



PARKER PALMER IS A XXX

SUBJECT

Parker Palmer

INTERVIEWER

Nathan Sclaro

LOCATION

Madison, USA

WEATHER

xxx

OCCUPATION

Human rights lawyer

PHOTOGRAPHER

David Nevala

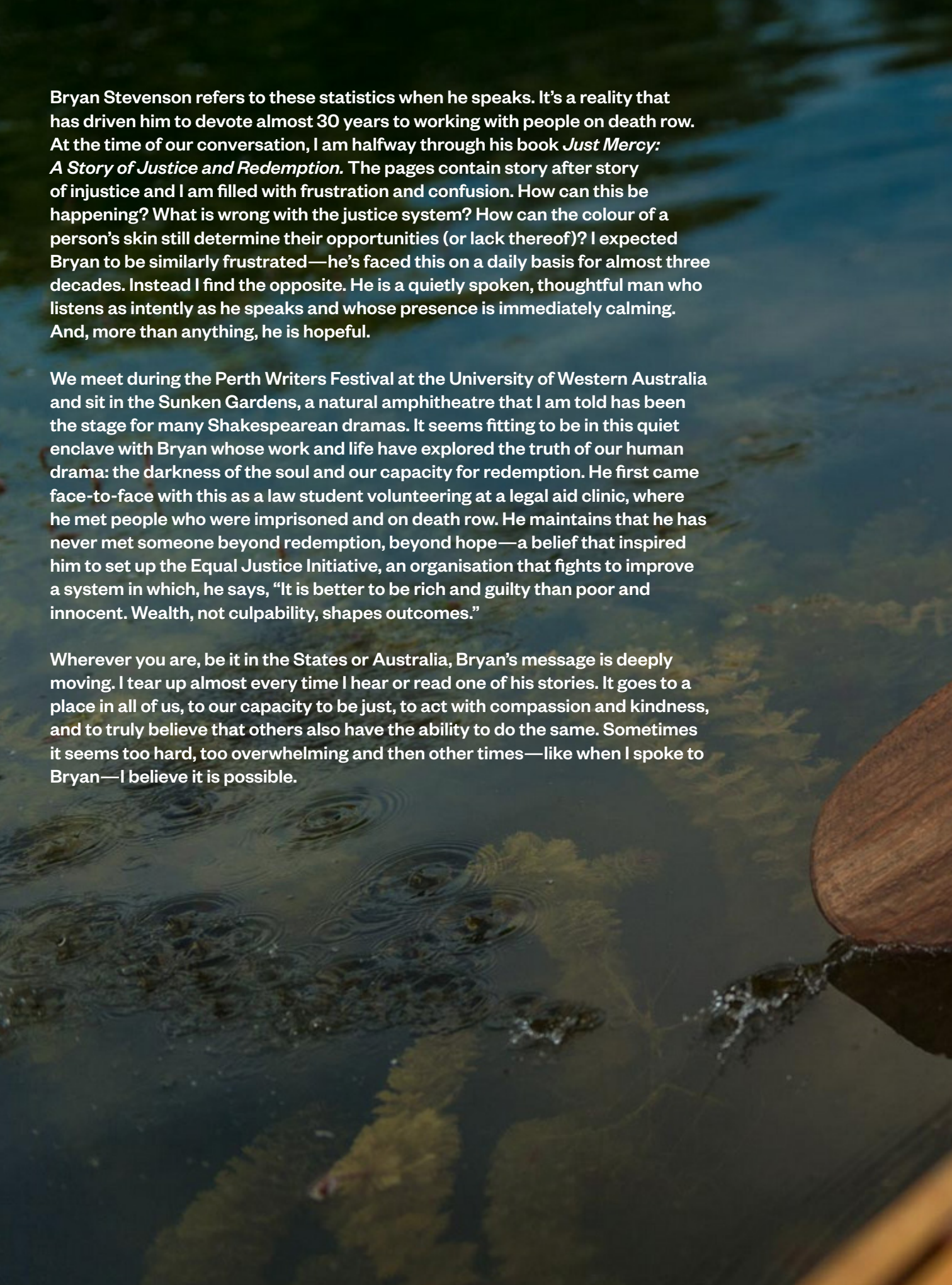
DATE

xxx 2015

UNEXPECTED

xxx





Bryan Stevenson refers to these statistics when he speaks. It's a reality that has driven him to devote almost 30 years to working with people on death row. At the time of our conversation, I am halfway through his book *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. The pages contain story after story of injustice and I am filled with frustration and confusion. How can this be happening? What is wrong with the justice system? How can the colour of a person's skin still determine their opportunities (or lack thereof)? I expected Bryan to be similarly frustrated—he's faced this on a daily basis for almost three decades. Instead I find the opposite. He is a quietly spoken, thoughtful man who listens as intently as he speaks and whose presence is immediately calming. And, more than anything, he is hopeful.

We meet during the Perth Writers Festival at the University of Western Australia and sit in the Sunken Gardens, a natural amphitheatre that I am told has been the stage for many Shakespearean dramas. It seems fitting to be in this quiet enclave with Bryan whose work and life have explored the truth of our human drama: the darkness of the soul and our capacity for redemption. He first came face-to-face with this as a law student volunteering at a legal aid clinic, where he met people who were imprisoned and on death row. He maintains that he has never met someone beyond redemption, beyond hope—a belief that inspired him to set up the Equal Justice Initiative, an organisation that fights to improve a system in which, he says, “It is better to be rich and guilty than poor and innocent. Wealth, not culpability, shapes outcomes.”

Wherever you are, be it in the States or Australia, Bryan's message is deeply moving. I tear up almost every time I hear or read one of his stories. It goes to a place in all of us, to our capacity to be just, to act with compassion and kindness, and to truly believe that others also have the ability to do the same. Sometimes it seems too hard, too overwhelming and then other times—like when I spoke to Bryan—I believe it is possible.

*“If somebody tells a lie, they’re not just a liar.
If somebody takes something, they’re not just a
thief. And even if you kill somebody, you’re not
just a killer.”*



NATHAN SCOLARO: Your writing and speaking over the years has covered so much ground: leadership, education, spirituality, community, democracy. What do you think has been the common denominator in all of it?

