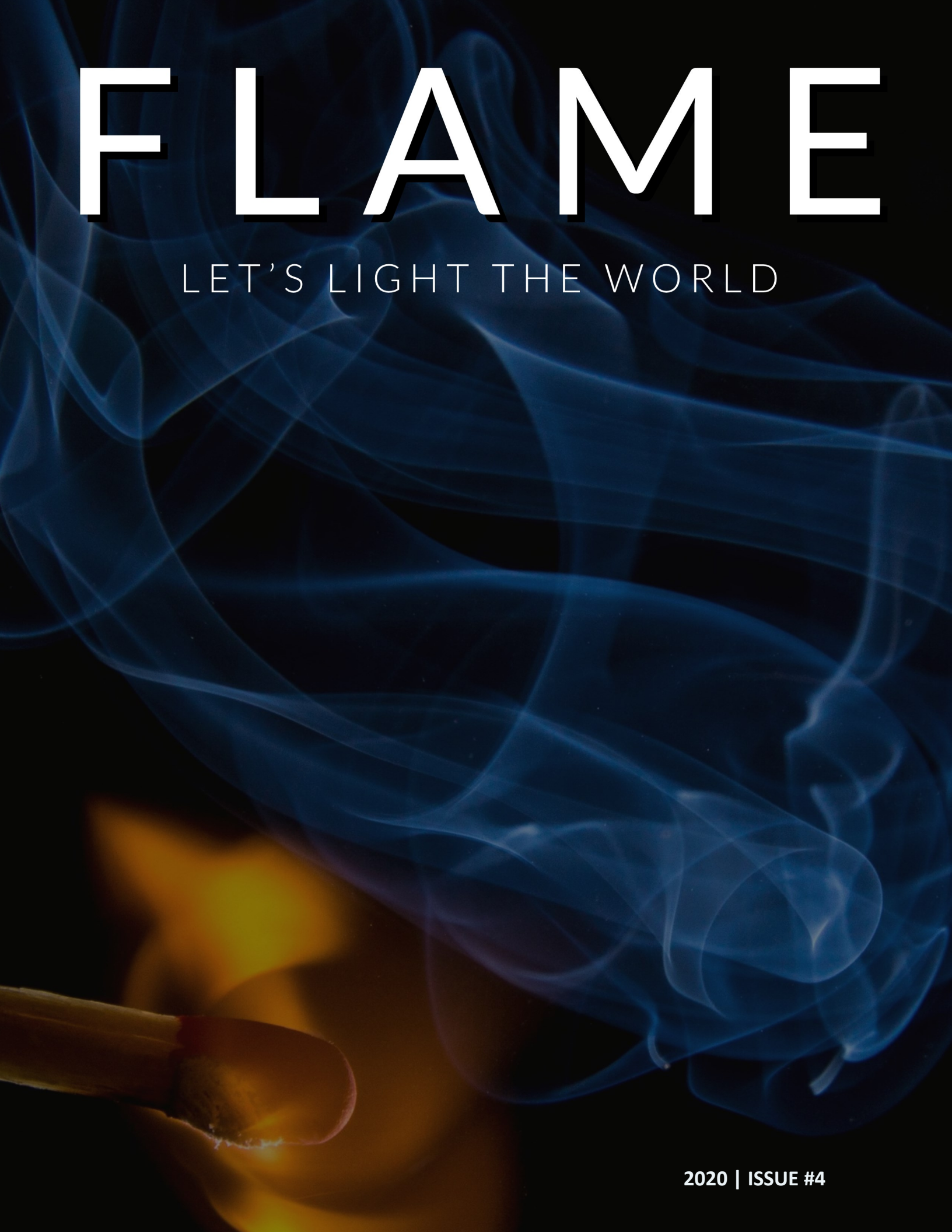


FLAME

LET'S LIGHT THE WORLD



2020 | ISSUE #4



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Message



Friends,

We cook our food and feed a family with a FLAME.

We light the way in the midst of darkness with a FLAME.

We honor fallen champions and heroes with a FLAME.

When we spark a FLAME within our community, our businesses, relationships, and every-day communication, we see results that are profitable, enjoyable and victorious.

F.L.A.M.E. or Faith, Love, Appreciation, Motivation, and Empathy, change the course of the things that matter most in our lives both personally and professionally. We empower our own success and that of those around us when we go to business and life with F.L.A.M.E.

I encourage you to pour into others, and allow wisdom and value to pour into you through the lens of FLAME. Now, please enjoy this edition of FLAME, which is powered by Collaborative Solutions Group, our supervising editor Christina Bartolotta, and all of our amazing contributors!

