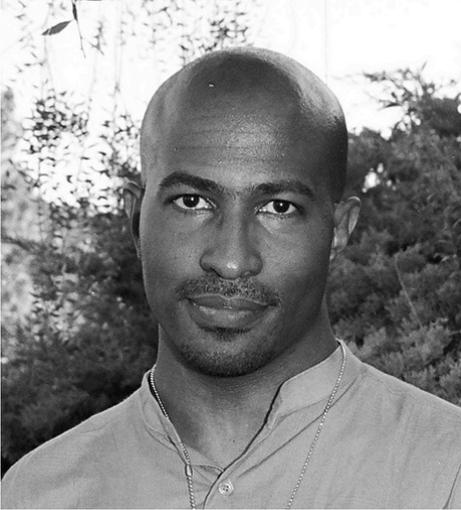


Voices of the Bioneers 2003

Van Jones

The Crossroads: Where the Hope Is



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Van Jones is the founder and national executive director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (EBC). Headquartered in San Francisco, CA, EBC is a national organization that challenges human rights abuses in the U.S. criminal justice system. Van is a steadfast opponent of policies that result in the over-imprisonment and unlawful abuse of marginalized peoples in the United States. He is helping to lead a national fight for alternatives to the U.S. incarceration industry and has been a pioneer in challenging police abuse, as well as the over-incarceration of young people. He helped to found the Ella Baker Center to anchor multiple efforts to challenge the criminalization, incarceration and abuse of low-income people and people of color.

This transcript is taken from his speech at the 2003 Bioneers Conference. The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights can be found in San Francisco, California or online at www.ellabakercenter.org. Further resources are included in the margins as you explore the Crossroads of Hope with Van Jones.

Food for Thought

Van presents three key ideas as the cornerstones of community. As an exercise, try to identify the history and influences that Labor, Land, and Love have on your day-to-day life.

Who are the original people that inhabited the land that you live on? What can you learn about them?

Do you know how your goods and services are produced?

Are you aware of the ecological community that you are part of?

Can you identify your social networks, the people and organizations that support you?

Everything that is good in the world comes from labor, the land and love, and I don't want to proceed without first honoring all three. So I want to thank the many people who, with all their work behind the scenes, make the Bioneers Conference happen. When I was backstage, I got a chance to eat beautiful California fruit, but we all need to remember that each of those strawberries was picked by a farmworker. Machines don't pick strawberries, and rich people won't pick strawberries, and you and I won't pick them either. Poor people far from home, missing their families, are in the fields right now, doing the work that makes all other work possible. Many of us here during this event stay at the hotel. Let's not forget the people scrubbing out the toilet for us, changing our sheets. Many of them are also far from home and make very little. We need to support their struggles when they seek to form unions and improve their lives.

With regard to the land, we need to remember that where we stand here in Marin County is the Ohlone people's land. They were exterminated by people who called them savages, but they were here for thousands of years in this part of what is now called California, and those "savages" had no homelessness and no environmental destruction. So let us never forget to honor those people whose land we now use and to learn from their example how to honor that land.

Finally, with regard to love, I'm blessed to have so many of the people I love here in this building. I wouldn't be anywhere without them, and I'm going to do my best to represent them here today.

Food For Thought

"From 1980 to 2002, the number of individuals incarcerated in the nation's prisons, jails, juvenile facilities, and detention centers quadrupled--from roughly 500,000 to 2,100,000 people. The U.S. has the largest prison system in the world and its impact influences the social, economic, and political life of all regions and sectors of America. Besides those behind bars, 2,200,000 individuals are employed in policing, corrections, and the courts, overshadowing the 1,700,000 citizens working in higher education and the 600,000 in public welfare. With 6,600,000 in prison and jail or on probation or parole, there are 8,800,000 persons either under the control of the correctional system or employed in the criminal justice sector."

– Statistics taken from Critical Resistance, a national organization working to end the Prison-Industrial Complex. Find a local chapter by visiting them online at: www.criticalresistance.org

"Nationwide, crime rates today are comparable to those of the 1970s, but the incarceration rate is four times higher than it was then. It's not crime that has increased; it's punishment."

