**A Breaking Point**

**Introduction**

*A Breaking Point* was created in the 23-hour production period of the 2016 Performing Our Future Institute hosted by Imagining America and Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Attending the summer Institute were13 intergenerational and interdisciplinary teams assembled and sponsored by Oregon State University, University of Florida, Wilfrid Laurier University (Ontario), Iowa State, Ohio State, Cornell, Virginia Tech, Syracuse University, Arizona State University, University of California Davis, and the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development. The 45 participants arrived to think about and experience how arts and culture promote individual voice and collective agency, unbounding a community’s imagination and ambition in order to create the conditions for equitable and sustainable economic development. They also arrived upset by the recent deaths, at the hands of police officers, of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, LA and Philando Castile in St. Paul, MN, and the ambush killing of Dallas, TX police officers Lorne Ahrens, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, Brent Thompson, and Patricio Zamarripa. During the Institute’s 23-hour production period on July 17, three Baton Rouge police officers would be gunned down.

The play creation and presentation process for *A Breaking Point* was led by Roadside Theater’s artistic director to demonstrate how quickly personal stories can form a basis for public performance. The entire group worked together for six hours. Participating in the workshop were: Amy Brooks of Roadside Theater; Shorna Allred, Paula Horrigan, Scott Peters, Sarah Chalmers, Caroline Williams, and Shannon Enders of Cornell University; John Alexander of the University of Florida; Charlene Martinez of Oregon State University; Roberto Bedoya of Arizona State University; and Owen Robinette and Ayleen Correa of Lafayette College.

The process had six phases:

3-7pm: Shannon Enders and Paula Horrigan volunteer for the role of playwright and director, respectively, and a story circle using Roadside’s methodology commences. Each workshop participant told a personal story prompted by the theme, “Tell a story about a moment in your community work when you (1) saw a breakthrough/possibility for new hope, or (2) had an experience that sobered you to hard truths.”Shannon and Paula took notes. The story telling was followed by group analysis of the stories’ themes, conflicts, settings, and characters. Ayleen volunteered to create a spoken word piece based on the stories.

That night and into the wee hours: Shannon and Ayleen carry out their writing assignments. Dudley orders his thoughts.

9am-11am: Shannon, Ayleen, and Dudley confer and bring to the group the script.

11:30-1:00: roles are assigned and the script is read in a circle several times, with changes to the script incorporated by Shannon as the group agrees to them.

1-1:45: the performance is blocked and stage lighting adjusted.

2pm: *A Breaking Point* is performed for Institute participants and the public. A discussion with audience members about the creation process follows.

**Characters**

Walker

Chorus 1

Chorus 2

Chorus 3

Chorus 4

Chorus 5

**Set**

A Bare Stage

***Walker*** *enters upstage right and walks silently back and forth across the stage, periodically pausing to look at his/her mobile phone. On the seventh crossing, stage left to right,* ***Walker*** *exits downstage right into the audience as* ***Chorus 1*** *enters upstage left.*

*Periodically during the performance,* ***Walker*** *crosses in front of the stage action, at first paying no attention, then gradually being drawn in, until finally participating.*

**Chorus 1** *(Spoken word)*–Chain - to rope - to bullet.

*(To audience)*

Do you hear me?

Chain – to rope – to bullet.

But then, I fell in love with imagination.

It was my playground of creation, the segway to the realization that I could and I would.

I wore the costume of success because I knew in my head that my life pointed to distress.

Distress… Distress was what I felt when the curtains were drawn before the final act. I thought my mind could save my body, that my life could have possibilities, but I forgot about the system that suppressed my roles, told me GO HOME, left me all alone…

And I can’t. I can’t. I reached my breaking point.

**Chorus 1** *(To audience) –* Help me.

*(Other Chorus members enter the stage from different positions in the audience, echoing Chorus 1)*

Repeat with me:I fell in love with imagination. I fell in love with imagination.

When we are born, we are given a pencil. I got mine when I was thirteen, and I marked the radius of my protection. The streets of the road where the big dog screeched, where fear and happiness meet…

I was told to play ball but to not shoot the hoops, to mine the black coal but to forget about you… and me.

