

Bryan Stevenson

*"A Case for a New Institution in America Committed to Truth Telling and Justice:
The Four Core Components of Mr. Gray's Work"*

Fred D. Gray Institute for Human and Civil Rights
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"I am so honored to be here. I'm honored anytime I'm in the room with Mr. Gray.

"He's such a source of inspiration; he is the architect of so much of what I've tried to do in my career. He laid the foundation and kept adding bricks.

"I read his book, *Bus Ride to Justice*, when it came out in 1995. It was during a critical time in my career because I wasn't entirely clear that some of the obstacles that were being created were obstacles that I could overcome.

"But reading about his life, understanding his life, learning from him, to know him, and to appreciate him has been such a great privilege. So, *I did not hesitate when they asked me to be with you tonight, to talk about the importance of this moment and this institute.*

"We need new institutions in America that are committed to truth telling, committed to justice, to make a way out of nowhere because we're dealing with a lot of complex problems in our country. And Mr. Gray's life and his work model something really important.

"I would like to share a few reflections about that.

"I hope this institute will teach lawyers, advocates, activists, young people, students; will educate people about four core components of attorney, Gray's life and work."

[After that introduction, the speech moved through four key components of Attorney Gray's work. The following are highlights from his keynote, which collectively express the character of the work of the Gray Institute.]

Be Proximate

“Mr. Gray’s commitment to *being proximate* to the poor, the excluded, and the neglected, were at the heart of Mr. Gray’s return to Alabama, which he had left to get legal education. He could have had all kinds of opportunities, made a lot more money, had a different, and more comfortable life, if he hadn’t returned. Mr. Gray had the kind of talent and ability that caused lots of people to want him to join their firms, to be part of their work. But he was committed to proximity, to being close to those who’ve been excluded. Growing up in segregation he had this concept embedded not only in his head, but in his heart.

“I believe that if we are going to increase the justice quotient in America, if we’re going to finish this race, we’re going to have to do *what Mr. Gray has taught us to do* which is to *stay proximate to the poor, the marginalized, the incarcerated, the condemned, the disfavored, and those are being abused by unfair policies.*

“Proximity is going to be key to our capacity to lift up justice and to honor Mr. Gray.”

“Mr. Gray is still practicing law 70 years later because he never stepped away from the inequality and injustice that he sees around him. That is his superpower; his capacity and willingness to stay proximate. When you don’t stay proximate you don’t hear the things you need to hear. You don’t see the thing you need to see to do what must be done.

“There’s a scripture in the prophet Micah. It was a difficult time, and people were coming to the prophet trying to figure out what they needed to change to stay in God’s favor. They were saying, ‘What does the Lord want from us? Should we offer more sacrifices? Should we alter what we sacrifice to God?’

“Micah responds, ‘He has told you what the Lord requires: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him (6:8).’

“And the way we do justice is to stay proximate to the people who are struggling. You can’t respond to injustice if you’re not close enough to see the very ones who are experiencing injustice.

“In my mind that is precisely what the life of Fred Gray models so beautifully. It’s what I hope this institute can teach people in the coming generations.

Change the Narrative: Tell the Truth

"I see in the life of Fred Gray, and in his life's work, a willingness to change narratives that need to be changed. We don't have to agree on every policy. We don't need total agreement on every political issue, but we must recognize the narratives that are feeding and sustaining bigotry, feeding and sustaining hate, feeding and sustaining violence. We must be willing to change those narratives.

"In the Northwest, the Midwest, New England; wherever you live you have inherited a narrative of racial difference that is feeding racial injustice. For too long we've been silent about the harm of that narrative, we've been silent about the need to confront that narrative. We haven't talked about things that we need to talk about, so I believe it's time for us to push and change the narrative.

"The Gray Institute will help change this narrative. We want to talk about some things that we haven't talked about before. I think we must talk about what happened to indigenous people before Europeans occupied the land. There were millions of native people on these lands, and they had communities and were thriving, having created very sophisticated systems for survival and a relationship with the planet. Within a very short period, they were removed from their land.

"We have a wealth gap in America today. Mr. Gray has done some work dealing with these economic injustices. But when we talk about wealth, we don't talk about the roots of it because many of the millions of Black people that were forced off their land by terror and violence left the land that *they owned*. They *left opportunities to create wealth for their children and their grandchildren*, so they were denied the opportunity to be wealth makers because of inequality, injustice, bigotry and because of this narrative.

