

Hell house

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

Halloween has come and gone in Habersham County. I cannot remember when I have seen so many houses draped with spider webs and strings of pumpkin lights. A faux graveyard appeared in one front yard, with clusters of leaning tombstones that glowed like psychedelic mushrooms in the dark. Skeletons sat in front porch rockers. Witches embraced the telephone poles they had crashed into, with nothing but their pointed hats sticking up on top and the ends of their broomsticks poking out in the middle.

Since my subscription to the local paper has expired, I do not know what church folk said to the editor about these decorations. I do know what they said about Harry Potter, which was quite harsh, but that was years ago. Perhaps the images from Ground Zero, Kabul and Basra have made skeletons in porch rockers seem quaint by comparison, or perhaps we are just more used to living with death.

Whatever accounts for the upswing in these secular displays, there was an organized religious response as well. Several local churches sponsored events for young people on Halloween that were designed to keep them off the streets. Some congregations went to great lengths to turn their fellowship halls and Sunday school rooms into “hell houses,” where believers and unbelievers alike could get the devil scared out of them for free.

Hell houses contain rooms in which certain grave sins are portrayed, including drug use, abortions, homosexual relationships, school shootings and satanic rituals. The perpetrators of these sins show up in hell later on—where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth—while visitors are offered the chance to choose heaven instead. Those who confess their sins, repent and accept Jesus Christ before they leave the hell house are saved from the real thing later on. Or at least that is the hope and promise of churches that fund such projects from their evangelism budgets.

I have never had the nerve to go into one of them myself, but thanks to a religion major named Stacie I am learning a lot about them. Her senior paper traces the phenomenon of hell houses in the Bible Belt, a swath of the southern United States

that grows wider by the day. According to her initial research, the first hell house likely appeared in Texas in the 1970s. Popular interest built through the 1980s and spiked in the 1990s with the approach of the millennium. After the events of 9/11, some churches added scenarios based on the vivid horrors of that day.

Today it is possible to order a Hell House Outreach Kit from the New Destiny Christian Center in Thornton, Colorado. For \$208, churches receive detailed instructions on how to create their own hell houses, including advice on marketing, casting characters and mixing fake blood. The 1997 manual advised facilitators to “purchase a meat product that closely resembles pieces of a baby” for the abortion scenes.

Now that Stacie has described them for me, I cannot seem to stay out of these rooms. Like scenes in a horror film, their power is visceral. They bypass the mind. There is no invitation to think about what might have landed these characters in these situations, nor what kind of compassion they might need. There is no chance to question the certainty that they are all sinners headed straight for hell.

Such decisions have already been made by the same people who mixed the fake blood. Because these creators have not signed their work, it is easy for the young and the vulnerable to mistake it for God’s work. Few holiday viewers are equipped to debate the merits of the theology behind these scenes. Also, the point of a hell house is not to make you think. Its point is to make you recoil and react, so that you leap into the arms of Jesus out of plain, gut-wrenching fear.

Some people swear that this has done them a world of good, in which case I have some new rooms to propose for the next edition of the instruction manual. First, I propose a “Resisting Evildoers” room, in which angry-looking people actively fight their enemies instead of turning the other cheek as Jesus told them to do. The judgment in this room will not be limited to those who actually land the blows. All who thrill to the violence will be exposed as sinners.

The “Lazarus and the Rich Man” room will be split down the middle, so that you can see what is going on inside of a house and outside of it at the same time. Inside, people will sit in front of a flat-screen television set watching reality shows while they pass a bag of hamburgers back and forth. Outside, a woman will be lying in a ratty sleeping bag under their window, listening to the commercials for Red Lobster while her stomach growls.

In the “Older Brother” room, a good-looking guy wearing a “Good Son” T-shirt will stand as far away as he can from a younger guy with a bunch of signs around his neck: “Prodigal,” “Degenerate,” “Fornicator.” A radiant fatherly character will be kissing the younger guy while motioning to the older guy to come join the group hug, but the older guy will just stand there with his arms crossed over his heart, refusing to come.

This room will be the last one before hell. The instructions will warn churches that they may need some extra ushers here, both to keep people from trying to walk into the father’s arms and to remind them that they still have hell to pay. If they resist, the instructions will say, then just leave them alone. It may not be hell they need, but a clearer view of heaven.