I could imagine. I could imagine the scenario of the *isms* broken down, the ownership of my dream, I need no permit for my crown.

**Chorus 1 with All Chorus Members** –But I can’t. I can’t. How long is a breaking point?

**Chorus 1** *(To audience)* – Help me. Repeat with me:

I fell in love with imagination.

I fell in love with imagination.

**Chorus 1** – The opposite of beauty is not ugly, it is injury. The scabs of a country exposed by one man, the voices unheard, don’t you understand?

We are at a breaking point!

**All Chorus Members** – We are at a breaking point!

**Chorus 1** – But when you break my branches, know that I will still have my roots so I will rise. Funny how the sledge hammers now construct the walls, how shootings are synonym to peace… Peace. Love. Joy. These are the things that I imagine and I have no intention to get into the fashion of resignation. Bob Marley *says* that the “movement of the people” is powerful and that is in my head.

So let us imagine together.

*(Chorus Members repeat)*

Because I will.

I will… because my breaking point is my making point.

*(Chorus and Audience)*

Chain-to rope-to bullet

Chain-to rope-to bullet

I fell in love with imagination

My breaking point is my making point

My breaking point is my making point.

**Chorus 1** –So just get with it.

**Chorus 2** –I read an article titled, “Thank you, Donald Trump.” The article showed how Donald Trump is revealing the fissures, how he is bringing what is bubbling beneath to the surface.

**Chorus 3** – Thank you, Mr. Trump.

**Chorus 2** –Me, I’m relieved that Trump is running for president. I can see now. It’s out, and I’m glad. America is finally showing itself.

**Chorus 4** – Thank you Mr. Trump.

**Chorus 5** –During the 2008 election cycle, I was in Dayton, Ohio, working at a Boys and Girls Club. There was a lot of hope when Obama was elected. You could feel the excitement. During his inauguration, we pulled out the TV and had the kids watch the ceremony. We wanted them to see this moment, but they were so bored. They were six years old. I remember thinking that they would never know that a black person could never be president. Now, I’ve come back to the Appalachian Mountains and many people support Trump. Obama to Trump.

**Chorus 1** – Thank you, Mr. Trump.

**Chorus 4** –Wait, wait. I’m not a supporter of Donald Trump, but I understand why he’s gaining power. People are frustrated across the board. They feel left out, ignored, dismissed. Maybe that’s the breaking point in America. We focus on one thing, like Black Lives Matter – and that is an extremely important movement. People are being killed. But a lot of people are suffering. We shouldn’t have to pick and choose which suffering to focus on. That’s not right. We shift the focus from one to the other, and we say we’re going to come back to this one or that one, but nobody comes back. Nobody ever comes back.

**Chorus 2-4** *(In different tones)*

Thank you Mr. Trump.

Thank you Mr. Trump.

Thank you Mr. Trump.

**Chorus 1** –I keep getting this picture of Donald Trump in all white–a white suit and a tall white hat. There’s a lot of trickery going on. It’s an invisible suit, a suit we cannot see, but we’re trying. We’re trying to make it out.

**Chorus 5** – I remember.

**Chorus 4** – He lost his dream….

**Chorus 2** – He was killed…

**Chorus 5** – I remember…

**Chorus 3** –I remember this one summer, I was about seven or eight years old. We lived in the Rust Belt, upstate New York. The black girls across the street would bring their record player onto the porch and dance. I remember watching them and thinking, I wish I could dance like that. I loved the way they moved their hips. I loved their music. I would watch them from my front porch. Now, nobody ever told me I couldn’t hang out with them, but I just knew it wasn’t allowed. I just knew. One day, I got the nerve to cross the street, and they let me in. They invited me onto their porch and taught me how to dance. To this day, I can get down because of Michelle Brown and Nancy Gaston and Risa and Trina King. Not only did I love their music and dance, but I loved how they braided their hair, so I asked if they would braid mine. It took about three hours for Nancy to braid my hair, and she even put these colorful beads in the ends. That night, my mother saw my hair, and she made me take every single braid and bead out. I learned that day that there were lines I could cross, like the dancing, and there were boundaries I could not.