About CSG

Personal and professional growth only happens after YOU start growing. Taking action is key when your expectations are to fully develop skills and enjoy meaningful results. There are six core elements that we focus on to help you grow in to the best version of yourself. These elements do not exist on their own. Each element influences the others and how you balance these interactions is vital to personal growth...

Opportunities For Growth

1. Growth Events:
2. CSG Premium—Private Coaching
3. CSG Lite—Group Coaching
4. Club CSG
5. The Master Within
6. Solutions From the Huddle
7. Critical Strategy Guide

FAITH



A Lesson I Learned from Coach

I am not sure there is a single principle more important than simply loving your people. I've always enjoyed reading books by John C. Maxwell, and in one of his books he had a statement from President Theodore Roosevelt, "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care."

In 1985, I met a man named Ray Parlier. Ray and I were very involved in the South Carolina Junior Chamber (Jaycees) and later he would lead the state organization as President. He also became one of my political advisors when I was National President of the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce. While Ray was

extremely successful in the Jaycees, his real impact was shaping the lives of kids at Furman University where he served as Athletic Director during the time when it claimed its only National Football Championship. Ray's influence on me was profound, but his greatest lesson was to love your people. If you demonstrate how much you care about the people you lead, they will follow you anywhere. People always came first with Coach Parlier and he was a master at making you feel special.

He called until it was too late to talk on the phone. Then he would switch to addressing postcard after postcard thanking folks for the smallest things. Ray was a fierce competitor and he believed everyone had a place on the team. The quarterback who made the perfect fade pass was important but so was the trainer who conditioned the players. Ray gave out more plaques and incentives than anyone I ever met and sometimes it was the smallest tokens that people desired the most. It was not the size of the reward but the appreciation for the job well done. I am not sure I ever saw as many grown men hug each other as they did under the leadership of Coach. He made you feel good about yourself and your effort.

Someone recently asked me to what I attributed the success of the Lake Norman Chamber I lead here at Lake Norman. Location is a critical factor for any business, but it really benefits those who make their home at the lake. We have businesses that work their plan, take advantage of our networking events, and our outstanding personal growth and business programming. However, the thing that sets our chamber apart, which enables us to be the "Best of the Best", is our appreciation of each other. You must show folks how much you care. It is the foundation of leadership.



Pictured Ray Parlier (Center), former Athletic Director of Furman University with Bill Russell (Left) and Robby Dawkins (Right) who both led the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce as National Presidents. Parlier, who died in 2017, left a Legacy of Leadership on thousands of young people as a Coach and Mentor.

The Business of Relationships

I still remember a Saturday morning in Charleston, S.C. when I had just been elected President of the South Carolina Jaycees. Coach Ray Parlier put his arm around me and hugged me tight. He then looked deep in my eyes, with a wide smile across his face and reminded me, “Bill, love your people and they’ll love you back.”

As I look back on a life that has spanned six decades now, that may well have been the single best advice I ever received.

Bill Russell



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LOVE

A mindset of pain...and healing

Let me paint you a little picture:

Imagine you have a child. Actually 4. For some, that may not be hard to do. For the rest of you, bear with me.

And then your oldest child was murdered by a complete stranger.

Then imagine that, just by chance, another complete stranger murdered your second child, killed them for no justifiable reason.

And just for kicks, let's say with your 3rd child, someone in the neighborhood randomly came and beat them to a pulp, but didn't quite kill them.

And now feel your blood boil. It's been boiling, but now it's ready to explode.

The desire of revenge growing in your bones. Your blood. Your DNA.

You said the words before anything happened to your children:

"If someone ever touches my child, I would... (fill in the blanks)"

"Damn the justice system, I would take matters into my own hands!"

And now that hypothetical has turned into a definite many times over.

And then you hear your family members and closest friends screaming:

"That's right."

"Amen."

"Go get him!"

The only issue is that the murderer of your first child, after several years of torment in the courts, was let go on a technicality. You see, there wasn't enough evidence to convict because, well, there wasn't a tape of the murder.

Or better yet, there was. But the prosecution claimed your child probably did something to bring out the inner-murderer of their murderer, so, well, they probably deserved it.

Yep.

Sit in that discomfort.

Then sit in it some more.

Then sit in it some more. Let it stew. Let it marinate.

A mindset of pain...and healing

Then sit in seeing your first and second child's murderer almost every day...or seeing someone who remotely looks like or reminds you of them (maybe they have the same hair color, eyes, etc.), and there's nothing you can do.

You wanna throttle them. Kill them. Destroy them. You seethe in anger every single time you see them.

Yet you know if you take action against them, it's over. No more time with your remaining children, spouse, family or friends.

Instead you decide to go to the gym. Or play some music.

