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Michael Jacoby Brown
training & coaching

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Organizer's Edge ▶

From Michael Jacoby Brown

Some good books

Since I wrote a book about organizing, I have been encouraging other organizers to write about our own work and experience. , our own campaigns, rather, than have academics explain what we do. Thankfully, we are seeing more books by organizers, although nearly not enough. We also need to read widely, and I am grateful to Scott Reed and the PICO network for encouraging their organizers to read and take the time to reflect and share with each other what we are reading.



This month I share some books I have recently read. They include:

Just Mercy, A Story of Justice and Redemption, by Bryan Stevenson.

The Difference, How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools and Societies. By Scott E. Page.

Deep South, by Paul Theroux

"Multiplication is for White People" Raising Expectations for Other People's Children, by Lisa Delpit.

My short reviews follow:

Just Mercy, A Story of Justice and Redemption, by Bryan Stevenson.

This is the story of the work of Bryan Stevenson, a Black, Harvard-educated lawyer who founded the Equal Justice Initiative in Alabama, working to stop the executions of innocent people... This is one of

toughest and saddest books I have ever read. It follows, often in gruesome detail, the stories of mostly Black men and boys, people with mental illness and others who have been the victims of brutal racism, unjust incarceration and executions. Intensely personal and following the story of one unjustly accused man - among others -- this book is no easy read. It shows what our criminal justice system is doing to thousands of people and the inspiring legal work that one organization in the toughest environment is doing to change that.

The Difference , How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools and Societies. By Scott E. Page. Page is a scientist who uses higher math (at least for me) to explain how differences in perspective, "heuristics" (rules we apply when trying to solve problems), training, background and experience provide better solutions to complex problems. Anyone seeking effective strategies and tactics to win campaigns and solve problems can benefit from understanding the importance of using a team of people who have such diversity - in many ways -- not only racial, gender or ethnic diversity -- although that can be important too. Page does not come to this work from a moral or political perspective but from the perspective of a scientist who has proven thru statistical and data-driven research that the collective wisdom of a diverse crowd will almost always beat a group of like-minded smart people. Many of his examples and proofs in this lengthy book were beyond me. But some of the simpler examples helped me understand (and even communicate to others) his points. For example, in the quiz show, "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" -- Page shows, thru math, how going to the audience for a "life-line" is the best choice to get an accurate answer. The math behind his conclusions is complex but the direction is clear: if you have a difficult problem to solve (climate change, inequality, racism, etc) you need to bring together a diverse team of people to achieve the most effective solution.

Deep South , by Paul Theroux. Theroux has written many books, including many travel books. This is the first I have read. Theroux takes us on a journey to the back-roads and small towns of the American South and has us meet everyday people at little restaurants, gun shows, community development organizations, farms, shot-gun shacks, churches and shines a light on the intractable racism and divisions that exist - amid the still vivid memories and results of Civil War, the Civil Rights movement, and the racial and class divides that shape the lives of millions of people. His trips are not a once thru. He returns over several seasons, traveling the back roads by car, following up with people who tell him to come back later. This is social commentary, history and sociology - no simple travelogue. Theroux, like me, is from the North, and records the detailed dialogue of the people he meets, their lives and losses, their dreams and defeats. We see the results of the industries that fled the region, leaving people in poverty. He lets us hear, in the words of the people he meets, the every-day racism and discrimination in farming, housing, education and the lack of opportunity that still permeates the region. *Deep South* helps us understand not only a region of our country, but the results and complexities of America's past and present.

"Multiplication is for White People" Raising Expectations for Other People's Children, by Lisa Delpit. This book should be read by anyone

teaching school and anyone who cares about the education of low-income children of color, and,, really all children. It is a beautifully and carefully written combination of data on human development, educational methods and theory, personal narrative and powerful advocacy for effective public education. I am indebted to my friend and colleague, Dr. Bernard Reese, for recommending this book.

Delpit focuses on charter schools and recognizes that "charter schools are not meant to contribute to regular public schools but to put them out of business." She criticizes schools which have "little tolerance for difference, for creativity or for challenge."

She points out that many urban schools have turned to inexperienced "white teachers (who) don't have the training or the experience to navigate such unfamiliar territory successfully; nor are they taught to learn with humility from parents or from veteran African-American and other teachers who know the children and the communities in which they teach."

Delpit also criticizes the over-testing and limitations placed on students. "We can educate all children if we truly want to. To do so we must first stop attempting to quantify their capacity."

In much of her book she returns to the theme of the importance of the teacher in a student's life and how critical good teaching is. She knows her business and her book includes specific detailed, practical teaching methods and also some wonderful instructive stories about her own struggles and her journey to find the right education for her daughter, Maya. Definitely required reading for all teachers, and anyone who cares about the future of our country.

Feedback Welcome

We want to hear from you, your reactions, ideas, what is at the edge YOUR "envelope." Just go to...

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Michael Jacoby Brown Story

Who else you will hear from.....

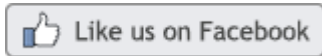
We are just starting, but so far you can expect to hear what the following people are thinking:

Jessica Tang: Boston Teachers Union, AFT
 George Luse of the Mass Teachers Assn,
 Scott Reed with the PICO Network, ,
 Cathy Howell, in Oregon and El Salvador, formerly with the AFL-CIO,
 Caesar McDowell of the Interaction Institute for Social Justice,
 Diana Bell of Community and Labor United,
 David Hernandez of the California Education Assn,
 Linda Honold, of Wisconsin Voices
 Attica Scott, now an elected official in Louisville, KY,formerly with Jobs with
 Justice,
 Quinn Rallings in Alabama with the PICO Network,
 Bob Van Meter with the Local Initiative Support Corporation in Boston,
 Walter Davis, in Tennessee, of the National Organizers Alliance,
 Deb Askenase, of Community Organizing 2.0,
 Deb Fastino, of the Coalition for Social Justice in New Bedford, MA,
 Rebecca Gutman, with SEIU-1199,
 Tim Dean, of SEIU-1199,
 Claudia Horwitz, of Stone Circles in North Carolina,
 Mary Ochs, long time organizer in Los Angeles
 and others, hopefully, including YOU

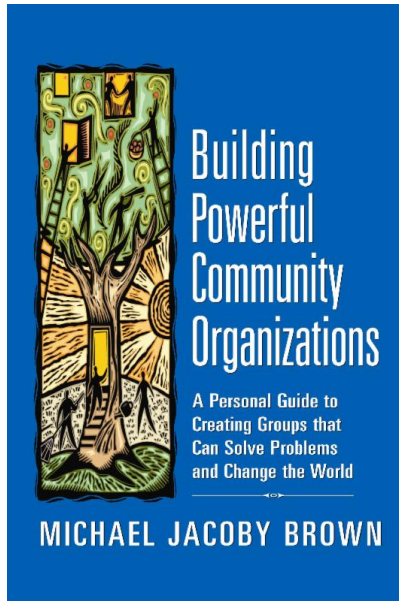
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