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An Experiential Response to Ferguson

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I t’s Thursday, December 4, 2014 – the morning, my favorite part of the day. I like getting a jump on the day, starting fresh and really considering what the day may have in store for me. Though, today is slightly different. In the span of three days, we, the United States, have learned the result of two grand jury trials – both rendering the same decision not to indict White police officers in the killing of a Black teenager and a Black man. Today is also different because I am facilitating a dialogue for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Maryland, where I work, about Ferguson. The program seeks to offer People of Color, Multiracial, and White people committed to eradicating racism a dialogue space to explore, reflect on, and interrogate race, racism, justice, and resistance in the aftermath of the Ferguson decision.

It is still the morning, and I am preparing for the rest of the day while in the library. Each morning I start my day at the library; it is my constant. Usually, I arrive by 8:00am. I check emails, read for class, write, and plan out my day on campus. However, this morning is a little different. My inbox, Twitter feed, and Facebook are filled with posts, information, and stories. I can tell my people are enraged, confused, and filled with emotions.

Up until this point, I haven’t participated in Facebook postings concerning Ferguson. Sincerely, while I have appreciated so much of what my friends, colleagues, and family have shared, I haven’t felt moved to post – I figured those who know me, know where I stand. Friends of mine have shared prophetic, smart, painful, and nuanced things. Some have strived for balanced commentary to strike a middle-ground, and others have expressed outrage and grave disappointment in our society. Honestly, I am lost.

Yesterday, I expressed to a White friend of mine that I was crazy. I think I am less than. Spew out all of your hatred. Let’s get it all on the table. It’s only when we can uncover what is deeply seated in your heart and mind, that we can address change.

Others before me have said this, and it will continue to be said. Yet, there is something so jarring when you engage this idea – that I am Nigger too – for yourself. You consider how far White people – American society – have come, and see that there is no distance between slavery, Jim Crow, and today. Shaken up, you admit to yourself that you must be just as concerned about how you walk on the street today, as your ancestors were 50, 100, and 200 years ago. That thought, and all the other related thoughts that rush your brain are enough to make you crazy.

The Eric Gardner decision pushed me over the edge. Admittedly, I didn’t know a lot about it. Actually, I am not sure I knew of the incident back in July. In a racist society ignorance is not bliss, it’s necessary – one can’t consume it all. However, on the heels of Ferguson, another decision, with what some might say is more clear and convincing evidence, demonstrates our inability to even consider holding White law enforcement accountable. And further, it shows us just how racist (and not post-racial) America is.

Yet, what is most problematic to me is that there isn’t the admission to the racism that lives and breathes in the wake of these decisions. The beliefs surrounding who and what Black and Brown bodies are is so deeply entrenched that some of the mass White psyche is beyond considering race. I’m not sure I need the admission, but I know I crave the honest conversation.

I am not. I am not afraid to believe that as a good and well-intentioned person, you could harbor such negative and harmful and hateful thoughts towards another.
Fast forward, it’s about an hour before the dialogue, and I am enraged. I’ve hit my tipping point, and experienced a break through. I am Michael Brown and Eric Gardner. I’ve known this, I knew this, but something came alive differently for me as I watched videos, read commentary, and really considered the gravity of both killings. Filled with emotion, I must get these ideas out. I must read what I have written. “Beth, do you have a minute?” I ask my boss. She and I are both facilitating the dialogue later. “I need to process with you. I need to share.” We walk into her office, I pull out my laptop, and begin: “Up until this point, I haven’t participated in Facebook postings concerning Ferguson…”. My voice shakes, emotions move from the pit of my stomach to my chest. It is different to say these words. It is different to speak them. I can feel my eyes begin to well up, though I don’t cry. My eyes never connect with Beth as I stare at my laptop to read these words. The hardest part I read is about internalized racism and distancing myself from my Black and Brown brethren. I finish. Beth expresses gratitude. We process. I feel better, though my thoughts linger.

“Talking about race makes you feel what, please fill in the blank.” Mary opens with a provocative prompt. Desiring to illicit and make emotions present, Mary asks everyone to respond. Words like uneasy, vulnerable, anxious, and confused are shared. Tension increases in the room, as folks are uncertain about what will happen next. Carefully, Mary thanks each person for sharing and proceeds to divide the group for our next segment, affinity groups. The White people exit, and People of Color stay in the room.

I stay. I begin: “In times like these, we need to be able to come together to express ourselves and put words to our emotions with people who look like us, and may feel similarly to how we are feeling.” Now the space is officially open for all of the People of Color gathered; they begin to share. Not long into comments, tears stream down so many faces. Mothers discuss their fears in having to raise Black and Brown boys. Almost mothers listen intently, echoing the fear and emphasizing the insurmountable apprehension of what is to come. Men of Color talk about the inescapability of sizing the insurmountable apprehension of what is to come. The volume in the room rises. Five minutes past, I quiet the room by chiming some bells. Nerves still bouncing, I stare out onto faces with varying looks. Some bewildered, confused, neutral, and already drained. I solicit a few responses: “I would be enraged.” “I’m not a parent so it’s hard to imagine, I guess frustrated.” “I would feel like I could kill Darren Wilson.” Emotions in the space are high. Moving through sadness and anxieties, I express gratitude to those who shared, and ask my colleague to facilitate the next portion of our dialogue.

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