



To Be Black in America: One Tuesday Morning With George Floyd

By Fitzgerald Brown



We were supposed to be dropping seeds. It could have been me instead of George Floyd, trapped, choked, dead and gone. None of it seemed real, much less right.

I thought we'd be out hugging trees by now, but it's 7 a.m. on a Tuesday morning, months after and we just can't get it together. It's like they're trying to rip your heart out, like they want to destroy that part of you that is divine and God-given. Your ability to love, to feel generosity, kindness, forgiveness and to share it all, loudly, boldly and freely.

But instead, they watch your pain and, not changing, they condemn another generation to the hell you're living in. It makes you weak, saps your spirit and reeks of pain.

How can they not understand? How can they not see and know what he was feeling or what you'd be feeling?

Pain and more pain.

And the utter horror and grief, because you know, we are better than this. We should be so much further than this, yet here we are.

I thought when I immigrated to the Netherlands, Amsterdam, that it was only white Americans that couldn't be trusted and I somewhat believed that Europeans were different, that they would move the marker of skin colour from the stratification of human definition. But the reality at present makes me unsure about this world. About them and about us.

I don't even know about Tuesday mornings anymore because the indifference spreads and I feel the pressure all around me. It is the kind of pressure that brings shame because you know your suffering doesn't reach them and that brings grief. You know you are at the bottom, at the very rock bottom of love. Your heart amplifies these feelings and the words you hear bring tears to your eyes, welling and then streaming down your cheeks from the never-before-aired footage of the last moment of Mr George Floyd's life that knocks you to your knees as you try to resolve the purpose of the latest video. And the silence of politicians and world leaders, ignoring a clear public cry for help, burns a hole in your head. Deep is the humiliation and despair triggered by the new reporting, played again and again, ravaging our sensibilities as those who should know better, be better, stand aside unmoved by the sight of Mr Floyd's demise.

I recall the years given defending the freedom of the Europeans who hold tight to their traditions today and it hurts me to the core.

The Dutch, the French, the Belgians, the Spanish, the Italians, all allies of the United States, have taken a position and their complacency speaks louder than words. My emergency, the Black man's emergency is just not their concern.

I thought about the past revolutions and wars, and the many concessions that were made so we could at least achieve a semblance of dignity that no government would impose its weight on its own citizens, but nothing was as it should be.

I thought about the early Berlin conference and the scramble for African wealth that would pull apart an entire continent to be exploited and plundered under the guise of colonialism and a new imperialism. I was a fool to believe these same people didn't know the wickedness of their deeds. They knew.

Imagine a meeting hosted by the Germans, attended by a league of White Europeans, all the nations present, all playing a part. The Dutch, French, Germans, British, Austrians, Belgians, Swedes, Italians, the Portuguese, the Russians, Spanish and the Americans sitting down at the table and agreeing to bring havoc to an entire continent and its people for their own personal interest.

I thought about the thirteen-year-old Jewish girl Ann Frank, hiding from the Nazis with her family in a small room in a house I've walked or biked past a million times before. The house today serves as a memorial to the holocaust, a testament to the evil men can do when there is no moral restraint or self-control.

Tourists gather to see the view she had while she waited for someone with a heart to save her and her family. Thank God for the tree she had to look upon while she waited. She waited for months. No one came. She died in a prison camp. Ann Frank's room and her diary is just something to do, something to talk about over a coffee and a croissant, if it doesn't move you. It's only public relations if we keep dying.

I thought about the twenty-seven years I've spent in the Netherlands and that surprising turnout (in Amsterdam), in support of George Floyd. On that day, whites and blacks of Amsterdam and the surrounding regions came out in record numbers, risking their health and their safety to stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter Protesters in America. The surprising show of support was

inspiring and welcomed.

I was inspired standing with so many of my young sisters and brothers on the Dam square and practically moved to tears in the Bijlmer for it's always been obvious to me, America doesn't like Black people. And I'll say it again, America doesn't like Black people. But that day I felt their energy, thousands of people, white and black people with fists raised in the air saying with one voice,

“Black lives matter”, and I was deeply moved.