– Mother Jones: Debt to Society
www.motherjones.com/prisons/

"California has the second highest youth incarceration rate in the country. It costs us more than \$80,000 per youth, per year...with a re-offense rate exceeding 90 percent."

– Books Not Bars: Transforming the CYA
www.booksnotbars.org



The Prison-Industrial Complex is an important component of the Gulag Economy that Van Jones is alerting us to. The Prison-Industrial Complex refers to the business side of prisons, from the private construction and administration of prisons to the growing relationship between prison labor and corporate profits.

Visit www.prisonactivist.org for detailed information on the relationship between corporations and the penal system.

How do you feel about use of prison labor for production of goods and services? What are the alternatives?

I want to bring to your attention something that is rarely discussed at environmental gatherings: We live in a gulag economy, and it will be impossible to achieve a truly “green” society unless we completely transform our current “prison-industrial complex” and incarceration-based economic system. The United States is the number one incarcerator in the world, jailing far more people per capita than China or Russia. We incarcerate a bigger percentage of our African American men than apartheid South Africa did, and sunny California has become the number one incarcerator of all the 50 states. In California we spend more money every year on prisons than on universities: We have built 21 prisons and only one university in the past 25 years. In the U.S. as a whole, when President Clinton came into office, there were a million people behind bars. When he left office there were two million, and 80 percent of all those people are in jail for nonviolent offenses.

Corporations are using the labor of prisoners to make products that you and I buy. Victoria’s Secret, Microsoft and a long list of major corporations are using prison labor, not in China or Cuba, but right here. Corporations that won’t give jobs to African Americans and Latinos in our communities will work us for pennies on the dollar behind bars, and then, when we get out, say that we are not employable because we are felons. Kids go to badly under-funded, overcrowded schools because so much money is going into incarceration. Right over here in Oakland, not far from where we sit, we have 30 kids in a classroom, and six books. We used to worry about the kids going to those congested schools and the chalk dust giving them asthma attacks. We don’t worry about that anymore. After October, there’s no chalk in the schools in Oakland, unless teachers are willing to buy the chalk out of their own pocket. That’s where we stand. When kids arrive at school, the police cars are already there at 7 o’clock in the morning. When poor kids have a pushing and shoving incident in the hallway these days, they don’t go to the principal’s office – they go to the precinct in handcuffs in a police car that has far better computers in it than the classroom they just left. When they get to the juvenile detention center, the adults who work there make more than their teachers back at school. It’s easier for a kid to go to prison than to get a scholarship to go to a community college right here in California. That is the gulag economy we live in, and those of us who want to see our society make a U-turn to a green economy have to understand that we’re starting from a mass incarceration-based economy in which corporations are profiting not just by destroying the land but by destroying the lives of kids who wind up as cheap labor behind bars.

Perhaps I’m asking a lot of you, and I’m sorry to do it because many of you already hold the candle of hope and truth in your communities. Some of you have been mistreated in your own lives and that’s part of why you have so much love and want to see things change. But I’m asking you to do more because you’re a critical part of what it’s going to

Food For Thought

"Once you begin to say, "This is my problem, this is our problem and I have a role to play," then you unleash the energy and creativities of untold millions of people to solve the problem. But as long as we distance ourselves from the problems, we not only cut ourselves off from other human beings, we cut ourselves off from the energies that we need to solve those problems in the first place." – Van Jones



From a backstage interview during PBS's Broadcast of the Human Rights play, "Speak Truth To Power." (www.pbs.org/speaktruthtopower/backstage.htm)

Keep Digging

Ready to get to work? Every community has a juvenile justice and penal system. Get involved. Find out how your community treats its struggling young people and make your voice heard if you think it isn't acceptable.

Volunteer with an organization that works in prisons or the justice system. There are Writing and Literacy programs, pre-release counseling programs and numerous others that do incredible work and would deeply appreciate your help. Be part of the solution. Contact your local detention facilities and speak to coordinators of educational programs or check out the database at www.motherjones.com/prisons/ for a useful state-by-state listing of programs and organizations.

take to turn the country around, and one of the great problems we have in our movements is that we suffer from what I call SDI – Strategic Deliberate Indifference – to everybody else's issues.

