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THE BIG PONDER

Anatomy of an Apology

By Katie Davis

Katie Davis: The Anatomy of an Apology. [MUSIC] Colombia Road cuts through my Washington, D.C. neighborhood. I've been walking it since I was ten years old when my mom sent me to buy bread at the Italian store, or for a dozen sugary churros at the Churreria Madrid. So yeah, I'd lived here decades and never really walked one block over to 17th Street until I started to tutor some of the kids from there. I learned that they faced a choice. The teenagers standing on the corner offered a way to make money selling drugs. The teen center, just a little bit up 17th street, offered another way. The kids worked with mentors, went on camping trips, and played on the center's basketball team. This story began 16 years ago – at a time I knew the kids very well. They came by my house when they wanted me or called.

Machine: Sunday, 12 a.m.

Jamal: Don't forget, if you're in the house, please pick up the phone. This is Jamal. I've got to talk to you. All right, Katie. Bye, bye.

Katie Davis: That's Jamal on my answering machine and I know why he's calling. I've been tipped off. He was in a fight at the teen center and told to go home but Jamal is still making threats. Serious ones.

Nigel: Jamal, number one, his presence is just like ... you know, he's a big dude. You know, he's got the bush out half the time, his pants are hanging down. His voice is fairly deep for a 14- or 15-year-old so he just commands so much space. Then he's got the whole sling thing going on where he can, you know, he's real street savvy man.

Katie Davis: That's Nigel. He's part of a group trying to stop violence among the neighborhood kids. We have rules about fighting: never allowed. No one says, boys will be boys. So, I know Jamal is calling to explain the fight to me to make sure he won't be kicked off the basketball team. I'm the manager.

Jamal: Katie, this is Jamal again Katie. I'm trying to talk to you about the situation, Katie. I just wanted to know am I still on the team?

Katie Davis: I invite Jamal over to my house to talk and he comes with an 11-year-old boy from his building and his baby nephew who wants to sing in the microphone before we get going.

Baby: Uh, ABCs.

Jamal: Sing it, man.

Baby: After me. Repeat after me. A, B, C.

Jamal: A, B, C.

Baby: C, D, E, F, G.

Jamal: D, E, F, G.

Baby: H, I, J, K, L-emello-P. K, L-emello-P. Q, R, S. Q, R, S, T, U, V.

Katie Davis: I remember the July afternoon I first met Jamal. He was ten years old and the fireman opened the hydrant. Jamal put his belly over the gushing water and made it spray everywhere for all of us. Jamal is 14 now and he's here to tell me about the fight.

Katie Davis: So, my dear, tell me what happened that night. How did the whole thing get going?

Jamal: Um, we at the teen center so Alfred say something to me. I'm thinking we playing. So then first he bumped me then I bumped him. Then he pushed me, I pushed him. Then I'm in the computer room, he came behind me, put me in a headlock.

Katie Davis: Describe what that was like. I heard it was a lot.

Jamal: Yeah, I – I kept on telling him, I laugh at this, then he kept trying to put – threaten me, saying he was going to kill me. He'll kill me.

Katie Davis: So, at that point it was pretty intense. It was like a fight?

Jamal: Hmm.

Katie Davis: I remember talking to you and you were trying to explain it to me. You just kept saying – and I want you to explain that – that he put his hands on you. What does that – explain that. Why is that a big deal?

Jamal: Because my – my mother told me somebody can say whatever they want to say but if they put their hands on you you've got the right to hit them back. So, he put his hands on me. I was about to fight him.

Katie Davis: Right there. This is the extreme danger zone: the threat of payback. Jamal could have a gun, we're not sure. One of his friends definitely does. We've seen it. So, let's hear about this fight from

Alfred, the older teen in this story. He's from Sierra Leone and he grew up here in Washington, D.C. with other refugees. His job on Wednesdays is to clean up after the group dinner at the teen center. That night Alfred was cleaning up some spaghetti off the floor and that's how things got started.

Alfred: So, he bumped me and I just looked at him just like ah, he was playing. So, I was on my way walking back towards the kitchen and all I see was someone just pushed me real hard from the back and I fell and almost hit my head on the ground. So that's when I turned around like he's not playing so I just chased him towards the computer lab, so he ran in here. And so, I caught him and just put him in a headlock. But I was like ah, he's a little boy so I ain't going to fight him. I'll just hold him up just to show him that he's a little boy, so I just put him in a headlock, hold him there for a while. So, Nigel come and say let him go and I let him go and walked back in the kitchen and, uh, he started acting all tough like he really wanted to fight me, getting all rowdy about it. Went outside, went to go get his friends and come back in talking about, yeah, whatever. You can see me in the street. I'll go get my heat. I'll pop you and all that. So, I was like whatever, do what you do.