The solidarity at both these protests in Amsterdam was inspiring and for a good moment I was proud of the Europeans, all of them except for the political leadership. Not one leader came out to speak against Trump's anti-Black sentiment like President Reagan did in 1987, when he took a stand for the human rights of German citizens in Berlin. President Ronald Reagan changed the course of history when he delivered a simple, bold message to Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev that would usher in a new era for the German families separated by a wall.

“Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”

Reagan made history on the 12th day of June 1987 at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, speaking directly to Russian President Gorbachev because he could imagine a different kind of world, a world without the Berlin Wall, and I was proud to be an American, and proud to be wearing the army green, and proud to be a democratic military presence among the Europeans, even back then.

As a former military intelligence non-commissioned officer, I wanted to overlook the silence from local leaders as mere protocol but with the weeks of civil unrest in America and President Trump's highhanded response to the protests, the silence coming from European political leaders was deafening, questionable and telling.

How could you not see the pain?

And already I was seeing people moving away from what mattered, from saving Black Lives to fighting over privilege, over monuments that honour confederate soldiers, men who fought to keep Blacks in chains (men who lost the civil war), to fighting to get economies to reopen (when the science advises against it) and fighting to remain simple-minded and elitist, instead of listening to evolve.

“What do you want? The cops to kneel to you Black guys?”

“They want to destroy our monuments, our businesses, our homes, to rewrite our history.”

People are generally poor listeners, but they would listen if leaders provided moral leadership. Destruction, chaos and anger reign, and the US President's reluctance to denounce the White supremacist groups along with his repeated denial of the serious threat of the COVID-19 virus while the statistics show that the number of people dying is mind boggling—until you see, until you learn that the virus disproportionately affects the homes of the poor, often African American and Latino, communities.

All this should make you sit up and take notice. We should be in a much better place, far from here, from the senseless violence, killings, racial hatred and economic prejudice. But the disease of indifference is worse than any virus, because indifference gets to the newcomers, the ill-informed incapable of understanding the legacy of slavery and the brazen impropriety which resembles hate. I know this because Europeans talk, and many sound like Trump's MAGA supporters.

But I also know the Dutch like van Gogh knows hands. I know they think they don't have a role to play. For one like me, who knows Dutch history and the Dutch way, who knows how the provinces of the low country became a state after the Calvinistic protest that would gain them independence from Spain, setting in place the economic structure and belief that would define the Dutch in this modern era.

Out from under the authority of the church, the Dutch turned the once forbidden practice of money lending into a business, pooling their funds and their knowledge of sailing, which happened to coincide with the technological advances of gunpowder and made them a force to reckon with. With the emergence of a banking system and a stock exchange, they entered the business of trafficking Africans across the Atlantic to work and die on plantations in the Caribbean and in the Americas.

This lucrative venture would usher in a period the Dutch remember as the Golden Age (1575-1675). During this period everybody was making money and the first model of the contemporary middle class society was born. Before then there were only two classes of men; the rich and the poor. Two hundred years later in 1885, the Dutch would meet with other European nations and sign an agreement to go back into Africa, this time not just to capture and enslave the people, but to take their land.

President Reagan claimed his moment in history by speaking in a clear, loud voice, "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall".

To see the Berlin Wall fall two years later in 1989, and the oppressed people running towards freedom, has always been a happy memory for me but today it feels like a slap in the face with a brick. For one like me who remembers traveling to Warsaw, Poland in 1999 and visiting the ghettos, the part of the city where the Jewish population was confined by the Nazis before being sent to the death camps, it is incredibly disheartening. It is also really sad, as a former volunteer soldier who served in four top NATO assignments before being sent to war and then going back to America to the Rodney King beating and the famously disappointing verdict that would set America's inner cities ablaze.

We should have been much further than we are. How are we going to ever recover from this?

My mind is scrambled, and the tears won't stop flowing. I had hoped to make it to the grocery store before the crowds. A young Muslim cashier greets me every time, with a big smile. Nothing crazy or romantic—she just found out I was an American and her eyes lit up, as is often the case.

