

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

BRYAN STEVENSON INTERVIEW
A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Bryan Stevenson
Founder and Executive Director
Equal Justice Initiative
January 28, 2021
Interviewed by John Maggio
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 3 minutes and 28 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATT HENDERSON:

And Bryan Stevenson, take one. Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Bryan Stevenson
Founder and Executive Director
Equal Justice Initiative

The influence of imagery

01:00:10:19

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Well, I think, you know, during the first half of the 20th century, photography was a way of conferring value on subjects. You know, people were used to seeing people who were important in photographs, and so much of photography was shifted away from people of color who were not perceived to have the same value, the same worth to be of the same interest, that when Black photographers began capturing African American life, it created a new relationship for Black people to their own identity.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

That's why publications like *Jet* and *Ebony* became so important to the Black experience, and then when photographers like Gordon Parks came along who had a reputation beyond just traditional Black photography, he had a way of conferring power and significance and- and value to his subjects that was really quite critical, quite important, and that he found value and interest and worth and art in the lives of ordinary people. People doing ordinary things that had extraordinary meaning in the African American community.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

It just sort of lifted up these images to kind of a new place and I do think there has to be trust between a photographer and the subject. And so much of the photography that took place at the end of 19th century and the beginning

of the 20th century was actually in service of maintaining racial hierarchy and maintaining the structures and systems that were so hostile to people of color, and the images would be used to exploit and demonize and legitimate this racial hierarchy.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And so, I don't think it's an understatement—I don't think it's an overstatement to say that Black—photography of Black subjects in the 20th century evolved in a critically important way for understanding the African American experience, for valuing the African American experience. And that's the power of photography. It confers a certain credibility, a certain legitimacy, a certain worth, and I do think that many historic- historic leaders appreciated it.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Frederick Douglass is one of the most photographed figures of the 19th century because he understood that if he could present as this dignified, strong, human being with a lot to say, he could rebut this idea that Black people weren't as good as White people, that Black people aren't evolved, Black people aren't fully human. And he understood the power of images, even his own image to be an important part of that debate, that argument.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Dubois had the same consciousness, so yeah, I think images and imagery shape the way we think about one another, the way we think about people, the way we think about places, and it took a generation of photographers to recognize the power of that tool to really contribute to this transformational century when it comes to African American life.

The humanity reflected in Gordon Parks' photography

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

What distinguishes Gordon Parks from a lot of other artists is that he had a quintessentially authentic Black experience. I mean, he was the child of Black people who had been enslaved, who had fled enslavement, growing up in Kansas to be proximate to lynching and racial terrorism, to understand the weight that people of color felt in these spaces where you had to basically be two people. One person around White people that would keep you safe and another person with your family I think just gave him an insight into the Black narrative, which of course is not a narrative that we understand very well.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I mean, until you understand that the great evil of slavery wasn't involuntary servitude, but this idea that Black people aren't as good as White people, that we're not fully human, we're not fully evolved, then you don't appreciate the urgency of lifting up your humanity, displaying your humanity. That's why, you know, you see these pictures of African Americans. As soon as enslavement ends, they presented themselves with such dignity and grace, the photographs are these well-dressed people.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And uh expressions on- on- on Sundays when you might be out, it carried with it this idea that you dress up. Not only because you're just trying to draw attention to yourself, but you're also trying to make a statement about the humanity and the dignity of this race, this culture, and that shaped Gordon Parks. So, when he goes north uh and he begins to experience some of the same exclusion and frustration that hundreds of thousands of Black people experienced in the urban North where they're not terrorized, but they're also not welcome. He begins to wrestle with a new kind of way of documenting the Black identity.

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KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And of course, that presumption of dangerousness and guilt that caused so many Black people to be lynched in the American South didn't go away when Black people went north. There was still that presumption of dangerousness and guilt, and it didn't necessarily result in lynchings and street violence, but it did result in arrest and a relationship with police that would often mean that communities of color would be menaced and targeted and harassed, and Gordon Parks, as a teenager, came to understand that in a very clear way.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And he also began to understand how other vulnerable populations would be targets; immigrants, poor people, people who were dealing with mental illness, people who were dealing with addiction, and I just think his understanding of this longer historical narrative gave him a heart and a lens that was atypically compassionate, atypically sensitive, atypically thoughtful about humanizing the subjects even when they were being arrested, even when they were being prosecuted and in the San Quentin case, even when they were being executed.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And it made his photography really unique, really distinct. I can't think of a 20th century photographer that was more sensitive, thoughtful, delicate and compassionate when it came to capturing the lives of not just Black people, but vulnerable people, poor people, marginalized people. And um, I think that's what allowed him to become trustworthy because what he does in the 60's is also remarkable. He gains the trust of militant Black revolutionaries. He gains the trust of fashion elites, who often feel mis seen, mistreated by the photographers that they're working with.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

He become—he gains the trust of Black celebrities and Black athletes, and I think it's the way that he approached photography that allowed that to happen, which of course then allows him to present to the world these—these vantage points, these insights to the humanity of some of these great, well-known figures, but also to people whose names we'll never know, but yet they tell an important story about the human experience.

