

The Art of Understanding

I've always loved Seurat's painting, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*. A permanent piece in the Art Institute of Chicago, I make sure to see it everytime I go. The painting, an icon of the Impressionist movement, is most celebrated for its incredible use of pointillism—it is composed entirely of small, brush-stroke dots. The portrait of people relaxing along the River Seine metamorphosizes before your eyes as you step forward to examine the painting up close, becoming an abstract spectrum filled with small bursts of color. The magic of the painting is in its details.

Different relationships have proven to me that people, in many ways, are similar to Seurat's painting. From afar, you might see a general portrait of who you think that person is; but up close, you see their complexity, their nuances, their different shades. (That's often where their beauty lies.) Walt Whitman captures this idea in his poem "Song of Myself, Part 51" when he writes, "I am large, I contain multitudes." People are dynamic and complex; there is something undefinable about all of us. Bryan Stevenson similarly champions this view in *Just Mercy*. He writes, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." Humans are never just one thing; so defining a person strictly by their worst deed negates every other quality about them. Just as you cannot see the dots of Seurat's painting from afar, likewise, Stevenson's grandmother says, "you can't understand the most important things from a distance." Proximity is crucial, Stevenson highlights, for seeing the complicated and beautiful humanity within each person. The core principle of empathy is understanding, and understanding demands intimacy.

These principles have certainly proven true in my own experience. My impression of other people has changed dramatically the more I've gotten to understand them. A powerful example of this occurred while I was interning this past year for the Chicago Public Defender's Office. Preparing for a hearing, I was reading the case file of a client—I'll call him Joe—and, truthfully, I was a bit disturbed. Joe was charged with child endangerment for dropping his newborn baby in a tub of scalding hot water. Neighbors called the police after hearing the baby let out an ungodly scream. Though I always tried to keep an open mind when meeting clients, the description of his charges, coupled with the pictures of the baby's burns, were horrifying. I wondered what kind of father could so negligently injure his own child like that.

But the next day, when I met Joe, my assumptions were entirely subverted. Unlike the apathetic, careless father I imagined, Joe was soft-spoken, sad, and visibly ashamed. The public defenders encouraged Joe to accept the State's plea deal because the deal didn't require him to serve more time (he'd been in prison since he couldn't afford bail), and because taking the matter to trial was risky given the clear facts of the case and sensitive nature of the charges. Joe was polite and agreed with the lawyers, but he was also filled with grief and emotion. He spoke primarily about wanting to see his children again. He said that he felt horrible about the accident and that he deserved to be punished for it. However, Joe expressed concern about the plea deal's rigorous probation terms: he explained that the accident occurred because he was stretched too thin between his job and range of home responsibilities. The night of the accident, he returned home from a long double shift and hadn't slept in two days. Exhausted, he didn't pay attention to the bathtub's temperature and forgot to check before putting his baby in the tub. In short: he had made a mistake.

Gaining proximity to Joe and his story enabled me to see him and his crime in humanistic terms. In fact, Joe's story reminded me of the time my father, whom I love more than anything, accidentally cut part of my sister's finger off while distractedly trimming her nails. Or the time he placed my younger brother on a coffee table, leading to a fall that later required head staples. Or probably the dozen other times that daily moments narrowly avoided disaster. Listening to Joe made visible to me that he was not the bad and neglectful father implied generally by his case file. Rather—after seeing him up close—I am convinced that he is a well-intentioned person living a complicated life. That he loves children deeply, and that he committed a very human error.

Significantly, the solution provided by the law only stacked more onto Joe's plate without addressing the root cause of his crime—that he needed more support. I believe this failure is indicative of how our criminal justice system lacks the intimacy necessary for achieving true justice. Applying a formulaic approach to criminal justice reduces individuals to their crimes, making it impossible to understand, and resolve, the complicated realities underlying each case. The one-size-fits-all model of sentencing guidelines and mandatory minimums are clear examples of this. The impersonal, arbitrary nature of our current judicial process relies on broad-stroke narratives, avoiding proximity—and, therefore, inhibiting mercy. For mercy demands empathy, and empathy demands understanding. And true understanding requires closeness, as Bryan Stevenson's grandmother explains.

We should strive to see other people as unfinished works of art. As with Seurat's painting, we must step forward—seeing one another up close—to truly understand each other's compositions, to see our varying shades, colors, and nuances. Prejudice is sustained through a

perpetual blindness rooted in generalization and ignorance, an inability to gain closeness to others. In our current political moment, we've seen how these attitudes can manifest into terrifying violence and hate. But I believe it's also true, then, that love, mercy, and justice can be obtained through vision and proximity. And that gives me hope.