

O B E I N G

On Being with Krista Tippett

Bryan Stevenson

Finding the Courage for What's Redemptive

Last Updated
November 4, 2021

Original Air Date
December 3, 2020

How to embrace what's right and corrective, redemptive and restorative — and an insistence that each of us is more than the worst thing we've done — these are gifts Bryan Stevenson offers with his life. He's brought the language of mercy and redemption into American culture in recent years, growing out of his work as a lawyer with the Equal Justice Initiative based in Montgomery, Alabama. Now the groundbreaking museum they created in Montgomery has dramatically expanded — a new way of engaging the full and ongoing legacy of slavery in U.S. history. Krista draws out his spirit — and his moral imagination.



Image by **Uli Knörzer**, © All Rights Reserved.

Guest

Bryan Stevenson is the founder and executive director of the **Equal Justice Initiative** in Montgomery, Alabama. He is the author of *The New York Times* bestseller *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*.



Transcript

Krista Tippett, host: How to embrace what is right and corrective, redemptive and restorative — and an insistence that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve done — these are gifts Bryan Stevenson offers with his life. He’s brought the language of mercy and redemption into American culture in recent years, growing out of his work as a lawyer with the Equal Justice Initiative, based in Montgomery, Alabama. Now the groundbreaking museum they created in Montgomery has dramatically expanded — a new way of engaging the full and ongoing legacy of slavery in U.S. history. It is an honor and a pleasure to experience Bryan Stevenson’s spirit and his moral imagination towards our need for healing, to become a whole society.

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoë Keating]

Bryan Stevenson: We’ve been dealing with injustice in so many places, for so long. And if you try to dissect, why is this still here?, it’s because people haven’t had enough hope and confidence to believe that we can do something better. You know, I think hope is our superpower. I mean, hope is the thing that gets you to stand up when others say, Sit down. It’s the thing that gets you to speak when others say, Be quiet.

Tippett: I’m Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*.

[music: “Seven League Boots” by Zoë Keating]

Bryan Stevenson’s book *Just Mercy* has been a bestseller for years and was made into a movie. He founded the Equal Justice Initiative in 1989, and it has won major legal challenges, including before the Supreme Court, for people on death row, people who are mentally ill and incarcerated, and children being tried as adults. This conversation happened in 2020.

I was very intrigued, when I went back to *Just Mercy*, getting ready to speak with you, that I had forgotten that you quote Reinhold Niebuhr at the beginning of the book, the public theologian of the last century, saying, “Love is the motive, but justice is the instrument.” And I feel

like that's something you didn't learn at law school, *[laughs]* but that came from your life.

Stevenson: Well, in many ways, I think it's the background of my family and a larger segment of the Black community, the Black experience. And I appreciate you asking about that quote, because I think I've increasingly recognized that we have to be intentional and explicit in our affirmation of the power of love. I don't think it often comes up when we talk about these dynamics that are so critical.

Tippett: Serious things.

Stevenson: Yeah, but in recent years, I really have been talking about it more and more and more. And what's interesting is that, when I grew up, I never really talked much about my family. I didn't talk much about background or anything. You know, you're in the middle of trying to navigate all of these challenges — as I've said before, I started my education in a colored school, and we were just trying to navigate the challenges of integration.

But for me, it really begins with this larger family narrative. My great-grandfather was enslaved in Caroline County, Virginia, and learned to read while enslaved. And I never really thought about that until later. But I just started thinking about the kind of hope, the kind of vision it took to believe that one day, you're going to be free, even when nothing around you indicates that freedom is likely for enslaved Black people in Virginia in the 1850s.

Tippett: We don't think about that, do we, that they couldn't see the beyond of it.

Stevenson: Exactly. And yet he had that hope, and he learned to read, and he loved it so much that he wanted to share it with others. So my grandmother would talk about how, after Emancipation, other formerly enslaved people would come to their home, and he would stand up and read the newspaper each night. And she would sit next to him, because she loved the power he had to engage people, to make people feel calmer or more informed. And she would use that word, "love." And it has absolutely shaped my work, more and more.

Tippett: You quote your grandmother a lot. She's very quotable. She was clearly a very formidable woman.

Stevenson: She had a very long view. I think she understood the power of an eternal witness. I mean, that's the thing that I appreciated about my grandmother. She actually interacted with us in this way that was meant to be eternal. And I think she was brilliant at achieving that, in both the things she said, but also in the things she

did. And I meet a lot of older Black people, in particular, that seem to have that instinct for creating these memories that just shape you for the rest of your life.