Racial terror as Gordon Parks comes of age

01:08:10:13

BRYAN STEVENSON:

When he was about seven or eight years old, a Black man was passing through a town that was about twenty—twenty minutes away, and a young White woman had been assaulted—had been accused of an assault and um uh this Black man was arrested and was being taken to the jail. A mob formed, they pulled him out and they lynched him. And, of course, it spread through the community, it created that terror. Because you have to understand, this is during the time period where lynchings could escalate into mass violence against the entire African American community.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

In Elaine, Arkansas, a single incident erupted and over 200 Black people were killed who were just in the community. And we had these massacres throughout the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. This was approaching the time period that was going to become one of the most bloody—the bloodiest periods in American history with regard to these mass eruptions of violence directed at people of color; the Saint Louis riots, riots in other parts of the country.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And those states kind of—those border states tended to be where a lot of this would play out because, um, there was a lot of insecurity when Black people

moved into those Midwest states. There wasn't the same history, there wasn't the same comfort level, there wasn't the same awareness, and it didn't take much to create the kind of violence that took place uh— that took place in Gordon Parks' community when he was a little boy. And what's interesting to me is how much that violence created a different kind of relationship to your parents and families.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

You know, parents would talk about, "Well my other kids were pretty good. They would lower their eyes, they would stay quiet, they knew to be quiet. But this child, he just had a spirit in him, he had a strength in him, and we worried about him more because we were afraid that that strength would manifest itself at the wrong time and he'd be a victim of this violence."

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

This incident where Parks was thrown into a river when he was a child by uh— uh these White boys and he didn't know how to swim. Um, I think reinforced this sense that you were never going to be safe, and- and I'm guessing, part in addition to the dynamics with his family, that awareness caused him to want to get away from there. And like so many others, you go

to the urban north and you're expecting a kind of freedom that you couldn't enjoy in the rural south, and you can't really have that.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

But when these communities start to form, communities like Harlem, communities like the South Side of Chicago, commun—and there's more space to be yourself, that's when you begin to see art and culture thrive and so it's not a secret that—it's not a mystery that Parks would be drawn to a place like Harlem as he's, you know, finding his vision, finding his lens.

Photography and race

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I—I think that that awareness about what can happen to a person that can cause them to fall down, that can cause them to make mistakes, that can cause them to get angry and do things that they later regret, made him very compassionate, just really thoughtful. He didn't seem to take insult and injury personal in a way that it disrupted his fundamental belief that human beings, all human beings, had value and worth. I think when you look at his images

and you study his life, you see someone who just believed in the basic dignity of all human beings.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Um, he didn't think that the fact that someone was a criminal or the fact that someone had gone to war, the fact that someone had done something racist or the fact that someone had said something, um, strong about what needs to happen in this country disqualified them from this circle of humanity that he put everybody in. And I just think it allowed him to navigate life with a certain kind of freedom, with a certain kind of, um, shield against all of those indignations that he experienced all the time.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And you know he experienced them all the time. And for a lot of people, that stuff wears on you and it knocks you down and it just changes you, and you get so angry that your artistry is compromised by that rage and anger. I think he was really concerned about race relations. I think he cared deeply about civil rights, I think he had passion and vision, but it seemed to be operating in—you know, at this speed that allowed him to get where he was trying to go and that's not always the case.

Racial portray

01:13:22:10

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Well, I mean it's interesting because I think you're right that there was this tendency to make images of that era gritty and black and white. And what was powerful about segregation story is that he actually introduced color because he wanted people to see the vibrancy of these communities despite the humiliation. And so that iconic photo where um uh Black people are drinking out of a colored water fountain has a lot of color. And he would depict African American's children and parents dressed up, and he wanted color to come through because he understood that the color said something about the lives of these communities that was often overlooked.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And there would still be the black and white images. You know, the images of poverty in the rural south, um, you know, would utilize that tactic, that strategy, that perspective. But he had this remarkable way of balancing color, vibrancy, life, joy, humanity, strength and courage; while at the same time carefully documenting deprivation and hunger and anguish and exclusion and pain. And um, and it's interesting now because I think many people who

are relying on other people to tell their story uh kind of resent when they only tell one part of the story, you know.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And that's sort of how we talked about enslavement during the 19th century. We only wanted to show images of enslaved people that suggested that there was some comfort or peace or acceptance, and that's enraging. And even on the depictions of the early 20th century of poverty and the struggle and suffering, you know it's not all about that, right? There's also another thing, and I just think Parks got that and his images were really full, they were complete, they were comprehensive in ways that you rarely saw.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Usually, these photographers would be given an assignment to depict poverty in the south and that's what you'd get. Or they'd depict, you know, the fishing industry on the coast and that's what you'd get. And I think Parks had this idea that you can't understand poverty without understanding the full humanity of these people, these communities. And uh, he also had this really remarkable instinct for in the face of really terrible economic conditions wanting to reveal that people could still love one another. Some of those

images are so tender, the children, you know, laid out on the bed in such order and the mother or grandparent nearby.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

