we ignore it. And the more we try to get rid of it without understanding it, the more power it seems to have over us.

That's why one of the most powerful metaphors for fear I've ever seen comes from the 2014 film *The Babadook*. In it, a grieving mother named Amelia and her young son, Sam, are being tormented by a strange, shadowy figure known as Mister Babadook. The creature seems to have entered their lives through a children's pop-up book, but it quickly becomes clear that the real monster isn't just lurking in the house. It's living inside them, feeding on unspoken grief, unresolved trauma, and repressed emotion.

Amelia spends most of the film trying to destroy the Babadook. She burns the book. She boards up the house. She screams at it to leave her alone. But nothing works. Eventually, her son offers a chilling bit of wisdom: "You can't get rid of the Babadook." And he's right. The turning point in the film isn't when the monster is vanquished. It's when Amelia stops trying to destroy it and instead chooses to live with it.

By the end of the film, the Babadook isn't gone. It's in the basement. She feeds it. She keeps it contained. But it's still there. What has changed is her. She no longer denies its presence. She no longer lets

[14] *What About Bob?*, directed by Frank Oz (Buena Vista Pictures, 1991).

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it control her. She's not cured of fear, but she's transformed by facing it. The basement—once a symbol of terror—becomes a space of reckoning and restoration.

Manufacturing Fear

I should probably clarify something. When I said earlier that the scientist in me consults the research when trying to wrap my mind around accounts of ghosts, demons, or spiritual disturbances, it's not because I don't believe in the supernatural. Far from it. I believe in a spiritual world. I believe there are forces beyond what we can see or measure. What I don't believe is that every spooky noise in the attic is evidence of a demonic presence. And honestly, I think my hesitancy has less to do with doubt and more to do with personal experience, specifically how often fear has been used to manipulate me.

I came of age before twenty-four-hour news cycles and algorithm-driven doomscrolling, before fear became the official currency of online engagement. But even back then, I was inundated with manufactured panic. I grew up during the Satanic panic of the 1980s—a time when well-meaning adults earnestly played vinyl records backward to reveal demonic messages, or circulated cassette tapes of "real" 911 calls featuring supposed supernatural activity. But I didn't hear these things in movie theaters or on cable TV. I heard them in church.

I remember Wednesday night youth group sessions where guest speakers—often police officers or local pastors—warned us about the hidden dangers of secular music, cursed objects, and spiritual warfare. The fear they instilled wasn't about spiritual discernment. It was about control. They were leveraging our natural fear of evil to redirect our attention toward enemies that didn't exist.

I'm not the only one who grew up in a context like this, which means that we now have generations of people who are totally confused about the true origins of our fears. And this is to say nothing of whether we should be afraid of the things a talking head on cable

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news or YouTube tells us to fear. Because that's the thing about manufactured fear: It almost always targets the wrong threat.

It turns our eyes toward whatever "other" is most convenient: Immigrants. Poor people. Rich people. Socialists. Capitalists. Republicans. Democrats. Doesn't matter which. In an attention economy, what matters is keeping us anxious, on edge, distracted. Whatever it takes to keep us from naming and confronting what we actually ought to fear.

Which brings us back, once again, to that origin story in the garden. The creature that slithered up to Adam and Eve wasn't just a snake. It was the world's first fearmonger, the prototype for every bad-faith voice that followed. And the fruit he offered wasn't temptation for its own sake. It was misdirection. What looked like desire was actually misplaced fear. They weren't seduced. They reached out for something they thought would quell their fear.

We may not be tempted by forbidden fruit anymore. But we're no less vulnerable to modern-day serpents who profit from our fear, those who manipulate our attention, monetize our outrage, and feed off our inability to distinguish between real danger and imagined threat.

The result? Generations of people, like me, unsure of what we're actually afraid of—and unable to tell whether the voice whispering in our ear is trying to save us . . . or sell us something.

