

Bryan Stevenson Beats the Drum for Justice by Mele-Ane Havea

Mele-Ane Havea on Bryan Stevenson

The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world. One out of three black men aged 18 to 30 is in prison, on probation or parole. The US is the only country in the world that has life imprisonment without parole for minors. For every nine people who have been executed, one is later found to be innocent.

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.

MELE-ANE HAVEA: So tell me about the Equal justice initiative. What it is and how it came to be.

BRYAN STEVENSON: Yeah. So The Equal Justice Initiative was created in February 1989. I'd been practicing in Atlanta for about four years representing people on death row, but I was getting an increasing number of calls from people in Alabama who didn't

have lawyers. Alabama was one of the Deep South states that didn't have a public defender system, they didn't have any system for providing lawyers. And we had a bunch of people who were soon going to be facing execution without counsel. There was a woman there who was not an attorney who had been monitoring the situation, and we decided that we should start this project to try to meet the legal needs of people on death row. My original plan was to set it up, hire a director then head back to Atlanta. But I couldn't really find anyone who was willing to take it on. So I ended up being there for a year, and a year turned into five years, five turned into 10, 10 into 20. And now I've been there for 26 years.

And what work were you doing in the beginning?

Initially we provided legal services to all the people on death row. Alabama has the highest rate of death sentencing in America, and the largest death row per capita in the United States. We had some success in getting death sentences and convictions overturned, but I still saw barriers to getting relief for people who were located in other parts of the criminal justice system. That's the point at which we began to expand our mandate and talk about the problems with indigent defence and racial bias in jury selection. And then we started getting calls and letters from people not on death row, but with compelling cases of innocence. So we started taking those on. We took on life-without-parole cases for people convicted of non-violent crimes who had been sentenced to die in prison, then cases involving life without parole for children. We started doing a lot of work with the women's prison because of the tremendous increase in the number of women being sent to prisons in America. Then we decided to do some re-entry work for our clients who we were getting out. The last thing we did was add a project on race and poverty, not specific to the criminal justice system, but really trying to change the way America talks and thinks about race. So we've come from a really tiny organisation that just did death-penalty work to a much larger one now that does death-penalty work and all these other things.

Wow.

Yeah. [Laughs].

I read some advice your grandmother gave you: "You can't understand most of the important things from a distance, you have to be close." And hearing about the magnitude of the issues your organisation works on I wonder how is it that for 26 years you've been able to sustain this kind of proximity?

It's a good question. I think from a distance it can seem intimidating to get close to people who are suffering, people who've been marginalised, and people who've been injured by our inattention to the needs of the most vulnerable people in our society. But the truth for me is that it's been the source of a lot of my hopefulness, my commitment, and it energises me to see people who have every reason to give up, to be angry, to be bitter, overcome those emotions and that worldview and push forward. Having practised law now for 30 years in proximity to people who are a source of inspiration, I just don't think I could do it any other way. I like getting to know my clients. I like being in communities where there's this hunger for something better. I am encouraged when people who have been ignored for a long time find their voices and a way forward and feel their humanity is being affirmed by the work we can do together. And so for me it's actually been a source of strength. It's what has allowed me to do this work for so long.

It's made that level of engagement possible. Can you share some examples of hope in

your work?

Sure. I had the great privilege of representing some people who had been unfairly convicted and unfairly sentenced to death in the '80s. And they both ended up on death row. It was interesting because when I intervened in their case, it was in a very difficult state. They were getting close to the time of execution.

What happens to people at that time?

Well, you're on death row, and the closer you get to the end of the appeals process, the more your chances of getting relief drop. Then when you get an execution date—it's usually 30 days away—you get put on what they call "death watch." They'll move you out of your cell and take away all your things. And it's a very overwhelming experience for the prisoners. But these particular men were both incredibly hopeful. They didn't want to talk about their cases, they didn't want me to talk about strategy. They said, "We trust you, we believe that you're going to do everything you can to keep us alive. And we know that if you can't get us a stay, it just couldn't have happened. So don't worry about that." And when I would see them, they just had this way of making the focus not about them. They'd go, "It sounds like you've been really busy, are you taking care of yourself?" And they just had this very... [laughs]... care-giving orientation, which I would have never guessed. I realised there was something about them that was more evolved. I don't know that I could have been a care-giver when I was that threatened and menaced. And we ultimately did get stays, and eventually got both of them off the row. But it was the beginning of this dynamic where I was constantly seeing things from condemned people that you wouldn't expect.

