# What We Hold

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### Transcript

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**Jeanetta:** Have you ever held a mustard seed? Hmm. Of course I have. And I cried the whole time. Yes, I am the big baby of my family. Yes, I grew up in a very Christian home. We went to church every Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Oh, okay. Okay. I think y'all get the point. My mother always encouraged me to keep the faith and believe I could do anything with Christ that strengthened me. I was raised to believe that even the smallest faith could help me move mountains. And trust me. I faced a whole lot of mountains in my life. My faith helped me overcome every one of them. But, back then, I didn't know much about mustard seeds. But I sure did love me a bowl of mustard greens. And when I started losing sight, my faith was challenged. I had so many questions and not many answers. I must admit, I was running very low on faith. One day, a good friend took me to a local shop and placed a mustard seed in my hand. It was so tiny. But it felt so powerful. I knew mustard seeds were small. But I never imagined they were this small. As I wiped the tears from my face, a sense of peace came over me. Have you ever held a mustard seed? Go ahead. Feel inside the bowl. Trust me. It's not mustard greens. That tiny seed took my breath away. And the longer I held onto it, the more powerful it felt. At that time in my life, I was in a very dark place. On that day, as I held that tiny seed, I began to hold on to the light in my life. I felt like my power was restored. And I began to live my best life out of sight. Today, we're sharing the seeds of our lives that shaped and molded us into who we are today. Now, Bill, I have shared a little bit about my childhood and how my faith has been something I've carried with me all my life. But I'm curious about you. When you look back over your childhood, what is something that has stayed with you all these years?

**Bill:** Well, you won't be surprised to hear this about me. But I've never been someone to take things at face value. Even as a child, whenever someone

presented something to me as truth, my instinct was to just ask questions. Thinking back, I suppose I was always a critical thinker. I wanted to understand why. So when I was presented with faith, I often found myself holding a seed of doubt. After all, faith means believing in something without evidence. My father was an Irish immigrant. He grew up in Ardara, County Donegal in Ireland on a small family farm. They had sheep, cattle, potato fields, and peat bogs. They were like, the real deal poor ass Irish farmers. They were also one of the few Protestant families in a predominantly Catholic community. His older brother, Tommy, was next in line to inherit the farm. And my father had a difficult time, as a Protestant kid, attending Catholic school. And, at 16, he left school and moved to Blackburn, England, where he worked in textile factories. In his mid-20s, he came to America, lived with his aunt, and worked as a house painter. He planned to save enough money and move to New Zealand. But when he met my mom, well, you know, the rest is history, as they say. He was an engaging storyteller. He loved telling stories about his childhood. And he had an array of just corny ass jokes that he just kept telling all the time. You know, he would read to me before bed. When I asked him questions about the mysteries of life, he often just turned to Christianity for explanations. There's this one story he just loved telling a lot. And it got a lot of laughs. So I don't blame him for it. But it was when I was allegedly about three years old. Apparently, I asked him where everything came from. And he said, "Well, God made everything." And my response was, "Really? So God went, 'Poof, there's a lamp?'" And so I pointed at the lamp in the living room. And then I went, "Poof, there's a couch. And poof." I don't know. A TV or whatever. And I just kept going. Pointing at different things around the room. I thought that was hilarious. And, as I said, he told that story over the years all the time. I'd heard it. It's not that I remembered it. But I remember the story, right? But, looking back, I think it says something about how I approached the world. I wasn't necessarily satisfied with an explanation that just someone gave me. I was always questioning things. Even at three years old, I was trying to make sense of what I was being asked to believe. School was difficult for me, I got to say. Reading and spelling were a struggle. I now know I was dyslexic. But, you know, back then, I mean, I didn't figure it out. I didn't know. Just three years ago, I just found this out. So I had no idea back then, you know? And so reading class was met with laughter. I remember this particular incident in first grade. My God. Stay with me forever. And it planted seeds of shame and doubt in myself. However, art made sense to me. I remember there was an experience in third grade when I was doing observational drawing. The art teacher had us

