



Season 2, Episode 2

Irwyn Ince Jr.'s Beautiful Journey from Rebel to Award-Winning Author

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

book, writing, church, ghetto, community, podcast, beautiful, questions, author, pursuing, ince, context, received, people, ethnic identity, voice, pursuit, white, conversation, find

SPEAKERS

Helen Lee, Irwyn Ince, Ed Gilbreath, Maila Kim

Maila Kim 00:05

Welcome to The Every Voice Now podcast, where we bring voices of color into the spotlight. I'm Maila Kim.

Ed Gilbreath 00:11

And I'm Ed Gilbreath. In every episode, you'll hear from authors of color as they share about the inspiring stories that led to the making of their books, as well as the challenges they had to endure and overcome along the way.

What's up, Helen?

Helen Lee 00:32

Hey, Ed, it is great to be here and to have a chance to do a podcast interview with you!

Ed Gilbreath 00:39

Same here!



Helen Lee 00:39

First time!

Ed Gilbreath 00:40

Yes! Yes, I am very excited for this chance, this privilege, to host with you. And also very excited about the opportunity we have to speak to Irwyn Ince, who is one of the first authors that I worked with during my time at IVP.

Helen Lee 00:56

Yes, and I remember back in the day when I was in the marketing department that I had a chance to evaluate this proposal and get a chance to talk to Irwyn when we didn't know if he was going to be an IVP author or not. So it's really fun to be on this side of things now, years later, and get a chance to talk to him about his book.

Ed Gilbreath 01:15

Yes. So we hope you all enjoy our conversation with Irwyn Ince, author of *The Beautiful Community*. We are excited today to welcome Irwyn Ince to the Every Voice Now podcast. Welcome, Irwyn!

Irwyn Ince 01:39

Thank you, Ed! Good to be here on this excellent podcast.

Ed Gilbreath 01:43

Yes, and this is a special treat for me. And you'll find out why later. But I'm just very grateful to have this time with you, glad you could be here with us. To start, why don't you tell us a little bit about your personal backstory, like where you grew up, what you do for a living now.



Irwyn Ince 01:58

I am a native New Yorker, I grew up in Brooklyn, New York. I describe myself as the son of a migrant and an immigrant. My mother came to New York City in 1952 as part of the Great American Migration—mass exodus, to Black Americans—out of the southern states, and came to Harlem. My father immigrated from Trinidad in the early 1960s. And they met in New York, and here I am. So I'm all things formative in terms of New Yorker, sports teams, life, urban density, and all of that kind of stuff. I currently live in Washington, DC, and I am the director of a ministry called the Institute for Cross-Cultural Mission, and I served as a pastor, as a lead pastor, of a church we planted for about ten years.

Ed Gilbreath 02:52

Let's go a little deeper on your ethnic identity journey. This is what we always do, to lay the groundwork here on Every Voice Now. Tell us about your ethnicity, and what are some key moments in your ethnic journey that stand out to you?

Irwyn Ince 03:06

Well, it's interesting, and I do like that question—because, right, there's a difference between ethnicity and race. A lot of overlap in our context, but I certainly will identify ethnically as African American, even though I said, you know, I've got a Caribbean side on my father's side of the family, that Trinidadian heritage, which I love as a part of me. But growing up in New York City—African American community, large African American family, my mother was one of six, and we were all in New York, and so lots of cousins, aunts, uncles—ethnically, I will say, I really became aware, and I'm going to use the word "race" here, of the difference, racially. So 1970s, Alex Haley's *Roots* comes out, you know, I'm a little boy, I wasn't really allowed to watch it. But I remember a particular experience when I was on vacation with my family, almost ten years old, was down in Disney World in Orlando, Florida. And we were at the hotel in the pool, my sister who's eighteen months younger than I. And she and I were, we were playing, we have these little floats. And there was another boy in the pool, who was white, but he asked us if he could play with this, play with our float. I said, sure, you know—Mom and Dad said "share your things." And then I asked if I could play with his float. And I'll just never forget: he said to me, he said, "no, because you're colored." And I just, I mean, I was almost ten years old. I had never had that kind of experience. I was just confused—what is that about?—and had to have the conversation with my mother. So this is like coming to a sense of an ethnic identity formed in terms of difference with others, right? And so for me, and I'll make this shorter, but I do need to



include this. Although I was raised in a Christian home, I began to reject the faith during my teenage years. And I went to school to study electrical engineering at City College of New York, which is in Harlem, and there I became a part of an Afrocentric organization called the Sons of Africa, and through that process, I began to actually view Christianity with a lens of hostility. And deepening, kind of centering, my ethnic ethnicity as the core of my being—that's what mattered most, my Blackness, my African-ness. And so, that's part of my journey, which I'm sure we'll be able to talk about, as to how it relates to what I've written and getting to this place of focusing on beautiful community.