Except now there's no gym. No music. The gym has been closed. Your music and ability to play it has been taken away. No one to talk to. No one there to express your feelings to. You surely don't have money to pay for one of those fancy therapists, and you don't have any insurance that'll cover seeing one of them. And because everyone in your family is feeling the same thing, going through the same collective grief, you can't really talk to them. Your spouse lost their children too; your remaining children lost their siblings; their friends lost a beloved friend.

So your anger & despair sometimes come out in ways you don't want or even expect them to. Maybe you lash out at your spouse or your remaining children. Punch holes in the wall. Kick and break the kitchen table. Not that you don't like your walls or appreciate your kitchen table – as a matter of fact, you are grateful for the walls that hold up the house you live in, and eating meals at that exact table with your family is one of the only ways you feel some semblance of sanity and normalcy these days. It's just that they were the closest things to you in your fit of anger you could take your anger out on. Until you find something more appropriate, whatever that may be or look like. You'll keep your eyes peeled for that 'thing.'

But in the meantime, you're feeling so much, that pain, that hurt; that helplessness has GOT to come out. Somehow, someday.

You don't think logically to yourself, "now I could just do yoga or meditate while I wait for the trial." You also don't find yourself thinking "I would love to have a chat with the people who did this, I'm sure they have a great explanation as to why they did these things to my children." Or maybe you do when you're calm. But you just don't have the energy. You're tired, overwhelmed, exhausted.

A mindset of pain...and healing

You probably think to yourself “I don’t know if I can live with all this pain. With all this grief. With all this sadness. With this heaviness. With this helplessness and hopelessness. After all, the murderer of my first child was let go on a technicality, who is to say it won’t happen again with the other two perpetrators who hurt my children?!”

And then you wait. And it happens again... And again.

No justice for your children. Their murderers, killers, perpetrators... They are able to walk the streets freely and go on with life as though nothing happened. In their freedom, they are empowered, and you have no recourse.

Now imagine that’s happened not only to your children, but one of your grandparents’ children, your great grandparents’ children, and so on. And you knew this through hearing those stories growing up, passed down from generation to generation – years of hurt, pain, and injustice.

Your family is still waiting for a promise that remains broken and unacknowledged.

And now imagine me as an outsider (mind you, I only know you in passing, and have just heard about your story through hearsay, including about the damage you’ve done in your house) coming up to you in your anger, grief, hurt, pain, disbelief and tell you “Just wait. Don’t be angry. Let the justice system do what it is there to do.”

I continue to say to you “Just chill. Calm down. Push your anger down again. Stop being so angry. Be civil with your anger. Trust me, it’ll be different this time around.”

And then I go on to tell you, even though I’ve never lost a child of my own – “You know what the best thing for you to do would be in this instance? First and foremost, don’t punch holes in your wall. Why did you even do that, punch holes in your wall? Don’t you appreciate your house? Because you seem pretty ungrateful right now. Same thing for your kitchen table. I thought you liked eating there?? I guess not so much, huh? Well, if that was me, I’d probably have gone to the neighbor’s house and caused some damage there. Better their stuff than yours!”

The only thing you can do is stare at me because, after all, I just don’t get it. I’ll never understand your pain. Your suffering. Your anger. And I didn’t think to ask you any questions about why you feel the way you do, how deep your pain runs...

And maybe now you start to understand the manifestation of years of anger, sadness, hopelessness.

So how do we change this?

A mindset of pain...and healing

First and foremost, we listen. We don't assume we know the best or right answers for your grief. And listening to respond is never the way to go. Listen to truly connect.

Next, we simply acknowledge the pain. The hurt. The grief. The anger. The frustration. There is nothing to do. We don't have to swoop in and fix it, take it away, or find a remedy. That's not our job. Our jobs are to hold the space. Otherwise, we try to rush or avoid a natural process that takes time. Just notice the discomfort in yourself that comes up as you have that conversation. There is nothing to do with that either. Just sit with it. Whatever you are feeling, that person on the opposite side of you is feeling it ten-fold. Now you can understand what that might feel like. Then reflect that back. "Wow, if I'm feeling this way, I can only imagine what it is you're feeling at this time." That's it. Nothing more, nothing less.

Finally, we can guide you in the right direction towards your healing. Maybe that means offering resources. A book, an article, a podcast, a movie, a website. Or maybe someone you know who might be able to relate more to the pain than you are. Maybe it's donating to a cause that's important to that person. Either way, there is a way.

This is how we truly connect. This is how we truly understand our fellow human, and this is how we truly stand with our fellow human. This is a necessary step, if you want to be a part of moving from a mindset of pain, to healing.



