

# Monsters At The Threshold

*What is true and what is liberating*

Victoria Ferrier · April 2026

Jasmine Bina gave a talk at Carnegie Mellon recently called “*Gazing into the Eye of the Monster / Machine.*” If you haven’t done so already, stop right now and watch it. It is an honest and thought-provoking account of the cultural moment we are living through, arriving in the register of a woman of Iranian heritage who has looked at the thing clearly, is looking at the thing clearly right now, and paid the personal cost of doing so.

I want to respond to it. Not to disagree - her diagnosis is brilliant, it feels true. But because she ends the talk in a place that is necessary and insufficient.

What comes next has already been built, by two women she has never heard of who arrived at the same insight from different directions, through their own wounds. And from absence, built what had been missing.

## 1. What Jasmine Got Exactly Right

Her central image is a beast with two faces. One face is the monster: a system that grows by consuming, indifferent to moral cost, that accumulates value and image and power even in the presence of horror. The other is the machine: a system that functions by numbing, that turns suffering into interface, that asks you to repress your humanity and manage your distance from the consequences of growth.

The monster/machine doesn’t just operate in markets. It operates even inside the parts of organisations that are supposed to be the most human. It is what happens when growth pressure colonises a People function and turns it into a compliance operation. It is what happens when the founder mythology is administered by HR rather than inhabited by everyone. It is what happens when a training programme is the answer to what is actually an infrastructure problem; the conditions under which people can think, learn and stay present.

What interests Jasmine most is not the monster; it’s what people do in response. And what she finds - in the qualitative research she has been doing across cultures, communities, platforms and subcultures - is a 20% who have looked at the monster with clear eyes and are quietly building alternatives.

Not protest. Not refusal. Desire paths; the routes people take when the official pathways no longer lead anywhere worth going. Grief retreats. Men’s sheds. Intentional communities. New forms of family, governance, work, belonging. People who have stopped waiting for institutions to change and started building the conditions they need inside the ruins of the old ones.

*Monsters always appear at the threshold between worlds. They test whether a society is ready to move forward or not. - Jasmine Bina*

Jasmine ends the talk with an injunction to stay optimistic and keep building. It is the right instinct. It is also where the talk stops; at the threshold of an answer, without crossing it.

Because the question her talk leaves hanging is the most important one: how do you build deliberately? How do you create, at organisational scale, the conditions in which human beings can stay present, think for themselves, and develop the capacity to remain in contact with difficulty without shutting down? How do you make it infrastructure rather than inspiration?

That question has been answered, just not on the stages where Jasmine speaks.

## **2. Three Women, Three Wounds**

Every framework of value was arrived at through a wound. This is not romanticism, it is epistemology; the people who build the conditions for human flourishing are almost always people who experienced the precise absence of those conditions personally and refused to accept that the absence was inevitable.

Jasmine Bina is one of them. Her family is from Iran; she knows the pain of oppression and the destruction of war. She looked into the Epstein files and cried for two days. She says she will never be the same person again and you know she means it. Her cultural research is not academic curiosity; it is the work of someone who has looked at the monster and stayed present.

Nancy Kline is another. As a young woman, a doctor told her she was going to die. She asked her father: do you think I will die? He did not answer, asking instead: what do you think? That question - returned to her as her own - changed everything. She did not die and spent the rest of her life asking: what does it take for a human being to think for themselves? What are the conditions in which the human mind can do its best, most honest, most generative work?

The answer she arrived at, after decades of discovery, is the Thinking Environment®: ten components that together create the conditions in which thinking ignites. The most fundamental is attention: not passive listening but active, generous, undivided presence. The quality of attention you give another person literally changes the quality of thinking they can do. Not metaphorically. Structurally.

Weil's observation, referenced in Jasmine's talk - *that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity* - is beautiful but static: attention as a quality you have. Nancy Kline made it alive; the Thinking Environment is not a philosophy of

attention; it is the active practice of it. At its heart is an insight that connects directly to the monster/machine: thinking for yourself, as yourself, is a subversive act. In a world organised around consumption and numbing, having genuine agency - the capacity to form your own conclusions from your own encounter with reality - is the rarest and most endangered human capability.

The third woman is Professor Ruth Crick. Her wound is different in texture. The prologue of her forthcoming book opens with the teenage Ruth on a beach at Deal in Kent: shingle, shame, the experience of being ungovernable and invisible. We do not need the details, we need only the shape of it: a person who experienced, from the inside, what it feels like when the conditions for learning are absent. When the system's limiting assumption about who you are becomes the air you breathe.