"Every time someone was lynched we were reinforcing this presumption of dangerousness and guilt assigned to black and brown people. That led to the architecture of Jim Crow and segregation. That is what Mr. Gray was determined to tear down. Because of his brilliance and courage, in a generation of people who were fearless, we tore down the legal architecture of Jim Crow and segregation.

"But that narrative persists. Here we are in 2025 still contending with this narrative of racial difference, challenging anything that tries to respond to the harm that we have created in this country. When you hear somebody talking about not wanting DEI, do not be confused about what that represents. What that represents is an unwillingness to confront the harms of this history of inequality and injustice, and it breaks my heart. It breaks my heart."

“We need an era of truth and justice, truth and restoration, truth and Repair, truth and redemption, truth and reconciliation and to get there that means we’re going to have to be truth tellers. For his entire career Mr. Gray has been a truth teller.

“What I also love about Mr. Gray is that he is a man of faith. I sometimes think that we need to put more pressure on our institutions of faith because people of faith are supposed to know something about how we lead people to truth and justice.

“Our faith community is supposed to help people see things. You can’t come to my church and say, “Oh I want heaven and redemption and salvation. But I will not admit anything bad I’ve done. I refuse to confess. I will not talk about anything that I’ve ever done wrong.”

Be Hopeful

“The third thing is that Mr. Gray is hopeful and he understands that we must be hopeful to do justice to love mercy. You can’t do justice if you allow hopelessness to shape your behavior. Injustice prevails when hopelessness persists. Hopelessness is the enemy of justice.

“Hope is our superpower. Mr. Gray was a very young man when he returned from Ohio to Alabama to destroy everything related to segregation. That required hope and faith that we must tap into. Our hope will be the thing that gets us to stand up even when people say, ‘sit down,’ to speak even when people say, ‘be quiet.’ Mr. Gray has done it for 70 years and we’ve got to understand the power of hope.

“I feel so privileged to be standing on the shoulders of giants like Fred Gray. I live here in Montgomery in a community where generations of people did so much more with so much less. I can’t in any way legitimate being hopeless because people who came before me created hope on which I stand. That is part of our calling.

“What I’m saying to you is that if we really want to honor the legacy of Fred Gray, we must understand what he has given us by his life of work, his commitment to justice and equality, and we must press on! His hope was enough to tear down segregation to change this country.

“We have all these great athletic teams in the state of Alabama, colleges with great football teams and basketball teams. Auburn and Alabama are both in the top 10. Both are amazing and neither of them would exist if it were for the worker, Fred Gray.

“George Wallace said, “segregation forever.”

“But it was Mr. Gray, Dr. King, Rosa Parks, and E.D. Nixon who made these teams possible.

“I think we should have statues of Fred Gray and Dr. King outside the stadiums at Auburn University and Alabama! I do, because they are the ones who opened the doors for the success that we’re seeing.

“If we change the narrative, the success we’ve seen on the football field and the basketball court will happen in other arenas unrelated to sports. If we change the narrative, the success found on the athletic fields and courts will occur in *businesses and government*. But first this narrative must change, and that change only happens with hope.

Be Willing to do the Uncomfortable and Inconvenient

“Fourth and finally, Mr. Gray represents the concept that you must be willing to do uncomfortable things, inconvenient things. It’s a hard one, but I know his life. I know his work. He couldn’t do the things that he’s done if he only did what was comfortable and convenient.

“We must be willing to do uncomfortable and inconvenient things if we’re going to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

“It’s a hard thing because we are biologically and psychologically programmed to do what’s comfortable. We like comfort. There’s nothing wrong with comfort, but we must be willing to do uncomfortable and inconvenient things.

“I hope the institute teaches the next generation that sometimes we must do something uncomfortable and inconvenient.

“I’ve had a really privileged career. I’ve been able to walk people out of jail and prison who were wrongly convicted, able to return people to their families who’ve been unjustly incarcerated. I’ve had a privileged career.

“I believe that the life of Fred Gray represents the life of someone who has struggled, fought, stood up when people said, ‘Sit down,’ and spoke when people said, ‘Be quiet.’ Mr. Gray’s life has experienced cuts, bruises, and scars. The result: he helped transform the landscape of America.

“And so, it gives me unimaginable joy for us to be in this place together, to say, ‘Mr. Gray, you have honored us by allowing us to continue this amazing journey that you have inspired. Thank you!’”