Dr. Damon Silas is an entrepreneur, a healer, and an artist who tackles the subjects of mental health, personal development and professional growth with a dynamic twist. A former contractor with the military and DC school system employee, he has used the challenges he has witnessed and experienced in order to help countless others to increase and improve their healing and growth process exponentially. A two-time published author (with another on the way), radio and podcast host ('A Mental Health Mixtape' which can be found on the WDRB radio station on iHeart radio as well as on iTunes; and 'From Mourning to ACTION' out on iTunes), and hip-hop dance instructor, this father of 2 fur babies and husband is originally from the Boston area and loves calling NC home now. and improve their healing and growth process exponentially. A two-time published author (with another on the way), radio and podcast host ('A Mental



APPRECIATION

Human Connectivity ...

As humans, we simply require the connection, and engagement of other people.

Even the most introverted individuals to ever live still, at their core, have a desire to engage with other humans. They may simply want to have it happen in shorter and less intense bursts, but they want it- which means you want it too.

There is no need to fight it. This is a basic mammalian need. We, as humans, as mammals, are hard wired to need other people. It is in our DNA.

If we understand that, then we can see why it is that when humans are able to find love, kindness, camaraderie, companionship, empathy, understanding, and connection in a reciprocal way with other people within the human race- that connection acts as a catalyst and it sparks into existence momentum that drives the greatness within us. That drive and momentum can push our greatness and it can come from the depths of our spirit and well up, bubble up, push up through and past the surface with such an overflow that it can be felt, appreciated, and experienced by those we (both knowingly and unknowingly) impact. Our creativity, best ideas, and most productive selves actually come to life when we collaborate. This then allows the puzzle of what's truly possible to form into the picture of a most amazing vision of significance, when we align our puzzle piece with that of our counterparts, in this human experience.

I want you to know that you are...

- You are stronger when you are many!
- You are smarter when you are many!
- You are more capable when you are many!

There is no doubt that when we surround ourselves with people that do not lift our consciousness, people that drive down our ability because of their negativity, it can be challenging to connect with them. Understanding that, we understand that we must be so careful with who we choose to connect with, stand with, and allow into our most inner circle. Yet, let us never lose sight of the fact that ... We serve the core of our soul when we commit to lean into those who want to see us succeed and prosper, just as we want to see them succeed and prosper.

- Are you seeking out those who want to lift you up?
- Are you vetting those with whom you share yourself?
- Are you protecting your mind, body, and soul?

Human Connectivity ...

You can not freeze with emptiness over uncertainty. You must remain faithful, loving, and both open minded as well as open-hearted towards others. You serve yourself and those around you when you extend trust, grace, empathy, and acceptance to others. It may hurt when once in a while your choice to love first, respect first, honor first, and trust first causes you pain; but the pain of living a life alone, and or walking through your time among the land of the living being dead inside, and/or filled with skepticism, and with a pessimistic worldview is much worse.

So take the risk! Do the work! Trust first and more often, love first and more often, assume the best of people more often – make this your go-to response, not the one you land on after you've carefully investigated the scenario. Be vulnerable... it's not easy, but it's possible.

When we are held up spiritually by our God, held up internally by our call, passion, and purpose and held up intellectually by our wisdom and real life experiences. We are equipped and prepared to avoid failure and to be able to navigate around major pitfalls, this is true. Yet when we connect with others, develop our team, and commit to a collaborative spirit, we don't just avoid failure, but rather lean into, drive towards and chart our course directly toward winning and living a life of real significance with high reward.

- Today, commit to being a great team player.
- Today, commit to joining a team!
- Today, touch base with those on your team and remind them you love them, and need them.

Be blessed, be great, and be together!



Titus Bartolotta is the founder, president, and lead consultant for Collaborative Solutions Group, the founder of The Lotta Foundation, and Co-Founder and President of Business Leaders Unleashed. Originally from New York City, Titus has spent the majority of his life in North Carolina. Titus studied business management at York Technical College in SC, along with having completed both culinary arts, and seminary training. Having worked as a manager & executive for several companies ranging from small to large businesses, Titus has spent the better part of his life staying teachable and gathering knowledge at every stop of his career. It was in the city of Charlotte NC, that Titus met his wife Christina. Today the Bartolotta family works to raise their two beautiful young boys Josiah, and Noah.



MOTIVATION

We Need to get Back to “Innocent Until Proven Guilty”

Can a right to “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” exist in a vacuum of “Innocent until Proven Guilty?” These two principals are supposed to be at the core of American Society. Until very recently, I wasn’t cognizant of just how dependent the former is on the latter.

While the Constitution of the United States does not explicitly cite a presumption of innocence. The courts have upheld this as a standard and its legal precedence dates back to 1895 and the case of *Coffin v. the United States*. But what does it mean to be “Innocent Until Proven Guilty.” It means that it is not the individual’s burden to prove their innocence, but rather the government’s burden to do so, in procedures that are spelled out in the constitution. Not on the streets, not in a jail cell, not in correspondence – but only in a court of law can an individual be found guilty and only in specific manners spelled out by the constitution and legislation may punishment of these transgressions be levied upon an individual.

