BUSINESS

What is for Me, is for Me

Rodney Bullard, Vice President of Corporate Social Responsibility, Chick-fil-A

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: You went to the Academy and are now on the corporate side. Would you mind walking us through that journey – where you started to how you got to where you are today?

Bullard: Absolutely. I grew up in Decatur, Georgia. I grew up with my father, who was a Baptist minister, and my mother, who was an educator. Both of those jobs, or roles, were really instrumental in my formation. My father had previously played for the Denver Broncos and he had gone to Morehouse College in Atlanta. My father and my mother met in the Atlanta University Center, the AUC. My mother went to Clark, and my father went to Morehouse, and they settled here in Atlanta. My father was involved in politics and the church. It wasn't that that the two combined or had anything to do with one another, they didn't, but those were the two things that he was involved in. So, I grew up around a host of leaders that were either in church or were in politics. This whole sense of leadership was around me because I saw people who actually were influential in the community and it was important because it was aspirational for me. But even more so, I saw how my father treated people. My father would have the opportunity to be around people who were influential in the community, but also particularly because of his role as a pastor, he was around people who were downtrodden. My father had a strong affection for the downtrodden. He would bring them in, help them out, and that was something that allowed me to form this sense that I was to respect the person. It didn't matter if you had a lot of money and it didn't matter if you did. It didn't matter if you were powerful or not. A title didn't mean a whole lot and still doesn't mean a lot to me. It really is about how you are as a person.

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There was this sense that we have to take care of people. My mother is an educator, and really focused a lot on education and making sure that I got a good education. She told me the power of an education and really told me that education was the way out of poverty. We weren't necessarily poor, but we weren't rich either. She told me that education was also the way to achieve. So, I had a focus on education early on and that was really powerful for me.

Later on, I wanted to play football because my father had played football and he told me the stories, but I was not a good football player. In eighth grade, I went out for the football team for the first time and I remember getting on the field. It was kind of a blur. There were all these people moving, all this equipment, and I had no idea what was going on. I didn't understand the plays, I had no idea why people were running into one another while they were trying to get to the goal line. I wondered, "Why do you keep hitting each other?" I think I only got in the game once in eighth grade. They put me in the game and at some point, I'm going after the quarterback and I thought, "I have a free shot at the quarterback." I'm about to tackle him and he puts his arm out and he stops me and he says "Take a look at the scoreboard. The game is over." So, they had put me in the game during the last seconds of the game and that's why I had a free shot for the quarterback because the game was basically over. That was something that was hurtful but also was motivational for me, and it stuck with me. Obviously, as I still remember it to this day.

The next year, I said I was going to be good at football. I really focused on football, and in ninth grade, I was starting on varsity. I went on to be pretty good at football and our team was decent. That was really a lesson for me in character early on that when we fall down that it can really be a motivational piece for us, and for me in particular. I often think about the failures as much as I do about the successes. I don't know if that's healthy or not, but that piece is important. It's also empathetic. Going back to my father, because I knew I had my own failures in life, whether they be big or small, I'm empathetic when other people have theirs. I think that is a key leadership quality that we don't focus on enough—empathy and grace and helping people. I think that's a big part of why we should want to be leaders of people. Not just leaders of organizations, but leaders of people. When it came time to go to college, I had an opportunity to go to a number of colleges. I could have gone to Morehouse College where my father went, and I did not really think about the academies. They just weren't on my radar screen until someone came from West Point to recruit me for football. I thought, "I'm not sure about that." I had graduated high school in 1992, right after the end of Desert Storm, and we had seen all of what was on TV. There was a sense of pride about that, obviously, but I wasn't sure if it was for me because my father hadn't served, my mother hadn't served, and I hadn't been around anyone who had served in the military. So, I didn't quite understand what it was about, but I did really get this sense of history and majesty from West Point. Then, the Naval Academy recruited me, and then Coach Fisher DeBerry from the Air Force Academy came in last and recruited me, as well. I also had other colleges that recruited besides the academies. I visited West Point, and then I visited the Naval Academy. The Naval Academy had a great recruiter who really connected with me and helped me learn about the academies, and he talked to me more about leadership and that the reason and the purpose for the academies was to create leaders. So, going back to the sense of leaders being around me and the aspiration of being a leader, that really resonated with me.

