Food for Thought
Sample FV Discussion Guide

Introduction
1. Stevenson begins his book by describing being “taken aback” by the idea that he had something to offer others, specifically those facing the death penalty. (pg. 6)
   Do you believe that you have something to offer the world?
   How did he find his passion?
   What are ways that we can find our own passion(s)?

2. Stevenson shares that he “had been struggling [his] whole life with the question of how and why people are judged unfairly.” (pg. 13)
   Can you relate to this question he describes?
   What other questions do you struggle with in your own life?

3. Stevenson describes his grandmother’s tight hugs. She tells him: “You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close.” (pg. 14)
   How does this relate to your own experiences and (mis)understandings?

4. Stevenson shares what he considers a humbling truth with us: “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.” (pg. 17)
   What is your reaction to this statement?
   What causes you to challenge or embrace it as ‘truth’?

Chapter 1
1. Have you ever had a conversation like Stevenson had with Judge Robert E. Lee Key?
   What was his response to the obstacles the judge attempted to put in his way?
   What are your reactions to obstacles? Difficult conversations?
   What can we learn from Stevenson’s response?

2. Have you read To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee (or watched the movie)?
   How does its fictional account compare to Bryan Stevenson’s work in the same town where it was set (and the movie filmed)?
   Can you think of other examples where we cherish fictional stories of justice, yet fail to respond to actual injustices around us?

3. How did laws regarding interracial relationships affect Tony Pace and Mary Cox?
   When Walter McMillian met Karen Kelly, what did Alabama’s state constitution state about interracial marriage?
   How have our laws throughout history regarding interracial marriage shaped the way we understand race and relationships today, if at all?

4. What was the evidence against Walter McMillian?
   What, if anything, is unsatisfying about this evidence?
Chapter 2

1. How did it feel reading Chapter 2, getting “closer to mass incarceration and extreme punishment in America”? (pg. 14)
   What surprised you the most about the conditions and deaths of prisoners that Stevenson described?

2. Stevenson relates a personal experience with police officers outside of his Atlanta apartment as 28-year-old lawyer. How did his knowledge as a lawyer help him? If he did not feel vindicated after meeting with the deputy chief, why did he not continue his to fight his case against the Atlanta Police? How can you relate to any parts of this story?

3. At the end of this chapter, Stevenson tells us about an interaction with an older black man that came to a talk he was giving at a church. What did this gentleman call his “scars, cuts, and bruises?” (pg. 46)
   Do you feel that way about your own scars?

4. Has anyone ever asked you what you were doing with your life, like this man asked Stevenson? In what ways is it be helpful to have others interested in our daily efforts and long-term goals?

Chapter 3

1. How did the threat of lynching affect McMillian? How does the threat of violence affect a community? How does it affect justice?

2. What are the reasons a community may feel a sense of relief when someone is charged with a crime that had been previously unsolved? Can you relate to this feeling when someone is ‘caught’?

3. In your own words, describe Alabama’s death row and “Yellow Mama.” How can you relate to Ralph Myers fears/decisions in this chapter?

4. How did the structure of the criminal justice system affect McMillian’s case? How has our jury system changed (or not changed) since the late 1800s? How did the descriptions in this book affirm or challenge your expectations of the U.S. criminal justice system?
Chapter 4

1. How long did Stevenson’s classmate from Harvard Law join him at the Equal Justice Initiative in Alabama? Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the challenges that you take on or that you find yourself facing each day?

2. Who is Herbert Richardson? What were the moments in his story that required the most empathy from you? Why?

3. In what ways are victims’ families well represented or misrepresented by our criminal justice system, specifically the prosecution?

4. How did Stevenson respond to Richardson’s execution? How did Stevenson’s experience affect you as a reader?

Chapter 5

1. Stevenson introduces us to Walter McMillian’s family in Chapter 5. How does it alter our perception of ‘the accused’ to consider their families, if at all?

2. Why is the title of this chapter ‘Of the Coming of John’ and how does it relate to McMillian’s case? How does it relate to our own communities?

3. Who is Darnell Houston? How does Stevenson’s time with Houston affect him?

4. Who is district attorney Tom Chapman? How does Stevenson’s time with Chapman affect him?

5. How do the interactions with the above two men challenge our ideas of justice?