

Listening to Ferguson Voices, Finding the Courage to Resist

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A team from the University of Dayton, consisting of undergraduate students, a faculty facilitator, and practitioner partners, conducted an innovative oral history project documenting the experiences of ordinary people who lived through the unrest following Michael Brown's death in 2014. The Moral Courage Project, as it was called, sought to investigate the spectrum of stories from Ferguson that failed to fit into the extreme and polarized narratives emerging from mainstream media coverage and were, therefore, overlooked. With the testimonies collected, the team produced a multimedia exhibit featuring portraits and audio materials. In the process of preparing, traveling, and working, we learned not only about the events surrounding Ferguson, but also profound lessons about building community and practicing courage. As the exhibit begins to travel and reach diverse audiences, the team bears responsibility for sharing these stories and positioning the content in a society where everyday resistance is a reality.

In 2016, a team of undergraduate students facilitated by faculty at the University of Dayton and joined by practitioner partners conducted an innovative oral history research project documenting the experiences of people

who witnessed and shaped the uprising following the shooting death of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014. The Moral Courage Project, as it was called, sought to investigate the spectrum of stories from Ferguson that failed to fit into the extreme and polarized narratives emerging from mainstream media coverage that were, therefore, overlooked. As a collaboration with the New York-based organization PROOF: Media for Social Justice, the team drew from PROOF's ten-year track record in the area of human rights storytelling. PROOF traditionally worked in post-conflict societies recovering from genocide and mass atrocities. Leora Kahn, PROOF's founder and executive director, sought stories in those contexts that problematize the conventional narrative revolving around victims and perpetrators. Dynamic environments, such as during human rights crises, contain a textured range of events that are often omitted from public understandings. By focusing on "upstanders," Kahn and PROOF pursue stories that can add untold dimensions to historical accounts, as well as inspire audiences of ordinary people to run towards the fire, rather than away from it.

In Ferguson, this formula was not as clear-cut and this would be PROOF's first domestic project. In addition to stories of obviously courageous contribution, the team enriched its definition to seek out individuals who voluntarily upended their own lives for the sake of a cause they believed in. Many sacrificed relationships, jobs, and other tangibles, and many others still attest to the equally important emotional costs. For the Moral Courage Project, Ferguson provided a setting still fresh in the minds of Americans but also sufficiently distant to demand a revisiting. With the escalating tensions around racism and police violence, Ferguson is ground zero in contemporary American political culture.

In the process of preparing, traveling, and working, we learned not only about the events surrounding Ferguson, but also profound lessons about building community and practicing courage. This essay sets out to tell the story of Ferguson through the voices of those people we met during our fieldwork and in the conclusion I will reflect on this process, particularly as a college professor working closely with students, across the scholar-practitioner divide, and outside of traditional academic boundaries. In 2017, as American society confronts uncertainty and

threat, the voices of Ferguson teach us about the demands of daily resistance and the transformative power of standing up.

THE “REAL” FERGUSON

The Ferguson we saw on the news in 2014 was a temporary Ferguson, engulfed by fury and chaos. We became fixated on the events occurring in this anonymous town neighboring an American city often affectionately/pejoratively affiliated as “flyover” territory. This place in that moment has come to mean so much, embedded with significance that far outpaces the reality of what Ferguson is day-to-day. Ferguson carries historical weight as a representation of racism, police violence, and political protest, distilled and captured in a discrete 100-day period. Loaded as these concepts are with emotion and provocation, Ferguson creates binary categories: for and against, black and white, police and protester, repression and resistance. The permanent Ferguson is much less exciting, much less dramatic. [Extremely mundane, in fact.](#)

Coffee shop. Micro-brewery. Library. Hardware store. Fire department. Farmer’s market. The scenes on South Florissant are familiar, suburban, quaint, and pleasant. West Florissant is a broader multi-lane avenue, flanked by strip malls and big name franchises. Fast food. Dollar Store. Beauty supply. Nothing extraordinary. Very much like any other local highway you’ve ever driven on your way to somewhere else.

