

Almost There

An Emerson Collective Podcast

Episode 13: You—yes, you—can decide how the government spends money

Dwayne Betts:

I read Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, back when I was still in prison. And what I remember most about the book now is that the main character was this teenage black girl, born into a post-apocalyptic Earth, that's ruined by climate change and social inequality. And she is born with hyper empathy, and that is what allows her to see everybody else. And she becomes the catalyst, and a conduit, and a driver of people to a new salvation. It's not really sci-fi, speculative fiction, it's about where we might go despite where we are now. And it's wild because when I read it, I didn't get something dystopian. I got something about the possibility of what it means to build community.

This is connected to the work of my guest, Shari Davis, because they are building community. And they're doing it with the tools and the materials that exist around them. Shari Davis is the co-executive director of the Participatory Budgeting Project, also known as PBP. An organization that has empowered thousands of people to directly decide how to spend millions, and millions of dollars in public funds across 30 cities and counting.

Shari Davis:

How would you spend a million dollars to keep your community safe? Sometimes I ask people, "What are we fighting for? What is the end goal?" And if we're not spending time dreaming about that, visioning it, building a blueprint toward it. Even if we tear everything down, what's going to happen next?

Dwayne Betts:

And so when me and Shari start our conversation with Butler, and then we end up talking about martial arts, and then we start talking about participatory budgeting, it's easy to think, are these pieces not connected? Until you realize that participatory budgeting, martial arts, Octavia Butler's book, they're all about stitching the fragments together so that our community will hold fast.

From Emerson Collective, this is *Almost there*. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. It's interesting when I get a chance to sit down and talk to folks, because I always find out things I didn't know. Talking to you, I think you'll remind me of some things that I knew that I hadn't thought of in a while. And I want to start first with this book that you carry around with you. Can you tell me what book you got with you?

Shari Davis:

The book that I carry around with me is *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler. Do you know it?

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah. Yeah, I know it. I mean, I'm black. I know it. No, actually that's not a given actually. And it's wild because my kid, my son, he read it in his high school class this year. Can you tell me why you carry that around? And when did you read it the first time?

Shari Davis:

That's a really good question, Dwayne. And I have to think about when I read it the first time, but I will tell you when I read it the last time. And I have a beautiful family, and I have some cousins in New

Orleans. These are like my brothers, and they're four boys. And these are, I call them my baby cousins, but they're all bigger and taller than me. And we started a book club. And each one of us would suggest a different book that we would read, and then we would take turns facilitating some cousin conversations. And they would get real, and raunchy, and we would challenge each other. And so naturally, the book that I suggested was Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. And when my brothers read this book with me and we had a chance to talk about it, the conversation that we had was so charged.

There was so much in there that was about hope and opportunity, and a reflection on pain and fear. And it opened up this channel for us to talk to each other honestly about the world that we live in now. And Octavia Butler wrote this book I think in '93, and it's set in 2024. And it's scary close, and sad, and destructive picture of society. And so it created this channel for us to have a conversation about what's at risk. And I like to talk to my family about democracy. And about how we could come together to change the levers of power. And sometimes they laugh me away, but *Parable of the Sower* gave me a different angle to have that conversation with my family members. And so we probably did a reading together, just before the pandemic actually, that felt really important.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah, the thing I remember about the book is a little girl walking, maybe in LA, and the whole world was burning. That's the main image that I kept from the book. I read it in prison. And in some wild sense, it becomes a part of this backdrop of my understanding of the world. Even if I know I would need to read it again actually to be able to have a real conversation with you about it. And yet I can't have a conversation, because I almost laughed at you when you said, "I like to talk about democracy." Nobody says really that they like to talk about democracy that is not a politician. And so I just want to ask clearly first, are you a politician?

Shari Davis:

No, I'm not a politician. And I don't have any intention of running for office. But I did work in government for a really long time, so I've worked closely with politicians. Really, I've worked with people to kind of wield power in their own ways and spaces, and I think that's what democracy is about. Of actually re-imagining the levers of power, and using them in ways that serve people that are impacted by decisions. So I think democracy is dope. I think it's sexy. I think it's something that we actually don't have an opportunity to experience, and need to talk about more.

