

Two days ago it happened again. An unarmed black man was shot in the back seven times by a Kenosha, Wisconsin police officer. We still don't know how the incident started (the police department there has yet to release any details or "explanation"), but the violent end of the matter was caught on video on a bystander's cellphone camera, and we have all seen it now numerous times. An unarmed black man, Jacob Blake, is seen walking away from several police officers (who have guns pointed at him). He opens the door of his SUV (three of his children were in the backseat); one of the officers grabs Jacob by his T-shirt, and shoots him seven times in the back.

It is a miracle that, as of now, Mr. Blake is not dead, but he has had to undergo extensive surgery, and may be paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life (he is 29 years old).

Now you may ask "Why was he walking away from the police? Why, if he had done nothing wrong, did he not cooperate as fully as possible – especially since he had three young children with him?"

If Mr. Blake had cooperated, would he not be unharmed today? Just now I read on a BBC news site: "Court records show there was an active arrest warrant against Mr. Blake, related to charges of sexual assault, trespassing and disorderly conduct. But it is unclear if police were aware of this at the time of his shooting." But I also read that the man who videoed the shooting said that before he turned on his phone's camera he witnessed the officers "wrestle, punch and taser" Mr. Blake. Could it be that Jacob Blake had no confidence that the police would treat him with due process? Or was it simply the case, as his family's lawyer has stated, that he just wanted to "check on his kids" in the car.

We do not know the answers to any of these questions. But clearly shooting a man in the back seven times who has posed no danger to the lives of others during the encounter is outrageous. Surely, if the police had good reason to question, detain, or arrest this man, and the man would not cooperate, they could have taken down his license plate number and gone to his home later, or even perhaps have shot seven times at the tires of his car so that he would not be able to drive away (or not very quickly) on deflated tires.

And it seems inconceivable in this present era – after George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breona Taylor and so many others, the loss of whose lives at the hands of white police officers (or white neighborhood vigilantes, in the case of Arbery) have sparked the explosion of the current demonstrations for racial justice– that any police officers would heedlessly take a man’s life like this. And there is something questionable, to say the least, at the delay of the Kenosha police department’s public statement about what happened. (The Kenosha police department deploys audio recordings of police encounters, but not video body cameras.)

Predictably, angry protests erupted in Kenosha in the aftermath of this incident. And yes, some of the demonstrators went too far with their anger, setting cars on fire and looting businesses. Blake’s family has publicly pleaded with protestors to protest peacefully. They do not want any property damage or violence done in the name of their son or their family. But when a group of people has been abused and denied justice and equal rights for so long, it is hard to expect that all of them, down to the last individual, will forbear, waiting patiently for the wheels of justice (in a society that has proven to be against them) to turn as they should.

In 1967 Dr. Martin Luther King gave a talk entitled “The Other America.” It is a brilliant speech (available online, I encourage anyone reading this to look it up and read the entire speech here: <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/otheram.htm>). Here is what King had to say about the riots of that era, and about their cause:

“Let me say as I’ve always said, and I will always continue to say, that riots are socially destructive and self-defeating. I’m still convinced that nonviolence is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and justice. I feel that violence will only create more social problems than they will solve... So I will continue to condemn riots, and continue to say to my brothers and sisters that this is not the way. And continue to affirm that there is another way.

But at the same time, it is as necessary for me to be as vigorous in condemning the conditions which cause persons to feel that they must engage in riotous activities as it is for me to condemn riots. **I think America must see that riots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots.** But in the final analysis, **a riot is the language of the unheard.** And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and

riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention.”

Is it not startling how absolutely relevant King’s words are to our situation today – fifty-three years later?