For the police, for individual citizens, and for lawmakers, the implications of “Innocent Until Proven Guilty” are far reaching. We cannot lose track of this presumption of innocence in any aspect of our interactions with one another. To do so places one individual above another in judgement and we are guaranteed a trial by a jury of our peers. Not by any individual.

Innocent Until Proven Guilty leaves no room for vigilante justice. It leaves no room for police officers to unlawfully detain or question individuals without cause. The Presumption of Innocence definitely precludes any sort of “punishment” in the apprehension of individuals suspected of wrongdoing. It may place limitations on the use of force in apprehending suspects. In many ways “Innocent Until Proven Guilty” should be a practical application of “The Golden Rule” – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” A sentiment and teaching found in many cultures, religions, and social teachings. Not just Christianity.

I’m a white, heterosexual, male. But I grew up in a community where I was always around people of all races and ethnicities. I went to school with kids of all backgrounds. People from different ethnic backgrounds, different races... they rode my bus, were on my sports teams, in my scout troop, and lived in and around my neighborhood. We met on the playground and played basketball together in the park. While we understood that there were some differences between us, ethnicity and race weren’t even considered an option to divide us.

It’s becoming abundantly clear that my experience growing up, and in the subsequent years since, has been significantly different than some of the other kids that I saw growing up around me. I was taught to have respect for police officers and to politely answer questions. But I was never taught that it was a matter of life and death. It has become clear that this is a lesson that many of my fellow citizens have been taught. Worse yet, 30 years later, they are having to TEACH these lessons to their children and it is STILL a matter of life and death.

I was raised to respect all that serve our communities – police officers, military – both officers and enlisted, fire fighters, nurses, teachers, and government officials. They give of themselves to make our lives better – this was enough to earn that respect

I’ve never felt fear when being approached by a police officer. Even when I earned it by driving too fast or failing to stop fully at a stop sign. I’ve never felt any unease at being approached and asked if I had seen or heard something. I’ve never had to teach my son that he should expect to experi-

We Need to get Back to “Innocent Until Proven Guilty”

ence anything else. That’s just one aspect of the white privilege that I enjoy and am beginning to understand a little better. I always felt that the comfortable protection of “Innocent Until Proven Guilty” applied to me.

“Innocent Until Proven Guilty” isn’t just a matter for the police to wrestle with. Their actions reflect their feelings and the realities of the mindset and atmosphere of the environment they find themselves in. If enough of our community is afraid, prone to bias and distrust then the police will be on edge and reflect these things too. It’s just a natural extension.

Panic, fear, and distrust are all contagious. From subtle body language to very obvious verbal and physical signs, these feelings eat away at and pass between members of any self-contained environment or community. Studies have shown this again and again. But these same studies have shown the calming influence that respect, leadership, and love has in these environments.

The actions necessary to build a community that embraces “Innocent Until Proven Guilty” will require leadership and empathy. We need community leaders, police leadership, and legislative leadership to come together and learn again what the implications of “Innocent Until Proven Guilty” really are. There will most likely be realizations in this process that make some people uncomfortable. But our leaders must step up and understand that the current situation is making some people uncomfortable – or worse. So the current status quo cannot be maintained.

Leadership should the values of the communities leaders serve and communities reflect the leadership they are given. We as a community have to find a way to stop giving in to fears, feelings, and biases that have slowly been passed down to us over the years, both intentionally and unintentionally. It starts with acknowledging those fears, feelings, and biases. If we are aware of these in ourselves, then we can start to deal with them in more constructive ways.

We don’t have to make that phone call to the police about a person of color jogging down the street or walking in the park. We as a community must see that individual just as we would be viewed jogging down the street. We can choose not to whisper something to our friends when we see someone dressed differently than we may. We can choose not to hold our children a little more tightly when we pass a stranger on the street. We can choose to not assume guilt when we see a Police Officer talking to someone.

We can choose to start to make our own experience with the world around us different. After all, that’s all we can really control. We control what we reinforce in others through confirmation bias and passive acceptance. We control what we teach to our children. All of this contributes to an environment of fear and distrust or love and acceptance.

We, as community members, must show that we value equality and that “Innocent Until Proven Guilty” must apply to all members of the community. We must reflect this fact in every aspect of our lives. From our interactions with each other to our interactions with community leaders at all levels such as police and governmental officials, we must send a clear message that these things are important to us. Until we Lead Up and exemplify these values those in leadership will not have a clear message that these are values that must be upheld.

“Innocent Until Proven Guilty” must be a standard protection for all members of our community. It is up to us as members of that community to lead up to our elected officials and authority figures to

We Need to get Back to “Innocent Until Proven Guilty”

ensure that they understand that this is the standard we expect for all members of the community. Not just for the ones that look like us, talk like us, dress like us, or pray like us.