Dwayne Betts:

All right, well, I'm going to back up a little bit because you've just said a few phrases, that I don't know what they actually mean. So the first is democracy, right? And wielding the levels of power. And in the second it's like, "I think it's dope. And I think it's sexy." Because I've realized the way language works is, when you hear a word that sounds good, you be into it. You be like, "Oh, you just described it as dope and sexy. I like things that's dope and sexy." But I don't know if I actually know what that is. And I know that, for the past five years, you've led the Participatory Budgeting Project. Can you help me understand what the work is of the PBP?

Shari Davis:

Yeah, absolutely. So the PBP, or the Participatory Budgeting Project, is a national nonprofit organization committed to transforming democracy by centering community power. PB, or participatory budgeting, is a process where community members directly decide how public budgets, tax dollars are spent in their

community. And let me just tell you how it works. The first phase of participatory budgeting is actually writing the rules. It's where folks come together, they determine who's going to be eligible to vote. What funding is going to be eligible for the process, and what the goals of the process are, for example. Once the rules are written and shared transparently, we move into one of my favorite parts of participatory budgeting, idea collection. This is where radical imagination happens. Community members tap into their lived experience, and they bring forward ideas on how to address issues in their community. Once the idea collection phase is over, we've collected hundreds, if not thousands of ideas.

We move into the proposal development phase. And this phase, this is where we see the most skill gains, and capacity gains for folks that participate in the PB process. They learned how to turn ideas into concrete proposals. What are the conditions for success? They think about that in proposal development. Once proposals are finalized and vetted, they make it onto the ballot. And nothing makes it onto the ballot unless it's feasible, unless it's going to have an impact on community, unless it furthers equity. And once the ballot is finalized, we move into, what most people think of as the favorite part of PB, which is the vote phase. And unlike local or traditional elections, a lot of the barriers in participatory budgeting are removed. So folks that have various citizenship status, that have been formally or currently incarcerated, are able to vote in a participatory budgeting process.

Once the vote is over, we announce the winning projects, and enter the last phase of participatory budgeting. And that is evaluation. The beautiful thing about PB, is that it's a change in the way that we do business. It's a change in the way that we think about government business. And the only way that that can be iterative is if we evaluate the process, figure out what worked and what needs to change in future years. This is not like a one-time thing. Participatory budgeting is an ongoing and iterative process, really a different way to think about government spending decisions.

Dwayne Betts:

See people listening to you, and it still sounds a little bit too vague. Right now, I get it though. And they might get it too, but I want to help them out a little bit. My understanding is you've given the opportunity to folks that has helped them redirect more than \$300 million in public funding across 29 cities.

Shari Davis:

That's right.

Dwayne Betts:

Is that correct?

Shari Davis:

That's right.

Dwayne Betts:

Now, see, that's when participatory budgeting starts sounding like a plan. See, at first it was sounding like an idea, but when you start telling me that you have figured out how to actually have communities make use of the resources that were set aside for those communities in the ways that they choose. Can you give a concrete example of how that's happened? And what that's meant for the community?

Shari Davis:

There are so many different kinds of projects that come out of PB. One of my favorite instances, actually in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where community members directly decided how recovery funds would be spent in their community. And these recovery funds were spent in all kinds of different important, impactful, and innovative ways. They ranged from things like affordable quality childcare, to support for victims of domestic violence and human trafficking. They also included things like lead line removal to improve water quality in Michigan, or specifically in Grand Rapids. Across the country, we've seen folks in the city of Boston vote for increased wifi access in neighborhoods that need it. So they literally installed more wifi access ports in low income and traditionally underserved neighborhoods. Folks have voted for park renovations. Not just to make parks more beautiful, which is important, but to make them more accessible for people of all bodies and all abilities.

Participatory budgeting has created opportunities for students in schools to get engaged in what happens around them in their school buildings. They voted for water bottle refill stations in places where it's really hot. And you need access to water, like in Phoenix, Arizona. Or they voted for recording studios so that they can share information amongst each other. And kind of curate morning announcements at school in ways that get other students deeply engaged. A lot of the projects that come out of participatory budgeting, really are on the spectrum from environmental justice, to physical safety, to building networks of community care. And also addressing issues like street challenges, and accessibility around curbs being cut.

My hope for participatory budgeting is, as we continue to practice PB, we all build our capacity to radically imagine how to address the issues that we face in community. And that we build our collective capacity to come up with solutions that work. Here is an opportunity to really implore our lived experience, connected with what's happening in the real world. And think about the future, and how we can address those issues. Not just today, but for tomorrow, and for years to come.