Ruth spent 26 years asking the question her wound made necessary: what does it actually take for a human being - or an organisation, a school, a city - to learn, adapt and grow under conditions of uncertainty? The answer turned out to be neither skills nor knowledge, but something more fundamental: a set of cognitive, relational and dispositional qualities that together constitute the capacity to engage with challenge without shutting down.

She called it Learning Power and built a psychometric instrument to measure it - CLARA (Crick Learning for Resilient Agency), validated across more than 100,000 individuals, 190 organisations, in 6 languages. Not an engagement survey. Not a culture score. A diagnostic instrument with the rigour of a financial instrument applied to human capability. And she built WILD Learning to bring it into the world.

Three women. Three wounds. Three routes to the same insight: that what determines whether human beings can remain present, think for themselves, and build something that holds is not personal. It's conditional.

### **3. What the Monster Assumes About You**

*Everything human beings do is driven by assumptions. We might as well become aware of them, remove the limiting ones, and live by the liberating ones. - Nancy Kline*

Nancy Kline's most important technical contribution is the Incisive Question™: a question that identifies the untrue limiting assumption that is blocking a person's thinking, surfaces it, tests it against reality, and replaces it with what she calls the true and liberating statement - the thinker's own words for what is actually true, once the limiting assumption is removed.

The process is precise. What are you assuming that is stopping you? Do you think that assumption is true? If not - what do you think is true and liberating instead? And then: if you knew that [liberating true assumption] - what would you do?

The monster/machine is, at its root, a system of limiting assumptions about human nature. That some people matter and others don't. That growth is the only metric worth measuring. That attention is a cost rather than a gift. That the capacity to learn is fixed and distributed unequally. That staying present when things are difficult is weakness rather than the rarest form of strength.

These assumptions are being lived as though they were true inside almost every organisation on earth. They shape hiring decisions, performance frameworks, leadership development, the design of physical and digital environments. They are so pervasive that they are invisible: the water organisations swim in rather than a choice they have made.

The 20% Jasmine identifies are people who have, through wound or witness or the accumulation of enough disappointment, stopped living the limiting assumption. They have arrived - imperfectly, often privately - at a true and liberating statement of their own. That human beings are capable of more than the system allows them to be. That the conditions matter more than the person. That building something that holds is worth the cost of staying present.

Nancy and Ruth didn't just arrive at that statement; they operationalised it. They built the Incisive Question into a framework, and the framework into an instrument, and the instrument into a practice that can be brought into any organisation willing to ask: what are we assuming about our people that might not be true?

WILD's diagnostic question - when the programme ends, does the change hold? - is itself an Incisive Question. It identifies the limiting assumption underneath most organisational learning: that a training event changes capability. It surfaces it, tests it, and offers the liberating statement: capability is a condition, not a content. It requires infrastructure, not intervention.

*What if the capacity to learn, adapt and act wisely is itself the infrastructure? What if the reason change doesn't hold isn't the strategy - but the absence of the human capability to carry it? -  
Professor Ruth Crick*

#### **4. The Capacity to Stay**

There is one more piece. Jasmine ends her talk with the Gabor Maté quote: *it is impossible to have your eyes open and not have your heart broken*. She is naming the cost of looking, but she doesn't name the capacity that allows you to look and stay.

Psychotherapist David Richo offers the most freeing formulation of trust I have encountered. Most trust frameworks - and there are many - are essentially risk management in disguise. They are trying to engineer the conditions that reduce betrayal. Brené Brown's vulnerability work, Patrick Lencioni's pyramid,

psychological safety research - all valuable, all operating in the register of: here is how we build conditions so trust is less likely to be broken.

Richo goes deeper: the question of whether to trust is the wrong question. Trust will be broken. Not because people or organisations are malicious, but because they are human - because people are fallible, because incentives shift, because growth pressure arrives and the mythology gets diluted and the founding DNA stops replicating. That is not a failure of the trust-building programme. That is the nature of things.

The real question is: knowing that my heart will be broken - can I remain present?

That question is in the monster/machine territory Jasmine maps. The machine produces people who have learned to manage their disappointment by not fully investing in the first place. Who perform trust rather than practice it. Who have learned that staying present costs too much. The numbing is not incidental to the system; it is the system's self-protective response to the cost of presence.

High Learning Power - in Ruth's framework - is what Richo's remaining present looks like in practice. It is what Nancy's quality of attention produces in a person who experiences it consistently over time. It is the inner resource that allows someone to have their trust broken and stay anyway. Not because they are naïve, but because they have developed sufficient relationship with their own thinking - sufficient agency - to know that the alternative is worse.