There's a kind of relationship dynamic in this family that is very affirming, that tells you that there's some love here despite the absence of all of these—of these things that people should have. And I think that was really important to Parks' art and photography as well.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I mean, it's so interesting because when you look at um—you know, as a photographer for *Life*, you look at these publications and the ads are kind of hysterical in the way that they depict the American family. I mean, the American family is always White, uh it's always, you know, in this sort of happy, comfortable space. And when people are looking at those images over and over and over again, it's very easy to understand how they saw people who were different as not really American. And in this very subtle way, this notion of who is an American was being reinforced week after week, month after month by a range of media and a range of publications just through images and advertising.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And so, Parks' images really disrupted that. If you had to see this family in one of his photos juxtaposed with these White families in these ads, it caused you to kind of think just a little differently, it raised questions about who is an American. And uh, I just think it played a really powerful role in the psyche of people in this country. I think it prepared people for some of what happened in the 50's and 60's and the 70's when that assertion of identity became more pronounced, became more vocal, became more accessible to a lot of other people.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Um, but yeah, the—the—the really kind of ethnocentric way in which media in America in the 50's and 60's depicted American life to be exclusively White, exclusively middle class, um gendered in all the ways that reinforced that a woman's place was in the home. All of that is something that we're still trying to recover from, you know, a half-century later.

Life Magazine

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

He was trying to tell a human story through images and photography and the editors and writers at *Life* were trying to fulfill stereotypes. They wanted to

tell a different story. They wanted to describe a notorious gangster. Parks saw just an ambitious young teenager trying to make a difference in his community, trying to take care of his family, trying to do the same things that he was trying to do.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And when the images would be edited so aggressively and the copy would be so hostile to the story he was trying to tell, it had to be enormously frustrating, and what's sad is that there weren't a lot of other options. I have no doubt he probably would have left *Life* if there were other mainstream publications that could provide the same opportunities that didn't have that mindset. I do think he had a belief that if he pushed hard enough, he could get people to change. I do think he was committed to advocacy of a sort.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And that may explain some of his continuing work with *Life*, but in retrospect it was quite criminal what they did to his images and the stories he was trying to tell. And that's why it's been so important to uncover the images unedited and to represent them. For me, that's a kind of affirmation of his vision, and a retelling of his work without the shade, without the, you know,

compromise, without the distortion that the editors and um writers at *Life* would frequently engage in.

Impact

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Well, I think he had enough power in his images that it complicated the viewpoint of a lot of White America, and in that respect, it was useful that those images would appear. You know, the segregation story edition I think was really powerful and it laid a foundation for much of the activism that people would then see on television during the civil rights years. So, I think it was important. I don't think—I mean, as an advocate this is my view, too. I just think if you're trying to change the world, you have to go places where people are, and you have to persuade them.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

You can't just stand on your truth and shout it and demand that people come and embrace what you're saying. You know, effective advocacy means finding ways to go where people are to use whatever space that you can create for yourself and try to push and push and push. And so, I do think that it was important that he was in that space, that he used that platform to push

against some of these ideas even though he wasn't always successful because of this heavy-handed editing.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

A lot still came through, enough that we can talk about it, you know, 60 years later and see the power of it. And- and- and I think careful readers would recognize you know, certainly on the crime edition, you know, those images are not in complete harmony with that copy. You know, you begin to say wait, why are they being so aggressive toward people? Why are they—and when I read it now, it's the editors and writers that look silly, not the images.

Crime series

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Narrative work is the heart of how you change hearts and minds. You can change laws, but if you don't kind of work on people and the psychology behind bigotry and exclusion, then you're not going to make any progress. And we haven't engaged in the kind of narrative work that I think we need to be engaging in. I mean, I give talks about this. I say you know, "The north won the civil war, but the south won the narrative war." That idea of racial hierarchy of White supremacy prevailed after the 13th amendment was

passed, which gave rise to a failed reconstruction, and then gave rise to 100 years of disenfranchisement and apartheid and legal segregation.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And we weren't paying attention to the narrative that we needed to lift up. Dubois understood that, which is why he would use fiction and non-fiction to create a relationship to what it meant to be struggling with the legacy of slavery. And images from the very start had the power to kind of override every other art form in terms of its immediate impact. And you saw that with films like *Birth of a Nation*, which reaffirmed the—for the—in the minds of White southerners, the legitimacy of White resistance to integration, of White resistance to equality.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And it's after that film that you see this spike in lynchings, this spike in membership in the Ku Klux Klan, and while that's a notorious destructive example of the power of images, it nonetheless makes clear why imagery is going to be so important in the 20th century for everything, you know, from World War Two and how we think about the holocaust to what happens during the Civil Rights era to what happens at the end of the 20th century.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And um, there were so few people who understood it and gravitated toward it that we were kind of disadvantaged by not having an army of Black photographers, and filmmakers, and people who could use imagery. But we had a few, and they were extraordinary, and that's why their work became so central to the civil rights space and the images that Parks created. You know, you take an image of those—his image, it's in Mobile that's of four or five Black children looking through a fence to a swimming pool that is racially segregated and you look at it from behind and all of a sudden anybody has a perspective on what it's like to be excluded.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

