

Roger Stevens Address
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for
The College of Fellows of the American Theatre

How Do You Fill the Gap?

It's July 24th, 2014, I'm in upstate New York - and it's my first day in prison.

Scattered all around me are a group of inmates that look like they're about to start a riot! And, right in front of me stands Tafari - 6'4" and built like a heavyweight boxer - and Dee, a head shorter but bulked up with muscles out top of his muscles.

All of a sudden – bam - they lunge and start punching away at each other! The rest of the inmates start screaming - but instead of spreading out to get away, they move in closer, trapping me and I'm stuck right in the middle of this mayhem.

Well, the fact of the matter was, I was *stuck* in more ways than one. I'd reached the point in my life where I was asking myself "Is this *it*? Is this what my life has become? Maybe it's time I start thinking about retirement."

OK. I know what you're probably thinking: how can you retire from prison? I promise I'll get back to that. But first, let's have a show of hands. How many of you are retired? And those of you that aren't, how many of you have given it some thought? Right. Then you know what I was feeling - all of a sudden life seemed kind of...uncertain.

So, right before I went to prison, I started asking myself the questions we all ask ourselves when we reach "that age." You know the ones. Will I have enough money? What about health care? Should we downsize to a smaller house? Where should we live?

The search for those answers is what I'd like to talk about today. And, strangely enough, it's also what put me in prison in the first place.

But, before that, in the spirit of full disclosure, I am not now - nor have I ever been - an inmate. I choreographed that fight for a production of *Macbeth*, performed by inmates at the Woodbourne Correctional Facility in upstate New York as part of "Rehabilitation Through the Arts," a program designed to teach inmates the life skills they need on the outside once they're

released. You see, I'm a fight master.

I don't know about you, but if you're like me, you do a little research before quitting your job. So, I started looking everywhere for some answers to the question how do you prepare for retirement? I asked my wife who had just retired, I asked my friends, I read a lot of books and of course, searched the internet.

The information was helpful but it didn't really give me the answers I was looking for. What I didn't know then was that I didn't really know the right questions to ask.

And then one day, I was in the office of my financial advisor talking about how to stretch my pension savings. Sound familiar? As I started to leave he says "David, so what are you going to do when you retire? And, I'm not talking about your portfolio, but, when you stop doing what you're doing, how will you fill the gap?"

When I stop doing what I'm doing, how will I fill the gap?

And, that's when it hit me: Being in the arts isn't just what we do for a living. Making a living in the arts isn't just a way to earn a paycheck. Being an artist is a part of who I am. It's a part of all of us, isn't it?

Everyone in this room has already grappled with or will have to grapple with these same questions sooner or later. When you stop doing what you're doing, how will you fill the gap? Is that even possible? Many of us are defined by our careers, right? I know mine was. David Leong, the fight guy, or David Leong, the Chair of Theatre.

I worked hard to build a career and I'm proud of that. But, I don't know about you but I never liked being solely defined by my job. However, the challenge is, if we're not defined by our job, then who are we? Sometimes, we're so busy building a career that we forget why we do what we do. And, if we forget, then how do we fill the gap when we retire?

To answer these questions for myself I had to dig much deeper into why I choose my career in the first place.

Okay now, when people learn that I'm a fight master they always want to know three things. 1. What's a fight master? 2. Do you know martial arts and, 3. Am I Bruce Lee? I swear that I'm asked that question at least 50 times a year!

The answer to the first question "what's a fight master?" Well, when you were a kid, did you ever

pretend you were Batman, or Roy Rogers, or, maybe Wonder Woman? Well, in the theatre and for the movies, someone has choreograph those fights. And, that person is a fight master.

Does anyone remember the Walt Disney TV show Zorro starring Guy Williams? Every Thursday night in the late 1950's I'd grab my plastic sword, don my cape and mask, turn up the volume on our black and white Zenith TV, and buckle my swash all over the house. My hero was Zorro - and I still have the costume to prove it. I was going to wear it today but if I did, my wife said she'd stay home. I guess that was the beginning of my stage combat career.

And, the other questions? Okay, I get it...when people see me - a small Asian man - and learn that I choreograph fights, well, no matter what I say, I can't win!

Do I know martial arts? Yes, I do. And, are you Bruce Lee? Are you Bruce Lee? Please tell me that you're Bruce Lee?