draw a shoe using a technique which, ironically, was called blind contour drawing, where you look at an object and then don't look at the paper. So you just stare at the object and draw. And when I compared my drawings to the other kids, my peers, mine actually looked just like the shoe, unlike theirs. And so my teacher pulled me aside and said, "Wow, you're quite the artist. You take after your father. Take after your father." And so, you know, I didn't quite understand what she meant at the time. So I went home and asked my mother. And she told me about, I guess, that, you know, during a parent-teacher conference, she told my teacher that my father is a painter. What the teacher didn't realize was that my dad was a house painter. A painting contractor. I still get a kick out of that. Because I just think that's a funny part of the story. But the important thing is that art teacher's words had a profound impact on me. Here I was, struggling academically. I was struggling as someone in a lot of ways. But I had a talent. And somebody believed in me. And I believed her. It felt right to me, right? I loved that idea. I loved the idea of being an artist. I loved animation. I was really into the newspaper comics. We only got the Sunday Globe in our household. But, every week, I'd run to the door and get that. And go right to the comic section. And pull out the full color comics. I decided I was going to be a professional artist. I wanted to be the next Jim Davis. You know who Jim Davis is?

**Jeanetta:** Absolutely. Garfield.

**Bill:** Yeah, there you go.

**Jeanetta:** I know Jim Davis.

- Yeah, I want to be the next Garfield comic of guy. Yeah.

**Jeanetta:** I know that's right. Bill, man, your story reminds me that, sometimes, people see greatness in us long before we see it in ourselves. Your teacher saw an artist. And that belief helped shape you to who you are today. In a similar way, my third grade teacher saw a little girl who was destined for greatness. And the confidence she instilled in me has stayed with me all these years. I remember like it was yesterday, Bill. One day, I was in class. And she had the top three students to stand up. And you know I was one of them. She said, "Out of the three, one of you guys missed two. And if you think you missed two, sit down." One of my good friends, she thought she had missed two. And my teacher told her she was correct. "You had the third highest grade in the class. Everybody give her a round of applause, right?" And then she said,

"Out of the two that's standing, one of you guys missed one." In my heart, I knew I made 100. But my classmate said, "You know I'm the smartest person in this class. Everybody knows that." He was real arrogant. Because his brother was like, an NBA player. And everybody loved his brother. So everybody loved him. So the whole class was like, "Yes, Jeanetta. He's the smartest person in the class." And guess what I did?

**Bill:** What?

**Jeanetta:** I sat down. My teacher said, "Price, stand up. You made a perfect score on this test. And don't you ever in your life let nobody sit you down." Her words spoke to my soul. And they still do, especially when I'm going through. My teacher reminded me to believe in what I knew about myself, even when someone else confidence tried to diminish mine. I didn't know then how much I would need those words later in life. When I started losing my sight, I just could not understand. Why me? Why every time I'm grooving in life, something bad always happened. Check this out. I was madly in love with my fiance. I was working nine to five and preparing for my wedding. My life seemed to be going as planned. So I thought until the lights went off. I didn't just lose my sight. I lost my confidence. I lost my job and my fiance. But hold on. Looking back, I realized that that was the best thing ever happened to me. But at that time, the grief was so real. And I no longer wanted to live. I remember sitting on the couch one day and crying for hours. I couldn't understand how I survived the brain aneurysm at 21. And, at 25, I'm facing blindness. I became angry at everybody. Even God. I refused to write for years. That was my darkest season of my life. I was grieving the old me. And I was still trying to live as a sighted woman. I didn't want anything to do with the B word. You know, blind. You could not say Jeanetta Price and blind in the same breath. I will cut you. Yes, I was in denial. Let's not even talk about all the traffic tickets I got for literally driving blind. There were a lot of prayers going up for me, especially from my mother. She never gave up faith, even though I did. For that, I am grateful that her faith restored mine. I began to fight for my life. I started focusing on what I could do instead of everything I could no longer do. I prayed more. I built a routine and became more involved in my church. I was the only blind usher. And I was excited about it. I had my position the same place every third Sunday. And I stood there with my head up and white cane by my side. And I stood with pride. And I knew that my eyes did not define me. I do. When I began to accept my blindness, Bill, I picked up my pen and I began to write to heal. Sometimes, I couldn't even read the words on a paper. But it felt good to

write. And as I continue to write, I wrote my way out of that dark season in my life. One thing I've learned is that blindness is not a one-size-fits-all journey. We may share the same disability, but not the same experiences. What has your journey been like? And what have been some of the greatest challenges you had to overcome, Bill?