However, this common place situated in North County, St. Louis infamously distinguishes itself. As [reported by the Department of Justice](#), “African Americans experience disparate impact in nearly every aspect of Ferguson’s law enforcement system. Despite making up 67 percent of the population, African Americans accounted for 85 percent of FPD’s traffic stops, 90 percent of FPD’s citations, and 93 percent of FPD’s arrest from 2012 to 2014.” That Ferguson’s population is 67 percent African American marks a 66 percent increase since 1970. “By 1980, Ferguson was 14 percent black; by 1990, 25 percent; by 2000, 52 percent; and by 2010, 67 percent” ([Rothstein 2014, 3](#)). A compelling explanation of demographic shifts during this period relies on rising black middle class families able to move to inner-ring suburbs like Ferguson, as well as the end of public

housing in St. Louis and the subsequent displacement and relocation of residents out of the city ([Rothstein 2014](#)). The grossly predatory targeting of African Americans documented in Ferguson is racist to be sure, but also has roots in simple financial need.

Surrounding St. Louis lie ninety-two individual municipalities each with its own police and fire, many sharing overlapping school districts. The unsustainable demands of independent small town governance creates a market for revenue policing in which a person may be ticketed for a motor vehicle infraction multiple times in a day on a route across North County. The aggregation of tickets and fines lead to wage garnishing and imprisonment, and the harassment and intimidation that accompanies this strategy is a shared experience within the African American community in St. Louis—a dirty little secret long confined to dinner table conversation in black households, put on full display in the days following [the Michael Brown shooting](#).

FOUR HOURS THAT MADE HISTORY

All the contextual and structural rationales for why the 2014 events evolved and exploded as they did fail to convey the most obvious and least cited reason. A young black man was shot by a white police officer on the street where his grandmother lived, on a Saturday afternoon in August. Michael Brown's body laid out in front of the Canfield Green apartment complex for four-and-a-half hours. For two of those hours, the body laid uncovered. When authorities finally brought a sheet, it wasn't large enough to hide Brown's frame. His parents were not allowed to approach the body. More police arrived, including SWAT. Dogs are brought as well, for crowd control. Witnesses reported seeing a police dog urinate on the blacktop where Brown's blood was drying, where flowers had been left. In a vulnerable moment of grief, magnified by the shared experience of harassment and humiliation, rather than being treated as mourners, the community was confronted as criminals.

The initial incident and its immediate aftermath struck some as reminiscent of earlier periods in black history. Brown's dead body being left out on display in front of the community—on a weekend, in a residential neighborhood, for all to see, as crowds gathered and grew—recalled a public lynching and reminded observers that no

one was safe. Lynchings across the American South and Midwest were tools of terror aimed to instill fear and [exert control over black populations](#).

The very presence of police in black neighborhoods bears a direct link back to slave patrols, groups of white men organized to catch runaway slaves. These patrols developed into local police forces, informing the view that modern day police serve little more than the purpose for which they were originally convened. Seeing Ferguson through history's lens helps bring into focus why the events erupted as they did. What happened in front of the Canfield Green apartments and thereafter was not an aberration or an error; it was, in many ways, the natural consequence of the tensions within a racist system.

As the tensions became too great to withstand the mounting pressure of a hot sticky summer day, furor boiled over. Responding to historical injustice and intergenerational trauma, and the indignity and incompetence of a mismanaged, militarized police response, a site of mourning was transformed into the source of protest. And protest took many forms. During the day, protest was collective and joyous. Marches and rallies filled the streets, walking from South to West Florissant and back. Drumbeats, bullhorn cries, and chanting provided the soundtrack. After dark, conditions changed. With a curfew in place, protesters nightly decided whether to obey and return home or stay in violation and confront the implications, which included rubber bullets, tear gas, pepper spray, arrest, assault, and a generalized threat of mortal danger posed by martial law enforced by lines of riot officers and armed snipers positioned atop mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs).

In this environment, facing these pressures and risks, Ferguson residents and citizens of St. Louis took a stand: upright and firmly rooted. In addition to the physical and mental impact of exhaustion, marching and running, not eating, sleeplessness, and what many have called post-traumatic stress, courage exacted other tangible costs. Homes foreclosed upon. Jobs lost. Relationships frayed. Yet, Ferguson protesters persisted. At their own expense and at grave disruption to the functioning of their normal lives, they continued to show up. Some were faces in the crowd, others played more instrumental roles. Each

did what they could with what they had. Through their sustained actions and through the stories of their experiences, Ferguson voices teach us about courage: what it looks like, what it feels like, what it demands, and why it's essential and rare in moments of crisis.



