

Reflection & Prayertime: Holding Space for Multiple Truths

Last week was a week of intense emotion in the Louisville community and around the nation. As I sat by my mother in her hospital bed, the results of the Grand Jury's consideration of the case involving Breonna Taylor's death were shared and as the names of each police officer were listed with no charges filed and then only wanton endangerment for one shooting into other apartments, my mother commented "well good" while I wept in a snotty mess in my n95 and other hospital mask. When they announced no murder charges, I had to say aloud "Well, there should have been." We didn't discuss further; my mother was ill. I've no doubt that my mother's brother having been a Kentucky state trooper played into her reactions. I grieve for what I perceive as a continuing injustice that continues to injure and I have more questions about the process and how it played out, especially with some conflicting information that has surfaced since. Suffice it to say, there were mixed reactions in our city and the greater community of our nation.

It seems that in the times of great polarization of views and values that we find ourselves in now, that there is a propensity to see the world in black and white, right and wrong. I do believe in clearly looking at right and wrong and there is a time and place for that diametrically opposed duality, but our world and the truths especially now are more complex than a simplistic view allows. At the time the Holocaust was occurring, one could argue that hiding Jews (and thereby breaking the law) was the moral and right thing to do, even as it was a criminal action. I admire the people who took the tremendous risks of securing the safety and well-being of those being persecuted just as I admire Harriet Tubman for her tenacious law-breaking to free so many from slavery.

I've shared in recent days stories of my pretty tame experiences with the police as a white woman, likely never having been considered a danger or threat. I've shared on social media about being pulled over for speeding while distracted and distraught over my father's hastening death from pancreatic cancer and of bursting into tears about it and showing the officer the photos of my dad that I was taking back home so my husband could make a DVD about his life to show at his funeral. I wasn't trying to weasel my way out of a ticket – it wasn't a ploy or strategy – I had just come completely undone upon hearing news about his tumor. The officer encouraged me to just relax, take a breath, breathe, and that my dad would want me to slow down and be safe. That officer recognized my humanity, my grief, and restored me as he sent me on my way and I'm forever grateful. I wish the officer who killed George Floyd had done so with him as well, but his humanity was not seen or acknowledged that day except by bystanders begging the office to see him and respond humanely.

I've shared that I was reading "Just Mercy" by Bryan Stevenson about his work with black men and capital punishment and death row and the racism within our mass incarceration system. I had just read one evening the account of Bryan Stevenson pulling up outside his home and just sitting in his car listening to the end of Sly and the Family Stone and an officer threatening and pulling a gun on him when my husband texted he'd been driving in the rain, slid and gently hit a police officer's car – he said there no damage but they were pulled over waiting for a seargeant to come and look at the car. I noted I didn't worry one bit about his safety – just texted "be safe" and mused about the brand new tires sliding on a wet street and asking my husband to bring upstairs some oreo cookies for me when he came home.

I was shocked last week when on the day of the announcement some close friends of mine had gone downtown to peacefully protest and as they were walking back to their car in time to comply with the 9pm curfew were, with no provocation or threatening behavior – simply were walking to their car – hit with pepper pellets by the police that swarmed around them. I do not understand this. Shortly

after that, 6 blocks from my house, 2 police officers were shot and thankfully with no life-threatening injuries. I can't help but wonder if the escalation brought about that result. I hate it that there is so much stress for everyone, so much fight or flight reaction in these tense situations. I'm hopeful that we come out of this in a more just place with change that sticks.

Sometimes we don't want to grapple with the complexity and we just long for a simple yes or no, black or white, good guy or bad guy paradigm because frankly it's so exhausting to try to sort it out. But if we truly believe in justice we have to engage in the struggle when it's lacking. For one thing, our black and brown colleagues and others have no choice but to be involved; no opting out for them. So even in just recognizing their struggle and being in solidarity with them, we have to engage with the complexity and the struggle as well. And while we all acknowledge bad apples – bad apples in law enforcement and bad apple rioters, this is bigger and more complex than that so I encourage you to just strike that phrase from your vocabulary for a minute because that's too easy of an answer and doesn't recognize structural racism baked in to systems and we have to engage with that. And let me be very clear that one truth we should never hold is that one person's skin color makes them more or less than that of another.