**Bill:** Well, yeah, first of all, my mother has retinitis pigmentosa. RP. It's an inherited retinal disorder. And so does my grandmother. And so, you know, the symptoms that start with something like that are commonly referred to as night blindness, AKA, can't see in low light. And then you progressively lose your field vision. And eventually leads to total blindness. And so, you know, growing up as a kid, I mean, I'm real little kid, I knew there was a 50/50 chance of inheriting it. I honestly didn't even really know what it was. But I didn't think about it. I really wasn't thinking about it. But all of that changed at age 11. I was on a school trip. One of those overnight outdoor educational programs where you stay in cabins and explore nature. On the first night, we went on a moonlit walk in the woods. We were supposed to walk along a trail, look at the stars, and bite down on Certs Breath Candy Mints and see the sparks. I think like, the moonlight reflecting off it. I don't know. Something. Still don't get it. But, hey. But, almost immediately, once we started walking in the woods, I realized something was wrong. I couldn't see the path. I was tripping over rocks, trees, roots.

**Jeanetta:** Wow.

**Bill:** Yeah, I was struggling to keep up. I was having trouble finding or even know where people were going as they were moving further away from me. Fortunately, one of my friend's mothers was a chaperone. She stayed behind and helped guide me. Eventually, we reached a clearing where everyone was told to look up at the stars. The other kids were talking about how beautiful the sky was and how many stars they could see. I looked up. I couldn't see them. Maybe one star. One like, that little bright nugget in the sky.

**Jeanetta:** Yes.

**Bill:** But not what everyone else was seeing. Certainly not. And that's when they handed out rolls of the Certs Candy. We were instructed to bite down on them and look at the person who was standing next to us to see the sparks. I couldn't see the sparks. I couldn't see anything. My peers were reacting with excitement. And the person who was next to me, you know, that I was looking at, said, "Hey, did you see? Did you see?" I said, "No, I don't see it. I don't see

it." He said, "Okay, well, let me try again." And, eventually, I said, "Oh, yeah. No, I see it." But I didn't. I didn't see shit.

**Jeanetta:** Oh, man.

**Bill:** I did not. It was dark as hell. And I was terrified.

**Jeanetta:** Yeah.

**Bill:** And that's the moment. That's when I knew. I knew I had what my mother had. And I was going to go blind just like her.

**Jeanetta:** Ooh, that's powerful.

**Bill:** I mean, out in the middle of the woods. Alone from my... I mean, of all places, really.

**Jeanetta:** I can only imagine. Yes.

**Bill:** I mean, I was already a kid that was being teased for being too tall, skinny, redheaded, freckled. And I was struggling, as I said, with reading and spelling. And, now, I was going to go blind like my mother? You'd think that having a parent that's already gone down that path could be a source of support and help and guidance, right? But no. Not my mom. No. My mom's relationship with blindness was complicated. Well, actually, not all that complicated at all if you think about it. She was extremely insecure. Deeply uncomfortable with it. And obsessed with finding a cure. I mean, you know, we know a lot of people like that. This is not an uncommon thing in this community, right?

**Jeanetta:** Yeah, absolutely. Mm-hmm.

**Bill:** You know, that's the narratives that are out there. She brought that deep-rooted culture and that fear of going blind as well as really worried about what people would think of her. And, really, still does. Now, she's really blind. But, you know. But as you know, this is not uncommon, as I said. And so she told me to not tell anyone else. And encouraged me not to. And she believed she was protecting me. And, actually, in many ways, she was. However, at first, I didn't listen. Not at first, right? As a kid, I thought I could tell my friends, right? Why not? I remember being with my friends on a church youth group trip. We'd go on these weekend trips. And it was in middle school. And I told them about my night blindness. And, that night, we were walking on an unlit path from the

dining hall to the cabin. And they ran ahead, hid behind trees, and jumped out to scare me.

