

“When I look in the mirror, I see George Floyd – and so do others”

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There is no doubt these are uncertain and unsettling times. Our world, struggling to deal with the new challenge of COVID-19, is now forced to confront the age-old scourge of anti-Black racism in a manner it never has before.

Everyone is acutely aware of the demonstrations against racism and police brutality taking place across the United States and around the world, but not all are aware of the root cause of the anger. For those who have not been personally affected by anti-Black racism, it can be hard to understand: Why all the fuss?

It's not the fact that another Black man was killed in public but the way he was killed. It was inhumane and inexcusable. It's also the latest example in a sick cycle that has been allowed to continue for more than 400 years, since the establishment of slavery on this continent.

For too long too many have said: “This is not my problem,” that anti-Black racism and hate are somehow distant from the lives we live here in Canada.

I am here to tell you they are not. When I look into the mirror, I see George Floyd.

Those individuals who perpetuate the cycle of racism and hate, like the ones who killed Mr. Floyd, would not have cared if he went to the University of Toronto, if he lived in Rosedale or if he worked on Bay Street. Just that he was Black.

What would the response have been if Mr. Floyd had been a 46-year old blond, blue-eyed woman? Would we allow the scene – of a police officer crushing this woman's neck with his knees for almost nine minutes, to the point where she was begging for air, gasping, pleading and eventually urinating on herself – to be played over and over again like the murder porn that the video of Mr. Floyd has become?

If that makes you uncomfortable, it should.

Anti-Black racism is not an abstract concept to be theorized about. It is a threat to the very essence of humanity.

The psyche and the system that caused Mr. Floyd to die transcend borders.

I often hear that things like this don't happen in Canada. But speak with any Black person in Canada and they will share their many encounters with anti-Black racism.

I live in the Rosedale neighbourhood in Toronto. I was out for a walk recently and saw an elderly white woman fall. I was hesitant to help her because I was concerned she would be startled by a Black man helping her, or that the neighbours would call the police on a Black man standing over an elderly white woman. How many white men would think this way?

As Black leaders, we cannot rely on the same people who created this system to fix it. We must remake the system that entraps us and leads to dozens of cases like George Floyd's every year.

We live in a world that was set up 400 years ago to protect white slave owners from their Black slaves. When slaves would fall out of line, white owners would call on the system to put them back in line. The problem is that when slavery was abolished, the system set up to enable slavery remained.

First, Black people were told what toilet they could use (only the one in their section), what water fountain they could drink from (the one for coloured people) and where they could sit on a bus (at the back).

Today, that system remains in place but just disguised a little better so as not to make those who benefit from it uncomfortable. Socio-economic shackles dictate what health care and education Blacks can get. Racial and ethnic biases influence the way in which the law will be applied.

We continue to live in a system that was set up to protect the world from Blacks:

- If you suspect a Black man is passing off a counterfeit bill, call the system to catch him. (George Floyd)
- If you are in Central Park and a Black man speaks to you in a way you don't like, call the system for protection. (Christian Cooper)
- If you see a Black man jogging in your neighborhood, take action; the system will protect you. (Ahmaud Arbery)
- If you saw a Black man standing over an elderly white woman in Rosedale, what would you do?

We need to treat breaking the cycle of systemic racism with the same level of determination, creativity and ingenuity we have applied to confronting the challenge of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

It is not enough to say, "Ugh, this is horrible" and tweet. Each of us needs to take meaningful action to dismantle the system we inherited and apply an unparalleled effort to build a better one. We cannot allow complacency or inertia to rob us of this historic opportunity.

When history looks at this period of time, I believe it will judge those who remain silent with the same ferocity as it does those who have perpetuated the cycle of racism. Inaction is a tacit endorsement of the status quo.

I believe the vast majority of people are good people. In fact, many well-meaning white people have contacted me to express their support and to express their desire to “find their voice.” They fear the repercussions of speaking out, notwithstanding the fact that they would be speaking from a privileged position.

We are born into this world with kind, loving hearts. It is only through our upbringing that those hearts grow hateful and accepting of the belief that one race is superior to another.

The officer who killed George Floyd may not be a racist. The person who called the cops on Christian Cooper may not be a racist. You may not be a racist. But the system is. That is why we have the term “systemic racism.” The system must be dismantled.