Human infrastructure is what you have when the conditions Nancy Kline identifies - and that Ruth Crick's instrument can measure - are built deliberately into how an organisation functions, not delivered once hoping it'll hold. It is the difference between a Thinking Environment as an experience and a Thinking Environment as architecture.

This is why the argument to consider human capability as infrastructure is not primarily about organisational effectiveness, though it is that too. It is about whether the people inside an organisation have developed the capacity that Jasmine's talk names as necessary for building the new world inside the old one. The capacity to look at the monster with clear eyes and remain present. To have your mythology disappointed and keep working. To build something that holds not because the conditions are perfect, but because you are.

## **5. The Shape of Something Real**

There is a structural fact worth naming explicitly, because it is itself evidence for the argument.

Ruth Crick did not build CLARA with Nancy Kline's Thinking Environment in mind. Ruth does not know Nancy's work. They arrived at overlapping conclusions through

completely independent routes: one through empirical research into learning conditions in schools and organisations, the other through the quality of a single conversation with her father and decades of discovery that followed.

In research methodology, this is called convergent validity. When independent methods arrive at the same finding, the finding is more likely to be true than if only one method found it. The conditions that allow human beings to think, learn and stay present turn out to be consistent across frameworks built by people who never met, in different decades, from different wounds.

That is not coincidence, it is the shape of something real.

The Ten Components of the Thinking Environment® - Attention, Equality, Ease, Appreciation, Encouragement, Feelings, Information, Difference, Incisive Questions™, Place - map with striking fidelity onto the eight dimensions CLARA measures: Creativity, Curiosity, Sense Making, Collaboration, Belonging, Hope and Optimism, Mindful Agency, and Orientation to Change.

Both frameworks understand that the conditions are more important than the content. Both understand that the capacity to learn is not fixed. Both understand that the limiting assumptions people carry about themselves are often more constraining than any external barrier.

And both arrived at the same implicit answer to Jasmine's talk: the desire paths the 20% are building are not just experiments in community or work or governance. They are, at their best, Learning Journeys and the construction of Thinking Environments; spaces in which the limiting assumptions of the monster/machine lose their hold, and human beings can begin to think and learn for themselves, again.

## **6. The Question the Monster Cannot Ask**

Jasmine Bina is right that we are living through the time of monsters. She is right that the 20% are building. She is right that collapse doesn't mean disaster - it means that things are not going to look the way they used to look.

But Jasmine's 20% are not a fixed proportion. They are what emerges when the conditions are absent. Build the conditions deliberately, and the number will grow.

What she didn't name - because she was observing from the outside, brilliantly, but from the outside - is that the conditions for what the 20% are trying to build have been identified, researched, and operationalised. That two women, wounded into insight by the very system Jasmine describes, have spent their careers building the technology of those conditions. That the instrument for measuring whether the conditions exist is already built, already validated, already in use.

The limiting assumption the monster/machine depends on is this: that human beings are fundamentally limited. That some can learn and some cannot. That attention is a scarce resource to be rationed. That staying present when things are difficult is weakness. That you cannot give what you don't have - and most organisations don't have it, so the best you can do is manage the deficit.

The true and liberating statement is this: the conditions under which human beings can think for themselves, stay present, and build something that holds are known. They are measurable. They are developable. And they depend not on finding exceptional people, but on building the right environment for the people you already have.

*If you knew that the capacity to learn, adapt and remain present under conditions of uncertainty is measurable and developable in every person in your organisation - what would you build?*

That is the Incisive Question this work has been waiting to ask at scale.

The 20% Jasmine identifies are the people who, when they hear that question, already know the answer. The work is to find more of them, give them the language and the instrument, and then - in the spirit of Nancy Kline's most important insight - get out of the way while they think for themselves, as themselves.

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## Notes

Jasmine Bina's talk *Gazing into the Eye of the Monster / Machine* was delivered at Carnegie Mellon University. Available at [conceptbureau.substack.com](https://conceptbureau.substack.com). The author recommends watching it before reading this response.

Nancy Kline's Thinking Environment is described in *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind* (1998), *More Time to Think: A Way of Being in the World* (2009), and *The Promise That Changes Everything: I Won't Interrupt You* (2020).

Professor Ruth Crick's Learning Power research and the CLARA diagnostic are held by WILD Learning Sciences Community Interest Company.

David Richo's formulation of trust is drawn from *Daring to Trust: Opening Ourselves to Real Love and Intimacy* (2010).