**Jeanetta:** Oh, no.

**Bill:** These were my friends, right?

**Jeanetta:** Yeah.

**Bill:** And they were effing with me in a space where I was vulnerable and scared. So I learned from a very early age that blindness had social consequences. And I had to protect myself and be careful who I shared this with. I tried ignoring as much as I could throughout my life. But I couldn't avoid incidents. I mean, I was going blind, right? So I couldn't see in some places. And so I played a lot of sports as a kid, including basketball with my friends in the afternoons. And, sometimes, we go into the evenings, you know, when the sun started to set. And we get towards twilight. And, all of a sudden, balls that were thrown at me, their pass were just bouncing right off my face. I mean, like, it hurt on all levels. All levels. And as I got older, going to the movies, parties, bars, anywhere it was low light, lots of people, crowds, it was really awkward and uncomfortable. I mean, I got really good at playing the clumsy, unaware person, rather than admitting I couldn't see. After the summer, after graduating from high school, just before going to get a BFA in art, I decided I was going to go to Boston. Get a full day of testing with a world-renowned specialist on inherited retinal disorders. See, at this time, the doctor had claimed that taking very high doses of vitamin A supplements would help slow the progression of vision loss. So I went in to just make sure and get the formal diagnosis before doing so, even though, you know, I knew, just from the symptoms in my mom. Although, really, I was really eager to go in, meet an expert, and get guidance and support from someone who understood, I thought, me and my condition. But, instead, it turned about to be, honestly, the worst day of my life.

**Jeanetta:** Really?

**Bill:** Oh, yeah. No, I endured hours of uncomfortable tests, including the grand finale, the ERG, the infamous ERG, where they dilated my eyes, left me in the dark room for an hour, then stuck electrodes with suction cups, contact suction cups, on my eyeballs, and subjected me to electrical signals and flashes of light. Then after sitting for hours of waiting, the doctor invited me into his office, right? But, finally, I get to talk to the expert. And when I told him about how I was going to be starting college soon to study art, he told me I was

wasting my time. He said, "There's no point in pursuing art because I was going blind. And if you can't see, you can't be an artist." He even suggested just getting out of college education-

**Jeanetta:** Whoo. That made me mad, Bill. Go ahead.

**Bill:** Oh, no. Yeah, I mean... Yeah, I was really upset. Because he just kept going on. He was like, "Why even get a college education at all if you're going to go blind?" And then he had all these theories that, you know, they've been debunked since. But he was real serious about this. About how if you were out in sunlight, that would accelerate the vision loss. So I shouldn't be exposed to sunlight. So I should stay inside and not go out. And then, of course, you know, night blind was already my challenge. But, you know, he had a solution for that, luckily. You know, he offered me this... He was going to sell me these $4,000 night vision goggles straight out of "Silence of the Lambs." It was crazy. Like, it was nuts. I couldn't handle it. I just couldn't believe what I was hearing. This is July 6th, 1993. I'll never forget that date. I walked out of his office in tears. I was devastated. I mean, oh, man. I was furious. How dare he tell me I couldn't be an artist? How dare he tell me I shouldn't pursue an education? I spent my childhood questioning what people presented to me as truth. And, now, a doctor, someone I was supposed to trust, was telling me that my future could, what it could and couldn't be. I mean, luckily, I just wasn't buying it. From that day forward, I determined to prove him wrong. He fueled my fire, right? And I held onto that belief in myself. Although, I gotta be honest, I didn't know where it was going to go. But I figured just, I'll do what I can do as long as I can. And I'll adapt as much as I can along the way.