It seems to me that whatever the answer is, it starts with a recognition of shared, common humanity and that, as Bryan Stevenson says, acknowledging we are more than the worst thing we've ever done. It starts with embracing the complexities and not being dismissive of them, of recognizing that multiple truths, some seemingly contradictory, can exist at the same time. I'm in conversation now with a white woman who lived with me with her children from 1989 to 1996 and whose son James grew up to go into the military and is now in law enforcement. She is apoplectic with worry for him and rightfully so in these days. James was like a second son to me and to honor him and my uncle Joe, a Ky State trooper his whole life and one of the most chill men I've ever met, I want to share a writing by Tim Hendrix, regarding the death of his brother Ryan Hendrix.

“Due to the current restrictions of international travel in the world, I am not able to make it home in time for my brother's funeral. I join many grieving people who have lost loved ones this year and have not been able to bury them. I am having to make peace with the matter, now knowing closely the suffering of many friends and strangers alike who have had to say their goodbyes from a distance or through a screen or only in their hearts.

I wish to share here some words of eulogy to my brother's life and the legacy he leaves behind. From the time he was young, Ryan had a very lively presence. Ask any of my siblings: He was always singing, dancing, scrapping, climbing, running, and just plain outdoing all of us on every level. At everything. It was kind of hard for the rest of us to make sense of when we were kids. There seemed to be no end to his energy and no limit to his talent. I can tell you that he was doing exactly what he wanted to do with his life — throughout his years, he tried and mastered just about anything he set himself to. If something was boring to him, he left it behind. We know that he loved his work as a police officer because he never tired of finding ways to do it better.

Ryan did not want to be a police officer who just drove around and wrote citations. That probably would have bored him. He wanted to catch bad guys. He enjoyed protecting his community. We have been told that he would come in to his morning shifts — still dancing, still singing, still full of energy, always smiling — and spend extra time studying the wanted posters. Then he'd spend his days going out to look for those guys. We're told one day he arrested sixteen wanted suspects.

What has been remarkable to us has been the outreach to our family of those people he arrested. People have contacted my family to say that Ryan's empathy towards them in the squad car after being apprehended changed their lives. We have heard that what made him stand out to people who

should have been his enemies was the dignity that he showed them as they were under his care. They felt understood by someone who listened to them, and because they felt understood, they heard his words to them. He gave people advice, he told them how to get their lives in order, he challenged them that the next time he saw them, they were to be doing better.

I have no doubt that, had the situation ended differently, Ryan would have treated even the man who killed him with the same respect, dignity, and care. He would have challenged him to change his life, to be a better man.

Cops and robbers, we learn even playing as kids, are mortal enemies. Ryan learned how to cross that divide, to help people who had lost their way to find it again. He saw that we are all motivated by the same basic stuff. We all want to be the good guy in our narrative, including the people breaking the law. Even our fears are often at their core motivated by our desire to protect the people we love.

Ryan was able to help people cut through the deeds they had done and reexamine their lives at that core.

When you think of Ryan, please remember a man of great empathy, a man who loved his enemies and valued his neighbors' lives above his own, a man who learned that the best way to help people live better was first to listen to them, to treat them well — although, in some cases, maybe to tackle them first, but then to be the first one to pick them up off the ground and dust them off.

Please follow Ryan's example. Please find ways to make your society better and do your work with empathy. Please rethink the way you address the people who are your enemies. Please learn to listen to people whose lives took a different direction from yours. You will find that you have so much in common, that you are motivated by the same things at your core. And when you find that common ground, you will be able to speak into each other's lives and show each other how to live better. You will be able, as Ryan was, to help lift people out of the lowest points of their lives.

Ryan was working to change his community, not just by protecting his society at large but by compassionately helping individuals to find a better path; he lived to protect people, he lived to serve others, and he was able to do some of his most transformational work by listening.

His work was cut short, and I'm inviting you to continue it. Cross the boundaries that divide us and help each other heal, in your communities and in our nation. Do not fall to destructive fighting.

Come together, protect each other. Help each other protect the people that you love.

My brother sacrificed everything to give his children and yours a better world. Let us all honor his sacrifice by carrying on his great work."

May we do so. Amen.