PARKER PALMER: Well, it's probably this dance between the inner and the outer worlds that we keep doing whether we're teaching, leading, organising or simply being. I'm fascinated with the way our

inner lives keep co-creating our external world—and how the external world then loops back to co-create us. The image I use is of the Mobius Strip, which is this very unusual 3-D shape that only has one side. If you take a finger and trace what seems to be the outside surface, you suddenly find yourself on what seems to be the inside, and vice versa. So the inside and the outside continually flow into each other and co-create each other. The first time I saw this I thought, *That's exactly how life is!* Whatever is inside of us flows out to help shape the outer world, and whatever is outside flows in to help shape our inner world.

That's such a great metaphor. And I'm particularly fascinated with this in the context of a Western culture that's obsessed with externality, as if only the external world were important, or real or powerful. The obsession and commitment of a lot of Western culture—including Western education—is that what is real and powerful is outside of us. I've wanted to say in all my work, "Well, that's a half-truth, and we need to take the inner dimension with equal seriousness." If we don't, we're going to continue to screw things up.

So what does the inner world bring to something like leadership and teaching? I think a leader or a teacher in a classroom—and teaching is a form of leadership—create environments in which other people must live and move and be. And as a leader, if you're not reflective about your inner life—if you're not in touch with not only all that is true and beautiful in you, but also all that's shadow in you, all that's suspect and dubious—then inevitably you're going to create an environment for other people that has at least as much shadow as light, maybe more.

Right, the people around you feel uneasy, maybe a bit distrusting. Yes. And teachers who only focus on the outer world will stand at the front of a classroom acting as if they have all the knowledge, all the wisdom, all the insight—and their task is to download that to students who are empty vessels and have no knowledge, wisdom and insight of their own. That is of course a terribly mistaken way to teach—the research shows that students don't learn well under those circumstances. They learn best from teachers who are able to intersect what they know and what the subject is about with the students' knowledge and insight and engagement with the world. This way we value what's inside everyone.

The student is not an empty vessel, but a human being with experience and knowledge that can be brought into the teaching and learning equation with great benefit to everyone.

