

Jeff Duncan-Andrade: Growing Roses in Concrete
TEDxGoldenGateED

(1) As the youngest of seven children I often felt like it was my birthright to complain. And I went on one of my adolescent rants and my mother sat me down at the kitchen table and filled the glass halfway. She came back and set the glass down between us. And She said, “Half Full or half empty?” And I got stuck on dumb for a second because of course it’s a trick question. And my mother proceeded to say that, son, how you choose to answer that question is how you will live your life. Because your life will always be both half full and half empty. And if you choose to see your life as half empty, if you choose to see your life for thing that you don’t have, then you will never fill your cup. But if you can see your life is half full, if you can recognize the things that you do have in your life, then your cup will fill up and it will overflow, and you can share that with others.

(2) This is kinda how I think about Tupac Shakur’s poem where he describes young people growing up in urban poverty as the roses that grow from concrete. And ‘Pac says when you see a rose growing in the concrete, you don’t question its damaged petals. Of course it has damaged petals, it’s growing in the concrete. Instead, you celebrate it’s tenacity and its will to reach the sun.

(3) Now I think ‘Pac is right to acknowledge that the concrete is real. And if there are young people attempting to grow in this concrete. And so it’s important when we’re to try to grow roses in concrete that we try to understand it better. There’s very few things out there that describe the concrete as effectively as this film series which PBS recently released called Unnatural Causes. And I think the title appropriate because the concrete is not natural. The conditions in which urban youth are growing are not natural. They’re created, which means that they can be changed.

(4) Now the thing about this concept is that there’s multiple layers to it. I don’t have time to go into all the layers today, so I’m going to focus on one that’s particularly profound in

the community to where I live and teach. I live in the 34000 block of east oakland. And in 2002 the San Francisco Chronicle became so concerned with the level of homicide in our community they started mapping it. And so between 2002 they drew out this map. Now the interesting thing about their word choice is they said that we have the plague. Now the interesting thing about that word choice is that the plague is the ultimate non-discriminator. It doesn't recognize race. It doesn't recognize class. And it doesn't recognize political boundaries.

(5) The red lines there are the city boundaries of Oakland. And you don't have to be a topographical genius to look at this map and see the outlier: Piedmont, a city inside of our city. Now what the hell is going on in Piedmont where they can completely opt out of the plague? And in fact, the plague is quarantined in our community. It's quarantined between the two freeways, between the 580 freeway and the 880 freeways which in our community we call that the flatlands or the lower bottoms. And that's where I live and that's where I taught for the last 18 years. Now over the five years that the Chronicle mapped the plague, there were 555 homicides in our community. In 2007 The Oakland Tribune began to map the homicides, they call it the homicide map. And every year they put the homicide map on the front page of the Tribune. And what you can see is that between 2007 and 2010 very little has changed in the homicide rate in our community. So I've decided to update the homicide map, but I'm gonna do that for thirteen years because that's how many years young people are in public schools in our communities.

(6) So I'm to eight now. Now you tell me where a young person can live in my community where they don't personally witness homicide. And this young person is only in middle school, this is only eighth grade, and they haven't even made it to my high school class yet. And of course we know that exposure to this kind of traumatic stress can result in PTSD. But much of the conversation about PTSD is about this guy. Which is right because soldiers are particularly susceptible to PTSD. But there's too little conversation about these brothers here. These are my students, burying one of their partners, 15 years old who was stabbed multiple times in the face with a screwdriver not

far from my house. And the next day, these young brothers showed up to school. And what are we giving them in school? What's the conversation about? Test scores. Attendance. Quantifiables. Things we can measure. Very little attention to the material conditions of their lives. Very little attention to their humanity. And yet at the same time, we tell them that schools care about them. At the same time, we tell them schools are the best chance out of the concrete. Little wonder why young people like these are not willing to engage in that promise.

(7) Now fortunately there's a growing body of research that is studying traumatic stress in young people. Like the work of this guy, Bruce Perry. And as a result of this new work, what we found is that one in three urban youth display the symptoms of mild to severe PTSD. And when you compare that data to the military data, what you find is urban youth are actually twice as likely as soldiers returning from Iraq to get PTSD. In fact, we've become so concerned with PTSD in urban communities we found that PTSD isn't even an accurate diagnosis. So the medical field and the field of psychology have begun to work a new diagnosis that they are calling CPTSD, or Complex PTSD, which captures the complexity of young people living in urban poverty who return to the violence. And rather than thinking about it as post-traumatic which is accurate for a soldier because the soldier leaves the battlefield, thinking about the complexity of continually re-occurring that prolonged traumatic stress.

(8) Now if we do nothing about this concrete, what we know is that some roses will still find their way through the concrete. But what we've done is we've begun to use the classroom as a space of intervention. And for the last 18 plus years, what we've attempted to do is to address the material conditions of kids in our community in the classroom, to add some additional resources down into the concrete through the cracks. More water. More light. More soil. And as a result, we've been able to grow more roses than most.

