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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS INTERVIEW
PORTIONS USED IN: *THE THREAD SEASON ONE*

Reginald Dwayne Betts, Poet and Lawyer
September 15, 2022
Interviewed by: Noah Remnick
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 18 minutes and 28 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Story Features

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Reginald Dwayne Betts

Poet and Lawyer

Reginald Dwayne Betts

Poet and Lawyer

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NOAH REMNICK:

So for an audience who may be new to you, tell me the story of how you became a prison reform advocate. How were you introduced to this world?

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Yeah, I don't know if I would call myself a prison reform advocate. That's interesting because it goes to the origin story. I never thought about prison in terms of what does it mean to be inside there? What does it mean to have far too many people inside of prisons? Who those people are? I never thought about most of it until I got incarcerated. And I got incarcerated when I was 16. Exactly one month and three days after my 16th birthday. I carjacked somebody, got arrested the next day, and went to prison. And the first thing I recognized really was— and I knew it, I knew how many Black men were in prison, but when you are in there yourself as a kid, you understand it. One, because the people around you aren't your peers. They're like, you know, your older cousins, your uncles, your fathers.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And there was a whole group of us who were in, who got locked up as teenagers and we got tried as adults. So that is really when I started thinking about this as an issue. When I started thinking about looking at people who've been in for five years, for 10 years, for 15 years, people who became my mentors, people who became my friends, who some of them had no hope of release. I think that's when I became a person that was seeking to reform the system while I was still in the system. And then publicly, I think somebody might say, if they were trying to create a timeline, they would say it happened when I came home and I was speaking about my experiences in a college classroom at University of Maryland. And there was a woman, her name was Liz Ryan. She was starting a campaign for youth justice and she heard me speak and said, "Will you come and speak for me? I'm going to this meeting where they're trying to change a policy that would make it easier to send kids from a juvenile detention center to the prison." And so I went to the meeting

and I talked, and at that point I saw that words could change policy. And so I began to be more actively engaged in these conversations to reform and change the system.

NOAH REMNICK:
Based on your personal experience and scholarship, what does how we treat incarcerated men and women teach us about our country?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
It's interesting. I mean I think it teaches us a lot about our country, but it teaches us a lot about ourselves. We forget that when we incarcerate somebody, the state is doing it in our name. And I think that what it tells us is that we are willing to abide by all kinds of cruelty and we don't have to think it's justified. If it makes it easier for us to manage the lives that we want to live, if it makes it easier for us not to ask questions about why a particular thing happened, we're willing to… not have a voice against a practice. And so I think what it tells us about our country is we are a country that's still struggling to live up completely to its ideals. And we're people who are still struggling to live up completely to our own individual ideals of what it means to be a member of a community, what it means to care about those who have hurt each other, those who've been hurt, and those who just can't figure things out.

NOAH REMNICK:
What have you learned about the role that art and literature can play in transforming our law and politics?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

I don't know. I mean, honestly, it's really interesting. Pablo Neruda was a statesman. It's really interesting when you imagine how art has played a role in other states. It's this poet named Serhiy and he's a Ukrainian poet. And I think about his work and how it's actively speaking to the conditions of his community before the war, during the war. He's a vital, I think, member of what I imagine and be the Ukrainian creative landscape, but also sort of understanding what it means for just regular people to walk around. I feel like in the United States we have a disconnect from poems in that way. You could think about a long list of poets who might be more well known from Terrance Hayes to Sonia Sanchez to even somebody like Walt Whitman.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

But you got the contemporary poets and you got the older poets and you got the novelists who don't seem to be a part of the fabric of society. And so when you ask what role does arts, what role does literature, what role does poetry play in politics and sort of shaping society? I would say we don't have a strong enough role. And one of the reasons is because we have to find a way… I think the onus is on poets to figure out how do you sing from the rafters? Like, we sing. But sometimes to be heard you got to sing from the rafters. And I think that we're still struggling to make that happen. I think it's a lot of people who are doing really legitimate work and sometimes you can see it more obviously in a visual artist, Titus Kaphar, Kara Walker. You see these people really engaging with what it means to be alive… Or if you take somebody like Anselm Kiefer, who all of his work as a German visual artist, all of his work is really engaged with what it means to have a German father who was… you know, who was in the SS. And what does it mean to live down

those memories and what does it mean to embrace a broader understanding of humanity? I think that visual artists, some of the best, set a real profound example. I think how we can engage differently in the world and sort of make a bigger impact.

NOAH REMNICK:
Do you believe that the institution of the prison can be reformed? Is it redeemable?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Look man, I know people in prison for murder. I know a lot of people in prison for murder. If I believe that those people are redeemable, I think that any institution must have something of value that could be salvaged. I think that when you talk to somebody who has caused a community, who has caused somebody they love profound pain, you know, who has committed the kinds of crimes that I was locked up for … I went to prison for carjacking. I think that we struggle to live in a world that believes that we could be redeemed. And I think we recognize, at least I recognize, the need for some kind of system that's a counterbalance, that could be not a factory of despair and sorrow, but a place where you could go to– to– to create that pathway towards redemption.

NOAH REMNICK:
Your writing and legal work is obviously deeply informed by your family and community. How would you describe the Maryland of your youth?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Oh man. I grew up in a Black belt. It's so interesting to think about Suitland, Maryland and PG County, Maryland and what it meant for me to be a 14 year old and a 15 year old. Particularly because this is pre-internet era and this is really, my whole life was circumscribed by the three, four, five-mile radius between where I grew up at and maybe as far out as Northern Virginia. And it was not a landscape where we talked about poetry. We talked about Tupac and we talked about Biggie and we talked about Nas. We talked about Gogo. It was a landscape that was dominated by sound and by music. I mean, I used to do back flips. I used to do black flips, too. I used to do back flips as a kid. I mean I used to do like five, 10, 15 somersaults in a row. I think about my childhood landscape and I know that it was crime and that it was violence. I know that we're talking about the '80s and the war on drugs. I remember the moments where we would go outside the next day and see the holes in the concrete and in the brick because there was a shooting the night before. I remember when the whole neighborhood was shut down because there was a hostage situation.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

But those aren't the moments that define my childhood. The moments that define my childhood are learning what throwback tackle is. It is really understanding what it meant to see a whole neighborhood of people who had to carry their clothes to the laundromat, walk five, 10, 15 minutes to the laundromat because the laundry in the neighborhood didn't work. I learned a lot from the community where I came from, but maybe the thing that I learned most of all is, now that I think about it, is the world can overwhelm you and you can believe that the world is just filled with whatever your troubles are and your sorrows. And you remember children, they live in the

same kind of world with those same troubles and those same sorrows, but somehow they're able to move from day to day to day, not holding on to it—to it the way we do. And so maybe the best parts of me and the best parts of what I can do and the work that I try to do, come from the moments when I remember that.