No, I'm not Bruce Lee. Don't you know that Bruce Lee died over 40 years ago. My name is not Bruce Lee. It's Jackie Chan.

The truth is, it's quite an honor to be confused with Bruce and Jackie - but they choreographed Asian martial arts for film and I stage American and European fights for the theatre...you know, sword fights, gun-fights, comedy fights, even domestic violence and sexual assault.

So, in June of 2014, my good friend Gary Sloan told me he was volunteering at the Woodbourne Correctional Facility in upstate New York. He was teaching acting and directing Macbeth.

"Wow, that sounds really cool Gary! Can I choreograph the fights? I'll do it for free."

He looked at me and said "We'll, the price is right - and I'd love to have you!"

Okay, let's see a show of hands if either you or someone you know has worked with inmates in prison. Yes, it's great way to give back, isn't it?

Well, I was so excited about this project that I forgot to think about the reality of what I had just volunteered to do. I didn't volunteer to teach poetry or painting. I volunteered to go to prison - to start some fights. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

So, let's go to the Woodbourne Correctional Facility. It's my first day as a "guest of the state."

After passing through 5 sets of jail bars the guards whisk me into a large, low-ceilinged room -

and standing right in front of me is the cast of *Macbeth*. Nineteen inmates, all glaring at me dressed in dark green jumpsuits with *name tags* – Tafari, Dee, Ya Prince, Kozo, Bey, *Angel*...and a bunch of others.

With names like that, I'm beginning to think the name "David" may not cut it and I start wishing that my name tag said "*Zorro*."

And then my good friend Gary Sloan, the director of the play steps into the center of the room: "Alright guys, I've told you that David is here to choreograph the fights for *Macbeth*. He's one of only 16 Fight Masters in the U.S. and his sword fight teacher was the man who choreographed and doubled for Errol Flynn. He's done over 20 Broadway shows and coached some big stars like Sam Rockwell, Don Cheadle, and Woody Harrelson. He's even worked with Sigourney Weaver on *Aliens*. So, before we begin, you guys have any questions?"

And Tafari stands up, walks up to me, stops about 12 inches from my face, looks down at me - way down - and says:

"Okay, so we know all about your *fake* fights with movie stars – but, have you ever been in a *real* fight?"

I can assure you that at very moment, I was not thinking about my retirement.

"Have I ever been in a real fight?" My God... These guys are criminals. What can I say to impress them? Nothing but the truth.

So, I look him right in the eyes and say, "OK, I'm ashamed to admit it - but when I was growing up I used to fight my father every time he went after my mother. Had to do it for years. So, yeah - I've been in a lot of fights. More than I want to remember."

After a long moment, he at me and says "Alright, so, when do we get to fight, Bruce Lee?"

From that point on, we were all cool. Actually, from the second I entered the classroom, I could feel the vibe. I could read their body language and I knew who was in charge - and it wasn't me. But...that was fine. Tafari didn't care about my stage cred. He was looking for my *street* cred.

The truth is when you grow up with domestic violence you very quickly learn to gauge the temperature of the room. The ability to read the room and build a bridge between people is a skill that I had to master to survive my family upbringing. For most of my life, I was ashamed of my childhood and never talked about it. But, on that day in prison, when I stood challenged in

front of 19 inmates, I knew that the only way I could gain their trust was to build a bridge between them and me.

That very thing- the ability to build a bridge between people is what drew me to the theater in the first place. It also saved my life.

And, ironically, it would help me answer the questions “Who am I and how do I fill the gap?”

You know how a major life event can flash right through your mind in just a fleeting moment? And, if you take the time to write it down or tell it to someone, it would take an hour right? Well, at that moment when I telling the inmates my childhood story, I flashed right back to 1982.

I was a young college professor at Northern Kentucky University directing a play called *Extremities* about a woman who defends herself from a man who breaks into her home and tries to rape her.

As it happens, at the same time I was in rehearsal, I’d started seeing a therapist for PTSD about all the stuff I dealt with when I was growing up. A lifetime of hiding the truth of my childhood had taken its toll and I’d finally reached out for help.

After a few sessions together, my therapist Dr. Ann Wierwille, said “David, I have an idea. I don’t normally make a habit of seeing my patients outside the office but I want to come watch you work.”

“Ah, hmm, are you *sure* you want to do that?” (Pause) So, two days later, she came to the theatre and watched me work with my actors as I staged the brutal sexual assault.

Now, it’s important to note here that, like all of you, actors have their own comfort zones, their own boundaries. Some actors are comfortable with the athleticism needed to perform a fight scene, others are fearful. Some are comfortable with the physicality needed to communicate intimacy – or, in this instance, a sexual assault - others are timid and more vulnerable.

Immediately, after the rehearsal, out of the corner of my eye I can see my therapist walking toward me *deep* in thought and I’m thinking “Oh, shit. She’s gonna tell me I’m *really* messed up and if I want to continue my therapy, she’s gonna double my fee.”

And, then she says “I thought I was just going to watch you choreograph fights - but I wasn’t expecting to see what you did *before* that. You did all those exercises to make them feel emotionally and physically safe before you even started to choreograph. And, more than

anything else, you made it look so real! You don't choreograph fights, David. You choreograph trust." And then with a smile, she says "We have a lot to talk about. See you Monday."

That was a "eureka moment" for me. We all have eureka moments in our lives but sometimes we're too busy to recognize them. You know what I'm talking about...sometimes months or years go by before the light bulb goes off!

With her help, I eventually realized what actually compelled me to work in the theatre. It's not the choreography of violence but the protection *from* violence...much like what that 8 year-old Zorro was trying to do for his family. And *that* is what informs my work in the theatre. That's my underlying reason why I do what I do. And that's how I can fill the gap.

So, to close this story out, let me take you back one more time to prison.

As you may know, the entire last act of *Macbeth* takes place on the battlefield and it ends with Macbeth and Macduff fighting to the death. The only problem was, as soon as we started to rehearse, the prison guards told me that "No physical contact between inmates is allowed. Ever!"

"Excuse me?"

They told me that even *casual* physical contact could mask suspicious behavior...like delivering contraband or perhaps passing off a shiv which is a self-made knife or razor.

"Handshakes *are* allowed, yes. But anything else, boom! They're marched into solitary, no questions asked. You understand, Bruce Lee!"

How do you choreograph fights if they can't touch each other? What could I do – have Macbeth and Macduff *handshake* each other into submission?

But after explaining the challenge this understandable guideline presented, we got "special permission" to, thankfully, do more than handshakes. But...no swords of any kind. Not even little plastic Zorro swords!

I was stuck, I didn't have a clue! So I ended up doing something that was virtually alien to the prison culture: I listened to them. I asked questions. I asked for their opinions and I incorporated their ideas.

"Guys, we got a problem, we can't use theatrical swords. You see, they're made of steel. The edges are dull and the points are blunt, but we still can't use them."

The inmates jump right into the discussion and say “How about we use *rubber* swords? Or, *cardboard*. What about *cardboard* swords?”

These guys were really invested in this! On the outside, I’m amazed and excited. I was proud. They were collaborators. But, on the inside, I’m about to bust a gut cause it’s hard to keep a straight face when hardened criminals suggest they fight with rubber swords.

So, this is how we fought without real theatrical weapons. Everyone – from where you’re sitting – hold your right arm like this.

Good. That is your sword. Now, hold your left arm like this.

OK. That is your shield. Now, everyone, do and repeat after me.

“CUT. PARRY. CUT. PARRY. THRUST.”

See? Because they used their arms as weapons, the fights still looked rough and tough and it gave them a sense of really fighting with each other.

Alright! So...it's Opening Night – actually Opening Afternoon - of *Macbeth*. It’s a full house – made up of administrators, personnel from Rehabilitation Through the Arts, prison officials and inmates - quite literally a captive audience!

Anyway, it’s the end of the play and Macduff, seeking revenge for the massacre of his family, confronts Macbeth. It’s a classic battle of good vs. evil.

Macbeth and Macduff exchange a few blows, back and forth. Then Tafari as Macbeth (and, of course, you just knew Tafari was going to play the title role, didn’t you?) gets ready for the kill. Looking at the short, stocky, muscular Dee he booms out "Lay on Macduff. And damned be him that cries hold enough!"

And then...they go for it. I mean *really* go for it!

Now, in rehearsal – after they’d learned to trust each other, after they’d mastered the choreography, and after they’d learned how to not really kill each other while fake fighting, we kept having to say "Slow down, slow down...hold back a little! Someone’s gonna get hurt." And they’d reluctantly pull back.