Dwayne Betts:

Okay, now I get how it's happened. I still have no idea how you came to believe that this was possible. Before you even do it, I get some sense of how the mechanisms work, but I want to know how did you even imagine that this was possible? And then the second question is. You said something in your narrative, is that you have to have a politician that is like, "I'm down for this." So if I don't know what participatory budgeting is, how do you make sure that the politician who has to say, "Yes. No?"

Shari Davis:

Yeah, these are really good questions. Number one, the idea was actually born in South America and Porto Alegre, Brazil. Which came out of one of the most impoverished spaces in that place where community members, mostly low-income folks, were able to make some decisions about how multimillion dollars of their public tax money was spent to meet their needs. It changed infant mortality rates, it had big impacts. And then from Brazil, this process, this methodology grew across the world. So now we've seen over 7,000 instances of participatory budgeting in the world. And it's new in the United States. We've only seen participatory budgeting in the United States for maybe 13 years. And the way that I was introduced to it, was actually from an elected official. I was working for the city of Boston at the time. I was overseeing youth initiatives, working with young people. And the mayor called me up to his office and said, "Hey, I want you to run a participatory budgeting process, where young people decide on a million dollars of the city's capital budget. And it better be good."

And I was like, "Yeah. Yes, sir. Absolutely." And I had to go Google what participatory budgeting was the first time like most people that get introduced to PB. And I found out a lot about what we're talking about now, and it didn't actually click for me until I was really in it. Until I was running the process. And

one day I looked up at a community meeting where folks were coming together and drawing out their pictures of the future, their pictures of what was possible in their community.

And when we set up this process, we wanted folks that were traditionally left out to be overrepresented. That meant formally and currently incarcerated young people in the city of Boston. That meant young people that identified as houseless. That meant young people that were part of the LGBTQIA community. That meant folks that came from the traditional and historic five lowest income neighborhoods in the city of Boston. And it was in that space where people are drawing out their visions, their values, their honest dreams of what would transform the streets that they lived on and walked on, that I got hooked on the potential of PB.

Dwayne Betts:

What I find interesting about this, and I laughed when it was a mayor who introduced you to this. Because I think a lot of times we forget that, within the walls of government you have people who are visionaries, who can hip you to something new. I think that somehow that gets lost in our conversations about democracy. But what you describe sounds so much like community that it makes me want to ask you, not how did you get involved with this, but what in your family life made you maybe open to engaging, and one, in the government in this way? And then two, with your community in that way? I don't come from a community that has had access to government in a way that you have, and it doesn't seem like you have either. It seems like you slipped in. So I wonder if you could explain what, if anything, in your upbringing made you open to this? And then how did you get from wherever you started to where you were when you were working for the government, for the mayor?

Shari Davis:

Yeah. I'm like, "You got to be careful being like Shari works for the government." I'm like, there was a period of time where I worked for local government running youth initiatives that feels important to clarify. But part of this... And I'm going to answer your question a little bit backwards first. You're right, I felt like I slipped in. Like I tripped and fell, and kind of woke up in this space where I could pull and push, and do some really interesting things. Experiment with what democracy was and could be, and have people listen to that. And one of the things that is real to this day, is I'm frustrated with how much of a unique story that is. When I was in Louisiana recently at a family reunion, we were talking about exactly that. And one of the things that's true about my family that hails from the Deep South, is that these are all revolutionaries, community leaders, activists in their own right.

And there are a lot of folks in my family that have different paths forward. Some folks have experienced the carceral system. Some folks are injured war veterans. Some folks have experienced real trauma. And I feel like that's a constant theme in my family. But the other constant theme in my family is this revolutionary bit. Whether you've served as a social worker, whether you volunteer on the weekend in an art program, whether sports was your calling. Everyone in my family has done something, or been part of some broader community. And for me, it was actually getting swept up in a black martial arts tradition, that was my opportunity to experience my independent learning along with my family about what community meant. And it was hard, and gritty, and uncomfortable, and you learned what it meant to be responsible for other people. I think that's what it was, right? My father talks about revolutionaries as not people that tear things down, but people that build stuff. And I come from a family of creative builders.

Dwayne Betts:

Hold up. Hold up. See, you keep dropping things on us, and then you're just not even telling us. You just said you come from a Black martial art background. What does that even mean? I should tell you, I worked for this federal judge. His name is Judge Theodore McKee, and he is a 18th degree black belt or something. So he came out of a Black martial arts culture too. But these are skilled black belts, breaking bricks with their fingers. But that is not a culture that I was aware existed when I was a child. So I think it's important for me... I'm just interested, what does that mean? Especially because I heard that you was teaching people martial arts when you was a kid.