You don't have to be a spiritual person in terms of the world's great religious traditions to get on board with what I'm saying about the inner life. All you need is Socrates, who said the unexamined life is not worth living. And on that I often say, "But if you choose to live an unexamined life, please do not take a job that involves other people, because you're going to do great damage" [laughs].



Bill Miller (11/10)
Drew - 1/10
Jeff Holt
Murray - 5/10
Shirley

Something you write a lot about is living a divided life—living this division between who we are inside and who we are outside. I wanted to know when you first encountered this division in your own life. And maybe how you've sought to bring the two together.

Well, before I go way back to the Stone Age [laughs], I want to say that

this quest for wholeness—for congruence between one's inner and outer life—never really ends. It's not a place you get to.

It's really a matter of asking the right questions, wrapping your life around them, and living into them. Rilke says if you do that, then in some distant day you might find you have lived yourself into an answer—but not an answer that can be put into words.

So for me, I think I began to get my first clues about living a divided life when I was in college or graduate school.

You were studying sociology?

In college I studied sociology and philosophy, and then at Berkley I did a PhD in sociology focusing on religion's role in social change.

I was the first person in my family to go to college, and perhaps that was part of why I felt divided in an academic environment. Even though I was very successful by external measures—awards and fellowships and so forth—inwardly I felt like I didn't belong. For a long time I thought there was something wrong with me. I thought it was a lack of self-confidence. It took me a long time to realise that academia was not my vocation.

I finished my PhD at Berkley in the late 60s. I'd spent five years preparing to become a professor. But instead, in 1969, I moved to Washington, D.C. to become a community organiser working on issues of racial justice and communal harmony. I was driven partly by the fact that the 60s in this country was a time of great turmoil—the racial crisis was deep and profound, as it still is. The war in Vietnam was going on. The cities were burning. And I felt very deeply that my calling was to use my sociology on the streets. That was a step towards bringing my inner life into more congruence with my outer life.

Right.

I spent five years as a community organiser, but I started to feel like a fraud—I was trying to lead people towards something I'd never fully experienced, which was community. I think fraudulence is often a symptom of the divided life: *If anyone ever found out what was going on inside of me, they'd kick me out.* [Laughs].

So you didn't have an experience of community growing up?

I grew up in a typical affluent white suburb where good old American individualism dominated rather than community in any deeply meaningful form. So after five years of community organising, I did another out-of-the-box thing: I took a one-year sabbatical and moved to an intentional community, a Quaker community called Pendle Hill, which was an adult study centre organised like a commune, a kibbutz, an ashram or a monastery—but a monastery where sex was ok [laughs].

Wow. What was that transition like? That's a huge thing to do...

It was deeply challenging, partly because of the economics involved. I had been making a normal salary, but when I went to Pendle Hill in 1975, everyone on staff made the same amount. It didn't matter that I was Dean of Studies, had a PhD from Berkley, that I was 35 and married with three kids. I made

\$2400 a year plus room and board, which was the same that an 18-year-old who came to work in the kitchen or garden made—someone who was there simply because they didn't know what to do next and needed a year to think it through after high school.

So there was this principle of radical economic equality which I really believed in, but which was hard to live by for a 35-year-old guy with three kids who had career aspirations and all kinds of assumptions about his obligations to his family. What was I doing to my career? Was I falling off the radar? Why wasn't I rising in the ranks of anything? I was haunted by these questions. Friends and family would ask me, "What the hell are you doing?" And I'd say, "I really can't explain it in terms that even I understand. All I can tell you is, 'I can't not do it.'"

It was a calling. Right. And today when I talk to younger people about vocation or calling, I eventually ask them, "Is this something you can't not do?" Maybe it seems too risky or you don't understand why you're drawn to it. But if it's something you can't not do, that's a pretty good sign you need to do it, no matter how it looks to other people.

Yeah! And I find I don't know where it's coming from—this "can't not do." It's subconscious. Which makes it really hard to explain, to make people see it's the right thing for you. I think you're right that it comes from the unconscious, from some mysterious place in ourselves. And I think if you're wise, you have to honour that place.

You can't always get out the calculator and add up your reasons. Life doesn't play itself out like a mathematical formula.

We are not machines, we are organisms that have tropisms like plants—we are drawn towards certain things. A plant can't tell you why it keeps reaching towards the sun every morning, but it does. And each of us responds to a different kind of light and moves in that direction at a very cellular level and inarticulate level.