I quickly realised my clients are not just their crimes. That's how I learnt that we are all more than the worst thing we've ever done.

It became clear to me working with my clients that 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. It made me really recognise the impropriety of the death penalty, the inhumanity of the death penalty, because when we execute someone we're not just executing a killer. We don't have the capacity to kill just that part of a person who committed a terrible crime who then deserves punishment. We kill all these other things. We kill this person who's capable of care-giving, this person who's capable of generosity and compassion, who might be a father, a brother, a son or a daughter, a friend, who might be all of these things that every human being strives to be. And that's why it becomes a sentence that is disproportionate by its very nature.

That made me see how unacceptable the death penalty is. It made me more burdened when people couldn't get stays of execution 'cause I realised what a tragedy that was. But in many ways, you know, I wouldn't have it any other way. Because I got to see the parts of these people that others had either chosen not to see, or just believed didn't exist. And for me that made the relationship and the work purposeful. Even when we didn't succeed in getting the stay.

Because in seeing them as their whole selves there is a certain freedom that you give them.

That's exactly right. I think it means that they can get through their time in prison, get through their time with their sense of being more than a killer or a liar or rapist intact. They know that they're a human being with dignity and beauty and capacity for

redemption and change.

And when someone else recognises things in you that you don't necessarily recognise in yourself, it gives you this confidence. It affirms you in ways that make you feel better about life.

I mean, that's sort of what...

That's what love is.

That's what love is! That's what healthy relationships do for one another. It's like, when someone tells you, "You are a really wonderful interviewer." "You are a really compassionate teacher." "You really made a difference when I was recovering as my nurse, as my doctor." That's how you sustain yourself—through that affirmation. Incarcerated and condemned people are no different. And I don't have to make it up—I see it. I've always seen it in the people I represent. I also think it's often very liberating for some people to know that while they're being executed or threatened with execution for something they actually did, it's not who they are.

Can you tell me about a time when you experienced that for yourself—somebody seeing something in you which was freeing?

Sure. Often it happens. I was giving a talk once and there was an older man in a wheelchair who came along. We were in a church in the Black Belt in Alabama—in a poor county. He came in through the back and he was staring at me, he was actually distracting me a bit. I kept talking, but I kept looking at him 'cause he was staring at me so hard. I got through the talk, and the kids came up, the people who were there came up. And they were very nice and they wanted to shake my hand, and I did, and took photos.

But this man was still in the back staring at me. And when all the kids left, he got a little boy to wheel him up to me. He was looking at me real hard, I was thinking, Oh gosh, what's going to happen now? And he got in my face and put his hand up and said, "Do you know what you're doing?" I didn't know how to respond. He asked me again: "Do you know what you're doing?" And I stepped back and started mumbling something—I don't even remember what. And he said, "Do - you - know - what - you're - doing?" And then he said, "I'm going to tell you what you're doing. You're beating the drum for justice." And it so moved me. And he said, "You keep beating the drum for justice." And then he said, "C'mere, c'mere, c'mere," and he grabbed me by my jacket, pulled me close to his wheelchair, turned his head and said, "Do you see this scar I have behind my right ear? I got it trying to register people to vote in Greene County, Alabama in 1963." He turned his head. "See this cut? I got that in Philadelphia, Mississippi during Freedom Summer in the 1960s." Turned his head again and said, "You see this dark spot? That's my bruise. Got that bruise in Birmingham, Alabama during the children's crusade in 1963." And then he looked at me, he says, "People think I'm some old man sitting in a wheelchair covered with cuts and bruises and scars, but I'm going to tell you something. These aren't my cuts. These aren't my bruises. These aren't my scars. These are my medals of honour." And he grabbed my hand and said, "You just keep fighting for justice. When they knock you down, you get back up. Try to fall on your back so you can look up and know which way you have to go."

I meet wonderful people like that all the time. All the time. And so I really feel quite privileged to be moving through this world where there's a lot of kindness, where there's a lot of generosity. There's a lot of suffering and a lot of hardship, but a lot of character and love and appreciation too. Which really energizes me.

It's such a beautiful perspective. It's what I was moved by in your TED Talk. What was that experience like by the way? Doing TED?

