DERAY MCKESSON: We start walking and nobody knows where I am leading them. Nobody knows that we are about to go to Barry’s house the night before graduation.

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: As a person of color growing up in the UK, I only had a relatively superficial understanding of what that experience is like in the USA, but that really changed for me as the Black Lives Matter movement came into my consciousness. DeRay Mckesson is a leading voice in that movement and his work in the aftermath of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson back in 2014 influenced me – and countless other people – in the areas of social justice and what it takes to organize activism.

DeRay is now also the host of the award-winning weekly podcast “Pod Save The People.” And I’m excited for you to experience the story he’s about to share with you. A story about the care it takes to bring people together and what can be achieved when we do.

In this series, we blend immersive, first-person stories with mindfulness prompts to help you recharge at any time of the day. I’m Rohan, and I’ll be your guide for Meditative Story.

The body relaxed. The body breathing. Your senses open. Your mind open. Meeting the world.

MCKESSON: I’ve always believed in magic. It’s hard for me to imagine that the world is just... what it is. I love witnessing magic because I love the element of surprise, of randomness, of the unexpected. But at a pretty young age I started to see that there is actually a design to magic, a way that magic can be created that is purposeful. And I started to realize that I can create magic too.

I become involved in student government very young, during middle school, sixth grade. And I loved it, I loved everything about it: the community, the dances, the event planning, the programming.

Every school I attend I put my name on the ballot for student government, from sixth to twelfth grade. And every time, I win. Student government is where I learn my sense of possibility. I come to understand that young people can dream, and imagine, and build in ways that other people have forgotten. And sometimes it’s because we didn’t know any better.
I take this lesson with me to Bowdoin College in Maine, where as class president it was my task to build a sense of community and purpose amongst the class. You see, Bowdoin is a small liberal arts school. There are 450 people in my class from around the world who all land on a campus with no established community amongst ourselves. But the good thing is that people are ready to belong to something.

The election for class president happens in the first few months of school. It’s a whirlwind because we just met each other. We barely know each other’s names and we don’t know each other’s stories. I need to get creative quickly. I sidewalk chalk my name outside of all of the major buildings the night before voting – and it works. In front of the union and the dining hall and the dorms. I also spend every night going to every dorm, meeting every single person in the class individually, and asking for their vote.

I found myself surrounded by so many people for whom magic had died. And I heard from students so much that followed a particular script around what success and achievement looked like to even get to a place like Bowdoin. And the reality is a lot of people are tired. They haven’t quite learned how to make magic on their own, to be the source of it. I heard this attitude all the time, that the world sort of is what it is. And I am like "No, college is this place with a lot of resources, big imaginations. That this place has money, access and support – all things I’d never had in abundance before."

We have this week every year where we do something cool every single day, that’s a surprise, for the students. And it was important to me because I wanted something that was just ours, that built a sense of class solidarity and unity.

So for the first year, I came up with the idea that we should do something for Valentine’s day. And I told the student government team that we were gonna make these big paper hearts with each person’s name calligraphed on them and then we were going to post them on campus in a big way. I was trying to get people to know that they were loved, that care went into whatever we did for them, and that they were part of something much bigger than just themselves.

Some people thought it was dumb, that it was a cutesy idea. And they’re not sold on the prospect of having to cut out 450 paper hearts. But we are all still learning each other still at this time, so I’m having to convince them a little bit, they’re pushing on me about how to make this work. We were in this sort of back and forth about it.

So I find 500 pieces of cardstock in pink and red. And the red is for the guys, the pink is for the girls. And over the course of a week we cut out 450 hearts. So when you walk into my dorm room, it is cardstock, and tape, and scissors everywhere. It looked like a Hallmark store just exploded in the room.
There was a girl in my class who actually did calligraphy. So she would come over every night and she would handwrite every single person's name in our class on their heart.

**GUNATILLAKE:** Can you see her working? Slowly making her way through the rhythm and curve of each name, and each time bringing the same level of concentration and generosity of heart. If seeing her makes you smile, then smile.

**MCKESSON:** By Valentine's Day, all 450 hearts are done. I call the head of security and I'm like, “Hey. Can you unlock the student union for us at like 5:00 AM so we can put this cool surprise up? And don't tell anybody.” And he's like, “I got you.”

The morning of Valentine's Day, we're on ladders and tables and we are putting the paper hearts up and we have all different types of tape, because we didn't know how to make sure that the hearts would stay up. We hang them all up and step back and look at it. And it truly is beautiful.

But it isn't just the wall of hearts that's amazing. We decorate the student union with toys and 500 red and pink cupcakes we had made for our class. We help each person find their name and take their heart. It's so simple and so wonderful. Seeing every student comforted by seeing their own name on a wall and being given a heart.

Then the cupcakes come out. The toys come out next. We make it a day. And you can see the shift in people. Not only do we love you, but as a class we love each other. But what we don't anticipate is what people do with their paper hearts. I don't even know who starts it, but somebody puts their heart on their dorm door. And then somebody else does it. And so it goes until every single door in all of the first year dorm buildings has a heart and a name in beautiful calligraphy adorned on it. And this ends up being the only way that we know where somebody's room is on campus. It was because of the hearts.

There's really no way to even start building community unless people know each other, unless they can see each other. And those simple hearts are unforgettable symbols that we're a community, and we're all in this thing together. We aren't alone. And it might seem like a little thing, but it reminds every person in the class who may be stressed or homesick or alienated that we are family, too. This experience invites each person to put their own meaning into it. And that collective spirit is how community is formed.