Facing the Darkness

Some readers might wonder whether the obvious answer is just to avoid all these horrors, whether real-world or fictional. Turn off the news. Cancel your streaming services. Block anything horror-related from your feed. Eat some ice cream. Watch videos of English bulldog puppies instead.

(Though fair warning—if you're not ready to adopt immediately, do not go down the rabbit hole of looking at bulldog puppies online.)

And honestly? That wouldn't be the worst strategy. All of us could stand to be more thoughtful and discerning about our media

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consumption. For those of you who prefer puppies over Pennywise (the horrifying clown from *It*), worry not. We'll get to your concerns in the next chapter. But even as we do, I'm not here to convert anyone into a horror fan or to suggest that you should watch every horror film that hits the market. The genre isn't for everyone, and like any other, there are plenty of horror movies no one needs to see.

But even if you never watch a single horror film again, there might still be value in understanding the genre on a deeper level. Because once you begin to see what horror reveals, you might also begin to see—maybe for the first time—the real horrors lurking in your everyday life. The ones you've been conditioned *not* to fear. The ones you've learned to ignore. I'm of course not naive enough to think horror films will fix our fear-soaked culture. But the more conversations I have and the more stories I hear, the more I'm convinced that horror might be a good place to start, at least for anyone willing to address their fears instead of being ruled by them.

Still, I wanted to test that hunch with someone a bit more qualified than me. So I reached out to Dr. Brad Strawn, a clinical psychologist, theologian, and friend, to ask whether fear in its cinematic form could actually be good for us. He said something that stuck with me:

> Being afraid isn't bad. Anxiety has a role to play. Without it, we'd walk into traffic, grab hot pans off the stove, or mouth off to someone twice our size. But everyone brings their own history to fear, just like they do to relationships or religion. And because of that history, what feels thrilling to one person might feel unbearable to another. Some people ride roller coasters. Others watch Stephen King movies. Both might be flirting with death. But the experience is never the same.[15]

In other words, fear itself isn't the problem. The problem is when we let it control us. We become captive to fear when we refuse to name it

[15]Brad Strawn, in discussion with the author, June 2023. Brad is also the author of numerous books, including most recently Brad Strawn and Warren Brown, *Enhancing Christian Life: How Extended Cognition Augments Religious Community* (IVP Academic, 2020).

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honestly. When we aim it at the wrong target. When we protect ourselves from the symptoms while avoiding the source.

Remember Adam in the garden? When God comes looking for him, he doesn't say, "I'm sorry." He says, "I was afraid because I was naked." But he'd been naked the whole time. That wasn't new. What was new was the fear. And more than that, misplaced fear. Adam wasn't afraid because he was naked. He was afraid because he had turned his desire toward something other than God. And we as humans have been doing the same thing ever since.

I do it all the time, especially in a culture such as ours that rewards busyness and glorifies productivity. I tell myself I work long hours because I'm providing for my family. Because we live in one of the most expensive cities in the country. Because I've chosen a vocational path that rarely offers financial security.

But if I'm honest, that's only part of the story. The deeper truth—the one I avoid by starting new projects and diving into endless tasks—is that if I stop, if I sit in the silence, I might have to face the anxiety and depression that threaten to steal my joy at every waking moment. I might have to admit that I'm afraid of what's inside me. And that truly terrifies me.

So I may claim that my behavior is rooted in my fear of leaving my wife and kids without a roof over their head. But as I do, I'm neither acknowledging nor addressing the real origin of my fears. I pretend my fear is about money, or failure, or time. But it's not. I'm not afraid of poverty any more than Adam was afraid of nakedness. I'm afraid because I don't want to be left alone with someone so fundamentally unlovable: me. Worse yet, I'm not entirely convinced that God does either.

And if you're anything like me, or like Adam, you too have probably become an expert at avoiding what you truly fear. Maybe that's why *The Babadook* serves as one of the best metaphors I've come across for what I'm trying to do with this book. Just as it occurs in *The Babadook*—where a woman's fear shifts from terrorizing presence to tended basement resident—our own transformation doesn't come

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from avoiding our fears. It comes from facing them, naming them, making space for them. And then one day, maybe, walking on top of them instead of being buried beneath them.