**Jeanetta:** Bill, your story speaks to something so many of us have experienced. People trying to define our abilities, based on their own limitations. But I've learned something along this journey. Just because you cannot see my potential doesn't mean it doesn't exist. And just because you cannot imagine me doing something doesn't mean I cannot do it. I remember, when I was pursuing my master's degree in counseling, I had a professor tell me, she had never seen a blind therapist. And it was a conversation I would never forget. It was my first semester of grad school as a clinical mental health counselor student. But on the first day of class, my professor asked me to stay after. She strongly encouraged me to change my major to something she thought would be a better fit because she just never heard of a blind therapist. I told her, "God did not tell me to quit. So I would not be dropping this program." Did she began to question me about what I could and could not see?

"Jeanetta, can you see a client's facial expression?" "No, but I can hear the client. And according to research, audio cues are more powerful than visual." This conversation continued until I took my first test. Before I had even asked for accommodation, she had already sent my test to the disability office. "Excuse me, professor. Here's my accommodation letter." And I informed her that I plan on taking my test with the class. She seemed surprised. But after I aced my first test, she seemed surprised again. "Jeanetta, you made the highest score." As I reviewed my test, tears flowed down my face. And I said, "Thank you." After class, she told me that there was another blind woman in the program who asked for special treatment. Not reasonable accommodation. And when she met me, she assumed we was the same. That experience taught me how quickly people can assume we are all alike because we share a disability. We are not. From that day forward, I made my mind up that my mission was to represent the blind community well. I want to keep the doors open for the next blind person pursuing higher education so they have a chance to walk through instead of being shut out before they even begin. Bill, one thing I've learned along this journey is that we cannot always control what happened to us. And we certain cannot control what people say about us. But one thing I know for sure is that people do not have the power to determine our destiny. So let me ask you something. Was there a defining moment in your life when you decided you were no longer going to allow other people to define you? When did you begin taking ownership of your story, living your truth, and using your voice, your art, and your passion for advocacy to make a difference?

**Bill:** Yeah. I don't know, Jeanetta. There really wasn't any defining moment. It was more of a gradual process with experiences along the way that really changed how I thought about my blindness, myself, and, of course, it led to all these other things. But that process really didn't start happening until I went to grad school during my MFA in 2013, which was, honestly, 20 years after that infamous meeting with the world-renowned ophthalmologist. So 20 years of bottling up and trying not to think about it or engage with the subject of blindness. Now, there were many elements at play in that graduate school environment that had me rethinking a lot of things, including my relationship with my blind identity. But one that stands out is, during a class session in Critical Theory 3, the professor asked everyone in the class to share something about themselves that nobody else knew. So I decided to tell everyone about my visual disability. Then during the class break, immediately after, I went into the cafeteria to use the vending machine. It was closed. So the lights were off. And just the only light was coming from a window. And I spotted my professor

in the far corner of the room and just started talking to her loudly. Like, "Hey, professor." You know, thinking there was nobody else in the room. You know, the place is closed and dark. She immediately cupped her hands around her face and pointed towards the side of the room. I knew exactly what she meant. Someone was over there, outside of my peripheral vision, just as I explained, and I just hadn't noticed. I turned and saw someone sleeping in the corner. It was such a simple interaction. But it stuck with me. Because I had told her about my vision loss. She understood what was happening. She communicated with me without making a big deal about it. And, honestly, if I hadn't disclosed my disability, she might have assumed that I knew that person was there in the room and judged me for being rude.

**Jeanetta:** Mm-hm.

**Bill:** You know. Oh, I know a lot of those things happen, right? And so after graduate school, I started teaching at college level. And I always had to disclose my disability to students. It was just one of those things. One of those need to know environments. But, really, outside of places like that, I still wasn't particularly open about my blindness. And my vision loss deteriorated. It became more difficult, right? I remember walking straight into a pillar in the university building where I worked right in front of several security guards. They started laughing and joking and said, "Oh, you must be blind." You know, I don't know if they meant it. But, you know, that was embarrassing. There were many other incidents. You know, I would accidentally brush shoulders with someone on the commuter train. And they'd react all kinds of different ways. And the couple occasions, big dudes asked me if I wanted to go. You know, like, fight.

**Jeanetta:** Oh, no.

**Bill:** Oh, yeah. No. Yeah, I had to diffuse, right? But this was serious stuff. These weren't just embarrassing moments anymore. They're becoming serious issues.