Ed Gilbreath 06:10

Well, speaking of what you've written, you are, of course, a published author. That's what I was referring to earlier; I'm excited to have been one of the editors to work on *The Beautiful Community*, which is a beautiful book. It was released last year, and has been doing very well. Tell us a little bit about the genesis of your pursuing the dream to be an author, and what was the moment that you began to think about writing this book?

Irwyn Ince 06:41

Really, it was birthed out of my pastoral ministry and work in my heart for what I call the ministry of reconciliation, ultimately, which is what beautiful community is about, in wanting to see the church reflect its community in all of its diversity, wanting to see the church really lean into pursuing unity and diversity, love across lines of difference in Jesus' name. A friend of mine recommended a book that asks some key questions that I would take notes on and kind of come back to, to say, should I really, should—does this need to be a book? Or am I writing, like, an article? Those kinds of questions I was asking. Personally, the question [of] self-doubt—as much as I loved what I had done in my dissertation, and thought, do I really have something worthwhile to say that would benefit others, benefit the church, as a pastor, and would anybody—who's going to listen to me, you know? And so it wasn't until 2018, toward the end, and I had served my denomination in pretty substantive ways. So I became the first African American moderator of the of the Presbyterian Church in America in 2018, I had helped lead our denomination, our overtures committee, where we did a corporate confession and repentance for sins committed during the Civil Rights era. Following those things, there was some interest in me, as a potential author.



Helen Lee 08:42

You've had the benefit now, Irwyn, of having had almost a year since your book came out. So I'd love for you to think about this year as a whole and identify what's been your favorite part of the whole journey of publishing a book, and did anything surprise you along the way?

Irwyn Ince 08:59

Okay, so let me just say this first, Helen, this is a point of personal privilege here in the podcast. My first call with IVP was with you and Ethan McCarthy after my book proposal, and your excitement about my book proposal just kind of put me on cloud nine, it really was a strong encouragement to me that there was something worth writing here and so, I'm just saying thank you.

Helen Lee 09:29

Oh, Irwyn, oh my goodness! Well, I remember when your proposal came through, we were so—not just myself and Ethan, but our whole team, we were so excited about it and felt like, we hope we have the privilege to get a chance to work with Irwyn. So thank you for accepting our, our acceptance. Being willing to work with us. Oh, that's wonderful to hear.

Irwyn Ince 09:54

Ah, now to your question.

Helen Lee 09:57

No, that was delightful.

Irwyn Ince 09:59

I've been I've been amazed over the past year at how the book has been received so well—you know, some pushback, a little, some questions and critiques, and that's fine. But I desire to write out of a pastoral heart that cares for the church and for the church to continue growing, and



health in this pursuit of beautiful community. And so what's really been encouraging is that the people have really just found the book helpful, a helpful resource for this conversation around race and justice. And, you know, who knew, when we published, you know, last summer, that the summer of 2020 was going to be such an intense time in our country and in the church over the issues of race and justice. And so, I've been just kind of pleasantly surprised at how overwhelmingly—and I mean, even up to a few weeks ago, having a conversation with some people, I was back at our General Assembly in St. Louis, and several pastors and church leaders just kind of sharing how they've been using the book and how it's been so helpful to them, and having this conversation with their congregations and their leaders.

Helen Lee 11:31

You're being very humble, so I'm going to go ahead and start to open this topic up a little more. Your book received amazing recognition, I think. It received an award from the Gospel Coalition for a first-time author, it received the Outreach magazine Racial Reconciliation Resource of the Year. So you're being very, very, very humble. But I'm happy to brag on your behalf. Those are amazing, amazing accolades, of all the books that were published—there are a number of people who've written on this topic, but at the same time, your voice is unique. And we like thinking about every person who comes on this podcast as having that uniqueness. So I'd love to just ask you, what is it that your unique voice offers that no one else can offer?