If the government imposed a policy on us that said, "You can't work with the African Americans – you can't work with the Latinos – you can't work with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement – you cannot do it," we would rise up because we would instantly understand that the government was trying to keep us apart from each other. But the government is not keeping us apart. George Bush is not keeping us apart. Ashcroft is not keeping us apart. It's the social walls that we build between ourselves that let these prison walls stand.

We let ourselves be divided. Those 21 prisons were built where rural, poor white people live, as economic development programs so that they could have jobs. There's a strong chance my kid is going to wind up in jail as a prisoner and a poor white person's kid is going to spend all day in jail as a prison guard. That is wrong. California shouldn't be spending billions of dollars to keep poor white kids in jail as prison guards, and poor black and Latino and Asian kids in jail as fodder for corporations. Poor communities don't have very much power, so they feel they have to take what they can get. But those kids whose lives are being thrown away have beautiful dreams. Many of them are so smart, so sophisticated and so funny, and this country needs their energy and creativity much more than they need this country.

A movement that is courageous and visionary on the environment but cowardly and ignorant about social issues will fail. A movement that is visionary and passionate on the social side, but is ignorant and indifferent on the ecological side will also fail. There is a light at the crossroads. There is a light at the crossroads. At the crossroads is where the hope is. At the crossroads the eco-innovators, the poor whites, the inner city youth need each other. Why? Because the eco-innovators need the government on their side, the way the government was on the nuclear power industry side, but you need a constituency for that. The inner city kids need jobs and so do the rural white kids.

What if we all stood together and said, "We want green jobs, clean energy jobs, not jails as a solution for California?" How much power would we have? A movement that is willing to take that position, that is willing to bring together the eco-innovators with the working-class whites, and people of color. That movement could say to the prison guards and the prisoners – "Come out of the jailhouse. There is work for you to do. We need you. There's a coastline to heal. We want to turn sunlight into electricity to keep your grandmama's house warm in the wintertime. Come out of the prison house."

Food for Thought

Van Jones is advocating for the integration of movements. He asks us to see a healthy environment, human rights and social justice as fundamentally related. This echoes what we know about the natural world – that all processes are interconnected. Take some time to explore the deeper connections that are implicit in this concept.

How are human rights issues related to environmental issues? Where do food and farming intersect with social and racial justice campaigns?

Look beyond accepted boundaries and walls – what other interrelationships can you imagine?

In light of these ideas, consider your own perspectives on the world. How can you broaden your own work or vision?

Food for Thought

Consider the challenge that Van presents to us – transforming our justice and penal system into a force for sustainability and restoration of communities and the environment. Set your mind free and imagine what is possible on a local and statewide level.

What are some 'green jobs' or projects you can imagine in your community?

What are the steps or changes that might need to take place within the penal system and society for this to occur?

What role could you, your school or your organization play in this shift?

A movement like that could redeem the jailer and the jailed if we would be willing to build it. The hope is that at the crossroads you can see the best thinking of the criminal justice movement, the restorative justice that people are talking about: We don't need retribution-based justice, punishment-based justice. Why can't our criminal justice system help restore the balance in the community, bring healing and help the people?

The last time our government was this misguided, people like us took responsibility and built the New Deal coalition that brought together workers, minorities, students, intellectuals and progressive capitalists. People picked up the government that had been put on the side of the robber barons and the despoilers of that day and put it back down on the side of the ordinary people again. I believe that we could together build a new version of the New Deal coalition for this century, and that's what I am asking you to do, because it's the only thing that will bring down the prison walls.

I heard a story that means a lot to me. I'm not absolutely sure of its veracity, but its message certainly feels true to me because it captures well what I think it is we need to do now. We build up all our different movements and organizations, and we're rightly proud of them. We want them to grow and meet their mission statement goals and get the next grant, and so on, but sometimes we focus so intently on our immediate goals that we miss the bigger picture and bigger opportunities for much bigger victories. This story is about a Special Olympics track and field race in which kids with all kinds of ailments, disabilities and challenges were participating. Those ten kids – with people telling them what they couldn't do and who they couldn't be – had made it all the way. They had worked hard to get to this final, as all Olympic athletes do, and winning a medal at such an event is an honor you carry with you your entire life. The gun went off, and the race began, but one of them fell down and couldn't get back up, and he started to cry. One by one the other kids stopped, and they all turned back. They went back, helped him up, joined arms, and they all crossed the finish line together.