Shari Davis:

Yeah. Well, you know there really is a important legacy that I feel like goes unsung in the United States about Black martial arts culture. And some people draw lines to the Black Panther movement. Some people draw lines to far before that. But my reality and lived experience included, starting to study and train in martial arts in inner city neighborhoods in Boston, Massachusetts. And these were predominantly black and brown students that would line up to take community classes. And not only was there the school that I happened to go to, but there was a network of schools across the region and across the country. And all of the OGs, so to speak... Billy Blanks is one of them.

Dwayne Betts:

What?

Shari Davis:

Billy Blanks is one of the meanest, nastiest martial artists that is underrated. People think about Billy Blanks and think about Tae Bo.

Dwayne Betts:

Tae Bo. Yes, that's who Billy Blanks is.

Shari Davis:

Listen, there's really hard to find footage of Billy Blanks doing point karate sparring, point karate fighting, fighting for grand championships. And this man is lightning fast. One of the most respected fighters of his time, right? Billy Blanks is part of this Black martial arts tradition. There are others, right? Pedro Xavier, Ronald and Donald Brady, Reggie Perry.

Dwayne Betts:

You do understand that... See, I feel so cheated because one, I disrespected Billy Blanks several times in the past. So I apologize to this brother. Not just because he could karate chop me, but also because it's just a huge reminder of those who know, know. And when Billy Blanks became the Tae Bo guy, we actually denigrated him, not even for being... We didn't even honor him for being an excellent business person, who was actually trying to translate his skill into a way for people to become healthier. We denigrated this brother because...

Shari Davis:

It's corny.

Dwayne Betts:

I tried Tae Bo before. Yeah, I tried Tae Bo and it gets you knocked out. That's the thing. And Billy Blanks knew that too. He was like, "Look, you can do this, Tae Bo, you going to lose some weight, but don't come in the street with this Tae Bo mess." But, you just educated me. And then the thing that you did and I appreciated it is, that you dropped the lineage. And some of us, we don't have it.

And you've done it a couple of times. You did it when you were talking about participatory budgeting, you acknowledged that it came from Brazil. And that it had this heritage that stretched back. And that we were just borrowing, and it's just been in the states for 13 years. And you mentioned Billy Blanks, but then you mentioned a run of other names, and I think that's deeply important.

I got a question though. How does that work in martial arts influence...? We think of ourselves as being engaged in the world, but I swear sometimes we all live in silos. And so you have that silo that is the part of you that works for the government. And then when you start doing participatory budgeting, it feels like now that silo gets exploded a little bit. Because now you go back into the community, and now you're working with the community and thinking about this idea called democracy. I wonder how much your work as a martial artist is also interspersed and interweaved, and just a part of everything that you're doing right now. Including the conversation that we started this with, which was about Octavia Butler.

Shari Davis:

Yeah. Man, martial arts is all of it for me. I'm a really big comic book nerd. That's probably why I love sci-fi the way that I do. And growing up, starting martial arts when I was nine, I wanted to do karate before then. So I was one of those kids that was punching my father's hands, and all of that good stuff. And when I got a chance to begin doing karate, when I tell you I loved it. I would show up before class, after class, if there was no class, I was practicing. And I was not good, man. It was rough, right? I could not control my body and my head. One thing would happen, and then my body would just spaghetti noodles. It was a really rough time, but I practiced so much that by the time I was 10 years old, I was starting to run the class.

I was starting to teach the class. Adults were working all day, and then standing in front of this 11 year old to go through a karate instruction of some kind. I got my black belt when I was 12, and I went on in my martial arts study from there. I was obsessed. I loved it. And the thing that I loved about it was how hard it was physically, how challenging it was mentally, but the rewards that I got. And I felt like I would watch people or have the honor of watching people get on the floor and explore what was possible for them, explore what was possible for their body. Hear people try something a hundred times. And be like, "I can't do this." And on 101, they would do it just that much better.

And I felt like it was this constant learning curve that has been a through line throughout my career. And democracy that has been a through line throughout the career that I have in government, that has been a through line now throughout this space where I'm challenging people to think about who they are, right? I've been doing some collective storytelling with people now. And for me, it all comes back to this belief that we don't need superheroes, but that we have superpowers that we can cultivate. Martial arts taught me that. It taught me that we can work at things and get good at them, and I could try something new and learn something different. And I think that is what gives me hope in the ways that we could shape democracy, practice democracy, challenge each other, grow into spaces that we've only imagined thus far.

