

Friends;

I will soon celebrate my first year at the University of Louisville. Traveling cross-country to begin anew was no small feat. After twenty-five rewarding years at The University of Tulsa, the move entailed many uncertainties, and a risk that I now know was well worth taking. I am a proud Cardinal, and my connections here with students, faculty, staff, and administrative colleagues are richer and more precious to me than I ever could have imagined. I am deeply grateful.

Within months of joining the Cardinal Family, I find myself bonded to this community in ways that are perhaps intensified by this time of global unease. In early March, the pronounced threat of COVID-19 caused us to quickly convert to online teaching. Our faculty were nimble and resourceful in managing this abrupt change, and our students were real troopers, sheltering in place as they received music instruction online, some completing their degrees in May. As we continue to face the threat of this global health crisis, we now face another crisis, one that is not new, but that has reached a dangerous boiling point given the convergence of recent tragic events.

The headlines on racial unrest require that influential voices bring messages of unity and hope. On May 29<sup>th</sup>, President Bendapudi did just that. In her email to our campus community, she affirmed our institutional identity as a Community of Care and our embrace of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In follow up to her affirmation, I offer these reflections to my School of Music Family with the intent of ensuring the prevalence of authenticity, safety, compassion, and friendship within our walls.

As a person of color in a role of leadership and visibility, I am in a state of constant internal negotiation, balancing my professional persona with this other reality of my existence that is well beyond the sanctuary of academia. For example, I speak of COVID-19 using statistics with deliberate calm and a measured, objective tone. Meanwhile, the virus hits close to home. A close friend of mine and the long-time music minister at my church contacted me in March as he sped to be at his father's bedside. One of the first that I knew personally to succumb to the virus, his dad lived in Flint, Michigan, where disadvantaged communities of color there have long sought access to clean water.

Even as I write this, I find myself negotiating, sifting through a pile of words, collecting some, tossing others aside, trying to decide just what to express about the state of racial injustice at this volatile moment in our country's history. Whatever words land in this message, I hope for two outcomes: First, I hope that my candor and transparency point a way forward for all of us, helping to facilitate the healing that our community wants and so desperately needs. Secondly, I hope that the spirit of my discourse affirms the basic goodness of humanity in which I so firmly believe.

One of the thousands of photos on my iPhone was uploaded in September of 2016. To understand the significance of the photo, I must take you back to the joyous and spirited

rehearsals I attended every Saturday at noon with the Unlimited Praise Gospel Choir on the campus of the University of Tulsa in the early 1990s. The musician for the gospel choir was a very soft-spoken musical genius named Joey Crutcher. Joey was one of the local ambassadors of the Gospel Music Workshops of America, an international organization that supports and disseminates black gospel music all over the world. From the piano, Joey taught our choir a wealth of repertoire week after week, and he traveled with us to do numerous singing engagements at churches and community events around the city and region. The Crutcher family was well known and highly regarded, and Joey was a treasured friend to many of us. He was the musician at my wedding in 1996.

The photo on my iPhone is from a police dashcam. It is time-stamped September 16, 2016, at 7:43 pm. Pictured is a black man wearing a white t-shirt with both of his arms raised in surrender; he is standing to the left of a stalled vehicle in the middle of the road, and he is faced forward, away from the camera, his back to the officers who are a few feet behind him. Within moments after that photograph was taken, Officer Betty Shelby discharged her weapon, shooting and killing the black man whose hands were in the air. He had no weapon. That man was Terence Crutcher. He was Joey Crutcher's son.

Despite the evidence captured on camera--that Terence had no weapon, posed no threat, and was only stopped in the street because his car stalled--ultimately, no one was ever held accountable for his death. There was outrage. There were protests in the streets of Tulsa, calling for Shelby's arrest. There was a trial. Betty Shelby was not only acquitted, but her record was expunged of the incident. She was hired by a neighboring Oklahoma county, where she has since been teaching law enforcement classes. The local news did a story on heroic officers, and Betty Shelby was the featured guest.