**Chorus 2** –You say boundaries. I look at boundaries as obstacles. Overcoming them is about how you look at jumping. How high will you jump over obstacles? See, for me, I had to overcome obstacles all my life. I was born – I didn’t talk. They called me retarded. They called me ADHD. I had all type of labels, and I had a hearing aid in my ear because I couldn’t hear. I remember standing up in class and the teacher would have me drawing circles counterclockwise as if that was gonna get me to talk!

And I was talking in my head, like, *How dumb are you, what is this?* But it didn’t stop there for me. See, when I was around 10 years old I got bullied because I had this odor coming out of my nose and the teacher was sending notes home to my mom and tellin’ her, “You need to take care of your son!” One day she took a flashlight and shined it up my nose and saw that I couldn’t breathe. Because it had closed in. And at the age of 10 years old, January 18, 1990, I had a partial facelift. And for the next six months of my life I had to eat and drink out of a straw. And I’m sitting there wondering, *Do I break now? Is this the breaking point?*

And when I went back to school the bullies who had bullied me all those years, I thought they were happy that I came back. They called me to the circle, they said, “Hey John! Come over!” And I went over with a smile on my face, and the leader reached his hand out and I reached my hand out and he punched me in my jaw. And I said, *Is that my breaking point?*

And then, as life would go on, I became angry and angry and ANGRY and I wanted to fight. I wanted to FIGHT, fight for things that I didn’t understand. And I reached my breaking point, but it didn’t stop there. At the age of 15, I ended up moving to a city called Madison, Florida. And I became homeless, and a guy called David Dukes – a *black guy* – named DAVID DUKES took me into his Center! He was a former civil rights leader. He stood up for freedom, he fought for the disadvantaged, and he took his life savings, and he started a program called the Johnson Project Center.

And when he found out I didn’t have nowhere to go, he said, “Listen, you can stay here,” and I spent the next three years from 15 to 18 getting anger broken up with love. With peace. With hope. And I stand today as a young man who was an ESE student, the last in the class to the top of the class, and I made my way to this giant kingdom in my city called the University of Florida, somewhere nobody thought that I would ever get! And so I look at life now, and I say that my breaking point was my making point. And I live every single day being an Impact, not an Impression. See, an impression gives people the leeway to determine how your encounter is gonna impact them. But an Impact, the force of it, causes one to change direction permanently. Be the impact, not an impression.

**Chorus 4** –I rememberPatrick Miller. He was a student of mine. He was was born in the Dominican Republic, first in his family to go to Cornell.

**Chorus 5** – He did everything right.

**Chorus 4** –He was a loveable kid and a great student. We stayed in touch after he graduated. I wrote his recommendation for grad school, and he finished his masters at Columbia. He had a wife.

**Chorus 3** – He did everything right.

**Chorus 4** – When he graduated, Patrick Miller went back home to his neighborhood in Washington Heights to make his life. Then he was shot through the window of a car waiting for his friend. He was a new father.

I went to that funeral. His fraternity brothers came, dressed in their suits, showing their respect. The casket was open. I’ll never forget his mother, his family, all the weeping.

**Chorus 5** – Patrick Miller did everything right.

He did everything to succeed and still he was killed.

**Chorus 4** –The world is deprived of Patrick Miller. This happened 20 years ago, which I can’t believe, but I feel like it happened today.

**Chorus 2** –It’s today.

**Chorus 1** – Chain-to rope-to bullet.

**Chorus 5** *(Pretending to hold a sign)**–*INDIANS ARE PEOPLE TOO

**Chorus 3 & 4** – GO HOME! YOU’RE GOING TO FAIL.

**Chorus 5** –In the 1920s, the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana started using a mascot called Chief Illiniwek. At football and basketball games a white student would come out dressed like an Indian and dance during half-time.

In 1988, Charlene Teters came with her daughter to the university to earn her Master of Fine Arts. Charlene was a member of the Spokane tribe. Her Spokane name was Slum-Tah. And when she learned about the mascot, she reached a breaking point. She went to the stadium with her daughter during a game. And she stood at the gate and held a sign that said

INDIANS ARE PEOPLE TOO

**Chorus 1** – She stood there, just her and her daughter – she hadn’t told anyone else – and they were surrounded by thousands of people, with many poking fun at her.

