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Not My Life: Filmmaker Robert Bilheimer's Latest Meditation on Good and Evil

"Anyone who thinks slavery ended with the 13th Amendment is not paying attention."
***–The New York Times* editorial, July 1, 2011**

Robert Bilheimer's remarkable film *Not My Life* (2012) begins with a black screen. The first thing you see, in stark white text, is this simple declarative sentence: "Human trafficking is slavery."

Then sunlight from above, piercing the surface of lapping, murky water, and a tiny boy, holding his breath and struggling to untangle a thick fishing net. This is Etse, whose whole life we could say is underwater, one of the scores of "fishing boys" who work Ghana's Lake Volta fourteen hours a day, year in and year out, on a single skimpy meal, unless they drown or perish from disease or injury. We don't learn his name until right before the final credits, during a epilogue that reports where seven of the film's figures are now – Etse, for example, rescued and reunited with his family, is back in school. What occurs on-screen in the highly-distilled, intervening eighty-plus minutes makes such consolation seem fragile indeed.

Bilheimer, who heads up Worldwide Documentaries from his home in East Bloomfield, a few miles below Rochester, New York, spent more than four years filming *Not My Life*. The second in a projected trilogy of films about "the way the world is" and "who we are and who we are not," *Not My Life* takes us to thirteen nations – Ghana, Senegal, India, Albania, Romania, Italy, Nepal, Cambodia, Guatemala, Uganda, Egypt, Brazil and – beginning twenty or so minutes in – to five locations inside the U.S., all the way from Midwestern prairie truck-stops to the household of a World Bank executive in the tony Washington, DC, suburb of Falls Church.

Leery of the numbing effect of too many numbers and committed to strong story-telling and film-as-craft, Bilheimer eschews all but the most telling and strategically placed statistics. More than 190 countries – every nation on earth – enslave people within or across their borders. More than 250 million acts of sexual violence are committed against under-aged girls each year within the U.S. More than 300,000 child soldiers fight in nineteen countries. For most of the last year or so, the conventional estimate of those enslaved globally has hovered at a round number of 27 million, but new estimates now

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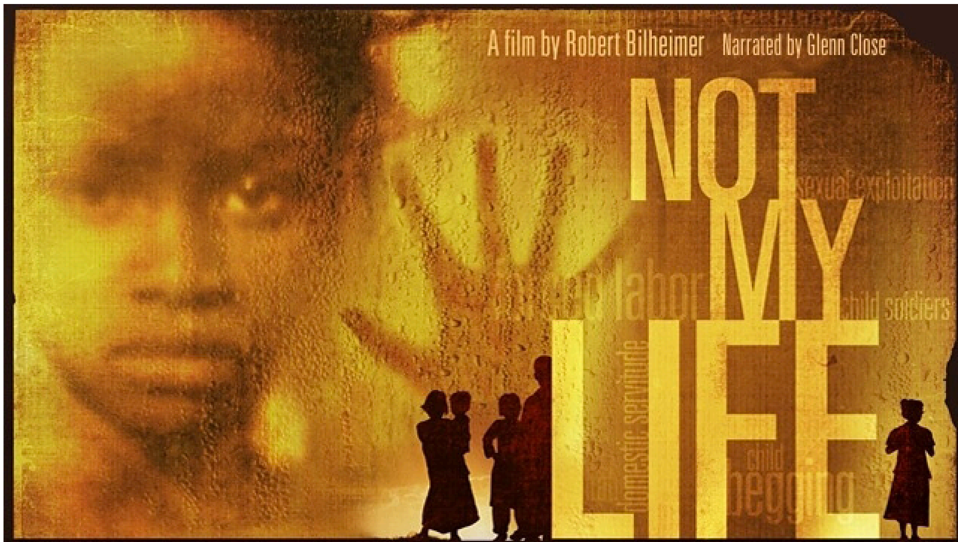
jump that to 29 million – despite the absence of open slave auctions in our public squares. According to the U.S State Department's Ambassador Luis CdeBaca, globally less than .001 % of slavery victims are freed or rescued every year, and only about 3,000 prosecutions a year end in convictions.



Bilheimer formed Worldwide Documentaries is 1985. His first feature, *The Cry of Reason, Beyers Naudé: An Afrikaner Speaks Out*, was Oscar-nominated in 1989. In 1992, he directed a filmed production of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* and completed production on *I'm Still Here: The Truth about Schizophrenia* (1996). *Not My Life* follows *A Closer Walk: A film about AIDS in the world* (completed in 2003, released 2006). The trilogy's projected third film is *Take Me Home*, broadly about our relationship with the environment. Courtesy Worldwide Documentaries.

On the other hand, hope glimmers even in unexpected places. In Upper Egypt, for example, there exist some 1,150 "girl-friendly" schools that have educated more than 30,000 girls, built in the center of small villages because families do not allow their daughters to walk alone to schools traditionally located just outside town, for fear of kidnapping by traffickers. Egypt's former first lady Suzanne Mubarak initiated the girl-friendly schools project, and Bilheimer told me most have remained open and are "valued and protected" despite the fall of the Mubarak regime. He filmed in the village of Abu Seer in April 2010, and premiered the original version of *Not My*

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Life, with a lengthier section on these schools, in Luxor, Egypt, at the International Human Trafficking Forum that December.

Nevertheless, Bilheimer eventually removed much of the material about the Mubarak school project from the final cut. He told me he'd wrestled with that decision because events of the Arab Spring clearly would date that portion of the film. Yet his contact with Suzanne Mubarak had convinced him of her sincerity about educating girls, and seemed to exemplify his own and South African Bishop Desmond Tutu's guiding belief – which Tutu appears on-screen to articulate in the final cut – that, no matter how flawed or seemingly wicked, "Each of us has the capacity to be a saint."

A second premier quickly followed at New York City's Lincoln Center in January 2011, and screenings in London. Some thirty focus-group screenings and many revisions later (including a complete do-over of the narration by Glenn Close late last summer), the final, slightly shorter version broadcast on CNN International, as part of the network's Freedom Project, over two nights on October 22 and 23, 2011. Worldwide Documentaries released the film on DVD last November.

On February 9 of this year, in partnership with the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication, *Stone Canoe Journal* hosted Robert Bilheimer for a screening of *Not My Life* here at Syracuse University. It was an evening of many events on campus, but when the lights came up, the auditorium was full, and most of the audience stuck around for a lengthy Q&A. As it happened, *Not My Life* screened the same evening in San Francisco; for a film without a conventional theatrical release, it has gotten around.

Since then, Bilheimer has started organizing for his next film, *Take Me Home*, but he hasn't left *Not My Life* behind. Instead, he's continued to participate in the quickening movement to end modern slavery – for example, this past summer he began a crowd-sourcing campaign through Indiegogo.com that makes screenings of *Not My Life* available for communities seeking to raise grassroots awareness and fuel efforts to combat trafficking.

After a long lunch at Bilheimer's home, while he was still in the midst of that final edit before the CNN International broadcast, a scheduled conference call cut short his answer to a question he said he wanted to tackle: "whether I feel my films have really made a difference in the world."

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What about this film makes it worth watching and, a year later, is there any evidence that it has made a difference?

"Human trafficking is slavery."

Not My Life makes this assertion quietly as it begins, and then offers its evidence in a number of ways. Because Bilheimer filmed on location over a period of years and around the world, the film has a deep familiarity with the territory and a framework of convincing scenes that establish that a range of practices are widespread – forced labor and begging, sex trafficking that involves children as young as five or six, and child military conscription in war zones. Some of these involve interaction, even clashes, with traffickers that demonstrate the brazenness of those who are unaccustomed to – even baffled by – any challenge on their home turf, and who are, in many cases, part of exceedingly well-organized networks.

In Senegal, Bilheimer investigated the *Talibae*, some 50,000 street beggars, young boys sent to Koranic schools who then fall into the hands of false teachers who exploit them. Many die from sickness or beatings if they don't make their daily quota, or suffer the constant stomach and skin ailments resulting from a diet of garbage and rotten food. In one sunny village square, a boy shyly holds up his diseased hands for Bilheimer's camera, only to have an adult hand roughly snatch him off-screen by his ear and drag him, unresisting, into the crowd.

In the Indian city of Delhi, Bilheimer films the flocks of children sorting mountains of refuse in the vast Ghazipour Landfill. Most wear flip-flops amid hazardous materials that burn their eyes, their lungs and their skin to the bone. It's illegal for kids to be there, but the city needs them to process the garbage. Later, we follow Balkrishna Acharya of Mumbai's Rescue Foundation on a brothel raid during which ten tiny girls are coaxed from a four by three foot hidden closet and an attic crawl space. The brothel madam erupts in a tirade; she sees the raid as stealing her means of making a living.

In Svay Pak, a small fishing village on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Bilheimer introduces us to the bargain basement of the Mekong Delta's global sex tourism destination. The only reason foreigners come to these boardwalks between row upon row of shacks is to pick out a girl and have her delivered to their guest house

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in the city, for a few hours or a week or a month. Don Brewster of AGAPE Restoration Center tells Bilheimer that the girls they have rescued say the worst – the most abusive clients – are the Americans.

In Guatemala City, Bilheimer accompanies local police and Gary Haugen and Pablo Villeda of International Justice Mission (IJM) – Haugen is now IJM's president and was honored this past June by the US State Department – to arrest one Efrain Ortiz on charges of violence against women and child exploitation. Ortiz sexually abused all five of his daughters and sent them and his two sons to collect garbage. What's most riveting here is the bewilderment on Ortiz' face as he's handcuffed, the disbelief that he has done anything that he should even bother hiding. His neighbors watch the whole thing. Pablo Villeda says, "The message is, you don't mess with your kids. You just don't do it. You could actually get in trouble. This neighborhood saw police doing their job today, in their uniforms."

Efrain Ortiz drew a prison term of ninety-five years. Historic, yes, and a win for rule of law. But over lunch, Bilheimer noted, "Well, we had to rent the car for the police to do that arrest."

Svay Pak, a village outside Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the compound of shacks and boardwalks where clients come to "pick out a girl and have her delivered." Cambodia claims they began cracking down on child sex trade in 2003, but Bilheimer filmed here in March of 2010. In 2012 the U.S. State Department launched the collaborative Mekong Delta Initiative among several nations to focus especially on providing more options to women and girls. Courtesy Worldwide Documentaries, photo by Craig Braden & Devon Higby.

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Not My Life contains an array of almost thirty anti-trafficking activists and workers, from UNICEF and UNODC (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime) and the US State Department and FBI, NGOs including IJM, Polaris (which runs the 24-hour-hotline in the US), the Somaly Mam Foundation in Cambodia made famous by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristoff, Free the Slaves, Terre des hommes, New York City's GEMS (Girls Education and Mentoring services), the Senegal-based TOSTAN and other community development bodies, to Bucharest-based investigative journalist Paul Radu, and some activists who chose not to be identified by organization. They provide often eloquent commentaries on the causes, extent and likely solutions to human trafficking, of course, as well as estimates of numbers.

It comes as no surprise that modern slavery mostly affects women and girls, or that poverty drives it; but the degree of violence is startling. Bilheimer, whose first feature film addressed South Africa's *apartheid*, says even there, in that era, he did not see such wanton cruelty.

Vincent Tournecuillert of Terre des hommes tells Bilheimer, "When I was in Albania I heard about a training facility in the countryside for the girls who would then be sent to the market, mainly in Italy but also to other countries – there was execution by shooting or burning alive, to show the other girls."

Also in Bucharest, Iana Matel of Reaching Out concurs with the level of violence. "After beating up a girl," she adds, "you bury her alive with just her face showing – just amusing yourself."

These comments occur in the section where Bilheimer and journalist Paul Radu introduce us to a couple of pimps who served brief sentences in Zoha Prison for selling girls. Typically they get only six or seven years for this, as opposed to twenty for selling drugs, and both these guys are back on the streets by film's end. Radu reports that the boyish, soft-spoken Ovidiu comes from a wealthy Romanian family and a generation "having a hard time right now." Ovidiu remorselessly explains he started when he was fourteen, "fooling around," by kidnapping a prostitute and selling her, and smiles as he describes how he treats them.

"I don't give them food, I beat them – with my hands, my feet… they will never be normal women."

Such an arresting encounter leads us into the real heart of *Not My Life*, the stories of those who have returned – or not. Before the

film gets to the Mumbai brothel raid, lest American viewers form too easy a judgment of that society, we meet Angie from Wichita. Angie "had parents and went to a private school" when she and two friends decided on a lark to run away. Their ride took them to Oklahoma City. On camera, she describes her first night working the truck stops, when she and her friend Melissa went to one big rig cab after another. At the first one, she says, "Melissa went through his wallet and he had grandkids as old as us… I had to do it so he [their pimp] wouldn't hurt her. We went to three trucks and we still didn't have enough money."

Angie paused here and her voice broke. "I would never forgive myself if he hurt her because I didn't do what I was supposed to."

The arrest of Efrain Ortiz in Guatemala, December 2009. Bilheimer rented the car used to carry out the arrest, resulting from work of the International Justice Mission (IJM), whose Gary Haugen, Amy Roth and Pablo Villeda were involved. The U.S. DOS named Haugen one of ten "TIP Heroes" at this year's June release of its annual *TIP (Trafficking in Persons) Report*. Courtesy Worldwide Documentaries, photo by Amy Roth/IJM.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation rescued Angie during Operation Stormy Nights, one of their first large-scale U.S. anti-trafficking operations, conducted between 2003 and 2007.

They convicted fifteen pimps and traffickers of running girls as young as eight or nine in the parking lots of Midwestern truck-stops. FBI agent Mike Beaver, a diffident man, notes, "It's not just truck drivers. We're seeing them purchased and abused by both white collar and blue collar individuals."

Quickly illustrating this, Bilheimer fades to a shot of two girls in their early teens changing into their "work clothes" beside the curb one night on K Street in Washington, DC, followed by Sheila White, a stocky, soft-voiced young Black woman, who cautions, "It can happen to anyone."

"It gets to the point where you're numb," Sheila White says. "I mean, I got beat up in front of the Port Authority in New York. It was like, two years after 9/11, so security out there was, you know, massive. Lots of police officers. Times Square is a busy place. You would think that somebody would stop and say something. Or ask you if you're alright, if you need help. But it didn't happen. I mean, he even had time to smoke a cigarette. You feel like you're not even a person."

This does not mean there's an "American section" to *Not My Life*. Indeed, one of the strengths of Bilheimer's narrative is that he shuttles between such American cameos and those from other societies, back and forth across the film. Eventually the experiences of young women with whom an American audience may more readily identify become one among many woven into the fabric of global trafficking, each lending the others a mutual depth and resonance.

Ovidiu is a small-time pimp who was interviewed in February 2007 while serving a brief sentence in Zoha Prison for sex trafficking of young women in Bucharest, Romania. By the time *Not My Life* was released, he was back on the street. Courtesy Worldwide Documentaries, photo by Craig Braden.

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Bucharest-based investigative journalist Paul Radu, left, with director Robert Bilheimer, February 2007, in Romania. Radu says the effects of the 1990s global recession have lingered in parts of Eastern Europe, making many more vulnerable to the promises and schemes of sex traffickers. Courtesy Worldwide Documentaries, photo by Craig Braden.

A signature theme in all of Bilheimer's films has been family. Perhaps the most wrenching interview in *Not My Life* is that of Sophea Chhun, who works with the girls rescued from sex trafficking and sheltered with the Cambodia-based Somaly Mam Foundation. Mam herself appears in the film, as does her shelter and the girls in it, some of whose very tender age will give any viewer pause. But it's Chhun who reminds us most pointedly that every person anywhere enslaved is also someone's daughter or son. With Somaly Mam from the early days – the foundation launched in 2007 – Chhun has been talking about how "children have resilient spirit" when she begins to recount how her own daughter, Sokny, twenty-three years old at the time, was kidnapped in 2008 while working with the Foundation's rescued girls.

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Most likely Sokny too was sold and in the years since then, “the police treated it like she wasn’t important,” perhaps because Sokny was an adopted daughter. Showing snapshots of the young woman, Sophea Chhun says, “You try to bury yourself in work, but every now and then you have a glimmer of her” – when another young woman who looks like Sokny turns a certain way for an instant, or when Chhun hears a snatch of some popular song that Sokny liked.

Witnessing this capacity to see our own children’s fate in others prepares us for the film’s final section, which commences with narrator Glenn Close’s quiet, “We are all members of the human family and it is time to come home.”

Bilheimer struggled with this complex and tightly edited finale perhaps longest of any part of the film. Lines like this one, given to Close – or Bishop Tutu’s observation about our inherent capacity to do good, or former Northern Ugandan child soldier Grace Akallo’s question, “I just want to know, why?” – have a simple declarative power that distills what comes before and so makes this epilogue’s handful of thumbnails deeply resonant. Brazilian human rights advocate Leo Sakomoto only appears once in the film, and Bilheimer gives him the last word: “I can’t seize a good life while there are people living like animals. Not because I’m a good person, not because it’s my duty, but because they are human – like me.”

Really *Not My Life* is what Bilheimer had come to see, in the long hiatus between the film’s first Luxor premiere in late 2010 and its eventual final cut last fall, as “a meditation on good and evil.” Elsewhere, Bilheimer has written, “In his time, confronting human-on-human violence, Abraham Lincoln wrote, *if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong*. When I first read that sentence, I was stunned by its moral logic. Here was the essence of *Not My Life*.”

And also the essence of Bilheimer’s own pivotal insight, stated in four words as the film opens: “Human trafficking is slavery.”

II.

But, we may be inclined to ask, the “real” slavery is over with, right? In terms of the kind of social consensus behind statements that begin, “Everybody knows…,” perhaps we are changing our minds about that.

The 21st century international legal framework for human trafficking arises from the Palermo Protocols that the United Nations

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adopted in 2000 in Palermo, Italy, along with the Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime. There are three protocols: the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children; the Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air;* and the *Protocol Against the Illicit Manufacturing and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition.*

Now widely known simply as "Palermo," the trafficking protocol entered into force on Christmas Day 2003. Palermo obligates ratifying states to introduce their own national anti-trafficking legislation. By June of this year, a total of 150 parties, including 117 countries, had signed. The U.S. signed in December of 2000, but did not ratify the protocol as binding until November of 2005. (However, Congress had passed and President Bill Clinton signed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act a few months earlier, in October 2000. The TVPA made human trafficking a federal crime and provides funds to combat trafficking and help victims; it also created a task force, chaired by the Secretary of State, which coordinates among federal agencies to implement policies against trafficking.)

It might seem now ironic that Palermo falls under the jurisdiction of UN's Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and not under the UN's Human Rights office. Perhaps there is an available legal vocabulary about illicit commerce that makes this a pragmatic and strategic choice, but does the remedy also unwittingly reinforce the problem – that of defining humans as chattel?

As anyone who has seen Steven Spielberg's new film *Lincoln* knows, it was just this distinction – the Emancipation Proclamation confiscated slaves, as property, only from those states in rebellion, because it was wartime, and perhaps only until the war ended – that made Lincoln's pursuit of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution so urgent.

And if we look back now, how did we see all this out there in the stew of popular culture, say, five years ago? Well, in February 2007, Robert Bilheimer was in Bucharest, Romania, interviewing two young smirking, unremorseful pimps in Zoha Prison. He also interviewed Paul Radu, the investigative journalist who founded the Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, who noted that the 1990s recession had hit Eastern Europe especially hard, with still-lingering effects such as rampant, cross-border trafficking.

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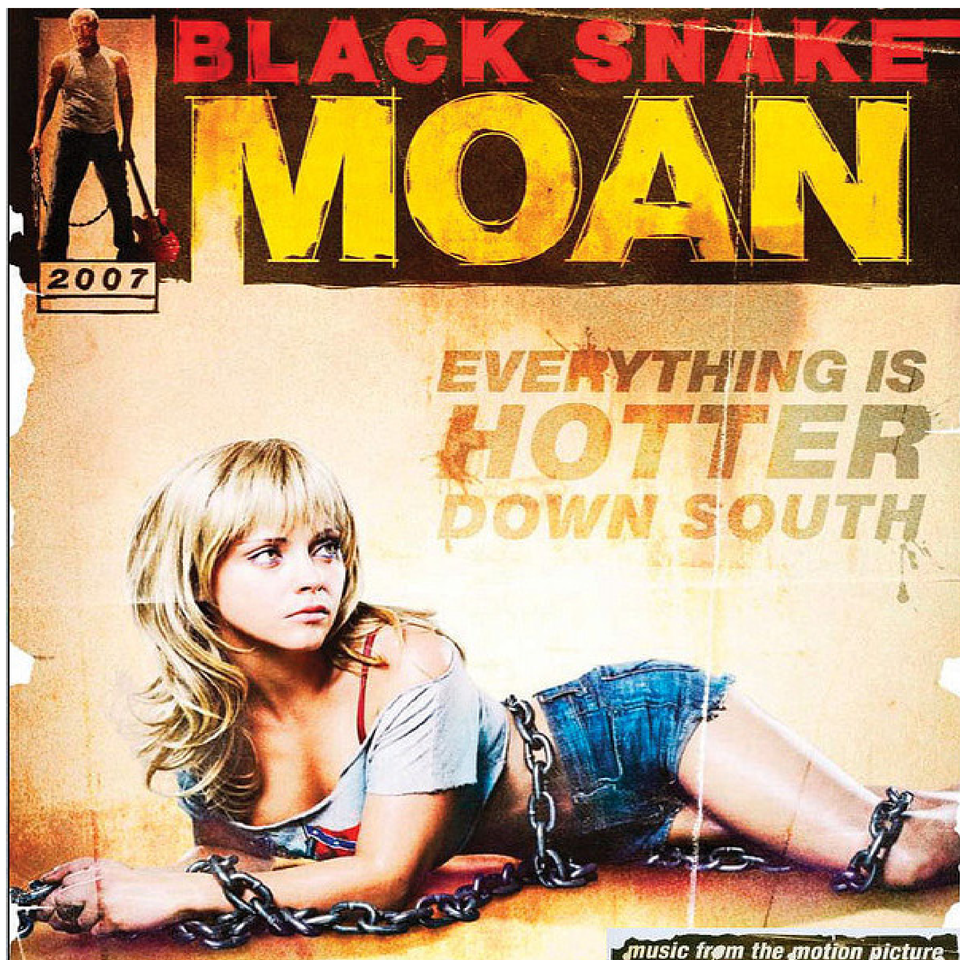
Just a month later, in March of 2007, director Craig Brewer – whose 2005 box office success, *Hustle & Flow*, took as its hero a Memphis pimp who tries to break into Hip-Hop – released his new feature film, *Black Snake Moan. Hustle & Flow*'s Hip-Hop theme, "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp," won an Oscar for best motion picture song. Here is one of three variants of the major image used for *Black Snake Moan*'s movie poster and DVD case, featuring Christina Ricci as the troubled, sex-obsessed Rae Duell, in chains and not much else, and Samuel L. Jackson as Lazarus, who rescues her from a near-fatal beating and, eventually, from herself.



Craig Brewer's film *Black Snake Moan* (2007, Paramount Pictures) was marketed with tantalizing images of one of the lead actors, Christina Ricci, scantily clad in chains and not much else, an example of the lurid use pop culture has made of the term "slavery." Photo Mike Atherton/Sizemore.

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Jackson appears in two of the images, one by himself (titillation to some audiences as a Black man in chains), tangled up in the tether that Lazarus improvises in his country shack to restrain Rae, and one with Ricci (adding a visual suggestion of interracial sexual bondage to the mix). The chain is the common element. In one scene still vivid to my mind's eye, Rae is outside in the garden and takes off at a dead run. I still wince at the instant that chain yanks her right off her feet, because I know that the camera angles and sound effects that conjure fake on-screen fist-fights are not protecting the actress here.

As films, both *Hustle & Flow* and *Black Snake Moan* have more to recommend them than either of these re-caps or the calculated choice of their marketing images suggest. And two films do not an exhaustive analysis make. But my point is what they tell us, especially for broader popular culture, about how, by mid-decade – just as Robert Bilheimer embarked on shooting his movie about modern slavery – we had largely and unwittingly come to view the whole notion of "slavery."

First, that other slavery – the historical slavery – was over. Was this not the victory of the British abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and, later, the victory of our own Emancipation Proclamation and 13th Amendment? It's taken a while to crystallize in my mind, but whatever we've casually thought "human trafficking" was – up until the very recent shift I think we are in the midst of now – it wasn't *that*. We've called it something else – "trafficking," the kind of mechanistic (and actually not very precise) word that comes into use in times of rapid slippage that even the language reflects when we start turning nouns and verbs into each other.

So if slavery were "over," the term itself becomes an artifact, available for re-purposing and metaphorical use. And what has "slavery" come to mean by the early 21st century, if it even shows up? I think we've turned "slavery" into a kind of atavistic throw-back. The word and its trappings – chains, for example – are good for evoking what's lurid, extreme, exotic, melodramatic, over-heated. It does the job of hyperbole. We find it in the confessional tabloid headline – *"I was a teen-age sex slave"* – or in pulp fiction's paperback covers, or on movie posters that advertise a struggle to contain salacious desire. Think about it. In contrast to the broad hint of forbidden, walk-on-the-wild-side allure that "slavery" takes on after its original meaning has fallen into disuse (which also matches up with some fantasies that

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women "want it like this"), "trafficking" becomes just – sordid.

In order to unmask "human trafficking" as "modern slavery" – to portray "the world the way the world is" and ourselves "as who we are" – Bilheimer must reclaim the original term and convince us that what is happening now is what happened then: highly organized and pervasive, intentional, highly profitable and, even without shackles or auctions in the town square, fully as coercive and wantonly cruel. Statistics are insufficient for this, although they do tell us there's a lot of it.

A second task requires the rescue of modern slaves from representation as exotic creatures, to restore their humanity and make them – a favorite undergraduate word these days – "relatable." Finding this quality in outsiders is a particular gift Bilheimer has as a filmmaker. He nearly always tells individual stories in the context of family and community, and he captures that threshold moment that we reach quickly when anything seriously threatens "our" children. Doing this requires another kind of observation – about the character of traffickers and rescuers alike, the resilience of modern slavery's victims, and the traits of slavery itself in the modern world.

Finally, *Not My Life*, like all Robert Bilheimer's films, casts its subject in language that questions what each of our own claims to humanity is exactly made of. In every Bilheimer film, there is someone who asks why, someone deeply baffled at how others could behave as they do toward other humans, deeply mystified by what such people could be thinking. As often as it is the reformer or the activist, it is the one on whose very head such trouble falls.

In his recent book, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (2010), Princeton philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah investigates what it would take to stop the honor killings of women and girls in Pakistan's Pashtun communities, so he looks for common features in previous moral revolutions. He asks in detail how three practices ended: dueling among European gentlemen to settle insults, foot-binding of upper class Chinese women to make them more competitive on the marriage market and tellingly, the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade via the British campaign to abolish slavery during a period when, simultaneously, some in England also sought to argue that the American colonists themselves were undeserving of freedom when they permitted and profited by the enslavement of others.

Appiah asks what it took for actual change to occur, because in each case evidence of harm and logical arguments against such practices were relatively well-known already, yet weren't enough. Appiah concludes it took an appeal to "honor," to what kind of man or woman any of us wish to be, as we understand that. This appeal to "who we really are" – though cynics and sophisticates sometimes dismiss the very idea as a will-o-the-wisp – shows up in every Bilheimer film.

From that perspective, writes Appiah, the world seems new and the steps forward clear. "'What were they thinking?' we ask about our ancestors," Appiah writes, "but we know, a century hence, our descendants will ask the same thing about us. Who knows what will strike them as strangest?"

If we were to remember who we really are and what trafficking really is, we could not allow it to persist. This is not a syllogism one reaches by statistics alone.

As an observation, there seems to be considerable overlap between Appiah's philosophical notions of honor as the spring for effective moral revolutions and a whole range of spiritual and transformational disciplines, east and west, whose vocabulary stresses in particular one's "true identity" as spiritual (or at least larger than oneself) and make recognition of having this nature in common with others the basis for mutual care and responsibility. As we'll see next, Bilheimer's work clearly has deep roots in his father's social justice work with the World Council of Churches as well as his own vast, working familiarity with faith-based projects that address the issues he's concerned about. Yet he shows little interest in conventional proselytizing. For example, I asked him about the meaning of the title of his AIDS film, *A Closer Walk* (2003). I wondered, "Is that something like not just 'talking the talk,' but getting closer to 'walking the walk'?"

"Yes, exactly!" he said, nodding – an epigraph right before the credits says simply, "Walk the walk," but still. Later I stumbled across a reference to Closerwalk Ministries, founded in 1981 by Father Harold Cohan, a Louisiana Jesuit who died in 2001. In 2010, Sister Eugenia Bonetti – who appears in *Not My Life*, talking about rescuing girls from traffickers in Italy – moved to Baton Rouge to work with women and girls there through Closerwalk. There's also Closer Walk of Upper New York, a network in mostly smaller communities. They explain

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their heritage as ecumenical, arising from Episcopal and Roman Catholic cooperation, their purpose as “to further one’s individual walk with Christ and empower disciples to impact the world with the Gospel,” and their group’s scriptural basis in *Luke 24:13-35*, in which two disciples on the road to Emmaus after Christ’s death are joined by a third walker, initially unrecognized, who explains these events to them. So is the title a discreet nod to the like-minded?

More intriguing is that Bilheimer lets go countless opportunities to plug any particular faith and instead focuses persistently on the task in the world to which each calls its adherents. This non-denominational approach casts a wide net and is echoed in his aim to eliminate the “preachy, campaign-y” parts from the last segment of *Not My Life*.