And if all this were not bad enough, when I turned on the news this morning at eight o’clock, it was being reported that armed white militia-type vigilantes had been involved in the riots in Wisconsin last night, claiming to be there to “protect” businesses from being looted. At one gas station an armed white man apparently shot at least one demonstrator (all told, two demonstrators were killed last night, although at this point the details are murky); later a white man carrying a long rifle was seen (and videoed) running down a street, with protestors chasing him. He tripped and fell, and as some of those chasing him tried to apprehend him, he then shot them. Some onlookers reported that after the gunmen got up three police cruisers came by. The gunmen raised his hands...but the three police cruisers just rolled by, with no attempt to apprehend the shooter (although they claim now to be looking for him).

This last detail – that the same police force which had shot an apparently unarmed black man seven times in the back for no discernible reason had “rolled on by” a white man with his hands up, bearing an ominous-looking rifle – this enraged me so much that I could not carry out my usual morning routine. I could not pray my daily prayers before sitting down to work, but felt that the only way I could settle my thoughts and my emotional reaction to all this was to turn once again to “chronicling” all of this.

I do not know what good can come of this relatively quiet activity of mine. Yes, I send these missives out to our community (I have no idea how many of you are reading); and in so doing, I hope to call your attention to an issue that might get lost in the midst of the *many* difficulties our nation is experiencing at this moment in history. We have plague, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, a crisis of unemployment and people losing their healthcare; we have the still-open question about how children and college students will continue their educations this fall without thousands more getting sick and maybe even dying as a result. We have the fretting (on both sides of the political spectrum) about how an expected and unprecedented volume of mail-in ballots for the November election will impact us on November 4th...how long will it take for all of the ballots to be counted, and for the election results to be certified?

And there are certainly many difficulties that I am leaving out! As I was watching the Republican National Convention last night, it struck me that although Governor Kim Reynolds of Iowa was full of praise for how quickly the current administration “cut through the red tape” to get federal disaster relief to Iowa’s residents after the recent high-wind disaster there, she said absolutely nothing that might call into question why this disaster happened. Why is California experiencing the worst wildfire season on record? Why has what scientists believe to be the highest temperature ever reliably recorded on earth (130 degrees) recently been recorded in Death Valley? Why have there just this last week been two hurricanes/tropical storms in the Gulf Coast region back-to back with one another?

Racial justice and environmental justice are inextricably intertwined. It’s not just that black people and other people of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods where the rent is lower and where various types of industry, legally or illegally, contribute to the toxicity of their environment (this is why “deregulation” is not such a good thing!) – it’s that, whether the problem be pollution of a poor neighborhood or a lack of justice to people of color, so many of the well-off, privileged people in our society *just do not want to know about it*. They want to go on pursuing what they think of as “the American dream,” and pretending that this dream is available to all who reach for it. But there are people reaching for it that are being prevented from ever grasping it. Whether this is because of the “blissful ignorance” of the well-off, or whether it is *by design* (I would venture that it is a little of both) – if we want there to be a decent, healthy nation and planet for our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to inhabit when we are gone, we have to *stop dreaming*, we have to wake up and see what is right before our eyes, if only we would pay attention.

In the Book of Proverbs it is written:

...the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them (Pr. 1:32).

I do see our nation, and our world, as “foolish” if we close our eyes to these matters, hoping, perhaps that some future generation will be able to come up with a solution that does not require that we make the changes *now* that are urgently needed to turn back the tide – both of climate change and of festering inequality – before it is too late.

Am I merely shouting into the wind? I have to hold onto hope that it is not so.

As I did last week, I will close with Dr. King's words – near the end of the same essay quoted earlier, "The Other America":

"Now let me say finally that we have difficulties ahead but I haven't despaired. Somehow I maintain hope in spite of hope. And I've talked about the difficulties and how hard the problems will be as we tackle them. But I want to close by saying this afternoon, that I still have faith in the future. And I still believe that these problems can be solved. And so I will not join anyone who will say that we still can't develop a coalition of conscience.

...With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discourse of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to speed up the day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and live together as brothers and sisters, all over this great nation. That will be a great day, that will be a great tomorrow. In the words of the Scripture, to speak symbolically, that will be the day when the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy."



...and the roses still bloom in Fall River (garden of the Fall River Historical Society) – from this past week, shortly after a brief rainfall.