Tippett: So you speak occasionally — and I think very much, these days — about that long arc of the moral universe, that sense of time and that sense of the work ahead of us, generationally, in this country — in our world, too, but in this country. And I just, I do feel like that is in relief now. And so what I really want to do, as we keep speaking here for this hour or so, is really draw out your perspective on that, through the particular place that you have inhabited, in your work and in our society, where you've been proximate — to use your language — and then pushing closer and closer to what are the root causes — what's behind this? — and kind of this relentless moving towards the heart of the matter and wanting to address this, because could you ever have imagined, when you started the Equal Justice Initiative, which was about being a lawyer and working with people on death row, that then today, somebody would go to your website and there's a memorial, and there's a museum? *[laughs]*

And so I'm curious, if you reflect, at this remove, on that evolution, what's that been about, at heart?

Stevenson: You know, it's such a terrific question, because you're absolutely right — this has definitely been a journey of discovery. Had we succeeded with just providing legal services to people and achieving the things that we thought needed to be achieved, we wouldn't have kept looking. But of course, that wasn't sufficient. And so you keep digging. And I would not have imagined that, today, I'd be working on a museum, a memorial, and these reports.

But it really was about a decade ago, I guess, or maybe 12 years ago, that I began to question whether the law was enough. And it was largely triggered by this awakening that, even though I'm a product of *Brown v. Board of Education*, about 12 years ago I realized that I don't think we could win *Brown v. Board of Education* today.

Tippett: Gosh.

Stevenson: I don't think our court would do anything that disruptive on behalf of disfavored people, on behalf of marginalized people. And that terrified me. But it also energized me to recognize that we were going to have to get outside the court and create a different consciousness. The question for me is, why wouldn't we win? And it's because we haven't really reckoned with these larger issues of what it means to be a country dealing with our history of racial inequality.

Tippett: Right. And I think that language you used, about — even you, because you are a product of this culture, as well, when you thought about people in prison, you didn't think about their humanity, you thought about what they'd done. And even how we use — I mean, you speak a lot about the narrative. Even how we use the language of — it's not somebody who stole something; it's a thief, it's a murderer.

And also, somewhere, you said slavery doesn't end, it evolves. And you go back to lynching, and there's this presumptive criminality just by virtue of being Black that then turns up in who is in our prisons and who's on death row. And what you uncover is this callousness — extreme callousness and coarseness and dehumanization that is so at odds with who we want to think of ourselves and want to be, I believe, as a country.

Stevenson: And I think a lot of it has to do with how we're governed, how we're acculturated. I think, in the 1970s, part of what happened is that our political leaders began relying on the politics of fear and anger as a way of shaping policy. And so we declare this misguided war on drugs. We say that people who are drug dependent and drug addicted are criminals, and we're going to use the criminal justice system to respond to that problem. Now, we could have said, and should have said, that people suffering from addiction and dependency have a health problem, and we need a health care response. But that's not going to generate the kind of energy that demonizing people for addiction will.

That's how we got to the point where we were putting people in prison forever, life without parole, for writing a bad check. I've represented people who were serving life without parole for simple possession of marijuana, taking away the minimum age, or trying children as adults. When you step back and you think about it, it makes no sense. And there are 13 states today that have no minimum age for trying a child as an adult.

And you can't really rationalize that unless you are distracted by these narratives of fear and anger. And I think that is part of the condition that gives rise to the brutality and the cruelty that I've seen in my work. And of course, when you are governed by fear and anger, when you're shaped by fear, you tolerate things you would never otherwise tolerate. You accept things you would never otherwise accept.

And I think, for me, getting at that, pushing people to step back from fear and anger, getting people to think more critically about this larger legacy of racial inequality, is the priority now. And that's what led me into the racial justice work that we've been doing and this effort at

trying to pull apart American history in a new way, in a different way than the way we have tended to hear it.

Tippett: Right — as something we have to reckon with, must reckon with on our way to reckoning with all of that, all of these what, in fact, are consequences.

Stevenson: And so the reckoning that has to happen in this country has to be rooted in a moral awareness, a moral awakening; a consciousness that evolves in a way that we begin to do the things that we must do if we're going to not only save the country, but save ourselves. And this is where, for me, faith traditions become so important, because in the faith tradition I grew up in, you can't come into the church and say, "Oh, I want salvation and redemption and all the good stuff, but I don't want to admit to anything bad. I don't want to have to talk about anything bad that I've done."

The preachers will tell you, it doesn't work like that. You've got to first repent, and you've got to confess. And they try to make you understand that the repentance and confession isn't something you should fear, but something you should embrace, because what it does is open up the possibility of redemption and salvation. And we kind of have a very religious society, where we talk about these concepts on Sundays, on Saturdays and whatever, but we haven't embraced them. We haven't employed them in our collective lives. And I think that has to change.

