

WHY DO BLACK LIVES MATTER?

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So...Let's cut to the chase. Don't All Lives Matter? Yes. That's the point of the Black Lives Matter movement, because after centuries of dismissing, undercutting, disregarding, oppressing and demonizing black and brown lives -- first blatantly, then systemically arranged -- black and brown lives still do not matter as much as white lives in our society.

Now there are people who want to claim that after Barack Obama was elected President and there was an African American first family in the White House that we now live in a "post-racial" society.

No...that would mean that:

Dr. Martin Luther King's Nobel Peace Prize meant that harmony and justice were the new norm in the civil rights era

Or because Hillary Clinton won the Democratic Nomination for Pres. that the Democratic party is past sexism and misogyny

Or since Yance Ford became the first transgender filmmaker nominated for an Oscar, we're now open to transgender issues...

These shifts of focus in our society are important steps, but the movement toward all lives mattering has a ways to go, and focusing in

on black and brown lives is a vibrant avenue for this transformation. It's a way toward understanding equanimity and seeing oppression.

Focusing on black and brown lives can inspire the heart to pulse with the courage to see clearly, the passion for justice and the strength, the breadth, and the abundance of diversity.

Part of Dr. Martin Luther King's genius was that he was speaking to the transformation of collective consciousness through individual claiming. He believed in cultivating our connection with the innate life affirming source, what he called in one speech to a Barrett Junior High School in Philadelphia, "the eternal principles of beauty, love and justice".¹ He often preached that if one can tap into that sacred source within that affirms all lives, one's choices would shift to choices toward harmony, mutuality and justice. If we pay attention to what matters, we can reform and reframe society.

He made this belief clear in December of 1955 when he stepped out of his house to begin his public service: "If you protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love," he said, "when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say 'There lived a great people -- a black people -- who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.' This is our challenge

¹ Speech to the Barrett Junior High School, Philadelphia, PA, 1967

and overwhelming responsibility."

Martin Luther King believed that the civil rights movement was the transforming of a nations soul. He believed in the American dream...equal opportunity, equal regard, equal liberty for all lives...and that the witness of black experience in America would uplift its conscience to revolutionary reform.

And we all know that that didn't happen in his lifetime, but the Black Lives Matter movement is an echo of that vision of our capability to see what needs attention and what can shift our consciousness to enable the aspiration that all lives matter.

The Black Lives Matter movement started *after* President Obama was elected. It was a response in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi to the murder of Trayvon Martin, and then gained national momentum after the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner.

(interactions with law enforcement)

That is why - Blue Lives Matter counter argument arose...there was a feeling of indiscriminate blame toward law enforcement – so there was push back. The tendency toward “us” and “them” became strong – fatally so (black men died and officers died) -- around the issue of race

and law enforcement. This is a difficult quagmire that needs reframing.

When I worked in Harford County, Maryland, -- I was part of a diverse group focusing on race and law enforcement. One of our first endeavors was a listening forum in Edgewood, a primarily black neighborhood, at the high school. We were concentrating on black youth and law enforcement and invited the community. At first the police officers did not want to come, thinking it would simply be a hate and blame fest, that their desire to keep communities safe would not be considered. There had been violent forums around the nation at that time. After some meetings, it was agreed that the police officers would come and simply listen in service of creating a safer environment for everyone. We had a discussion about whether the officers should come in uniform, since it might dissuade folk of color of speaking their truth in fear of repercussions. The officers did come in uniform, and demonstrated they were in solidarity of this hope that the community would share their truth – something that would benefit all.

We devised ways for people to see they were being heard and taken seriously: everyone got 3 minutes at the mike. If everyone who wanted to talk got a chance, then people could return for a second three minutes. That way, we could include many voices in the listening forum. We also had a blank mural behind the microphones, with two people writing in

live time highlights of the comments shared – no judgment, simple recording.

The sharing was slow at first, then people got going. It was respectful and powerful. Near the end, two black teenagers came up together to the microphone, clearly hesitant at first, but then their sharing flowed about what it was like as a black youth to be anywhere near the police: they are afraid when police are near, that just hanging out together had folk think they were dealing drugs.... At one point, one of the youth said that people mistake him for being in a gang because of a tattoo he had on his shoulder. “This was done last year when my mother died. This is in memory of her.” Everyone sat stunned for a minute, cause they knew of the assumptions they had made.

Afterwards, two women of color who were on the planning were reviewing the forum. “Those two teenagers,” one said. “That was God,” the other agreed.....“that was God”

Hearing people into speech. SEEING THEM. Telling them they matter...sacred truth can then emerge.

Milton Police Chief John King spoke at a Courageous Conversation on Racial Justice, a town-wide coalition in Milton, and is willing to speak

again on issues of race and law enforcement. There is no question that there is implicit bias – amongst police officers and and implicit bias amongst those who the officers serve...the public. This is not a cut and dry issue, it is a quagmire. There *is* a clear understanding amongst law enforcement that racism is a cultural factor that makes everyone less safe.

