

July 30
Radical Hope
Rev. Linda Simmons

Bryan Stevenson is an American lawyer, social justice activist, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, and a clinical professor at New York University School of Law. Based in Montgomery, Alabama, Stevenson has challenged bias against the poor and minorities in the criminal justice system, especially children. He has helped achieve court decisions that prohibit sentencing children under 18 to death, or to life imprisonment without parole.

Stevenson has assisted in cases that have saved dozens of prisoners from the death penalty, advocated for poor people, and developed community-based reform litigation aimed at improving the administration of criminal justice.¹

He spoke at General Assembly this year in New Orleans. The message he gave was simple. He said to us all: “You’ve got to get close to the poor and excluded. It’s essential to our capacity to change the world. We need to get closer to the parts of town where people are being abused.”²

Bryan Stevenson told story after story of people he serves as a lawyer on death row.

As the 4,000 people in that room listened, air conditioning blasting down on us so we didn’t know we were in the south, the sweltering and stormy south where Katrina happened not long ago and once again African American lives were counted as mattering less, while air conditioning propelled us into our sweaters and shawls while the tar outside got so hot stiletto heels could make pock marks in it, Stevenson’s stories led us to our own that night, each of us in private reverie at different times, each of us led to our own accounting with our souls.

I was led to a story from my work with the young people who had dropped out of high school in the program I directed for many years before I became a minister.

There was one young man, 21 when I met him, I’ll call him John Samuel. He was put in foster care when he was very young. His parents had left him home alone one evening and not returned. He was 14 months old. Neighbors heard him crying. He went from foster home to foster home after that; from situation of abuse to situation of abuse, that included physical and sexual. He didn’t like to talk about it much.

The program I ran was at a community college in New Hampshire. He would talk a little when we would go for walks around the building when he needed to let off steam.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bryan_Stevenson

² Bryan Stevenson, “Ware Lecture” General Assembly, New Orleans, June, 2017.

Sometimes we circumambulated that building 5 or 6 times before he was ready to go in again.

Bryan Stevenson told us that when he travels to Germany they talk about the Berlin Wall; when he travels to South Africa, they talk about apartheid; but when he travels here, no one talks about slavery. There are no markers where lynching took place. He said that we cannot be free until we talk about it. None of us can be free. I know this myself from within myself. Don't you. Have you experienced a story that owns you so deeply because you refuse to give it voice? I have known such a story. John Samuel had so many of these stories. Some of them I didn't learn until much later.

John was working on his GED with us. He struggled so much. He did not get the nutrition he needed when he was young. I always thought this affected his brain's capacity. He studied and studied. I had a really cool tutor named Mark who played in a band. John liked him a lot. He too wanted to be in a band and wrote songs and played the drums. Mark would stay after with him sometimes and play music.

Mark would also give extra time to help John with his GEDs. We all did. On the practice tests, John would barely pass, sometimes he would not. I kept trying to tell him he'd get there one day soon. He kept trying to believe me.

Bryon Stevenson is working to establish *The Memorial to Peace and Justice in Montgomery*, which will document each of the nearly 4,000 lynchings of black people that took place in the twelve states of the South from 1877 to 1950.

He believes that the history of lynchings has influenced the subsequent high rate of death sentences in the South, where it has been disproportionately applied to minorities. A related museum, *From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration*, will offer interpretations to show the connection between the post-Civil War period of lynchings to the high rate of executions and incarceration of people of color in the United States.³ He hopes that these marked lynchings will give us all a voice, all a language to discuss what happened here.

One morning our program tutor Mark called me and told me to switch on the local news. It showed a bank robbery and a picture of John being led to a cruiser. I was devastated. Bryan Stevenson told us that 1 out of 3 black male babies born today will go to prison in their lifetimes.

