

Special Issue on Violence against Individuals and Communities: Reflecting on the Trayvon Martin Case [This article appears in the Narratives and Reflections section of the Special Issue]

A Moment to Come Together: Personal Reflections on Trayvon Martin

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Abstract

Three personal reflections provided by doctoral students of the Michigan School of Professional Psychology (Farmington Hills, Michigan) address identification of individual perspectives on the tragic events surrounding Trayvon Martin's death. The historical ramifications of a culture-in-context and the way civil rights, racism, and community traumatization play a role in the social construction of criminals are explored. A justice orientation is applied to both the community and the individual via internal reflection about the unique individual and collective roles social justice plays in the outcome of these events. Finally, the personal and professional responses of a practitioner who is also a mother of minority young men brings to light the need to educate against stereotypes, assist a community to heal, and simultaneously manage the direct effects of such events on youth in society. In all three essays, common themes of community and growth are addressed from varying viewpoints. As worlds collided, a historical division has given rise to a present unity geared toward breaking the cycle of violence and trauma. The authors plead that if there is no other service in the name of this tragedy, let it at least contribute to the actualization of a society toward growth and healing.

Keywords: social justice, history, social construction of criminals, culture, parents, practitioners, community

Introduction

In the wake of such a senseless and painful tragedy, one which will serve as a historic marker of this era, humanity is left to ask how to proceed. Does life continue as it is while the media loses interest? Do parents grieve in a community without support? Do practitioners fight to enact systemic changes? And, do we, as a society, even know where to begin? Three doctoral students from the Michigan School of Professional Psychology provide their perspectives on the circumstances surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin. Collectively trained in the foundations of humanistic psychology, each author brings individually unique backgrounds, personally and professionally, to the here-and-now conceptualization of this historical event, and provides perspectives toward the needs of the community-at-large for growth and healing within a cohesive social justice framework. The very foundations of social justice, which nourishes the essence of each of these reflections, are balanced upon the understanding of human rights. They are foundational to the success and longevity of a humanity that values the life of its fellow man and woman. Topics of culpability, responsibility, and social meaning are addressed to varying degrees ranging from the global scale to the family dinner table. Systemic effects of the ripples created in the societal pond by such events are addressed both historically and culturally; and hope for future growth and learning, both internally and externally, are explored from varying perspectives. In story format, we hope to set the historical stage for the reader, tie that into the global and worldview implications thrown onto society, and then narrow the broad scope lens to the intimate conversation at the dinner table between a scholar-practitioner who is a mother and her sons.

Where is the Equal Right to Not be Racially Profiled or Victimized Through Gun Violence?

Demetrius E. Ford

The tragic death of Trayvon Martin reminded the Black community of the horror of the deaths of Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Malice Green, Rodney King, Martin Luther King Jr., and others. I think the delay in the arrest and investigation of Trayvon's murder was especially traumatic to Blacks. A USA Today/Gallup Poll (USA Today, 2012) shortly following Trayvon's death indicated that 73% of Blacks said they believe George Zimmerman would have been arrested if Trayvon was White, while 33% of Whites agreed. The majority of Whites polled 52% said race made no difference in the case.

I am concerned that mistreatment of Black men in America is rooted in the fabric of America. After all, before the colonies were united, slavery existed. As a matter of fact, the Declaration of Independence did not abolish slavery. Scottish philosopher and economist David Hume said, "I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the White" (Garret, 2000, p. 171). It wasn't until about 100 years after the Civil War ended that the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964. The Voter's Right Act was not passed until 1965, granting African Americans the right to vote without restriction of poll taxes and literacy standards. This happened, eleven years after Thurgood Marshall, a Civil Rights attorney, successfully argued in the *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka* case in 1954 which overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896, which stated that separate is equal, concluding that separate is inherently unequal.

The Trayvon Martin case re-traumatizes many Blacks because it reminds Blacks of slavery and Jim Crow. It reminds Blacks of the treatment of Rosa Parks in 1957; when she was accosted and arrested for refusing to move from the front row of the Black's section of the bus for a White man, resulting in the MLK, Jr. led bus boycott that same year (Brinkley, 2001). Trayvon's case reminds Blacks that in 1962 President Kennedy had to send 5000 Federal Troops to protect James Meredith, while he enrolled at the University of Mississippi. The Trayvon Martin case reminds Blacks of how Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor used fire hoses and police dogs on Black demonstrators in 1963. It reminds Blacks of the murder of the four young Black girls; Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carol Robertson and Addie Mae Robertson, who were killed in Birmingham, Alabama, as they attended Sunday School in 1963.

The Trayvon Martin case reminds Blacks of James E. Chaney, 21; Andrew Goodman 21; and Michael Schwerner, 24: the young men who went to Neshoba County Mississippi in 1964 to investigate a church burning. Six weeks into their investigation, after being arrested for speeding, incarcerated for several hours and released to the KKK after dark, they were found dead and buried in an earthen dam. The handling of the murder of Trayvon Martin suggests that racism and unjust treatment continues to plague the Black community.

