

Reflections on a Peaceful Protest

Category: Racism

written by Alexander Vining | June 4, 2020

For the first time in my very privileged life, I was forced to lie face down, in the middle of the road, with my hands behind my back. The asphalt was hard and tore into my knees. My shoulders and wrists ached from having my arms pinned behind my back. The muscles in my neck cramped from trying to hold my head off the ground. I could barely get the words "I can't breathe" out of my mouth. I was there with hundreds of others of all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds who were also forced to lie face down on the asphalt and chant "I can't breathe."

There were no shackles cinched tightly around our wrists or police officers' knees digging into our backs. We felt forced to do this to honor the lives lost to systemic racism in our country. We felt forced to do this because doing nothing is not an option. We felt forced to do this because George Floyd was murdered simply because of the color of his skin.

Lying on the ground was uncomfortable, but that was not what hurt. The hurt I felt was much deeper. It hurt to realize that people of color are forced violently onto the pavement, with handcuffs digging into their wrists and a knee in their back, every day simply because of the color of their skin. It hurt to realize that even after our country elected our first black president, the legacy of racism on which this nation was built remains alive and well. It hurt to realize that the brutality that people of color are forced to endure at the hands of police is only a fraction of the brutality they are forced to endure at the hands of our society. It hurt to realize that I could have used my privilege to help effect change for years but instead chose silence. It hurt the most to realize that my silence has resulted in the deaths of countless people of color.

As others began to stand or kneel, holding fists and signs over their heads, I stood up as well. I dusted myself off and joined the chants for change, justice, and equality with a deeper understanding. It was not an understanding of what people of color live through every day—as a white heterosexual male, I will never truly understand—but of why I must join this fight.

Night began to fall, and I walked over to the police officers who were present and thanked them for serving our community even though it is filled with righteous anger toward them over the murder of yet another black man. As I walked home, the cries for change became muffled and then disappeared, and I was left with an emptiness in my heart. How—as a nation built on the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all—have we failed so miserably to uphold that promise? How—52 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.—has so little changed?

How do we move forward together?

Alexander Vining
South Portland, Maine