

“Finding Hope in an Age of Despair”

Modified from a reflection given by

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In the face of a global pandemic, mass unemployment, and the public execution of yet another black citizen in public view, a member of my center—The Center for Social Solutions at the University of Michigan—asked how do I hold onto hope? The question sent me searching for an answer. The American jeremiad, the social sermons we recite about the profundity of the American civic project, first came to mind. For nearly forty years I have written that America was, contrary to what has been suggested, not originally a shining city on a hill. Through trial and tribulation, and on the backs and brows of millions of African-descended people and scores of others, a more perfect union has been proposed, and bit by bit, constructed.

Then my mind quickly raced to the political realm. For more than half a century politicians have invited us to remain hopeful. Jesse Jackson intoned, “Keep hope alive.” Bill Clinton told us he hailed from a place called Hope—Hope, Arkansas. Barack Obama is quoted as saying,

Hope is not blind optimism. It’s not ignoring the enormity of the task ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. It’s not sitting on the sidelines or shirking from a fight. Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and to work for it, and to fight for it. Hope is the belief that destiny will not be written for us, but by us, by the men and

women who are not content to settle for the world as it, who have the courage to remake the world as it should be.

As I reflected on past moments and comments, I felt myself sinking into a deep reservoir of emptiness, into the depths of this age of despair. I, born just in time for the Supreme Court to instruct the nation to desegregate its schools with all deliberate speed, knew all too well that change came slowly and unevenly. I came of age in an era and among a generation told to stay the course, fight for change, make the nation better, confront racism and bigotry, educate, and propagate an inclusive vision of America. We did. More of us than our parent's generation could imagine went off to college, joined some version of the middle class, took seats on boards and in government, challenged corporate excess, and told ourselves we were making a difference. And from Emmett Till to George Floyd the body count mounted.

When counting and memorializing the dead, it would be easy to single out highly public moments of police brutality. But that can't be our only task. While their murders must never be forgotten, and their names repeatedly said, their deaths are part of a larger societal problem. Despite the aforementioned advances, African Americans continue to die at higher rates and younger ages than their white counterparts, which epidemiologists log as health disparities. Data, in fact, show a disproportionate number of the COVID casualties are black and brown. Many have attributed this pattern to co-morbidities (high blood pressure, diabetes, heart ailments, etc.) but as one scholar recently observed, all have their origins in the system of chattel slavery that dominated American life for 250 years or 60 percent of this nation's history, traumas slavery visited on bodies and psyches. That system, and its legacies, will have borne additional witness once we take full stock of the consequences of post-COVID un- and underemployment.

In this brief recounting racism can't be ignored. As Ibram Kendi has so powerfully illustrated in *Stamped From the Beginning*, the principles of racist thoughts are deeply ingrained in all we learn; they exist in the institutions we create and reform but don't abandon and completely reconstruct.

Yet America is begging for a thorough reconstruction. While it may be the case that some of those who took to the streets of America these last few days are anarchists, saboteurs, paid provocateurs, and the like, millions more are awake to something more. It has become fashionable to lay everything at the feet of white privilege. In my search for hope I fear the cloak of white privilege hides the underlying reality of white power. George Floyd brutally died in police custody, while begging for his life and calling for his mother. Reports have surfaced that the officer who held him in place with his knee was no stranger. The two had worked together at the El Nuevo Rodeo club as security personnel. Chauvin, according to the club owner, knew Floyd. Why then mete out terminal force on someone you knew, unless, in this instance you could not see him—as a colleague, a human being, someone's son, brother, uncle or friend? The answer, in a word: power. The criminal justice system refers to it as discretionary power. Bear in mind, "discretionary" modifies "power." For generations of black Americans taught to be wary of the police, we knew that "discretionary" often meant "arbitrary." A gesture, look, body lean, verbal tone, make of car, companion, all had the potential of invoking a close encounter of the wrong kind.

So where do I find hope? Half a century ago, MLK wrote,

Certain conditions continue to exist in our society, which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots.

But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard.

King wrote those words in an analog world, when most of us got our news from one of three sanctioned networks or PBS; where daily newspapers placed national news in local context; where black-owned media informed millions about the shared experience of being black in America. Today, social media competes with the legacy networks as well as the new entrants. From Berlin to Baltimore millions get to assess the evidence and see the exercise of power in real time, unmediated.

So people become angry. They say enough is enough. They take to the streets. They demand redress. They want the justice system to hold the officers involved responsible, not just Chauvin, but the others who stood by, who participated, who failed to show leadership and allowed someone in their custody to die, needlessly. They remember Philando Castile, and they are aware of what became of Officer Mohamed Noor. They know the indiscriminant firing of rubber bullets, may not killed but can injure, as the story of a reporter who lost an eye covering the events, illustrate. They know that even bystanders become collateral when leaders mobilize military personnel for urban peace keeping, heeding none of the lessons from the 1960s and the findings of the Kerner Commission Report.

Yet in the multiracial and multi-generational crowds that have assembled to protest, I find hope. In the case for reparations, I find hope. In the determination to hold leaders accountable, I find hope. In the Flint, Michigan sheriff who joined protesters and instructed his officers to lower their batons, I find hope. In a people who can distinguish between the destruction of property and the death of a person, I find hope. And in the recognition that we are the heirs of those who survived enslavement and the terror of Jim Crow, have overcome many chapters of white rage that followed black progress, and understand the contest for shaping a more inclusive and equitable union is never over, we simply pass forward the baton, I find hope. And

in a college or university conscious of the fact it must be a part of the solution to racism and bigotry or it is a part of the problem, I find hope.

Yet we must not forget this is a season of despair. We—individually and collectively—are hurting. The hurts are real. They are cumulative. In an age so addicted to speed and quickness, we need to sit with the hurt. Feel it. Experience it. Own it.

And as we speak and move forward, I also pray we don't abandon hope.