Over two years ago now, at our first Courageous Conversations, we hosted a ted talk by Verna Myers, a diversity and inclusion professional, about how to overcome our implicit biases. Early on in the talk, she speaks of how racism is seeped into our being and relating as an unconscious conditioning in all of us, informing the assumptions of our society -- distorting our natural responses to fear and the need for security. “We were all outside when the contaminating rain came down,” she offers. It was an invitation into the work of dismantling racism.

We must recognize that we will at times be misguided and misunderstand in our reaching toward an evolution of consciousness. With this permission to make mistakes comes responsibility: an essential willingness to see, to learn, and to recognize the toxic nature of systemic bias and racism. We’re talking about rewiring our brains, reframing our perspectives, and committing to the worth of all lives in order to find a

new way forward. Again, “all lives matter” is not yet a reality.

This is the soul deepening work that Dr. King spoke of decades ago – a necessary vulnerability to examine our assumptions. I truly believe that those of us alive today are called to a competency of discomfort. We need to say to the next generation that we will stay in the uncomfortable shift from the ways we thought we were supposed to be into a different way of relating in society. We need to be able to stay in uncomfortable dialogue -- learning, listening, misunderstanding, trying again in order to come to a new way of being that none of us can fully envision. This is uncharted territory for everyone.

But it is more dangerous, more pressing for those who are still invisible, those who are still not treated with equal regard in the systems of authority, opportunity and access in society.

James Baldwin, African American poet of the civil rights era, wrote about this decades ago: “It comes as a great shock to discover the country which is your birthplace, and to which you owe your life and your identity, has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you.”² He lived the reality in this country that black lives did not matter.

Now there have been some improvements and shifts since the 1960’s, however, we are nowhere near done. A 2012 article from the Center

² <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/03/513311359/i-am-not-your-negro-gives-james-baldwins-words-new-relevance>

for American Progress offered current statistics about people of color in the US Criminal Justice system.

- ! Though black lives are about 30% of the US population, 60% of those imprisoned are black
- ! One in three black men can expect to go to prison in their lifetime
- ! African American youth have higher rates of juvenile incarceration and are more likely to be sentenced to adult prisons.
- ! The war on drugs has been waged primarily in communities of color
- ! Once convicted, black offenders receive longer sentences compared to white offender

And in Michelle Alexander's book The New Jim Crow, she points out that more black men are behind bars or locked in the criminal justice system now than there were enslaved in 1850 – granted our population is larger, however, this is a clear symbol of the systemic effort – conscious and unconscious – to keep black men from free and full participation in our society.

If black lives mattered, we wouldn't send black juveniles to adult prison
If black lives mattered, we wouldn't administer harsher sentences than those of their white counterparts

If black lives mattered, we wouldn't incessantly show images of black perpetrators or alleged criminals on the media

We can be a part of this system without agreeing to the racist ideology, but because it has been in place for centuries and because "we were all outside when the contaminating rain came down" we make choices that sustain the system of racism – choices of seeing, choices of assuming, choices of sharing power because that's what we were systemically taught. So what we have to do is see more clearly and change our choices.

** (told a couple stories of racist thoughts that occurred to me --noticed and not acted on)

first year here – Dorchester – Rite Aid on Central Ave – pharmacy (bias strong when we are fearful for our safety)

Moved to Mattapan – went into local CVS – looking for "nude" stockings – assumptions....And I've been doing this work for years. **

I remind you of the phrase my daughter learned in college: "Your first thought is what you were taught. Your second thought is who you are." If you give yourself that permission, you will be shown your assumptions and begin to weed them out of your system – and so the

larger system.

Now there are many times, for all of us, that we don't have a second thought about what we are thinking. There are many times we are so steeped in our conditioning, we don't see what we are swimming in. So halleluia! if you notice your thought, halleluia! if you say to yourself, I can't believe I just thought that. *That* moment is an opening to transformation -- *that* humility, *that* noticing, *that* realizing that there's another way to see the world...that's an opening to transformation.

That's not a time to become defensive or hide or pretend you didn't really mean it or huddle in a corner in despair and shame. None of that will help: all of that keeps the attention on you rather than the transformation you are called to engage. We don't have time for white guilt, defensiveness or comparing ourselves to someone who is worse. Enough already. We need to nurture our souls with clarity, faith and the true seeing that all lives matter.

If we are willing to be uncomfortable. If we are willing to listen. If we are willing to not know what will come next... We can find a way together. With mindfulness, perseverance, curiosity, humility and love we can get deeper and wider and healthier in the interdependent web.

We're trying really hard, we may say, see how far we've come. --- ok
--- good – agreed--- but we're not done. Don't expect rewards or
kudos, just keep trying.

The work of anti-racism isn't about being liked. It's about being willing
to see differently. It's about being open to systemic change. It's
about the holy tension that leads to transformation. Things will not
be the same as we move
toward authentic integrity and wholeness.

“Black Lives Matter” is an affirmation, not a criticism, a spiritual calling
not an angling for position. “Black Lives Matter” does not leave anyone
out...it is an attempt to balance the worth of all. It is a calling to have
open heart, open mind and clarity of justice.

So let's find a way through. We can do this. Amen.