I chose the Air Force Academy in part because they had a good football team. They also had a pre-law program, and it was the only school that had a pre-law program. The pre-law program was really important to me because I knew I wanted to be a lawyer. All the schools had talked about being a Judge Advocate General (JAG) and the potential of being a JAG and practicing law in the military. That was really fascinating to me. Basic training was something that I was nervous about. I was in Atlanta, Georgia, and just going across the country to Colorado was a completely unique experience. I got to basic training, and at some point, a reporter had interviewed my mother and asked her how she felt about her child now belonging to the Air Force. My mother said, "He will never belong to the Air Force. He will always be my baby." And, I envisioned her saying, "I will come get him if I need to." I was probably clearly unnerved early on in basic training, and a friend of mine said, "Hey Bullard, you know we're in basic training, and we're the basics. They can't have basic training without the basics. We're the most important part of this thing, they are going to yell at you one way or the other, so just settle in and relax." It was simple advice but it made all the difference for me. I thought about the whole thing differently after that. There was a whole bunch of hurry up and wait, as you know, in fact, I'm sure you were probably yelling at me.

One of the things that I appreciated about basic training was this notion of taking care of one another and having one another's back. I remember a time in which an upperclassman was yelling at one of my classmates and I did something to get out of line so they would stop yelling at that person and come over to me. I appreciated that camaraderie. I appreciated the unity that basic training really created. It started from a statement that was really simple, that we are all the basics and that they can't have it without us. Then going into the year, I played football. I hurt my knee my freshman year and ended up having to have some surgery, so that was a little bit of a downer, and it was really to be the narrative of my football career that my knees continued to be hurt. I had another major surgery my junior year and really could not play football my senior year. It ended up being a blessing because I went out for the mock trial team. I had gone there for football and mock trial, but football and mock trial conflicted from a time standpoint. I went out for the mock trial team, and I remember that they were full and they didn't have any room. At some point, they told me that I couldn't be on the mock trial team. This was after I had really hurt my knee, but I was recovering and I couldn't play football my senior year. The lesson, going back to eighth grade when I had that failure, came to mind and the motivation really came back to me. I had hurt my knee and I was down, but I was motivated to do something more than that and not just stay down. I think that is the whole narrative of athletics, for me at least, and that is the whole lesson about athletics for me. There is a saying in football that you win by getting up one more time than you fall down.

When I went out for the mock trial team, they said there was no room, but I came back and I asked, "Can I start my own team?" They ended up saying, "Yes, if you can find enough people." So, they ended up allowing us to start another team. I recruited just enough people. I think I may have had one person too few and they gave me a person and we ended up having two teams that year. I was captain of one team and Linell Letendre (current USAFA Dean) was the captain of the other team. Both teams did extremely well and it was the beginning of a long friendship with Linell. I didn't know her that well at that time, as Linell was a superstar doing great things and was Wing Commander, but it was the beginning of a long friendship. We got picked up for law school at the same time, went to JAG school at the same time, and we were in the same JAG school class. Judge Eggers was our mock trial coach and I don't know whether or not it was an easy decision to let us have a second team, but I know Judge Eggers was so gracious and so accommodating. I appreciated that and he was a mentor to me for years after that. I would go sit with Judge Eggers even after graduation, even after law school, and I would come back and speak to his classes. Even more so, I would want to speak to him. We all celebrated his home going about a year or so ago, and Linell didn't expect me to come, but she saw me in the audience and asked me why I had come. I said there was no way in the world I was going to miss giving my last respects to Judge Eggers.

So, that really makes me think about the power of leadership and the power of mentorship. How people invest in us – and the importance of investing – because none of us are finished products and all of us need support and encouragement. I have found that it's really a role that I have to play, that I enjoy playing, but I also enjoy having mentors. To this day, I enjoy looking up the people who have done things that I have not done or that I aspire to do and sitting at their feet. But not just anybody. I enjoy sitting at the feet of those who are willing and those that have good hearts and I guess some would say, good character. I think character is an amorphous thing. Some might say, "I have good character because I have good moral fiber," and that may be true. But, I think it's also how you treat people and how people feel in your presence, and I think it's how intentional you are about connecting with people. That has to be part of your character, as well. Your character at the end of the day is who you are.

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I ended up choosing the Air Force Academy, and often I wondered if it was the right decision for me, but when I look back on it, I think it is the right decision because of the people I met, because of the people who invested in me, and because of the people who really inspired me to do more.

I went to law school because I was working in the minority enrollment office, which had allowed for recent graduates to be employed there at the office. They would go out and they would cut up the country or partition the country into different regions. I had the Southeast along with another gentleman, and we would go to different high schools and different colleges, and we would talk to different people about the Air Force Academy. We decided that we were going to not talk to them about admissions to the Air Force Academy, we were going to talk to them about all the things we learned at the Air Force Academy so that they wanted to come based off of that. We would talk about the camaraderie, the brotherhood, the sisterhood that we developed at the Air Force Academy. All of us were very close. James Johnson was my compatriot in the Southeast and I loved that job. I loved the job because I got a chance to mentor high school students. I now look back and they are colonels and doing great things in the Air Force, which makes me feel old. It's amazing because it was the first real opportunity we had to mentor and to give back. I think that was so critical, and I loved that job.

One day while I was in the job, I got a phone call from a lady by the name of I.C. Barton, and I.C. was from Charleston, South Carolina. She was calling to tell me about her son, Charles Barton. She told me about him and talked to me for at least an hour and a half to two hours. I literally wanted to get off the phone. I said, "I've got to go. I've got to do something else," but she just kept talking. I didn't have the heart just to get her off the phone, and finally she seemed like she was coming to an end, and I got a pause and let her know I needed to go. She said, "Before you go, tell me about you. Tell me what you want to do." So, I told her very quickly that I am from Atlanta, Georgia, and I want to go to law school after this assignment. I'm applying to law school. She said, "Well, you just sit right there and I'll have a gentleman call you." Within five minutes, a gentleman by the name of Major Will Gunn called me, and Gunn was a graduate of the Air Force Academy, Class of '83. Gunn was a JAG, and he had this deep resonate voice and he said, "I understand you want to go to law school." I said, "Yes, Sir." He then said, "I understand you want to go to Harvard Law School." I again said "Yes, Sir." He told me, "I went to the Air Force Academy, and I went to Harvard Law School," and Gunn became this larger than life figure for me. He became a dear friend and mentor, and I ended up going to Boston at Hanscom Air Force Base because I thought I was going to go to Harvard Law School. At least, I wanted to go to Harvard Law School.

I told everybody on base that I was going to law school. I was a person that had nothing to do with law, but I got to know all of the JAGs. I got to know all of them personally because it was a small group there. Down the hall, there was a JAG by the name of Willie Epps, and I'm still close to two or three of the JAGs from Hanscom Air Force Base. They all knew I wanted to go to law school. The deputy SJA had gone to Duke Law School and he said, "Hey Rodney, I understand that you want to go to law school and I understand that you applied to Duke. I know you want to go to Harvard, but I know you applied to Duke, as well." He told me, "The Dean from Duke Law School - her son is graduating from MIT and she is going to be here and I want to invite you to this function." So, I go to the function with him and there are only, I think, two African Americans in the room, myself and another gentleman, and this gentleman comes up to me and he is the Dean of Admissions at Duke Law School. He asks me about myself, about what I wanted to do, and at the end of the day after a great conversation with him, he told me that he really wanted me to go to Duke Law and he helped me with a scholarship. Initially, I didn't know who he was, I think it's just important that you treat everybody well and that you try to be a good person and to have good conversation, because you don't know who you are talking to.

I ended up going to Duke Law, where I had a wonderful time. I enjoyed my time at Duke because one of the things I wanted to do at Duke was, again, this whole notion of leadership. So, I aspired to leadership, I went out for the American Bar Association and I ended up being a governor of the various law schools in the Southeast. There were thirteen states in my region at the time, and I was a governor for all the law schools within those thirteen states. Then I ran for ABA Delegate and law school delegate, and I was one of three national delegates representing all of the law schools in the country. I enjoyed that and enjoyed meeting people. I enjoyed connecting with people and felt that is what the Air Force Academy would want me to do. That that is what they had kind of taught me to do and I ended up being a graduation speaker for law school graduation.

