A Reflection on Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy”

The beauty of humanity lies in its diversity. Every member of our population looks, sounds, and believes in different things. For reasons extending beyond basic Darwinian principles, this is a good thing. If everyone looked the same and thought inside the box, the monotony of existence would be maddening. But sometimes, where appreciation — or at the very least, acceptance — should be, fear and aggression are found. We see something outside the scope of socially accepted norms and we become afraid. Out of fear, we lack understanding and do whatever we can to encourage conformity. We oppress, taunt, and worse, as Bryan Stevenson has seen: We condemn innocent people to death.

There are common threads that tie us all to one another, regardless of appearance, beliefs, or socioeconomic status. These bonds can only adequately be described as visceral, as they are more potent and carry much more weight than that which meets the eye. For the guard covered in Confederate flag tattoos and anti-black sentiment, for example, empathy for a mentally ill, black inmate convicted of murder seemed impossible. However, upon hearing the similarities in how he and Avery Jenkins were raised in foster care, the guard’s prejudice, bigotry and assumptions melted away — and he saw Jenkins as the human being he is. “... I came up in foster care, you know. I came up in foster care, too.’ [The guard’s] face softened... ‘But listening to what you was [sic] saying about Avery made me realize that there were other people who had it as bad as I did. I guess even worse’... (Stevenson 201).
By learning of a horrific experience they both shared, a man went from having bumper stickers reading “If I’d Known It Was Going to be Like This, I’d Have Picked My Own Damn Cotton” to illegally going out of his way to purchase a chocolate milkshake for a man he previously deplored (Stevenson 192). Stevenson mentioned how the guard quit not long after the last time they met after Avery’s trial. I’d like to believe that wherever he has gone, he took this newfound lesson in community inclusiveness and individual dignity with him.

Something else I particularly admired about Stevenson is that he never stopped trying to expand his operation and broaden his docket. He grew from the injustice his family experienced as a youth, and used it to fuel his desire to make a difference for those inappropriately locked away and forgotten. It is clear Stevenson’s service to people is what kept him going. Even when he was extremely close to giving up everything he had put his entire being into, he bounced back — and ended up playing a critical role in banning death-in-prison sentences for children convicted of non-homicide crimes. This is the kind of individual I strive to be; the kind who, regardless of how many times I get knocked down, will inevitably get back up.

There were certain aspects of Stevenson’s experiences as a person of color I could relate to. One of Stevenson’s experiences that particularly resonated with me was when he and his car were illegally searched a few feet from his house. It reminded me of the time my dad was picking me up from a friend’s house, around 6 p.m. on a Sunday night, and had accidentally pulled into her neighbor’s driveway. His innocuous error was met with unexpected hostility. Dad tried calling me, but I was in the bathroom when he called; all I got was a voicemail, in which I could hear him sounding extremely confused, upset, and apologetic.
“That neighbor was yelling at me,” my dad told me later in the car. “I was confused. I explained I was sorry, I was at the wrong house. He was threatening to call the police. I explained I was picking you up from your friend’s house, named her by name, and he was still so angry.” Both my father and Stevenson were professionals, minding their own business, merely feet from where they were supposed to be. Still, they were met with unnecessary hostility.

Stevenson did an incredible job of depicting how our sameness and our uniqueness is a beautiful paradox. But he also makes it clear that there are Walter McMillians everywhere — innocent people condemned for no reason other than their race or socioeconomic status. And until we can replace discrimination and oppression with acceptance and understanding, there will be no end to the violence, poverty, and injustice that plagues humanity as a whole.