Irwyn Ince 12:16

I think a couple of things. I do think my experience of coming to faith in Christ, out of a very overtly racialized worldview, set the course for my heart to pursue unity and reconciliation in Jesus' name. So it's what gave me certain lenses, coming to faith and looking and seeing how the Bible uses primarily familial language to talk about the people of God. And so I start to say, wait, family, and it's naming nationalities. It's—wait, I don't see this working out in the local church context. So my personal experience, bringing me to have this kind of passion. And I think that this is not unique about me, but particularly where I am. So it's not unique that I am a Black Christian man who is ministering, serving, in majority-white Christian space, right? There's another guy on this podcast who wrote a book about that. So, right, that's not unique to me. But I would say being in a Presbyterian denomination that holds to covenant theology in a Reformed space, and seeing how much the doctrinal commitment in covenant theology should be leading us into the pursuit of beautiful community, that when we're not doing it, it's because we are not robustly living out the implications of what we say we believe and commit to in terms



of our understanding of the Scriptures. And so this kind of uniqueness, if you will, of being a Black Christian man in a Reformed context, who, being able to see the documents that we hold to as leading us in a particular direction, and I get to say, can we just live out what we say we believe?

Ed Gilbreath 14:50

Well, it is such a powerful statement, you paint such an attractive picture of the body of Christ and who we should be, and at the same time, you're very honest and transparent about our issues as a church. So thank you for giving us this opportunity to really work our way through some of our mess in pursuit of that beautiful community. We need to take a quick break. But when we return, Irwyn will do a reading for us, and we'll talk more about his book-writing process. So stay tuned. And thanks for listening to the Every Voice Now podcast.

Helen Lee 16:15

Welcome back to the Every Voice Now podcast. I'm Helen Lee, and now it's time for our Behind the Words segment, where we hear a reading from our guest today. And then we're going to find out more about what went on behind the scenes of writing that portion. So Irwyn, what will you be reading for us today from your book?

Irwyn Ince 16:34

I will be reading from the from the end of chapter five of the book, and the chapter title is "Your Beautiful Crown Has Come Down from Your Head." And this part is about, how do we get out of the ghetto? I call our polarized church life "ghetto living." So here we go. "How do we get out of the ghetto? What's the solution to so much brokenness? Here's the quick answer: it's nothing short of the blood of Jesus. It's in the community of the redeemed that we should see the dividing line of hostility broken down. What does this mean on the ground in our day-to-day lives? It means you have to walk with humility. You have to know that when we're talking about and engaging the issues that still divide us in this land (and in the church), your thoughts are informed by the ghetto that formed you in ways that you're simply unaware of. And we need to be shaped and reshaped by other brothers and sisters in the Lord who come out of different ghettos if we're going to learn to love well and strive for justice and righteousness in our communities. I used to say to the church I served that God was giving us a particular kind of



grace as we pursued crosscultural living. I knew that we would regularly offend one another because we speak different languages. That is, we come from different ghettos. When we offend one another, that grace takes the form of asking ourselves, "Why am I offended? Is the heart of this issue really about my preferences and desires that have been shaped by my ghetto? Would the Lord have me die to this for the sake of unity, the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?" What I'm about to say may not be popular, but in America the greater burden of dying to preferences is borne by those in the majority white culture. Among the many points we can make about America's founding, we must include the establishment of a white cultural normativity. Its existence has made the norm for minorities in America to embrace discomfort in majority culture contexts—an experience no less true in the church. As I mentioned earlier, we have no idea the depths to which our expectations, desires, preferences, and predilections are informed by our ghetto. When your ghetto is the norm, your default position is to expect others to conform to your way of being. This is the elephant in the room because the default perspective, even among people of color, is that of white norms in racially and ethnically diverse church contexts. Dr. Korie Edwards likens it to adding rainbow sprinkles to a dish of vanilla ice cream. The vanilla ice cream is still the strongest flavor you experience. I've experienced this in diverse churches where I've worshipped and in the church I pastored. This is why I say that there is a particular need for white Christians to develop a deeper cultural self-awareness and a willingness to die to maintaining some of those cultural norms for the sake of pursuing unity in diversity. We must realize that getting out of our ghettos isn't free. It'll cost you. You'll have to examine your preferences. You'll have to regularly embrace being more curious than confident when you're in a situation involving diversity and difference. If you're part of the majority culture, you'll have to learn how to listen to and learn under the influence of non-majority culture people."

Ed Gilbreath 20:16

I remember when I first read the manuscript and stumbled over your use of "ghetto" there, and just how striking that metaphor was. So thank you for sharing that. Could you tell us a little bit about why you picked this particular passage, what it means to you?

Irwyn Ince 20:34

I picked this particular passage because, as I write in those pages—that this is the elephant in the room. We are tempted to try to engage these issues of cross-cultural life and love or the pursuit of beautiful community with a notion of just kind of this equal playing field or



colorblindness, or the goal is to forget about the past and the ills of the past and just move forward, let's—"can't we all just get along," kind of thinking. And I chose this passage because that doesn't do us a service in the pursuit of beautiful community. We have to be honest about how we came to be where we are, and the ways in which those truths of the past are still shaping our current reality and thoughts and ideas.