The worldwide protests dominating our headlines today are not just for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, or Ahmaud Arbery; they are protests against a system of brutality and inequality that extends back generations. This system normalizes, particularly for black men, a macabre cause-and-effect relationship between routine acts of everyday living (like stopping at a 7-Eleven for a bag of Skittles, or going for a jog, or seeking help with a flat tire) and the probability of a violent death at the hands of law enforcement. Each glance at that photo of Terence's last moments of life brings me another micro dose of grief.

Terence's death, George's death, Breonna's death, and Ahmaud's death are all part of a pattern that now seems to garner a predictable reaction, followed by a national shrug of the shoulders before things revert to the status quo. Countless unarmed people of color have met with a similar demise at the hands of officers, and some of the higher-profile victims within the past six or seven years have included Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Dontre Hamilton, John Crawford, III, Michael Brown, Ezell Ford, Tanisha Anderson, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, Phillip White, Eric Harris, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray. In the 1950s and 1960s, television was the new technology that enabled eyewitnesses to record and disseminate evidence of the treatment of blacks in the Jim Crow South. Today, the technology that captures the racially charged brutality that would otherwise go unnoticed is the Smartphone. The evidence explains why African

Americans live with the daily realization that the mere perception that we pose a threat could cost us our lives.

On July 6, 2016, Philando Castile was pulled over by a police officer and was shot and killed as he reached for his license and registration. I know that law enforcement can kill my husband, my father, my uncles, my nephews, my brothers-in-law, my students of color, and me without a good reason, and that they can do so without consequence. As Amy Cooper recently demonstrated during the now-infamous incident in Central Park, there is a clear and common understanding of how incredibly vulnerable people of color are at the hands of the police. Guilty or not, threat or not, history has proven that any encounter we have with the police potentially places our lives in the balance.

For a very long time, this uncomfortable reality was never one that emerged with any degree of authenticity in my conversations with my white colleagues and friends. That all changed the day after Officer Betty Shelby's acquittal for Terence Crutcher's murder. When the verdict was announced, the entire city of Tulsa seemed as racially polarized as it had been during its infamous 1921 Race Massacre. I was shocked and appalled when colleagues with whom I'd worked for many years seemed satisfied, even relieved with the verdict, believing that Terence-- whose character by then had been spun into an entirely fabricated, incriminating narrative-- had gotten what he deserved. I had to expend enormous amounts of mental, emotional, and psychological energy just to keep from becoming consumed with despair and hatred. That's when I decided to take a risk.

I have a friend who is white and remains to this day one of my dearest buddies and closest colleagues in Music. She and I had worked and taught together for over twenty years. I taught her son and watched her kids grow up. We joined each other for decadent meals at breakfast or lunch on a fairly regular basis. Over the years, we'd have our fitness binges, meeting at the track to walk, or at the Y for yoga, all excuses to talk and just enjoy spending time together. We kept each other laughing, finished each other's sentences, and whenever we had the chance to hang out, the time seemed to pass too quickly. We talked about everything. Everything, that is, except race.

We in the black community are very well practiced at grieving together and consoling each other. This time, however, I needed to locate, affirm, and draw upon humanity in my white colleagues and friends. During the time of this tragedy, I needed to know that they were really friends, and not just superficial acquaintances for whom I was the checked-off box on a diversity list. Afraid, angry, and unsure, I took out my cell phone that day and I sent her a simple, four-word text: "I am not well."

Right now, black people in this country "are not well". Our titles, our positions, our achievements notwithstanding, we as a community "are not well". We have spent our entire lives learning the history and mastering the norms, customs, and standards that emanate from a Euro-American lens. We survive and succeed *only* because we adapt. Conversely, even some of the most well-intentioned and good-hearted white friends and colleagues among us have, at

best, a fraction of a clue as to why race is fraught with such tension and pain. They mentally ascent to diversity policies, and they dutifully recite all of the politically correct diversity and inclusion mantras; yet, they've spent precious little time learning the history and understanding the norms, customs, and survival mechanisms that inform the way many black people view and experience the world. With only surface knowledge of our history, and with little incentive to dig deeper, we remain stuck in a cycle. Another weaponless black man is killed, there is an outcry, there are protests, but nothing really changes. Things quiet down, and then the cycle repeats. Another weaponless black man is killed, there is an outcry, there are protests . . .