What it's like to be humiliated by being told that you are not good enough to get in that pool with those other kids. And that kind of framing, that kind of image has tremendous power uh and um, you know, we're doing work now on slavery and one of the great challenges is the absence of imagery that depicts the brutality of enslavement. But that famous photograph of private Gordon where his back is scarred from—it tells an important story, but when you see it, it just—it just does something to your consciousness about things.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

So yeah, I don't think there's any question that images—and we're battling images, right? You know, and this still happens today. You know, if a Black person has been shot and killed by the police when they're unarmed, some people will want to depict the sorrow and the grief and the anguish that creates in an African American community. They want to hear mothers and fathers talking about how devastating it is to have to tell their child, "You're not as free as your White friends."

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And other people want to depict the angriest people doing the most violent things they can do in reaction to that, because it fulfills a certain kind of narrative. And this narrative struggle is at the heart of how we think about basic human rights. Um, we have a consciousness about the holocaust that's shaped by those heartbreaking images of—of survivors of the chambers being—being freed. Imagery is critical and we've become even more visual with the explosion of multimedia from television to cable television to film to you know, documentary.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

All of that has, I think, just made what we see such an important part of what we think, what we believe, and Parks understood early that he had a role to

play if we were gonna kind of shape the things that people believe about equality.

Impact of technology

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Well, I mean just sort of human rights globally has been influenced by this in the 80's. Remember Peter Gabriel and some other people had a project where they would just give cameras to people in war-torn areas and areas where there was abuse and military oppression. And the camera was a weapon of documentation, and those images are really powerful. I just had a chance to see this film *For Sama* and it begins with this—a woman in a war-torn space and it just is so powerful to have that proximity, you know, and have these things play out.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

But you don't get that story in the absence of the images and the visuals that she's able to capture.

Black media

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

When we were doing our research on lynching, we were really able to find incidents and events that other historians had not found because we did exhaustive research using Black newspapers, because Black newspapers knew there was a crisis because they were talking to their relatives and their family members, and they saw mainstream media not covering this epidemic of terror and lynching.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And uh, they would even take photographs of where it happened even if it was just a tree, even if it—but that image was important, it gave a kind of credibility to the story. And, you know, by the mid-20th century they'd found their voice. And interestingly, their voice was visual; it was in creating images that people could recognize. And so yes, when the outrage of Emmitt Till's murder and lynching caught the attention of the nation and Mamie Till decides that she wants the world to see what happened to her child, I think *Jet* is prepared to make that happen.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And it was bold; it was in many ways unprecedented, because it wasn't done to reduce the humanity of Black people as was true when mobs would take photographs of lynching victims, right? That was designed almost to dehumanize the subjects. This was done actually differently. It was done to kind of make clear this was a human being. And as important as the picture of his battered body were, the pictures of his grieving mother were equally important.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

It was her grief and her pain, and her anguish also documented in film and photography that really told the other part of the story, a necessary part of the story. And that's where that balance that Parks was so great at capturing was on display.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think it's the honoring of this person whose life has been lost. This life mattered to people. This life had meaning and purpose and value. When you show it kind of on the street just bleeding, you don't get that. When you show it surrounded by this ceremony, this tradition, this place of honoring and remembrance, it has a very different meaning. And I do think that's something that we continue to think about. When we did our report on

lynching, we made the choice not to show any photographs of lynching victims suspended from trees.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

We—it wasn't just that they were graphic, but we know that the intent of those images was to dehumanize. What we rather wanted to show were the pictures of the White people who were so comfortably standing next to this barbarity. So, we would have a little hint of a body, but we wouldn't show the full body. What we wanted to show was the atrocity of people taking children to witness torture, celebrating torture, celebrating brutality.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And those images have power in a completely different way now. They expose the heartlessness, the cruelty that we tolerated for a half-century in this country, by allowing this violence to go uncorrected, this terrorism to go unchallenged, and it just puts you in a different place when you see it.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

We- we do a calendar of images each year, and it seems like every year we'll hear from a family member, and they didn't know about that image. So, we

did a—it's a classic photograph of a Black family traveling and they're well-dressed and the father's pointing at a sign that says, "Colored only" and explaining to his children. And we heard from the little child in that photograph, you know. And we hear from relatives all the time.

01:32:31:00

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And- and what's been powerful, you know, we have this memorial and what's been powerful about the memorial is that we—we almost daily, certainly weekly, we have people who will come into that space, know that their family is from some county in Texas or some county in Tennessee or some county in Mississippi, and look for their family name and find it and it will just trigger this incredibly intense emotional response to this recognition of this history. And it's been so ignored and unacknowledged that it's not a shock that we're only now beginning to have these discoveries.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

You know, even in my own journey you know, my great grandparents were enslaved. My grandmother would talk to me about them. It's only in the last few years that I've started actually talking about that history. You know, I went to Harvard Law School. I didn't want anybody to know that my great grandparents were enslaved, that I started my education in a colored school.

