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An Experiential Response to Ferguson and Eric Gardner

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It’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 needed to feel insulated. And, like some of my educated Black and Brown brothers out there, believed that accruing the goods of the White middle class would afford me some protections from the injustices perpetuated against my “uneducated and poor” Black and Brown brethren. I know, knew, discover, rediscover, learn, admit, and am reminded this is NOT true. No Black, Brown, or Of Color body is protected, insulated, shielded, or safe in our racist society.

Here, I have to come out and say, for me, this is internalized racism. Sadly, I am motivated to achieve, gain, garner, and accrue to distance myself from my racialized Black, Brown, and Of Color family. I achieve upward mobility so that I may be safe. That is fucked up. That there is pressure to do so, and I am so moved to behave in a way to be seen differently by White people to – be seen as acceptable, a non-threat, approachable, nice – diplomatic, if you will. That is fucked up. The truth is, no matter what degrees I earn, the salary I garner, how I speak, where I live, or how well I behave, I will always be a Nigger to (some) White people and (some of) American society.

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.

Just tell me that you are scared of me. Say that you 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.
The hardest part I read is about internalized racism and distancing myself from my Black and Brown brethren. I look out onto every hue of skin tones as I share my 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. 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 my 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.”

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 the system despite playing by the rules. “Dammed 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?”

Looking around the room, I welcome and thank everyone for coming. We are multi-racial. 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.

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 jurors.” 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 morose 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