[music: "Nothing Nothing At All" by Blue Dot Sessions]

Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*, today with lawyer Bryan Stevenson.

[music: "Nothing Nothing At All" by Blue Dot Sessions]

I see you having played a role, having a voice that is so important, and I'm not sure that people point this out to you, bringing a word like "mercy"; using the language of redemption. This is significant because, I think — you went to law school because — you and I are about the same age. That's how you were going to change the world, right? — changing legal structures. And here's something you wrote — and I'm pretty sure this is from *Just Mercy* — which gets at this, the life-giving possibility in us picking this up.

You said, "We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy. And we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others."

You end this by saying: “We all need justice,” you said, “the closer we get to mass incarceration and extreme levels of punishment.” But I think, in wider and wider circles, we see this. “It’s necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice, and — perhaps — we all need some measure of unmerited grace.”

Stevenson: I really believe that. I really do. And I think for me it makes it easier when I have to challenge people, when I have to go into places where there’s a lot of hostility, where there’s a lot of resistance, where people look at you as if you’re evil. It makes it easier because I’ve never thought what I do, I do just for my clients or I’m doing just for the people who I represent or the people who know I care about them. I’ve always felt like my work, our work, is for everybody. That is, we’re trying to save everyone from the corruption, from the agony of living lives where there is no mercy, where there is no grace, where there is no justice, where we are indifferent to suffering. Those kinds of lives ultimately lead to violence and animosity and bigotry, and I don’t want that for anybody.

And I do talk a lot, obviously, about my clients; those are the people I have to advocate for, and when I say that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done, I am thinking specifically about them. But I’m also thinking about everybody else. I mean, I believe that for every human being. I think if someone tells a lie, they’re not just a liar, that if someone takes something, they’re not just a thief. If you kill someone, you’re not just a killer.

But it’s also true, a nation that committed genocide against Indigenous people, a nation that enslaved Black people for two and a half centuries, a nation that tolerated mob lynchings for nearly a century, a nation that created apartheid and segregation laws throughout most of the 20th century, can also be more than that racist history suggests.

Tippett: That worst thing we did. You always say that none of us is defined by the worst thing ...

Stevenson: Exactly. And that’s the reason why we ought to find the courage to acknowledge the wrongfulness of those things, so that we can then embrace what’s right, what’s corrective, what’s redemptive, what’s restorative. And I do want that for everyone.

Tippett: You gave the commencement address at Harvard Law School, your alma mater, which I think you said you’d never turned up to graduation when you actually graduated from there.

Stevenson: *[laughs]* That’s true.

Tippett: You were off pursuing your found vocation.

Stevenson: Yes, exactly.

Tippett: I feel like you offered some — I mean, I bet you get in conversations like this all the time, too — like people say, “What do I do?” “So give me a tip,” or, “What’s the first step?” *[laughs]* But you did actually lay out a four-point program, which I think is helpful, understanding that this is not a four-point program for what you do this week, but stepping onto that long arc of the moral universe, right? And the first part is about staying proximate. Your grandmother, again, said to you, “You can’t understand the most important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close.”

Stevenson: And for me, it is an important idea. It’s interesting, because in science and in research, proximity is baked into the very heart of the discipline. If we create a cure for this virus, it’s because the researchers and scientists understand the details of this virus with such precision and clarity that they’ve been able to create an answer. Innovation comes, in science, by the people who are able to pull something apart with such insight and knowledge that they can then innovate, and they can create new — it’s how we make progress. And I think the same is true in the justice sector, that we cannot make progress in creating a more just society, healthier communities, if we allow ourselves to be disconnected from the people who are most vulnerable — from the poor, the neglected, the incarcerated, the condemned. If you’re trying to make policies in the criminal justice space but have never met someone who’s in a jail or prison, you haven’t been to a jail or prison, you’re going to fail.

I think sometimes, when you’re trying to do justice work, when you’re trying to make a difference, when you’re trying to change the world, the thing you need to do is get close enough to people who are falling down, get close enough to people who are suffering, close enough to people who are in pain, who’ve been discarded and disfavored — to get close enough to wrap your arms around them and affirm their humanity and their dignity. And that’s why, whether you graduate from Harvard Law School or you graduate from college, whether you’re a social worker or a teacher, you should not underestimate the power you have to affirm the humanity and dignity of the people who are around you. And when you do that, they will teach you something about what you need to learn about human dignity, but also what you can do to be a change agent.