III.

Already a veteran of more than thirty professional regional theatre productions, Bilheimer set out to change direction mid-life and enter filmmaking because he grasped the possibilities of expanding his audience exponentially (and further with television broadcasts) and because film was also an aesthetically congenial fit for him. That is, film could reach lots of people in a way particularly worth reaching them. He’s commented on this from time to time, but he writes this in his Director’s Note for *Not My Life* (Facebook/NotMyLifeFilm):

> Film has proven to be a profoundly democratic, enormously accessible, and vibrant way of communicating with one another. And at its best, it can also have the powerful, private, and redemptive effect that a work of art has upon an individual soul.

Looking back, it’s possible to discern that Robert Bilheimer’s films have been part of a number of pivotal moments that have, as Appiah notes in describing moral revolutions, “involve[d] a rapid transformation in moral behavior, not just moral sentiments.” If we cannot say he single-handedly and literally “caused” these changes, he has been in enough right places at the right times to claim a spot in the first row of critical mass.

This has been so from his first film, which tackled *apartheid* in South Africa, and in his subsequent documentaries, which have grappled in succession with the social stigma and stereotypes surrounding schizophrenia, the global AIDS epidemic, modern slavery

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and, if he has his way with the next one, our urgent relationship with the planet.*

Christiaan Frederick Beyers Naudé (1915–2004), subject of Robert Bilheimer's *The Cry of Reason, Beyers Naudé: An Afrikaner Speaks Out*, Oscar-nominated in 1989 for best documentary.

Over 1987-88 he completed *The Cry of Reason, Beyers Naudé: An Afrikaner Speaks Out*, which Hollywood's Motion Picture Academy nominated for an Oscar as best documentary in 1989. A leading clergyman in the Dutch Reformed Church on track to a powerful future, perhaps even high political office, Dr. Naudé had sharply changed course in mid-life too and in the early 60s became hugely instrumental in the drive to overturn South Africa's system of enforced racial separation, *apartheid*.

While *Cry of Reason* remains a riveting film today – I think it should be part of every Doc 101 course that young filmmakers take – certainly part of that Oscar attention lay in the momentum of world opinion and the quickening changes

* Something of an anomaly to this is Bilheimer's one fiction film, a filmed production of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* which the Smithsonian Institution's Visual Press released on VHS as part of *Beckett Directs Beckett* (1992). This project came out of three Beckett-directed productions in 1985 at California's San Quentin Prison. Beckett directed his own works *Waiting for Godot*, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Endgame* as stage pieces with the San Quentin Players (SQ Drama Workshop). They toured Europe and parts of Asia. The performances were taped in Paris and aired on PBS in the US. *Godot* and *Krapp* are slated for eventual DVD release. Bilheimer had directed *Endgame* previously while he was Len Cariou's associate artistic director at the Manitoba Theatre Center, where it was very well received. The CBC named Bilheimer Director of the Year for *Endgame* and a second production, Arthur Miller's *The Price*. This recognition may explain how he became involved in the filmed Beckett set. The original set of three VHS tapes is now out of print, although a few (very pricey) copies crop up sometimes online. Bilheimer told me he didn't own a copy and he was surprised to hear that his *Endgame* is now also on YouTube.

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in South Africa at the time of the film's release – which the film, in turn, boosted by its critical reception, fed back into. The South African writer Mark Mathabane narrates *Cry of Reason*, something of a catch for Bilheimer that stamped the film with invaluable street cred. Mathabane's acclaimed 1986 autobiography, *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa* was still a new sensation. The year after the Oscar nomination, South African President Frederik de Klerk released Nelson Mandela from prison and began negotiations to end *apartheid*. In 1991, South Africa officially abolished the interlocking laws holding *apartheid* in place. In 1994 South Africa elected Mandela its President, ending the decades-long rule of the white supremacist Nationalist Party, which had implemented *apartheid* immediately upon coming to power in 1948.

A few accounts date *apartheid*'s demise a mere fifteen or so years before, from the Soweto riots of 1976. Students in that poor Black district of Johannesburg protested a 1974 government edict to conduct all classes in the nation in a mix of Afrikaans and English which cut them off from subjects leading to professional advancement. They met swift repression, with casualty estimates ranging from one hundred seventy-six killed to seven hundred. In the next year activist Steve Biko was beaten to death in detention, his partner and children's mother, Mamphele Ramphele, was banned, and the United Nations condemned the regime's policies and behavior; thousands were detained, tortured and killed in this massive security crack-down. The Nationalist regime banned Beyers Naudé for seven years, beginning in 1977, a form of official silencing and isolation so severe that his wife Ilse may best sum it up when she explains in *Cry of Reason* that she could not sit with him and another adult in their own home.

But the roots of *apartheid*'s rise and fall are significantly older and deeper, beginning with the Dutch East India Company's first toehold there in 1652 as a commercial venture. Many Americans watching this film may be unaware that *apartheid*'s birth in 1948 represented, for South Africa's Afrikaner community, close to three centuries of upheaval, as Dutch and British business and political interests competed for land, gold and diamonds, playing off European settlers against each other and native Africans, the Dutch (or Boers) moving deeper inland to set up new refuges which the British then simply annexed. They fought two brutal and protracted wars – the First (1880-81) and Second (1899-1902) Boer Wars – and suffered through

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an unforgiving reconstruction before, in 1910, the British combined the Cape Colony, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State to create the Union of South Africa.

The Second Boer War was especially harsh. It was longer and caused more British casualties than even the Crimean War. About 30,000 Black African conscripts joined British troops in a scorched earth campaign that included burning, killing livestock, salting fields and poisoning wells, and emptying vast tracts of countryside to break the Boers' long guerilla fight. Held in British concentration camps, some 26,000 Boer women and children died of hunger or disease; another 26,000 Boer POWs were sent overseas to other British colonies.

Boers who refused to pledge loyalty to the new Union of South Africa – called "*Bittereinders*" – chose exile, though many later returned. In 1915 these formed the core of the new Nationalist Party. In 1918 four men founded the Broederbond, a secret, all male Afrikaner group whose religious framework included a Calvinist belief in predestination. One was Rev. Jozua Naudé, who served in the Second Boer War as pastor to military hero General Christiaan Frederick Beyers (for whom he named his son), and who went on to occupy a string of major national political posts.

So the son was Beyers Naudé. Following his father, he studied theology at Stellenbosch University and then joined the Broederbond (at twenty-five its youngest member). In 1940 he married and became pastor to a DRC church in Cape Town. Twenty years passed. He was now pastor of Aasvoëlkop in Johannesburg, perhaps the most elite congregation in the country. From this pulpit, after a series of shocking, even terrifying realizations that he in no way welcomed, he condemned *apartheid* in September 1963, and effectively resigned from the DRC and any hope of future worldly success as he might have conceived it up till then.

Bilheimer structures *Cry of Reason* around two sets of parallels, factual events and spiritual kinship. The events that scaffold the story's narrative are Beyers Naudé's two farewell sermons – the first in 1963, and the second in September 1987, this from a very different, mixed-race church in Alexandra Township, when he actually did retire – and of course the man's radical reinvention that occurs between these two events.

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On-screen Naudé describes in detail leaving the pulpit the first time, taking off his vestments before the congregation and, following the custom, repairing with Ilse to the church door to greet the congregation as they left the building. He describes the mood after the last Aasvoëlkop sermon as funeral-like: some worshippers wept and others simply shunned him as they passed, making no acknowledgement. Bilheimer filmed the second farewell sermon and customary church-door greeting afterward. This time: singing, warmth, physical embrace, tears of joy on both sides.

Much of the power of *Cry of Reason* comes from its appreciation of thick family networks operating for Afrikaner and Black African figures alike, and what costs and obligations such loyalties incur. And leading Black South Africans – clergy such as Allen Boesak, Frank Chikane, and T.S. Farisane (whose torture in detention put him in the hospital for one hundred and six days) – understood exactly what Naudé risked and endured.

"They might've forgiven someone who was a lesser light," says Bishop Desmond Tutu in the film, for example, of elite Afrikaner wrath against Naudé's defection. "But he, with that kind of father, who had that kind of record in the Anglo-Boer War, and he having been to Stellenbosch, the seed-bed of Afrikaner nationalism – had he gone into politics he would almost certainly have ended up as prime minister."

The earlier Sharpville Massacre of March 21, 1960, when sixty-nine people died during protests against the Pass Laws – most shot in the back or side, Naudé tells us – brought particular notice to *apartheid*'s harsh effects on Black families. Under South Africa's Black "homelands" and migrant labor systems, men only went home once a year for a month's visit. But the year before Sharpville, at the urging of some fellow clergy, Naudé visited the living quarters in a miners' compound.

"I said to myself, what is my responsibility?" he recalls in the film. "Where do I go from here? I remember it so well. I went into the mine compounds in Johannesburg where male, so-called single men were housed and the terrible conditions under which they lived. It is evil, it is inhumane."

Later he says, "My discovery was in fact a shattering one, because it meant that the whole moral and ethical basis to the Afrikaner's thinking, the church's justification of *apartheid*, of separate churches,

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of everything which the Afrikaner stood for, fell away. It crumbled."

And again, later: "This discovery made me terribly afraid. I realized suddenly what it would cost to start stating this conviction to my own people."

At the University of Cape Town when Bilheimer made this film, Mamphele Ramphele, who had gone on to create a whole new model for community development in South Africa, reflected, "As a mother, I worry a lot. My children concretize the future for me. Any society that can detain children – we might not have a future."

Bilheimer singles out Grace Akallo in *Not My Life* and highlights her question, "Why?" *Cry of Reason* contains similar inquiries about what makes us human and how we behave toward one another. Naudé says, "It should be so evident that here people are suffering. How is it possible not to see that?" And in *Two Dogs and Freedom*, a collection of writings from Soweto schoolchildren, a sixteen year old boy wonders, "You ask yourself the question, which has no answer, why did God create a human being?"

There's also a second implicit parallel structure to *Cry of Reason*, one of spiritual kinship between two sons of powerful fathers, who both changed course in midlife. You could miss this entirely unless you're watching the film's closing credits closely and see the brief dedication text – *Very special thanks to Rev. Robert S. Bilheimer, Convener of Cottesloe, Counselor to us all* – and then have a mind to dig a little deeper.

In 1984, Beyers Naudé's banning was suddenly lifted and very shortly he was called to replace Desmond Tutu as General Secretary of the (non-Afrikaner) South African Counsel of Churches. Of this whiplash reversal of fortune, Tutu says in the film, "Everyone accepted it – at a funeral in Craddock they carried him shoulder-high" – there's footage of Naudé and Rev. Allen Boesak aloft in a sea of people – "it was a tribute to what people saw him stand for, but also a message to white people."

With deadpan understatement, Naudé remarks, "If ever I needed a kiss of death, that [funeral procession] was the final one. But," he adds after a beat, "I also realized, as far as the Black community was concerned, this was a singular honor." Another beat. "Never exploit it, as long as you live."

So you learn a good deal about Bilheimer from what he leaves out

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too. Mirroring Naudé's determination never to take advantage of his place among Black South Africans, Bilheimer eschews exploiting his own father's part in the story. His father's part is almost certainly why Naudé agreed to this film after rejecting all previous requests.

In 1948, as South Africa's Nationalist Party was spending it new mandate and putting *apartheid* into place, the World Council of Churches organized and held its first assembly in the city of Amsterdam and, as it happens, South Africa was a founding member. Rev. Robert Speery Bilheimer, a Presbyterian from Canandaigua in western New York State who later rallied clergy against the Vietnam War, was among the U.S. organizers. From 1954 until 1963, Rev. Bilheimer, his wife and three sons lived in Geneva, Switzerland – Desmond Tutu visited their home there – from which the elder Bilheimer convened three special WCC missions to nations in crisis with a faith dimension: to Hungary in 1956, South Africa in 1960 and the USSR in 1962.

The Cottesloe Convention, held over seven days in December 1960 in Johannesburg, was an attempt to reach consensus on race and prevent a break between the English and Afrikaans-speaking churches. In that aim, Cottesloe ultimately failed. But for a moment, participating South African member churches and WCC representatives agreed upon and issued a proclamation that rejected any theological basis for *apartheid* and called *apartheid* a threat to the practice of religion. Several months later, South Africa's prime minister demanded that Afrikaner participants retract their support and all but one – Beyers Naudé – did. The Dutch Reformed Church left the WCC in 1961, just as South Africa was achieving independence.

You can see it went beyond not turning Beyers Naudé's story into a story about Bilheimer's own father. That this must be a film about how South Africans managed their own transformation, not about how outsiders rescued them. And while certainly Cottesloe happened, telling this particular story without it presents any filmmaker, perhaps especially this one, with questions of narrative strategy. In this age of tell-all reality shows and exposé, I'd like young filmmakers and journalists alike to see what an enduring alternative option looks like.

IV.

If there are reasons Robert Bilheimer is overtly absent from the Beyers Naudé film, he shows up on-screen much more in his next

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documentary, *I'm Still Here: The Truth about Schizophrenia*. As is typical with his films, there was a lapse of years between completing production (1992) and release (1996). And now, we are two decades past the research he was covering, such as that done on genetics and neuro-imaging at the University of Iowa College of Medicine by Nancy C. Andreasen, MD, PhD, and her colleagues. Much of their work remains relevant today, as do efforts from that time – also in the film – to inform community psychiatry about poverty and homelessness, to correct stereotypes of people with schizophrenia as violent and "just-escaped," and to avoid tragic mistakes arising from the belief that medications alone will manage this condition (and *I'm Still Here* was commissioned by the pharmaceutical company that makes the antipsychotic drug Risperdal).

However, *I'm Still Here* seems imbued by two other qualities more than any other. Dr. Michael Flaum aptly sums up the first when he says, "It's horrifying that once we thought families caused this illness."

It's not surprising that a filmmaker such as Robert Bilheimer felt drawn to this subject and found ways to explore schizophrenia within families in great depth. He interviews three families and we get to see something unusual: both family members and the labeled "patient" sit together, listening to one another talk about what has happened. We see what plays across their faces and hear their sometimes halting words, although all three families have evidently learned to be frank. There's the Friedrich family, whose daughter Kristi fell apart as a college student at Arizona State. The Jordan family of Philadelphia, whose son James was in his third year studying jazz at Boston's Berkeley School of Music when he got sick and is just now starting to edge out again by playing in his father's Black church on Sundays. And the Hollister family, whose daughter Annick now has a thousand hours volunteering at the Los Angeles zoo, where she paints the animals and birds, adored by her younger sister. In Seattle, there's Jim Fitzgerald, informally adopted by Jeanine, the mother of his friend John. Jim is finally married and working as a landscaper after a decade's battle and several suicidal moments (and, we learn at the end, succeeds the last time less than a month after Bilheimer filmed him). Even among the many homeless served by New York City's Project Reachout at 88th and Amsterdam – the city had lost 100,000 units of low-income housing in the previous ten years – there is one

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reunion between a grizzled man who has wandered further off than usual and the mother to whom Project Reachout's van returns him.