That's beautiful. It makes me think of your book, *Let Your Life Speak*, and the point you make—that the question is not so much "what are you trying to do with your life?" but rather "what is your life trying to do with you?" Yes, and oddly enough—this is a new thought I'm having as we speak—in some ways "let your life speak" is a way of saying "don't always imagine you can put it into words—your life, your actions, your choices, your tropisms." Decipher them, interpret them, try to figure out what they're saying in action, because it ain't going to come in words.

So how long did you live in the Quaker community? It ended up being a total of 11 years. I was there for one year as an adult student and stayed on for 10 more years as dean of studies and writer-in-residence.

And how was it for your wife and children? Was this a sacrifice they had to make for you? Not really. My wife was as eager as I was for an experience of community and an opportunity to pursue her vocation as a crafts person. She'd spent the previous seven years as a stay-at-home mum, and shortly after I became dean of studies, Pendle Hill hired her to head up their arts and crafts program. This not only gave her a chance to work as a potter and weaver, but to discover her own gift for teaching, a vocation she pursued until she retired a few years ago.

As for our three children—who are, of course, three quite different people (among other things, two of them are adopted)—the best generalisation I can make is about their experience at Pendle Hill prior to and after hitting their teenage years. When they were young, my kids loved the place—it was full of “grandmothers,” “grandfathers,” “uncles” and “aunts” who loved them and did kind things for them. But once they got into their teenage years, their friends began wondering about this weird “hippie commune” where we lived.

Where was it? It was set on 20 acres in the middle of a very conventional Philadelphia suburb.

Ha! And so to varying degrees my children, as teenagers, found themselves embarrassed by the alternative lifestyle we were living. Then, when they got to college, things changed again. Suddenly it became “cool” to live the way we lived at Pendle Hill. When they hit their thirties one of my kids said to me, “Pendle Hill gave me the gift of knowing that there is more than one way to live your life. I might not choose to go that way myself, but it’s important to know that I can make lifestyle choices, something a lot of my contemporaries don’t seem to understand.”

And how do you personally reflect on that period of your life? For me, it was a critical decade for several reasons. One is that during my time as a community organiser, I found myself grieving the loss of my teaching role, because I had always thought of myself as being called to be a teacher. But at some point I realised that as an organiser I was still a teacher—I just had different students in a different classroom. I realised whatever role I played I would always be a teacher. At Pendle Hill I had an opportunity to be a teacher in a way that was outside the box of conventional academia. The students who came ranged in age from 18 to 88. They came because they were at some sort of turning point in their lives. They didn’t come for a degree or grades—we didn’t offer those things.

It was education for the sake of the soul, for the mind, the heart, the whole person.

So as dean of studies I had the opportunity to learn and practice a new way to teach. I wasn’t constrained by academic protocols. I had a chance to invent for myself a pedagogy of teaching and learning that I have found enormously satisfying. And it’s the same pedagogy we practice at the Centre for Courage & Renewal, the non-profit I founded 25 years ago.

Ah. The second thing that happened to me in my 10 years at Pendle Hill was in some ways even more fundamental in the shaping of my life. I mean, look at me: a white, middle class, well-educated, straight male who lives in a society that is made to work for people like me. So people like me have a sense of entitlement that is very toxic to other people—and I think ultimately toxic to ourselves. We have this sense that we’re set apart, special, that the normal rules of life don’t apply. Living for a decade in a society of radical economic equality rammed away at my sense of entitlement in ways that helped me come back to health and wholeness and sanity. Because that entitlement stuff is insane. It’s batshit crazy!

[Laughs]. So it let you plant your feet in the ground. Exactly. It was a lot about grounding. It was a life that brought me from “elevations” of various sorts down to the ground, and for that I’m ever-grateful.



Tell me about this philosophy of teaching you developed at Pendle Hill and how it's informed your work at the Centre for Courage & Renewal.

Right. So the Quaker tradition, which has been foundational for me, holds a paradox that I find very powerful. On the one hand it says there is within each person a voice of authority, of truth, an inner teacher. Every person has that. There's no ultimate reference outside of yourself in the form of a pope or an expert. It's not that Quakers don't respect expertise. But in critical moments of life, when your identity and integrity is at stake, when your wellbeing is the central question, the ultimate authority is inside you. That's one pole of the paradox.