Tippett: They will show you.

Stevenson: Yes, they will absolutely show you.

Tippett: Proximity will reveal the — yeah. And another of your pieces of counsel is, Be willing to do inconvenient and uncomfortable things, which may also entail getting what feels like unsafe. And we are so segregated, in so many ways, in this society, so thrust together with people who are like us, that I feel like getting proximate in this culture may often mean getting uncomfortable ...

Stevenson: Absolutely.

Tippett: ...and inconvenienced.

Stevenson: I think it requires a kind of intentionality. I mean, human beings are biologically programmed to do what's comfortable. We do what's convenient. It's just how we get through ...

Tippett: What feels safe.

Stevenson: ... which means that, to do something uncomfortable or inconvenient, we're going to have to make a choice. We're going to have to make a decision to do what everything around us is telling us we shouldn't do.

But it is that process that yields progress. I mean, athletes understand this. I mean, every great performer understands that the path to greatness requires an uncomfortable commitment, sometimes even a preoccupation with the skills necessary to deliver the artistry that you want to deliver. And I just think the same is true when we're trying to increase the health quotient, increase the justice quotient, in the communities where we live.

[music: "Dirty Wallpaper" by Blue Dot Sessions]

Tippett: After a short break, more with Bryan Stevenson.

[music: "Dirty Wallpaper" by Blue Dot Sessions]

I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*, today exploring Bryan Stevenson's spirit and his moral imagination. He's brought the language of mercy and redemption into American culture in recent years, through his book *Just Mercy* and his tireless work as a lawyer for people who, as he says, have been defined by the worst thing they've ever done — people on death row, people who are mentally ill and incarcerated, and children being tried as adults. The Equal Justice Initiative that he founded in Montgomery, Alabama, has also created the groundbreaking National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and The Legacy Museum. In October, 2021, that museum reopened with dramatically expanded space and exhibits. It is a new kind of experience for engaging the full and ongoing legacy of slavery. I spoke with Bryan Stevenson in November, 2020.

I'm so relieved that the election is over. I mean, just setting aside the actual details of the election, *[laughs]* which are significant, but also because I just feel like 2020 — March, April, May, just those months alone — it laid out so much for us to just dig into.

Stevenson: That's right, because that's the other thing I talk about, is you have to be hopeful. And I do think that's important in this moment, as well, because there's so much that we see that is dispiriting. We do these web articles at EJI — we post stuff, and we do a daily calendar thing. And I was just working on one today, about some of these comments by law enforcement officers, over the last couple of weeks, and I just find it heartbreaking.

We had a police officer in Alabama say, "Join me. I'm going to Washington. I'm going to shoot Democrats, I'm going to kill these socialists, and we're not going to leave any survivors." And some of this rhetoric — it was a police officer in Wilmington, North Carolina, that welcomed a war, and he couldn't wait to kill Black people. And you read some of this stuff, and it's so disheartening to imagine that we have people who carry those kinds of sentiments in positions like that.

But I do think it's important that we stay hopeful about our capacity to overcome that bigotry. And I am persuaded that hopelessness is the enemy of justice; that if we allow ourselves to become hopeless, we become part of the problem. I think you're either hopeful, or you're the problem. There's no neutral place. Injustice prevails where hopelessness persists. And if I've inherited anything from the generation who came before me, I have inherited their wisdom about the necessity of hope.

Tippett: I think you meant "justice prevails where hopefulness persists." Is that what you ...

Stevenson: Injustice persists —

Tippett: Injustice prevails where hopelessness persists, yes, OK.

Stevenson: *[laughs]* It's a lawyerly way of saying something that should be said a lot — but I say it that way only because we've been dealing with injustice, in so many places, for so long. And if you try to dissect why is this still here, it's because people haven't had enough hope and confidence to believe that we can do something better. I think hope is our superpower. I mean, hope is the thing that gets you to stand up when others say, Sit down. It's the thing that gets you to speak when others say, Be quiet.

I never met a lawyer until I got to Harvard Law School. I had to hope I could be something I'd actually never seen anybody like me be. You know, we built this museum and memorial. *[laughs]* I didn't know anything about museums and memorials, but I had this kind of idea that we could create a space that might be a truth-telling space that might help people reckon with this past. And because we had this hope — even starting an organization like this in a place like this, it didn't make sense if there wasn't a hope dynamic pushing you.

And I think we have to have that. I get worried when I meet hopeless teachers or hopeless lawyers or hopeless politicians or hopeless advocates. Those are people who are not going to help us advance justice in the world.