My greatest mentors at Duke were Air Force JAGs. Scott Siliman was an Air Force Colonel and a JAG, and he was a professor there at Duke. I still keep in touch with Scott to this day. We had a judge who was on the Court of Military Appeals as well, he was awesome, and just really took care of me and mentored me, and gave me a place where I could ask questions in safety and have mentorship. This whole notion of mentorship, at least throughout my life, has been really keen. After that, I went off to Biloxi, Mississippi, to Kessler Air Force Base. My first hearing there was really pivotal. It was basically a probable cause hearing, an Article 32 hearing, and I was calling witnesses and at some point, I realized that my witnesses weren't responding. They were in another room and I had a bailiff, and I was going to get the witnesses and the bailiff was going to get the witnesses, as well, and they weren't responding. We didn't know what was going on. When we got to the room there was a little TV and one of the witnesses pointed at the television and it was the twin towers. There was smoke that was coming out of one of the towers and it was very clear that something horrific had happened. We didn't know what it was at the time and later found out about the attacks on the twin towers, the attack on the Pentagon, the aborted attack on the White House. That gave me a completely new sense of why I was serving, why I went to the Air Force Academy in the first place, and why I was a leader. There was something bigger than me, that there was a *raison d'etre* that was bigger than me. That there was a need for me to do something that was beyond myself. I had initially gone to the Academy because of the good football team, because I played football, and it had pre-law because I wanted to be a lawyer. At the end of the day, it wasn't selfish, but it wasn't anything that was bigger than myself. September 11 gave me a completely different sense of service, the importance of our service, and that our service was real. This wasn't mock, this wasn't play, this was real.

I decided then that I wanted to try and serve at the highest levels that I could. I ended up talking to now Lt. Col Gunn, and he had been a White House Fellow in addition to going to the Air Force Academy and Harvard Law School. So, I applied for a White House Fellowship and ended up being selected the second time I applied. The first time I applied, I didn't get it. The second time, it was a great interview and I ended up then going to nationals and having a wonderful time at nationals. I will never forget that this guy from the Coast Guard said, "Hey man, there is this guy here and you and I are not going to make it. He is a Navy Seal, he graduated top of his class from Duke, he did work with Mother Teresa, he is awesome, he has written a book, and he's done all of these things." I thought to myself, "I don't know if you are going to make it, but I'm gonna make it!" The guy that he was talking about was a guy by the name of Eric Greitens, and Eric and I became fast friends and were both selected for the class.

I think that mentorship and faith had helped me with that confidence. Faith in God and faith in understanding that what is for me is for me, and that God will bless me. I don't have to compete with anybody in this artificial way. All I have to do is really take care of people and do my best and what is for me is for me. The Fellows program was a great program. A few days into the Fellows program, Hurricane Katrina hit. I had previously been stationed in Biloxi, Mississippi, and it hit Biloxi and New Orleans, and that was impactful because there were people that I knew who were impacted, whose homes were impacted, whose lives were impacted. I didn't know anybody who had passed away, but I did know a lot of people who were displaced. We got a chance to go down to Mississippi and to New Orleans to see just utter devastation, particularly in New Orleans. We saw the Governor of Louisiana, who was having a hard time and was literally shell shocked, and the Mayor of New Orleans was kind of all over the place. He later was arrested and actually placed in jail—Mayor Nagin. Leadership mattered not only in the military, but in civil life, and in fact, mattered very much in civil life. It gave me this sense that leadership was about solving problems and taking care of people. You need to be prepared to solve those problems and you don't have to do it alone. That was really a big lesson for me, and an experience that I keep to this day. In my home, we have art from students who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina who had come up to D.C. and finished their high school careers in D.C. You would just see steps leading to where a home previously was, the four square marks on other homes that meant someone was missing or that someone was dead, as well as how many people had lived in the home – that was powerful. We also took trips around the globe. We took trips to Brazil, and we took trips to Alaska, and saw poverty that was frightening. In Alaska, in particular, it was frightening because this was the United States. This wasn't another third-world country. That led me to this sense of that leadership is really about solving hard problems but it is also very much about helping people.

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At the end of the day, I recognized that I enjoyed the military, and I enjoyed the Air Force, but didn't want to stay in the Air Force because the problems that I wanted to solve weren't resident in the Air Force. Others had a greater passion for security, a greater passion for being a JAG, but I wanted to solve problems that you found elsewhere—poverty, lack of equity, and I wanted to mentor people in other ways.