Katie Davis: He said he'd go get his heat?

Alfred: Yeah. So, I was like ...

Katie Davis: Do you believe that?

Alfred: I wasn't tripping about it.

Katie Davis: Did you catch that? Jamal told Alfred he was going to get his heat. Heat means gun. He also threatened to pop him, to shoot Alfred. The next day I get a call from the teen center director, use any leverage you have to get Jamal to apologize. Threaten to take basketball away. We need to squash this. So, I talked to Jamal. You heard some of it. I talked to him more. He proposed some alternatives. Jamal asked if his friend could beat up Alfred. No, Jamal. Or what about waiting until the basketball season is over and then beat up Alfred? No, Jamal. This story is also Nigel's story. He's lived it and lost close, close friends to gun and prison and he was right in the middle of the fight at the teen center trying to stop it.

Nigel: Jamal had pushed Alfred pretty hard and his response was to grab him and put him in the headlock. And Alfred just seemed so sincere, you know what I mean? He was just like man, this dude pushed me. My first instinct was to kind of hit him off the top but I didn't, you know? So, he actually went through a thought process, like options. Okay, I could hit this dude, you know what I mean? Or maybe I'll just get him in a headlock. Which is a good thing, you know what I mean? Which is a good thing. So, progress, that's right. It's progress.

So, he got him in the headlock and he wasn't like bending or twisting him or anything violent but he did have him pretty secure whereas Jamal was in a vulnerable position, he couldn't really defend himself. But to be honest I mean Alfred really had a tight grip so I was just getting into his head a little bit so he could actually think about what he was doing.

Katie Davis: What did you say?

Nigel: I was just like, Alfred, man. Man, come on, man, not in the computer lab, man. Let go, let go. He was just like, man, he had him real tight and then he said, like, man, you're lucky man, you know? At that point he just kind of voluntarily let go. At that point Jamal, oh boy, I thought I had a lot of pride. This guy, because so many people had seen it Jamal was pissed, you know what I mean? Like he felt embarrassed, he felt punked, and nobody sees Jamal as the guy who gets punked. Like we as a staff could not hold him. He was very respectful in his obnoxiousness but I mean like he did. He was like, Nigel, for real man. I don't want to hurt you, man. I don't want to knock you down. Hey, but can I just go talk to Alfred? Can I just go do what I need to do? That kind of thing. And I was just like, no, Jamal. No, Jamal, you can't do it. It's pretty much tit for tat, let's call it a truce. Those kinds of things. And he was just not having it.

So, at that point he was like, you know what? I'm leaving. And guess what? I'll be back, in a threat kind of a tone. And he did come back and I talked to him on his way out. I was just letting him know that this is what it's all about, like a lot of the stuff that we read in the papers and see on the news, this is what it boils down to: a petty fight where someone either got pushed, shoved, looked at wrong, something like that. And when the detectives come in the end after cleaning all the blood and guts this is what they find out it's about.

Katie Davis: Which shocks people.

Nigel: Yeah, which shocks people, you know what I mean? It seems like the really pettiest thing but if you do not do some sort of intervention, yeah, it's a recipe for disaster. So, Jamal did come back. He came back with three friends as if they were going to jump Alfred inside the teen center. So, upon seeing them coming in I immediately was just like, look, it's no point for y'all to even come down here, just like straight up, you should just roll right now. Oh Nigel, we ain't doing nothing. I mean we just came to kind of see what was going on.

So – so yeah, Jamal kind of left again. He was just like well since y'all ain't going to let me do anything tonight I'll just do something tomorrow. And it was so funny because I just saw both this ferocious, crazy dude and I also saw a real vulnerable little boy all within the same – like within five minutes. And here I mean literally nobody could stop him from trying to get to Alfred. I mean outside of the teen center when he wasn't restrained he was crying, you know what I mean? He looked me in the eye, he was crying. He was just like, Nigel, you don't understand, man, you know, I was just like, no, I do understand. I feel you, you know? And I just saw this little boy, you know?

Katie Davis: The teen center staff kept talking to Jamal and to each other and talking. It is a talking place. There was one goal: get Jamal and Alfred to apologize to each other. Now Alfred did this without much pressure.