The second striking quality about this film is its unusually nuanced attention to the anxiety and discomfort that people – with and without schizophrenia – can experience in one another's presence, sometimes unrelentingly, when that diagnosis looms as an unspoken third party.

So a grassroots organization like NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) is of great use, making available people who can speak from both sides of the divide. Bilheimer met Fred Frese, PhD, at a NAMI conference and Frese opens the film recounting how "about thirty years ago I was walking along and I heard this voice…" It starts out kind of like a funny story, but abruptly he's recreating his own terror and you're holding your breath. Frese is personable and articulate and bright. He was committed in 1968, a patient at ten different hospitals over ten years, then went on to become director of psychology at Ohio's largest psychiatric facility and, after retiring, taught psychiatry students at Case Western University.

Frese explains, "We make too many connections. Most people go from lion to tiger to stripes. We can make the connection from lion to stripes without tiger."

Frese became director of psychology "in the same state hospital system where they locked me up." Wryly, he adds, "Most people are curious as to how I did that!" Right before the final credits, Frese comes back on-screen to answer that with quiet relish. "I got letters from other patients. Admiral so-and-so and General so-and-so. Who do you think the patients were in Bethesda? I got into graduate school."

Among uncomfortable people was Bilheimer himself, who told me how one of his contacts dropped him off unexpectedly and left him alone for an hour to do his own interview with a schizophrenic. Bilheimer said he'd thought he'd be "sitting back and watching." Was this on purpose? "Oh, totally!" said Bilheimer, chuckling and nodding vigorously. He counted this as his greatest lesson for this project, because it put him in the shoes of his subjects and gave him access to what they face with the fearsome rest of us. Which is simply coming at the question of what kind of people we are from another angle.

This informs the final segment of the film, in which Bilheimer sits near a leafy park with Dan Flach, a former high school valedictorian with a different trajectory than Frese. He went to Western Michigan

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University on a full ride, finished his doctorate and had begun his university teaching career when his first break occurred. Dan Flach is a pacer; we've seen him earlier walking tirelessly around a room in the drop-in center, one arm held tightly against his body and his head at what looks like an uncomfortable tilt.

"One is never out of the woods," he says, after thirty-two years of this.

Just before their conversation ends and he walks across the street and into that green park, he says to Bilheimer, "I've gotta let you recover – I caught you there with a tear or two in your eye! Hey, I'm the one with schizophrenia."

V.

Here is a harmonic convergence. In the year 1996, Robert Bilheimer and the late Dr. Jonathan Mann, the architect of the World Health Organization's global response to AIDS (who died in 1998), conceived of a film that would become, after three years of preparation and another three years of shooting, *A Closer Walk: A film about AIDS in the world*. Bilheimer says the phrase "the way the world is" came from Mann. It was at this point that Bilheimer began thinking in terms of a trilogy of films about "the way the world is" that would address this trio of intractable issues: AIDS, modern slavery and our relationship to the planet – in fact, he says the title for *Take Me Home* came to him first, as if in anticipation that such a project would need to come to rest by somehow making sense of all the suffering that lay before him.

Also in 1996, Bilheimer met Dr. Paul Farmer, the Harvard-trained American physician who set up his Clinique Bon Sauveur eleven years before in two rooms in Cange, in Haiti's Central Plateau. Farmer's career has been widely heralded since that time – including the expansion of his Partners in Health to more than a dozen countries, several books and editorship of *Health and Human Rights* magazine, a MacArthur Fellowship, and Tracy Kidder's profile, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, in 2003, the same year Bilheimer began early screenings of the film* – but a key to Farmer's influence

* *A Closer Walk*, like *Not My Life*, had a series of early screenings both theatrical and broadcast. After the first public screening in 2003 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, it went to the Tribeca Film Festival, CBC in Canada, South Africa and China. The US broadcast TV premiere on PBS was 8/31/2006.

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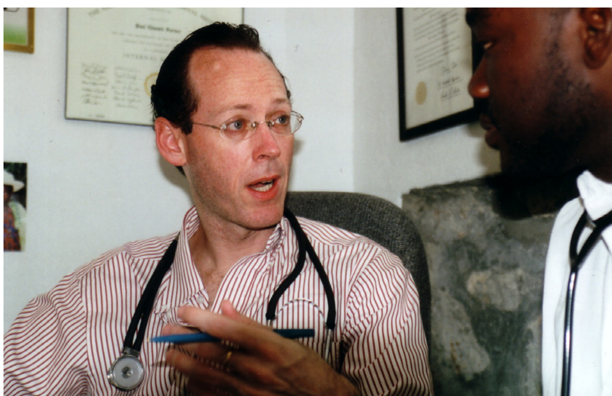
is his continuous active affiliation with Harvard – in 2009 he became head of the medical school's Department of Global Health and Social Medicine – which has allowed him to shuttle between personal direct care and a much wider stage as needed.

In 1996, Farmer was revolutionizing the global AIDS community's approach to treatment by, one, insisting that poor people, given the proper medication, can respond just like everyone else. Because of this, also in 1996, he was starting to give his Haitian HIV patients what we now call combination anti-retroviral therapy (ART), or "triple therapy," in which a person takes three drugs that block one or more steps in the HIV virus' replication. This drives the virus to extremely low levels in the bloodstream and gives the immune system a breather so it can restore itself. Moreover, people with a fully suppressed HIV virus rarely transmit the disease.

In the film, narrator Glenn Close says Farmer simply "has leveled the playing field." Some villagers bring in a sick woman who's been HIV+ for at least four years to his Cange clinic. Farmer says of his Haitian patients and their families, "They seem to have more enthusiasm and hope than the experts. They're being treated and they're doing well. It's a living rebuke [to the experts]. But my contract," says the author of *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights and the New War Against the Poor* (2003), "is with the patient."

It's now a decade since Bilheimer finished shooting *A Closer Walk*; more millions of people have died. And there's an even longer perspective now available too. The International AIDS Conference last convened in the U.S. twenty-two years ago, in San Francisco. In 1990, AIDS was almost always lethal and there was just one



Dr. Paul Farmer pioneered "triple therapy" with anti-retroviral drugs at Clinique Bon Sauveur, his clinic in the remote village of Cange on the Central Plateau in Haiti. Robert Bilheimer visited him there in March 2000. Courtesy Worldwide Documentaries.

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drug in the arsenal, which didn't work very well. On July 22 of this year, the 19th International AIDS Conference opened in Washington, D.C. This in itself marked the end of a long policy banning people with HIV from entering the country. Many AIDS activists have themselves been HIV+, beginning in 1982 in New York City when HIV+ gay men organized the first hotline, Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and then in 1987 the political action and protest group ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). Bilheimer's film features a number of gay men who are veterans of this movement, such as Eric Sawyer, who had been living with AIDS for twenty-three years. Other groups especially vulnerable to AIDS, both here and abroad, have often followed the GMHC and ACT-UP models to organize for their own survival and advocacy efforts.

Writing a round-up article about this history in the *Washington Post* the day before this landmark gathering opened, David Brown called ART the "greatest scientific achievement of the past twenty-two years."

By the Barcelona conference, held in 2002, Brown writes that the greatest "take-home" was "that Africans and Haitians could successfully take the complicated ART regimen and benefit as much as Americans and Europeans. [That is, there was] no excuse for not bringing AIDS care to the developing world."

What difference did Farmer make? ART was a strategy discussed at the 1996 AIDS conference in Vancouver but, as *A Closer Walk* tells us, when Farmer began trying "triple therapy" in his mountain clinic in Haiti that same year, he was immediately testing its efficacy for more than his own four hundred patients – about 95% of people with HIV lived in the developing world.

The day after the July DC AIDS conference opened, the U.S. DOS issued a statement on the progress of a project called "an AIDS-free generation," announced by the Secretary of State last November before the annual observance of World AIDS Day on December 1st. Like JFK's declaration in 1960 – "A man on the moon in ten years" – or similar declarations of goals, such as "an end to hunger," this created a context within which people could work on solutions previously considered "impossible." Practically speaking, "an AIDS-free generation" would mean three things: no one is born with HIV, there is a much lower risk of contracting the virus and, if you do contract the virus, you will get enough treatment (that is, ART) so that you

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don't transmit it to anyone else.

So how's that working out for us? In the run-up to this year's World AIDS Day observances, Donald G. McNeil, Jr. reported recently in *The New York Times* (11/20/12) that new HIV infections have dropped by half in the last decade in twenty-five poor and middle income nations, many in Africa and that, according to Michel Sidibé of the UNAIDS agency, the most important factor has been focusing on prevention in high-risk groups, and the greatest success has come in preventing mothers from infecting their babies. And if you'd seen *A Closer Walk* back then, you've have heard there was a brand new drug that blocks mother-to-child infection.

For *A Closer Walk*, which actors Glenn Close and Will Smith narrate, Bilheimer visited ten nations – South Africa, Uganda, Haiti, Switzerland, India, Nepal, Ukraine, Cambodia, Senegal, Brazil and the U.S. (with four locations here: New York City, Kansas City, San Francisco and Cambridge). He started production in February of 2000 and finished the shoot in December of 2002.

It's often easy to get lost in the numbers where AIDS is concerned. Although the occasional "telling statistic" can brilliantly illuminate, the sheer deluge of statistics where so many people are concerned sometimes seems like the refined white flour and sugar of information, not really offering us much lasting nourishment. We know the numbers – which are scary and awful – have changed since Bilheimer made this film, but on-screen we can see how another kind of shift began. Paul Farmer's clarity about who his "contract" is with and what to do about that is one embodiment of that shift.

Although the film opens in a medical research center in Kampala, Uganda, with Dr. Peter Mugvenyo gently undressing an impossibly frail and dying child named Lucky, Bilheimer began shooting elsewhere. The first place he "hit the ground" to film, after years of preparation, was South Africa. He posted a series of letters to the film's supporters during the long shoot, now available on the film's website, the first one from Johannesburg in early February 2000. He had returned to the setting for *Cry of Reason*, a place of historic human triumph over the hatred and division of *apartheid* and a country he loves deeply, and found that one of its provinces, KwaZulu-Natal, had the highest HIV infection rate in the world, with half of pregnant women HIV+. He was invited to the funeral

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of Joseph, whose widow, Octavia Dlezi, despite ongoing efforts to follow and assist her, is – in the film's epilogue – lost to all contact.

The question of what kind of people we are, who "we" even comprises, and how we treat one another crops up early and often in the global AIDS epidemic. AIDS seems to have offered particular examples of this dilemma – perhaps all plagues do – because those who became the first AIDS activists had come to realize they must advocate for one another because no one else would. They would simply die – because they were already among those "not worth saving": women and children, non-white, gay, poor, stateless or prisoners, sexually active, addicts, any combination of the above, or in some other way off the grid and so beyond the circle of care. It's been a deadly attitude, both for those already at high risk for AIDS and for those imagining just their own station in life would protect them. Such stigma shows up no matter where AIDS does.

In the city of Odessa, Ukraine, Bilheimer follows two young IV drug users, Ruslan and Katerina, skinny kids with pale complexions who hang out in damp stone cellars in the winter, shooting up and believing that sharing one needle is a good thing. "There is total frustration," says Sergei Kostin of The Way Home, who wants to introduce the concept of "harm reduction" so young addicts could at least get clean needles. "People don't believe they have a future."

In another Ukrainian city, Kiev, and on a very different part of the social spectrum, Dr. Anatoliy Vivevskiy tells Bilheimer, "Ukrainian people won't accept this – it's for others. We are some kind of biological strangers – this is not for us. But you know, this is simply stupid."

Bilheimer's shoot occurred at a moment when, increasingly, key figures – like the UN's Kofi Anan, who asks, "What sort of people are we?" – began challenging those assumptions of some "natural" separation – assumptions which are not unlike the Afrikaner's predestination-tinged belief in *apartheid*. It's not as if we haven't had examples within living memory.

"It's just such a stunning thing," Jeffrey Sachs, an economist at Columbia University in New York City, tells Bilheimer. "I was brought up to believe that if millions of children were dying, we would do something about it. After the Holocaust – we were brought up to believe that this wouldn't happen again."

Rev. Emanuel Cleaver of Kansas City, now chair of the

Congressional Black Caucus, says, "There is no subject we should not touch. My first cousin was afraid to go to his church so he went into an abandoned house and he laid down there till he died."

In *A Closer Walk* the notion of families and children quickly turns to widows and orphans and the sudden absence of family. In Kampala, Uganda, for ten days over Easter week in 2000, Bilheimer comes across Joyce Nassuma, one of the many "orphan grandmothers" in Uganda, painstakingly making the bricks for a new house for herself and her ten grandkids. In this film, Kofi Anan says there are entire villages in parts of Africa without parents, only kids and grandparents. This phenomenon persists a dozen years later, despite our strides: *TIME Magazine*'s December 3rd issue includes a feature, "The AIDS Grandmas of South Africa."

Also in Kampala, Bilheimer found Hassan, who dropped out of school at fourteen to care for his mother and two years later is raising his younger brother and two sisters. "I am the eldest of the family," he says simply, though he had wanted to be an engineer, and now says of his life and prospects, "I don't eat enough and I no longer associate with ordinary people."

Or there are the women of Tamburin Hospital in Chennai, formerly Madras, in India, where Bilheimer filmed in April 2001. The previous year he had spent a month traveling in this area, trying to figure out how to film the epidemic here. He settled on the ward filled with women, so many that they have to share beds or sleep in shifts.

A Closer Walk is filled with such profiles and cameos. About midway through the film's production, Bilheimer wrote his eighth and what would be his last letter to friends and supporters of the film. He was in New Delhi, India, a few months after his trip to Chennai. He notes he's been to India eight times in twelve months. It's November 18th, the day after Diwali, the Feast of Light. At that point, he writes, he and his team have done seventy-five interviews. He's in New Delhi to film an interview with the Dalai Lama. This was neither the first nor last time Bilheimer has spoken with the Dalai Lama, but this was His Holiness' first public statement on the subject of AIDS, and he'd just given Robert Bilheimer forty-five minutes.

Yet this conversation occurs for Bilheimer in the midst of a sort of crisis. He notes it's been a month since 9/11. Caught in the numbers himself of average daily deaths from the epidemic, he writes, "And the day after September 11th, another 8,000 people died, and the day

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Hassan Semakula lost both parents to AIDS and, at age 16, was raising his three younger siblings. Robert Bilheimer filmed for ten days in Kampala, Uganda, over Easter week 2000. At that time Uganda had 1.5 million AIDS orphans, more than any other African nation. After the filming, an American donor committed to pay tuition through primary and secondary school for Hassan and his siblings. Courtesy Worldwide Documentaries.

after that, and the day after that. I confess I find myself longing at this point for a sense of balance and perspective."

