

“I Can’t Breathe”
(In Remembrance of George Floyd)

There are so many stories of police brutality and violence against people of color that it’s almost easy to turn the channel, turn our heads, and turn our hearts because we’ve seen it all before. We see the news, see the outrage, see the reaction of the families and friends of the fallen, and we see the officers get away with murder time and time again. As I watch the news during the past few days, I keep hoping this time will be different. I keep hoping all of us knows a George Floyd in our circle of friends or in our own family.

A few weeks before George Floyd’s death, I was in Minneapolis for a conference for work, and each evening, instead of going for an expensive dinner on the company dime with colleagues I’d already spent all day in meetings with, I tried to find a small, funky place within walking distance of our hotel. But being notoriously bad at directions, I easily got lost walking around the city, and once, while stopping to get my bearings, I was greeted by a jovial African American man who asked if I was lost. When I explained that I wasn’t really lost, just looking for some good, cheap food in the trendy little area of town where we were staying, he pointed me in the direction of a place that filled the bill perfectly. As we were talking, he mentioned that he was heading for the bus stop but was a little short of the bus fare. He wasn’t panhandling or begging – and if he was, who cares? I didn’t have any change, but since I was not eating at the pricey places, I did have some cash I hadn’t spent, so I handed him a \$20 bill and thanked him for giving me a great impression of Minneapolis. We both walked away smiling. As I was watching the news about George Floyd being murdered by a cop for possibly attempting to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill, all I could think was that perhaps I met George Floyd, and it could easily have been the \$20 bill I handed him that got him killed.

I’m not trying to insert myself into this horrible tragedy, but I can’t help but think that no one would have ever questioned me or suspected anything untoward if I had been the one inadvertently trying to use a fake \$20 bill. It would have been automatically assumed that I had been given a fake \$20 bill as change and was just spending money that was in my wallet. What I will never be able to understand is why the color of his skin made it different – fatal – for him to do the same thing that would have earned me an eye roll and a ‘teachable moment’ from a store clerk or police officer. They might have even gifted me with one of those pens that helps you tell if the bill you’ve been given is counterfeit or genuine because, well, because I am a white woman, and the lack of pigment in my skin somehow gives me unearned credibility.

I’ve been watching with great sadness the anger and hatred and the rage that people have been expressing, and while I completely abhor the looting, vandalism, burning, and tagging and think it negates the powerful message the peaceful protestors are trying to make, there is a piece of me which understands why there is so much anger and vitriol. So many African Americans have been treated so horribly for so long, and there have been so many other “George Floyds” that we can’t even remember their names or faces, yet nothing changes. A simple traffic stop or asking for directions in an unfamiliar city can still instantly become a life and death situation for someone with a skin tone that’s darker than mine. The weight of the problem is so overwhelming that it truly does take my breath away, which makes me think of the excruciating last moments of George Floyd, pleading for his last breaths, calling out for his dead mama, and being told to relax to his very last breath by someone whose power had overwhelmed him until he forgot the

difference between right and wrong, the oath he took to serve and protect, and the lessons we are all taught to treat one another the way we'd want to be treated.

How many George Floyds will it take before we change this broken system, relieve some of the pain and inequity that causes so much hurt and anger that even when people try to peacefully protest, the rage leaks out like a poison and the circle becomes an endless spiral of death and revenge? How can we allow our children and grandchildren out of our sight never knowing if the "friendly neighborhood officer" we tell them to trust is so drunk on power that he tortures and murders them while his colleagues cheer him on, all of them aware that they will never be punished for their crime? And are any of us in a position to judge and condemn those who have been held down in poverty and fear for so long seeing an opportunity to rage against the oppression and grab something – anything to help ease the pain, if only for a moment?

If any of us believes that we are, let us for a single moment, just imagine how it would feel to have an armed police officer kneeling on our airway, being cheered on by three others more than willing to take his place should he get weary or bored of the torture. And when, in desperation, we gasp out a cry to our dead mama, who, in life, could always protect us in childhood from the evil of the world the words, let us imagine how it must feel to know that she cannot help us now. And when we imagine choking out a rasping, "I can't breathe," just before losing consciousness for the final time. Let's imagine that the last face we see on this earth is our murderer and the last word we hear on this earth is, "Relax."