Fear doesn't disappear. But it can be transformed. So I guess this is my small addendum to Scott Derrickson and Wes Craven. Horror films don't just release fear. At their best, they remake it. They help us face what we'd rather avoid and, in so doing, enable us to live differently on the other side.

A Strange Kind of Grace

What about you? What scares you? Can you remember the first time you were truly afraid? And if you can, have you ever stopped to ask what it was that made that moment so powerful—so formative? Because here's the strange grace of horror: Even if you never watch a single scary movie, these stories might still offer you a gift. They might help you finally name the thing you've been running from. And in doing so they might help you find a way through.

Indeed, unless we name and confront our fears, they will name and confront us. And unless we acknowledge them, they'll creep in through the back door. For people of Christian faith, however, that's not the end of the story. It's just the beginning. Once we name our fears, the question then becomes: What will we do with them?

When I posed that question to theologian and literature scholar Tim Basselin, he didn't start with monsters or movies. He started with a painting.[16] *Monk by the Sea*, by Caspar David Friedrich. A lone figure stands on the shore, dwarfed by sea and sky. No storm. No violence. Just a vast, quiet presence. And yet, you feel the weight of it. The awe. That kind of fear—the "numinous," as Rudolf Otto calls it—isn't paralyzing. It's expansive. It reminds us we are small but not insignificant.[17]

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[16]Tim Basselin, in discussion with the author, August 2023. Tim is an expert in theology and literature, particularly the work of Flannery O'Conner. See Timothy J. Basselin, *Flannery O'Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity* (Baylor University Press, 2020).
[17]Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1958).

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It finds an echo in Psalm 8:3-4: "When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers . . . what are human beings, that you are mindful of them?" (NRSV). We are like the psalmist in that so much of our life is born of wonder and fear and hope all tangled together—which makes me wonder. What if, in much the same vein as artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and the psalmist before him, horror filmmakers are now some of the only people we can actually trust with our fears? In a society filled with countless fearmongers, what if they—more than pundits or preachers—know how to lead us through the dark and toward something sacred?

I know that may sound absurd. But it wouldn't be the first time the truth came in an unsettling disguise. So stick with me because, in the next chapter, we dive into the various subgenres of horror and how each one targets a different fear. From body horror to psychological horror to supernatural thrillers, we'll explore how the shape of our fears is often reflected in the stories we tell. It'll be fun. But I won't lie to you. Exploring the inner recesses of the human heart never gets easier or more lighthearted. If anything, your eyes just adjust to the darkness.

Questions for Discussion

1. **How do your earliest experiences of fear shape the way you engage horror today?**

   The chapter opens with a vivid memory of childhood fear. In what ways do your own early encounters with fear—whether through stories, films, or real-life events—continue to influence how you respond to horror now?

2. **Why does setting matter so much in horror stories?**

   The author emphasizes how environments—such as the oppressive rural Texas heat—intensify dread. How do particular places or landscapes shape fear in horror, and why might geography matter for theological reflection?

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3. **What does it mean to live with an awareness of death?**

   The chapter reflects on death and the dead as realities we often avoid. What is the theological or psychological significance of acknowledging mortality, and why might horror films be one of the few cultural spaces where we do this honestly?

4. **How does horror invite us into empathy?**

   The chapter suggests that horror films ask viewers to identify with vulnerable characters. How might this identification cultivate empathy, and in what ways does it resemble—or diverge from—Christian understandings of spiritual formation?

5. **What role does humor play alongside fear?**

   This chapter, like the book as a whole, balances humor with horror. How does humor help us engage frightening or traumatic material, and can laughter itself function as something redemptive?

6. **What does it mean to describe ordinary life as "haunted"?**

   The author describes the air as haunted and the heat as clinging "like guilt." How do metaphors of haunting help name emotional or spiritual realities we might otherwise overlook or suppress?

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