In Europe being an American carries a certain sort of notoriety, a certain sort of celebrity. I get that, but today, I am wondering how she is, how we are going to come back from this, after this, without tears from all sides.

No one was listening to Mr Floyd. Now he's gone. No playback button on this one. You begin to think crazy, insane thoughts, maybe they can't see us, maybe it's true and they really think we don't feel pain or suffer. But we do, every time that we are excluded, pushed aside, ignored or mocked by the government or in the media or the news.

It gets into the heart, suddenly tears floods your face, because you know your cry falls on deaf ears, so you turn to the only help you know, the one that's always been there for you.

You turn to her and you pray just maybe the mention of her name strengthens and sustains you behind the weight of doom. Mr Floyd cried out for help in handcuffs for eight minutes and 46 seconds for just one someone to save him and no one came.

But now George Floyd is gone. You want to stop the utter horror and grief but you can't. You want to distance yourself from the graphic image being broadcast around the world but for some reason, you can't switch channels. You try to convince yourself that maybe you are too emotional. You didn't even know the man or his momma. So why all the tears?

Because you know how it feels to be powerless, you know how it feels to want your mother in a difficult or bad situation. You know the centuries' old abuse. You know the European adventures. You know the freedoms of the Dutch. You know the road it took for you to be here. You know Vermeer's blue skies, and the Dutch Spirit Jenever. But none of it brings you any relief.

Sunday night, and a new video on my social media page showing a Black male, 29-year-old Jacob Blake, in a dispute with a police officer that ends in another shooting of another Black man.

As I watched the video I prayed it was a fake. I wanted more than anyone to learn that the video was a hoax, sent out to further divide the ill-informed.

One could only have hoped that since the death of George Floyd and the weeks and months of protest that happened on a global scale, every police officer would know that when it came to a show of force, pulling out a gun was just not to be done.

Emotions were already too high.

However, soon after watching the video I would learn over mainstream media that the horrific shooting in Wisconsin was real. A police officer had shot a man seven times in front of three little children who witnessed those seven rounds going into Mr Blake's back.

While listening to the report, I couldn't help but think of Dr Martin Luther King Jr's book, "Why We Can't Wait". As he wrote from a Birmingham jail cell back in 1963 about the reason he protested despite the threat of violence directed at him and his followers, Dr King knew that it was time.

Just as Dr King believed, I know that today young Blacks all over the world are watching what's happening in America, they know America is not living up to its creed, and they just aren't going to take being treated as second-class citizens anymore.

An ordained minister and Reverend of the Baptist faith, Dr King knew that seeing their uncles, fathers, cousins, brothers dying at the hands of those who were employed to protect them would only incite young Blacks to extremes.

If significant visible gains were not seen and felt in the Black community, America could never trust the freedom it boasts of. Dr King believed America could make real the creed of its nation and all men would be treated equal under the constitution, if only we "commit to live together as brothers or perish as fools".

This latest shooting of another unarmed Black man joins a long list of others killed for being Black in America, and brings us yet again at to new milestone, not only for Blacks but for Whites as well. We must do all that is in our power to rid this world of racism.

We are on the precipice of change, our humanity is in the balance. We can't romanticize the systemic racism, or the ill-treatment of Blacks by law enforcement agencies or the call for reparations. We can no longer sit on the sidelines. We must commit to overcoming this evil.

We must have the uncomfortable conversations about the underrepresentation of Black leaders on the work floor, in the boardroom and across the board.

We must begin to look one another in the eye as human beings, regardless of race, class or gender.

Beyond imagining an all-inclusive world, we must all become ambassadors ushering in a new era, a new age and a new way of being.

The age of real partnership, where all life is precious and endowed with certain rights that can't and must not be denied, including the right of any man to rebel against any authority that doesn't support his interest.

Until America's Black population is free from the tyranny of a racist and biased system that allows officials to take Black lives so easily, I tell you none of us, in Europe, Asia, Africa, or the Caribbean will ever be free. For as the Rev Dr Martin Luther King so rightly wrote some fifty years ago, "Injustice anywhere in the world directly effects justice everywhere".

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