

THE Skanner
Challenging People to Shape
a Better Future Now

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Opinion

Complicating Our Country's Racial Narrative

Bryan Stevenson, the brilliant founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, believes it's possible to change our nation and world despite the inequality and violence that sometimes threaten to overwhelm us. He speaks often about the urgent need to confront our historic narrative including recently to young servant leaders preparing to teach children in Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® programs across America.

"There is a narrative that explains how we got here. Mass incarceration was created by policy decisions. We decided to deal with drug addiction and drug dependency as a crime issue rather than a health issue . . . We didn't do that for alcoholism. We said, 'Alcoholism, that's a disease,' and now we don't have a consciousness that when we see an alcoholic going into a bar that we have to call the police-but we didn't do that for drug addiction. The reason why we didn't do that was because of a narrative. And there's a narrative of fear and anger out there."

He continued: "You see, there's a smog that's hovering in the air. It's a pollution created by our history of racial inequality . . . We've got to talk



Marian Wright Edelman

Children's Defense Fund

about the fact that we are a post-genocidal society. There was a genocide on this continent. When White settlers came, they killed millions of Native people. It was a genocide where famine and war and disease destroyed a whole culture, and there are things

“We’ve got to talk about the fact that we are a post-genocidal society

you have to do to recover from genocide that we haven't done. And because we didn't deal with that, we created this narrative of racial difference that allowed us to tolerate slavery.

"And when we talk about slavery, we have to understand what we're talking about. I don't think the great evil of American slavery was involuntary servitude and forced labor. I think the great evil of American slavery was the narrative of racial difference that we created to legitimate it. The great evil

of American slavery was the ideology of White supremacy that we made up to legitimate the way we treated people of color, and we didn't deal with that . . . And because of that, I don't think slavery ended in 1865. I think it just evolved. It turned into decades of terrorism and violence. And we've got to deal with what it's turned into.

"From the end of Reconstruction until World War II, people of color were terrorized, pulled out of their homes, lynched, burned alive, taken from jails, hanged, shot.

Older people of color come up to me sometimes and say, 'Mr. Stevenson, I get angry when I hear somebody on TV talking about how we're dealing with domestic terrorism for the first time in our nation's history after 9/11.'

"They say, 'We grew up with terrorism. We had to worry about being bombed and lynched every day of our lives,' and we've got to tell that story.

"When I look at this country, I look at a country whose demographic geography was shaped by terror. The Black people that are in Cleveland

and Chicago and Detroit — those of you who live in these cities in the North and West, you need to understand how you got there. The Black people in New York and Boston and Cleveland and Chicago and Detroit and Los Angeles and Oakland didn't go to those communities as immigrants looking for new economic opportunities. They came to these communities as refugees and exiles from terror in the American South. And there are things you're supposed to do for refugees that we didn't do, and that turned into this era of segregation.

"And I have to tell you, I think we have to change the narrative of how we think and talk about civil rights . . . I hear people talking about the Civil Rights Movement, and it sounds like a three-day carnival: On Day One, Rosa Parks didn't give up her seat on a bus. On Day Two, Dr. King led a march on Washington, and on Day Three, we changed all the laws and racism was over. And we've got to change that narrative. Because the truth is that for decades in this country, we had segregation, and segregation was brutal... My parents were humiliated every day of their lives."

Read the full story at
TheSkanner.com

Even Funerals are Not Family Reunions Anymore

Most of the relatives on my mother's side migrated from Tuscaloosa, Ala. to Johnson City, Tenn., where my oldest aunt, Julia Mae Cousin, established roots after she was married. Growing up, I divided my summers between Johnson City and Reform, Ala., where my father's relatives are anchored.

Because I spent so much time with my cousins, we have always enjoyed a strong bond, stronger than some brothers and sisters. And because we were closer in age, I spent most of the early years romping the streets of Johnson City with Aunt Julia Mae's kids - Hattie, D.D., Charles and Little Buddy. My cousin, Bertha Mae, was almost a decade older and she was more like an aunt than a cousin.

With her strong personality and huge heart, Aunt Julia urged her siblings to move to this small, east Tennessee town, near the Virginia-Tennessee border. Over the years, a parade of uncles and aunts acquiesced: Uncle Frank, Uncle Buddy, Uncle Percy, Uncle Padna (Jesse) and Aunt Kat. Mama (Martha L. Brownlee) and Big Mama (Sylvia Harris) were the holdouts, preferring to stay in Tuscaloosa but making frequent trips to Johnson



George E. Curry

NNPA Columnist

City.

No one loved going to Johnson City more than I did. By day, I lived at the Carver Rec Center with D.D., Charles and Little Buddy and at night, Hat-

Uncle Percy, who perfected lying to an art form. Uncle Buddy, a Navy veteran who introduced me to world travel, was easy-going and fun. But he should have known better than to wear red socks to the reunion one year. As expected, we lit into him, accusing him of everything from having been cut on the ankles to working for the Red Cross. The next year, the first thing Uncle Buddy did was raise the legs of his pants to show us he

(Katherine Madison).

I had already been close to Uncle Frank's children, especially the older ones - LuLu, Dosha, Doris, Carolyn, Alberta, Knuck and Herman - because he held out a long time before moving from Tuscaloosa to Johnson City.

Over the years, the family elders died - Big Mama, Aunt Kat, Uncle Frank, Uncle Percy, Uncle Padna and, most recently, Aunt Julia Mae, who took over as head of the

“At my cousin Charlene’s funeral last week, family relations had deteriorated to the point where it was obvious that funerals can no longer be used as family reunions

tie would take me to one of the Black clubs. There was a rough one up on Wilson Avenue, but we knew to stay away from there unless Hattie and I had been dispatched by Aunt Julia Mae to look for Uncle Frank.

For the younger members of the family, nothing was more popular than our family reunions that featured us cracking jokes on one another. Aunt Julia warned us each year not to showcase our comical side, which was considerable, and this was the one time we brazenly disobeyed.

Everyone had a story about

was wearing black socks.

When he was only 4 or 5 years old, Hattie's son Robbie surprised everyone by going to the front of the room and cracking on his mother. Hattie gave Robbie a look that only Hattie can give, but it was too late — Robbie had brought the house down. His brother, Phill, was accused of bringing a rent-a-date to one reunion.

Through those family reunions and hot summers, I grew closer to my younger cousins: Lynn, Phill, Robbie, Charlene, Audrey, Albert, Regina, Greg, the twins (Ronald and Randall), and "Suzie Q"

family upon the death of Big Mama. With each passing, the reunions became fewer and fewer, to the point that we don't hold them anymore.

In recent years, I have said family funerals have become our family reunions. I told it as a joke, but it was the painful truth. At my cousin Charlene's funeral last week, family relations had deteriorated to the point where it was obvious that funerals can no longer be used as family reunions. But as long as I have breath in me, I am going to try to get my family back together. I owe that to Big Mama and Aunt Julia Mae to keep trying.