**Chorus 5 –** Thousands of people passed by her. The anti-chief movement grew up from there. A new chancellor for the school, Nancy Kantor, came in the early 2000’s. She was a supporter of the anti-chief movement. And because of that support, they came after her. The pro-chief supporters said the chief was a symbol and a tradition and that it couldn’t be changed. They put up billboards around town that said,

**Chorus 1 & 2** –Save the Chief

**Chorus 3 & 4** *(In unison)*– Dump the Chancellor

**Chorus 5** – And they forced her out. The chancellor fought with Charlene Teters, and they forced her out. It took 12 years for the chief to be eradicated. For 70 years people just walked on by. But Charlene made us stop. She and her daughter hit their breaking point.

**Chorus 4** –I remember another student of mine. She wasGarlin Capeta, a Haitian American, the first in her family to go to college. She was speaking her mind and getting involved on campus. She designed a provocative installation about human rights, out on the quad. She went back to the department and one of her classmates, this white guy, a student from the south, had made this big sign “GO HOME.”

**Chorus 1**– Go Home!

**Chorus 4** –As a professor, this was a really hard moment for me. I had to do something. I convened the class, and we had a painful conversation about diversity and respect. It was a making moment.

**Chorus 1**–I was very interested in education and environment. I had my BA degree and wanted to go to get my MA at Michigan State, so I travelled there to talk to the administration about combining education and the environment into one degree. The dean advised me not to do it. He said, “You will fail.”

**Chorus 2-5** *(In different tones) –* You will fail.

**Chorus 1** –He told me I would be the only black woman in that field and that I would have no support system. I didn’t give up. I went to Penn State…majored in forestry… environmental education. I was happy. With that degree, I got a job teaching inner city youth about the environment.

When I was teaching an 8th grade class, there was a girl who would put her head down every day and sleep through the class. She didn’t hide it. She just put her head on her desk and fell asleep. I thought, why isn’t she paying attention? This lesson I’m teaching is important. This is our earth. Why doesn’t she care? I asked one of her classmates what was wrong with her. She was tired, because she was in her first trimester of pregnancy. She was in 8th grade. I realized that the environment was important, but who cares when you have these problems?

**Chorus 3** –Nobody talks about it.

**Chorus 2** – I’m just trying to stay alive.

**Chorus 1** – I couldn’t do it.

**Chorus 3** – Nobody talks about it.

**Chorus 5** –I feel like I’ve been at a breaking point with higher education for three years. There are so few of us in Oregon, and no one is talking about it. We are invisible. As I get closer to the core at the leadership table, the more fear I feel. It’s easier not to fight some days. To collude. To just go with leadership and what they say. I struggle with this. I am still radical inside. I still dance. Leadership has to live with the discomfort of who I am – all of me, the way I challenge, the way I speak – they have to live with the discomfort. I’m worried about myself in this space. I don’t know if I can continue to do this. Arts & Cultural Organizing saved me. This is my breaking - making point.

**Chorus 4** –I’m at the breaking point too. As an educator, I’m tired of being nice. I’m tired of behaving. I feel like I missed my chance to change things. I feel like it was way more complicated than I thought. I can’t do it. I can’t do it. It’s a slow death, but I feel like I missed my chance. I’ve reached my breaking point. I didn’t do it. I wasn’t able to do it. I failed.