**Jeanetta:** Absolutely.

**Bill:** And so, around that time, luckily, the university disability support services department gave a presentation on ableism to the College of Art and Design Faculty. And that was transformative for me. I spent my entire life experiencing the consequences of blindness, but hadn't really understood what ableism is, hadn't heard of it, and really hadn't even thought of myself as someone who

was disabled. It was like, I just have this medical condition. I didn't really get it. Suddenly, I had this framework for understanding things that had been happening to me for decades. Around that same time, right, my childhood friend, who became a retinal specialist, one of the guys who threw the basketball at me right off my face, is now like a world-renowned retinal specialist, right?

**Jeanetta:** Full circle, yes.

**Bill:** In Texas, by the way. Helped connect me with doctors who actually understood my condition and wanted to help me find practical ways to adapt without questioning my life choices.

**Jeanetta:** Absolutely.

**Bill:** So all these things, you know, coming together. So it's all these elements, right? And so, with all the trouble I was getting into, I realized I needed to start carrying a white cane. Not so much necessarily to tackle the navigation, although I did need it for that more than I realized. But, really, because I wanted a way to communicate to others that I couldn't see them.

**Jeanetta:**Absolutely.

**Bill:** But, unfortunately, orientation mobility training was expensive. And health insurance did not cover it. My doctors explained that, you know, if I qualified as legally blind, the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind would provide those services that I needed. And so I asked my doctor, "So how close am I?" And she said, "Well, you might actually be there now." And she explained that, you know, we could perform this visual field test to find out if I met the legal threshold for blindness, though she'd be required to report that to the state. And I would receive a certificate of blindness and lose my driver's license. So, now, I'd already stopped driving. And I was ready to get the help I needed. So I said, "Let's go for it. Give me the test."

**Jeanetta:** Let's go. Yes.

**Bill:** Yeah. But, you know, I wasn't quite ready for the result, as you might imagine. She came back. She told me the score was just under the legal threshold. I was officially blind. I cried. I was overwhelmed.

**Jeanetta:** Yes.

**Bill:** Even though I knew this was coming at some point, right? This is inevitable. Hearing those words was something else entirely.

**Jeanetta:** Yeah.

**Bill:** After that emotional moment, I just looked up to her and said, "What do I do now?" She gave me a very simple answer. "Be an advocate."

**Jeanetta:** That's powerful.

**BILL:** "Be an advocate." I know. Three words. But, you know, somehow, those words really changed everything. You know, that emotional moment. Went oh crap to all of a sudden, okay, all right. There's sense of purpose here, right? I was already thinking I was moving that direction. But hearing those words gave me a sense of purpose when I really needed one.

**Jeanetta:** Yes.

**BILL:** And there was something very freeing about that moment. That label. Validating my experience. I had spent years caught between that sighted, blind, and not. Questioning whether I was blind enough to claim that identity and not sight enough to not. This gradual process is a complicated thing here. But for this first time, I was just adapting to blindness. I was now officially blind. I had that as part of my identity. And I was ready to claim it. I was ready to claim it and start being fully open about it.

**Jeanetta:** Ooh, Bill. Like, you just took me on this rollercoaster journey, right?

**Bill:** Yeah. Well, that's how it goes, right? It's no smooth ride here.

**Jeanetta:** And I, like you, I'm feeling all the type of emotions. 'Cause I remember when I first got my diagnosis. And I was like, "Finally, I'm blind enough," right? Because, I mean, I'm walking around here, falling off the curves and kissing the sidewalks, okay?

**Bill:** Oh, that's quite a smack right there.

**Jeanetta:** And then I learned that picking up that white cane didn't mean giving up my independence. It meant taking it back. One thing I had to learn. That picking up my white cane didn't mean giving up my independence. It meant taking it back. I'll never forget the excitement I felt when my first free white cane arrived in the mail. I was so proud of myself. I immediately called my blind mentor and said, "Hey, I got my stick in the mail." She said, "Don't call it a stick. It's a cane. Some blind people may find it offensive. So don't ever call

it that again." Apparently, she found it offensive. I said, "Okay, I'm sorry." Then she asked me, "What's the name of your cane, young lady?" I was like, "Is she serious?" And she was. So, without further ado, I introduce to you my bestie. She never leaves my sight. In fact, she's my eyes. You guessed it. Her name is Faith. Because I walk by faith and not by sight. My life really changed when I met my blind mentor and connected with other people in the blind community. It was important for me to see a reflection of myself. A blind, Black, successful woman. Connecting with the blind community felt like a divine connection. And I truly began to thrive.

