

# Celebrating a Broken Community, Full of Grace and Love

On January 28, the Open Door Community celebrated its 30th anniversary with more than 300 friends at St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Atlanta. Our keynote speaker was Bryan Stevenson, longtime friend and colleague of the community, Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and Professor at the New York University School of Law. Bryan is a leader in the legal effort to abolish the death penalty and mass imprisonment and is currently leading efforts to end life prison sentences for children in the United States. (For more information, see [www.eji.org](http://www.eji.org).) This is the second and final part of his address; the first part was published in the last issue, May-June, 2012.

By Bryan Stevenson

I'm here tonight because I want to talk about the Open Door Community's identity, its willingness to talk about things that are hard and that not many others are willing to talk about, and that's grace.

I've learned some things doing the work I do. You can get really engaged in serving other people, in trying to help, and all of a sudden, something can sneak up on you and cause you to have a moment of doubt. We represent people on death row in Alabama, and our state has a very high rate of executions. We had six executions last year. So my staff and I get involved in all these executions and try to stop them, and sometimes it just gets to you. It really takes a toll.

I worked on a case out of Birmingham not long ago involving a man who was severely disabled. He was accused of killing someone he actually didn't kill. He was involved in an argument and the other man was shot, but he didn't die of his wound. The man didn't get the medical treatment he needed because he was poor. For nine months he was denied medical treatment, and finally, because he didn't get the treatment he needed, he passed away. It was only then, nine months after the argument, that our client was charged with capital murder.

The prosecution didn't really want a death sentence, so they offered him a sentence of 20 years. But the lawyer who was appointed to represent him never told him about the plea offer. So he went to trial and was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. And then he couldn't find a lawyer to help him appeal the case. He was on death row for 16 years and could never find a lawyer. We were trying hard to get to so many cases, and we couldn't get to his.

Then he was scheduled for execution, and I was feeling deep regret and anguish. Here was this man who was about to be executed, not for his crime but for his poverty. Not for the crime he had been accused of, but for his inability to get the help that any justice system *must* provide for any human being.

I was talking to him on the phone on the evening of his scheduled execution, and we were having one of those really difficult conversations. It got to me. I've got to be honest: it really got to me.

## "I Can't Do This Any More"

When I was a little boy, my grandmother took me to church every Sunday. One Sunday I was there and was talking with one of my friends when a little boy I had never met came over. He started trying to talk to us, but he had a really hard time getting his words out. He had a pretty serious speech impediment. Because I'd never met anybody who talked like that, I did something really ignorant: I laughed.

Well, my grandmother saw the whole thing, and she gave me a look I had never seen before. Then she grabbed me

by the arm and pulled me aside and said, "Don't you ever laugh at somebody who's having a hard time getting their words out!" Then she said, "Now you go back over there and tell that boy you're sorry. And then you hug him. And then you tell him you love him."

I said, "Mama, I can tell him I'm sorry, but..." Then she gave me that look. So I went back over to him and said, "I'm sorry." Then I gave him a very awkward nine-year-old-little-man hug. And then I said, with very little sincerity, "I love you." And I never will forget this little boy hugging me back and saying, "I love you too."

I was thinking about this little boy on the night I was on the phone with this man who was about to be executed, because he too had a very serious speech impediment. We were getting closer and closer to the execution and the anxiety was growing and growing, and he was having a harder and harder time getting his words out.

So I was sitting there on the phone listening to him trying to say "Thank you," trying to say "I appreciate so much what you did for me," trying to say "It means something to me that someone stood with me." But he just couldn't get the words out. But he was trying so hard, trying *so* hard.

## I sat there and wept, and then I started to pray. I realized that I do this work because I'm broken too.

I was standing there on the phone, tears running down my cheeks, and I started thinking, "This is too much, just too much! It's too hard, too hard. I can't do this any more." He kept trying and trying to say what he wanted to say. And finally he said, "I just love you for fighting for me."

When I put that phone down, I was devastated. I had been listening to *all* that brokenness. I sat there and said, "God, why is it we want to *kill* all the broken people? I don't understand it. I'm in a place full of brokenness — so many people who have been broken! *Broken* by alcoholism, *broken* by drugs, *broken* by racism, *broken* by poverty, *broken* by illness, *broken* by heartbreak, broken, broken, *broken*! I'm living in the midst of all this brokenness, and I just can't do this any more. Too much brokenness."

## God Fills the Cracks

I sat there and wept, and then I started to pray. All of a sudden it changed, and I started to realize things that I've always known but hadn't stopped to remember. In that moment I asked myself, "Why are you here? Why has God placed you here?"