Valeri Felix; Photo by Mark Katzman

A Middle-School Student

[Valeri Felix](#) was 12-years-old when Michael Brown was shot. She turned out to protest because she recognized that if he could be killed in such a reckless manner, then so could her brother or cousins. In order to prevent that from happening, Valeri felt it was her duty to be out in the streets. Surveying the priorities of most 7th graders, protesting police violence doesn't register high up on the list. For one thing, protesting can be dangerous. But perhaps more identifiable for a middle-schooler, protesting can be unpopular. Most people across age groups steer clear, but the social pressures of peer approval are acute for younger people. Being challenged by classmates in this way would have deterred many young people. At such an early age, conformity exerts a force, making it hard to assert individuality, to know yourself and be confident in your decisions. Valeri is an individual, tuned into a clear sense of right and wrong, for which she paid a social price. Fortunately, Valeri leaned on a trusted teacher for advice and support.



Tony Rice; Photo by Mark Katzman

A Janitor

[Tony Rice](#) resides in Ferguson. Prior to the uprising, he worked with his hands, doing odd jobs and construction. Ten years earlier, Tony bought his first home but lost it when he started protesting and stopped paying bills. When he first arrived on the scene one night, Tony saw the streets a mess, so he picked up a broom and began to sweep. In this capacity, Tony returned and became a visible fixture particularly in the area in front of the Ferguson police station, which was in walking distance from his home. As weeks stretched on, Tony became a resource for the movement and a point person. For people traveling from out of town, Tony and his Twitter feed grew into a go-to for reliable information on events and developments. Since the end of the uprising, Tony has remained one of the few faithful Ferguson protesters, staying engaged on local issues related to the Consent Decree and electoral and judicial politics. While the spotlight is no longer trained on Ferguson, residents like Tony work to keep up the pressure, to seek reform, and to hold public officials accountable.



Bradley Rayford; Photo by Mark Kaztman

A Witness

Having taken up the trade of photography, [Bradley Rayford](#) was used to controlled, casual settings, like weddings and engagement sessions. From day one, Bradley was on the ground in Ferguson, playing a self-appointed role as photojournalist. But he was not employed by a newspaper or media outlet, which means he was not compensated. Nor was he protected. And, as many photographers before him have reported, living an event through the lens of a camera places distance between yourself and those around you—distance that allows you to remain apart, if only in that moment. But the emotional gravity of the situation surfaces later, after the work is done and the streets are clear. Until then, the work of the photographer is ongoing and constant. Bradley is now beginning to reflect and take stock, accounting for how he has grown and changed since Ferguson, all that has gone well for him as well as the heaviness he still carries. Several mainstream media outlets featured Bradley's imagery, which helped earn him a fellowship at MSNBC. But his own costly process of healing is still underway.



Tory Russell; Photo by Mark Katzman

An Organizer

[Tory Russell](#) described his pre-Ferguson occupation as a “professional bum.” He tried some college, later working in child care and factories. On August 9, Tory showed up to the police station demanding answers. No political background, but conscious and read. But to those around him, he looked like a leader. Maybe it was his stature or the way he spoke, but others listened. From August through what was known as “Ferguson October,” he and his comrades were responsible for many major actions across the region, many of which were replicated across the country. Tory orchestrated the shutdown of highways and the interruption of professional sporting events hosted by both the St. Louis Rams and Cardinals. The potential for collective action to advance the cause of racial justice, and even more basic claims to dignity and empowerment, sparked Tory to keep on. More profoundly, though, Tory experienced a high that he can’t shake. Freedom, similar to the tear gas he faced on the streets, stayed with him. It’s a feeling he never forgot and cannot escape. It transformed him and, in spite of the cost, he went back for more.