Tippett: The other thing to say about that, or one other thing to say about — the example you gave of the people who are the most hateful and the most consumed by that fear and anger so that they have become it, they're the ones who get quoted in the newspaper, right? They represent an extreme. And so, you know, for me, one of the many humbling things about this year is really, really knowing myself to be white and interrogating what that means. And I insist on using the language of "we," thinking about that long arc, because our descendants are going to see a "we," an "us." But the white "we" has a lot of work to do in this country, right? And it's easy for people who feel, I don't know, a little bit more enlightened — it's easy for white people to start pointing at the bad white people, like that person you just mentioned.

Stevenson: Sure, sure.

Tippett: And that doesn't get us anywhere ...

Stevenson: It does not.

Tippett: ...because we all have work to do. And so I'm curious about how you apply what you learned on death row *[laughs]* or working with people who are criminals or are being treated as criminals by our justice system — that none of us is defined by our worst actions. I feel like that is such an important equation for our common life right now.

Stevenson: Well, I think you're absolutely right. And I am more interested in what the "we" does, what the collective "we" does, than what the outliers do. And I think one of the challenges of this era of social media is that everybody has a platform, and we do tend to highlight and emphasize the extreme voices and perspectives. I think the media does that; I think the larger culture kind of runs to that. But I do think it's important to push back against that, even as we think about how to repair much of the damage that has been done.

During the 1950s and '60s, you had all of these people engaging in horrific criminal acts — the white men who killed Emmett Till; who killed the civil rights workers in Selma; who blew up the church. And 20, 30 years later, we thought that the response to that should be, we should go prosecute those people. And then we had these prosecutions of older white men in 80s or 90s, who were Klan members, and we thought that if we convicted them, that we could exonerate the society. And I'm not opposed to those convictions or to those prosecutions, but I think it's a mistake to think that they acted in a setting where only they were culpable. It was the politicians, who gave permission to people to talk and think and believe these thoughts; it's the larger we, who created an environment where we were saying, "Segregation forever."

And just as then, we are now. When we give in to rhetoric, and we start talking about using violence to silence those whose positions and opinions we disagree with, when we engage in rhetoric that tries to legitimate the conduct of people who are advancing ideologies that are destructive and violent and bigoted, we become complicit. And we have to understand that. And it's not just the people who have power, the elected officials — it's everybody else, because we give those people the power that they have.

And in our museum, we really thought about this, because when I started talking about enslavement, the first thing you'd say is, "Well, my people never owned slaves," as if somehow that exonerates them. And the political consequences of driving 6 million Black people out of the Deep South, into the margins of communities in the North and West, are evident in the political contours of our society today, the legacy of segregation, right? And we try to run from it: "I didn't do that."

I can't do that. I have to own that.

Tippett: And you especially can't do it if the goal is not just the punitive or just getting justice in a narrow sense — if the goal is repair and repentance and redemption.

Stevenson: That's exactly right. That's exactly right. And in fact, what you ought to be doing is thinking about, OK, in what ways am I contributing to this? We have a project that we're starting. It's called the Truth and Justice Project. And we're actually going to be working with institutions, asking them to focus on their institution — to kind of step back, put aside all the global stuff.

And it began, really, in 2018, when we were opening the memorial. The local newspaper, the *Montgomery Advertiser*, was kind of

complaining a little bit. They said, “Oh, we know you’re going to talk to *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and all of these other — but you won’t talk to us.” [laughs]

And I said, “Well, let’s have a conversation about that.” And we showed them their coverage of lynchings that took place in this area, early in the 20th century. And you read it, and it breaks your heart. They were absolutely encouraging this violence. And I said, “If you ask me why don’t I trust you, it’s rooted in my knowledge of this history.”

And we started a dialogue, and the editor didn’t know about any of that stuff, but when we confronted him, he says, “You know what? We have to apologize.” I said, “I think that would be really powerful.” And on the opening, they did this massive headline, massive frontpage, a whole edition dedicated to apologizing for their role in contributing to racial terror, lynchings, in this community. And it was really powerful.

But this project that we’re doing is a project that is going to encourage these institutions to do exactly what the *Advertiser* did in that setting. You know, we have banks that denied mortgages and loans to Black veterans after World War II and created the wealth gap that we still see today. And I think they need to own that. We have institutions in this country that refused to provide coverage on insurance claims when Black people were forced off their lands as a result of racial violence. And I think we need to own that. We’ve got railroads —

Tippett: Oh yeah, there’s so much. I think of Marilyn Nelson. Do you know her — the poet? She’s been working with a church in Connecticut, a church in Connecticut that’s going back to their original documents and how many slaves the pastor owned.