Without the protection of “Innocent Until Proven Guilty” it’s impossible for a community to say that all of its members really have a chance to experience “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”. At least not to its fullest extent – the extent that the founders of our nation anticipated for all citizens and that the day MLK dreamed of, where all men really are created equal.

Until such time that the children of the friends I grew up with no longer need to teach their children to be wary or careful, or even anything other than simply respectful of police officers, that day is not here. Until such time that minorities can speak up and bring uncomfortable truths to light without being shouted down, that day is not here. Until such time that everybody, not just white, heterosexual, males – can jog down the street, watch birds in the park, or any number of the actions I can enjoy today – free from fear, that day is not here.



Matt Swanson is the owner and founder of [MS Digital Solutions](#), a digital marketing agency that focuses on helping businesses make the most of their digital footprint. 15 years in the media industry and experience a variety of marketing roles has prepared Matt for helping businesses understand the possibilities and processes of a strong digital presence. Matt is married to Jen, his wife of 19, and together they have 1 son, Ryan, and live in Mooresville NC.

EMPATHY



Life through a Different Lens

This past February, I remarked to a friend what a great year 2020 was shaping up to be! Our stock market was at an all-time high and unemployment had dropped to its lowest recorded levels. Indeed, African American and Latino unemployment both saw the lowest points since the statistic was first recorded in 1972. Our local Lake Norman retailers were reporting strong numbers and home sales were off the charts.

Then a pandemic known as COVID-19 took the wind out of our sails. The statewide “*Stay at Home*” order and the subsequent economic lockdown have had businesses reeling and some on the brink of no return.

Then, when it seemed the sun was again rising for Lake Norman businesses, a senseless and tragic death claimed the life of George Floyd. His death at the hands of Minneapolis Police Officers has sparked nationwide protests, and in some cases, violent riots throughout the land.

Tensions between law enforcement and the public have reached a precipice in America. Protests have taken place throughout Lake Norman but to date there has been no violence or destruction in our lake communities which has scarred other metro cities.

Several years ago, after a similar protest and subsequent riot broke out in Charlotte, I struggled trying to come to grips with how we could be at this racial impasse in spite of the fact we had elected our first African American President. I recall sharing my feelings with Chris Hailley, who was then a Board Member for the Lake Norman Chamber and Chair of our Diversity Division. Chris startled me when he asked me to “step back away from my ‘whiteness’ and see the world through a different lens — that of an African-American man.”

What some of us may see as a single incident is for many a tipping point of years of frustration, anxiety and fear. While there can be no excuse for looting, violence and lawlessness, there must be a way to confront the feelings many minorities have and are continuing to experience.

It is my sincere hope that the dialogue and conversations sparked by the recent protests will allow positive change for our community and nation. In the meantime, I am thankful for the work of agencies like the Ada Jenkins Center and the *Unity in Community* group which have brought people of all ages, races, and socio-economic levels together. Our Churches are actively promoting inclusion and the Chamber of Commerce itself has a Diversity Division, which has promoted diversity and inclusion since its creation in 2008. Through the work of local Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis, the Lotta Foundation, and many more charitable organizations, we are working together to find strength in what we have in common and appreciation for our unique differences.

Life through a Different Lens

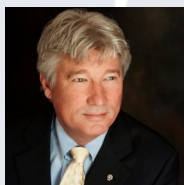
I also must acknowledge the outstanding Police Officers we have at Lake Norman. These courageous men and women are woven into the very fabric of our community. They are not simply law enforcement officers but neighbors and friends who care deeply about our citizens and the towns they serve.

In 1992, I listened as former President Ronald Reagan reminded all of us, “Whether we come from poverty or wealth; whether we are African-American or Irish-American; Christian or Jewish, from big cities or small towns, we are all equal in the eyes of God. But as Americans that is not enough; we must be equal in the eyes of each other.”

My friend Chris asked me to see life through a different lens. The reality is, I am not sure I ever really can. But I do know, I need to try. I pray to God that we all try.



Bill Russell



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LEADERSHIP



Seize the opportunity for progress

I recently had a phenomenal opportunity to record a tapping meditation for the Tapping Solution app for Racial Anxiety. As I continue to receive feedback and questions from so many not only within the states, but internationally, I'm realizing just how triggering and traumatizing the images on TV and social media that we have been seeing are.

And what I'm sensing is that people want...no...NEED more.

You're tired. You're fed up and exhausted. You're angry and full of rage. Or you feel helpless for yourself, your friends, your loved ones. Perhaps you are trying to figure out how to help your friends or loved ones, especially those who may fall into a minority (black, brown, LGBTQ, etc.) category.