**Chorus 2** –Don’t quit, because then I might not be able to tell the story of my little brother. ‘Cause of people like you, people that don’t quit. It was eight of us. We spent a lot of our years in the projects growing up. Four boys, four girls, and I had six years of glory being the baby. And then come along my little brother. Spoiled all of that for me. I was number seven, he was number eight. And you know I had the opportunity to watch all of my siblings grow up, watch the good decisions they made, the bad decisions they made. And I decided to be the first male in my family to graduate from high school and change my life and not go to prison and not do the wrong things, and so I felt like I was kinda rewriting the legacy for my little brother. And just when I thought that he was taking it all in and following after the steps of his big brother JJ – he skipped me and followed after one of my older brothers. And he started gettin’ into trouble in school, and before you know it, he got a letter saying that he was getting kicked out of school in the 8th grade. So he ended up going to this small school, Hawthorne. They gave him a chance. By the time he selected his schedule, all the electives were taken. Now he was a stud, he was an athlete, you know? And he was looking for team sports. And the counsellor said, “Sorry buddy, no more team sports.” And he goes, “Well what’s left?” She goes, “Theater.” He said, “No, WHAT’S LEFT.” She says “Theater, that’s it.” And so here he is on the verge of dropping out of school, had already repeated a grade, and so he enrolled in the theater class and all of a sudden – because our life was always like a stage and we were always having to play roles that we didn’t wanna play and play roles that we did – he was used to acting and he didn’t even know it. And before you know it, he began to get into playing these different roles because that class, it was an opportunity for him to escape everything that was reality in that moment. And all of a sudden his grades began to come up, and before you know it, this young man that was making Ds and Fs started making Cs and Bs, and Bs and As, and straight As. He became the senior class president, the thespian of the year.

But then reality hit, and it wasn’t time to act anymore. He got a scholarship to a school in New York, but we didn’t have the money to send him. And my mom was gonna put a second mortgage on our house but it was too risky so my brother, the class president, had to take a scholarship at a 2 year college in a little place called Polaca, Florida. And he did it – and then he was goin’ back up to New York, but again we didn’t have the money. So he joined the United States military.

And because he could act, because of theater, the Platoon Sergeant was running and calling the cadence, and the drill instructor got mad with him because he wasn’t calling it right, so he stops the platoon, he says, “WHO OUT HERE CAN CALL THE CADENCE?!”

And one of the guys that my little brother had been joking with, he knew my brother could act, he said “JOHN CAN!” And my brother was like, “Please don’t come – please don’t come – please don’t come.” And the drill instructor gets in front of him saying, “CAN YOU CALL THIS PLATOON?” He said “AYE SIR!” And he began to call it, theater-like: “ONE TWO THREE FOUR ONE TWO THREE FOUR!” And the Drill Sergeant gets in front of him, “ARE YOU MOCKING ME SIR?” He says, “SIR NO SIR!” And he began to make rank. But all of a sudden he had a breaking point, because he had a son. But his son only lived five months because his mother was smoking and drinking in the club while she was pregnant.

And then, two weeks after that, he’s driving on base and a blind boy pulls out in front of him in a car. And he almost kills the boy. And my brother’s military career was over. He had a breaking point. Moved back to Gainesville, dealt with depression, dealt with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, dealt with all these different things, and all of a sudden he found himself back on his feet. And right now, if you Google his name, Jonathan Alexander – Dapperville USA – he is the CEO of his own company. He bounced back – he let his breaking points be his making points.

**Chorus 1, 4, & 5** *(In different tones)*– Everyone has their breaking point.

**Chorus 3** –My brother Michael got into a fight with this black man one day. I can’t even tell you what it was about. Michael had been painting our house and the next thing I knew, he was rushing down the ladder and going after this man. The two were rolling around on the ground, both of them just punching one another, just locked and punching, and rolling around in the street. I remember watching my brother’s head bounce off the pavement. I’ll never forget that as long as I live. At a certain point, they separated, and the black kid ran down the street. By that time, my other brothers and my father and uncle had come out of the house. They grabbed hammers and shovels and sledge hammers. Meanwhile, the kid he was fighting had run down the street to get his people. They had bats and pipes and one had a knife. They walked toward us, spread out across the street, and my family walked toward them. I remember feeling terrified. As they got closer, both lines paused for a moment. They started yelling things to one another. Someone from their side lifted up their pant leg to reveal a knife. My mother was screaming at the top of her lungs.

**Chorus 1** – Someone call the police! Someone call the police!

**Walker** *– (Finally drawn from the audience to the stage)* Ray-Ray? Ray-Ray, is that you?

**Chorus 2** – Michael? Is that Michael Scrofano?

*(The two step toward one another while the lines stay back.)*

**Chorus 2** *(Turns to the line behind him)* – Awww man, that’s Michael Scrofano. Those are the Scrofano boys. They cool.

