



The Tragedy in Moscow: Grief, Mercy, and the Weight of Agency

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What does faith require in horror's wake? A deeper understanding of agency, space for grief, and trust in divine mercy.

On November 13, 2022, the lives of four University of Idaho students—Kaylee Goncalves, Madison Mogen, Xana Kernodle, and Ethan Chapin—were brutally ended in their own residence in Moscow, Idaho. The horror of this atrocious crime—a nighttime invasion and stabbing—shocked the world and shattered lives and families forever. None of us can truly comprehend the anguish and loss experienced by the victims and loved ones because of this heartless crime. And yet, as with all tragedies, I believe God invites all of us to learn from this heinous darkness, to seek growth and compassion even amid tragedy.

The Savior never promised we would be spared from injustice in mortality—but He did promise us a way to transform suffering through His grace. In the aftermath of such darkness, we confront not only the fragility of human life, but the unsettling truth of human agency—how it can be wielded for either sublime compassion or unspeakable harm. What does it mean to trust in a God who permits such agency, even when it devastates lives? And how do we make peace with that trust?

The Weight and Gift of Agency

During the recent sentencing hearing held on July 23, 2025, families spoke for nearly two hours. Each response was deeply personal, raw, and unique, reflecting where each soul stood—with agency intact and a path toward healing or forgiveness unfolding. Through the lens of divine love, we see that grief takes many expressions, and each response must be honored as part of God’s merciful design. Each witness reminds us that while pain is inevitable, the response is sacred—shaped by agency and observed with mercy by a loving Father in Heaven.

Agency is not neutral; it carries the weight of eternity with every choice. As Latter-day Saints, we speak often of agency as a divine gift—but events like these force us to ask: how do we reconcile that gift with its terrible potential to harm others? We cannot understand another person’s situation completely and cannot judge their situation or response perfectly, but each experience can open us to more empathy and compassion for the breadth of our connected human experience as fellow brothers and sisters, and help us better understand what the Savior must have [suffered](#) and felt for each one of us.

The Anger of the Bereaved

Kaylee’s sister, Alivea Goncalves, delivered a searing, forceful [statement](#). She denounced Kohberger as “pathetic,” “delusional,” a “sociopath,” accusing him of “thriving on fear and pain,” “terrified of being ordinary,” and calling him a coward—emphasizing that her sister would have shown him kindness if they’d met under different circumstances. Alivea was clear: she wanted him to feel pain. Her anger is a valid expression of grief—and it deserves space and understanding. She is still deeply hurting, and that kind of suffering is real and righteous. In Heavenly Father’s plan, agency includes the freedom

to feel anger and sorrow. It is part of the grieving process, and grace allows that place of valid pain without condemnation.

The Savior taught us to mourn with those who mourn—but how do we do that when the mourning is loud, raw, vengeful, grief-stricken, and also righteous, like Alivia's? Does our theology make space for unfiltered and searing grief? Yes, I believe that as covenant keepers, it must—and that it should. We need to create safe spaces for people to feel what they are feeling and understand their own emotions, which are needed for healing.

Survivor's Trauma

A surviving roommate of the tragedy, Dylan Mortensen, [spoke](#) of how her life has been forever altered. Her address shows that she lives with a loss beyond comprehension. Her search for safety and peace is ongoing. Dylan's tears, suffering, and grieving voice reveal the depth of fear and dislocation she now lives with—constant fear from surviving such a terrible nightmare. Her feelings are valid; she deserves protection, healing, and security following the horror that irreversibly changed her life.

We rightly feel compassion for the ongoing trauma she endures. Her situation shows what real fear is and reminds us of our need for the peace only found in God. Her story also points to the healing power and protection of loved ones—like her mother—and the yearning our Heavenly Father has to bring His children to safety and rest.

This is not just about individual recovery; it is a testament to our collective need for spiritual refuge. What does healing look like when peace feels unreachable? Just as we believe in a Savior who can calm the physical storm, we also believe He can quiet trauma's aftermath—over time, through love, and through others.

Forgiveness and Courage

Xana Kernodle's mother, Cara Northington, stood before the court and [testified](#) that Jesus allowed her to forgive Kohberger—even though he showed no remorse. She declared, "Nothing man can do to you can ever compare to the wrath of God." By God's grace, she found a peace rooted not in justice served by human hands but in trust in divine justice. She refused to share her daughter's good memories with Kohberger,

saying, “You don’t deserve our good memories that we have.” Her journey shows the power of turning sorrow over to God, and how mercy and forgiveness can exist even in the depths of such profound tragedy without minimizing loss, but relying on the Savior’s atonement.