And then when I started doing this work by the time I graduated, it kind of shifted 360. It became part of the identity I wanted to assert because I wanted to say something about that legacy in that space, and I think that we're now kind of recapturing some of that sense of identity, that sense of strength.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Because that's the other part of the story. As brilliant and as gifted and as remarkable as the images that Gordon Parks took over that incredible career, there are very few photographers in America, there are very few contemporaries that had to overcome the challenges that he had overcome. None of the rest of them had been nearly lynched. None of the rest of them had been terrorized by an actual lynching. None of the rest of them had to flee the community they grew up in to go to the urban north.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

None of the rest of them had to deal with the routine daily persistent humiliation and indignation of being thought not good enough. And even when he makes these extraordinary—has these extraordinary achievements like *Shaft* (1971), you know, making that film, which kind of changed cinematography. Not just Black cinematography but all—it was never valued

in the way that it should have been. And he had to kind of just carry all of that and still have this hopeful, thoughtful, compassionate lens on the world around him. And I think that's what makes his- his contribution so- so extraordinary.

01:35:08:04

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Part of the coping mechanism in a lot of African American families has been to simply not talk about all that bad stuff. To kind of shield your children from the fears and the anxieties that are created when people understand what folks had to live through. It took me a long time to get my dad comfortable with kind of detailing every aspect of Jim Crow and segregation that he lived through as a child.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

And um...that's true for I think a lot of people. You know, my grandfather who saw—who- who witnessed a lynching is just near impossible to get him to talk about that. It's like soldiers who come back from war. When you've been sort of traumatized with something, it takes a certain kind of courage to find your voice around that. And so, a lot of us don't know these histories in the way that other communities do.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

You know, there's something glorious in an immigrant's story about a great parent—great grandparent who took a bag of something and got on a boat and came to Ellis Island, and then the next generation did this, and the next generation did that. There's—there is no shame in that, there's a kind of built-in glory. It's an American story we embrace and celebrate. We make movies about it, etcetera. To be kidnapped, abducted and enslaved and then to be abused and mistreated and tortured, and then to have your rights denied and then to be terrorized, and then to be humiliated and excluded, it's a very different kind of history. It's a very different kind of legacy and it's easy to understand how many generations have felt it better just to not talk about that.

The camera as a 'weapon'

01:37:01:12

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Gosh, I've never thought about it in those terms. I mean I do think using the rule of law in a society that claims to be committed to the rule of law is certainly a way to fight against inequality and injustice. I mean, as a product of Brown versus Board of Education, you know, I think I recognized early that the law had a power to change things to create opportunities that traditional

democracy doesn't have. So, if you had a vote in my county on whether to end racial segregation, we would have lost that vote and majority of people in the county would have said, "No we're going to keep racial segregation."

01:37:46:13

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Um, but these lawyers had the power to end racial segregation, despite the fact the majority of people wanted to preserve it. And that power, if you will, that commitment to the rule of law is certainly something that I have embraced and utilized and continue to utilize. I know there are people in this country who are disfavored, who are marginalized, who are excluded, who are vulnerable, who will never have the political power they would need to fully protect themselves. And so, rights and a commitment to basic rights, a commitment to the rule of law is what I use to protect these communities.

01:38:30:21

BRYAN STEVENSON:

It's how we could end, you know, mandatory life sentences for children, it's how we could end the death penalty for children. It's—you know, these are clients who are so disfavored that if you voted on that, you'd never win. So that continues to be part um,uh of the- of the toolkit if you will. But I have recognized that that's not enough, and now I see myself very much engaged in narrative work and using narrative tools to fight against inequality and

injustice. And it's the whole assortment, it's—you know, I did this TED Talk about seven or eight years ago.

01:39:13:21

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And when they asked me to do it, it was—the guy called and said, “Oh, we want you—” he had heard me someplace. “Oh, we want you to do a TED Talk.” And I said, “When is it?” And he said, “It’s in March.” I was— “I have a Supreme Court argument that month, I can’t do that.” And I told my staff, I said, “This guy named Ted asked me to do some talk. I’m not gonna do that.” And they were like, “No, a TED Talk is a big deal. You have to go do that.” But I had never seen one when I went there. I didn’t truly appreciate the power of that platform.

01:39:40:12

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Um, but things like that and speaking and books and film are all ways to kind of engage people in narrative discourse that, I think, is going to be necessary. I mean the truth is our commitment to the rule of law is not so stable; it is not so secure that if we are indifferent to the narratives that threaten that commitment to the rule of law, that it will survive. And one of the challenges that we’re living through right now is that we’re in this moment where the

politics of fear and anger are raging, and we have leaders that are trying to persuade people to do things that they would otherwise not do.

01:40:25:08

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Try to persuade people to accept things they would not otherwise accept. You know, tolerate things they would not otherwise tolerate because they are afraid or because they're angry. And it's in moments where the fear and anger index get high that a commitment to the rule of law is threatened, and you see law suspended, you see law abandoned, you see rights suspended. It's what happened in the 1940's when Japanese Americans were placed in concentration camps.