But yeah, I love this. I think this is a move — we just did something, just a couple weeks ago, with John Biewen, just talking about — and he grew up in Minnesota — talking about being white and just interrogating the history of your town. And in fact, the history of his town is where the greatest massacre in American history came of Indian tribal peoples, signed by, set forth by Abraham Lincoln, in the middle of the Civil War. [Editor’s note: Mankato, Minnesota, John Biewen’s hometown, was the site of the largest mass execution in U.S. history.]

But just uncovering that, just as we would in a family, if we wanted to heal our family, we would start to tell the truth about what really happened.

Stevenson: Absolutely. And it’s the way we get better. You know, 12-step programs are built on this idea that, first, you have to

acknowledge the problem.

Tippett: Confession.

Stevenson: Confession: “I am an alcoholic.” If you’re unwilling to say that, AA can’t help you. And we are a society that has been racially unjust. We have done horrible — and we have to be willing to say that.

Tippett: We haven’t even said it out loud.

Stevenson: We haven’t said it out loud. Part of the idea for the museum was — I went to the Holocaust Museum. You get to the end of that — it’s a narrative museum, and we don’t have many cultural spaces in this country that I define as narrative spaces. The Holocaust Museum is an exception. And when you get to the end of the Holocaust Museum, you’re motivated to say, “Never again,” regardless of what your background is.

Tippett: I’ve heard so many people who speak about coming to your museum, to the lynching — do you call it “the lynching museum,” The Legacy —

Stevenson: It’s actually two institutions —

Tippett: There’s the memorial, right?

Stevenson: So The National Memorial for Peace and Justice is the institution that honors victims of lynching. The Legacy Museum is actually the institution that tells the stories —

Tippett: Enslavement to mass incarceration.

Stevenson: Yes, exactly.

Tippett: But people speak about that the way they speak about making a pilgrimage.

Stevenson: Yeah, and for me, that’s really important. I think the journey is important, and going to the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, were transformative experiences for me. And I think this country needs that kind of transformation, that kind of reckoning. And unfortunately, we’ve made it harder than it needs to be, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t do it. And that’s certainly what we’re trying to achieve in our spaces.

Tippett: So one of the weird things about the world right now is that I’m in my basement, and I don’t have a clock right here, which I would have in the studio. So can you tell me what time it is?

Stevenson: *[laughs]* I think we are at 10 after the hour.

Tippett: 3:10, OK. So can we keep going for 15 minutes or so?

Stevenson: Sure.

Tippett: OK; all right. So there's a story you tell that I just, I love, about when Rosa Parks used to come to town from Detroit. And she had some friends there, and you knew these women, and they would — oh, one of them was Johnnie Carr, I guess the driving force behind the Montgomery Bus Boycott. And they would invite you, not necessarily to take part, but to listen, *[laughs]* and that Rosa Parks asked you, at some point, to tell her about the Equal Justice Initiative. And what did she say?

Stevenson: Well, you know, I was really privileged to be nurtured by this community of mostly women who had been so staunch and resolute to achieve justice. And yes, Miss Carr invited me to go over to a woman named Virginia Durr. Virginia Durr was a white woman whose husband, Clifford Durr, had represented Dr. King. And she lived in a part of Montgomery called Cloverdale. And Miss Carr told me Miss Parks was coming to town, and she said, "Do you want to come over and just listen?" And I said, of course. And then every now and then, she would do this; she'd say, "Now, Bryan, what does the word 'listen' mean?" And then I'd have to explain that I knew *[laughs]* I wasn't supposed to say anything.

And I remember that day so clearly. I sat out on Ms. Durr's porch with Rosa Parks and Miss Carr, and they just talked and talked and talked. And the unbelievable thing about their conversation was that none of them were talking about all the extraordinary things they had done in the '50s and '60s and '70s. You know, when Miss Parks left Montgomery, she went on to work with John Conyers. She went on to do a lot of work in the social justice movement. She was involved with Malcolm X, she was involved with a lot of people, trying to advance racial equality after Montgomery.

But they weren't talking about any of those things. They were all talking about the things they still wanted to do. And there was this hopefulness in their conversation, and it was so powerful. And I just sat there, *[laughs]* soaking it in.