**Walker** *(Turns to the line behind him)* – Hey Stephen, it’s Ray-Ray! Ray-Ray Jackson from Roosevelt School!

**Chorus 2** – I won’t let my son play sports. See I started out college as a pre-med microbiology student. I wanted to be a pediatrician. I wanted to be just like Dr. Carson. I wanted to be that guy that went from the lowest of the class to the top of the class that was from the projects. I wanted to be that guy. But that wasn’t my life. That wasn’t my destiny. My destiny was to work at the Reichert House Youth Academy where 133 young at-risk males come every day to receive the same type of nurturing that I received, that helped me become the man that I am today. So here’s the thing about that. My wife and I dated for eight years in high school. And then we got married and we had our first child in 2006. And it was a girl. I was like, “OH NO.” Because I thought about all the things that I had done to other girls. And I was like “Oh, it’s comin’ back around….”

But it was my daughter. She softened me up. But then we had another child, and I was like, “HAH, the male seed is coming,” and it was another girl. And then I had another child, and I was like, “This is it, I been working 13 years in this place, God, working with all these young men who don’t have fathers, GIVE ME MY SON,” and He said, “Okay...I’LL GIVE YOU ANOTHER GIRL.” Ahhhhh! And then...when I didn’t care, when I didn’t care, I said, “Whatever You bless me with I will take it, because being a father is the best job that you could ever have.” And all of a sudden I’m on the beach in Destin, Florida, and we’re at a marriage retreat and all the couples are standing around and we’re having to repeat our vows to each other, and my wife holds up a little onesie...and it says HANDSOME LIKE MY DADDY, and it went over my head, and I was like “Ain’t no babies! Like, *what are you doin’?*” And she said, “Read it!” And I was like, “I can read!” And she finally hit me over the head with the thing like, “Boy, read the thing!” And I looked at it and I said “AAAAHHHH!” And I started runnin’ around them other married couples, and they were like, “He got a bee on him, it’s a bee!” And on that beach, the greatest gift that I could’ve had, the Lord gave me a SON. And I knew that at that point, I would have the opportunity to shape the mind of a young man, work that I had been doing for the last 13 years of my life. But here’s the reality: As happy as I am for having that son, when I looked at my phone today and I saw that three police officers just got killed today in Baton Rouge, and six others was wounded, when I turn on the TV and I see bullet holes … it just LOOKS LIKE my son could be a victim one day, innocently walking down the street, walking down the street playing basketball...football...wait a minute, basketball? Football? The biggest, the strongest, the darkest. The most vicious. The ones with the most aggression. Well they’re the ones that I see on draft day. Slavery. The biggest, the darkest, the strongest. The ones that can work the most, those are the ones that get sold. I refuse to let my son be the subject of entertainment. I refuse to let my son be the one to get on the field and BANG his body and BANG his head. And when his body is no good anymore, he’s not for sale. I refuse to let my son be building his body and not his mind.

**Chorus 3** – The people are upset.

**Chorus 1**– Chain-to rope-to bullet.

*(To audience)*

Do you hear me?

Chain-to rope-to bullet.

But then, I fell in love with imagination.

It was my playground of creation, the segway to the realization that I could and I would.

I wore the costume of success because I knew in my head that my life pointed to distress.

Distress… Distress was what I felt when the curtains were drawn before the final act. I thought my mind could save my body, that my life could have possibilities, but I forgot about the system that suppressed my roles, told me GO HOME, left me all alone…

And I can’t. I can’t. I reached my breaking point.

*(To audience)*

Help me.

Say with me: I fell in love with imagination.

*(Audience with Chorus)*

I fell in love with imagination.

**Chorus 1** – My breaking point is my making point.

**Walker** – We are not alone.

**Chorus 2** – We honor

**Chorus 5** – Charlene Teters

**Walker** – We are not alone.

**Chorus 3** – We honor

**Chorus 4** – Patrick Miller

**Chorus 2** – Garlin Capeta

**Walker** – Not alone.

**Chorus 1** – *(To audience)* Who do you honor? Please say their name.

**Chorus *(all)*:** No, we are not alone.

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