The other pole is that not all the voices inside us are voices of truth. We also have voices of ego, of fear, greed, jealousy, et cetera. So it's vital to test what you regard as truth, to sort and sift that truth in community. That's how science has worked from the beginning. Someone comes up with an insight, then you test it in a community of people who are engaged with the same subject. Nobody has the final word, but bit by bit knowledge evolves and brings us a little closer to the mark.

So the Quakers hold this paradox of going inward and outward to find a truth. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr once offered a wonderful definition of paradox. He said, "The opposite of an ordinary fact is a lie, but the opposite of one great truth may be another great truth." I love that. A quick example: are we made for solitude? Absolutely. We're all going to die alone so we better get accustomed to our solitary condition. Are we made for community? Absolutely. We can't do without it!

Yes! Ah, so true. Right? One great truth plus another great truth as "opposites" that are actually complementary. That's paradox. So my teaching approach is really very simple: as a teacher you pose a question, then facilitate a process in which individuals can go deep into their experiences with that question, then create processes where they explore all that with each other. We call these Circles of Trust. They're about people telling you—from their own truths—what they see, what they don't see, what they feel fairly certain about, what they feel doubtful about. Out of that process, truth emerges as the complex thing it is. I have a definition of truth that has served me well over the years:

"Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter conducted with passion and discipline."

Every piece of that is important. If you're talking about things that don't matter, it's not going to take you to truth. If you're talking without passion, that means you're not deeply invested enough to get anywhere near truth. If you're talking without discipline it means it's chaos, random, so truth eludes you.

And then if you believe there's an endpoint to your truth you're never going to really arrive. "You're never going to really arrive." For me, that's precisely right. The "truth" has to be in the process, rather than in the conclusions, because in every field I know anything about, from theology to physics, the conclusions keep changing. You want to live in truth? Then you have to live in the conversation.

That's exactly it. So my beef with traditional academia is that it teaches a lot of conclusions and sends people out as conclusion-repeaters, rather than as people who know how to live in the eternal conversation, who have the skill of being in community with their own voices

and yet attentive to the voices of others. The Circles of Trust we conduct through the Centre for Courage & Renewal teach people how to do this dance of inward journeying regarding things that matter to them, a dance held in community where sorting and sifting goes on. So it's not a community that says, "You're wrong, we're right." It's a community that helps individuals see truth in a larger and brighter light.

And the Centre for Courage & Renewal is running programs in many parts of the world now?

Yes, across the States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, in the UK and South Korea. They usually take place in a retreat environment where we facilitate these Circles of Trust with groups of twenty or thirty people. Some have a focus on leadership, others on vocation, others on finding wholeness in your life and work.

A manifestation of your writing. Yeah! And of the minds and hearts of many other people.

Wonderful. I imagine these Circles of Trust would be important for addressing the darkness in people's inner worlds in particular. Which is something I wanted to talk to you about. I know you've been open about your experiences of depression in the past, and if you're comfortable sharing, I'd like to know what those times were like for you and maybe what kind of role community played in them?

Thank you for the question. It's something I want to talk about, because so many people suffer from depression, and we double down on their suffering when we don't talk about it. I've made three deep dives into clinical depression—twice in my forties and once in my sixties. During

each of those episodes I would wonder repeatedly, Is this the day to end it all?, because the darkness was so deep. One of the ways I make meaning out of what would otherwise be a nihilistic experience is to talk about it. I hope it helps people who are in it see that there is life on the other side.

In the depths of clinical depression, it's not like you're lost in the dark, it's like you've become the dark. I'm eager for people to understand that.

I'm eager for people to understand that. Normally when we have a feeling that's difficult to hold, we have the capacity to step back and look at ourselves and say, "I see what's going on, I see why I'm so devastated. I can see enough light to find a pathway out of this." But when you can't step back and say, "Oh, I see I'm in depression again, and the voice I'm hearing is not mine but the voice of depression"—when you can't do that because you have become the dark, the sense of annihilation is just overwhelming. I hear people say, "I don't understand why so and so committed suicide." Well I understand perfectly. The whole experience is exhausting and annihilating and that person needed the rest.