NOAH REMNICK:
What was your family life like?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
My mom was a single mom, so I was the only child and I learned how to be by myself, which is useful. My mom was going to work… I was in first, second grade, my mom would be gone to work before I woke up in the morning. She would wake me up and make me take a shower and get dressed and then let me go back to sleep. And then when she got to work, she would call me and wake me up a second time and then I would really get ready for school. I would eat breakfast and then I would go. I would come home, she hasn't gotten back from work yet. So I grew up in a house where I learned what it means to work hard and I learned what it means to… Actually like the duty of a parent almost. Somebody told me, "It's not just enough to be successful." They said, "You have to be successful and almost look effortless." This is why we love Roger Federer. It's just something about the way he plays tennis, where it just looks like he's not working hard. And my mom, I think she taught me that one of the responsibilities of a parent is to shield your child from whatever suffering that they might be dealing with. And my mom did an amazing job at doing that.

NOAH REMNICK:

What lessons did your mother try to pass on to you as a boy? What were her hopes for you?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

It was not prison, I know that for certain. Honestly man, it's a strange thing when you realize that, you know, what my mom wanted was for me to be happy and for me to be safe. I assumed she wanted me to go to college. We talked about college a lot, but I was the first person in my family to go to prison, and I was the first person to graduate from college. My mom, her hopes and aspirations for me weren't captured in things that she communicated to me with words. She would get me the latest, say Walter Mosley book, something I wanted. I thought it was the latest, but it would be a paperback and it would be two years old. But it was all that she could afford. And because I was reading them in sequence, I didn't know that hardback books came out first. So when she got this thing for me, it felt like that— she'd be like, "I got you the new Walter Mosley book." Book two years old. But she taught me that reading mattered even if it came at a cost. And actually the bookstore was like this magical place. I didn't go to a bookstore till after I got out of prison. So even her bringing those books to me felt like, "Where did you go? Did you meet the Black Santa Claus to get this for me?"

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And the other thing she taught me though is that… The first poem that I read was a poem that she wrote, and she wrote it for herself and it was in this little photo album. It was like a greenish photo album filled with black and whites and some color Polaroids, too. But it was a poem and it was like, "Life is for

caring and sharing, living and loving." It was pretty much a horrible poem. But back then I read it and I just thought … The lesson I learned from it was that you could have an interior life that deeply matters to you. And sometimes you could live in a space where, for whatever reason, the circumstances of the world didn't let that interior life blossom.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And so sometimes my mom would give me glimpses of her interior life, whether it was a book that she was reading that she hadn't told me about it and I didn't know captured something that she cared about in the world, or whether it was that poem or whether it was the memories and the scrapbooks that she would make or whether it was her decision to be vegan and to stop eating chicken and red meat in '91. Crushed my spirit completely when bacon disappeared from the home. But in all of those decisions my mom taught me what it meant to be your own person, you know, what it meant to hold part of yourself for yourself, but also sometimes to make decisions that the world saw and you did it because of something that you value, something that you principally thought was important.

NOAH REMNICK:
You grew up largely without your father, but you've been wary about some of the narratives around how that's affected you. How do you feel like his absence did and didn't shape you?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
It's interesting because I don't know if you missed the thing that you didn't fully know wasn't there. I think sometimes what we understand about

childhood we understand in retrospect. So growing up I never really thought about it. It wasn't like a hole that was there. But I do think now, and I should say that when I was getting sentenced, my whole, not my whole family, but I had some folks there and they give you a chance to have people go to the stand and try to explain how you got here. And imagine that, like nobody in the courtroom knows how I got there. I'm 16 years old, I carjacked a man. I have no real explanations. I've never been in trouble before. The judge doesn't understand it. The prosecutor doesn't understand it, the defense attorney doesn't understand it, and none of my family understands it. And we are playing a charade where everybody's supposed to pretend like they have an explanation, and they're asking me why I did it. And I'm like, "You just told me that I was 16 and that I was foolish and that I was like impulsive. Why should I know why I did it?"

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And so I'm sitting there knowing that people want an explanation from me and I watch my folks and they get up one at a time. Everybody but my mom. But I had an aunt, I had an uncle, I had a friend of the family, they get up and they keep saying a version of the same song. I did it because I didn't have a father in the house. And I was listening and my back was to my mom because she was in the audience behind me, and I just thought … And them saying that, they're saying that my mother wasn't enough. And I remember standing up telling the judge, "I don't exactly know why I did it. I'm not going to pretend to have a real reason." I just made a mistake and I apologized. I didn't do it because I didn't have a father in the house.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And I am a father now and I think that my presence matters to my sons. I think that some of the things I missed is … I've coached basketball in my community for five, six years straight. I mean, it's other parents who know me as a basketball coach. I remember when I won that award and they said, "Man, I saw you won a big award and you a lawyer too and a poet? How come I never knew this about you?" I was like, "Because I'm with your child from 6:00 to 7:10, you know, one night a week, on the weekend. I think it's not about everything else I might do." I think I missed some of that though, like what it means to have somebody that was in my life for just these things that mattered because he believed they mattered.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And you don't know what that means to miss that. Even now that I provide it for my sons, even now that I think I provide some sliver of it for other young people that I interact with in the community, you still never fully know what it means to have missed that. And I don't know what the impact was. I think if anything it just means that I don't have memories of my dad kissing me and saying like, "Have a good day at school." And I also don't have memories of my dad sad. I don't have memories of my dad laughing. I think all of those things go into you becoming who you are. And maybe for me it's allowed me to really believe that it's value. I used to … Man, I used to work in Philly and I would come home every Wednesday. I would get on a train and come home just to coach. I talked to my boss and said, "I need to come home on Wednesday because I'm coaching these two basketball teams." And he looked at me like, "I don't know if you need to coach two basketball teams." And he said, "You could go home, though." And I think those kind of things matter

and they matter to me, they matter to my children. I didn't have it. And such as life.

NOAH REMNICK:
What first drew you to poetry as a young man? What role did it play in your life back then?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I tell people this story and I don't know if they believe it because I'm not even certain if I believe it, but I know that it's true. I expected to go home. It was my first time getting in trouble. I mean, why wouldn't I get a second chance? I was a 16 year old kid who was in the Honor Society. I was a 16 year kid who was the class treasurer. I had braces. I just really expected to go home. And when the judge sentenced me to nine years in prison, I just remember being in a holding cell asking myself, "What do you become after nine years in a cell?" I had wanted to be an engineer, planned on going to Georgia Tech, being an engineer, and a point guard for the team. I was going to have a growth spurt. That didn't happen. And I knew I wasn't going to be an engineer now that I had nine years in prison.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And I just said, "I'm going to be a writer." I had no idea what it meant. Didn't even tell anybody. Because you say something that's outlandish as that and you start telling people and they start discouraging you. So I just carried it around in my head with me and I started to approach the world as if I was a writer. I took writing in my journal seriously. I was like, "This is the beginning of some book that'll happen later." And I wrote and I read, and then two years