Yet Bilheimer goes on to sum up the Dalai Lama's thoughts. Pronouncing AIDS "part of humanity," His Holiness stresses universal responsibility, duty to those who are marginalized and developing a sense of justice. This, he says, requires an awareness of justice, which in turn requires us to understand the dangers of silence.

The last shot in A *Closer Walk* shows us a high, narrow rock chasm with rushing water spilling and bursting over its precipice. This is Murchison Falls in Uganda, on the Upper Nile at the outlet of Lake Victoria. It's certainly an image that suggests going back to the source. It's also reminiscent of that parable about the people living along the edge of a river who notice one day some babies out in the deep middle, struggling in the rapids. For a while all their efforts go toward pulling the babies out, one by one. Then one villager sets off into the forest. "Where are you going?" cry the others. He answers, "I'm going upstream to find the bastard who's throwing them in."

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VI.

The day we went to meet Robert Bilheimer at his home in East Bloomfield, south of Rochester, was a quintessential mid-July day, with brilliant sun and windy blue sky, lofting clouds, long quiet expanses of road and field, and little traffic on the back roads. It's easy to miss the drive into Bilheimer's place – not much but a rural mailbox on a post painted with flowers, the narrow dirt driveway beside it quickly swallowed by the surrounding forest. First there was lunch with Robert and his daughter Amy Detweiler, who'd been working with Worldwide Documentaries for about a year and a half and was pregnant then with his first grandchild, *Stone Canoe*'s Bob Colley, and myself.

Here is part of our conversation:

Nancy Keefe Rhodes (NKR): One of the things that really struck me, watching* Cry of Reason*, the Beyers Naudé film, and I didn't figure this out until I was all the way through it and I saw the dedication, to your father, and then I started looking things up. I had read Donald Wood's book on Steve Biko years ago. And then I realized that you're the son of this World Council of Churches figure who initiated the Cottesloe Consultation with the Dutch Reformed Church hierarchy in South Africa in 1960, and Beyers Naudé was the son the Rev. Jozua Naudé, the man who articulated the Dutch Reformed Church's religious basis for apartheid and organized the hierarchy maintain its grip on South African society.

Robert Bilheimer (RB): Beyer's father preached the moral justification of apartheid. As Desmond Tutu says in the film, here was somebody whose father was a great hero of the Anglo-Boer Wars. The fascinating thing to me about Beyers – here was a guy who most people thought was going to be the next prime minister of apartheid-based South Africa, until he preached that famous sermon. Then he and my dad connected thereafter, when he went over to the other side, as it were.

It was big news at the time, when my dad went down there on behalf of the World Council. We were living in Switzerland and I remember my mother and brother, you know, on the radio listening to the BBC, and the headline in whatever the paper was. That's how I got started, frankly, as a filmmaker. Byers had refused steadfastly any request to have people make a film about his life, because he did not

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want to be seen as glorifying himself. So the only reason he agreed to do it was, I'm sure, because of his relationship with my dad, and I had met him a few times in New York.

I fought hard for my freedom in this respect. In Beyer's case – he never saw a single frame of that movie until it premiered at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., with Ted Kennedy and Cyrus Vance and all those people. He had never seen a frame. The faith he had put in us! This was like, the first film I had ever made.

NKR: At one point he says that he understands his relationship with the Black community and that it must never, never, never be exploited. So with that in mind, I'm watching this film and I see your dedication at the end, I start looking this up and piecing the story together – you're the two sons. And you didn't exploit who your father was either. There's nothing in the film that would tell us that. So you really have taken a position that's parallel to his.

RB: Hmmm! Subconsciously, I think.

NKR: It's one of the things – after the film, it's very moving, to understand the integrity on both sides.

RB: It's a great way to start off a career later in life. I think I wound up feeling, by the time we got around to that – it was the 80s, that's why we founded Worldwide – is that I had done lots of other things, but all in the fine arts or with the kind of social conscience that I have because of my dad's work.

NKR: So how did you come to make that film?

RB: I knew enough about what was going on in the world and of course my dad was very much alive at the time. You know, to be honest, how I thought enough about Beyers specifically – I suppose when you're thinking about human rights and you're saying, this is sort of how I want to structure my life and my career, now that I'm in my forties and have sort of figured this out. You know, you start looking around. It was a story that just jumped to my mind, because it's so compelling. Such an amazing story. I figured that it would be a relatively straightforward film to make – it would be a classic profile of an individual who had this amazing story to tell. And it really wasn't much more complicated than that. The opportunity was there because Beyers trusted my dad and ultimately, eventually, me.

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I had friends in South Africa who helped me make the film, because we were both not allowed – Dad was banned from South Africa and I always, whenever I went, I had to sneak in. You know, this was only the mid to late 80s. A lot of that film was done by remote control with South African filmmaker Kevin Harris – we communicated by Telex machines.

Here's a great story about South Africa connected to my work as a filmmaker which you wouldn't know about, because the film never got made. You know the great Harlem institution, the Dance Theatre of Harlem? So, I had made *Cry of Reason* and it was recognized. Some buddies of mine, Danny Schechter and Rory O'Connor, who ran a television news magazine – it was kind of like a human rights *60 Minutes* – had somehow been contacted by Arthur Miller, and Dance Theatre had been invited to go to South Africa in the mid or early 90's, and had some money from the Ford Foundation, which had long been one of our funders, to make a movie about it. Danny and Rory said they wanted me to direct this movie. So I met with Arthur and we went to South Africa with DTH and it was historic. It was the first Black cultural group in the world – and certainly in our country – to visit South Africa. And we just hung with them for however long – two weeks. By that time South Africa was in my blood – still is. Dr. Naudé, Beyers, married Heidi and me. It was one of his last public appearances, in the garden of my friend, Caiphas Semenya, and Letta Mbulu, one of the South African musicians who were in exile – so, all this happened and came about because of *Cry of Reason* and that incredible sort of acknowledgement we got from the Academy.

But the interesting thing that happened to me, we're down in South Africa with DTH and one night I'm walking back from dinner – we're in Bloemfontein, where the big theatre is, where they were performing every night – with one of the dancers. And a couple of white guys – young, young, you know, guys who still have a major chip on their shoulders about everything – pulled up in this little white Renault, jumped out of the car and tried to fuckin' kill me. He had a knife. And went like this – it was just the fact that I walking with a – yeah. It was like fifty yards from the entrance to the hotel. And intuitively – you know, it was like, a serious knife – I went to protect the girl and instinctively myself at the same time and he got me here and here. I still have the sweater that's got the stitch marks because it was my favorite sweater. And I was just bleeding profusely – but the

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story made its way into the front pages. The guy disappeared. But it was very awakening. Because the tour was all very feel-good? And then – all of a sudden.

NKR: You think things have changed and they really haven't.

RB: Well, they still haven't changed, in some ways…This is just triggering stuff and making me think of how little things connect in your mind, I suppose, and a body of work. I interviewed Tutu, you know, for the film about Beyers, but I also interviewed him for *Not My Life*, and his interview is not in this cut, but I think it will go back in the final cut. And it was on this subject. Because I got to thinking that *Not My Life* was not so much a film on trafficking as it was a meditation on good and evil. So I talked to Desmond about this. And it was so interesting! I said, you know, I talk to especially women who are otherwise compassionate, level-headed, but when it comes to the subject of what these traffickers do to these girls, these women will say the most astonishing things – "Hang him up by his balls and then cut 'em off!" You know, "Kill him!" You know, literally, really. So I think people see this film, like you said, in kind of the sense Beyers meant when he used the phrase, "pastoral counseling," they need something to get out of themselves. That's why I went to South Africa for *Not My Life*, to talk with Desmond about this.

NKR: Well, it's PTSD – this happens to people who work in war zones, people who work with abuse victims, of all kinds of abuse.

RB: But what Desmond said that was interesting to me, he said, "What about the perpetrators of these crimes?" And of course Tutu was the head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He said the most surprising thing. He said, "These people have committed monstrous acts." And this of course is coming from a man who has seen monstrous acts. And as head of the Reconciliation Commission, has listened to these people, held their hands, in cases has forgiven them, and the whole tenor of his interview was that you cannot give these people a one-way ticket to hell. You cannot do that, he said, at least from a Christian perspective. And he was just, you know – that was it, from his point of his view. And we couldn't find a way – you see, he sort of opened that. We looked at it – I mean, we poured over this thing. At one point – it's in the demo, he says, every one of us has the capacity to become a saint. So his whole argument was – yes, but.

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So the missing thing is, I never found a way to connect back to that issue that I raised about forgiveness and how you deal emotionally with this evil. But I think in the context of the rule of law, I might be able to find a way to talk about it.

[At this point Bilheimer was considering an interview with retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who had written the majority opinion in the case of U.S. v. Kozminski *(1988), which influenced the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. O'Connor's opinion had to do with broadening the meaning of what constitutes "coercion."]*

Even to this day, in many states a minor has to prove coercion. Yeah! So what we're after in this country now is really state by state by state. New York has the Safe Harbor Act, where now the police cannot go and bust a brothel in which minors are performing sex acts – they not only cannot arrest a minor, but the law provides protection for that minor, so the police have to take that minor somewhere because she or he is under their protection. The presumption has to be that because of certain circumstances, which contribute to the likelihood that you have been coerced – including the fact that you're only eight years old! The Trafficking Victims Protection Act is still only a few years old. This is what nobody understands – only a handful of states have enacted "safe harbor" or the equivalent. Now the TVPA is a little better but that has to be reenacted every year or two. And it's mainly designed to protect immigrants, but typically you'll get people snuck over and the women and the girls just automatically become trafficking victims.

NKR: Going back to the rule of law, that's what makes that scene so powerful in* Not My Life *– I think it's in Guatemala – where they arrest Efrain Ortiz and one of the guys is saying as a crowd gathers, "We need to leave this area soon." The whole neighborhood is watching and you get a sense of what this mean to them. That they put the cuffs on the guy and they put him in the car.

RB: That's extremely perceptive. The guy – his name is Pablo Villeda – he's not a cop but he's with the International Justice Mission, a U.S.-based organization that does these things all over the world. But the whole premise, in the absence of the fact that there's no way

that the Guatemalan police will start putting an emphasis – we had to rent the car for the police to go make the bust! – no resources! – so that, Nancy, your perception is exactly correct. Okay, so that neighborhood is going to see that you can't get away with this. So it's like a viral thing, in a way, it's like Facebook. And it's an historic case. In the last scene of that segment it says at the bottom that he was sentenced to ninety-five years – but it's easy to miss and if you look away, you miss it. So I'm beginning to think an update epilogue is a good way to go in the final cut.

Robert Colley: The thing I noticed was the look on the guy's face – you know, what's the problem? What are you bothering me for? I'm trying to make a living. He had no recognition on his face that – maybe he's being unfair.

RB: He was petrified. He was a deer in the headlights, this guy, he had no idea what happened to him.

NKR: There's a film about women judges in the African nation of Cameroon,* Sisters in Law *[Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi, 2005] where they're arresting men in their communities and telling them they can't beat their children and they can't do this and they can't do that, and the men have that same stunned, perplexed expression – what do you mean, I can't do this?

RB: You know, we try to parse these immensely complicated issues and it becomes…. Look, there are lots of filmmakers out there, and the medium, with the advent of the digital age, has become very democratized. I don't think it's a bad thing necessarily. Anybody can make a movie now, with an iPhone. But certainly what we try to do, or that I have found throughout my life as a documentary filmmaker, is the assumption that your story is in and of itself sufficiently important so as to not require the kind of attention to craft of story-telling and to the craft of filmmaking. If we have a quality to our work that we attempt, it's A, that we try to tackle really, really big issues and make them accessible to quote-unquote ordinary people. And B, we try to celebrate the actual craft of filmmaking. We're about the only people I know, literally, who still shoot on film. I do think we're the only ones I know who do what we do or who are attempting to do what we do. Among the quote-unquote major filmmakers – I always

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say that Ken Burns' films are about the way the world was, our films are about the way that the world is, and Michael's [Moore] films are about himself! And yet they're wonderfully entertaining. But it shows you how the world has changed. We wouldn't stand a chance – the Beyers Naudé film would never get an Oscar nomination in this day and age.

NKR: I'm stunned that more people don't know about the Beyers Naudé film – it ought to be in documentary courses. I'm surprised it's not on Netflix.

RB: I think that's a little bit shame on us, but I also feel it's never too late. We're in the process of creating a body of work. It is important, I think, to set apart and distinguish those earlier films – the film about Beyers, the film about schizophrenia, which is a film I love – I think it needs to be tightened up a bit – the Samuel Beckett piece. But when you start with the AIDS film, *A Closer Walk*, and then you look at this one, and then the third one coming. There's beginning to be a body of work. *A Closer Walk*, *Not My Life*, *Take Me Home* is a trilogy that we're planning and it's a built around that opening line that I wrote for Glenn Close in *A Closer Walk*, where she says, "This is a story about the way that the world is." So that's how our work as a body of work is evolving. I fully, fully intend to make that third film.

But I also think that by the time we're done – this is to answer your question – if you look at the amount of interviewing that we've done since we started about Beyers, even taking out the film about schizophrenia, but if you look at the work that we've done that's concentrated on the major defining human rights issues of our time, in fact what we have is an oral history of what I just said – the defining human rights issues of our time. So we will want to find a way to make that work. We could probably make a fairly kick-ass film of just a lot of the "best-ofs"? You know? Once *Take Me Home* is finished we could make a film called *The Way the World Is* or something.

Take all of my interviews with Desmond Tutu. There's a wealth of material that should be free and anyone able to look at. We haven't really thought this through yet, and intellectual property is an issue. We're struggling with it now, especially with *Not My Life*. The film is so needed in the anti-trafficking community that it's very hard to resist, you know – but we are. We realize it's a film but we are putting

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force fields around these, to a degree, and price tags on them. So we're creating a model, for instance, in Arizona, that gives an unrestricted duplication, which means sort of at cost, an exhibition license, to a consortium of NGOs, for the full-length film and the shorter version, for creating awareness about this issue to a per cent of the state's population. And then we're going to try to cookie-cut that model all over the country.

***NKR:** A couple of weeks ago the State Dept's annual report came out.*
RB: The *TIP Report*, Trafficking in Persons. Yup.

***NKR:** There was coverage in the* **Washington Post** *about that, back to the Palermo Protocols, that provides some background. When I saw that come out and I saw the coverage, I thought, this film coming out this fall could really be important. There has been some priming of the audience.*
RB: Big time. We're at exactly the right – [laughs] – good job!

***NKR:** Well, you have to kind of front-load the system, because you know, nobody hears these things when you say them just once. So you have to kind of seed the clouds so that then something like this can come along.*
RB: The metaphor that I've been using lately is that the ground is soft and we're gonna rain on it. No doubt. You're totally correct. There are a lot of courageous people. We interviewed all three of the TIP ambassadors – John Miller, Mark Lagon and now DeBaca. He was the one who pointed out to me about Justice O'Connor's opinion in the Kozminski case. But there are in fact all over the world enormously dedicated and courageous people who know! And what everybody said to me – and it's why we were able to make a two and a half million dollar movie during a deep recession – is that, in the end, all of these organizations, including the TIP office and all these folks everywhere, are operating kind of without a constituency in terms of the general public. And that's why we're very excited about this, precisely because the time is almost perfect. And then you get the CNN International broadcast – you know, CNNI is in 280 million households. And hotels.