And so when she turned to me and said, "OK, Bryan, now tell me about the Equal Justice Initiative. Tell me what you're trying to do," I mean, the first thing I had to do was to look at Miss Carr to see if I had permission to speak. And she nodded, *[laughs]* and then it just came just tumbling out of me. I started giving Miss Parks my rap. I said, "Well, we're trying to end the death penalty. We're trying to help people on death row. We're trying to challenge conditions of

confinement. We're trying to help the mentally ill. We're trying to help children. We're trying to help the poor." I'm just throwing all of these things out. *[laughs]*

And when I finished giving her my rap, she looked at me and she just said, "Mm-mm-mm. That's going to make you tired, tired, tired." *[laughs]* And Miss Carr leaned forward, and she said, "That's why you've got to be brave, brave, brave." And I'll never forget it, because I do think, in many ways, what these women taught me was the necessity of courage if you're going to advance justice, if you're going to be even a complete human being. Sometimes it takes courage to love, to just be who you should be to the people you care about.

Tippett: I guess you're legendarily hardworking, dedicated, devoted to your vocation, which is what I want to call it. How do you stay brave? How do you nurture that in yourself? Because I know — there's a moment, and you speak about this, about realizing — you were, I think, at the execution of someone — Jimmy Dill, is that right? Am I remembering that right?

Stevenson: That's right, yep. That's right. That's right.

Tippett: Thinking and dwelling on — reasonably — the brokenness all around you, in the system, in the people, and then understanding that that brokenness was in you and that, in some way that doesn't make a lot of rational sense, that that realization was part of what kept you connected and kept you going.

Stevenson: I do think what sustains me is this knowledge I have that it's really the broken among us that can contribute a lot to our quest for full, equal justice. I mean, when you're broken, you actually, you know something about what it means to be human. You know something about grace. You learn something about mercy. You learn something about forgiveness. It's the broken among us that can teach us some things.

And knowing that you don't have to be perfect and complete gives you a way of moving through challenge that would be hard if you think that that's not something that's possible. And so I tell my young staff, you can't do this work, you can't be in some of the painful places we're in, you can't hold children who've been abused and not be impacted by that. You're going to shed some tears. You are. And you're going to be overwhelmed, you're going to get tired, you're going to get pushed down — all of those things are going to happen. And it doesn't mean you're weak. It doesn't mean that you're not up to the task. It doesn't mean you're incompetent or incapable. It just means you're a human being. And that's what I want — I want human beings.

And so what sustains me is, in part, this knowledge that I can't always feel confident and sure and clear, that there are going to be times when it's uncertain what's going to happen. And I've tried to appreciate that. And I do feel, at times, lifted up by the spirit of people who have endured way more. You know, I talked to John Lewis just before he passed away, and it was such an honor knowing him. And I was just saying to him, "I feel so privileged, as a result of what you did." And I told him, "I've had hard days. I get death threats and all that kind of stuff. But I've never had to say, 'My head is bloodied but not bowed,' like you did."

And when you realize that those injuries created spaces that some of us could occupy that were a little less violent, you begin to appreciate what you can do and why you shouldn't feel overwhelmed and why you shouldn't feel knocked down.

When we opened the memorial in 2018, it was just such a surreal experience to have 25,000 people come to Montgomery to see these spaces that we had created. And I wanted everything to be perfect — we had all of these great thinkers and civil rights activists, and musicians were coming to perform. And on the morning of the dedication at the memorial, it looked like it was going to rain, and I'd been just terrified at the idea that it would rain and mess up this experience. I was so worried about it, and the clouds were just getting darker and darker.

And just as I was getting ready to stand up to speak, I mean, the clouds just opened up, and all of a sudden, it was a downpour. And this thing I had been dreading all of a sudden became something completely different. And I was listening to these raindrops hit the top of this memorial, and looking up at all of these monuments, which are dedicated to lynching victims. And all of a sudden, I had this awareness that this wasn't something I should fear, that this wasn't something I should dread. In that moment, it didn't sound like rain hitting the top of the memorial. It sounded like tears being shed by the thousands of Black people whose lives have never been honored, whose names have never been mentioned, and it sounded like they were shedding tears of joy that there was this moment of reckoning.

And that's the gift I think I've been given by this legacy, by this ancestry that celebrates struggling for justice, that honors struggling for justice. And I hold onto that. I do. And it sustains me in times when I need it and absolutely compels me to keep doing as much as I can.

Tippett: You know, I do have to say, you use the word "beauty" a lot. I also have the sense, you know, you see the beauty that comes from

what happens to people when they come to the memorial, the beauty that comes from truth-telling. And I just sense, I sense, kind of delving into you, that that also sustains you, whether you're even conscious of that or not.

Stevenson: Oh, it absolutely does. I mean, I feel like that's the great joy of my work, is that I find beauty in places where people think beauty can't exist. I've found it on death row. I've found it in the lives of people who've been told that they're so beyond hope and redemption and purpose that they should be killed. I've found it in places of extreme poverty. I've found it in places that have gone through incredible challenges as a result of injustice and bigotry. And yet, there it is.