later I'm in solitary confinement. It's like woe is me, man. I had got in a fight. I don't even know if you call it a fight. This dude that … It was just rough. And I get let out of the hole and then I end up back in the hole. And this time it's for six months. 17 years old, in prison, in solitary confinement. There's no air conditioning. It's so hot back there. And books are contraband. What am I supposed to do with the hours in a day?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I heard a dude call for a book. Who was he asking for a book? And then I heard the book slide across the concrete. I would hear it again a couple days later. And I realized that they had set up a library, you know, a kind of underground library. Only rule was that if you had a book and somebody asked for it, you gave it to them. And so I called for a book and somebody slides Dudley Randall's, *The Black Poet*, under my cell. And at first I'm thinking, "What am I going to do with poetry?" I mean I'm 17 and I'm in prison. I ain't got no love stories to tell. And I get introduced though, through that book, to Langston Hughes, to Claude McKay. I get introduced to Sonia Sanchez, to Lucille Clifton.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And it radically changed my life. And the reason, honestly, I'll tell you this, the reason is because there was his cat named Etheridge Knight that was in the book, too. And Etheridge Knight had did time in prison and he was writing poems about prison. And so all of a sudden I had this medium that I could write about a whole world in 15 or 20 lines. Part of the reason why I never told anybody I wanted to be a writer, because I didn't know what that meant. Does that mean I want to … James Baldwin is writing these brilliant 50-page

essays. It's like, "I can't do that." Walter Mosley is inventing a whole world. "I haven't even experienced half of these things. I can't talk about what it means to be a father, a husband, a detective, a cop, to go to the war." I read *Sophie's Choice*. "How can I pretend to approach that level of artistry? I don't even understand the world I'm writing about."

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And what a poem said is that you could write a whole poem that's just capturing a moment. And reading Etheridge Knight's poetry, where he said was that the things I was experiencing, desiring to teach myself Spanish because I heard a brother on a wreck yard speaking Spanish, watching this kid jump from the top tier because he didn't want to get raped, fights, cooking meals together. The hope, the desperation, struggling with what landed us in prison cells. Like he was writing poems about all of that. And he was writing poems about this 16 year old kid that was in prison, named Gerald. It was this piece called “For Freckle-Faced Gerald.”

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And I'm reading this in the hole and I'm thinking, "Damn, I'm going to be a poet." And it made sense. And then I took to it. I'm obsessive compulsive. I wrote a thousand poems over the next six months. I wrote so many poems, I said, "I'm going to make a book," and I folded it all up and it's a stack like this and it's sometimes three poems on a page. I mean, I was getting request forms and writing the poems and request forms. And I ripped up a sheet and I threaded the book and I was like, "This is my book." And then the guards were shaking down. I had to rip the string out. And I still got it, though. I still got it. I still got the poems from that first winter that I said I would be a poet,

which in itself is amazing given how hard it is to keep track of things, moving from prison to prison.

NOAH REMNICK:
How did you manage to sustain relationships with your loved ones while you were inside?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Aw, man. I wrote letters when I was inside. I wrote letters. Letter writing is a lost art, it's one of the few challenges with technology. It's one of the few challenges with instant messages. But I learned to love writing letters, and I would write about what I was thinking about. I asked them about themselves, but I just wrote. I wrote everybody. I wrote a thousand letters. I wish I still had them. Yeah, I wish I still had them, but I wrote a lot of letters.

NOAH REMNICK:
Do you have any mentors or figures who helped guide you during your time inside or any particularly lasting friendships?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I have lasting friendships. I have a lot of lasting friendships. I mean, some of my homies, I've been fortunate enough … Went to law school and then represented folks on parole, helped them get out of prison. So I got a decent reputation with folks, like, did some good in the world. But mentors is a different type of question because a lot of the prison experience was transient. And so the older cats, you know, they always— if they in a position to be a mentor … I was on the upswing, going from violent prison to violent

prison to violent prison. And they were on a downswing, going from violent prison to less violent prison to less violent prison. And so when I was a kid and I really kind of needed that … There was a couple guys, but we were kind of like ships passing in the dark and they would give me jewels that I would hold onto and I would remember. But in terms of somebody who was there the whole time or who was there even for a long period of time, it was more my friendships. It was more the dudes who were my peers and my brothers, who pushed me and who was there for me more so than somebody who I would name a mentor.

NOAH REMNICK:
What kind of wisdom did those older gentlemen or peers of yours impart to you?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I remember this one guy, he was deeply religious. And it's not that I remember any particular thing he said to me, but he just showed up and he showed up for everybody, right? And he was able to be a kind of beautiful, gentle human in prison. And I don't know if he was ever able to be the same thing in the world, but man, he would take care of the young cats. If somebody was getting bullied, he would pull their coat and teach dudes how to fight. You know what I mean? He took seriously this idea that you had to know how to take care of yourself. And even when I got transferred, he would write me letters and he stayed in contact with some of my close friends. And the point was people like that sort of instilled this value of what it means to be present when you don't have to. Particularly what it means to be present when you don't have to for people who need something, people who can't

take care of themselves, people who don't have enough food, people who are just devastated by what it means to be locked up. And so, it's guys like that who, even if they weren't with me for a long time, who I've recognized them being in the world became a presence for me.

NOAH REMNICK:
So taking a step back for a moment, talk to me a little bit more about that carjacking that you took part in at 16 that sent you to prison. What was going on in your life then that led to that moment? Or is it still a mystery to you now?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I mean, it's not so much as a mystery. But you do have to understand that anything that anybody does is a product of what's in the realm of possibility for him. And so we say, "Well why did you commit a carjacking?" Instead of saying, "How did that become a thing that was actually in the realm of possibility?" And I could say it was the fact that two of my classmates got murdered and nobody talked about it. They both got murdered by teenagers who then went to prison, tried as adults and nobody talked about it. I could say that the first time I heard about a carjacking was when I was 12. I could say that the second time I heard about a carjacking was when I was in ninth grade and a classmate and some friends tried to carjack somebody and one of them ended up dead.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
But the truth is that those weren't the things that pushed me to do it. Those just gave me a landscape of what was possible. And honestly, up until the

moment I picked up a gun and I committed to robbing somebody, I would've said it was an absurd idea. I would've said it was completely outlandish. And the rest of the story ultimately doesn't make a lot of sense because most people don't get caught after the first time they committed a crime. And so I might be telling you a very different story today, had I not gotten caught the next day, but it was happenstance. It was… I'm at a friend's house with my man Marcus, and people are broke and somebody's talking about getting some money. "I'm going to get it the best way I know how."

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And somebody else was like, "You ain't going to do nothing." "If I had a pistol, I would." "You wouldn't do nothing." "You wouldn't do nothing. I'm out there with you." None of us have a gun, so this is all talk. And then somebody walks in the room, "Oh, you know, my cousin got a gun." "Y'all ain't trying to do nothing." And now we in a car, driving to Virginia to do something that's insane. And I say all of that, not as an excuse, but as– as– as how sometimes overwhelming it is to know that you could start a day or morning thinking that you're going to end with hopes of being on a basketball team, but you end driving away from a crime scene.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And in some ways, it's maybe good fortune that I got picked up the next day because it is so hard to live in the world when you put those kind of expectations for violence on yourself, and prison forced me to confront all of the absurdity of it. You know, if you ever— I mean, nobody call a parent, call your mom from a jail cell, as a child. And you can't lie. You can't say you're at your cousin's house. It's just this one moment where as much as you want to

lie, you got to admit the thing that ain't nothing going to make right. And that's how it happened.