I'm a human rights filmmaker, but more and more I like to think of myself as a human rights strategist as well. There's no point in going

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through what we went through to make *Not My Life* unless we're incredibly smart about how we get it out there. Which is why I'm willing to take the film and make fifteen-minute shorts. This is not this sacred work of art to me. I'm willing to chop it up.

NKR: You get a lot of different audiences that way.

RB: More! As an artist, to me the thing is that hopefully, absolutely, this will always be a film at seventy-five or eighty minutes long that is my attempt to understand this issue, as an artist, as a filmmaker. That's one thing and extremely important. That's a big part of who I am. But there's another part of me that says that never should be – at least for me – so sacred. And you know the famous phrase that I was thinking of lately in this regard? I have to give this speech sometime this fall to some lawyers in Dubai and I was thinking about the phrase from [W.H.] Auden's poem, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," in which Auden says at one point, "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives in the valley of its making where executives would never want to tamper…" But it's so cool, right? But only if you have this view, I think, that this is somehow sacred. I don't think art should be sacred in that regard. It's the executives part that I really loved – you know, "We don't go there." I meet with executives all the time. I've always believed, as a grantee, that the relationship with these folks does not end with the financial transaction – it actually begins there. So a lot of the folks who have given us money have become friends, they've become advisors, they've become colleagues.

NKR: They want to do something with their money!

RB: Yeah! You know, they've been conditioned to say they gave him their money for his film and it got on TV and did great. But this is why we came up with this free licensing concept. Otherwise the screening becomes just a memory. So it's a big part of what we do and who we are.

NKR: What's the third film –* Take Me Home*?

RB: I'm not quite ready yet – I will say that the big issue is our relationship to the planet. So to make this a so-called environmental film is an over-simplification. And unlike with *Not My Life*, the field is crowded there, not like the stuff that we do – so I'm gravitating, I'm

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going more toward the idea of doing something that's more personal, of going back to Haiti. I'm not convinced that the two ideas are mutually exclusive. So the idea of *Take Me Home* is emotionally very important for me – I thought of this title way before I thought of the other two titles. But check this out. You know this guy? Bill McKibben? Sure. He wrote the definitive book [*The End of Nature*, 1989].

So the idea for *Take Me Home* is this: it's when he first found out about, the first time thinking about global warming, and this is a new edition [2006] – this book became a best-seller and so he wrote a new prologue. When he says "original book" he's referring actually to this book.

This is from the prologue, I think. He says, "The science was one part of the original book but not the most important. What mattered most to me was the inference I drew from that science, that for the first time human beings had become so large that they altered everything around us. That we had ended nature as an independent force, that our appetites and habits and desires could now be read in every cubic meter of air, in every increment on the thermometer."

And then – this is the part that I think is just quite wonderful. "But to me it made this historical moment entirely different from any other, filled with implications for our philosophy, our theology, our sense of self. We are no longer able to think of ourselves as a species tossed about by larger forces. Now we are those larger forces."

So this is a great summation to me of a lot of these things that we've been struggling with. "Hurricanes and thunderstorms and tornadoes become not acts of God but acts of man. That was what I meant by 'the end of nature.'" And I think that may be why we're drawn to Haiti, because I think that in the struggles of the Haitian people you find a lot of these kinds of issues.

NKR: You also find in their culture a lot of what goes wrong when we go outside our place in nature.

RB: You know, it's recognizing your place. I think that the danger – like with the trafficking issue – is that somehow, like in one of our demos, we say, "If human civilization has reached a point where it's cannibalizing its own children, then it's no longer human and no longer civilized." See what I mean? Hence, take me home. I think we've lost – we've wandered away. I think we've wandered far from our sense of what that means.

NKR: There are filmmakers who use the horror movie to talk about this. There's always that moment in a horror film when there's been a massive catastrophe and some character says, "They warned us not to do this. And we didn't listen." It's always there.

RB: The people of Haiti are wonderful people, starting with Paul Farmer. I have lots of Haitian friends and it's good for me because I speak French and when we were there I started picking up Creole, and I just had a real wonderful sort of empathy. Amy asked me, "Are you really ready to do this again, you know?" Months of – well, I am. But getting back and forth from Haiti is a lot different from what we've been doing for the last ten years. And it's not to say that we don't go elsewhere.

NKR: You said once before that you're very tired – that you've been traveling for ten years. Four years on this film, with post and everything.

RB: And four years on the other. Yeah, it takes it out of you. And in the end, if you fly business class, which we always didn't, we could never have survived. But it doesn't even matter. The travel is just in the end very debilitating, when you do it that much. I couldn't tell you how many times we've been to Africa in ten years. India – six, seven times. Cambodia, four. It's hard work.

NKR: Tell me about the narrator you used when you did* Cry of Reason*, the guy who did the book* Kaffir Boy *– how did you get him?

RB: I think we were so immersed in the issue at the time and *Kaffir Boy* has just come out. [Mark Mathabane, *Kaffir Boy: the True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa*, 1986] There were mutual friends.

NKR: As a filmmaker, now – in your films there's always a scene with a person that absolutely kicks me in the chest. I think in* A Closer Walk *it's Hassan, the boy who's taking care of his younger siblings. He's got such a weight on him – there's such relief in the epilogue when you say that somebody's paying for his education and his siblings'. Until then it's like, how is this kid going to survive this? He has to! In the movie* I'm Still Here*, the movie about schizophrenia, there's the opening scene with that guy. He's a PhD and he's starting off to tell you about what happened to him and how the voices came to him and they tell him, "Your mission is going to be to be crazy the

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rest of your life." And then he re-enacts the utter terror that he felt. Right off the bat you kick the person watching this in the chest. That scene – when he goes into that, it's really amazing.

RB: He's really in it – he didn't re-enact that. He lost it for a minute.

NKR: Whatever happened, he took me there too.

RB: Whatever it was, he kicked ass. Oh absolutely – he might have started to re-enact it, but viscerally he went there.

NKR: The other guy, who you're sitting and talking with later in **I'm Still Here*****, and then you walk through the park and he walks***

Robert Bilheimer and his DP, Richard Young, filming *Not My Life* in Romania, February 2007. Young died on December15, 2010, right after the film's first screening in Luxor, Egypt, and before its Lincoln Center premiere in New York City. *Not My Life* is dedicated to Young. Courtesy Worldwide Documentaries, photo by Craig Braden.

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off and it's so clear how affected you are. As someone interviewing on-camera, how have you developed that? People have really been themselves with you.

RB: Yeah, it's true. I think it's probably just kind of who I am. So if I bring anything, and other people have commented on what you're saying, it's that the people you see on the screen are clearly very, very real – very themselves. There are occasionally these stunning moments when there's nothing between you and that human being. It may be the height of perception or the depths of suffering. I think partly it's just who I am and when I'm in those worlds, I truly love to be with these people. So that's just a chemistry thing that has to do with my personality.

The second part is a fair amount of preparation, in the sense not so much of getting the questions just right, because one thing that people also comment on is that the interviews are more like conversations, as opposed to questions. Although what would drive Richard [Young, his DP] crazy, of course, is that during the conversations that we're having the camera was off and rolling and just chewing up film. I started to refine that a little bit so that we would kind of have little signals. We were so close and so attuned by the time of *Not My Life*. But the other part of the preparation was a technical kind of thing, the way that we would conduct these interviews. And it was more complicated by the fact that we were shooting on film and we'd have to use the clapper and all that stuff.

NKR: You can't just keep going with film.

RB: No, you have to stop every ten minutes. Or, when we used to have the 800-foot loads, every twenty. But that would kill Richard. And then the other part of the preparation was – apart from just getting to know a person, and you wouldn't always have the time for this. And obviously the more famous, if you will, or so forth, the less you were able to do that. But what also comes over time, I think, is just having confidence. You know, I've interviewed enough people now that nothing really fazes me anymore. In terms of who they are, even. And I think probably that's a vibe that I give off, that I'm just quite comfortable in my own skin at this point.

NKR: Well, I still go back to that scene of that arrest – not only that he gets arrested and that neighborhood sees it, but as you say in

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the film – or someone says in the film – the neighborhood sees the police behave properly. they see the authorities doing what they're supposed to do too.

RB: Yes. I think you're absolutely right. And it's really helped having this hiatus that has kind of been forced upon us since the event at Lincoln Center. We had been in Egypt, we had had a financial commitment from an Egyptian businessman who withdrew that commitment….

NKR: When the Mubarak regime fell.

RB: Yeah, we had to go to him, three days after the premiere at Lincoln Center. But during that time, I've really been able to reflect on the film itself and the issues. I think more and more about what you just said, and what people have been trying to tell me, that this is about the rule of law in many ways. And what does it mean? What does the absence of the rule of law mean? To the average American and the average world citizen? Well, it seems to mean that human lives are now worth – that you can buy and sell a human being for twenty bucks. Or twenty thousand bucks.

NKR: It's back to the Wild West.

RB: Yeah, it's very much.

NKR: Which is why I think in the last decade – well, since 9/11 – we've seen so many Westerns made again. Because there are so many places on the globe now, the term "ungoverned spaces" is now part of political vocabulary, where the state doesn't reach. And that could be in the suburbs of D.C. or in Wisconsin or in Houston too. As you say in **Not My Life*****.***

RB: Well, it is. I used the cancer metaphor early on. You know, a malignant tumor on the body politic.

NKR: We should be as shocked by where we'd find trafficking as we are shocked by Osama bin Ladin and how was he in the city he was in.

RB: Oh, infinitely more so. You see, we're so far from any kind of knowledge. The first thing, of course, is just in the United States, we really don't know. Even if you take just sexual trafficking, we just don't know how many of those girls like Angie are out there. But I

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think the most recent really solid academic study on this is five, six, seven years old already. Somehow, as you – again – said, Nancy, the ground has softened sufficiently and the diligent people out there have arrived at a bare minimum figure of, say, one hundred thousand girls, eight to fifteen, which is probably, most of them would say, probably a third, but you gotta start somewhere. Now, a hundred thousand girls, all – again, a bare minimum – ten sex acts a day times three hundred sixty five – because they work all year – that multiplies out to a billion unpunished crimes of sexual violence on an annual basis. So we're living in this world that – my feeling is that we can't, whether we know about it or not. It's like the malignant cancer that you don't know you've got it until it's too late. But one day, you know, you can't live in a world like that with impunity forever. Something's gonna have to give.

Robert Colley: You know what does it for me? I can't drive by a truck stop now.

RB: There are some good truckers out there. But no, it's horrible. It's just unbelievable. The truck stop we were at with Agent Beaver – it was on Route 65, out there in the Midwest. We were just in the truck stop, talking. We did an interview with Mike Beaver in a truck stop. You know, he had one of those FBI Ford kinda things, a dirty car. There were a lot of truckers around. Sure enough, we went outside and someone had written on the side of Mike's car, "Fuck you, asshole!" It's like they would've shot us – that hatred for the law enforcement. But these are guys who are taking these girls – you know, they'll send them. They'll use the CB's, the girls will sit in the cabs when it's cold, in the wintertime, and they're tiny little creatures in these big huge trucks with the engines running. The girls will sit there, and he'll go on the CB and he'll flick his lights and it's, "Off you go." Angie used to have to do forty tricks a night. Forty a night. It was fifty bucks for oral sex, sixty for straight sex, seventy for both.

Robert Colley: These guys mostly don't see the horror of it.

RB: No, they don't see what happens to these girls if they don't come back and turn the money over to these pimps. No, they don't, they don't. Either want to know or do know. And the other thing too

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about gender-based violence, in general but on this issue in particular, is that it's not confined to blue collar workers in this country, or to truckers. In fact, when they did Operation Stormy Nights, which rescued Angie and rounded up a dozen pimps, one of Angie's friends – I know this because I was in the prosecutor's office in Oklahoma City – they sent her over to an assistant D.A. to set up her testimony. The guy asked her to get down on her knees and give him a blow job before he talked to her. He was a lawyer. So – these are very, very complicated issues.

***NKR: So, how did you come to make* I'm Still Here?**

RB*:* Sometimes these things happen by accident and this film does stick out a little bit in that regard. We lived previously just down the road and the guy we were renting the house from was a real estate guy and sort of a sales guy. One of his accounts was the pharmaceutical giant, Janssen. They make a drug used in the treatment of schizophrenia, Risperdal. They were interested in doing a good piece about schizophrenia and very much in staying in the background. They asked if I would be willing to make this film and the time was, I don't know – I said sure. So we embarked on this amazing odyssey in the course of a year, meeting all these people with schizophrenia.

Again, I feel these are among the most marginalized people in society and it's a dreadful, dreadful, dreadful disease. It tears families apart. It's surrounded with stereotypes and certainly a theme in our work, one of our objectives, is to deconstruct stereotypes that either harden or build around schizophrenics, or people with AIDS, or what have you. With trafficking I think we're uncomfortably close to thinking this is an entirely gender-based violence issue when it's not. So when Bill came to me, it seemed it might work at that point because of the great recognition that we had gotten with the South Africa film.

It was just an astonishing journey. Nancy Andreasen [MD, Ph.D., then Andrew H. Woods Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Iowa College of Medicine] and the people at Iowa at the big research center were amazing. You know, I often try and put myself in the position of my audience members and I just try to make these things accessible for people at a very human level – just as a person entering this issue with normal apprehensions or misconceptions

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about schizophrenics. I'll never forget Frank, who worked in the university project at Iowa. The second day I was there, took me to visit one of their clients, a brilliant young man who was actually working, doing some research. So I said, oh good, Frank and I are gonna go visit. So we got up to this guy's house in a little suburb, a little house next to a whole bunch of other houses on a nice little side street. Frank says, "Okay, I'll be back in an hour." I says, "What?" He says, "I'll see you. You know, he's expecting you – just knock on the door." It was like really – yeah! I was scared. I thought I would have Frank there with me and be able to sit back and you know, sort of watch this. I'll never forget that, actually, because I think it was a step for me early in my career of learning, you know.

NKR: Did he do it on purpose?

RB: Oh, totally! That really was the point that I was trying to make, is that he did it absolutely on purpose. He helped me. Not only with this film, but I see it as something that I've learned from. I was uneasy the whole time, to be perfectly honest with you. Certain patients – you know, the wonderful bearded mathematician that we did a long interview with, remember the two pieces of lemon on the coffee table? The boy who killed himself in *I'm Still Here* – that was a heavy blow too. But he said the same thing. He was a young guy, he was down in Florida, he was sitting on a bench with his girlfriend – just totally normal – I'll never forget this. He said he's sitting there, he said, "Yeah, and all of a sudden I go, what was that?" It was so severe in his case that two days later he had turned himself in to the police and surrendered as a Soviet spy. Which is one of the classical delusional things that they still haven't quite figured out.

