

## BLACK LIVES MATTER: AN APPROACH TO BELOVED COMMUNITY

Richard S. Gilbert – Interfaith Impact of NYS – March 19, 2017

Langston Hughes' iconic words are all-too-relevant as we consider "Black Lives Matter: An Approach to Beloved Community."

"What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode"?<sup>1</sup>

Gunnar Myrdal's "American dilemma" is still with us. The contradiction between the American creed of freedom and its historic racism is as stark now as in 1944.<sup>2</sup> While progress has been made in legal freedoms, and for some, economic prosperity, racism is rife despite talk of a post-racial society in the Obama presidency. I was at the 1963 March on Washington; I was in Selma in 1965; now I am in Rochester, New York, in 2017 and racism thrives. After civil rights legislation, I naively thought the civil rights movement was simply a chapter in our history rather than a persistent plot.

The Black Lives Matter movement is one response to this dilemma. It began with the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and continued with the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, and Sandra Bland, among others. It emerged on working class streets where police confronted people of color and continued on the campus of Georgetown University, where Mulledy and McSherry halls were renamed after it was discovered they were named for school presidents who orchestrated the sale of slaves to help pay off a campus debt.<sup>3</sup> It is with us in the racist rants of Congressman Steve King who longs for a return to a homogenous white America.

The Black Lives Matter movement is given scholarly underpinning in Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.<sup>4</sup> She decries colorblindness as a kind of moral myopia which does not see the racism embedded in our culture, an inescapable sea in which we swim. She details the "school to prison pipeline" which makes inner city young black men redundant and documents the devastating impact of the War on Drugs on black youth. The U. S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, disproportionately black and Hispanic.

The Black Lives Matter movement is given experiential credence in Te-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*,<sup>5</sup> an open letter from a black man to his son. He writes: "I am not a cynic. I love you, and I love the world, and I love it more with every new inch I discover.

But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you.<sup>6</sup> ... All my life I'd heard people tell their black boys and black girls to 'be twice as good,' which is to say 'accept half as much.'<sup>7</sup> ... You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always in your face and hounds are always at your heels. ...<sup>8</sup> Some of us will make it out. But the game is played with loaded dice."<sup>9</sup>

My job is to provide a white male perspective on Black Lives Matter and suggest what might be done. BLM is a continuation of the civil rights movement, a "movement, not a moment." But what about the argument that "all lives matter" or "blue lives matter"?

One response is: “When the fire department comes to your neighborhood, do you send the firefighters to all the houses or to the house that is on fire? For over 500 years, the house of the people of African descent has been on fire.”<sup>10</sup>

Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza writes: “Black Lives Matter doesn’t mean your life isn’t important – it means that Black Lives, which are seen without value within White supremacy, are important to your liberation.”<sup>11</sup>

I would say “Black lives matter, too.” BLM is not like traditional civil rights groups. There is no single leader; it is decentralized in 31 chapters. One item on expression is “Campaign Zero,” calling for ending the Broken Windows policing and policing for profit which we saw in Ferguson, Missouri; limiting and demilitarizing use of force by police; providing body-cams; training police in non-violent conflict resolution; community representation in police forces and independent investigations and prosecutions in cases of charges against police. In Rochester, the new study by Barbara Lacker-Ware and Theodore Forsyth, “The Case for an Independent Police Accountability System” deserves careful attention and support.

What to do?

Be informed: Despite words to the contrary from on high, and the occasional blip in homicide rates like Chicago, the Brennan Center for Justice reports that the overall crime rate is half of what it was in 1990 and almost a quarter of what it was at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And, though we know being a policeman is hazardous, the “number of police officers killed by suspects declined in 2015.” Despite the tragedy at Dallas and other police deaths, being a police officer has gotten safer over the past decade.”<sup>12</sup>

Racism is not simple prejudice. It is prejudice plus power and resides in the structure of society’s practice and policy. In 1965 when I studied housing discrimination in Chicago as a graduate student, I found it was the result of deliberate public policy.