[Silence]. A very simple answer as to why people commit suicide.

Mmmm. What I don't understand is why and how some people come through to the other side, how they find new life as they emerge from the depths of that darkness.

That's the mystery for you? Yeah, it's powerfully mysterious. I've talked to psychiatrists about it and they've said, "There's a lot we don't understand about this and people who give you definitive answers about where it comes from and how to cure it don't know what they're talking about." I was talking to a therapist just recently and said, "Do you believe it's true that most depressions eventually go away if the person can

How to Change the World

WORDS: BRYAN STEVENSON VIA DUMBO FEATHER
IMAGE: CALEB CHANCEY

A few of us at Dumbo Feather were lucky enough to experience Bryan's powerful closing address at the 2015 Perth Writers Festival. In it he explored four ways that we can all help to build a kinder, more just world in our everyday lives.

ONE: PROXIMITY

Bryan says proximity is essential to creating justice—that we need to get close to a problem and experience it first-hand to find a solution. He believes that trouble arises when we make decisions from afar because it highlights the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Each time Bryan himself has become proximate to someone on death row, it has renewed his commitment to ending the death penalty because he is privy to all the other aspects of that person's humanity—their vulnerabilities, their passions, their kindness, their potential. He believes proximity to an issue gives you nuance and insight that cannot be gained from a distance: you hear things that cannot be heard, you see things that cannot be seen. And often, he says, that is the difference between acting in a just or unjust way.

TWO: CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

Narrative is how we make sense of the world around us. It's how we make sense of ourselves. Bryan believes a big part of changing the world is about changing the stories we tell. First, he says, we need to understand the narrative that is creating a problem—the narrative that is creating divisions or putting something negative into the world. Then we can make the space to introduce a more just and compassionate perspective. He says: "For years we have sustained a narrative of fear and punishment. We've been told that justice needs to be tough, but this has resulted in an increase of lives being destroyed." Bryan believes we all have the power to change the story, and that in doing so we can end the cycle of fear and anger and open the doors to a kinder world.

THREE: BE HOPEFUL

Hope is what makes the impossible possible. It's what keeps Bryan fighting for his clients on death row. And it's what keeps his clients' spirits alive in the face of execution. "Being able to hope even until the last minute that your life might be spared is important," Bryan says. "If I start believing execution is inevitable and stop fighting, then the execution is made all the more unbearable." Bryan believes hope is what has driven all of the extraordinary change that has happened in the world—it has liberated the marginalised and created peace in times of war. When we start to believe a problem is too big and there's nothing we can do about it, injustice prevails. "When we become hopeless," he says, "we become agents of injustice."

FOUR: MAKE YOURSELF UNCOMFORTABLE

Human beings are hardwired to seek comfort. But Bryan believes we cannot make real and lasting change if we choose to stay comfortable. He urges us to make ourselves uncomfortable—to put ourselves in situations that might be difficult to tolerate. When we have that experience of discomfort we are more likely to act on it, we embody the injustice that's potentially taking place and work to change it. Bryan says great movements where justice has prevailed began with people choosing to do uncomfortable things. Going beyond the bounds of routine and convention lets us challenge an unjust system that may well have grown dependent on apathy.



endure it?” And she said, “Yes, that’s been my experience.” I said, “Do you have any clues about how people endure it?” She said, “No,” and I said, “Neither do I.”

Can you talk about what was going on in your life the first time you encountered depression?

Yeah, and this would get us back to the whole discussion of the divided life. In my forties, my depression had partly to do with the fact that I was full of doubt about this “can’t not do” stuff, full of anxiety about the path that I couldn’t not be on. Was I fulfilling my responsibilities? Was I disappearing from the known world? Was I using my gifts in the best possible way? Those questions became so weighty for me that a kind of situational depression kicked in.

Here’s the issue with diagnosing or understanding depression. Some are situational—if you’re in an abusive relationship and something keeps you in it, you’re going to get depressed. Some are bio-chemical and genetic—they run in families and have to do with what’s in your DNA or brain chemistry. And the two interact in very subtle ways. So if you’re in a situational depression you start losing sleep. Maybe you get radical insomnia. That’s going to change your brain chemistry. Then your brain chemistry kicks in to worsen the situation because you can’t think clearly, can’t make good decisions. On the other hand, if your depression starts with DNA or brain chemistry, then you’re going to be led into situational issues that come about because your thinking is skewed. It’s enormously complicated.