It's funny. I'd never heard of a TED Talk. I probably shouldn't admit that. And they called me and said, "We want you to do this TED Talk." And I had this Supreme Court argument like two weeks after that. I said, "I don't have time to go to California, do a TED Talk." So I said "no" and I mentioned it to my young employee who said, "You have to go!"

"Get on the plane!"

[Laughs]. And they talked me into it. So I went out there. I'd never seen a TED Talk. And I was really pretty dazzled because they all made these presentations that used technology, Powerpoints and pictures. And I felt a little intimidated to be going in with nothing. But I didn't have time or the confidence to try something I wasn't used to. So when I got up there I thought, I don't know what these people are going to think of what I'm going to say. But they were so responsive.

You got two standing ovations.

People were really responsive in ways that I didn't expect.

Another thing you said in your TED Talk that I loved was this idea that innovation and creativity should exist alongside suffering and sadness, that the key to a rich life is recognizing these things coexist. And I wondered about the process of integration, because I struggle with it. How do you integrate those personally?

So I grew up in a very musical family. My Mum was a musician. Everybody in my family was musical. When I was a little boy I started playing the piano. Then we lost our piano. We lived in a really poor community. But then we got another one, an organ, when I was 10 or 11. So I started playing.

Music was a portal into this world of beauty and magic and all these spiritual aspects of our lives. Transformational things happen in music.

And when I finished school and ended up in law school, I was spending a lot of time at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. So I wasn't sure. It just felt like this life of music was uncertain, but it is this part of the world which is stimulating and creative and affirming...

And beautiful.

...infinitely dazzling and beautiful, all of that. And then it also just seemed to be complicated and potentially dark and challenging and painful. It did seem at that point like these two different worlds.

And were you thinking about going down a musical path?

I think initially I was. I had chosen to go to law school, it just seemed more sensible at the

time. But once I was there I thought, I'm not sure I'm going to be that happy. Maybe I should keep working at this music thing. And then I met these guys on death row, and I talk about this in my book. First man I met on death row I was terrified to meet because I just didn't feel qualified or prepared. But the first man I met, in this moment when I was super-stressed because the guards were treating him so roughly, chose to do something for me. He looked at me and said, "Bryan, don't worry about this. Just come back." And to make me feel better he stood there, closed his eyes, and he started to sing. And in the middle of this dark world, this world of people on death row, I had a condemned person singing to me, this beautiful voice with all of this heart and compassion and sincerity. And it so moved me. That's when I believed that these worlds can exist within one another. That you actually need to bring that beauty, you need to bring that technology, you need to bring that creativity to the spaces where there is suffering and anguish.

And vice versa?

And vice versa, exactly. I grew up in a poor black church, and the music was rooted in this reaction to grief and suffering and all of these challenges—it expressed something really profound and important. So for me these worlds not only can be integrated, they have to be. I think the most dazzling inventions, the most innovative work, is usually born out of real struggle. People who are just pushing and pushing. People who are not satisfied. People who are antagonised by the inability to do something. People who have been pushed by an idea or a challenge. And so I have in many ways made peace with that divide. Even now when I'm really worn out and I can't sleep or I can't make sense of something, I play my piano. And I bought a house so I could get a piano, which was not the normal way. But I...

You bought a house for your piano?

Yes, I bought a house for my piano.

[Laughs].

You know, I wanted a piano. I lived in this tiny apartment, and I couldn't get a piano in there so I bought a house. That's what I did. And that's what comforts me and helps me manage. So I do think these things come together in a really important way for sustaining the truly transformational.

And have you ever had to, I suppose, explore the darkness within yourself?

I think you get pushed. There are times when you get angry and frustrated and you just have to sort of check yourself. But I have been really well schooled in some ways, growing up witnessing the discipline of the civil rights community who used non-violence to overcome brutal oppression and hostility and hatred. And seeing how that transformed America.

So that was your childhood?

Yeah it was!

Tell me about that.

I grew up in the '60s listening to Doctor King and witnessing these moments in American history of people being brutalised to win the right to vote, to achieve some progress in

equality. Getting to know those people later in life I realised how much they had done with so little. And they only had a couple of lawyers to call on when things got really, really grim. And here I am, an attorney with an office full of resources, with a full staff of lawyers. I often feel like I can't complain, I can't get overwhelmed, because if they did so much with so little, I've got a lot more to do. People say, "It must be hard, it must be challenging". And at times it is.

But I've never had to say my head is bloody but not bowed like the people who came before me.