When I go to sleep that night I think about it. That there's a way to do cheesy and hokey, and still be fun and cute and surprising. And when you're really down with that, coordinating all kinds of crazy ideas becomes possible because it all adds up to one thing: creating a space where everyone is a part of something bigger than any single person can be alone.
My senior year brings the biggest challenge. I decide that for graduation we’re going to print physical copies of the senior class photo to give to every single person individually. Now this is a logistical nightmare because this photo is taken only a few days before graduation.

At night, after the photo is taken, I go to the photographer’s studio in a house in Maine. And I’m pleading, “Can you churn out 500 copies of this photo in 24 hours?” And he’s like, “Yes.”

So the next morning I send an email to the whole class and I tell everybody to show up in front of the student union at 10 pm for a big surprise.

Barry Mills was the president at Bowdoin. He’s a tough guy but really kind and loved by all the students. He was fighting cancer, he had just finished chemo at the time, and we were close. I realize that we can do something really special to thank him.

So, the whole class shows up in front of the student union. We have the college dining team helping us pass out glasses of apple cider. And we start walking, and nobody knows where I am leading them. Nobody knows that we are about to go to Barry’s house the night before graduation.

Someone starts singing the alma mater, and then everybody’s singing the alma mater. And now there are hundreds of us, on the lawn of the president’s house, singing. And out comes Barry. Stunned. And I look at him and say, “We just wanted to say, thank you.”

I tell Barry we’re not done, there’s one more surprise. But this surprise was not only for Barry, it was for everybody in our class. We’d actually hidden these tables behind the bushes. And on all the tables, there are the class photos, wrapped with one of these graduation rubber duckies that people can take as a keepsake. After everybody says thank you to Barry, we as a team say “thank you” and “I love you” to every member of the class. They go get their picture, they go pick up their duck, and they go get ready for graduation tomorrow.

GUNATILLAKE: Why not join them? Thank Barry and then walk, chin high and heart open, to get your duck and your photo. How does it feel?

MCKESSON: Graduation is something we share with everybody, but this night, this pilgrimage to Barry’s house, this moment we saw a picture of our class, our peers, our family, this was just ours. This is the class of 2007.
The ultimate power we have is the power of community, where people feel like they are being a part of something bigger than themselves. It takes work, but when it's done well, it's magic. People deserve a little magic, you know?

I don't do as much programming as I used to do, because criminal justice and policing is more policy and laws and structure than programming. And as unrelated as those experiences at school might seem to my work now, those experiences are what borned my sense of possibility. That we can change the whole system. That we can do big things. That we can dream and push and imagine. That we can transform the world.

People say, "I'm only human," as if it’s a bad thing, something that makes you small. But being human is something that makes you big, especially when you're part of a community or movement. Being human is the ability to create magic. And sometimes it can be hard to see when so much of our world seems routine. So much seems scripted. All life is a little programming.

But here’s the thing – it’s possible to program for good, for the unexpected, for the surprise. We can design a world that allows people to build special connections and relationships, to expand their belief in what’s possible, to find personal meaning in the company of others.

Often, as organizers, people will say the system is broken. And other people reply, It’s not broken. It’s working exactly like it was designed to. And my takeaway from that though is that it was designed, that people made it up. And because people made it up, we can make something better.

Every day I fight for a world that I know is possible, even if I've never seen it before. This is what magic is – that hope in the possibility of a thing you can't quite see but you know is possible.

GUNATILLAKE: Like DeRay, I too believe in magic. I believe in magic for a few different reasons, but mainly because not believing can make life a little boring.

I also believe in the power of community, so inspired by DeRay's story and his work, here is meditation founded on both of those themes.

In recent decades the idea of the solo meditator has become more and more popular. Do an image search for the word “meditation” and the vast majority of what you get back show a single person sitting alone. But for me, meditation is not a one-player game. Since the very early days, it has always been a practice intimately linked with community, a thing done together with others. So let's do it together.
Whatever you’re doing right now, wherever you are, just be here. Do what you need to do to feel connected with what is happening right now.

You might want to feel the contact of your feet, the contact of your body on the ground. You might want to become sensitive to the temperature of the air around you as it touches your skin.

You might want to notice the tone of your inner world, your mood, your emotion, and without judgement give it a name: Calm. Distracted. Thoughtful. Whatever. Or you could just breathe and know that you are breathing.

Doing what you need to do to settle into this moment. Meeting it with aliveness, alertness, even vulnerability if that makes sense to you. And as you do that, as you meet this moment, it might feel like you’re doing it alone. But you’re not. I’m here. Yes, disconnected from you in time and space. But I’m here. I’m connected. Connected to this moment and connected to you.

Reconnecting to this moment, to your experience however comes most naturally to you, with the knowledge, the confidence that I’m doing the same. I’m here. You’re here. Here together.

Our minds will become distracted, that’s sort of what they do. When you notice that, come back, back to whatever anchor you’re using for your attention. Breath, body, mindstate, whatever.

You’re here. I’m here. We’re here.

Opening out your imagination to include all the listeners to this episode, a community united by this moment shared together but spread out in time and space. If that’s not magic, then I don’t know what is

I’m here.

You’re here.

We’re here.

Breathing together

Connected together.

Close. Far.

Known. Unknown.

Coming back, back here.
And for these last few moments, seeing if you can get a sense of all of us being present together, a felt sense. Imagining what this network of good intention looks like. Seeded by DeRay’s story.

We’re here.

May we be well.

May we be happy.

May we be “only human.”

And may that humanity always be seen.

Thank you.