NOAH REMNICK:
What do you remember about that phone call to your mom?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
It was late, man. It was late. They put you in a cell and they make you sweat it out for like four or five hours. So already, I woke up that morning, my mom … It was a Sunday morning. My mom went to work and I left out the house at 9:00, 10:00. And no such thing as cell phones, so it's not like she expected to hear from me before 3:00. But she got home at 3:00 and I'm not there. And then 4:00 and then 5:00 and then 6:00. And I know my mom is wondering where I am and I'm in some cell and they won't let me make a phone call. And I'm by myself with nothing but my own thoughts running wild. And the call was short. It's like, "I'm in jail. Don't worry, it's going to be okay." "Tell me not to worry. You calling me at 9:00 at night, telling me you in jail."

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And I remember her coming to see me, actually one of the first times she came to see me, and I had to tell her I did it. I confessed to the police. So it's not as if I could act as if I didn't do it. Yeah, I mean, you know, you spend your whole life trying to redeem yourself from that moment. It probably hurt more than knowing that I hurt this couple I tried to rob, that I waved the pistol in this man's face, and I know that devastated him. He might wake up at night still thinking about that. I hope he doesn't. I hope he sees me on the news and says, "Is that the kid that carjacked me? I'm glad he's doing something

meaningful with his life." I mean, I hope that's the story, but the truth is, the thing that truly devastates me is like everything that those folks felt, I could hear in my mom's voice. And you just work… I think, some of us, we spend our whole life trying to work our way away from that moment that you can't rescind.

NOAH REMNICK:
How do prisons blunt personal identity and creativity?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I don't think prisons blunt personal identity and creativity at all. I was in a cell with a dude that made a tattoo gun out of the motor of a Walkman. Matter of fact, this cat once took two Walkman, neither of which had the capacity to record. He built a new Walkman out of those two, the parts from those two, that had a hidden compartment where you could turn the switch on and off. And when you turn the switch on, when you push play, it was a recording device. And you're wondering, "Wait a minute, who cares? You got a recording device, but you don't have a microphone." But you got headphones. And those headphones would be the microphone. I mean, we in a prison cell making mix tapes, you know what I mean? Like this dude, he had the schematics for every television, every Walkman, every CD player that had been released in prison in the past 20 years.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I knew dudes who were painting murals. I know a cat who wasn't locked up with me, but was locked up somewhere else who did a 40 by 40, a 40 foot by 40 foot mural, a sort of two by two foot square sheet at a time. And he mailed

them out and then when he came home … He couldn't see it until he came home. This cat named Jesse Krimes. He came home and then put it all together and saw it for the first time with his audience. I mean, I've seen people do wondrous and miraculous things. I know people who've written novels in prison, so I don't think … I know people who became somebody in prison. I mean, somebody respected. So I don't know if I would say that prison blunts creativity. I would say that prison creates more challenges than you could imagine.

00:32:02:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

But MacGyver is born out of those challenges. So I think that what I want to hold onto is the possibility… You know, the possibility… I mean it's like fucking chitlins, you know what I mean? It's like what does it mean? And you're not just taking the worst that people have given. You also going inside that cell every night with the worst that you've done and you're trying to transform that into something that matters. And first, it just matters for the people around you. I think that prison has, at times, given us an opportunity to be more than we would've ever been without it. And that is not to say… that's not an advertisement for prison. That is an endorsement of the undying spirit of men and women and children who find themselves confronted with this question. It's like, "Can I be more than what I was?" And I want to focus on that because if we focus on the worst of what prison does to people, we might imagine that people who go into those places could only be the worst. And I don't think that's true.

NOAH REMNICK:

So while you're inside, you chose a name for yourself, Shahid, meaning witness. Can you tell me the story behind that?

00:33:17:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Yeah, everybody was picking names. I was running with some guys of Nation of Islam and Muslim and Five Percenters and everybody was picking names and it was something beautiful, actually though, about the ritual of being able to dress yourself in new clothes, you know, and walk around and people are calling you Wise and calling you Mathematics and calling you Malik and calling you Rashid. And you picking these names that have a meaning. We at this prison where it's the spot you go to before you go to the real prison. And so everybody there is between the ages of 14 and 20, and a lot of dudes got 30, 40, 50 years. I was already a short timer and I had nine years. And I'm running with these guys and it's like, "Yo, who do you want to be?" And they give you a book of names and say, "Who do you want to be?"

00:34:09:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And it became an opportunity. I walked into prison with my father's name and I wanted to be somebody else. I wanted to be somebody who hadn't called his mother 9:00, 10:00 PM to say I was in jail. And it took a minute for me to find a name. I mean, I took it very seriously. And then I decided to be like Prince. I found one and I was like, "I'm not going to push my luck. I'm just going to stick with this one." And I chose Shahid because, I mean, what is a writer, if not a witness? And I thought to myself, I was looking around me, and at first I thought like I really didn't belong here. And then I realized none of us belong here, but what story do we have to tell from being here? And so sometimes you get lucky. I wouldn't even be a poet if I'd have picked Rashad

or something. Oh, I might've ruined my life. Instead I would be a mathematician. So yeah, I picked the right name for somebody who would end up a poet.

NOAH REMNICK:
A lot of your work is about the afterlife of prison. How did the label of felon continue to follow you, even after your release?

00:35:11:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I mean, all of the obvious ways. It's hard to get a job. Sometimes you can't rent an apartment. They ask you on your college applications, I got denied a full tuition academic scholarship to Howard University. But in other ways, ways that are harder really to talk about. The first time you tell somebody that you just met, who you've come to love or you think you might come to love. So it's too early in the relationship for anybody to make a commitment, yet if you don't say this thing … I remember telling my wife, I told her on our second date. We're in a car. I was such a fool. You never get in a car with a woman and say, "Look, I got to tell you something." It's like, no, this is not the place to be like, "I got to tell you something." We're on a second date. I should have did it out in public and be like, "Yo, I wanted to talk to you about something." But I'm like, "I got to tell you something."

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
She was probably looking like, "What does this fool got to say to me? I liked them, too. He about to mess everything up." And I told her I just came home from prison, I served eight and a half years in prison. And she went on a third date with me. And a fourth. And I proposed and see what I'm saying? Yeah, so

it worked out. But the thing is … And children, you got to tell your children. The thing is, it's something that you don't just carry in the world. It's something that everybody who loves you carries in the world. And it's easy for me to reduce what it means to carry that in the world to like Howard not giving me a scholarship or this organization not giving me a job or that organization not giving me a job, or me having to explain myself in front of these admissions officers. But that's not the thing.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
The thing is, I know that I made a decision when I was 16 that my children, if I'm fortunate enough to have grandchildren, my wife, my mom, like everybody who loves me, carries that with them. And there is no amount of success that makes … You know, you would just give it up. You would be like, "I would rather not carry that thing. I'm okay with just having a job and not having that particular story and not giving everybody else that particular story." But unless I move to … I don't know where I would move to. But unless I move to another country, that's the story I got.

NOAH REMNICK:
What about personally on the internal level? What are the ways that your time inside continues to shape your inner life?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I mean, you know, it shapes who I care about. I think it influences who I care about. I don't know if my time … It influences who I care about. I have friends who still in prison. It influences the work I do. And it's just a part of me and in

some troubling ways and maybe some profound ways, but it's just a part of me.