Alfred: It wasn't hard for me to do. I knew I was wrong for putting him in the headlock. I could let it go. But what happened at the time, it was a reaction. So, I apologized to him but he wouldn't accept my apologies. He wanted to start talking trash.

Katie Davis: Why do you think he's still doing that? Like seeing you and grumbling and talking trash. What is he trying to prove?

Alfred: He's trying to show that he ain't scared, that he a man. He's trying to get his respect.

Katie Davis: Chris Dwyer of the teen center says a few years ago Alfred would've balked at apologizing.

Chris Dwyer: The key ritual for kind of squashing it meaningfully is just the owning up in kind of to your end of where you crossed the line. Just you've just got to learn how to do that, basically saying to the other person, hey I want to apologize. And very specifically for the headlock and for saying I was going to kill you. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that and I was wrong." And on Jamal's side, you know, I'm sorry for hitting you, shoving you so hard, knocking you down, and for making the threats and going after you after that. Both those instances were just out of line.

So initially people would sort of say – sometimes kids or other people – like, why do you make them do that? They obviously don't mean it. Because usually – usually in the moment kids are still pretty annoyed. It's not like a heartfelt, gracious I'm sorry. It's more like a grudging I'm only doing this because if I don't there'll be some – you'll have to involve my mom or be out of the center or something. You know, so ... so I'll grudgingly go through the motions. So, people just ask why would you do that when they don't really mean it? And all I can say is I think initially we just did it because it seemed like that's the right thing to do. You wronged somebody. Own up to it, apologize, try to make good. That's all you can do. But that simple act, even if it's going through the motions, it's a practice of what you should do. It makes clear what you should do. And even when it is grudging the insistence that this be done, that I think – like just that that happens affirms and reaffirms that kid's dignity that's been kind of disrespected in some way.

Katie Davis: But that's in your mind. In Jamal's mind his dignity was taken away and what he kept saying to me is, he put his hands on me, he put his hands on me. And I guess to get it back the only thing he can do is to do the same in his mind. How do you – how do you try to dissemble that?

Chris Dwyer: We do the ... you ever seen that 'think outside the box' exercise? Basically, within the box he's thinking within the world he knows you're right. There's one course of action to rectify the situation and that's it: retaliate. And that's what I said to him. I said, well I know you've got to even the score, you know? I understand. He's like, I've got to get one up. [LAUGHS] I was like, you're right, yeah. I'm sorry to misspeak, you're right. It's not about evening the score; it's about getting on top. But then, but where does that leave you? He's like, I don't care, wherever it goes, that's where it's going to have to go. I was like, well I know, and you know where that can lead.

I don't think he conceptualizes all this. I guess all I do know is when you insist on it it gets easier. It's not at all uncommon for someone like Jamal, he's new to the center this semester, to show up and have been really a kid on the street in a lot of ways for a while now, you know, to have an enormous problem with this idea. [LAUGHS] Own up? Apologize? Graciously accept an apology? You've got to be kidding me. So, all I know is you insist on it. It's amazing. If you give it a little time, you keep pushing insistently just by saying, this is what you need to do.

Katie Davis: Jamal seemed open to the next step.

Chris Dwyer: As soon as we said, well we have Alfred here, let's go, then Jamal started to shut down, no, that ain't going to happen. Uh-uh. And so, as he said it didn't happen. Alfred did his part. Jamal was having none of it, though I did think it – find it a little interesting that his anger he no longer directed at Alfred, he no longer directed at me or Nigel. He just looked down and just was like, man, fuck this apology shit man. You know? So, he just looked down and cursed the apology. And it wasn't even him doing it; it was just listening to one given to him. When we do this I've never had a problem continue. When we don't do this it just – it always comes back. Even little times when it's not even a fight yet, I think maybe we should squash it but I'm busy. I'll let it go. That'll come back up as an argument or a fight whereas even the worst fight, we go through this, it doesn't continue. So, there's some little – that's where I was going to finish my point about why we do it is that when they go through it it gets easier for them. And I've just found for practical purposes it just seems to work when you just drag them through it.

Katie Davis: Jamal stopped going to the teen center. Nigel's job was to stay in touch with him so whenever he saw Jamal on the street he'd stop and talk.

Nigel: So, what happened from there, I saw Jamal and I had a CD that he really wanted, a Kanye West CD. So, I happened to have that with me, just like, here you go Jamal, why don't you come take a walk with me? So, he usually isn't hesitant. There's usually something always on his mind. You know, we walked back to the teen center together. He was just like, Nigel I'm not apologizing but I'll walk with you. And that speaks to Jamal's character so well because he's kind of torn in-between what he wants to do and just kind of what the tradition is out here on this block, you know? And that's okay, you know what I mean? That's a process that you go through. The skill is being able to recognize it, you know?