Because of that I feel like I don't get to stay in dark, difficult places. I don't want to stay in dark, difficult places.

So with that knowledge, do you feel like you're doing enough?

I'm trying. You keep pushing. I certainly am all in, as they say. And that's all you can do. I often wish that we could achieve more with less, but it doesn't always work like that. Sometimes I'm surprised by what we can get done. Sometimes I'm disappointed. But all you can do is keep pushing and thinking strategically and tactically about how you push. And that ultimately makes me feel like we're doing the right thing.

There's a question that you raise in the very beginning of your book which you said drove you to do the work you do. "How and why are people treated unfairly?" Do you feel like you've come to answer that in the last two decades?

Yeah, I think part of it has to do with the distance we create from people. I think a lot of it has to do with the narratives we have in our heads about others. I think a lot also has to do with our hopelessness that sometimes causes us to treat people in a way that's devoid of any hope. Some of it has to do with our preoccupation with staying comfortable. So I talk to people about getting proximate because I think that's what lets you see the consequences of being unkind or unfair in ways that will challenge you to do something different. I talk about changing narratives because I think until we start understanding why it is we have these attitudes about certain kinds of people, we won't appreciate how those narratives aren't necessarily fair or just.

I think racial inequality in America has been sustained for as long as it has because we've never dealt with this narrative of racial difference that was created during the time of slavery.

And for me involuntary servitude wasn't the true evil of slavery. The true evil of slavery in America was this narrative of racial difference, this ideology of white supremacy, this notion that black people aren't as smart, as good, as hard-working as white people, had these deficits that couldn't be overcome. And that narrative, which was designed to make these Christian slave-owners feel less tension with the fact that they owned human beings, was the true evil.

Our laws that ended involuntary servitude didn't deal with that narrative, and in that respect slavery didn't end, it evolved. It turned into something else. And it turned into decades of racial hierarchy and segregation and lynching and terrorism and victimisation of people of colour. There's still a presumption of dangerousness and guilt that gets assigned to people of colour. And it's why unarmed black men are being shot by the police, it's why in too many circumstances people are disfavoured. They don't get the job, they don't get the opportunity, they don't get the same respect in the school setting. And

that has to change, but it won't change until we start focusing on this narrative. Even good people are corrupted by what this narrative has created.

This idea that we are different? Or that there is somehow the "Other?"

That there's an "Other" and that that "Other" can be ranked in some way.

Yeah, so weird.

Better, worse, more advanced, less advanced. It's sad, and I think once you stop thinking about that narrative and you see these things playing out, you get hopeless about what can be done. And so you accept slavery. Or you accept lynching, you accept segregation, you accept mass incarceration, you accept the death penalty, you accept police shootings. That hopelessness can affect both the victims of violence and those who are creating it. And so you've got to challenge that. You've got to resist that hopelessness. I say it all the time. I believe that injustice prevails where hopelessness persists. If you want to find inequality and injustice, look for places where there's a lot of despair and hopelessness.

And then, ultimately, I think it is about comfort—about choosing to do something uncomfortable because every time we've made progress in these issues, it's been because somebody's been willing to do something uncomfortable. Somebody's been willing to stand when others are sitting. Someone's been willing to speak when others are quiet. And that's hard and difficult but it's necessary to create the kind of progress that I think many of us want to see. And every great moment in history, every instance where progress has been made has been created and sustained by people who have gotten close, who've changed narratives, who've been hopeful and who've done something uncomfortable. That's the blueprint for what we are trying to do at the Equal Justice Initiative. By staying close to people in communities that have been marginalised and disfavoured, by really taking on this narrative and trying to change it, by insisting on a hopeful perspective about what can be done, and not accepting that it can't be done or people can't change.

Part of what you were saying sounded like it could be religious or spiritual doctrine.

Yeah! [Laughs].

Do you have any religious beliefs?

Yeah, I grew up in the church. I think of myself as a person of faith.

What does that mean for you?

For me it means believing in things you haven't seen. It means accepting that you're never really alone, that there's a whole community of people who have tried to do some of what you've tried to do. It means really acknowledging that some things you just live on by grace. Sometimes people say, "These people are threatening you and you should be worrying about this." There's a lot of energy you can just use up worrying about some things. Sometimes you have to give it up. I'm just not going to worry too much about it. Because there's nothing I can do about it.