We might look at racism through the ‘birdcage’ metaphor: “If one thinks about racism by examining only one wire of the cage, or one form of disadvantage, it is difficult to understand how and why the bird is trapped. Only a large number of wires arranged in a specific way, and connected to one another, serve to enclose the bird and to ensure it cannot escape.”<sup>13</sup>

Those of us who are white must come to terms with the meaning of white privilege, the default world in which we live. We do not expect to have trouble with the police just for walking or driving; nor would Grand Rapids or Grosse Point, Michigan, be subjected to the environmental racism of Flint.

Racism is revealed in public policy - the disproportionate impact on people of color of the misguided attempt to repeal Obamacare; and in Donald Trump’s draconian budget proposal. Martin Luther King said the “inseparable twin of racial injustice is economic injustice.”<sup>14</sup> Classism and racism are the evil twins of our time.

There is much to do to resist increasing racism and escalating inequality. But we do this piece by piece, an issue at a time. Specifically we can support legislation now before the New York State Legislature: Our criminal (in)justice system reinforces our racist tendencies as study after study shows a discriminatory pattern in police stops, conviction rates and prison sentences.

We must Raise the Age of criminal responsibility: Only New York and North Carolina treat 16- and 17-year-olds as adults when accused of a crime. This results in sentences that are often brutal and inhumane. In Albany a child with no prior record was sentenced to nine years in prison for stealing a pair of sneakers.

Most (86%) of these children are accused or convicted of non-violent offenses. Raising the age of criminal responsibility will reduce crime, recidivism and costs to the state.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, reforming juvenile justice policy in New York is a profoundly moral issue. We are mistreating children whose brains and personalities are still being formed. Our religious affirmation of individual worth and dignity requires us to recognize that adolescents' behavior is often impulsive and they lack the ability to focus on the consequences of their behavior. At this stage in their lives, they can be rehabilitated. We must raise the age - now.

The other issue that especially affects impinges the minority community is HALT – the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement Act. Current policy involves keeping people in a cell for 22 to 24 hours a day without meaningful human contact, programming or therapy. Prisoners detained in these conditions deteriorate psychologically, physically, and socially. There is a disproportionate number of non-whites confined to solitary confinement.

New York rates are well above the national average. The system is not only inhumane but also counter-productive, often damaging a prisoner's ability to form human relationships, making successful reentry after release unlikely and recidivism more likely. As people of faith, we recognize a need to balance prison safety and compassion. We urge the Legislature to pass the HALT Act.

One thing we must not do is to become discouraged. Folk singer Pete Seeger left us a metaphor for what Jews call “tikkun ha olam” – repairing the world: Seeger likened justice work to a seesaw with one end anchored to the ground by a basket of rocks, while activists were at the other end using teaspoons to slowly fill a basket with sand. Some day the balance will tip and the rocks will be sent flying into the air. People will ask: “How did that happen so quickly?” It was because of “us and our damned little teaspoons.”<sup>16</sup>

The Black Lives Matter movement calls us to lift a prophetic voice and speak truth to power to what the bible calls the “principalities and powers.” Its call goes beyond police-community relations to what we are as a people. It has to do with our dream as a Beloved Community. As Martin Luther King reminded us in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” “the time is always ripe to do right.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, “Harlem.”

<sup>2</sup> Gunnar Myrdal. *The American Dilemma*. .... 1944.

<sup>3</sup> *The Washington Post*, November 17, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 90-91.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Knotts, UN UUA director. Website of the Unitarian Universalist Association, November 10, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Alicia Garza. “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement” *the Feminist Wire*, October 2, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Berman, *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> *The New Jim Crow*, p. 184.

<sup>14</sup> *Strength to Love*, pp. 167-8

<sup>15</sup> For detailed information, see the “[Final Report of the Governor’s Commission on Youth, Public Safety and Justice](#)” and its recommendations for juvenile justice reform.

<sup>16</sup> (Interview in Studs Terkel’s *Hope Dies Last* as reported in *Trinity Seminary Review*, Fall, 2005, via *The Christian Century*, November 15, 2005, p. 7)