Finally, I'm not so confident that Mr. Zimmerman would be convicted of the murder of Trayvon, although I think there is sufficient evidence for a first degree murder conviction. If the jury is insensitive to diversity and civil rights, the jury might be more inclined to see Trayvon, as the aggressor. On the other hand, if the jury is humanly aware of the history of police brutality against Blacks in this country, it will be more likely to asked the right question about how could Trayvon who was being stalked and unarmed, be the aggressor. From humanistic and civil rights perspectives, the Trayvon/Zimmerman case should be interpreted in light of national issues concerning Blacks in America. Why is president Obama blocked by a republican congress in every effort he makes to improve the U.S. economy? Never were White democratic or republican presidents denied requests to increase the debt ceiling. Never was any president interrupted by a congressperson and called a liar. In conclusion, how closer are we to Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream? For a few we are closer, but for many we are further away. Every word of King's "I Have a Dream" speech is still relevant and in play for the conditions of today.

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Justice for Justice

Roxanne Christensen

Silence. No sirens, no foot traffic, no horns honking at a roadblock. It is a crisp morning and I drive past the same corner on my way to work as I do every morning. I pass the very street corner where hours before a gang-affiliated minority youth lost his life, a youthful phoenix preparing to rise from the ash that was his life. He was my client, whom I was mentally preparing to meet with this morning just three miles further down the road, armed with contingency plans and treatment goals for health and growth prior to his release back into the war zone he calls *community*. There is no chalk outline, no wailing mother, no makeshift grave marker. Nobody is taking statements, nobody is creating a record to remember this morning. The red light is annoyingly long; and that is it. I drive past this grave and do not even know to hold my breath. Business has continued as usual, quite literally, as the corner storefront flashes its neon signs advertising luck and lung cancer.

The reality is that youth like Trayvon Martin die every day. They die at the hands of each other, at the hands of the gangs, as casualties of the War on Drugs, as casualties of poor health care, and as recipients of ominous bullets we label meritocracy and social order. When God stopped sorting humanity out so quickly, humanity created weapons against one another and taught its own kind to wield them; blades versus healthcare, bullets versus education, and injustice versus dignity. It is in our human nature to clutch closely resources, even those which do not tire or change in value by scarcity or plenty; resources such as education and food...and freedom. With the deepest remorse for the loss of a young life, and the utmost respect for the collective empathy common to two parents from opposite poles of the continental United States, I am aware that youth like Trayvon Martin die each and every day. What should be remarkable is that we can say this so readily, so wholly, and not question the veracity of what should be an odd statement to make. That it is unremarkable that Trayvon Martin died at the hands of another *is* what should be remarkable.

I make a plea in this moment for a greater cause beyond the actions of one man. For one man is rarely an island and it is with the perceived strengths of a community, organization, or system behind one actor that he feels free and compelled to act; just as a community cautiously watching Mr. Martin walk its darkened streets through glowing dining room slats alerted he and those like him that they were not welcome on those specific streets, and are inversely restrained and restricted. The actions of one man simply reconfirm the desires of many, whether explicit or implicit. For every single individual's action there exists a society and a system that either actively or passively defends or refutes it. Few people act so cavalierly without at least the perception of protection by the society in which they exist. It is therefore the systemic, global-scale inequities and disparities that are merely concentrated into one specific act. The actions of the community, those policing the community, and the politics policing the police require public challenge. Between history and present, color somehow became synonymous with safety, and people with color. Errors in judgment, procedure, and protocol have ensured that the chasm between justice and closure remain cavernous. The fault lies not solely with one system, however, but with the interconnected balance of inequities. The error is not solely based in the reactive systems of oppression. It is in the passive corridors of complacency. Instead: empty. Empty streets where the fallen have merely fallen.

Silence. Where is the public outcry at the irresponsible sensationalism of first responder tapes and nightly news image portrayals? Is this a reconfirmation of the Darwinian principle that urban warfare is just a form of species selection? Are public media and its edge-of-seat consumers really telling Trayvon's parents that his life would be less meaningful if he was a thug? Is anyone's life less meaningful simply because it does not fit another's standards? Why has no one tweeted the address of City Hall to thousands of followers with the plea to ask the opaque systems intended to protect all beings how they are really working? Where is the outcry for justice from the institutions intended to protect all of the people? When did the court of public opinion become a sequestered jury, and a silent, shrouded executioner?

Taxpayers are quick to remind police officers during routine stops for broken turn signals that meager public worker salaries are contingent upon customer satisfaction and property taxes. As the country turned toward community oriented policing, top-dollar voices begged officers to listen to funded wants and needs, to focus on the bang-to-buck ratio of perceived community problems and to act as the gatekeepers of their communities. Invariably, we as a society asked the police state to keep safety *in* and to keep danger *out*. Although easily perceived as such, these are not two sides of the same coin.

