

June 1, 2020

Dear friends,

On this Monday, the sun is shining and the sky is a pale blue in Newark. Everything looks eerily normal. If we don't pay attention, we can be lulled into a false sense of security that everything is ok and everything will be ok. We can pretend that people aren't dying in this pandemic; pretend to believe that this virus is indiscriminant and all people are equally at risk. While scientifically correct, it could not be further from the truth. If we pay attention, we know that some groups bear a greater burden of exposure and risk of death.

And now, another scourge has come to the forefront exposing the depth of structural and individual racism that has torn the fabric of our communities since the founding of this country. In my mind I see over and over again the image of George Floyd gasping for breath with a knee on his neck. I see Ahmaud Arbery as he is literally driven into an ambush. These terrible and disturbing scenes are made even more horrific by the reluctance of police and other government officials to arrest those who-- ON VIDEO-- murdered these two men. I also remember so many others whose Black lives were stolen.

But let's be real. There is nothing new about any of this. I now see posters saying, "The system is broken." But the system isn't broken. The "system" is doing exactly what it is designed to do. It is not by accident that many Black and Brown communities still don't have access to decent education and healthcare. It is not by accident that police violence is concentrated in these same communities. It should come as no surprise that it is these communities that bear the brunt of COVID-19 deaths and where anger and rage against police abuse is most prevalent. In their efforts to achieve their aspirations, children from these very same communities find the odds are stacked against them. When they do reach those personal goals, like Christian Cooper, the simple fact of being Black in America put them at real risk from vigilantes, hate groups AND those sworn to protect and serve.

As Dean of the School of Criminal Justice, where over 65% of our students are young people of color, what can I say to you? My heart breaks, I weep for the COVID deaths in our Newark community and across the nation, and for the senseless murder of George Floyd and so many others. I am enraged at the callous disregard for Black and Brown lives. Please know that you are all in my thoughts and in my heart. I know many of you come from police families and aspire to be officers who will truly serve and protect and will work with, rather than against, communities. We need you now more than ever. We need you to understand clearly whom you serve and, when you do, to serve with all the courage, care and respect you can muster; be that same kind of hero we have seen in so many of our first responders during this pandemic. I also know that many of you are drawn to advocate and to fight directly against the many forms of injustice you see in the world. We need you, too. We need you to think critically, imagine the possible and act boldly.

I cannot comprehend how every aspect of these deadly threats has been interpreted and weaponized to divide us as a people. In this moment in time, we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of either/or. We need to be a people of "both." Yes, we have all seen the horrible images of police use of force - from choke holds, knees in the back and shootings to tear gas, rubber bullets and sheer brutality. And we have also seen images of officers taking a knee to honor victims, taking off their helmets and marching with protestors and protecting rather than assaulting those who demand justice. Regardless of where your personal journeys take you, I hope you will become effective advocates and activists for justice knowing that this is an enduring struggle. We need all of you. Be courageous, be smart, and be the shining beacon that the next generation can point to as a guiding light.

Bonnie Veysey
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