But if we thought they were going fast in rehearsal, that was nothing compared to the bright lights of Opening Afternoon! Now the guys have an audience – and their adrenaline kicks in!

Tafari and Dee start going fast... I mean *really* fast. The faster they move, the happier they are. And the happier they are, the wilder they get! They are so wild at times they forget the choreography!

They keep blanking out but somehow, they always find their way back to the choreography they'd practiced for weeks. They're in it one minute and out of it the next. In, out, in, out and until finally - thank God, the choreography stops - But they don't.

Now, they begin to improvise! But here's the thing – Tafari and Dee are so in the moment, so focused, and they trust each other so completely, that in those moments they are like great jazz musicians, anticipating each other, supporting each other, building the fight together through eye contact and silently communicating to each other what their next move was.

I'm watching this with both fascination and horrified pride. Finally, stocky little Macduff picks up giant Macbeth...and throws him off the stage!

Yup! Dee picks Tafari up and literally tosses him off the stage!

There is a gasp from the audience then silence as everyone stares at Tafari lying in a motionless, heap on the floor in front of the stage. And in that stunned silence I'm thinking "Well Dee *just killed* Tafari in a fight I choreographed. They'll convict me of manslaughter and I'll never leave here."

But, suddenly...Tafari pops up - in one piece - and runs up the aisle happy as a lark! The audience goes berserk – clapping, yelling, standing up, stomping feet, whistling...the most satisfying ovation I've ever been a part on Broadway or beyond!

It was...magical - one of the best moments of my career – and not just because I made it out of prison alive!

You know, not too long after "Opening afternoon", the guys sent some of their thoughts about working on *Macbeth* and I'd like to share a couple of them with you.

"I learned how to be flexible." This from a man whose life lessons had taught him "Stand your ground. Never give an inch." Another said "I learned how not get caught up in selfish issues." That's quite different from "Look out for number one" isn't it?

And then there was this one. "I learned what it's like to step outside myself to benefit the group." Hear that? Empathy. Empathy from prison.

Now, make no mistake. These were men who were living in a place that some of them would never leave. But for a brief moment, they worked together to move beyond the circumstances of their lives and, through vulnerability, emotional honesty, and trust, they learned to “walk in one another’s shoes.”

Isn’t that ultimately, the value in what we do?

So, that was the “eureka moment” I walked away with from my time in prison. And, that’s is how I’m going to fill the gap. I’m not talking about working in prisons, although that would be a worthy thing to do. What I learned from the inmates at the Woodbourne Correctional Facility will remain with me for the rest of my life...because they helped me figure out the next chapter.

You see, I’m now Certified in Conflict resolution and Mediation so that I can use my skills of looking and listening, perception, and building trust and safety. In fact, my wife Patti and I both earned our certification in conflict resolution and mediation and now, instead of *only* getting paid to start fights, I get paid to stop them as well! I guess that’s one way of guaranteeing that I’m never out of work!

Yes, I’m still going to choreograph fights. In fact, later on this year, they’ll be seen in Porgy and Bess at the New York Metropolitan Opera and this winter I’ll choreograph the fights for a world premier of Peter Pan at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, DC. But now I’ve found a way to enrich my life both inside and outside the theatre.

I’m not sure where all this is going to take me so I’ll end with this.

You know, it’s not news to say we’re living in such contentious times – we all know it, we all experience it in our daily lives, this continual, hostility we see on the streets, in the news and on the internet, everywhere. It’s infecting all walks of our life. Friends turn against friends, family split over politics. Our differences are pronounced. The need for resolution and mediation, for finding some way to bridge the widening gaps that separate us are more essential now than perhaps any other time in our recent history. And we need empathy and trust more than ever.

Today is Sunday, April 21st and in 12 days I’m retiring. Twelve days. After forty-three years in higher education and professional theatre I’m about to start a new chapter in my life. Wow.

Mark Twain said “The two most important days of your life are the day you were born and the day you find out why.”

I think I may have discovered an answer to the last part of his quote. I hope so – and I hope by

sharing my journey with you today that you have taken one of your own.

So, whatever your profession, what's your life's journey? And, more importantly what underlying need brought you to your profession - and, can you use it to fill the gap?

Maybe you're living it already...or, maybe, you're as clueless as I was in the middle of those inmates.

Whatever it is, I hope you don't have to go to prison to find it. Thank you.