(9) The way that we've been able to do this is that we use a looping system and we stay with them over multiple years. And so three years later, with our last cohort, what you

see is the retention is up. College-going is up. GPAS are up. All the measurables that we want in schools we're able to get. And when you compare that with the broader district data, you see that we have a level of uncommon success. Now this picture that you see right here is actually a picture of the last cohort the day that they graduated. and they're on our porch at our house. And the little bubble you see next to each of their names are the four-year colleges and universities that they went off to.

(10) Now we have people from all over the world come to our program to see how is it that we are able to reach this level of uncommon success. And I often feel like that when they come in that they think that they're going to see us blow some pixie dust on kids right and that we just magically create it . No pixie dust. In fact I was quoted once in the Oakland Tribune as saying that it's not rocket science That we don't have pixie dust. That we don't have a magic wand. And we sure as hell don't do rocket science. I'm a social scientist; I couldn't even fool with it. Well, what we do do is we go back to a basic needs framework. We we go back to 1943 and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Because Maslow was right. Maslow made it clear that if you don't address the lower levels of the hierarchy of needs, you can't find stability in the upper echelons of the hierarchy of needs.

(11) And particularly interesting thing to me about Maslow's hierarchy of needs is the pinnacle. Because the pinnacle is self-actualization. And what we know from the research in education is that self-actualization is actually the precondition to long-term academic success. And yet when you look at this list, the things that lead to self-actualization, not a public school teacher in this country is evaluated on their ability to do those things, even though the educational research is clear that these are the things that you have to do in order to get the things that teachers are actually evaluated on, which is higher test scores, higher GPAs, more engagement, etc, etc.

(12) But what we know after almost twenty years of this work is that it's not enough. And so we began to think about what would it mean to take these principles that we developed in our micro-ecosystem and begin to think about them as a meta-ecosystem..

What would it mean to take these principles and institutionalize them and then surround that institution, thinking about school as the center of our community, thinking about school and young people as the center of health in our community, and then wrap these services around young people, all the services that any healthy community should have and deserves. Now some of you might have heard of these kinds of models, for example, Harlem's Children's Zone or other similar models, but we're thinking it a little bit differently because the problem with those kinds of models is that they do grow roses but in then those roses leave the concrete, and so then the process has to start all over again. So that we've been shifting the conversation to start thinking about what would it mean to have a model growing roses that is connected to the idea sustainability and security for communities like mine in East Oakland.

(13) Now perhaps nobody models this better than this woman, Maya Angelou, who in the early 1990s was on a film set called *Poetic Justice*. And she walks out of her trailer to do her scene as she walks out she see two young brothers at each others' throats. She doesn't know either one of these brothers, but she intervenes between them. And the one brother she's trying to stop, he starts coming back, like he's not even trying to hear her, and she's holding him up. Maya's a grandmother, alright? She doesn't know these two brothers, at all. And she's intervening. He's coming back. And she looks him in the eye, she says, "Do you understand how important you are? Do you understand our people lay spoon-fashioned in the filthy hatches of slave ships, in each other's excrement and menstrual flow so that you could live. Do you understand how important you are to me? To us? To our community and to this world? And this brother started to cry. And she didn't have any tissues, so she slid up her sleeve and dried his tears. Later that day, she found out that that brother was Tupac Shakur. And Tupac's mother wrote Maya a letter many days later saying thank you for intervening in my son's life, because you saved his life that day.

(14) Now because Maya was able to see 'Pac not for his damaged petals, but for his tenacity his will to reach the sun, because Maya was able to see 'Pac as a rose growing in the concrete. And because Maya created the opportunity for 'Pac to come back to the

concrete, 'Pac came back to the concrete, year after year. And he reached student after student all over the globe. And as a result of Maya's intervention in 'Pac's life, in 2010 my homie, all the way across the world in Kathmandu , snapped this photo which is a photo of three young brothers in one of the largest Buddhist shrines in the world. And what you see in this photo is that the oldest brother is consoling the middle brother who's deeply saddened. And the youngest brother is watching, learning empathy. Now what you might not catch about this picture is that its an image of one of Tupac's albums. This album was released long after Maya intervened in his life.

(15) Now the problem with the educational system that we have in this country today is that it's based on a model of rugged individualism. But our program doesn't ascribe to that. Instead we tell people that we need you and you need each other. The two things that we regularly tell our young people is, one, we're gonna be in your lives forever. They don't always like that one. And two is, we love you. And as a result of those kind of conversations with young people, as a result of a pedagogy that builds on those ideas, compassion and love, so many of our young over the last 18 years have returned to the community as doctors, as lawyers, as teachers, as veterinarians. And what we know from our work in East Oakland is that when roses come back to the concrete, they create rose gardens. Thank you.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CwS60ykM8s>

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