Dwayne Betts:

I see both why Mayor Menino called you a troublemaker, but also why it's good trouble. And I actually am encouraged to hear you talk about democracy in this way, because I am so sometimes exhausted

with the way in which you said, being a revolutionary is about building something up. I think a lot of times from impoverished communities, from communities that suffer from too much lack of resources, from too much violence, from too much interpersonal violence. I think a lot of times we begin to imagine revolution as tearing something down. And I appreciate hearing you talk about it being a product of building something.

Shari Davis:

What's on the other side of that, right? Sometimes I ask people, "What are we fighting for? What is the end goal?" And if we're not spending time dreaming about that, visioning it, building a blueprint toward it. Even if we tear everything down, what's going to happen next? And I think that is the space that we need to be in. I think that's the space that young people need to be in. I think that that's the space that folks that have experienced depression need to be in, and are actively barred from. If we're able to exercise our radical imagination, I feel like our movement will be stronger. And the last thing I'll say to you, Dwayne, that makes this work super important is, when I do work in Detroit, Michigan, for example. And I knock on a 50-year-old black woman's door, and I say something like, "How would you spend a million dollars to keep your community safe?"

The likelihood that she will say, "The police." Even if she's had a million terrible experiences with the police or her family members have is really high, because that's usually the only option that we're given to consider. If I was to knock on that same person's door and change the question to, "When have you felt safe? What are things that we could invest in to grow your experiences of safety?" That would be a totally different conversation. And so that's the conversation that we're having. And this stuff is hard. I can't be like, "Look, here's a perfect answer." But I will say that people are wrestling with it. It comes with practice, it's going to come with some experimentation. And this is a huge culture shift that I think we have to think through together.

Dwayne Betts:

Let me ask you one more question, and we can talk about this forever, and I have my own opinions. But let me ask you one more question. It sounds like you live in a space in which you're reaching for a future that it's almost challenging and difficult to articulate. I know you still got to keep pushing, and I imagine that there's profound failures along the way. I imagine it's setbacks, and we haven't had a chance to talk about those. But tell me, what do you hear when I say a phrase like, "Almost There?" Which is the name of this podcast. What does something like that mean to you in the context of the work that you've been doing?

Shari Davis:

Yeah. When I think about the future that I want to create, and when I think about where we are, I feel this resonance and to that almost there. I think some of my hesitance in saying, "This is what that future looks like." Is, I can tell you what my version looks like. But I think in order for us to get there, we have to build a practice of talking about what almost there and beyond means to each of us. And I feel like we actually don't do that. We don't practice dreaming. We don't practice building a blueprint for the future. We don't practice proposing things to each other, maybe being shot down or seeing that as an opportunity to refine a policy. We think about things in wins and losses. We don't celebrate the why. And I think almost there, to me is a signal to celebrate an exploration of why we're doing this to get to a specific place.

And I think for me, participatory democracy is an exploration of our lived experience, our radical dreaming, to be able to get to a place. And it is happening. I'm seeing people right now vote on decisions

that mean that they're canceling their school safety officer contracts in a high school. And making decisions on how millions of dollars are spent to invest in alternatives to policing that keep people safe on school campuses. So it is happening. This future is happening. And I think where almost there hits home for me, is how we think about not just one example, but how we think about this becoming normal. Normal for people to dream, normal for people to participate and transform democracy. I want to say we're almost there. And this podcast feels like a push, a call, a call to action for us to almost get there.

Dwayne Betts:

I really enjoyed talking to you, and I'm impressed. I mean, not impressed as in... I should say I'm awed. And awed is this sort of recognition of something that kind of both surprises you, and astonishes you. And that's what I feel having had this conversation with you. So thank you. Yeah, this was dope, Shari. Now, I learned a lot during this episode. But one of the things I learned is that there's so much more to know, and I hope you're asking the same question. "How could I know more?" It's easy. Go to www.participatorybudgeting.org. Now, let me spell it out for you. Wwww.P-A-R-T-I-C-I-P-A-T-O-R-Y B-U-D-G-E-T-I-N-G.org. Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Newsom at Magnificent Noise for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Eleanor Kagan, Paul Schneider, and Kristen Mueller. Along with Patrick D'Arcy, Alex Simon, and Amy Low from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliot. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.