Safeguarding resources turned neighborhoods into serfdoms and officers into knights. Collaborative community fear dug moats around picket fences, settling into the false comforts of protection. Somewhere in the loose translation of inalienable taxpayer rights, society created the monsters that are the corrupt systemic inequities which now run rampant, undeterred by millage. From the deep recesses of the country's laboratory, ignited by the electronic shockwave of moralism balanced against elitism, we as a society have created, and accepted, a system of rogues who know better than us what is better for us. The sirens should have been immediate and deafening. The painful sounds of a human being wailing should not have been the interlude of the evening news. The coasts should have been marked off with familiar yellow-and-black-banded police tape. America was the scene of a crime.

Instead, silence. Hoodies flashed on YouTube and Skittles sold out in record amounts, yet post offices remained stocked with stamps intended for governors and the sidewalks of City Hall choked with open space for traversing. What systemic inequities and grand-scale malfeasance did was deny justice. Not just for the right or the wrong in this case, but for the country as a whole. Regardless of how much the proverbial gun smokes, so many global mistakes and mishandlings of the incidents immediately following the death of Mr. Martin have ensured that the country will not easily heal from this gaping wound. Innocent, guilty, wronged, or righted, justice cannot occur when the facts have been so poorly attended to. The ironic unity in our country will now be with the inability to heal, grow, and move forward.

My plea today is for one life, as well as for many. For perpetrators and victims, for racism, classism, elitism, ageism, sexism, and each other -ism that persists when cyclically reconfirmed through unjust standards and procedures. This plea is not for an uprising in the streets recontextualizing an American Civil War. Fighting upon fighting upon fighting are merely shovels with which to deepen graves. The humanist in me wants to implore our collective society to momentarily set aside race, prejudice, and history and attend to the very real vulnerability of acknowledging that a human being lost his life on that day. And that he was not the only one. Trayvon Martin was not a hoodie, a thug, a symbol, or a martyr. He was just

a person, and he did not need to be anything more. But he could have been. My plea is for justice, for justice.

I am not Trayvon Martin. It is unlikely that I will suffer such a tragic and public demise as he. The proverbial smoking gun is unlikely to burn in my palm, yet I have a role here, too. Perhaps I am the elitist majority class citizen who pressures my local police to harass signs of differentness on my streets. I am the parent who opts for private education at unreasonable rates to shelter my children from exposure to general public woes and the mediocrity of a starving educational system. I am the gates that shut people out based on color. I am the arbitrary mile-marker which tells people where they *belong* based on their household income and access to resources, and the Great White Flight which threatens to strip my community of resources at the fearful sign of contamination. I am the congressional oversight committee which can turn a blind eye because I have become too busy to sign, seal, and deliver my pleas for justice. I am the media consumer, the juror in the court of public opinion who has already tried and executed any opportunities for justice. When I did not scream for action, I silenced the voices of many. No, I am not Mr. Martin, but there are many who are just like me. This event required for me a moment of great personal, and painful, reflection. I welcome others to reflect on the personal, professional, and global meanings of this tragedy, and to take up a voice beyond silence.

The Injustice of Trayvon Martin

LaSonia Barlow

When I initially heard the story of Trayvon Martin's senseless murder, it was deeply troubling for me on two levels. Firstly, as a mother of two male ethnic minorities and secondly as a psychologist whose main practice is with inner city adolescents. As mother of two minority sons who enjoy wearing hoodies and love to partake of the snack of skittles and ice tea, the story of Trayvon Martin affected me on a personal level. My sons, a teenager and a young adult, could be easily mistaken and stereotyped as criminals looking to engage in criminal activity. However, as their mother, I know they are not criminals. Both of my sons are high achievers involved in sports, Church and various other positive activities. I could not fathom anyone assuming that my sons were involved in criminal activities just due to their teen appropriate attire. To cut short a life full of possibilities and potential is deeply saddening. That is not only an injustice to Trayvon's family but also to the world. The world will never know what great accomplishments might have been in the future for Trayvon Martin.

As a psychologist who works with troubled inner city adolescents, I have learned to view them as victims of circumstances and environment. For the inner city youth that I treat, to hear the story of a young person who was killed for being stereotyped further victimizes them. They already feel imprisoned by the injustices of the world given their experiences of being stereotyped by the judicial system as well as law enforcement. To hear that someone who may look like them, wear the same clothes as them or enjoy the same snack was murdered for doing nothing places them in a state of bewilderment and confusion. The youth have all heard or experienced police profiling or harassment, but the crime perpetrated on Trayvon was done by another citizen. Trayvon's murder creates feelings of distrust and apprehension for the youth.

This story has placed me in the position of bewilderment as to what can I do to heighten others' awareness. How can I be a vessel to enlighten and educate other individuals? As a mother and a psychologist, how can I explain to my sons and other young people what happened when I do not understand? Young people look to their elders for answers and explanations, but there is no explanation for this senseless murder. I question what can I do and my response is to seek forums to educate others. To educate my colleagues and community to counteract stereotypical beliefs that race, clothing or presentation of a young person define the individual. To encourage my colleagues and community to abandon possible ingrained beliefs about young people. To encourage my colleagues and community to interact with the youth to better understand their plight. As for the youth, to be available for the youth to address their fears and concerns, to offer hope in a society where hope seems to be dwindling every day.

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