What did you need in that time? When you’re deep in depression, when you’ve become the darkness as you say, what do you need?

I’ll give you a very grounded example of what people in depression need—and it comes back to your initial question about the role of community in this.

People in depression need someone, at least one person, who is not afraid of them.

Someone who doesn’t treat depression as if it were a contagious disease, and who is willing to be present to them in the simplest possible ways.

I love to tell the story of a man who was this person during my first bout of depression at Pendle Hill. He asked my permission to do this, and when I said yes, he came to my house every afternoon at about four o’clock, sat me down on a chair, took my shoes and socks off and massaged my feet for about 30 minutes.

Ah! Ah. He was a very intuitive person. He didn’t say many words. He just somehow knew that what I needed more than anything else was a connection to the human race—and he found the only place in my body where I could feel that connection, or feel anything: the soles of my feet. When you’re in depression your body goes dead. Depression is not so much a feeling of sadness as it is the terrifying fact that you can feel nothing at all.

Nothing. Numbness. So he found a way to break through that. He wasn’t afraid of me, and I knew he wasn’t afraid of me. He was simply with me, present to me, and he kept my connection to humanity alive during a deadly time.

A depressed person is in some ways dying, or parts of that person are dying, and there were parts of me that died off in depression—stuff that needed to die off: ego stuff, intellectual stuff, all the oughts and shoulds. That’s another example

of being pulled from dangerous elevations to the ground. A therapist once said to me, “Parker, you seem to treat depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush you. Would it be possible to imagine it as the hand of a friend pressing you down to ground on which it’s safe to stand?”

How powerful. Wow. That image didn’t fix things right away, but over time it became powerfully helpful to me. Being with a depressed person is like sitting at the bedside of a dying person. When you do that you realise two things. First, you don’t have a fix for this problem, so don’t even try. Second, it would be profoundly disrespectful to avert your eyes or leave the room because you can’t bear the sight. What the dying person needs is simple companionship. That’s what this friend at Pendle Hill gave me. He was a lifeline.

Just by being present. That’s so true. Because so often we try to make a positive thing out of tough situations. Yes. A lot of people who came my way said, “Parker, why are you so depressed? You’re such a good guy. Your writing and speaking and teaching have helped so many. And I just felt like I’d defrauded another person. Others would say, “It’s a beautiful day out, why don’t you soak up the sunshine, enjoy the flowers?” That depressed me further because I knew intellectually it was a beautiful day but there was not an atom in my body that could feel the beauty.

What was it like for you on the other side of depression? Have you known when you’re out of it? I think for me one of the first signs of coming out of depression was that my sense of humour returned. But ultimately, the only image I’ve ever been able to come up with is that when I came out of depression I felt more at home in my own skin. That’s been true every time.

And what does that mean for you, to feel at home in your skin? For me it means embracing all that I am.

Wholeness does not mean perfection. It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of my life.

It’s also about self-forgiveness, not taking myself so seriously, being able to smile and say, “There you go again Parker! It’s okay to screw up.” In the larger world, feeling at home means extending that same grace to other people. And more than anything else, feeling at home means relishing the diversity of life on earth and enjoying—profoundly appreciating—the little things. I often get up early to write, and these days I never fail to take time to observe the sunrise because it’s such a great thing to see. I spent many years so eager to get in front of the computer to start writing that I failed to see sunrises. That doesn’t happen any more.

Where do you have your best thoughts? My first response is, “At inconvenient times!” When I have to say to people, “Excuse me, I have to go write this down.” I also have them walking in the woods. I live in a place where there’s lots of natural beauty, water and woods, and I like to do a lot of walking. I also have them in the process of writing. So for me, writing is not about having a bunch of thoughts lined up and then committing them to paper. It’s starting to think with my fingers on the keyboard and finding out what’s in there as I write.

I wanted to talk about the words you use when you write, words like “compassion” and “kindness” and “love.” They’re words that have been watered down a lot in our culture. But when I read them in your work I feel their weight. How do you use those words the way you do?