So, what happened from that point was Jamal came in. He was really receptive. Chris and I both kind of corralled him and talked with him to find out what was the deal? Let's actually talk it through. And he said some things that were powerful. He was just like, well, Alfred threatened my life and I don't play. And I talked to him about times in which my life was threatened and how I carried it to the extreme and what I learned from it and I think he really heard that, you know what I mean? I think he really heard that. And I just tried to give him an idea of how big the world is.

He is so – Jamal is so 17th Street focused. I tried to get his mind off just this little block and more so to the big picture. One of the ways I do it, or that we do it, is by letting him know how much power he has. Jamal's a leader, a subconscious leader. Every time you see him there's like a herd of kids right behind him and I think that just speaks to his personality, his presence. Just so many great qualities in Jamal that you see in the greatest leaders, you know?

So yeah, I try to reaffirm that stuff and tell him, you know, that can be used negatively or positively and the ball's in his court. But whichever way that he goes people are going to follow and I think he's starting to recognize that. So, we had a really long conversation in here. He was open to the fact of like really giving Alfred like a handshake, possibly a hug, calling a truce. But when we paired the two to do it I mean yeah, he just couldn't do it. He was really hold onto his pride. And again, that was okay, you know, because he was open to it. He tried. But at that point he was just like man, Alfred was man enough to step up and apologize for his part and Jamal was just like you know what? Screw this. Screw it. And just kind of left.

And it takes time, you know? That's where you've got to kind of let go of all the stuff and all the happy endings we want as human beings and just kind of realize that things take time. And then what really brought everything to a head was when one day I was just walking out front and I hadn't seen Jamal in the neighborhood. I might mention, I might not, depending on how I'm feeling. So, at that point I didn't mention it, I was just going to go greet him as I always do and he was just like, Nigel I want to apologize for the way ..., I mean it just totally shocked the hell out of me. He was like, Nigel I want to apologize for the way I acted last night. He was just like, man, I was dead wrong. And it came from the bottom of his heart because he looked me right in my eye and I was just like wow. I was just like ... at first, I was stunned, just kind of quiet for a second, then I was just like wow, kind of put my teen center hat back on. I was just like, you know, I'm glad that you told me and shared that with me but I think Alfred should be the one that you should apologize to. And he was just like, okay, I'll apologize.

And still that's not the end of it, you know? I mean although that's a happy ending and almost enough for me, you know, and the staff here, we just really wanted to put some closure on this with an actual handshake – which later happened. But what I see down the line, because he's a bright kid, if that stuff's tapped into there's no limit. And I know we say this with every kid but with Jamal's case it's just special. There's no limit to what he can do and how he can be such an influence in a good way to this whole community, you know?

Katie Davis: After he apologized Jamal kept one foot in 17th Street with the corner guys and he kept trying new things. He did an internship and then a trip, a big trip. His basketball coach Bryan Weaver took him to Guatemala to a Mayan village with the leadership program *Hoops Sagrado*. Jamal and the other D.C. kids coached basketball and the Mayans taught them Spanish. Bryan wrote about that summer, about how Jamal learned to see himself in the stranger, in the other. He learned some ideas the Ki'che Mayans valued: I am the other you, you are the other me.

Bryan says one day Jamal saw a few boys who wanted to join the basketball games. The Guatemalan teachers called them “good for nothings.” When Jamal heard that he walked over and stood with them. He didn’t say a word, just stood there. From that day on those kids were never late for camp and if they acted up Jamal would go stand with them.

A few years later I walked down the hill to do an errand. As I came out of the store the whole street was taped off, yellow tape and police everywhere. I could see an upside-down car and someone said there was a shooting. At home the calls came. It was Jamal who had been shot coming out of the funeral for a friend. He died right there on the street. He was 21 years old. Bryan, Nigel, Chris, myself, and others gathered up Jamal’s friends to talk. We urged them not to retaliate.

This all happened a decade ago. It took me a long time to feel I could write about it. When I listened to the interviews it was wonderful to hear Jamal’s voice again and to understand how much Chris and Nigel know. Nigel went on to found his own youth group in the neighborhood and he’s helped many young people and Bryan is still taking kids to Guatemala. For my part I tutored a kid in the neighborhood and I sent him to college.

For THE BIG PONDER this is Katie Davis in Washington, D.C.

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