Helen Lee 21:36

In that short passage you read, I felt like there was a challenge there for the majority, white Christian reader that is impossible to turn away from. It was so clear and so vivid, especially some of the analogies you use. Ed mentioned the "ghetto"—I wrote that down: "your thoughts are formed by the ghetto that formed you." I mean, you can sit and reflect on that for quite some time, because that's really, really striking and convicting, I think, for anyone who really wants to take that sentence seriously, that short section, you read—you could exegese that! I mean, there's so much there that I hope that the church continues to wrestle with.

Ed Gilbreath 22:14

Yeah, I'm curious, Irwyn, what advice would you have for other writers of color who are tackling this topic, and the sort of inevitable pushback or backlash that they might experience, and the critiques that they'll run up against? What advice would you have for them in terms of that?

Irwyn Ince 22:35

Well, I—and I think this is advice for writers in general, right, but in particular to writers of color who want to engage a topic like this. It's really: What am I trying to accomplish and achieve—what am I after? What is the goal here? I'm not trying to write in a way that I'm winning arguments. I'm trying to write in a way that I'm winning hearts, right? That I really do want people to be able to see truths and receive and maybe hear hard things. But write in such a way—I go back to this term—that's pastoral, that I'm not just writing to attack, or I'm not writing just in anger, even though I might be angry. I'm not saying, "don't be angry." But I think that that fundamental question that guided me, like, what am I trying to accomplish here with this? And that does speak to the tone that speaks to the use of language. It speaks just powerfully into how I'm going to communicate what I'm saying.



Helen Lee 23:57

I love that phrase, "writing to win hearts." That's lovely. It's fabulous. Well, we need to take another quick break, but when we return, we are going to continue our conversation with Irwyn Ince, and we'll find out a little bit more about his personal writing habits and quirks. So you'll get to find out more about that, and also how to get a special discount on Irwyn's book, so stay tuned. And thanks for listening to the Every Voice Now podcast.

Ed Gilbreath 25:31

You are listening to the Every Voice Now podcast, and I'm Ed Gilbreath, back at you. Today we've been talking with Irwyn Ince, author of the book *The Beautiful Community*, and keep listening to find out how you can get a special 40% off discount on Irwyn's book at ivpress.com. But first, let's find out a little bit more about your writing habits and quirks, Irwyn! Was there anything that you did that was a little bit—sort of, quirky or unusual or weird that helped you stay on task?

Irwyn Ince 26:04

That phrase, "stay on task"—it's important to have deadlines, right? I'm so grateful for the deadline. This writer's block cannot continue, right? It has to come to an end. Because I have to get up and walk around and talk to myself about what I'm trying to say. And I'll have the pad or notebook or whatever in my hand, or my iPad. And I'm just walking—my headphones are still in—and I'm just walking around, I'm just talking. I'm just mouthing stuff, just—I'm in my own world because I got my headphones or earbuds in my ear, and so I don't mind looking a little strange to folks when I'm trying to do that.

Ed Gilbreath 26:47

One more: What is the single best piece of advice you've ever received in the area of writing?

Irwyn Ince 26:54

Oh, wow. Yes, the single best piece of advice, okay. And this was not directly given to me, okay? It happened in the process with IVP. "Every book is not for everyone, but there's someone for



every book." That became something that I just kept coming back to. No, I'm not—every book is not for everyone, but there's someone for every book. That includes this one. Right? And that just, it didn't happen until—because it's part of the videos and the things that I got from IVP in the publishing process when I came across it. But it just—it just stuck with me throughout the process.

Helen Lee 27:39

Well, I have a few questions. So do you have any memory of any incident that happened while you were writing this book that made you feel like, "God is with me as I'm doing this project," or something that just sticks in your mind as being a moment in the process of writing your book that was just unforgettable for whatever reason?

Irwyn Ince 27:57

I did a—it's not really a moment. It's something that was also kind of with me throughout. I wrote the tribute in the book to my father. He passed away several years ago, 2009. But he—I'm his son, not just biologically, but in my ways, in the way that I talk, in the way that I smile, it all comes from him. And so the thought of how delighted he would have been—I mean, legitimately, how delighted he would have been to know that I was writing a book. It's just sat with me throughout, you know.

Helen Lee 28:56

Do you mind if I ask you to read that dedication you wrote to your dad? Because it was so—it was so beautiful. And I would love to hear you actually speak the words, if you're willing.