PRACTICING COURAGE

*Courage is acting, especially when it's unpopular.
Courage is a feature of a healthy democracy.
Courage is spontaneous, ill-equipped, and exposed.
Courage is compulsively pursuing an elusive utopia.*

Most of us will never face down MRAPs on a suburban street, so how do we apply these lessons in our lives? On a personal level, the multitude of stories documented from Ferguson share a common theme: transformation. It is one thing to grow, develop, and evolve, but “transformation” suggests a leap—a leap forward and a leap of faith. Transformation is not necessarily planned or voluntary, but it depends on an openness to being changed by forces around you, a willingness to put yourself in a vulnerable position. Transformation presents new opportunities and obstacles, the effects of which may take time to set in. When they do, there’s no going back to who you were before. It becomes your responsibility to deal with it, to make your way in a shifted, shattered reality.

Many of those transformed by Ferguson have translated “transformation” into an agenda. Refusing to leave Ferguson behind, these individuals have doubled-down on their efforts to bring about lasting change across a range of venues, with an array of tools and talents. Just like in 2014, they make contributions based on the resources they have available. Ferguson was a catalyst for personal, social, and political transformation that continues to reverberate.

Courage is being open to transformation.

[Courage can also become a practice, a habit, a routine, an intentional behavior.](#) The militarism and racism that the state put on display in Ferguson only laid bare the structures that are at work every day in far more subterranean ways. Toxic and dangerous, the manifestations of these forces in public present opportunities for courage to be put into practice. Courageous action cannot only be reserved for crisis or imminent danger. Systems of hierarchy and chauvinism that express themselves in multiple forms of control and abuse must be uprooted.

But that's not easy. Many of us—particularly white, male, cisgendered—benefit from these systems and challenging them is not only difficult, but it's also awkward. It leads to uncomfortable moments, moments we generally try to avoid. And that's the point, really. Courage is placing oneself into discomfort for the benefit of others and for the greater good. Nobody wants to be attacked with tear gas, but you are compelled to do it when the reason is right and the cause is just. Nobody wants to interrupt a misogynistic punch line, but you are compelled to do it if you care about respect and equality. These are Ferguson's lessons and as the cultural climate in the United States continues to nurture discrimination and extremism, each of us will be placed into a circumstance when our courage will be tested.

CONCLUSION

In addition to inspiring audiences to reflect on their own capacity to run towards the fire, rather than away, I hope that the Moral Courage Project can also motivate teachers and professors. I'll admit that I didn't fully know what I was getting into at first, but my students trusted me, even before they should have. When we traveled to an unfamiliar and charged location with plans on paper, but no clear sense of how things would play out, I trusted my team to work together, dig in, and get to work. Being with ten students for fifteen intense days was certainly unlike any teaching experience I've ever had and it was more than teaching to be sure: mentorship, collaboration, friendship, and learning, among other things. From their feedback, I know my students had challenging but transformative and rewarding experiences—nothing like I could have offered in the classroom. I won't regularly be able to do anything as extensive as this with a class of students, but I do hope to draw from this time and replicate it in small doses where I can. As rewarding as my students' experience may have been, I know intimately how profound of a memory it has made for me.

Also, throughout a process that has been so deeply collaborative, I've worked with many professionals in different fields: non-profits, journalism, web design and development, music, and audio engineering. We all approached the project with unique expectations and outlooks and that complicates things sometimes. For instance,

relative to academics who rarely complete anything in less than eighteen months, practitioners are accustomed to accelerated timelines and demonstrable outcomes. These are not traditionally the strongest traits of academics.

And the work continues. Since collecting the interviews, we've produced a multimedia exhibit that has begun to travel to college campuses and public libraries, and have recently launched a [storytelling website](#) and [limited series podcast](#). My students contributed as writers, transcribers, editors, and narrators across these products, so our working relationship continues in so many fruitful and rich directions. It has allowed me to work in different media, and forced me to learn new tools, including audio recording and production. These are not areas I was trained in, nor were they facets of my comprehensive exams, but in an age when communication is so dynamic, it would seem silly to confine myself to the stale two-dimensional pages of a traditional academic journal. This has been exciting and challenging and so worthwhile.

Joel R. Pruce is assistant professor of human rights studies at the University of Dayton. His research focuses on transnational human rights advocacy and he is the editor of a collection, *The Social Practice of Human Rights* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016). Joel is team lead on the Moral Courage Project, an initiative of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center that produced “Ferguson Voices: Disrupting the Frame”—[a website](#), a [podcast](#), and [an exhibit](#).