Overall there seems to be a lack of information out there. As we know, where there's a lack, there's an opportunity.

This is the opportunity to address what might be coming up for so many people, especially persons of color, across the globe these days.

Whether you are feeling fear, anger, helplessness, hopelessness, sadness and despair...know that whatever it is you are feeling, it's ok. Not only that, it's completely justified. It's understandable.

When the images of violence and aggression that we're flooded with continue to come at us at such a rapid pace, it can feel overwhelming. It can feel tiresome. Not to mention traumatizing. Just when we finish processing, let alone mourning the death or maltreatment of one person, we are inundated with the news of 1, 2, 5 more. It truly is exhausting.

It's like having multiple family members die in rapid succession, one right after another. You don't even have a chance to pay honor and respect to one family member before giving that same energy to another family member. Perhaps you get to a point where you feel numb. Almost as though you don't even have the energy to mourn the loss of the second, fourth, or tenth family member. Or you have so much energy of anger, rage, pain in your body, it has to come out somehow, someday. And all of that makes complete sense.

Your mind is still on the first, or an earlier loss. It's still trying to make sense of that person no longer physically being here, even if you just spoke with them earlier that day or the night before. Your brain is doing what it needs to do in order for you to survive. Your brain is trying to protect you from further hurt.

It's like when you stub your toe really hard against something. You know it hurts, or is going to eventually, but for a split second, there's a moment where there is no pain. It's like your brain takes a minute to register what just happened. But when it finally does, when that signal finally gets up to the brain and back down to your toe, that's when the pain truly starts.

Now imagine doing this multiple times in a row. There might be a prolonged period of numbness,

Seize the opportunity for progress

followed by a whole bunch of pain. Pain that may seem unbearable. Excruciating. You just want it to go away.

There might even be a part of you that wishes your foot was no longer there if that meant you no longer had to feel that level of pain.

And no, it's not that you don't appreciate your foot and all that it has done and been for you. It's just that when your rational brain turns off, you're not thinking of the long-term impacts. You just want the pain to stop. But it doesn't. It keeps coming.

This is where we are now. It's hard to not focus on that pain. And we just want it all to go away. We might even find ourselves interested in how to heal this pain even though this was not even a thought on our radar before. All things we were interested in before become null and void. We lose interest in them because, well, it's hard to focus on anything besides this pain.

It's not to say what we were interested in before isn't important. It just means there's a bigger incentive to focus on the immediate issue at hand because you may get some relief in the near future.

In the long-term, your interest may return to what you were focused on, what you enjoyed when you were pain free. And that's very normal.

But for now, you simply want to ease that pain no matter what it takes, at all costs and by any means necessary.

In these moments, we may tend to do one of three things according to our primitive brains. Note, I said primitive and NOT our logical, rational, thinking brains. After all, that part is only a small part of our overall functioning.

So that lizard brain either wants to run or fight. I'll get to the third option momentarily.

As I stated before, the brain is designed and wired to keep us going as a species, and to keep us (and/or our loved ones) safe. So perhaps it goes into fight mode. It is ready for whatever comes its way, ready to battle, ready to defend. We see that with a lot of the protestors. They are willing to fight for what is a human right of dignity, respect, and the right to live freely.

Now, some of us may tend to flee, or retreat into our own shells. That might look like reading more, studying, researching, or turning everything off. Shutting down. Retreating from life as we know it, because sometimes, ignorance is truly bliss. Or at least it's numbing when it comes to the pain. Which is why you may also see a lot of people turn to drugs or alcohol, because that is a way to numb the pain. And that feels better...at least for the time being, for the short-term relief.

The third option as I alluded to is more about freezing. This is the third (based on the polyvagal theory by Steven Porges) option – not requiring thought – where our bodies simply go limp and numb. We play dead. You've seen an animal or bug do this many times. Just when you think it

Seize the opportunity for progress

has seen its last breath, it jumps up when it thinks it's safe to do so, and scurries off to hopefully some safety. Maybe for you it looks like an inability to get out of bed, no energy to engage anyone or anything. A complete shut off and shut down of all major systems, because, what's the point.

So whatever it is you might be feeling right now, I assure you that a) it's ok; b) it's normal; and c) it's part of our natural and evolutionary response to any threats in our environments. And as we see, there are a lot. First it was COVID-19, aka the Coronavirus. Then it was the resurgence of, or recognition that, racism is still very much alive and well, and appears to be thriving. So take your time in processing and trying to make sense of this all.

That might mean talking to other people who get it, who understand exactly what it means to be stressed and overwhelmed in this particular society and culture. This provides a safe space so needed during these times. Then from these conversations perhaps you can start to create something that didn't exist before. Something that is protective, helpful, innovative, loving and compassionate for voices that need and deserve to be heard.