Then I realized what I had forgotten. I don't do this work because it's fun; I don't do this work because it's important; I don't do this work because there's such a need for it; I don't do this work because there are so many intellectual challenges that make it interesting; I don't even do this work because it's an opportunity to be in community with people I care about. I realized that I do this work because I'm broken too.

What I've come here this evening to tell you is that *if you are proximate to suffering*, if you embrace the homeless, if you embrace the hungry, if you are in ministry with the condemned and incarcerated, if you stand next to people



Bryan Stevenson

Kari & Carlton Mackey

who have been deep-down traumatized, if you stand next to all this suffering, *it will break you*. There will be little cracks and fractures that begin to appear. And there will be times when you're tempted to think that these cracks and fractures are going to destroy you, but the grace of God allows us to recognize that when we begin to break like that, there's an opportunity. Because if we have the wisdom and the blessing, if we find an open door, we can actually get to a place where God will fill those cracks. God will fill those fractures with grace. And that grace gives you strength to do things you couldn't do before; that grace gives you wisdom to see things you couldn't see before; that grace gives you love to go places you couldn't go before.

And it's because we are a broken community, full of grace and full of love, that we celebrate tonight. It's not because we're better; it's not because we're holy; it's not because we've got the answers. It's because we are broken but redeemed.

It's wonderful to recognize that when you actually open yourself to grace and love and mercy, these *new things* happen. I've learned some very basic things, being a broken person. I've learned that each person is more than the worst thing they've ever done. I believe that if somebody tells a lie, they're not *just* a liar; if somebody takes something, they're not *just* a thief; even if somebody kills someone, they're not *just* a killer. And because of this, I believe that we have this need, this mission, this calling, to embrace them and to recognize this "something else."

The other thing I've learned from this broken place is that in this country, the opposite of poverty is not wealth. We are not working for wealth; we're not working for riches. In this country — in Alabama, in Georgia, in Atlanta — I recognize that the opposite of poverty is justice. We cannot have an end to poverty without having more justice. And for this struggle, as Mrs. Johnnie Carr said to me, "You have to be brave, brave, *brave*."

## The Miracle of Service

Open Door Community, I want to thank you for your courage. Because even when our hearts and our minds tell us what we have to do, we don't always do it. But you've been willing to stand when everybody else was sitting; you've been willing to speak when everybody else was quiet. You've reached out in situations where nobody else was prepared to do it. And because of that, the life and the presence has been offered with such clear focus that we're all moved, we're all deepened, we're all more faithful because of that witness.

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And every day I think about the great miracle that is service with a heart full of love. I never understood what they meant in church when they said, “The first shall be last and the last shall be first,” until I stood next to people on death row. I never understood what Dr. King was talking about when he said, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” I didn’t *get* that until I was standing next to somebody who was about to be executed. I didn’t appreciate what Dostoevsky was saying in those Russian novels when he said, “Truth crushed to earth shall rise again,” until I saw a working community living out its faith and the hope that is inspired by our Beloved Community here in Atlanta. I want to celebrate that, because we are called to recognize those among us who are lifting us up.

You know sometimes we get to where our lives are out of balance. I certainly get out of balance at times. I push too hard and I get tired. And that’s one reason it’s important to take time like this, that we have a moment like this, to celebrate special occasions like this. And I’m so grateful to St. Anne’s and to so many of you who have made this such a wonderful evening. Sometimes you can just get out of balance, and if there’s not some loving community there to hold you, you can get lost. I know that I am deeply, deeply comforted to know that I can always have sanctuary at the Open Door Community. It’s like a gift that I have. No matter where I am or how many years it’s been, I know I have people there who will embrace me and love me. And I tell you, it’s a great comfort.

I’ve been working on cases of children who have been sentenced to die in prison, 13-year-old children who have been sentenced to life without parole. The United States is the only country in the world where 13-year-old children have been sentenced to imprisonment until death. When you start working on these cases, they can get to you.

### A Judge Who Works Magic

Not long ago I worked on a case of a 14-year-old who was living in a household with his stepfather and mother, who was the object of a lot of domestic violence. One night the man came home drunk and angry, and he punched the boy’s mother in the mouth, and she was lying on the floor bleeding. The boy saw his mother fall down and tried to revive her; he thought she was dead. The man went to the bedroom and fell asleep. About 20 minutes later this boy, with no prior conviction or trouble, went into the bedroom to the dresser where he knew the man kept a handgun, walked over to the bed where the man was asleep and pulled the trigger, shooting him at almost point-blank range. It was tragic.

This boy was not tried as a juvenile. It happened, you see, that this man was a deputy sheriff. Because of that one fact, the prosecutor said that this child, with no history of violence, must be tried as an adult.