Well, I try never use to those words in a cheerleading way: “Let’s go out there and love.” “Let’s go out there and be

compassionate.” “Kindness is the way.” I try to use language in a way that reflects the shadow as well as the light. If I find myself writing a lyrical passage on how wonderful life is, there’s something in me that says, “Remember the days you wanted to take your own life,” and let some of that come onto the page as well. The response I get from people is: “Thank you for being honest about the entirety of life, and for not overemphasising one side or the other. You don’t go to gloom and doom, but neither do you go to, ‘Ain’t everything great.’” It’s very interesting to me what happens when you frame things with a kind of honesty that some people might regard as too dark, but a lot of people experience as affirming and encouraging.

What’s most important for me is that I am faithful to my own gifts, faithful to what I perceive as the needs of the world, and faithful to the points where my gifts intersect with those needs in some way that I have something to offer. If on the day I die I can say, “To the best of my ability—cutting myself some slack for my human flaws and fallibilities—I was faithful to my gifts, to the world’s needs as I saw them,” then I can take my final breath with a feeling of satisfaction that I showed up on earth with what I had and offered it up to the world.

Beautiful. What are you still learning at this stage of your life? At 76? What are you learning from the generations coming through?

Well, at the Centre for Courage & Renewal we’ve been reaching out in very systematic ways to the under-40 generation. And it’s been one of the most exciting engagements we’ve had, certainly for me. Four years ago, we gathered a group of young people here at our house to talk in part about the best uses of digital technology in our work, because folks in my generation aren’t up to speed with that. On the second day of our gathering, I was learning so much—I mean, it took me beyond Facebook so I can even Skype with you now, Nathan!

Ah yeah, look at you go! [Laughs]. So I said to these young people, “I have an image I want to share. At age 72, I feel like I’m standing somewhere down the curvature of the earth where I can’t see the same horizon that you can see from where you stand closer to the top. But that same horizon is coming at me whether I know it or not. As long as I’m alive I have to deal with stuff that I can’t see but that’s coming at me. So I need your eyes and ears. I need you to tell me what it is you’re seeing and hearing because I want to engage the world that’s on its way. And I want to help give shape to it on the Möbius Strip.” And I remember adding, “Incidentally, I need you to speak loudly and distinctly because we older people can be hard of hearing!” [Laughs].

[Laughs]. And these younger folks very kindly said, “Well, we need what you have to offer, which is this filtered experience of some of the things we’re dealing with now.” So it became this wonderful generative exchange.

The parts of this rising generation that I interact with give me great hope.

They don’t trust existing institutions any more than I do. But instead of just walking away, they’re inventing new institutional forms, new ways of doing things—some of which are digital, some of which are face-to-face. They’re creating a new world that isn’t dependent on these rapidly failing institutions of ours.

Who would you say has been your greatest teacher?

My dad had an enormous influence on me. He grew up in a blue-collar family in Waterloo, Iowa. During the Great Depression, he went to




Chicago—“the big city”—in search of work, carrying only a high school diploma, and rose over the next 50 years to become owner and CEO of the company that had hired him as a temporary bookkeeper in the early 1930s.

He was a very successful businessman, but he had an amazing ability to avoid telling me what to do about the issues in my young life. Instead, he asked me honest, open questions that evoked that inner teacher. He never laid particular expectations on me, as in, “I want you to do X, Y or Z with your life”—but he surrounded me with a kind of energy field of expectancy that made me feel confident that I grow from the inside out, in my own direction, toward my own tropisms. At the same time,

Dad surrounded me with an unconditional love that made it safe for me to risk failing,

the downside that always comes with the territory called “growing!” I did not have to succeed to “earn” his love. I have no doubt this is why I’ve had a basic trust in life from early on that has made it possible for me to risk, grow, fail and repeat that cycle again and again.

I think the Circle of Trust model is basically an extension of the “safe space” Dad created for me as I was growing up—a space full of expectancy and unconditional regard where people can and do take the risk of growing while being rooted in what is deepest in them. 

THINK

BUSINESS CAN

CHANGE **THE WORLD?**

At Dumbo Feather, we do too.
That's why we're a B Corp.

Find out more at bcorporation.com.au



**Dumbo
Feather** is a certified B Corporation