That's just going to be all God's grace for me. And I don't think that you have to have a particular religion or faith or anything like that, but you do have to be willing to believe

things you haven't seen.

Why do you have to?

Well, because much of what we want to accomplish in the world hasn't been accomplished yet. I've never seen an America where race makes no difference at all. I've never been to a place in the United States where poverty has been eliminated. I haven't seen our system deal fairly with everyone case after case. I haven't lived at a time when there weren't executions. But I do believe that it's possible to create a country where we are free from this narrative of racial difference, where we are less burdened by this history of exclusion and bigotry, where we don't execute people, but we do recognise the potential of every human being—a country where we get closer to the kind of justice that we talk about in our songs and anthems and in our laws. I believe we can do that. I've seen things that I didn't expect to see. We've had a lot of wins, gotten 115 people off death row who are no longer at risk of execution. Some of them have been released. If you told me 26 years ago, "You're going to get over 100 people off death row" I would have said, "That's just not possible." That's why I think you have to believe those things, because otherwise you'll be confined to the world that's already been created. And it won't allow you to change the world into something better.

Do you have a family?

My dad is still alive and I try to spend time with him when I can. I have two siblings, and my brother has two boys, my sister has two girls.

Oh, how about that!

Yeah, it's been great. And I have always enjoyed spending time with them.

Do you live in the same city as them?

No, they live closer to where I grew up in Delaware. But they've been very tolerant of me when I've asked to spend some time with them. And they're great. My nephew might come down for a while, or I go see my nieces. When they were young, I had the advantage of being the uncle who could return them back to their parents when they were worn out and fussy. [Laughs].

[Laughs].

For me it's a lovely relationship.

Yeah. I want to talk about your family's history of slavery and how you've personally come to terms with it. How it's played a role in your own personal growth.

Absolutely. You know, it's interesting, and I've been thinking about this recently. My grandmother was the daughter of people who were enslaved. My great grandfather was born in slavery in Virginia. And we grew up with segregation, I started my education in a coloured school. I couldn't go to the public school when I started.

When you think about that now...

I know! It's interesting that I never, ever talked about that in the first 35, 40 years of my life. Never.

What do you mean?

I just didn't feel like it was something I wanted to assert, generally speaking. And then I got to the point where I realised there is power in this history. In the last 10 years I've been talking about it more and more, and now I want everybody to know that my great grandparents were enslaved, that my grandmother was raised by people who were formerly slaves, that she grew up during a time of lynching and was terrorised every day of her life. That my parents couldn't go to high school 'cause there was no high school for black kids. That they faced humiliation and the injuries of exclusion every day of their lives, that I started my education in a coloured school. Because it's by giving voice to all of those things that I can push something, because people survived and overcame these barriers. And that actually makes me not weaker, but stronger.

How did you come to that realization?

When we took on the project of race and poverty living in Alabama we saw this preoccupation with mid-19th-century history. They tell a story about the Civil War that's very, in my judgement, misguided. "All our generals were great. The architects and defenders of slavery were noble, honest men who should be celebrated."

Really?

Yes! All the high schools are named after their Confederate generals. Jefferson Davis' birthday is a state holiday even today. Confederate Memorial Day is a state holiday. In Alabama it's not Martin Luther King Day, it's Martin Luther King slash Robert E. Lee Day. And they put markers and monuments everywhere and there is not a word about slavery. I realised part of what has corrupted us is that we haven't told the truth about this history. So we actually put out a report about slavery. And we did a project last year where we put out markers about the slave trade in Alabama—lots of resistance. The Alabama Historical Association said, "No, we're not going to do that." But it's really when I started being more truthful about my own family's history, so saying, "I grew up poor." I did. We grew up in a black settlement. You know, people had outhouses. That wasn't what I wanted people to know about me when I was at Harvard, but now I realise...

Was that because you wanted to fit in?

I just didn't trust them with that information and so I didn't share it. What I've learned now is that you've got to trust yourself. That's what we're really doing with our race and poverty program. We put out this report on lynching last week, and my goal is to put markers and monuments at lynching sites all over America.

It's truth-telling. Because the only way we're going to make progress is through truth and reconciliation.

And if I'm insisting on that for the nation then I'm going to insist on it for myself when it comes to these issues. It's actually been really liberating, and I've been remembering these things my grandmother used to talk about, what she taught my mother about managing the challenges of racial terrorism expressed through lynching. All of that has definitely made me more hopeful, more determined, but also stronger in terms of how to confront some of these big issues.