NKR: That's when a lot of young people can't do it – when they leave home. They go to school or they move out on their own, eighteen, nineteen, twenty. They've maybe been a little bit bizarre to some people but they've been okay – like the college girl, who seemed like she was so successful. Really, when she went away that was it.

RB: I think that would be a trigger, it's so clear. You know the brain is still forming at eighteen, nineteen years old. Classically, it's nineteen- or twenty-year-olds. So something [snaps his fingers]! But I think it's sort of like, just as something is beginning – I think any

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number of triggers can make that stop. Clearly there's late-onset schizophrenia. But classic paranoid schizophrenia is a teen-age thing – well, it's an issue with serotonin, in a certain critical way that they still haven't figured out. It's interesting, the boy who killed himself, he was a poster boy for Risperdal actually. Jim. Fitzgerald. And the classic thing that happened there that's so fascinating is that the drug worked so well for him. He tried to kill himself twice – we filmed a re-enactment of his suicide attempt.

NKR: In the stairwell…

RB: Yeah, in the stairwell. And he threw himself off a roof. Jim had done so well, in his case though, that he started to take on too much. He bought a house. Got a girlfriend and moved in. And created a certain amount of stress. When I talked to him he was full of hope. And one day – I'm dead certain what happened - not long after I did the interview with him at all, a voice must've come back and he was taking no chances. He shot himself in the mouth with a shotgun. And the doctors I talked to afterward said, "This is the failure here. We should have prepared him better for feeling better – before, and monitored that behavior better." I think that we're way down the road now on this, but my heart still goes out to all these people.

NKR: You're how old at this point?

RB: Sixty-six.

NKR: And you made your first film when you were – ?

RB: I was forty-something. Mid-40s.

NKR: What did you do before?

RB: Well, the quick rundown is this. After I got out of Hamilton [College] I went to Africa, basically as a free-lance journalist, in Nairobi. Then I came back. I got drafted in the service in the Vietnam War. I didn't go to Vietnam, I was in the Panama Canal Zone, as an enlisted man. Got out, went to Indiana University and got a graduate degree in theatre and film. A couple buddies of mine and I had formed the Indiana Repertory Theatre at I.U.

There is an interesting, fascinating coincidence – you know, when you reconstruct your life. The coincidence had been that in addition to the upstate New York Hamilton thing, right around that period – it was right after I graduated, the late 60s – my dad left the World Council of

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Churches because they had appointed a new secretary general, not him, and it was tough for him. But he came back and took a church here in Rochester as a pastor – Central Presbyterian Church. He didn't stay long. He even went back to the Council and did social justice work. The church was vacated and I basically built a theatre in there, and founded something called the Rochester Shakespeare Theatre, which is the first professional repertory theatre here in Rochester in about twenty, thirty years, and became pre-cursor to what is now the Geva Theatre.

Once the Shakespeare Theatre evolved into Geva, my friend Len Cariou, who is a very well-known Canadian actor, invited me to be his associate at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in Winnipeg. So Len and I went there for a year with my first wife, Judy, who is Amy's mom – Amy was born there. That was where I first directed Beckett's *Endgame*, on the second stage. Len and I had planned on staying for a year or two, because it's the biggest theatre in Canada apart from Stratford. He was the artistic director and I was his associate, but he got offered – [laughs]. I was in his office when his secretary comes in and says, "It's Hal Prince." Hal was calling to offer him *Sweeney Todd*, which was the great achievement of Len's career. He created the role of Sweeney Todd in Sondheim's musical. So that was kind of it for the Manitoba Theatre Centre, and we both helled it out of there.

I came back to Rochester again because I had roots here. I was living out in the boonies up here and I went to work at a series of advertising agencies. Rochester had a very active advertising community back in the heyday of Kodak and Bausch and Lomb. I became the creative director of one. It was a conscious choice. I felt that my life, even though I had done some journalism and stuff – I was starting to get really interested in this film medium. I wondered, what is a way to do this? A number of British friends said, "Make television ads, make commercials, dude. Say it quick, say it short." And that's what I did. Made some TV commercials – you know, worked two or three years, got Amy going, and then I quit and made *Cry of Reason*.

NKR:* Cry of Reason *was right around, shortly after Byers Naudé had retired that you went to make that, is that right?

RB: I think he was still running the South Africa Council of Churches, but he was about not to anymore, yeah.

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NKR: Because that just occurs near the end in the narration.

RB: Yup. I don't remember who took over – well, Desmond, I guess. But what was the pre-cursor? Relatively straightforward in some sense, but there was this fine arts background and then the journalism. I remember opening my desk drawer at work and saying, "I don't want to see a can of beans there at the end of my life." I hated that world, frankly. I absolutely despised it because I saw how it consumed people. I've never watched *Mad Men* – but I just hated it.

NKR: It's not surprising that now you make a film and say, "This is a film about the way the world is."

RB: [laughs] It was a clean break for me and I had a lot of friends at Kodak and they were very supportive. The ad agency where I was director at the time, we had done a series – Rochester celebrated a sesquicentennial back then and they wanted to do a series of ads about the city and we won that account. It was a pro bono thing. But Kodak underwrote it so I got to know a lot of cool – you know, Kodak was back in its heyday. Richard [Young] was there. He was their main filmmaker.

NKR: So he's been with you for a long time.

RB: Yeah – I've known Richard for a very long time, twenty years maybe. But we've been hand-in-hand since *A Closer Walk*. He's been my co-director. He did not work on the *Cry of Reason* film. He started working with me on the *Closer Walk* movie. That was ten, eleven – we started shooting just ten years ago. He and I sort of went forward on this path together. So [his death in December 2010, between the Luxor and Lincoln Center premiere screenings] has been very hard and unexpected. Not a smoker. He died of small lung cell cancer. I remember him coughing away three, four years ago. He had had testicular cancer twenty, thirty years ago but that's pretty clean, cut and dried. Where the small lung cell cancer came I just don't think anybody knows. His doctors treated it and – he was one of my very best friends. Even so, I'd talk to him about this coughing, because we'd be on a plane. I remember once, we were actually in first class on British Airways so that he was pretty far behind and I could hear him hacking away. But all I know is that it came on very, very quickly. Less than a year ago. So that's been hard and I have to reflect on it. Richard was cool. We had a lot of talks in October after he had been

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diagnosed. You know, we were really good with each other. He really believed in this *Not My Life* movie – much more than I did. He said it's absolutely the best work. For some reason he really, really believed in it. So I'm taking that forward.

NKR: Well, its topic is so contrary to who we say we are in our world. And it permeates everything, it's everywhere.

RB: It's very disturbing, for that reason. I spoke at something called The e.g. Conference in April. It's pretty strict – you only get twenty minutes. I showed a couple of clips. Speaking to your question, I mentioned my interview with the Dalai Lama for *A Closer Walk*, where I wanted to talk to him about how this is a sort of preventable thing and how do we think about that? I pointed out to the audience that His Holiness is a great student of scripture and he's engaged in many wonderful dialogues at a sort of seminar level with Christians. And there are a lot of parallels. I consider myself, I told him, a kind of hybrid Christian-Buddhist. So yeah, His Holiness had actually written a beautiful little book of essays about the parables and so forth, and my last question in this interview – I said, "Your Holiness, I know that you've studied Christianity and are very eloquent in interpreting. What do you think Jesus would say if he were walking the earth today?" And it was quite cool, because unlike his other remarks – he gave it a good little think. And he said, "Well! I think when you look at all that we've accomplished, technologically and everything beautifully, beautifully – he would be very, very impressed." Then he goes, "But I think he would be scolding us." Yeah. You know, that's it, right?

NKR: When it was, I think, his last major birthday, some English journalist asked him if he was ever angry. He said he had gotten angry at a reporter who asked him if he was thinking about his legacy. And he said, "I am a practicing Buddhist. The last thing I need to be concerned with is my legacy! I am angered by stupidity."

RB: [laughs] Right! The wonderful thing about the Dalai Lama and Buddhists in general, I think, is that just because you're a Buddhist does not mean that you're not human or that you can't be angry. He talked to me about, you know, missing sex. That's the great thing about Buddhists – they accept these things. It's in the acceptance, I think. And I've learned that, to be honest, since Richard died has been

a really kind of major turning point for me. That thing that happens when your friends begin dying – with Richard, he was only sixty-nine or seventy. I mean, I'm glad to have been able to have the privilege of those kinds of insights, studied Buddhism or any of those things, because you really do learn, I think, to appreciate the every day. And every moment. And I'm hoping that with *Take Me Home* I can sort out and reconcile all this pain and suffering that I've been witness to. And then, how can I make this a film that people would actually be interested in going to see, like one of Mike's films [Michael Moore]? So that's what that porch is waiting for, this winter.

NKR: Sitting.
RB: Yeah – going out there and thinking. I want to see if we can get things kind of up and running and then take the winter off. I've found this to be just lovely. One of the things I wanted to ask you – it's very, very nice when you or others actually pay attention to the work. I'm interested in how you see the work.

NKR: I think of it as a body of work.
RB: It's starting to be.

NKR: Yes. And it's something that each film you have been deeply, deeply immersed in and you've become very conversant. One of the things that draws me to your work is that you don't rely on the statistics to make the argument. I think there's been a revulsion against that by some good documentary filmmakers.
RB: Well, we try to tackle big subjects. And that's why I'm curious because I think we're trying to do something that's sort of unique. Take these things that people won't touch, but we've been very touched by a lot of kids in their teens who really glom onto our work big-time – for some reason that I don't quite get yet.

NKR: **Not My Life** ***starts out, "Consider the fishing boys – "***
RB: "Consider the fishing boys of Lake Volta."

NKR: And it seems like this is remote and unique, but very quickly you see it's not. And you spend enough time visually with the people and their everyday lives, that very quickly there's an identification. And I think young people have receptivity to that.

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RB: I've been told we don't spend enough time!

NKR: Well, I think you spend more time than many documentary-makers spend.

RB: This time [with the final cut] we're going to go back ten minutes. We're taking ten minutes off it. And the ending is the problem. That's what Amy and I were saying earlier about doing a re-cap at the end. Starting with Egypt, which we have to deal with, because Mubarak dates the film. But it gets preachy and talky and campaign-y, as the BBC guy said to me, toward the end. And that's why I have a problem with this movie, still, and that why a lot of it had to do with rushing to get to a preview in Luxor, Egypt, at the Africa conference in December of 2010. So the film's got two or three endings. And it starts to feel – many of the – not many, but I'm sensing this from folks who are quite blown away but, if I really press them? You know, there is that sense that it doesn't [snaps his fingers] – it doesn't wrap right to me. So I think you're going to like this new one better because we're going to end – we'll keep it mostly the same, we're going to tighten it here and there, but toward the end, once we get to Egypt I'm not going to do this whole preachy thing. And I may do like what we did with *A Closer Walk*, which is I'd go back to the boy underwater, who in fact was rescued – with his twin brother – and they are in school. I don't have a problem if something really works – you want to put a bow on this thing, you want to know what's happened to some of these people. But it'll be tighter – it'll be seven, eight minutes tighter.

NKR: I know we're almost out of time for today and if we can talk again at some point that'd be great. What I'd just like to ask you today is, if I didn't ask you – what would you like a journalist to ask you about your work?

RB: Well, I think anybody who spends millions of dollars of other people's money trying to change the world or make a difference should be held accountable to that, to a degree. To what you're claiming you're trying to do, so I'd be willing to tackle the question of whether I feel my films have really made a difference or not in the world. Yeah, we do need to stop.

VII.

Bilheimer and I spoke again about six weeks later at the end of August, this time by phone. He was driving to the Wesley Hill Nature

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Preserve near Naples, New York, for a morning hike, and we stayed on the phone on his way through the woods on the path to Anna Pond until the connection started breaking up. The final cut was rapidly taking shape and he thought he'd be done in another three weeks, in time for CNN International's deadline. The week before, he'd met actor Glenn Close in a Boston studio and re-done *Not My Life*'s narration (Ashley Judd voiced the narration in the film's first premiere cut), a change he'd mulled at some length. He sounded elated.

"She absolutely nailed it!" he said. "She's so good at nuances and picking up rhythms. She blew the room away and she brought the words to life. I'm really pleased and excited."

Close and actor Will Smith had shared narration on *A Closer Walk*, and I wondered if Bilheimer thought Close might do it again for *Take Me Home*.

"Yes, she will – so she'll do the whole trilogy."

Bilheimer ticked off a detailed, precise list of what he was doing with the final cut – besides making it about five minutes shorter, he'd moved sections around, trimmed some scenes, added cameos, and figured out the ending.

"The ending is better, a lot tighter," he said. "I decided to end after the hotline scene – it started to get too preachy. I moved [former child soldier] Grace Akallo up to after the domestic servitude piece. We condensed Molly Melching's talk about hope."

Molly Melching, who's been in Senegal since the 1970s, is founding director of TOSTAN, a community-based human rights education organization whose name means "breakthrough" in Wolof, Senegal's major language. TOSTAN began in there but now operates in ten African nations, with more than 99% of its paid staff African. Melching tells us in the film that there is no trafficking in a TOSTAN community because the community is self-policing. *Not My Life*'s title comes from something Melching said when Bilheimer interviewed her in the city of Thies in June 2009. They were discussing the difficulty and denial many have with facing modern slavery in our midst and identifying with its victims. She remarks, "People can say, 'No, this is not my life.' But my life can change. Let's change together."

"The whole ending," Bilheimer went on, "is Grace asking why. And then Glenn says the answer is that there has always been a battle between good and evil. Grace embodies hope, the Egyptian school girls are hope. Glenn mentions the human family, that we need to

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come home, and then Leo. Leo stays in – he's the last word."

Melching's remark supplied a title but also shows the arc Bilheimer draws between a starting point – that is, the personal disconnect from modern slaves – and Leo Sakomoto's "last word" that we are all human.

And what about the mantra of *Not My Life* – the phrase, "the way the world is"? Did that mean that to change anything, one first has to accept its reality?

Robert Bilheimer and students in a "girl-friendly" school at Abu Seer, Egypt, April 2010. Courtesy Worldwide Documentaries, photo by Craig Braden.

"Oh, exactly," he said. "The idea is redemption through suffering. Thirty million people have died of AIDS, often on doorsteps. But I'm not saying that in a ghoulish way. When Glenn says, 'This is the way the world is…,' the way she reads that line is like reading to a child. The girl who got beat up in the Port Authority – no one cared. This really echoes the AIDS activists really getting that no one cared if they died. They had to see that in order to act. This is the eternal question. And this is what Grace is struggling with. My father was dealing with these issues too. Only as a child can you enter the Kingdom of Heaven – and we're destroying our children."

