

THE STRENGTH OF BLACK TEARS

BY ALEXIS BECKFORD

It took me quite some time to formulate my thoughts coherently and pen this open letter. The recent state of civil unrest is a new experience for many individuals, especially those who do not have black and brown skin. For me, it is a perpetual battle—consistently re-opening wounds that never have the opportunity to heal.

The first time someone called me the N-word, I was eight years old. At the time, my best friend was a little boy named Jack, with the bluest eyes and a spattering of freckles on his cheeks and nose. We were exiting the school library, sharing a fruit roll-up and chattering excitedly about our newest book rentals. Another girl named Maggie casually interrupted our conversation and asked Jack why he hung out with me. Except she used the N-word to describe me. I remember feeling the gravity of that word, as it penetrated my mind that day. I was too young to understand the explicit hatred her statement carried, and yet the word immobilized me.

Immobilization is a feeling that I've played tug-of-war with for the past few weeks. On May 25, 2020, the world witnessed the modern-day lynching of George Floyd. As Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd's neck, and unapologetically observed the life drain from Mr. Floyd's body, I struggled to watch. Because it wasn't just George Floyd's face swimming through my eyes, but the face of my father, my uncle, and my cousins. I watched a grown man cry out for his mother in agony and fear, while onlookers did nothing.

However, the unity of black people throughout the past few weeks has taught me how resilient my race is under adversity. One of the greatest tools we have, as black people, is our voices. And yet, it is the tool that many of us feel most apprehensive to use. We constantly censor our words, afraid of the outcry that will follow once we share our pain. Our fears. Our truth. Nevertheless, the recent protest has negated apprehension. As thousands of black and brown individuals marched up and down various streets, they openly demanded to be heard. It has given me renewed joy and willful hope that systemic racism will no longer be suppressed.

I have come to the conclusion that true fights cannot be won through compromise. So, here's my unapologetic statement: BLACK LIVES MATTER. It baffles me that the initials BLM create such a negative effect amongst many white individuals. The KKK screams hate, and yet receives minimal backlash, if any. So, to my white allies, I bluntly say, "start putting your words to action." The fight for black and brown lives goes beyond a BLM Instagram post or the purchase of a book about systemic racism. As you stand with us to protest in the streets, I urge you to stand with us in the courtrooms, on the police force, and in the classrooms. As I recollect my friendship with Jack, it reinforces the fact that racism is learned. Help us teach the world to stop killing us. If they aren't afraid of a box of crayons, then the color of our skin shouldn't give them cause to fear.

As I prepare to exit law school, I excitedly await the day to “have a seat at the table.” I have a small plaque that sits in my office, with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. It says, “if I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way.” My goal is to make every decision within my career count; that is how I can make an impact on the road to justice.

I end this open letter by reinforcing the fact that the fight is not over. We still need to arrest the killers of so many black individuals who’ve died at the hands of police brutality – including Breonna Taylor and Elijah McClain. We cannot let this fight die. We still have work to do.