John was in jail for 3 years. We wrote letters back and forth. I visited him every few months and then he got moved too far from me, or that's what I told myself. Anyway, I lost touch with him. Bryan Stevenson said that until we know that the journey of the abused and broken to higher ground is tied to our own journeys to higher ground, none of us will arrive. I will say that one more time. Until we know that the journey of the abused and broken to higher ground is tied to our own journeys to higher ground, none of us will

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bryan_Stevenson

arrive. John would slip out of my mind from time to time over the next 2 years. I would forget John, focusing on the others in front of me and then he'd be there again clear as day singing me one of his songs when he should have been studying.

Bryan Stevenson told a story of one man he worked with on death row, I'll call him Joe, whom he learned to love, to see as a human being with many identities: brother, son, person who loved music, vanilla ice cream, who wrote poetry, whose laughter could ignite a room, rather than only as someone who had killed someone else. Joe had killed a man who almost beat his mother to death when he was but a young boy. Stevenson tried to save Joe from death row with a mental illness plea.

When the sentence would not be transmuted, when the call finally came in that there would be no execution stay on the very day of Joe's execution, Joe called Bryan and told him he loved him.

A while after John was moved to another prison and I lost touch with him, one of his family members came to see me and told me that one day when John was leaving our program several years before, some of the other kids offered to drive him home because John's car was busted up from one issue or another. On the way there, they stopped in some abandoned place and they stripped him and beat him, calling him faggot and queer. They hurt him bad. I tried to place this time in our work together. I remember a whole 3 weeks John called in sick telling me he just couldn't make it in to school. I thought he was using or something. I wish I had known. I wish I had known.

Learning to see another in ourselves, both John and those boys that beat him up. That's the hard part isn't it. That's the work isn't it my friends especially when we'd rather be sure that they are not us, not at all. Learning to see another, no matter the color of skin or where they grew up or the accent or the story, but learning to recognize that there but by the grace of love and opportunity and privilege and learning and luck go I.

When John got out of prison, I was still working in the same program. I was still working late. He stopped by one evening. My back was to the door. He said, "Linda, it's me." He was changed. We sat together for some time. He told me how in jail he stopped using drugs and started to pray. Those were not the days when I had yet learned to pray. He told me about prayer, how it finds you where you are and teaches you to listen to yourself. I have never forgotten that.

After some time, he took from his pocket a napkin on which he had written a poem. It was called simply, Schoolin'. He read it to me. It was a rap kind of poem about how the loving and work and talk and cheering him on we had done in our little rag tag federal program had changed his life, made it easier for him to be in prison, given him courage.

And then he told me something that blew me away. He told me about those boys who beat him up so bad and that he forgave them and that when he did, he could forgive himself too. He told me he realized in prison that whenever another person puts someone down, and we all do this don't we, whenever another person puts someone below them it's because

they don't realize that they themselves are worthy of love. And when he realized this he could see that those kids who beat him up were just like him, hurt and broken and didn't know they were worthy of love and he found hope again. He could begin to forgive himself and them too.

Bryan Stevenson told us toward the end of his talk that evening, "The broken teach us mercy, compassion and hope."⁴

John taught me that day what it means to hope, how it means to see oneself in another, to see the brokenness that we all carry reflected in each other's lives and hearts and eyes. He reminded me that that hope means to not give in, to keep showing up, to keep loving, to keep offering forgiveness.

Stevenson closed his talk by saying, "We've got to stay with the people not deemed worthy of hope. We've got to stay hopeful. We cannot compromise this. Hope is the energy of justice. You're hopeful or you're part of the problem."⁵

With enough mercy and hope, with enough love and compassion, with enough ability to see ourselves in each other, we can save not only ourselves but this world.

Before John left that day he and I held each other and he told me he loved me. I told him I loved him too. I can't tell you where John is today. We lost track of each other again. I do know that part of him lives right here in me, and right there in you too.

One love, one heart.

It's only together that we can feel enough to go on in our humanity.

Amen.

⁴ Bryan Stevenson, "Ware Lecture" General Assembly, New Orleans, June, 2017.

⁵ Ibid.