01:40:55:04

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Its what's happened repeatedly across the world, and so to just do the law thing... in a moment like this to me is not enough, and so now we're trying to use narrative work to go with that and that's the reason why-- it may seem crazy to some people, but it makes perfect sense to us-- to build a museum, you know, to build a memorial, to create content that is storytelling. That to me is now a big part of what we're utilizing to fight against inequality and injustice.

01:41:35:20

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I mean I think— first of all there’s so little education about this history. We just want people to understand what happened. You start talking about the domestic slave trade and people have no consciousness about that, about what we did to people, the families we broke up, the children—we saw how barbaric, how brutal it was, the violence of it. And then educating them about how pervasive terror and lynching was and what it represents. So, part of it is just educating people, exposing people to things that they wouldn’t otherwise get. Our educational system has done a horrible job at teaching this history, honestly.

01:42:15:01

BRYAN STEVENSON:

We don’t teach it at all, and that has left us vulnerable to a kind of ignorance that makes it easy to sustain inequality. And so that’s one part of it, but the second part of it is to tell a story about our history that shakes people sufficiently. You know, and this is what comes to me from—you know, you go to the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, you go to the Genocide Museum in Kodaly, you go to the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin or even the Holocaust Museum in DC, by the time you get through that space and you see all those shoes piled up or you see these images that just break your heart, you’re motivated to say “never again.”

01:42:56:23

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And I just don't think we've created cultural places in America that motivate people to say "never again" to racial bigotry and bias. And because we haven't made that commitment, we keep manifesting it in new ways. We're comfortable, we are acculturated to accepting it and I just think that has to change. And so that's the primary goal is to disrupt this comfort level we have with inequality and injustice.

01:43:23:20

BRYAN STEVENSON:

This accommodation of bigotry, this tolerance of White supremacy and—and to push us into recognizing that we're going to have to acknowledge the terrible things that have happened. I mean, I do think we need an era of truth and justice in this country. I don't think it's a single commission, I don't think it's a day, I don't think it's a week. It's going to take an era to recover from 400 years of this kind of violence and brutality and racial bigotry. And I don't think we have a second to spare in beginning that era, and so, you know, that's really at the heart of what the museum and the memorial are about.

01:44:06:20

BRYAN STEVENSON:

You know it's been—it's been a steady evolution. You know, I didn't really—I'm not somebody who's ever really thought like way, way, way, way far ahead because I think the data you need to figure out what you need to do next is constantly changing. You know, I finished college as a philosophy major, realized there was no career in that, ended up in law school. I think meeting people on death row, meeting people who were literally dying for legal assistance had a deep impact on me and the ability to connect that to this history made it urgent in ways. Um, and I just started doing the work and then you meet other people, other populations that are suffering and you want to respond.

01:44:57:00

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think for me it was less about kind of a clarity of vision in terms of what I wanted to do in terms of the nature of the work and what kind—and more about how I want to stand, you know, and where I want to stand. And I just think growing up the way I grew up, it feels important to stand with the poor, to stand with the marginalized, to stand with the incarcerated, to stand with the condemned, to stand with the excluded, to stand with people who are disfavored, and to be an advocate, be a witness to their humanity. Don't need to stand with these other folks who are more protected.

01:45:42:13

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Nothing against them, nothing wrong with them, but there's a need to stand where I stand. And then when you stand in a space like that, things will emerge that you need to do, that you need to take on, that you need to talk about. And so, it's really more about, you know, standing in that space and if I think back now, I realize that's the space I've kind of always been in. I can say maybe as a child I was sitting rather than standing; I was just trying to kind of get through it. But now I feel like, you know, you have to stand.

01:46:19:17

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And it's just—you know, you stand in some of these places, you have to face the wind. Uh, you kind of get used to a certain amount of just push back, but the longer you stand, you know, in a lot of ways the stronger you get, the more you understand what it takes to keep standing.

Power proximity

01:46:46:08

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think he understood the power of proximity. You have to get close to people you care about, people you're trying to serve. People whose lives you're

trying to uncover. You know, and we have this tradition, particularly in America, where our policymakers often are making policies from these really different places. When you're proximate, you hear things you otherwise can't hear. You see things you can't otherwise see. It's in proximity that we begin to understand what their true issues are.

01:47:13:02

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And proximity means you don't go in with your own agenda, it just means you go in. And we learn the things the things we need to learn not because we're smart and because we had an education, we learn the things we need to learn because we're at a place to hear what people can tell us. And I do think that was the way Parks saw photography. He wasn't going to do, you know, segregation story unless he went to the Deep South and spent time and communi—and he didn't go to the famous places. He didn't talk to the elites even within the—he went to poor families.

01:47:45:06

BRYAN STEVENSON:

He went to places where people did ordinary things and that's where he uncovered the things that I think have been most influential in our understanding of his work. And so, for me proximity is key. I'm a product of someone's choice to get proximate. I wouldn't be here if lawyers hadn't

chosen to come into a poor racially segregated community like mine and insist that Brown be implemented. And, you know, my—the people in my life, my grandmother in particular, have always affirmed that and, you know, she—she would always just say, “Come sit next to me.” You just—and I’d say, “Why?”

