This White Woman’s Reality Check

Every single day for seven months out of each year my fourteen year old son leaves our home wearing a hooded sweatshirt. He loves Skittles and tea. Never once have I worried he would be shot and killed for walking down the street and talking to a friend on a cell phone. Not one single time. Most days, I am ashamed to admit, I don’t even remember what a privilege that is.

White privilege? Um…yeah. My kid is white and he wears a hoodie, and when he and his friends cross the street between the closest snack vendor and our neighborhood, nobody stops them to ask what they are doing. They are not assumed to be up to no good, nor does anyone think they don’t belong here. They are white kids in rural Tennessee. They belong here—whatever the hell that means—and that turns my stomach inside out.

Occasionally, I do worry that he or his sister will be treated badly because I’m a lesbian, but even in our very conservative and sometimes close-minded town, I most often feel that they will be safe. Of course, you can’t tell by looking at my children that their mother is different from the other mothers. The same cannot be said of Trayvon Martin and his mother.

Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old in a suburb of Orlando, Florida, was shot and killed by a man who, even after being told by the 911 operator to back off, pursued him and shot him in the chest. His killer, self-appointed neighborhood watch captain George Zimmerman, claims he was protecting his property and that ultimately, this was an act of self-defense.

This won’t happen to my son because he is white.

No, my son is not bulletproof. Do not misunderstand me. Bullets care not for the color of my son’s sun-kissed skin, or his feathery blond hair. If someone shoots him in the chest — much less from a distance short enough that they could have instead reached out to shake hands — he will die... just like Trayvon Martin died.

But people who hold guns care deeply about the color of my son’s skin — as do teachers and neighbors, executives and stay-at-home moms, and every other person from sea to shining sea. . . even if they don’t want to.

The fear-driven killing of Trayvon Martin isn’t the first of this kind, not even close. But every tragedy like this, every injustice, seems like trying to start a wave at a football game. Some attempts cultivate the attention of 20 or 75 or 300 or 1,000. Some go all the way, around and around until the people are one.

Never has there been an experience like this that went completely unnoticed. But, never has there been one in which everyone allowed themselves to be consumed by the wave of possibility. There’ve been maybe 10,000 people enraged or engaged, or even a million or more, but not everyone.
We’re being given that invitation again now. Nothing we can do now will justify the taking of Trayvon Martin’s life. Period. But, please, please, please let this be the last false start of that wave that can take the fearful energy that is consuming our country, and return it to love.

Let us be consumed this time. Let us rise up and demand justice. Let us throw up our arms, long and strong and proud, so that others will feel encouraged to join us. Let us raise our voices stronger than we’ve ever raised them before. Let us have the courage to explore how this tragedy could happen in America in the year 2012.

Let us at least have the courage to admit that this did happen, that it happened on our watch; and let us not pretend that we didn’t have plenty of evidence that it could. No more silence, for that is the darkness that breeds fear and we can no longer afford to sacrifice even a single person to hate. Let us be honest with ourselves today. Let us be broken open by the horror of this story, for it is only in that openness that a seed of hope can be planted.

Let us consider the equity of our mindset: If you would feel outraged if that bullet had gone into my precious son’s white chest, then — for the love of whatever you find holy — be outraged right now.

“Our son is your son.” – Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin’s Mother

I, like most of you, am not an attorney or an investigator, and I don’t even live in Florida. I am a white woman whose heart has been shattered by this vicious reality check. But, what now? How can we let this life-changing experience change us? We can see the need for healing, for change, for this wave of love, but we are paralyzed.

This simply is not enough. Stopping here, with the horror and heartache, and slowly returning to who/what we were before Trayvon Martin died simply isn’t enough. I am reminded of a conversation I had many moons ago with my friend Caroline Blackwell who is now the Executive Director of the Metro Human Relations Commission in Nashville, Tennessee. She has been a most inspiring and gentle guide as I’ve begun to explore matters of diversity and inclusion.

Nearing the end of this conversation, I was completely overwhelmed by the magnitude of the obstacles, all that stands between our reality today and true equality for all. I stumbled and bumbled, and finally, I was able to choke out, “There’s so much that’s broken. Where do we... How can it... What can I do?” What follows is the essence of what I learned from her that day.

We start by talking about it, people like you and me, and others who care about these issues, so that others can begin to care, too. We talk about what we see and what we think, and feel. We create safe spaces, like the circles we use here in our community, in which people can come together to talk about our needs and our fears, our hopes and realities. We explore our thoughts and our beliefs, with ourselves and with others. By sharing ourselves in this way, we begin to learn to value our differences and similarities. . . We start by talking about it.
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