I ended up after the fellowship going to the Pentagon working as a legislative council working on Capitol Hill. I specifically asked The Judge Advocate General of the Air Force (TJAG) to do that because I wanted to be around Congress people and Senators so I could see how they lived, and how they led in solving domestic problems. It was an interesting exercise because I got to know some of them. I then went back to Atlanta into the U.S. Attorney's Office. I remember asking someone, "Is it a good thing to go back to the U.S. Attorney's Office? Is this a bad step?" They said, "It depends on who your U.S. Attorney is. I don't know who your U.S. Attorney is going to be." My U.S. Attorney ended up being Sally Yates, and Sally Yates ended up being the United States Attorney General. So, I ended up having a pretty good U.S. Attorney. We had a great conversation one day, Sally and I, about the issues that we saw in our community. She had a wonderful response. She said, "We can't yell our way out of the issues of our community. We have to do more than that. We have to go and help people and find the root causes of why they are committing crimes and why they are in these situations and circumstances, and we have to help them." We ended up starting a program to help those who were returning from jail because we knew that within three years, 75% of those who had gone to jail, would return. The recidivism rate was pretty high, and every time someone went back to jail, that was a brother, husband, mother, daughter, being taken away from a family, and those families were fractured, and you could see the result of it. The stats were horrifying. Children whose parents were in jail were 80% more likely to drop out of school and were more likely to be trafficked sexually. So, all of those problems were problems that we felt like we could address.

We started a program to provide wrap-around services for those returning citizens, and the first service that I really realized that needed to be provided, was literacy. It was happenstance because we had a sign-in sheet and people were walking past the sign-in sheet. I would direct them to the sign-in sheet because we wanted to know who was there and how many people were there. We were working with the state on the recidivism program and some people would spend an inordinate amount of time trying to read the sheet or an inordinate amount of time trying to write their names. Some people just put X's. That was heartbreaking. That some education system had failed them in that way.

We started literacy programs and other programs and at the same time Dan Cathy, the CEO of Chick-fil-A, was getting to know Atlanta – the urban part of it. Chick-fil-A is an Atlanta-based company that was started in Atlanta in 1946, but it had really been a suburban creature. It's a very successful company and I think that because of that, there was this bifurcation of urban poverty and success of corporate America that they were feeling and experiencing. Dan had gotten to know a couple of homeless shelters, one in particular called City of Refuge. At some point, I was introduced to Dan, as a mentor of mine had invited me to Trinidad. She was the Ambassador to Trinidad and I had met her during the White House Fellowship. She asked me to come down and speak, and there was a Kentucky Fried Chicken that was open 24-hours, so I made a joke because I'm from Atlanta, and said "If you all like Kentucky Fried Chicken, you'll love Chick-fil-A." I said, "You need to have Coke and Chick-fil-A down here in Trinidad." I came back and told that joke in Atlanta, and it wasn't that funny, but a friend of mine told me, "Hey, we should try and get a Chick-fil-A in Trinidad." I said, "I'm not interested in getting a Chick-fil-A in Trinidad," and she replied, "I'm going to introduce you to a guy who knows the CEO of Chick-fil-A." It was a guy by the name of Al Mead. He had been a Paralympian, and had lost his leg when he was nine years old. He was a pastor and he knew Dan Cathy. He said, "Both of you have a heart for the community and both of you are getting to know this urban community in a different way." As a result, I met Dan, and Dan and I immediately hit it off about urban Atlanta and the plight of other people. We had this sense that we had been blessed with talent and resources, in his case in particular, and that our job was to help other people, to give that back, to use that leadership to solve hard problems that were present in our society and in our community. So, we started the Chick-fil-A Foundation to do that.

It initially started as a place-based foundation in Atlanta, but it has grown now to where we have activities in Canada and all over the country. This notion, going back to what I saw with those returning citizens who could not read, or had a difficult time reading or a difficult time writing, was that we wanted to make sure that every child could grow up to be everything that they could be. That there was an education system that wouldn't fail a child. That they weren't doomed by their zip code or doomed by where they were growing up. It's been important to understand that you have to do good and do well. That we needed, and we need, a very strong and vibrant business, and I have to be involved in the business. I have to understand the business, and know the business, and help advance the business, so that we can have the largess to do good things elsewhere.