01:48:26:21

BRYAN STEVENSON:

She just goes, “I want you close.” And she would just say all the time, all the time, “Come sit.” And— and, you know, in retrospect I think about those moments as some of the most meaningful and empowering moments of my childhood, and that’s the power of proximity.

Changing the narrative

01:48:50:06

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I mean, that we have to understand that we have those images about the world and that a lot of those images were created and shaped by people who had a very, very disconnected, unhealthy perspective. So, the image of Black life that emerges at the end of the 19th century is an image that is disrespectful, that is um, uh dishonest and sustains racial hierarchy and White supremacy. So that narrative, that image has to change, which means

we have to be proactive in the kind of images that we create, and I certainly think that's true when it comes to race.

01:49:31:10

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think it's true when it comes to children. We had, you know, criminologists going around saying that some children aren't children, they're super predators. And that kind of labeling, that kind of language created a narrative that made it easy for us to throw children away, to put 13-year-olds in adult prisons where they're the victims of abuse and assault and nobody responds. So, we have to change that narrative, we have to counter that narrative.

01:49:55:15

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think all children are children, and that we don't show our commitment to children by looking at how well we treat rich and talented and gifted kids. Our commitment to children is expressed by how we treat poor kids, neglected kids, abused kids. And um- and I think when it comes to race, that narrative has to change. And I think that's what's so powerful about Parks' photography. He disrupted the conventions. You look at his crime series, it challenges this notion that a criminal is someone who is entirely loathsome, entirely evil, entirely untrustworthy, entirely beyond redemption.

01:50:33:14

BRYAN STEVENSON:

That's not what you see when you see his photographs. People were told that segregation was benign. It's ok, Black people want it. That's not what you see when you see his images and the hurt and the exclusion that these families present. You know, we were told that some of those big-name people, they're scary, they're—they're not to be trusted. Muhammad Ali, you know, leaders of the Black Panther Party, people who are talking in very strong language about the need for things to change.

01:51:05:08

BRYAN STEVENSON:

But in Parks' images that's not what you see. You see people who are just deeply committed to a new way of coping with these problems and yeah, I think narrative change is going to be the great work of the 21st century. If we don't get better at disrupting these narratives that have sustained inequality and injustice, we're not going to succeed as a community, as a nation. We're not going to get free, and I do think there's something better waiting for us, and I think people like Parks imagined that, understood that, but they understood that we can't get there if we don't do something more honest than how we talk about one another.

Police officers

01:51:50:07

BRYAN STEVENSON:

You know, I just—you cannot be a person of color growing up in the urban north and not be mindful of the way in which police officers were symbols, they represented threat and menace. They were all White. Um... My cousins lived in North Philadelphia and when we would go spend time with them, there was a completely foreign environment. There were some gangs and my cousin would say, “If you see a gang coming down one street and you see the police coming down another street, both of them are dangerous, but run towards the gang, not towards the police.”

01:52:26:00

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And um– and I don’t think most Americans understood that, and there was no platform to kind of talk about that. And it wasn’t because people didn’t want law and order; they did, they just didn’t want it imposed through abuse. And that image where he shows those, you know, police officers, you know, crashing down a door gun in hand, you know, the writers tried to make that heroic and courageous and comforting, but the image is anything but comforting. You know, a suspicious door is I think the language they used.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Well, what's a door got to do to become suspicious. It's just a door, it's suspicious officers. You know, and even the cop that drives up and pulls the young man, it's harassment. It doesn't create the kind of trust that we now recognize you need to create if we're going to be effective at public safety. And Parks got it, you know, in the images presented. And I just think that that perspective, that lens was so necessary, so critical and still really overlooked, yeah.

Shaft

01:53:41:07

BRYAN STEVENSON:

It was a phenomenon. I mean, people were talking about it even in the church. And in my church, you know, they didn't really want you doing anything too secular, but even in the church they were like, "Ok, yeah y'all should go see *Shaft*." Because it was this synthesis of, you know, kind of Black life in the urban north, Black art and music, right, and the visuals and incredibly influential. Incredibly influential. You know, I played basketball in high school, you know, and our—and our entire team, we had to get dressed up.

01:54:20:00

BRYAN STEVENSON:

We all looked like we were auditioning for *Shaft 2* or something because, you know, it just created this style and people began to embrace this identity. And it was really thoughtful narrative when you kind of pull it apart. You know, not only did he have agency, he had this kind of intuitive sense of right and wrong, and he was evaluating people based on their commitment to right and wrong whether they were Black or White, right? And there were some White people who he embraced because there was a basic commitment and there were a lot he didn't because that was the thing that mattered.

01:54:57:06

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Color wasn't the determinant, it was this kind of value system, and that's a really radical way to tell this story and it's also incredibly skillful filmmaking. You know, the way he captured the fighting, the way he depicted conflict, the way he used humor, the way he created this kind of cool for Richard Roundtree and some of those characters was really astonishing when you think about it for a first-time filmmaker who's largely doing this on his own against the wishes and the—kind of the institutional forces that were shaping films.