But here's what gives me stubborn hope. I sent my friend the text, and I held my breath, unsure as to how she'd respond, as we'd never been down that path before in our friendship. And then, the dam broke. Literally within seconds, she responded, understanding full well from just those four words exactly what I meant. She urgently flooded me with the love of a sister who feared neither my brokenness nor my blackness. And our conversations changed. She admitted that she knew me, but didn't really *know* me, my people, my culture, my history; and that she wanted to correct that. Soon, her vulnerability matched mine, and she started asking honest questions, and I answered her without judgment or ridicule because her sincerity empowered me to do so. Her ignorance about my history was not her fault, but she made seeking this knowledge her responsibility. She started to read, to learn, and to impact others, and she did so, not as a perfunctory Band-Aid, but as a matter of heartfelt commitment to making the world better. She became a safe place for me, and I for her. We began to heal each other, and to this day, her friendship continues to be a highly valued source of support for me .

Policies may govern behavior. Policies alone, however, don't change hearts. Through the anger that I feel whenever human life is devalued, I persist in my conviction that most of the people are good. I believe that the overwhelming majority of white people are kind and concerned, but many may be profoundly confused. They know that racism is bad, and yet they are flooded with images and stories that depict black people as dangerous and destructive societal burdens who are ultimately disposable. Many have only a shallow awareness of the African American story, an awareness so frail that it can hardly compete with the powerful onslaught of misinformation that normalizes the unwarranted destruction of our lives.

The only remedy for ignorance is education. And so, for my white colleagues, students, associates, and others who wish to move beyond that awkward, uncomfortable space where the genuine desire to do good sits in stagnant conflict with uncertainty about where to start, I offer practical help. To white people, I say notice your circle and see the people of color in your life whose healing depends upon your willingness to be vulnerable. To black people, I say look beyond the madness and locate, among your circle of white colleagues, peers, and friends, the spaces where you can take a calculated risk to be open and honest about your pain with those who may genuinely care. To those who would admit to the gaps in your knowledge of the African American story, I say fix it--not in one rally, or one protest, but fix it with commitment over time. The UofL Office of Diversity and Equity offers programs, training, and resources in diversity, equity and inclusion, and social justice. Those who wish might also begin this learning

journey by viewing ROOTS, the miniseries based on the memoir by Alex Haley. (There are two different versions of the miniseries, but either will do.) From there, consider viewing *Twelve Years a Slave*, *The Help*, *The Butler*, *42*, and *Selma*. For reading, begin with *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois, and *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander. Additional readings are *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, by Austin Channing Brown; *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X Kendi; *So You Want to Talk About Race*, by Ijeomo Oluo, and *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* by Layla Saad. Learning takes time and commitment, but this is nothing to despair. Black people start learning about whiteness at birth. The more we all learn about each other, the more effectively we can break the patterns that sicken our society.

I envision that, in our best world, our racial climate results not from policies and mandates handed down from administrative thrones, but from heart-changes fueled by vulnerability, honesty, authenticity, and true friendship. For any who would seek to know the deeper reasons behind the trouble that fills our news, I offer myself as a safe space, an accepting heart and a nonjudgmental listening ear for all people who want to transcend broken patterns. If there is interest, I am also more than willing to schedule a series of “safe place” discussions and informal listening sessions so that good people who wish to move us all toward a better reality can collaborate in achieving that objective. I envision that we have the power to grow into a community where any one of us can send a four-word text message and we will all have the skills necessary to respond with trust and love regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, or any other identifier. We often refer to the SOM as a family. It is important that we live the essential meaning of “family” by becoming a true component of support during these times as we navigate and heal together.

I thumb through the photos on my iPhone and get a glimpse of Terence Crutcher. I also get glimpses of hundreds of family photos that prove the transcendence of authenticity, honesty, and friendship. I see my two white nieces, my two Puerto-Rican nephews, and their beautiful children, and I think through my tears that this is possible.

Warmly,  
Teresa