NOAH REMNICK:
Tell me more about your relationship with Terese. How did you two meet and how has that love transformed your love?

00:38:21:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Yeah, I met my wife in a bookstore. I was working in a bookstore. I took a pay cut to take that job, too. I had been working somewhere else, and then I got offered the opportunity to apply for this job at the bookstore. And it was more responsibility. The owner knew I had been to prison, so I wasn't concerned with that. And I love books. And so I took this job at the bookstore and yeah, she came in one day and she was lovely. She was smiling and it was 9:00 in the morning and she just seemed, you know, just really happy with the world. And I remember she was like, "Can you help me find a book? Do y'all have this?" And I was like, "Yeah, we have it." I had no clue. I was like, "If this is going to work out, I got to gamble from the very beginning. I got to fulfill all of the expectations." I was like, "We got this book." And we had it on the shelf. It was an African American studies book. And we talked, I read her a poem.

00:39:21:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Oh man. I was like, "Yo, you like poetry? Let me read you something." I read her an elegy, which is not the kind of poem you should read on a first meeting, you know, but I've read her a poem about a friend of mine who got murdered in high school. And then we would meet about five or so months

later. We were both students at the same community college. We were both working full time. So we saw each other on that day, September 19th. And then we ended up getting married three years later on September 19th. But we saw each other on that day in the bookstore, and we didn't see each other again until May. And it just so happened and I saw her three times in the same week and the first time I saw her and I just didn't know how to respond.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
But it was great because I came home in March of 2005. I met her in September, 2005. And I hadn't even been free long enough to understand anything about the world. So it was probably perfect that we didn't really start dating at that time. I saw her the first day and I saw her the second day and the third day. I was like, "Yo, you got to go. I mean, this is fate." We saw each other three days in a row, and she let me take her out. And then when she let me take her out, the professor who had sent her to the bookstore to buy a book for his class, that professor comes into the vegan spot where we getting food at and I'm like, "Oh, this is it right here. You got me for life now." She laughed, but I was telling the truth.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
You know, you work really hard, man. You do this thing, you do this horrible thing, and you do a bid and you want to walk into the world and have people see you as however you might imagine seeing yourself. You want to be able to talk to one person who when they find out that you've been in prison, that is not the most interesting thing that they believe they know about you. And on our second date I told her, and even though she knew very little about me, she did not believe that that was the most interesting thing about me. And I think

that you need somebody like that… or you're just fortunate if you have somebody like that, and I've been fortunate to have somebody like that and if I'm… Yeah, I try to be that for her, at least a little bit. She's way more kind and generous than me. I'm a bit self-centered.

NOAH REMNICK:
What has fatherhood been like for you? What lessons do you hope to pass on to your sons?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I don't know, honestly. I mean, I wonder about that. I wonder, how do you … I was reading Hamlet recently. And Ophelia's dad is telling her brother, her brother says something like, "Man, you know, treat each man … You give each man what they deserve." And his dad says to him, "What? If you give each man what he deserves, each man deserves the sword. You don't give each man what he deserves. You give each man what is most honorable in you, to bestow upon him," right? And it's wild though because in Hamlet, Ophelia's dad is kind of foul. So he is not even able to do this thing that he told his son to do, which is to say children are remarkably consistent in doing the thing that they see you do more than the thing that you tell them to do. And so I don't know if I got some wise words like Shakespeare is dropping through this character. I think hopefully I'm trying to live a life that reflects upon what it means to believe that people deserve to be loved, you know, what it means to be kind and sort of generous and funny and maybe patient.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

But yeah, I don't know. Being a father, it's taught me a lot. It's taught me a lot about what it means to be in community also because you don't raise children by yourself. And so I got a bunch of good people around me from my family, my wife's family, but really the network of friends that we've built. So I think that… I hope that in what I do with those folks and what I do with my children, what I do with the boys, and what I do with friends, that they learn something from that more than what I might say. Even though I be dropping jewels. But it's like if I tell you and it doesn't sound profound, everybody's going to laugh. They'll be like, "Remember that interview when Dwayne said that he told this kid, 'Follow the golden rule'?" And this kid was like, "Dad, that was from the '40s. I mean, yo, that's not where it's at right now. It's updated. It's now the platinum rule."

NOAH REMNICK:
Your poem, “Essay on Reentry,: you recall having to tell your son about your past. How exactly did you describe it to him?

00:44:17:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Oh man, he was five, actually. It turns out that simple explanations work for children. It turns out that— I mean, first he was five, so he had no real interest in the details. And what I could see was that I had to tell him because I already told him. But it's never just one conversation. It's that first conversation, and then it's the second conversation, and then it's the third, and at this point, you know, my children know more about prison than probably most Americans. They've heard me talk about my experiences more than really anybody else. And I think… I mean, that's what you carry, you know, you carry this understanding— Once you have a child, you carry this

understanding that this story never gets told once. and like every time… I heard my kid, I heard my oldest son, he was… they were talking about Ferguson and he says something like, "Y'all just don't understand what it means to have a father that's been to jail."

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And I realized that he carries around the kind of knowledge that his classmates don't. And when the issues of the world come into that classroom, and it's around police violence, and it's around prison, and it's around crime, that– that's when that other part of what he knows begins to mean something. And the question is always, will it mean something that he can gain insight from, that he can feel like it is not this burden that he carries? But that's on him. You know what I mean? It's literally not something that I could deal with. And so when I told his little brother for the first time, honestly, he was half asleep, he just crawled in my arms. I wanted to make sure that I was good for the night, because I had been out hanging with friends.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
It was after I got sworn into the bar, and we were sort of celebrating, and he just was waiting up because more than any of those things, more than me being a lawyer, more than me being a poet, he wanted me to be his father. And that didn't come with the need even to tell him that piece of myself that we both knew I had to tell him.

NOAH REMNICK:
How did your relationship with your mother evolve later in her life and yours?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

I mean, I don't know. I missed a lot of years of being my mother's child, the one that she could take care of. I was always her son, but in prison you sort of fend for yourself, and so I missed a lot of years and being able to be that. But we made a way. I think that we always stayed close so we always wrote and we always talk on the phone. And it's interesting though because once you have your own children, you see your mother's life in a different way. And I think my mom sees my life in a different way because I have children. I think she understands something different about me just from calling me like, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "I'm taking Makai and Miles to school." Or she'll call and we're cooking and I'm like, "Oh, we're cooking, me and Miles are making homemade biscuits." That's his thing.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And my oldest son, he makes waffles. He's really good at making… I got this waffle maker, I was pressed to get the waffle maker, and then I decided that I'm not interested in making waffles, right? And he ended up being interested in making waffles, and so he makes these waffles from scratch. And sometimes my mom will call and I'm like, "Yeah, Makai is making waffles." And the point of it is— Or they in a garden with Terese, and we trying to grow vegetables or whatever. But the point of it is you get this whole interior life that gets animated, and it's this thing that me and my mom share. And it reminds me that it was also things that me and my mom shared when I was young that I might have just forgotten about, like making french bread pizzas. Or when she was making buffalo wings, and I'm tasting the buffalo sauce.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And so it's nice to reproduce a lot of that with my son to reproduce some of that with Terese. What we got, things that we do, whether we taking them on trips or we just going to museums as a family, or we got some show that we all watch. It's kind of nice to have rituals that you develop. Or we paint, you know what I mean? We got a house and we get to paint the house together. We painted the deck, I was like, "This is crazy. Why are we painting the deck?" And then it became a thing and then all four of us just out on the deck painting. And so I think life is an accumulation of these details that matter, and a life well lived I think is an accumulation of a lot of details that you feel matter. And those details could be anything.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

I found four leaf clovers all of the time. I mean, some of the details that matter to me is the time I was walking my puppy and I found seven four-leaf clovers, seven at once. Actually, it was five four leaf clovers and two five leaf Clovis and a span of 25 seconds. And the puppy was completely uninterested, right? But I was delighted, and I'll carry that with me. And I think what me and my mom could do now that we definitely couldn't do when I was in prison, is reconnect on these kind of moments, so what it means to be alive.

