

Sidwell Friends

Dear Friends,

Dismayed and grieving citizens are protesting the heinous murders of George Floyd, Amaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor in the District and around the nation, shaking us from our pandemic-focused stupor and reintroducing us to our nightmarish history of committing violence against people of color, a history that our nation and many of its historians have sought to bury under the notion of American exceptionalism. The current events and riots, conversations with friends and colleagues, and our mission have inspired me to re-engage with several texts I taught at Sidwell Friends years ago. Taken together, these discussions and materials remind me of important lessons we all must learn, relearn, and practice if we are to stop racial violence and pursue social justice.

From Denmark Veysey to Eric Garner, Harriet Jacobs to Miriam Carey, Emmet Till to Tamir Rice, Monticello to Minnesota, this national plot has unfolded with ghastly predictability. “Violence,” wrote a former activist who succumbed to its practice, “is as American as cherry pie.” Ta-Nahesi Coates put a finer point on it, telling his son, “In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—*it is heritage.*” These statements cut to the quick, forcing us to reckon with the complexity of our national narrative and the role we are obliged to play in deconstructing it. As citizens and members of a Friends community, we all have a responsibility to confront the ugly side of our heritage, and to work actively and persistently to discontinue its lingering effects.

I have followed the news of Mr. Floyd’s death. I am horrified, but unfortunately not surprised, by the inexplicably cruel behavior and lack of intervention that precipitated it. I have spoken privately with friends and have discussed the event at our dinner table, where my daughter insisted that white people have a responsibility to view the video in which we see Floyd perish, to bear witness to the dehumanization and destruction that results from racism. She is right in implying that it is easier for whites to change the channel, both physically and emotionally. Whites have the luxury of choosing not to pay attention, to avoid the pain and suffering, to unload the heaviest burden of our national history.

The emotional impact of the Floyd slaying, like COVID infection rates and the economic destruction it has wrought, falls disproportionately on African Americans. So too does the weight of an anecdote shared by a group of African American parents with whom I met a year ago. Every time their boys leave the house, they explained, they think of Trayvon Martin. Slavery, black codes, and segregation have long and crooked legacies that continue to contribute to the unequal distribution of wealth and health. Police brutality opens old wounds and inflicts new ones, reminding everyone that the song remains the same. A good friend and former colleague shared that Floyd’s death rendered him speechless, even as he was trying to have important conversations with his young adult African American sons. He recalled a conversation we had

when Michael Brown was killed. When will ongoing violence toward and harassment of people of color end? [And how do we talk to our children about this matter?](#)

I believe that every member of the Sidwell Friends community finds these brazen acts of racism to be abhorrent. And there are many members of our community from all backgrounds who work to promote justice across a broad spectrum of issues. They remind us that we need to do more than simply express our disgust about racist violence at the dinner table, although we must have conversations with our children. We must not leave the work of undoing systemic racism for others and wash our hands of its presence. The effects of racial violence extend far beyond bloodied bodies: they place tangible burdens on many members of our community, create an inequitable educational environment, and reveal our collective ethics. If we care about one another, we must openly renounce hatred, dismantle structures that sustain racism, and let our lives speak for equal rights and justice. We must hold victims of injustice in the Light, and yet that is not enough.

At the 2019 Upper School Equity, Justice, and Community Day, John Biewen spoke about his award-winning podcast [Seeing White](#), a documentary about racial formation in the United States. In my introduction, I quoted James Baldwin. “White man, hear me!” Baldwin exclaimed in an issue of *Ebony* audaciously entitled *The White Problem in America*. “History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it with us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. . . And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this.”

Reluctant to face this pain, many white Americans continue to downplay the centrality of racism in our lives, subscribing to an idealized view of the past that justifies the inequities of the present. Those who imagine history in this way, Baldwin asserts, find themselves “impaled . . . like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world.” The image is powerful. White Americans often find themselves in this condition, he observes, living incoherent, immoral lives that cannot be clarified until they recognize how they have benefited from systems of inequality. It is impossible, in the tradition of a liberal arts education, to live an examined life without reckoning with this truth. [These resources](#), as well as this article from [medium.com](#), provide guidance for how we might go about freeing ourselves from the pin.

Baldwin’s assertion that race was formulated in the past does not let us off the hook for the effects it has in the present. White Americans cannot, he insists, simply blame our national sins on those who engineered the middle passage, owned plantations, burned crosses, bombed churches, and designed the school-to-prison pipeline. “If race lives on today,” writes the historian Barbara Fields, it does so because we “need a social vocabulary that will allow us to make sense, not of what our ancestors did then, but of what we ourselves choose to do now.”

On Friday, a black staff member wrote to me about the incident in Minnesota, explaining that “we are not ok” and urging me to issue a statement about the violence. Her powerful truth reminded me of words Martin Luther King, Jr. authored from his jail cell: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” None of us can be ok as long as injustice persists. So what will we do now

that we have witnessed more racial violence? How does race enable us to make sense of what we choose to do today, particularly when it comes to developing public health policy in response to COVID-19 infection rates? These are questions that we must not lose sight of during the pandemic. So too is the query raised by the poet [Elizabeth Alexander](#) '80:

*Poetry (here I hear myself loudest)
is the human voice,
and are we not of interest to each other?*

I believe we are. I don't pretend to have solutions to these complex problems, but know that our learning about them must always continue. I know that racism is not an abstract construct that reproduces itself. Racism is a human invention that can only be undone by seeking to understand the pervasive effect it has on our national and individual consciousness, and its effects are so far reaching as to dizzy the mind. We can only begin to limit its power by listening, learning, and acting together in the shared interest of community and justice.

Natalie Randolph will communicate shortly with updates on ways we can come together as a community this week and will continue the important Equity, Justice, and Community work of creating understanding and respect for others. Adele Paynter, Rachel Kane and Mamadou Guèye are working with their teams to address current events in age appropriate ways next week. We will also call an all-community Meeting for Worship on Wednesday night at 7 p.m.

Meanwhile, I am grateful for the engagement of colleagues and hope that others will join the dialogue in the spirit of truth and love.

In peace and with humility,

Bryan

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