He also said he'd just talked with someone who might fund the Haiti portion of his next film, *Take Me Home*.

"I'm deeply committed to going back to Haiti. Part of my thinking is, do I need to bind myself to a trilogy? I've got this idea of going to Haiti and hanging out more by myself, basing myself in one or two hospitals. There are so many stories! The Haitian doctors are a breed apart. And Paul Farmer has trained many of them. I still cling to the idea of "home" and what that means – a lot of people don't have homes in the traditional sense. Should it just be Haiti? I always had this thing about Haiti and the Adirondacks. The other day I had a third

idea. I've lived in *Nairobi, and there is still wide-spread poaching of elephants, a form of abusing our ecology, particularly since they are so sensitive and intelligent. I came across a story by a woman who's created an orphanage for baby elephants. With the first grandchild on the way, I thought I'd love for *Take Me Home* to be something they'd like to see one day. There is such a potential metaphorical confluence here – Haiti and new old-growth forest and the majesty of compassion. I just feel there are such interesting connections to make, why not make them?"

Bilheimer went on. "Other societies re-jigger the idea of home – what is it, really? A structure or is it your children or a planet or a canopy of leaves? What about [Truman] Capote's book [*In Cold Blood* (1966), about the 1959 murders of the Clutter family in rural Kansas by two drifters]? Is it still a home if no one survives?"

Bilheimer related the story of a Haitian policeman he'd met who walked seven miles after the earthquake to his two daughters' school, only to find both girls had died.

"I had to reconstruct that walk with this guy," he added. "And then he went back and helped other people find their kids. That idea of home, I think it wound up having a broader meaning."

Bilheimer was nearly to Anna Pond then. "I want to get to that pond," he said. "I can throw some sticks in the water."

VIII.

So it seems to matter what we call things. A year after that first long July drive into the country to talk with Robert Bilheimer in person, if you were looking you might notice a shift has occurred. It is now hardly possible to visit an anti-trafficking website that does not employ the term "slavery" – in the present tense – as part of its home page presentation. Earlier this fall, in an email exchange about some of the images in this article, I asked Heidi Ostertag, who has been Bilheimer's senior producer since Worldwide Documentaries began (they are also married), if she had noticed this. Yes, she replied simply, she thought so too. There have been more pointed public namings of the tie between modern and historical slavery, just in the last few months.

* Bilheimer went to Nairobi after college as a journalist, working as a stringer for *TIME, Nairobi Daily Nation* and Agence France Presse.

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• Every June, the U.S. Department of State delivers its annual *TIP (Trafficking in Persons) Report*, as it has done since DOS began managing this initiative. The Secretary of State speaks, there is a thick written summary, individuals and groups receive special recognition. In 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton made two changes. For the first time, she ordered that the report's ranking of progress among nations (184 now) include U.S statistics too.

And she scheduled this year's event for June 19th. In her remarks, Clinton drew attention to choosing the anniversary of "Juneteenth," now celebrated in many communities across the U.S. On that day in 1865, word of the Emancipation Proclamation finally reached Galveston, Texas – two and a half years late – where a Union officer read General Order Number 3 from a balcony, declaring, "All slaves are free." (Texas slave-holders suppressed the news in order to get in that spring's crops.) Clinton added, "Today, there are 27 million victims of modern slavery…labeling this for what it is, slavery, has brought another dimension."

• *Can You Walk Away?*, an exhibition on modern slavery, opened at the Lincoln Cottage in Washington, DC, this past February and runs through August 2013. The Lincoln Cottage, now a small museum, is the house in the capital where the Lincoln family stayed from June to November in the years 1862-64. The exhibition includes screenings of *Not My Life*, along with interactive features such as "Your Slavery Footprint," which allows visitors to calculate how their purchases and investments fuel and derive benefit from the modern slave trade.

• On July 17th, actors Will and Jada Pinkett Smith, along with their daughter Willow, appeared before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee wearing tee-shirts emblazoned with the words "FREE SLAVES." Jada Pinkett Smith spoke in favor of re-authorizing the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which would cover the years 2012-15. Congress reauthorized the TVPA three times under President George W. Bush (in 2003, 2005 and 2008), but it last expired at the end of 2011. The TVPA has now joined a pool of formerly bipartisan legislation held up by Congressional gridlock and has not come up for a vote before either full house.

• On September 25th, President Obama said that trafficking "must be called by its true name – modern slavery." This was his first

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major public address on the topic, during which he announced his Executive *Order to Combat Slavery*.

The International Justice Mission (IJM) had formally requested action by him in June, supported by of a petition with more than 73,000 signatures. Obama's executive order now requires that all U.S. government contracts include "supply chain transparency," that is, proof that all related goods and labor are non-trafficked. It also provides training and guidance to federal prosecutors and law enforcement, immigration judges, commercial transportation officials, state and local law enforcement, state work force agencies and educators to detect signs of trafficking in cases they routinely encounter. And it provides increased services and legal assistance for victims.

- Then, in August, Central New York Freedom Makers formed here in the Syracuse area, a new alliance between local activists and the International Justice Mission. CNY Freedom Makers rapidly organized a number of local events and set a goal of raising $100,000 by the end of 2012. They earmarked this amount to fund creation of an IJM satellite office in the Philippines for the existing Manila field office, specifically to work with women and girls needing rescue from sexual slavery.

Intriguingly, CNY Freedom Makers hit the ground running by squarely defining trafficking as modern slavery. More, they made the basis for organizing here the region's own historical identity as a hotbed of the 19th century Abolitionist movement, with significant events, a cast of historical figures who serve as exemplars and a network of already designated landmark historic sites related to Abolition and the Underground Railroad.

Here is an excerpt from their mission statement (cnyfreedommakers.org):

> Today's facts are staggering. Today slavery exists in numbers greater than at any time in history. Globally more than 27 million people, half under the age of 18, are forced into the $32 billion dollar human trafficking industry. 80% of these victims are women and 70% are sold for sex.
>
> But we have a different history. Syracuse has a storied history of interest, passion and activism towards slavery. The Jerry Rescue of 1851 in Syracuse was one of the great triumphs of the anti slavery movement and is commemorated in downtown's Clinton Square. Syracuse was known as the "great central depot" along the Freedom

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> Trail, a central stop along the underground railroad that was a pathway to freedom for those held captive.
>
> Building on our history, legacy and identity as a community that has engaged in the anti-slavery movement in the past we are uniting to continue this movement of modern day abolitionists, working to address the current human trafficking industry and become CNY Freedom Makers.

In mid-October, CNY Freedom Makers hosted a talk at Syracuse University's Hendricks Chapel, by Greg Darley, titled "The Fight Against Modern Slavery." Darley is IJM's national director of student mobilization and the University connection was made through the Chapel's dean by a member of CNY Freedom Maker's launch team.

Emma Voight is an AmeriCorps VISTA staff for the Northside Urban Partnership in Syracuse and part of CNY Freedom Makers. Before she graduated from nearby Cazenovia College, she'd read Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn's 2009 book, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. Several days after the Hendricks Chapel event, she told me, "From there, I wanted to come up with more ways I could do something. Americans have a really limited view – we look at slavery as something that happened in the past. I remember my mom saying that, when I was in school. That was such a jarring idea!"

Voight said it was Kathy Schreiber who made the tie-in with the Jerry Rescue and the region's particular Abolitionist history.

Schreiber is on staff at Eastern Hills Bible Church, a large, non-denominational congregation just east of the village of Manlius outside Syracuse, where she's head of Local/Global Ministries.

"For the last four years, we've attempted some fall and holiday funding effort," she explained. "These have been projects outside our own community. We've done a clean water project for Ghana and Senegal. Last October we raised money for World Vision's work on the famine in the Horn of Africa. We'd always like to cooperate with other partners so that there's a Central New York umbrella."

Schreiber says that when the idea for a project against human trafficking came up, especially sex trafficking of women and children, the search for an established partner organization had specific goals.

"I contacted the International Justice Mission, because they do comprehensive work," she said. "So they rescue, they also carry out prosecution to help a community extend its own rule of law, and they

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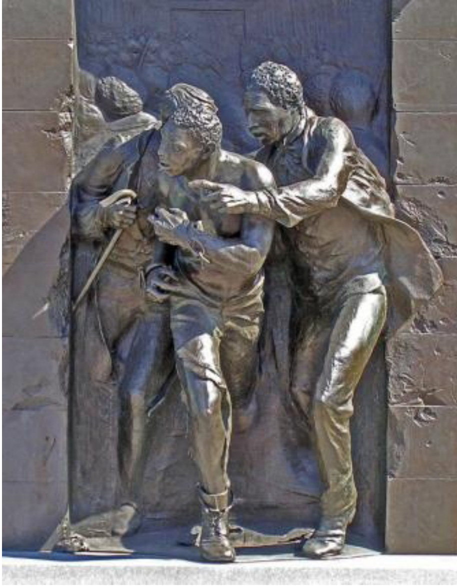

CNY Freedom Maker's reference to the 1851 "Jerry Rescue" aptly highlights how members of this community rose en masse to free a jailed fugitive slave in defiance of federal law – or, from another perspective, a moment when the community was "self-policing" in its refusal to allow slavery in our midst. Slavery was legal in New York State until 1827. But beginning in the 1830s, thousands fleeing slavery passed through this region on their way to Canada or the West, via the Underground Railroad (UGRR). By the 1850s Syracuse was known as a "free city" because sentiment against slavery was so strong and open. In 1851, federal marshals arrested William "Jerry" Henry here, intending to return him to Missouri under the Fugitive Slave Law. Some 2,000 Syracusans broke him out of jail downtown and helped him get to Canada. According to historian Samuel Gruber, this was the last time federal marshals tried to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law locally. In 1990 the city erected Sharon BuMann's cast bronze statue of the Jerry Rescue in Clinton Square, depicting Henry rushing through the battered jailhouse door, broken chains still around his wrists, flanked by AME Zion pastor Rev. Jermain Loguen and Unitarian pastor Rev. Samuel May. Loguen himself had fled Tennessee; he and his wife Caroline sheltered some 1,500 persons traveling through on the UGRR.

provide follow-up for the people they've rescued. We wanted to come up with a specific community somewhere, almost like a sister city. They suggested the Philippines because they had a four-year project there that they had started with a grant from the Gates Foundation, and it really works. We grabbed hold of that – we'd replicate that by funding another field office there. We'd shoot for $100,000 by the end of December and then in January turn this into a gathering of all the people in Central New York working on this. There's lots of groups out there and we could see what we can do together."

Voight thought about a hundred people had come to the Hendricks Chapel event, from which blossomed an IJM campus branch. Since then CNY Freedom Makers has hosted an open house at the Cape Cod Cottage, a historic Underground Railroad site on Palmer Road outside Manlius, and a benefit concert at Eastern Hills. In November

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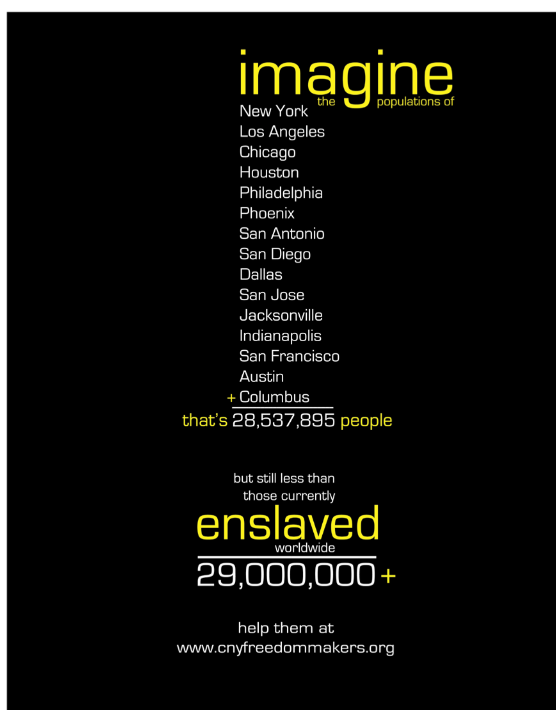
there was an on-going "Loose Change Breaks Chains" collection at several spots – in the atrium of Syracuse University's student center, at the YMCA branch in the Syracuse suburb of Fayetteville, and some local churches. There's also a poster series, produced by Cazenovia College design students; these have been for sale at events and through the project website, as well as on display through October at ArtRage Gallery in Syracuse, which draws especially an audience interested in social justice-themed art.

Undaunted at the prospect of raising such a sum by year's end, Schreiber said they'd hosted an IJM speaker the previous weekend.

"He spoke to about eight hundred people at Eastern Hills," she said. "We have done these individual projects. There are some significant checks, though most of them are under a thousand dollars. Last year, altogether from the Central New York area, we raised $81,000 for hunger."



A striking example of the "telling statistic," this poster, by Paul Roberts, is one of six produced by art and design students in Laurie Selleck's Protest and Propaganda class at Cazenovia College. Roberts' research into the numbers of modern slaves suggests a massive uptick from the 27 million figure we've been comfortable with for the past couple years. Besides Roberts, Vin Halsey, Jessica Lacelle, Joshua Skibbee, Noelle Sippel and Kathryn Wheeler were winners in a contest to produce graphic designs with text in opposition to human trafficking. Their posters are for sale to support the CNY Freedom Makers' current fund-raising project, available at the project's public events and the project's website. Professor Selleck is director of the Visual Communication Program at Cazenovia College and a board member of ArtRage Gallery in Syracuse, which displayed the six posters during October to publicize the campaign. Courtesy CNY Freedom Makers.

Since CNY Freedom Makers began with such clarity that slavery is happening now, it's not surprising that – the Philippines project notwithstanding – they have also recognized fairly early on that it might also be happening here. On November 14th, they piggy-backed on a local newspaper story from the day before about the city's Housing and Homeless Vulnerable Coalition, which had announced a ten-year plan to end homelessness in Syracuse. Repeating the Coalition's current estimate that there are, on average, four hundred twenty-four homeless people on any given day in Syracuse, CNY Freedom Makers used their Twitter account to note that this translates to four hundred twenty-four local people vulnerable to modern-day slavers, right here, on any given day.

When Kathy Schreiber and I spoke, she had not seen or heard of Robert Bilheimer's *Not My Life*. But when I asked her about framing this project in terms of Central New York's Abolitionist heritage and history, she answered by first telling me about a trip she'd made elsewhere. Like the film itself, which opens and closes with Etse, it seems we come full circle.

"Well, four years ago I went to Ghana," said Schreiber. "And there, I saw the fishing boys."

"At Lake Volta?" I asked her.

"Yes, Lake Volta. I met a little boy who'd been rescued. He was fourteen and he'd started school again. 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I asked him. He said he wanted to be a soldier – he wanted to go back to Lake Volta and make sure no other children became slaves."

"It's almost the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation," Schreiber went on. "You know, I have a friend who moved into a house that was part of the Underground Railroad. This is who we are here. And I wanted to re-ignite that. We need to be who we are."

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