A Reflection on Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy”

Newton’s Third Law states: “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” More broadly, I take it to mean everything has an opposite, to which it negates for a perfect balance. There are the rich and poor, the black and white, the sweet and sour, the fair and unfair, the merciful and merciless. Within these complete opposites of the spectrum known as life, awe-inspiring people, actions, thoughts, and bonds arise to resolve the inevitable conflicts that surface between such counterparts.

Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy,” a moving account of the eternal battle for justice, paints a picture of contradictory clashes. Stevenson’s most notable points of this journey are the remarkable qualities, links, and experiences of victims that come to light when such conflicts are explored. Perhaps the most prominent are individual dignity, community inclusiveness, and service to others.

Individual dignity, or respecting oneself and recognizing one’s own rights, becomes prominent in Ian Manuel’s case. Although only 13 when sentenced to life without parole for shooting Debbie Baigre, Manuel wasn’t heartless. With his first phone call he called Baigre, who survived, to express his deepest apologies and regret. Acceptance and realization of consequences of this incident demonstrated his impressive ability to respect and recognize
himself as an imperfect human. Education, another pillar of individual dignity, shows learning is simply recognizing and exercising one's own right to thrive and grow. Even in solitary confinement, "... [Ian] had managed to educate himself, read hundreds of books ..." (Stevenson 161). Given Manuel’s circumstances, the feat is all the more astonishing. Manuel’s story closes with a letter he wrote requesting photos of himself because he wanted "to show the world [he is] alive!" (Stevenson 162). It is precisely then when individual dignity shown brighter than any illustrious star; it is impossible to miss Manuel's acknowledgement and respect of his own right to exist.

Community inclusiveness involves working toward a discrimination-free society that welcomes diversity and equality. Few instances better demonstrate this than does a flashback to Stevenson’s childhood. When Stevenson was young, he had laughed at another schoolboy who stuttered. After his mother reprimanded him, Stevenson reluctantly followed her orders: Apologize, embrace, and say, "I love you" to the stuttering child.

The child had answered with a perfectly whispered, "I love you, too" with deep "tenderness and earnestness" (Stevenson 287). It is in this moment when a mother’s lesson becomes clear: Embrace all differences others possess, despite any shortcomings they have. This community inclusiveness on a small scale becomes more astounding as it extends to a larger scale. Today, Stevenson strives to help those who are disadvantaged and discriminated against by the justice system. He devotes his time to giving people fair shots at life. To watch community inclusiveness grow from small to large scale through Stevenson and his efforts to create a world void of discrimination is a breathtaking
escapade.

Service to others graces “Just Mercy” through Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). Frequently, Stevenson drives for hours to speak with condemned prisoners, not only about their cases but also their interests. They discuss music, art, hobbies, and dreams, allowing the imprisoned to rediscover the humanity they have lost. EJI not only defends the unfairly condemned, but also hosts a “race and poverty initiative” (Stevenson 298), transforming “the way we talk about racial history and contextualize contemporary race issues” (Stevenson 298). EJI’s actions and services assist innumerable lives by heightening people’s awareness. From “Just Mercy’s” first pages involving Henry’s case to the final cases of Carter and Caston, Stevenson and the EJI staff members have given time, hope, and energy to others. Every bit of service they provide, regardless of a court’s verdict, makes a world of change for those they reach.

Within “Just Mercy” lay the chance, the potential, and the hope to transform our world into one where every soul has an entirely equal chance at living, existing, and impacting.