NOAH REMNICK:

How does poetry reach people in ways that other forms of literature cannot?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

I mean, I'm telling you man in a poem, you could say something like, "I have brave for want of wild beasts still cages," and that line can sing in somebody's

head forever. I mean, a poem just has the ability to capture something with the music, with the sense. It's the end of a Lucille Clifton poem that says, "Come celebrate with me. Every day something has tried to kill me, and has failed." And I remember sending every woman I knew that poem on Mother's Day one year from prison. I mean, a poem could just give somebody a whole world in a moment in a way that no other medium can. You got to spend time with a novel, and that time gets rewarded. But a poem, you know, you could sing it once and a person could carry it around with him forever.

NOAH REMNICK:
Are there particular lines or particular poems that you've carried forever in that way?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
It's a lot, and they come up mostly like, “What did I know? What did I know of love's austere and lonely officers?." And that's from “Those Winter Sundays'' by Robert Hayden, or the Nikki Giovanni poem that ends with the lines, "And they'll never understand that Black love is Black wealth." It's just these lines and poems that… Man, some of those poems I first read in solitary. You know what I mean? That's the beauty of a poem, is that you carry these pieces of it with you. And you can, if you choose to, bring them up when you need them.

NOAH REMNICK:
Who do you see as the audience for your own poetry?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Carl Phillips just said— Carl Phillips is a poet, fantastic poet actually, and he just said he can't imagine writing for an audience because he writes out of this deep and unabiding, urgent need to write. And that write is not predicated on who would hear the thing. And I believe that. But I also believe that I found that sometimes when you writing for a particular person, somebody's son has died and they asked me to write a poem, and I had to write a poem. Somebody's getting married, and they ask me to write a poem, and I got to write a poem. I found that it works both ways, right? Sometimes I can't imagine who my audience is. My audience is just a page, you know, and then sometimes I know who I'm writing to. But the truth is, in both moments, the poem only happens if it gets to a moment where that is just not what I'm thinking about.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
All I'm thinking about is that I once got up at 4:00 in the morning to take this puppy to the bathroom, and I was just taking her to the bathroom and a whole poem came to me. And I went back and I got into bed and I thought, "I'll just write it when I wake up." And I couldn't. I closed my eyes and I opened my eyes back up, and I took out my phone, and I literally typed the whole poem right there. And it was a good poem, too. It was about, "What does it mean when your urge to do something just cannot abate? And what does that kind of joy mean?" So yeah, poems man, poems do something to us.

NOAH REMNICK:
Is that typical for you? What exactly is your process for writing poems? Do you start with an idea, a turn of phrase, moment of inspiration?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

All of it. You know, all of it. Sometimes it's an idea, sometimes I just hear something and I want to write about it. Sometimes I'm pushing myself, you know, I'll write a poem and a friend says, "That's a good poem, but you know, you didn't follow the form exactly." And then I get obsessed over getting the form right and then the form leads me to new kinds of meanings. I once met a woman at a bar and she was like, "Hey David." And I was like, "I'm not David." And she's like, "I'm sorry, you look like my coworker David." And in my head I was like, "You're making it worse, because this is your coworker, you should know what David looks like." And then I put my hat down and she said, "That's a beautiful hat." And I said, "Don't try to make up for the fact that you just accused me of being David."

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And there was a guy behind the bar, and he laughed, and I laughed too. And she said, "Y'all cousins?" It's like, "Yo, this is getting progressively worse!" And then she's saying, "Yo, those feathers, man, those feathers, it reminds me of a grouse. That's some beautiful feathers." And I started talking to her about my work and the fact that I've been to prison, and the fact that I build these libraries in prison with this organization I started called Freedom Reads. And she says, "That's pretty cool." And then we talking and then she says, "But those feathers." And she tells me about the grouse, and the grouse, I think it's the greatest age grouse. For four weeks it's plumage becomes remarkably beautiful. And that's how it attracts a mate just for four weeks. For the rest of the time, it's just some old regular grouse. And she tells me the story, and of course it had to become a poem. And the first poem had all of this interesting

stuff about me and her conversation. She ended the conversation telling me I should run for office.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I went from being her coworker David that she couldn't identify, she was like, "And I would come work for you." It was wild, right? And it was cool. And it was in The Hamilton of all places, this restaurant in DC. And the whole thing was like America, you know, because it was this white woman who starts the conversation in the stereotypical way, and it could have went all kinds of directions. And then me and her start talking, and then she teaches me something. And then it ends on this other note of possibility of she is talking to a Black man who just confessed to carjacking somebody to her within six minutes of meeting her.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And she ends the conversation— and she was in politics, so that's why she said running for office, because she's in politics. But the point is that nobody would expect the conversation land where it landed, and so I wrote a poem about it. Then it turns out that the only thing that poem needed was that story about the bird. And so what the poem ended up being was just this idea about how that's what we all crave to be, even for just a moment, like as beautiful as the grouse is when it's plumage blossoms. And sometimes you know. You know a moment will be a poem, and that was one of those times.

NOAH REMNICK:

So alongside your poetry, you somehow found the time to graduate from Yale Law School. What drew you to law school in the first place, and how did you find life at a place like Yale?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Unemployment. Unemployment drew me to law school, for real. You could hide from all of your debtors by going back to college again and again. And I couldn't get a job, man. And I figured if I was going to be unemployed, I'd rather be an unemployed Ivy League trained attorney. And I had taken a paralegal course while I was in prison. I had done all of this advocacy work, but I was struggling to find a job that would allow me to help support my family. And law school just seemed… it just seemed like the right hail Mary. And I applied and I got into a bunch of schools, and I chose Yale, one because it was less… I chose Yale because it was less traffic than all the rest of the places.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Oh man, they going to hate me when they hear that. But I loved the school, you know… I got to be in a clinic in my first year. I got to work in a public defender's office. I had great classmates, I mean people that I cared a lot about. Teachers that pushed me. And I like the New Haven community, honestly. I think it's like this college town, but it's not a college town. When I talk about coaching, I'm in the community, I'm coaching people that just live in New Haven. And so I love my experience, and it didn't end the way I thought it would. I thought it would end as me being a public defender. I thought it would end as me actively practicing law on a regular basis. But it

was hard, you know what I mean? It's just like watching people— your clients, and watching them go to prison. I just couldn't deal with it.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I couldn't deal with people on the front-end of the system not having the ability, not having an audience for their redemption. Because the only question at the beginning is if you'll go to prison and if so, for how long? And so I ended up not being able to do that, but I've been able to use my law degree in different ways and I'm really, really happy about that. Whether it's doing some legal scholarship, or doing some research, or really representing people on parole and on clemency, and using my legal education as a foundation for the way I think about what it means to transform the system.

