

Socratic Seminar: *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson

For this, our first Socratic Seminar, please respond to the following excerpts from the book by answering the guiding questions. For #7, please write out a quote that spoke to you and follow it with a question for the group.

1. “I feel like they done put me on death row, too. What do we tell these children about how to stay out of harm’s way when you can be at your own house, minding your own business, surrounded by your entire family, and they still put some murder on you that you ain’t do and send you to death row” (93). - Walter McMillian’s older sister, Armelia Hand

What is the pain and frustration Ms. Hand is describing? How does this type of injustice occur in our community?

2. “John convinces the white judge who controls the town to allow him to open a school for black children. His education has empowered him, and he has strong opinions about racial equality that land him and the black community in trouble. The judge shuts down the school when he hears what John is teaching” (100). - Stevenson summarizing a DuBois story, “Of the Coming of John”

How does education both empower and oppress?

3. “I’d seen the abuse of power in many cases before, but there was something especially upsetting about it here, where not only a single defendant was being victimized, but an entire community as well... ‘Mr. Stevenson, all I wanted was to tell the truth. I can’t go to jail, and I’ll be honest - these folks have scared me’” (113, 114)

How does the abuse of power systematically victimize entire communities?

4. [Vaclav Havel had said] “the only thing they needed was hope. Not pie in the sky stuff, not a preference for optimism over pessimism, but rather an “orientation of the spirit.” The kind of hope that creates a willingness to position oneself in a hopeless place and be a witness, that allows one to believe in a better future, even in the face of abusive power. That kind of hope makes one strong” (219).

What could potentially be the effect on communities if more people were oriented to this kind of hope? What would that hope look like in the behavior of people?

5. “The racial terrorism of lynching in many ways created the modern death penalty. America’s embrace of speedy executions was, in part, an attempt to redirect the violent energies of lynching while assuring white southerners that black men would still pay the ultimate price” (299).

What is the purpose of terrorism? How is racial terrorism carried out in our communities?

6. “We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others” (18).

What does it mean to be implicated by apathy? How do we condemn ourselves through an absence of mercy?