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. 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 have expressed outrage and grave disappointment in our society. Honestly, I am lost. 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 tell my people are enraged, confused, and filled with emotions. 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 tell my people are enraged, confused, and filled with emotions.

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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.
human being.

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 began 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.

What am I called to do, really? As I watch protests, see people walk out of work, others boycott companies, I ask Sean if I can share my writing with him. “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…” Still, he struggles to respond. Swirling in my head were phrases like: “Of course I expected this outcome from you feeling now?”

Looking around the room, I welcome and thank everyone for coming. We are multi-racial. I sit on the floor. Looking around the room, I welcome and thank everyone for coming. We are multiracial. I look out onto every hue of skin tones as I share about the intentions I have sat for our time together. I call for people to dig deep for compassion, and care, while being honest and authentic. My voice is soft. “How might you feel if you were Michael Brown’s parents?” I posed this question to the group and asked that people pair up with the person next to them to discuss. The volume in the room rises. Five minutes past, I quiet the room by chiming some bells. Nervous 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 the anxieties, I express gratitude to those who shared, and ask my colleague to facilitate the next portion of our dialogue.

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 every person 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 to correct me of Color talk about the inescapable looks of the system despite playing by the rules. “Damned if I do, damned if I don’t,” one Black man shared. A police officer shares that each day he promises his two-year old twins that he will come home that night. The dialogue is complex, nuanced, and hard. During several moments my eyes began to well up, though I don’t cry. This lasts for more than two hours.

Final fast forward, it’s Friday, December 5, 2014 – the morning, my favorite part of the day. I wake up hungry. Almost sprinting to the kitchen, I make my coffee, toast waffles, and broil some sausage. My roommate Sean is up, seated in the dining room. I haven’t seen him in a few days. I suppose I’ve hidden away a bit in the chaos of Ferguson and Eric Gardner. I tell him that yesterday was my angry-Black-man-day. I shared that I felt more yesterday than I had in the previous days concerning all that was happening in the United States. I ask Sean if I can share my writing with him. I begin: “Up until this point, I haven’t participated in Facebook postings concerning Ferguson…” Still, he sits, somewhat unaffected. I finish. He asks: “How are you feeling now?”

What a profound question, I thought to myself. I struggled to respond. Swirling in my head were phrases like: “Of course I expected this outcome from the jury.” And, “history is bound to repeat itself!” Yet, I suppose I thought or hoped the outcome would be different. And now, as Sean asked me that question, I feel with a little less hope. As a Black man living in a racist society, I expect the weight of judgment to benefit White people and disadvantage Black people.

However, for me to remain hopeful about the fight against injustice, I know I require a morel of progress – just a moment that bares the light of possibility. Simply, a small declaration that justice is achievable, even with all the injustice surrounding us. I suppose I thought that the Eric Gardner decision on the heels of Ferguson would offer me that light. I thought: “we can get it right this time.” Even if the outcome of the trial, had the grand jury decided to indict the police officers, we would have found the police officer not guilty, we would have at least said that Eric Garner’s life was worth figuring it out. But, no. Not even. So, now I feel a little less hopeful, and a lot more hopeless.