NOAH REMNICK:
So poetry and the law are not exactly the most natural of bedfellows. Do you see those two areas of your work as completely distinct, or do they converge anyways?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I'm certain that Wallace Stevens was a lawyer, so I don't know how strange bedfellows they are, although I just gave you only one example. But it's a few of us, even contemporary writers who are lawyers: Brian Gilmore, Monica Youn, me. So it's a few of us, but… I think that good writing is good writing, and lawyers have to have a really keen attention to detail. And honestly, frequently, if you read a Supreme Court decision, you think the decision is about this whole world of events, this whole corporates of events. But the decision literally could just turn on whether or not a person was made aware

that the lawsuit was filed. I was like, "But wait a minute, that's not the issue at hand." I mean literally in law they say, "The holding," and a holding could be as limited as the judge decides. So a lot of times the law is doing the same thing that poetry is doing.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
That it's choosing the singular thing that matters. Law is, I think, a profession that operates in the moment, it's not like being a novelist. If you wanted to compare writing to the law, I think it would have to be poetry. It's obsession with the arcane, you know, it's obsession with the smallest details for the micro over the macro. So I think… It actually was the best choice for me in terms of not losing my poetry as I sought to get a different kind of set of professional skills. I don't know if I would be as good a poet as I am now had become a— Even if I had become an anthropologist, you know, because the lawyer is a journalist in the same way that the poet is. I've written poems about all kinds of things that I don't know as deeply or profoundly as I would want to. And it's only the law that kind of really encourages that kind of absurd obsession with knowing a little bit about a lot of things.

NOAH REMNICK:
What have you learned about our criminal justice system from your work as a public defender?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
That it is unforgiving and challenging. Once I had a case where this kid had robbed another kid, and the police had a photo of the kid who did it, and the mom wanted to see it. And at first she kept saying, "Let me see the photo of

that devil. Let me see the photo of that devil. I told you about hanging with those devils." And the cop is like, "I'm going to go get the photo." And they go get the photo. They get it and they pass it to her. She says, "He could be my son," and I mean she said it like so low under her breath that the police didn't even hear it. They said, "See, I told you that's that devil." They didn't hear her gasp when she looked at the photo and recognized that he could be her son. And I think working in the public defender's office reminded me that the system doesn't give most of us the opportunity to have the realization that this woman had.

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And I used to call her, you know, she wanted to talk to me. And we talked long time before the case got settled, and it ended up being settled without my client going to jail. It ended up being settled with him having a felony conviction, but he didn't go to jail, and he could have easily got sentenced to 5, 6, 7 years in prison. And I think part of the reason why— I know a huge part of the reason why he didn't go to jail was because this woman recognized that he could have been her son. And so, the public defender's office taught me that there's not enough space in our system for us all to have that recognition.

NOAH REMNICK:
What has it been like for you to navigate these elite and often elitist, literary and academic establishments? Have you felt appreciated, tokenized?

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REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

I have been fortunate, really, to travel in some pretty interesting circles since I've been out of prison. And in a way it's hard, you listen to me talk, or you read something I read, and you might say I've had more opportunities than a lot of people who haven't gone to prison. I mean, I have been a student at some of the best universities in this country. I have been welcomed more often than not. I have been able to build relationships with some people who I never thought I would be in the room with. And I don't know, I just feel like the world is a generous place, even when it could be a hard one, even when it could be a cruel one. I think… I don't know if I think the institutions are necessarily elitist. I think that the institutions are filled with people, and that those people come as they come just like prison is filled with people.

01:03:20:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I feel like I've never been in a place that I didn't feel like I could find some way to be welcomed, and to be welcomed when I didn't deserve to be welcomed in that place. I think a lot of times we have this notion that we are owed something by the world, and because we think we are owed something by the world, we don't recognize grace when we have it. And me having a bunch of felonies and me having served a bunch of time in prison has made me… has honed my ability to be grateful for the opportunities that I've had. And I think it's honed my ability to be far more forgiving of folks, because folks have had to be far more forgiving of me.

NOAH REMNICK:
Over the past decade, there's obviously been a great deal of discussion and protests and in some cases even legislative action around prison and police reform. Do you see this as a tide turning, or do you sense a backlash is afoot?

01:04:16:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I think it's both. I mean, ultimately, you know, it's a tide turning, but– but we still haven't answered some really crucial questions. I mean, we don't have a public narrative that counters the Willie Horton story. We don't have a public narrative that says that one of the foundational principles of this country is mercy. And I think that because we still lack that public narrative, um, it's always this tension. How do we respond when car thefts go up? How do we respond when it's an uptick in people jumping the turnstile? I think that it's these questions that still have to be answered and answering those questions will decide whether or not it'll be a backlash.

NOAH REMNICK:
A lot of these reforms have centered non-violent drug offenses, but nearly half of all people incarcerated are there for offenses classified as violent. What do you make of the way that the legal system defines violence, and do you think of these offenses as categorically different?

01:05:18:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
It's not… I mean, most of the people in prison are locked up for violent crimes according to, you know, the classic Prison Policy Institute study that they do almost, like, yearly, every few years they update it. Most of the people incarcerated are for crimes that would be classified as violence. Do I think that the non-violent crimes and the violent crimes are categorically different? I don't think they're categorically different, but I do think that the public is really willing to hear like, "Let's not lock people up who have committed

non-violent crimes," and less willing to hear what does it mean to grant mercy for somebody who has committed a violent crime?

01:05:56:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And what does it mean to treat all of these folks as individuals? And what does it mean to recognize that we need a system that handles all of these situations in a profoundly different and better way? I mean, I served nine years in prison. The judge told me, "I'm under no illusion that sending you to prison will help." I think we asked the wrong questions. We asked, "How do we feel about violent crimes and non-violent crimes?" As opposed to, "How do we feel about the fact that we have a system where a judge sends a 16 year old kid to prison and says, 'I am under no illusion that sending you to prison will help?'"

01:06:27:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I think that we could do just much more work finding ways to think about the real lives of the human beings who get caught up in the system, and find ways to do less of treating it as if they're on a conveyor belt. And yet ushering them off to a place that allows you to not think about them anymore, which is frankly what happens far too often.

NOAH REMNICK:
How can we balance our instincts towards vengeance with the need for compassion and the knowledge that prisons are so violent and ineffective?

01:07:00:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And again, it's… prisons are violent, but it's not that prisons are just violent. And it's not just that prisons are bad because they're violent, it's prisons deprive you of your ability to thrive in the world. And the question is, "What would be a better way for you to pay what you owe to society, to your victim, to your community? Is it just sitting in a box for five years, for six years, for seven years?" I don't know if prison is even motivated by a need for vengeance. At least, that is not what we articulate as the reason for prison. Publicly, I think most people think when they say, "I'm for incarceration," they're thinking about vengeance. But the system is thinking about things like deterrence. They're thinking about things like decapitation, right? They're not thinking about vengeance.