On a personal level, I think that's the same. We have to take care of ourselves. We have to feed and water ourselves, both mentally and physically, so that we can have enough energy and capacity to help other people—to be good leaders. That fuels our character, as well. So, I wrote a book called *Heroes Wanted* which has been well received, and I think it's been well received because people see themselves in it. I particularly talk about how I had a difficult time reading in first grade, and I had a first grade teacher who helped me read when others were ready to write me off. This whole narrative of helping those who can't help themselves is really important in everybody's life because someone has invested in all of us and probably given us a helping hand at some point when we needed it. So, that has been an important part of my journey, an important part of my story.

Lindsay: I appreciate the story because I think how we get to a destination and how we go through that process shapes a lot about who we are. I believe that who you are is how you lead. It's important to be authentic and to understand where we are coming from. We lead from where we are – we don't lead from somewhere else – and we see the consequences of people to trying to be something they are not. I really liked what you mentioned about "What is for me, is for me." It implies that I also need to work for it. It doesn't come at no cost. You had some opportunities, but you were willing to work for that opportunity. You were willing to do the work that was required to take advantage of the opportunity. We need to invest in ourselves so that we show up, like you mentioned, ready, willing, able, and rested so that we are able then to help and serve and give back to others. I like that idea, that notion that really is the character of who we are. How we are showing up, how we choose to show up, do we even show up? All of those aspects that are critical important to our development and that development is ongoing. We are not a finished product. We don't arrive, we don't get there, we continue on.

Bullard: That's right. We do not arrive. You know one of the things, this sense of competition, because we are all competitive by nature, but there is an importance of being competitive with ourselves and not competitive with others, or at least appropriately competitive within a space, within a sphere. This whole notion of "what is for me is for me" also helps with that because I've learned in life that I will cooperate and collaborate over competing any day. That I will get more done, in that sense, any day. But I think that it is a key notion for leadership and for leaders that if you try to do this by yourself, or if you are trying to do this for yourself, than you really are not leading.

Lindsay: And that opens the aperture for things like humility, right? If the focus of competition is toward myself and my development and not toward others. When you think about that notion, about being able to compete against yourself and be the best version of myself, then I position myself to be who I want to be to be authentic and not try to do it at the expense of somebody else. If you look at a lot of what you see in our communities today, it is very much a "what can I get, what can I have, what can I do," versus "how can I serve, how can I mentor, how can I give back, how can I serve my community", in a way that doesn't have to be an either/or, you know what I mean?

Bullard: Absolutely. Particularly, implicit in what you are saying, is our politics are that way. That we have created this "us or them," and when you create that dynamic, that really is unhealthy for our nation, unhealthy for our future. If we think that leadership is about eviscerating the other side, that leadership is about creating a narrative of, "Well they hate me, and therefore I have the right, I have the moral authority to hate them back," which is really dangerous.

Lindsay: That's true. I like to look at things in Venn diagrams. When you look at competing ideologies, or you look at competing approaches and philosophies, we tend to think that we are 100% different. However, the reality is that our Venn diagrams overlap a lot more than we really may realize or that people really pay attention to. If we only pay attention to the differences or we only pay attention to those kind of polarizing things, getting back to the whole notion of humanity, there is a lot of similarity there and if we can understand that, then the difference doesn't become the goal or completion, it becomes how we approach things a little bit differently. We are all going to approach these situations a little differently based on how we grew up, what we believe, what our moral compass is, all of those things; but the reality is a lot of that how we approach life, a sense of community, a sense of responsibility - they overlap regardless of which side, if we want to use that terminology, you are looking at it from. We want people to have access to things, we want open opportunity, we want engagement, we want all of those things, so to your point, how do we get back to that? We've swung a bit towards the competitive side.

Bullard: Yes, we have. When you swing to the competitive side, it shows you are potentially willing to do anything—lie, steal, cheat. That is the void of character, it's the void of all of the things that we should be holding leaders accountable to. I also worry about our politics because we hold our leaders to a false standard, because nobody is perfect, and we will attack any little imperfection or any big imperfection. We don't allow for grace, and we don't allow for growth, and we don't allow for someone to change. I worry about that as well.

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