**Bill:** Wow. Yeah, for me, once I started being more open about my blindness, I became increasingly interested in connecting with other blind and disabled people. I wanted to understand my own experiences in a broader context and learn from people whose lived experiences were similar to mine, as well as different, but understood disability through that lens, right?

**Jeanetta:** Absolutely.

**Bill:** I started getting involved with disability advocacy and being invited to speak about my experiences. Suddenly, here I was. Someone who had spent much of his life trying not to draw attention to his blindness being asked to speak about exactly that. I was even invited to speak to doctors and medical professionals about health equity and how patients with disabilities should be treated. And that's where I met you, Jeanetta, right?

**Jeanetta:** Right.

**Bill:** We were both invited to participate on a panel.

**Jeanetta:** Yes.

**Bill:** As part of a closing keynote where we shared stories about our lived experiences with medical professionals. And the ways we've been treated. And what it meant to be respected as a person and a patient. As my understanding of disability deepened, I became more interested in exploring accessibility tools. I began to let go of the stigma I associated with audiobooks, text to speech, and embraced them in ways I hadn't. And started really reading for the first time. It eventually led me to I realized, like, wait a minute. There's something going on here. And it led to a dyslexia diagnosis. And that wasn't bad news.

**Jeanetta:** No.

**Bill:** You know, just like being told you were blind, it was freeing. I realized, wait, this explain the challenges that I've always been dealing with reading. It gave me a better understanding of how I think, learn, and why I was drawn to art and critical theory. Now that I could read and comprehend books more easily, I was able to dive deep into topics like critical disability studies. I began to understand how disability wasn't simply something I had to work around. It was a source of knowledge. A way of experiencing and understanding the world. And it could inform my art, my teaching, my relationships with other people. For so much of my life, I've been taught, directly or indirectly, to think of blindness as a limitation. Something to overcome, conceal, or compensate for. I was challenging that way of thinking, right?

**Jeanetta:** Yes, Bill. Yes.

**Bill:** And that brought me back to something that had been part of me since a child. Questioning what we're told to believe. Only now, some of the most important things I was questioning were the beliefs I had absorbed about myself.

**Jeanetta:** Yeah.

**Bill:** And I think that's the part that makes this conversation with you so meaningful. We come from different backgrounds. We have different relationships to faith, blindness, and the world around us. But we both have to confront the ideas about who we are, what we're capable of, and what other people believe our lives should look like.

**Jeanetta:** Wow, Bill. I'm so proud of you. Like, just listen to your story and some of the challenges you faced from a child. I just want to let you know that it's been an honor to have this conversation with you and-

**Bill:** Same here, Jeanetta. Same here.

**Jeanetta:** Yeah. Like, listening to you reflect on your journey together reminds me that, sometimes, the most beautiful things in life begin with a single seed. And what I appreciate most is that we didn't just plant that seed and walk away. We continue to nurture it through our shared passion for advocacy, the opportunities we've experienced together, and the genuine connection we built along the way. And somewhere along the way, what began as two advocates sharing a common purpose blossom into a beautiful friendship. You know, Bill, that's what faith reminds me of. We don't always know what will grow from the seeds we plant. Sometimes, we simply have to trust the process, keep

nurturing them, and believe that something beautiful is unfolding. So, my friend, whatever faith looks like to you, keep holding onto it. Keep creating. Keep advocating. And, most importantly, keep living unapologetically true to you. Our stories, Bill, is still being written. And I believe there's so much more ahead of us. So I want to leave you with two questions. What are you holding on to? And what might you need to let go of to make room for something new?