Forgiveness in this context is not weakness. It is spiritual courage. The theologian Miroslav Volf [wrote](#), “Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans, and myself from the community of sinners.” Cara’s example shows a powerful refusal to do either.

Justice and Mercy: The Enigma of Bryan Kohberger

Bryan Kohberger—once a 30-year-old criminal-justice doctoral student—admitted guilt in July 2025 and was [sentenced](#) to four consecutive life terms without parole, plus ten years for burglary and substantial fines. He declined to offer any motive or speak in court, stating simply, “I respectfully decline.” The judge called him a “faceless coward” and “the worst of the worst.” [Reports](#) describe him as emotionally detached—ignoring his sobbing mother and sister as he was led away. Background accounts portray him as someone from a strict household, bullied in youth, who reacted with anger to rejection by peers, especially by girls.

While these details cannot justify what he did, they reveal a painful personal narrative. They offer a glimpse into the kind of unhealed wounds that, when left unchecked, may evolve into monstrous choices. Like all of us, he had his agency and chose to pass on his pain in terrible ways.

The Savior’s plan includes mercy for all, even the guilty, as long as they repent and change. If we say we believe in Christ’s power to change hearts, do we dare believe that even someone like Bryan Kohberger could, in some unseen future, choose to turn toward God?

We do not know whether Kohberger possesses the ability to have genuine empathy or remorse in this life or how he will be judged in the future. While we don’t yet see any evidence of softening, God knows the full picture. Whether he becomes contrite or remains hardened, his fate lies in his choices—and ultimately, in Divine mercy. And

while divine mercy is real, so too is the demand for justice—both are essential to God's plan.

The Curriculum of Grief

Each person—Alivea, Dylan, Cara, even the parents of Ethan Chapin and others—walks a painful journey of grief and healing. Their trials are unimaginable. As Heavenly Father shapes us, our individual challenges differ: some far greater, some more subtle—but all real.

Eder Orson F. Whitney [explained](#):

No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude, and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God ... and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire and which will make us more like our Father and Mother in heaven.

Perhaps it is in these moments of moral horror that we most urgently need to believe in a God who sees more than we do—who knows not only what someone has done, but what led them there, and what they might yet become.

Mercy as a Holy Defiance

In life, we all confront emotional wilderness; how we respond is our sacred agency. We must offer grace and mercy—to others and ourselves—as we navigate sorrow and anger and allow for the full expression of others' feelings as well as our own.

Only through the Savior's Atonement can we find true hope in the midst of pain. He suffered what mortal men cannot bear, enabling Him to succor us with empathy beyond measure. The Atonement is sufficient not just for the innocent, but even for those who've inflicted deep suffering—if they turn to Him in repentance. Theologically, mercy is not the denial of justice but its transformation. It is not forgetting, nor condoning—it

is a holy defiance of destruction's final word. In these dark circumstances, we glimpse how essential The Atonement is—both for healing and for justice tempered by mercy.

Toward Softened Hearts

The Kohberger case reveals extremes of human brokenness and suffering. It also reveals the power of agency—Alivia's righteous anger, Dylan's grief and longing for peace, Cara's forgiveness grounded in faith, and Kohberger's silent choices. Each response is part of Heavenly Father's merciful curriculum. None of us would choose such trials, but each teaches something profound: that agency, emotion, and divine love intersect in sometimes terribly painful ways we often cannot completely grasp.

Our collective response to evil is not merely legal or procedural—it is spiritual. It reflects the kind of society we are shaping. Do we believe in the possibility of redemption for victims and perpetrators, even when all evidence appears to deny it?

May we learn to honor the pain of others. May we extend mercy where wounds are fresh. May we trust the Savior's Atonement as the only sure balm in this life and the next. May we each choose to wrestle with grief, judgment, and mercy—not just to explain them, but to be changed by them.

It is my hope that even in the shadows of such terrible tragedy, we may find courage to believe in Christ's capacity to heal—and to let that belief soften our hearts, one merciful choice at a time.

About the author

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David Bingham is a practicing dentist in Boise, Idaho. He graduated from BYU with a degree in English and attended dental school at Creighton University. He enjoys thinking about how the worlds of psychology, neuroscience, and the gospel connect in fascinating ways.