That's what we've got to do. That's the kind of movement we have to build. All of us are going to fall down sometimes. We're going to have our shortcomings and blind spots and we're going to make mistakes. We're not always going to understand the right words to use or the right thing to say to each other. We don't know each other that well, and we're going to all fall down at times, but there's a greater victory to be had if we decide we're not going to leave anybody out, that we're not going to build a movement that wants to create an ecotopia but leaves out most of the people in California. A movement willing to partner with mushrooms but unwilling to partner with the African American mother across town isn't going to work.

The hope is at the crossroads.

Further Exploration of the Crossroads of Hope

Van Jones is the founder and National Executive Director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. An innovative model for a community human rights organization, the Ella Baker Center is home to a number of remarkable programs and projects, including Books Not Bars and Freedom Fighter Music, among others. To get involved and to find more information and resources visit the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights online at www.ellabakercenter.org.

Visit the Bioneers Website at www.bioneers.org to further explore this topic via articles, videos and audiotapes of Van Jones and many other brilliant thinkers from the Bioneers Conference Archives.

Books Not Bars is the Ella Baker Center's Alternatives for Youth program. Advocating for a new approach to youth incarceration, Books Not Bars is focused on transforming the California Youth Authority into a system that helps troubled kids instead of punishing them. Visit them online at www.booksnotbars.org.

The Mother Jones Magazine website on prisons is a good introduction and resource for understanding the current state of the penal system. A well designed project, Debt to Society consists of articles, organization listings, an incarceration atlas, and examples of solutions to this crisis. Visit: www.motherjones.com/prisons/.

The Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (CJCJ) was established to promote balanced and humane criminal justice policies that reduce incarceration and promote long-term public safety. A leading light in the movement to rethink our justice system, the CJCJ website hosts their research on current problems and new solutions. This incredible resource can be found at www.cjcj.org.

Speak Truth to Power is a human rights organization, a book, a play, a photographic exhibition and more. Dedicated to pushing the issue of human rights into the forefront of public consciousness, Speak Truth To Power aims to become a networking forum for human rights activists from around the world. The 'Speak Truth to Power Educational and Advocacy Packet,' developed in association with Amnesty International, is now available, free of charge. For a copy email Karen Robinson at Amnesty International (krobinso@aiusa.org) or call at (212) 633-4200. Visit www.speaktruth.org.

The Center for Young Women's Development (CYWD) is a shining example of the human investment approach advocated by Van Jones. Founded in San Francisco by Bioneer Lateefah Simon, CYWD works to ensure that young women who have been homeless, incarcerated, involved in the juvenile justice system, or otherwise severely impacted by poverty are able to achieve self-sufficiency. All of their programs have been designed using a holistic approach that recognizes each young woman as a whole person who already has the experience and strength necessary to become a powerful leader and agent of change. Visit them online at www.cywd.org.

Tune in to Hard Knock Radio, an award-winning talk show broadcast on KPFA/Pacifica Radio in Berkeley, CA. Listen online at www.hardknockradio.com for up-to-date news, stories and cultural highlights from an activist hip-hop perspective.

The Beat Within is a weekly publication of the writings and art from youth at Juvenile Hall in San Francisco. It is available at www.thebeatwithin.org.

Related books and resources:

- Visit Critical Resistance for a extensive list of books, video and other media focused on this issue. www.criticalresistance.org
- *Juvs*: A New Documentary film about the Juvenile Justice System produced by Leslie Neale. Visit www.juvs.net to order the film.
- Tara Herivel, Paul Wright : *Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America's Poor*
- Angela Davis: *Are Prisons Obsolete?*
The Prison Industrial Complex (Audio CD)
- Howard Zinn: *A Peoples History of the United States*.
- Kerry Kennedy Cuomo: *Speak Truth to Power* (Includes a profile of Van Jones)
- William Upsi Wimmsat: *No More Prisons*