01:55:39:00

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And then to succeed like it does it just is—it's remarkable. Yes, but I do think he got to the point where he saw the need to add to his toolkit to kind of venture into some new spaces, to use a new medium and he did it brilliantly.

01:55:53:12

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Yeah, no, I mean I think it was— it was really revolutionary. Every person I knew, knew that Isaac Hayes song, *Shaft* and could recite every word. And when you think about it, too, there's a little bit of rap in there and this way of telling stories in music is reinforced in this very popular way. Yeah, it was incredibly influential because again, it was celebrating someone who had a certain kind of strength and a certain kind of dignity, but also again didn't lose their sense of right and wrong and that was the critical element.

01:56:40:09

BRYAN STEVENSON:

We'd seen, you know, these Black figures who had strength, but they would often be lost to something that overwhelmed them and- and- and uh, Parks really wanted *Shaft* to retain that in ways that I thought was really brilliant.

01:56:55:03

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Well, I think—you know, I think about him enduring all of those—the indignation of having his images so aggressively edited and enduring the insult of having copied that was not really in harmony with the visual. And I just think it—he had to have some hope that he could still make a difference despite those obstacles in that space. And I appreciate that because I think about some of the most influential artists. You know, I think about Toni Morrison when she’s just kind of a lowly copy editor or—and making her way through but had enough hope about that medium that she could tell a story and then of course becoming the great writer she became.

01:57:45:19

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I just think it takes a willingness to believe things you haven’t seen to achieve the things that are necessary. I tell people now I went to Harvard Law School; I had never met a lawyer ‘till I got to law school. Had to believe I could be something I hadn’t seen; you know even doing things like building a museum and a memorial. It’s not the norm, and we have a lot of people say you can’t do these things and I just think for people like Gordon Parks I know there were people who said, “You can’t make a major motion picture.” “You can’t do this.” “Oh, that person’s not going to talk to you. That person’s not gonna talk to you.” “You can’t do, you know, fashion photography and spend time with Muhammad Ali or Eldridge Cleaver.”

01:58:29:14

BRYAN STEVENSON:

You ca—and um– and he just didn’t accept that. He actually had that hope and I do think that defined his work in a lot of ways. In so many of those images he presented something challenging because I think he hoped that people would respond to that challenge. You know, those images I know had an impact on people like Robert Kennedy and a generation of politicians that were ultimately motivated to declare a war on poverty. Well until you see it and you understand it, you’re not going to have that motivation. And—and I think that—that he was a hopeful artist. I don’t think he could have done what he did without a huge dose of hopefulness.

01:59:14:20

BRYAN STEVENSON:

His willingness to navigate multiple worlds. I mean, he was the only Black photographer working in that space for a long time, and yet um– and that came with a certain cost, it came with a certain amount of discomfort. I—you know, it must have been really upsetting to sometimes pour your heart and create these beautiful images to then have them edited in such a destructive way, dishonest way, and yet he persisted. And—and, you know, he constantly put himself in uncomfortable situations. Going to the rural south with a camera documenting segregation was dangerous.

01:59:58:04

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Presenting images that contradicted the images that the rest of America wanted to present, dangerous. Pushing against these ideas, very uncomfortable; very uncomfortable and yet he did it. And so, you see it throughout his career. I met him once because he'd actually gone abroad to do some war documentation, which there's not a lot about, but he would talk about that and how challenging it was to be in that environment. But what I remember is him relating that to other things he had done in this country. Times when he had been chased, times when he had been yelled at, times when he had been threatened, times when he'd been told that, you know, the Klan or some group was going to get him.

2:00:55:00

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Being in the company of people like Malcolm X or others who were often the target of a lot of suspicion and violence and nonetheless kind of reconciling himself to be the person who documents these truths about the world around us, and I just think you have to be willing to do uncomfortable things to do that.

Malcolm X

02:01:22:08

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I have no doubt that the list of people that he had to worry about is long and extensive from, you know, violent White supremacists in the American south to Black nationalists, to law enforcement who didn't trust his comfort level with people they deemed to be traitorous or- or dangerous. You know, to people who didn't like the way he was disrupting the space with the kinds of images he was creating. So, it's—that's why I think of him as a courageous photographer. I don't think he ever let any of that keep him from looking for new images to show the world about who we are.

Gordon Parks' relevance today

02:02:16:08

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Well, I just think we're- we're finally rediscovering and reevaluating the contributions of these extraordinarily influential and courageous people. You know, writers like James Baldwin didn't really get the respect and attention they should have when they were writing a generation ago, but now we can look at that work anew. I think it's true for many of the lesser-known civil rights leaders and icons, Bayard Rustin and Ella Baker and so many others, Diane Nash. And I- and I think it's true for Parks.

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02:02:57:19

BRYAN STEVENSON:

It's just he's created this record, this catalogue of images that today now tell an important story we're still trying to understand, and if we're willing to look at that story, we're gonna learn some things that we need to learn. We're gonna see some things we need to see, and we'll gain an appreciation of some truths that we've been slow to recognize. And so, I think it's absolutely necessary and wonderful that there is some interest in his work.

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