01:07:42:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
A prison sentence is not supposed to be motivated by vengeance. And so what happens is you got a disconnect between what is motivating a lot of the people on the street who call for more people in prison, and what is motivating the prosecutors and the judges who make those decisions. And neither one of those groups is really thinking about, "What would it mean for people to actually pay what they owe? What does it mean to articulate what it is that you owe?" I mean, that's a profoundly, profoundly difficult question, and it's more challenging and I think we… It's so challenging, in fact, that we ignore that question for other questions. And by we, I also mean me, it is a much more difficult question.

NOAH REMNICK:
Well, I hate to pose it to you now, but in an ideal world how do you think we manage harm?

01:08:26:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Frankly, as complicated as it is, I think that we have to put real downward pressure on prison sentences. Cap every sentence out at 20, 25 years, and then you have to figure out how to make the system better because it's no longer the illusion that you could just send people off to never return. Two, I think that parole boards, they have to truly be empowered and charged with seeking out the redemptive qualities of the human beings that come before them to make decisions based on that, and not be so afraid that they might release somebody and something bad happens, since that's not often the case, that's not the case the majority of time.

01:09:03:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And then finally, I think the staff, the people that run prisons, they have to actually be empowered to be a pathway to rehabilitation, be charged with being a pathway to rehabilitation and have the budget to make that a possibility. I think all of that would sort of shrink the system dramatically, but I think it would change and transform how everybody interacts with the system.

NOAH REMNICK:
One campaign that's been resurgent of late has been the movement for prison abolition. Do you see abolition as a North Star?

01:09:34:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I see freedom as a North Star, and I see abolition as a… I actually don't like to use words associated with slavery. It's just my pet peeve. I don't like to

compare my time in prison to Frederick Douglass' time enslaved. I don't like to— I just think it's a hard metaphor. And I just… I don't, you know. I believe that the people who work on abolition are doing profound work and really important work, and they're changing the narrative about what's possible. And I think we have to have people doing that. I think it's important… I think… I think it's important, but I also… prison is not like slavery. And… I don't know. Prison is not like slavery. And I have a hard time… Yeah man, I mean, I know people in prison because they have done things that'll haunt them for the rest of their lives.

01:10:41:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And I just don't think any of us think that we were running around like Kunta Kinte. And so… the North Star is what you chase for freedom. And I associate the North Star with Frederick Douglass with being in the Antebellum South when all you did was be born. I just… I don't associate it with what I experienced because I called my mom in the middle of the night damn near telling her, "I put a pistol to somebody's head." Essentially, you live in a world where people will tell you they love you, and then you realize that they are choosing to characterize what you've done in a way that allows them to avoid staring at you. They've clothed you in all the symbolism that erases all of the shit that you spent so much of your life trying to redeem yourself from.

01:11:38:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

And sometimes when people talk about abolition I believe that they… don't see me. And I'm not trying to be ungenerous, I'm not trying to be contrarian. I'm just… I'm just trying to remember that– that part of redemption is recognizing that… that a person has to matter in a way that reaches past the

easiest of explanations. Anyway, the folks like Dr. Ruthie Gilmore, the folks like Angela Davis, I mean— Dr. Angela Davis, the folks that I know who are abolitionists and who helped develop the framework for so many others. I think that when I'm at my best, I see the world the way they see it. But a lot of times, I just don't.

NOAH REMNICK:
Are you able to envision a world without prisons?

01:12:48:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
I know a lot of people who have been shot, so I don't know. I think I would first want to envision a world without violence. I wonder if we're asking the right questions. One of my favorite rappers got this line, he says, "They want peace? Tell them dudes to bring my homie back." I just think of some other really difficult questions. There's this book I thought was deeply powerful. It's called *LaRose* by Louise Edrich. This man, he kills him um— he accidentally shoots the son of his sister-in-law. And what do you do after that happens? And some people saying that he did it on purpose, it wasn't an accident, that he was drunk, that it was negligent, that he should go to prison. And some people saying, "No, of course it was an accident", but it doesn't matter, what do you do? And the next scene in the book, him and his wife are taking their son to his sister-in-law, and it's like, "He's your son now."

01:13:50:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
And maybe I just think that the world without prisons is not as interesting a question, because that question doesn't make me weep. But reading the *LaRose*, and thinking about what it means to have accidentally murdered a

child, and then your response is to give your son to this family and your son is not two. Your son is old enough to understand what's going on. I think that I want to ask different questions like, "What does it mean to live in a world that lacks violence? And what does it mean to profoundly figure out how to hold ourselves in account or to account for what we do?" I think that for me, that's a more substantial kind of question, and that's the question that keeps me up at night. Because as a person that's representing people I know who've killed people. I mean, we walk into the parole hearing and that's really what we're trying to speak to. And most of what we say feels, like, foolish. It's like it's nothing sometimes that we say that accounts for the dead body that's in the room with us. And I think that is what we're trying to deal with. That is what we're trying to be able to walk into a room and tell somebody, "But wait, it's not just he's not the worst thing he's ever done in this world. It's not just that. It's also this, and figuring out what that this is." I mean, that's the golden ticket.

NOAH REMNICK:
Forgive me, I wasn't planning to ask this, but it's striking to me how much guilt you still seem to carry from that moment when you were 16 years old, and how heavy that burden is still on you. Do you think you'll ever be able to forgive yourself for that, or have you been able to forgive yourself for that?

01:15:34:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:
Um. I don't know. I would say, "Have I?" Probably not, but it comes up a lot. I mean it comes up a lot. And I don't mean because I do interviews, I mean because I walk back into prisons. I mean, because I represent people who are still in prison. I mean, because I write about prison. So, I don't know. And it's

not self-flagellation or anything like that. It's just owning how you live in the world.

“For a Bail Denied” from *Felon*

Written and read by Reginald Dwayne Betts

01:16:09:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

"For a bail denied. I won't tell you how it ended. His mother won't either. But beside me she stood and some things neither of us could know. And now, lost is all, all is lost and what came after. The kid, and we should call him a kid, a child, his face smooth and without history of a razor. He shuffled. Ghostly in a court, and let's just call it a caldron. And admit his nappy head made him blacker than whatever pistol they claimed he'd held. Whatever solitary awaited. And now lost is all, all is lost. And what came after. Does it matter?

01:17:11:00

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS:

Black lives, when all the prosecutors said of Black boys is that they kill. His bald head brown, but when has brown not been akin to black here, to abyss and does it matter? Black lives? Child is beside his mother, and his mother is beside me, and I am not his father. Just a public defender near starving here where the state turns men, and women, and children into numbers. And it's all possible because the judge spoke and the kid says, 'I did it. I mean, I didn't. I mean, Jesus.’ Someone yelled and the boy's mother wailed, 'This ain't justice. You can't throw my son into that fucking ocean.' She meant jail, and we was powerless to stop it. And too damn tired to be beautiful."

END TC: 01:18:28:00