So the boy was sent to the adult jail and his grandmother called me. I went to the jail

to see him. I asked him questions and tried to talk with him, but he wouldn’t respond. He just sat there. I finally said, “I really want to help, but I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.” Still he didn’t say anything. So I got up and walked around the table and sat down next to him. I started leaning on him and said, “Come on, please talk to me. You gotta talk to me.” I put my arm around him, and finally I noticed that he was starting to lean back. And through tears, he began to talk to me — not about what had happened with his stepfather, but what had happened to him in jail.

He said that on the first night he was assaulted by several men. And on the second night he was raped by several men. And on the third night he was raped by so many dif-

So as I was thinking about all this one night, I started to wonder, how is it that a court has the power to turn a child into an adult? How can a judge turn my client into something he’s not? That’s like magic! A 14-year-old boy is suddenly an adult. How did that happen? The judge must have some kind of magic, so you should ask the judge for some of that magic.

I was staying up too late and had probably been working too hard, and I wasn’t thinking straight, so I thought to myself, “Yeah, that’s a good idea.” So I started putting together a motion in the middle of the night. I titled it “Motion to Try My 14-Year-Old Poor Black Male Client Like a 75-Year-Old Privileged Wealthy White Corporate

God gives us this grace. I walked up the steps to the courthouse, and at the top there was this older Black man who was the janitor. He looked at me and said, “Who are you?” I said, “I’m a lawyer.” He said, “You’re a lawyer?” Then he came over and hugged me, and said, “I want you to know that I’m so *proud* of you.” Well, that hug really did something for me. And when he let go, somehow I felt better, and I walked into the courtroom.

The judge was already on the bench, and as soon as he saw me he said, “Mr. Stevenson, did you write this crazy motion?” I said, “Yes, sir, I did.” He started hollering about it. And the prosecutor started hollering about it. And we started talking about race and poverty and abuse of power. And people started coming into the courtroom, all of them angry that we were having this kind of hearing. When I turned around at one point, there were all these assistant prosecutors and police officers and court workers who were outraged that we were talking about *these* kinds of issues. And out of the little window in the door at the back of the courtroom I saw this older Black man, this janitor, who was pacing back and forth outside. He kept pacing and looking through the window at all this hollering, and he had this worried look on his face. And finally he came into the courtroom and sat down, right behind me, almost at the counsel table.

About 10 minutes later the judge called a recess, and a deputy sheriff got up and ran over to the older man, clearly outraged that he would be in the courtroom. And he yelled, “Jimmy, what are you doing in this courtroom?”

He stood up and looked at me, and looked at that deputy sheriff, and said, “I came into this courtroom to tell this young man, ‘Keep your eyes on the prize.’”

I’ve come here this evening because we have a Beloved Community. We have a precious spirit. We have a precious identity in this community.

We have spirits and hearts and souls so full of love, so full of grace, they are literally



Brian Kavanagh

**We have spirits and hearts and souls so full of love, so full of grace, they are literally saving lives; so full of hope they are willing to reach out to the condemned; so full of mercy and compassion that they will take any and everyone.**

ferent men that he couldn’t remember. I held this little boy while he cried hysterically for almost an hour.

Well, we were able to get him out of that jail, and he’s done really well since then. But it’s heartbreaking when we see people who are not able to break the curse of addiction or who for whatever reason are not able to move forward with their lives. It can be so discouraging.

But this is where it’s important to recognize that we *are* a community of faith. I remember hearing them sing those songs that might not have meant so much until I began to take this journey. “God gives more grace as the burdens grow greater, gives more strength as the labor increases.”

Executive.” And I put into my motion all this stuff about prosecutorial misconduct and police misconduct and judicial misconduct, and I think I had a line in there saying there was no conduct in this county, it’s all *misconduct*.

Well, I woke up the next morning and thought, “Did I dream that?” And to my horror I realized that not only had I written the motion, I had *sent* it to the court!

### Eyes on the Prize

About three months later I had sort of forgotten about it when it was time to go to court. I drove down to this courthouse feeling tired. I hadn’t seen my young friend for a while and was feeling down. This is why

saving lives; so full of hope they are willing to reach out to the condemned; so full of mercy and compassion that they will take any and everyone. They literally follow Jesus’ words to “Come, ye who are weary and heavy laden, come to me and find rest.” We have this precious, precious community in our midst. And we have to do this tonight — if nothing more, we have to tell them, “Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.” Because if you hold on, Open Door Community, if you keep struggling, if you keep serving, if you keep feeding, if you keep loving, I am persuaded that God’s love will rain down in ways that we cannot imagine.

God bless you in your work. And thank you for all you have done. ✦