Irwyn Ince 29:06

Yeah. I'll read both the quote from Esther Lightcap Meek, and then my dedication to him. This is—Esther Lightcap Meek says, "A sense of personal beauty comes, I believe, only in the generous self-giving gaze, the noticing regard of another person." And this is what I wrote: "For Irwyn L. E. Ince, from whom I received a sense of personal beauty before I knew what that was. I never had to look for eyes to affirm my beauty and dignity because his gaze always spoke a



message of generosity, selfless giving, and love matched only by the actions that confirmed the message."

Helen Lee 29:48

When I legacy. I mean, that's, that's wonderful that you had someone in your life who was able to give you that kind of gaze to encourage you of all of your days. What a beautiful gift. That's wonderful. Well, thank you for sharing that with us. As we wrap up our time together, Irwyn, any last words of advice that you would have for up-and-coming authors of color who maybe are thinking about one day becoming a published author or just have that aspiration and desire to do that someday?

Irwyn Ince 30:20

Yes, please write. Please write. It is true, what you write is not necessarily going to be for everyone. But there are people who need to hear what you have to say. Your voice is needed in these spaces. So write.

Ed Gilbreath 30:43

Irwyn, we have come to the end of our time together, sadly, but before we go, we want to give you a few moments to share with our listeners about any special projects you have going on right now, and about how people can best reach you.

Irwyn Ince 30:58

We try to put this pursuit of beautiful community into practice through the work that I do for the Institute for Cross-Cultural Mission. We literally exist to try to equip churches and organizations with the competence for pursuing beautiful community. And so I certainly welcome folks to look us up online, to reach out for conversations about how we might serve you. We're not in the apologetics business of saying, "we need to convince you to try to pursue beautiful community," but we're saying, "if the Lord has brought you to a conviction, and you're trying to figure out, 'what do we do,' that's the space we want to—we operate in.



Ed Gilbreath 31:43

Great. Well, we'll put the link to that in the show notes. And we can also find you on Twitter.

Irwyn Ince 31:49

Yes. Instagram—I will give you a fair warning. My Instagram is faith, family, and fitness. I post a lot about my kettlebell training on Instagram, maybe more about kettlebell training than the other stuff. So I'm on social media platforms—that's just an Instagram warning for you.

Ed Gilbreath 32:14

I could use a little inspiration and motivation myself.

Helen Lee 32:16

Me too, especially after this pandemic, my goodness.

Ed Gilbreath 32:21

Well, thanks, Irwyn. It's been great to have you on the podcast today. Just a blessing to spend a little more time reflecting on the beautiful, beautiful community that God is calling us to be. And now we wanted to share with everyone that you can find Irwyn's book, *The Beautiful Community*, at ivpress.com. And if you use the code EVN40, you can get 40% off and free shipping in the United States. So visit our site to get a great deal on Irwyn's book. Thanks, everyone for listening to the Every Voice Now podcast, brought to you by IVP. Our producer is Helen Lee, and our sound engineer is Jonathan Clauson. If you are enjoying our show, we'd be grateful if you'd share about it with your friends. Please review and recommend us on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

Maila Kim 33:14



And we love getting your feedback, so get in touch with us with your comments, critiques, or questions. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter @EveryVoiceNow, or you can email us at evn@ivpress.com. And join us next time for another inspiring episode of Every Voice Now.

About the Guest:

Irwyn Ince Jr. serves as a pastor at Grace DC Presbyterian Church and director of the Grace DC Institute for Cross-Cultural Mission, a church-based training and research entity dedicated to equipping current and future Christian leaders for cross-cultural ministry. He is a graduate of City College of New York, Reformed Theological Seminary, and holds a DMin from Covenant Theological Seminary. You can reach Irwyn at his [website](#) or follow him on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

SPECIAL OFFER | Save 40% on Irwyn's book [The Beautiful Community](#) and get free US shipping when you use promo code EVN40 at checkout.

About the Hosts:



Helen Lee, Producer and Creator

Helen is the associate director of strategic partnerships and initiatives; she has a B.A. from Williams College in bioethics, an M.A. from Wheaton College Graduate School in interdisciplinary studies, and an MBA from Babson College in entrepreneurship. She enjoys reading novels by authors of color, finding spots of natural beauty wherever she can, and listening to podcasts such as *Serial*, *The Rewatchables*, *Filmspotting*, and *The Disrupters*. You can find Helen on Twitter and Instagram @HelenLeeBooks.



Ed Gilbreath, Co-Host

Formerly an editor at IVP, Ed is currently an executive leader at Christianity Today; he earned his bachelor's in communication arts from Judson University and a master's in philosophy of history from Olivet Nazarene University. He is also the author of two IVP books: *Reconciliation Blues* and *Birmingham Revolution*. Follow Ed on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.



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