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Winning Hearts, Not Arguments: An Interview with Father Greg Boyle

Christopher Sean Harris and Jorge Ribeiro

Thirty-two years ago, Father Gregory Boyle of Los Angeles founded Homeboy Industries, the world's largest gang-intervention, rehabilitation, and re-entry program with goals to reduce recidivism, reduce substance abuse, improve social connectedness, improve housing safety and stability, and reunify families.¹ As the director, Boyle currently helps Homeboy Industries serve some 8,000 people each year by offering tattoo removal, workforce training, legal assistance, education, mental health, and re-entry services to often marginalized people. During the Covid-19 Pandemic, Boyle helped Homeboy Industries shift its outreach programs to address food insecurities by providing some 30,000 Homegirl Cafe meals a week to needy Angelenos.

The educational components of Homeboy Industries offered some 31,000 class sessions in 2019 and draw upon emancipatory education to help homies successfully navigate the disproportionate power structures within society. While we often overlook the value of workforce training and General Education Diplomas, they do have inherent value. In this interview on February 5th, 2021, Boyle examines the art of storytelling and how that storytelling can be a mode of healing and self-actualization for homies progressing through their programs. Ultimately, Homeboy Industries' educational offerings provide cultural capital to underserved and often ignored students, the kind that faculty sometimes claim shouldn't be in school.

On the Power of Storytelling

Storytelling drives Boyle's methodology, as his books and lectures often focus on the people he has served through Homeboy Industries. When asked about the power of storytelling, he claims, "I don't think people pay attention unless I'm telling a story," but laments that, thanks to the Covid-19 Pandemic, he has not been able to board a plane or speak to a live audience for ten months at the time of the interview. Interestingly enough, Boyle claims that "stories help heal" and the pandemic has left many hurting.

In discussing his storytelling methodology, Boyle dispenses advice for storytellers. He prefers to begin with a poem before discussing his vocation and the mission of Homeboy Industries. As he talks, he checks people's eyes. If they begin to glaze over or wander, then he tells a story or asks a homie to tell a story, which often regains the audience's attention. The art of discourse lies in the fact that "Everybody loves a story," Boyle claims, adding, "None of it is about trying to win the argument. It is about hearts." Sharing stories helps people form and strengthen communities because effective storytelling prompts rhetors to move beyond their own minds and connect with others.

1. Homeboy Industries serves people of all races, creeds, nationalities, sexes, and genders. Boyle lovingly refers to his clients as "Homeboys" and "Homegirls." For the purpose of inclusivity and to honor their gang-related backgrounds, in this interview, we will refer to those clients as "Homies."

On Giving Voices to those He Serves

Boyle typically takes one or two homies with him when he speaks. Additionally, he asks them to tell their own stories. Opening the discourse by inviting the subject of his vocation to participate is akin to Alex Haley's methodology in *Roots*, Boyle claims. While the audience might consider the homies the story, the homies don't see it that way. As initiates to the study of language, they don't always care about narrative structure, and they don't always immediately realize how powerful their life experiences are when shared with others. For example, at one event, a Brobdingnagian homeboy and a Lilliputian homeboy took the stage to share their stories. The larger of the two had trouble speaking as his words were evading him. As he spoke, the smaller of the two worked in earnest to fill in the gaps, offering words and phrases. This perhaps comedic episode is enlightening, according to Boyle, as these two former gangsters were helping each other navigate the world of words, not the streets. They are the accomplishment, claims Boyle.

On Writing as Healing

To show them that they are the accomplishment and that their lives are full of events worth telling about, Boyle works to help homies notice that their stories—*they*—have value for others. One example of how the homies are worthy humans came in the form of a request for a blessing, a common request. Boyle, as is his custom, was brief. "And now it's my turn," said the homie, an unheard of step. The homeboy's prayer was lengthy and florid, full of purple prose. Nonetheless, even after telling their stories or sharing their prayers, the homies don't see their weight or their impact on the audience. This homeboy started his blessing, saying "God, you fill in the gaps," which Boyle found profound even though the homeboy wasn't aware of his brilliance. The interaction was in fact "profound, poetic, and life-affirming" because the homeboy, an inmate formerly deemed not worthy of integration into society, subconsciously proved his human value to another human.

Stories and hints of stories often surface in interactions with the homeboys. "I try to notice them. I try to listen," Boyle claims. One of those stories surfaced in the form of a homeboy who expressed regret for his life, asking Boyle why he serves and loves them. "Every day, I take myself to court and I find myself guilty," exclaimed the homeboy. "If you really knew me, it would dissuade you from loving me," he claimed. The expression of that homeboy's trauma is "profound to the first order," exclaimed Boyle. They are strangers to themselves and don't realize that their stories are valuable, that they are valuable.

"Every human is unshakably good," according to Boyle, so the mission of Homeboy Industries is not one of change but one of healing. "I told him, 'You can not be one bit better.' Am I full of it when I say that? No. That's exactly the truth, but the trick is he needs to see that, he needs to know that, he needs to discover and recognize that, and then he's good to go."

To see homies ask how they can be better humans is heartbreaking to Boyle, as he strives to help them "see, know, and discover" that they are "unshakably good." The dominant mantra is "good, better, best. Never let it rest."

Healing is more complex than recognizing stories and healing narratives, however. Boyle frames it in wholeness. The homies are working on becoming whole, according to Boyle. Someone who hates is not healthy, and thus a racist is not whole, explains Boyle. Becoming whole entails explanations, not descriptions according to Boyle. Arguing is not going to heal people, but inclusion and nonviolence will. It's important to "nurture people into nurturing" by treating all people as if they are unshakably good.

On the Transformative Nature of Education

Homeboy Industries offers emancipatory education that involves guidance in self-actualization and the examination of societal power structures, all with the aim of freeing homie students from societal bottlenecks and biases. For those pursuing education, Boyle and the staff at Homeboy Industries encourage them to never stop: "We'll keep tutoring because homeboys can always take the next step." After a GED or high school, the next step is college, and then the next step is a Master's degree, Boyle says. Homeboy Industries will make those next steps more accessible by offering housing and tutoring as well as help managing the difficulties of remote learning and the videoconferencing that comes with it.

On the Importance of Mindfulness

Managing the transition from gang life to the job force involves a great deal of stress, so mindfulness is present in nearly every element of Homeboy Industries, according to Boyle, who integrates direct and purposeful mindfulness training in addition to sneaking it into everyday interactions. "Mindfulness ought to be part of the air that everyone breathes," says Boyle. In the past, it was integrated into a brief daily morning meeting that included rituals such as singing happy birthday, daily prayer, and daily thought, but for now it's integrated into a once weekly morning videoconference. Mindfulness and meditation, however, aren't new to the homies. They coped with life behind bars and therefore had plenty of time to sit and think. Some of them have already started on the healing path.

The first 15 years or so of Homeboy Industries' existence, the organization's motto was "nothing stops a bullet like a job," Boyle notes, but that has given way to the deeper idea of healing. "Kids join gangs because of a lethal absence of hope," he says, "and because they're traumatized and have mental health issues." So in addition to supplying jobs and an education, the goal is to infuse hope. And the ultimate goal is to "enter exquisite mutuality where there's no daylight that separates us."

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