Most importantly, don't forget to take care of yourself. Turn off your devices. Truly retreat, if you can. Read a book that is mindless, light, and entertaining. Go for a walk, exercise, go on a quick day trip if you can. Dance, listen to music, write and journal your thoughts and feelings.

And finally, get your mind right. Meditate. Pray. Do yoga. Engage in tapping (EFT, aka Emotional Freedom Techniques) if you need. And the truth of the matter is, we all need it. Talk to a professional if need be. That's what therapists and coaches have been trained for. To help people with their stuff. So don't hesitate to do any and all of the above. We are all needed in this fight, and it's only right we do it by taking much needed breaks. We can't do this alone, and can't run on fumes. We have to refuel and re-energize as needed.

Last but not least, know that you are loved. You are appreciated. You are revered. You are honored. You are acknowledged. You are validated. You are special. And you more than just matter – you are here to shine and change the world. So let's do exactly that.



Dr. Damon Silas is an entrepreneur, a healer, and an artist who tackles the subjects of mental health, personal development and professional growth with a dynamic twist. A former contractor with the military and DC school system employee, he has used the challenges he has witnessed and experienced in order to help countless others to increase and improve their healing and growth process exponentially. A two-time published author (with another on the way), radio and podcast host ('A Mental Health Mixtape' which can be found on the WDRB radio

station on iHeart radio as well as on iTunes; and 'From Mourning to ACTION' out on iTunes), and hip-hop dance instructor, this father of 2 fur babies and husband is originally from the Boston area and loves calling NC home now. and improve their healing and growth process exponentially. A two-time published author (with another on the way), radio and podcast host ('A Mental

MINDSET



True Freedom Is An Inside Job

What is true freedom?

True freedom is to be unshackled. No longer tethered to things that weigh you down. To that which holds you down.

True freedom is expressing yourself to the fullest, with no apologies and no qualms.

True freedom is clearing the old stories you have been holding onto and creating new ones.

Note, I didn't say any of these things are without fear or worry. But truth be told, real freedom is an ability to at least quiet, if not silence, fear and worry.

It's stepping fully and boldly into your truth, your light, your wisdom, your being.

It's accessing what is at the core of your essence. It is accessing peace, love, and light. That which we all are and that which we come from.

Some might call this a Godly state, or a state of divinity. Some might say it's reaching the apex of our human journey.

Whatever you call it, fundamentally it is what we all want, and what we were all put on this earth for.

To gain access to our true freedom. Not only for ourselves, but for those around us. To quote the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "no one is free until we all are free."

But what if you are not granted true freedom by your government or society at large? You aren't granted the same rights as another group (eg., LGBTQ people not being able to marry freely in this country until 2014; Jim Crow laws in this country that prohibited black people from having access to the same resources white people were for many years; etc.) Or, your freedom has been taken away by being imprisoned after being accused of having committed some crime. Then what? Is freedom still possible?

I would venture to say yes. Now hear me out.

Freedom is a state of mind. They may shackle your body, but they can never shackle your mind.

There was a documentary I saw all about the power of Kirtan music, a chant and response type of meditation, entitled "Mantra." In this documentary, they went around the globe showing just how powerful this and healing this music is. It was certainly eye-opening to me as I never heard of this nor knew much about it before watching this movie.

At one point in this movie, they went to a prison (San Quentin in California) to share this phenomenal and empowering movement with the prisoners. There was a particular prisoner they interviewed after going through the process of playing and listening to this music and dancing. He stated something to the effect of 'despite being locked up here, that was the most free I have ever

True Freedom Is An Inside Job

felt.'

Wow. That quote and sentiment has stuck with me ever since. They can take everything away from you, including your physical freedom, but they can never take your mind. And in our minds live possibility. Even if that possibility is not fully actualized, it can still be imagined. And if it can be imagined, it can be materialized. And if it can be materialized, there's always a sense of hope, realness, and reality to it.

By tapping into the true power of our minds, escaping into our inner landscape, we can access true freedom. And if your mind doesn't feel like a free space, and sometimes may even feel like a prison for you, there are ways to deal with that.

It can be through something like Kirtan music, yet it doesn't have to be. It can be another type of music that allows you to escape into a sense of freedom and bliss. It can be movement, free and pure. It can be through Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT, aka 'tapping'), meditation, mindfulness, and turning inwards. The more we turn outwards for other people to supply us the freedom that we long for, the longer we will be waiting. True freedom is an inside job. So what are you waiting for? It's time to get working ;)



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The image features a dynamic, abstract composition of swirling, smoke-like or flame-like forms in shades of deep blue and purple. These forms rise and twist against a solid black background, creating a sense of movement and depth. The lighting is soft, highlighting the delicate, ethereal textures of the smoke.

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