A Reflection on Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy”

My sibling fights surpassed the normal tormenting and playful teasing nearly five years ago. My youngest brother, Charles, who was 9 at the time, became overly aggressive and threatening when he felt agitated or belittled. A harmless remark such as “C’mon, why didn’t you take the trash out,” could fuel a tear-streamed, red-faced brawl that lasted hours and remained a point of debate for months.

This hostile boy was especially quick tempered toward schoolwork, which is why the diagnosis of dyslexia and ADD gave reason to his lashing out. The difficulty in both learning and focusing created an emotionally frustrated kid who felt attacked and “stupid” by everyone. This was a completely different monster from my twin brother, Chester, who — with the same diagnosis years earlier — had resorted to simply not speaking rather than risk being confused. The extremes of being overly reserved or verging on the edge of anger management were their coping mechanisms for lifelong battles that are beyond their control.

In “Just Mercy,” Bryan Stevenson writes, “We tend to be dismissive of the needs of the disabled and quick to judge their deficits and failures” (199). When reading these words, I found a new understanding for the seemingly irrational actions of my brothers. They were struggling. They were struggling with disabilities that separated them from the norms of society, and I had berated them for not acting as I thought they should.
My brothers were fortunate to get testing, additional aid, and family support, but this extra attention is not so readily available. It is evident in Stevenson’s stories about Trina Garnett and Avery Jenkins, who both inadvertently committed crimes because of their mental disabilities, we are quick to judge those who are disadvantaged. This oversight in our culture is slowly being addressed, but until we can all take up a patient heart toward any individual, our understanding of the human will never fully be reached.

My own sibling quarrels are minuscule in comparison to the horrific tails of the wrongly convicted in “Just Mercy,” but in today’s society, we have subconsciously passed on a culture of discrimination. Mothers locking car doors as they ease up to a corner of a predominately African American neighborhood teaches children to stereotype and fear others. Crossing the sidewalk to avoid the homeless instructs youth the poor are dangerous. We have already presumed guilt.

We find ways to justify our judgmental psyches by arguing that Michael Brown must have advanced toward the officer in Ferguson, Mo., and George Zimmerman surely feared for his life when he shot Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Fla., because we could not possibly accept that our own prejudices are destroying lives. The generations of propaganda whispered between individuals created a legal system that incarcerates more people than any other country, but until we convince our subconscious that people are generally good, we cannot expect a change.

Perhaps a more effective jumping off point than changing years of discriminatory living would be to reevaluate the American rehabilitation system as well as improving preemptive aid to the impoverished individuals doomed to turn to crime. One point that Stevenson and I disagree on is the three-strike rule. He writes of its harsh nature toward
minor offenses, but the law would not seem harsh if the rehabilitation process worked. The hefty punishment does not point to the flaw in the rule, but instead the flaws of the reform system in place. The recidivism rate would not be so high, and the three-strike-rule would rarely be used, if convicted criminals left prison with a sense of recovery.

The final and perhaps most impactful words Stevenson wrote were, “We are all broken by something” (289). He has connected each human being to a common anguish, and I would also like to suggest that we are bonded by hope. Hope that we will one day heal the brokenness inside each of us. Hope that our broken system filled with broken individuals will find peace and justice for all.