Tippett: So here's my last question. You know, I think a lot about what are the callings for this time, callings, being alive at this time. And I think there are so many of them. And I hear one in your phrase, "we have to be stone catchers." *[laughs]* I wonder if you would just reflect on what you mean when you say that and if there's a way you would want to expand on callings for this time.

Stevenson: Well, I do think we're at a time when it's just become so easy to judge people in these really harsh and extreme ways. And even people of faith have been pulled into this habit, this instinct for condemning the others who don't share their beliefs and views; for reducing people to their worst act. And I've always been struck by that parable, that scripture, that story where Jesus encounters the woman who's been caught in adultery. And what's powerful about it is, no one says, "Oh, she didn't do it." It's not an innocence story. That's not part of it. And those who are there to judge her say that the law says we should stone her to death. And the scripture reveals that Jesus says, Well, let he of you who is without sin cast the first stone. And they're convicted by that, because they know that none of them is sinless. And they one by one put their stones down, and they walk away. And then Jesus says to the woman, Go, and sin no more. And it's a powerful story about mercy and redemption and grace.

And what I've realized is that in this era, I don't think our righteous would put their stones down. I think that we have too many people who would, despite that exhortation, would still cast the stones. They feel insulated from the hypocrisy and judgment that that implies. And so I think it's incumbent on some of us to intervene — to catch the stones. It doesn't mean that those vulnerable should be condemned, it just means that some of us are going to have to be stone catchers.

And that's the idea that I've come to embrace, is that just because people won't recognize what the right and just thing is to do — that it's

not right and just to cast those stones — doesn't mean that that's the end of the struggle. We have to stand up, we have to step in front of those who are vulnerable, and we have to catch those stones. And I think that is one of the callings for this moment.

And I think the other calling, for me, is that we have to begin this process of truth-telling, that we have to recognize that we can't get well if we don't diagnose the disease. I mean, we have this instinct for quick fix and quick cure. And if you don't know what's wrong with you, you're not going to know whether the cure that you've been prescribed is sufficient. And I think this process of diagnosing the many ways that we are not healthy is not something we should fear but something we should embrace, because once we've done that, I think we have the capacity, the genius, the strength, the ingenuity, the wherewithal to begin to address these maladies, this illness, and emerge as a healthier society, a healthier nation, a healthier place in the world for everyone. And that's what animates the work that we're trying to do now.

[music: "Gbfsysih" by Blue Dot Sessions]

Tippett: Bryan Stevenson is founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, based in Montgomery, Alabama. Find out about everything they do at **eji.org**. His book is *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*.

[music: "Dirty Wallpaper" by Blue Dot Sessions]

The On Being Project is: Chris Heagle, Laurén Drommerhausen, Erin Colasacco, Eddie Gonzalez, Lilian Vo, Lucas Johnson, Suzette Burley, Zack Rose, Colleen Scheck, Julie Siple, Gretchen Honnold, Jhaleh Akhavan, Pádraig Ó Tuama, Ben Katt, Gautam Srikishan, Lillie Benowitz, April Adamson, Ashley Her, Matt Martinez, and Amy Chatelaine.

The On Being Project is located on Dakota land. Our lovely theme music is provided and composed by Zoë Keating. And the last voice that you hear, singing at the end of our show, is Cameron Kinghorn.

On Being is an independent, nonprofit production of The On Being Project. It is distributed to public radio stations by WNYC Studios. I created this show at American Public Media.

Our funding partners include:

The Fetzer Institute, helping to build the spiritual foundation for a loving world. Find them at fetzer.org;

Kalliopeia Foundation, dedicated to reconnecting ecology, culture, and spirituality, supporting organizations and initiatives that uphold a sacred relationship with life on Earth. Learn more at kalliopeia.org;

The George Family Foundation, in support of the Civil Conversations Project;

The Osprey Foundation, a catalyst for empowered, healthy, and fulfilled lives;

The Lilly Endowment, an Indianapolis-based, private family foundation dedicated to its founders' interests in religion, community development, and education;

And the Ford Foundation, working to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement worldwide.

Books & Music

Recommended Reading

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption

Author: Bryan Stevenson

The On Being Project is an affiliate partner of Bookshop.org and Amazon.com. Any earnings we receive through these affiliate partnerships go into directly supporting The On Being Project.

Music Played

Into the Trees

Artist: KEATING,ZOE

Little Rock

Artist: Blue Dot Sessions

Lemuel

Artist: Blue Dot Sessions

Man Made Object

Artist: GoGo Penguin