How did your family react when you started talking about it publicly?

I think we've all been ready. My brother's a psychologist and he does a lot of work on race and ethnicity as well, pushing school systems to deal more effectively with the challenges that kids face because of race and exclusion. We've always been mindful of the way these issues play out. My sister, all of us.

What does your sister do?

She's an elementary school music teacher. And also a church musician. She plays for a big church in Delaware. In that sense she's carrying on my mum's career.

Wonderful. I have to say, I experienced this colour-lens when I went to America for the first time. I became really conscious of my skin colour because other people were conscious of it. And I felt sad. I thought, What does this do to individuals, and what does this do to a country?

Yeah, absolutely. I think that it's gone on unchallenged for so long. That's the real ugliness of it. And I think there is this presumption that gets created around race. I tell this story sometimes. I was going to court a couple of years ago and I was sitting in the courtroom, trying to get ready to do this hearing. I got there early, and it was the first time I'd ever been in this courtroom. And I had my suit on, I had my shirt and tie, sitting at defence counsel table. The judge walked in and he saw me sitting there and he said, "Hey, hey, hey, you get out of my courtroom without your lawyer! You wait out there in the hallway 'til your lawyer gets here." And I stood up and said, "Oh I'm sorry Your Honour, I didn't introduce myself. My name is Bryan Stevenson. I am the lawyer." And the judge started laughing. The prosecutor started laughing. I made myself laugh because I didn't want to disadvantage my client who was a young white kid.

The irony!

Heh! I did the hearing, but afterwards I was sitting in my car thinking, Why does this judge see a middle-aged black man in a suit and a tie at counsel's table and it doesn't occur to him that's the lawyer? What is that? And then I thought, Well, is whatever produced that going to disadvantage black defendants when they're being sentenced by this judge? Of course it will. Is it going to create barriers for fair treatment when this person encounters people of colour? Of course it will. And I'm not even saying he's a bad person or anything, but it's that kind of bias that has been fostered.

It's the unconscious narrative.

Yes it is. And so we've got to challenge that.

Every great moment in history, every instance where progress has been made has been created and sustained by people who have gotten close, who've changed narratives, who've been hopeful and who've done something uncomfortable. That's the blueprint for what we are trying to do at the Equal Justice Initiative.

Through all these challenges, what brings you joy? What do you love?

I really feel fortunate that I get to work with people, some of whom are incarcerated, some of whom are condemned, some of whom are in really difficult situations, but

because they share so much of themselves with me, I reciprocate that. I love my clients, I do. I feel like there are a lot of people I get to watch grow and change, and that's really, really, affirming. And I love the people we serve. There's a community of people who give up a lot to do this work, and I appreciate and love them for that. And I actually love the idea that we are trying to advance. To me, it's rooted in something really beautiful, something really righteous. And it may seem idealistic and a little misguided to kind of organise your life around it. To some people it seems that way. But to me it makes perfect sense. I can't actually imagine doing anything else. Other people say, "You need to make money."

But in this work I get to feel the things that make my spirit soar, see the things that give me hope.

And, you know, it's the rare joy that comes along when you win and people who've been condemned and beaten and neglected and abused and told they're nothing get to stand up and show the world just what they are. That, for me, is gratifying in ways that few things can be. And so I love the work I do.

That was one thing that struck me so much about you is that your work is who you are. You do it because it completely aligns.

Yeah. It's the great privilege of education. You get to make choices about what you can do and what you want to do. My Dad didn't have as many choices to do what he wanted to do. And many people struggled to create opportunities that got me the education I had. And so to make those choices in a way that aligns with the things you care most deeply about is a real privilege. And you should celebrate that. I get sad for people who have the capacity and the opportunity to make choices, but don't make the choices that align because they're afraid of this or that. I get it.

I understand. But I just have found something infinitely rewarding, and being able to do the things that I care about is deeply empowering.

Do you think that's the point of this existence?

You know, I think for me it is the point that makes sense. I don't want to put that on anyone else. My dad is now 85. And he is going strong. He still works and lives by himself and he takes care of himself.

Really?

Yes!

What a man!

And I'd be grateful to be where he is at that age in terms of his own sense of peace and his own sense of purpose and fulfillment. And it's been a different path than mine. But for me at least this is the road I need to be on.