

In Response to the Death of George Floyd (and Countless Others)



*“We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,”*

—Paul Laurence Dunbar

June 5, 2020

To Members of the Wake Forest Divinity Community:

My father was fifteen years old on August 28, 1955. This was the day two white men dumped fourteen-year-old Emmett Till’s body in a Mississippi river with a cotton gin fan tied around his neck. My dad would say that he was saddened yet sickeningly unsurprised. This was the culture of terror that black kids lived with each day in the segregated South.

My mother was twenty-three years old on April 4, 1968. She was one of two African American women hired to integrate the phone company in Memphis. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s body lay in a Memphis morgue, she fielded hundreds of calls on the switchboard such as, “I am glad that N-word is dead,” and “I hope these riots will get rid of the rest of these N-words.”

It was 1992 when I attended my first protest as a freshman in college. Video footage of officers beating Rodney King and their subsequent acquittal led to uprisings across the country. Like Till's murderers in Money, Mississippi, nobody was held responsible.

So here we are in 2020. I'm watching my children. They have a dull look on their faces, as they see footage of white men roll up on Ahmaud Arbery with evil and insidious assumptions about his humanity. Their body language is nervous as they watch officer Derek Chauvin kneel down on George Floyd's neck with such calm that his hands were in his pockets. I cannot help but consider what kind of storm clouds are descending upon their adolescent mental skies. Anger? Anguish? Fear?

They are children of immense privilege. But the antibodies of economic and educational advantage cannot fully inoculate them from the antigen of white supremacy. They just afford me more time and a safer space to blunt the sick truth that every African American parent seeks to delay, but can never deny their children. "In this nation, black life has never mattered as much as white life."

William Faulkner was right. "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The lie of presumed white innocence and black guilt converged to create that despicable scene in Minneapolis. Officer Chauvin was just a stock character actor from historical central casting. George Floyd—like Breonna Taylor, Atatiana Jefferson, Terence Crutcher, Philando Castile, Darnisha Harris, Amadou Diallo, Tyisha Miller, and innumerable others dating back to 1619—served as the ritual sacrifice. The ceremonial lynchings of black people are the price this nation pays for "law and order."

Today our nation is in chaos. Protests and uprisings coupled with an international pandemic. Both reveal acute vulnerabilities among communities of color—manifestations of the pain and misery baked into this nation's noble yet fragile experiment of democracy. A democratic experiment with a blueprint of equality, yet erected with the machinery of inequality. It's an unsteady design that professes to be inclusive but works best for those of us in power when exclusive.

We slide the velvet rope for privileged access. White. Male. Wealthy. Married. Homeowner. Straight. Hair texture. Private School. Christian. At times these barriers are strongly braided. At other times any single rope has the power to constitute a noose around the less vulnerable.

These are the reasons that so many of you with beautiful fleecy locks and sun-kissed dark skin feel weary. These are the reasons the economically vulnerable feel isolated. To live each day in a relative place of privilege like Wake Forest University School of Divinity is to “wear the mask that grins and lies.” With each slight and microaggression that you choose to grin and bear. With each interaction that you must quickly decide whether you’re talking to an ally or an “Amy Cooper.” With each gesture of perceived tokenism that says, “but you are different,” the mask becomes heavier and heavier.

Yet there are times when we no longer have the energy to conceal. Often it’s a single triggering event, like the murder of George Floyd. The pain born of a million paper cuts of bias and bigotry bleed through. Ask African Americans in Wilmington in 1898, Atlanta in 1906, Tulsa in 1921, Detroit in 1943, Watts in 1965, Miami in 1980, Los Angeles in 1992 or Ferguson in 2014. The wells of endurance evaporate.

Nevertheless, herein lies the reason that I am an educator. I come from a tradition that taught me that black lives and black minds matter. Such is our productive and progressive history. Recall W.E.B. Du Bois, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Benjamin Elijah Mays. Their intellectual cultivation formed the mental artillery that has dealt ongoing blows to structures of white supremacy and colonialism.

We must embrace this rich tradition by understanding that our protest is not solely at moments of mass demonstration. Every book we read, every word we write, with each form of knowledge and way of knowing that we expand, we can dismantle injustice. Education expands democracy. Knowledge is protest.

This search for expanded knowledge is also why I am a minister of the Gospel. The teachings of a peasant Jewish rabbi provide moral and spiritual resources to imagine alternative ways of living and loving. The interpretive and preaching traditions of Jarena Lee, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Delores Williams inspire me to work for a kingdom where there is always “plenty of good room” for all of God’s children.

I hear your voices in my head saying, “Enough talk.” I hear you asking, “So what are you going to do?” I understand. I have asked that question of myself every day since I raised my fist in protest in 1992. But today I grieve alongside you holding vigils of prayer, lament, and demonstrations of protest. At this moment, I hold my mask in my hand and say, “Lord, have mercy.”

One Luv,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. L. W.', written on a light-colored rectangular background.

JLW

“The love of God and the love of humanity are one love.”

– Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays