

Beyond chocolates & roses: Community, love and commitment after the Kimani Gray shooting

By DR. TOBY JENKINS | Posted: Thursday, March 28, 2013 11:57 am

“This morning I woke up in a curfew

“O God, I was a prisoner, too —yeah!

“Could not recognize the faces standing over me

“They were all dressed in uniforms of brutality....

“That’s why we gonna be burnin and a-lootin tonight”

—Bob Marley, “Burnin & Lootin”

Can protestors be patriots? Can looters be agents of change? Can we view unrest as anything other than violence and law breaking? Recently, four days of protest in Brooklyn left many people around the country asking questions about the human behavior behind rioting, the effectiveness of protest and the historical vestiges of police brutality that create a tipping point for outrage. There are several issues at play in this complex discussion, but undoubtedly, this is an issue of community, love and patriotism.

The Huffington Post posed the question, “Are NYPD officers too disconnected with the communities they serve to protect?” Civil service positions are often dangerous, underpaid and highly stressful, but they are indeed meant to be a form of community service. One of the basic tenets of any community-based work is the need to develop a strong, lasting and collaborative relationship with the community. Find out what they need. Understand what they believe are solutions. Elicit their help in leading, building and transforming their communities.

In the field of education, we know that some of the best educational outcomes can be achieved when education is a community effort—involving families and community leaders. Strong relationships with the community and an equally strong commitment to students can be achieved when teachers live in the communities where they work. It creates a sense of ownership, concern and understanding. Such is the case with the police force. We have got to be real about the growing tension between police officers and the communities they serve.

Twenty-five years ago, the rap group N.W.A. shocked the world with their direct and forceful

declaration, “F— the Police,” which was a song on their “Straight Out of Compton” album. The song is rated No. 417 on the Rolling Stone list of the “500 Greatest Songs of All Time.” That’s telling.

We should have listened deeply and read between the lines then. People held contempt for the police in their communities decades ago. What real structural, policy- and intervention-based efforts have been made since?

A reporter asked me last week, why do I think people choose to riot and destroy their own communities? I’ve been thinking deeply about this question. First, it doesn’t matter where people are standing; when they reach their boiling point, they rage where they are. If a couple gets into an argument in the kitchen, they don’t stop and take it to the living room because the kitchen is meant for cooking. They stand their ground where they are. Also, it’s important to consider that people are raging where the incidents are happening.

People are being harassed and shot on the same streets where they are rioting. The injustice happens there, so why not the protest? Finally, it is often easy to stand on the outside and shake our heads at people, proclaiming that it’s a shame that they are destroying their own community. But does the community truly “belong” to them? Do they own it? Do they run it? Do they have any say in the matters that really count concerning community development and city planning? Do investors (who don’t live in or care about the community) own the majority of the neighborhood, and do most of the residents just live there? These are not simple reactions to one isolated incident. They are a buildup of tension and disenfranchisement—a reaction to much broader circumstances of living. And I pose the question: Is the response altogether wrong?

Well, one thing that we should have learned from protests of the past is that we need diverse strategies to create sustainable change. We do need folks to take to the street to shine a light. But we also need political, corporate, law enforcement and grassroots allies to effect policy change. Of course, violence, arrests, physical abuse and stealing is never OK and should not be condoned—we definitely need some healing and constructive intervention there. However, I do support the foundational ethic behind speaking out. In a broad sense, I am concerned that our country has raised citizens who are not taught how to be critical thinkers—to question, to learn, to criticize the status quo. We seem to be zombies who recite catchphrases and key words that sound poetic; meanwhile we ignore practices, policies and laws that oppress people around the world and in our own country. And so when some folks act out in rage, there is shock and awe.

As a citizen, I love my country like a mother loves a child. You love your child so much that you don’t want to see her do wrong, and so you discipline and correct every wrong turn. We correct our children out of love. So why don’t we see people who take that same approach outside of their family as being

true patriots? If we were to see a child acting out in public, the first question we ask is, “Where are the parents?” and we often negatively judge their parental abilities. So why don’t we do the same thing to citizens who live blindly in our country, who take no interest in truly learning our country’s history, who recite news bites without doing further research? Why don’t we judge their lack of critical and deep engagement as citizens? Instead, we define patriotism through words rather than action. And so this is an issue of defining active citizenship within all of the spaces that we occupy ... our country, our companies and our communities.

I used to work at Penn State University, where I led a cultural center named after Paul Robeson—another great activist in history who was persecuted and attacked for challenging the politics of the day. Though many people today applaud Robeson as one of the greatest domestic and global humanitarians of his time, when he was alive, this country applied its full weight to crush him because of his outspoken work and criticism against segregation, lynching and global oppression in Africa. Attacked as a communist because of his active travel throughout the world and open sympathy for the struggles against oppression of all people, he was eventually called before the House Un-American Committee. This was the infamous committee before which many actors and celebrities were called to testify at hearings to determine their involvement in the communist party. This committee was essentially a judicial board established to chastise and legally silence anyone who posed a threat to the American right-wing. At his hearing, Robeson made history as the only person to directly challenge the committee.

When asked at the hearing why he didn’t just leave the United States and become an ex-patriot, he said boldly and unapologetically: “My father was a slave and my people died to build this country, and I’m going to stay right here and have a part of it, just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear ... you are the non-patriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”

And of course, there is also Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose model of leadership is often praised and is therefore relevant to this discussion. King was not the type of man to silently accept the status quo or to engage in uncritical dialogue about his country. He was fighting the unfair policies and practices of the United States through nonviolent social action. And in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King spoke frankly about the necessity for critical thought and social tension to create social change. And he challenged the citizens of our country to become active agents for social justice rather than passive moderates that sustain, through their inaction, the status quo. Making any entity better, whether it is a school, a company or a country, is not achieved through rhetoric that makes us feel good, but rather through action and calls to action that inspire us to do good.

Here is what King had to say: “But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word ‘tension.’ I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is

necessary for growth ... I have been gravely disappointed with the ... moderate ... who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice, who prefers a negative peace, which is the absence of tension to a positive peace, which is the presence of justice.”

My hope is that we begin to view patriotism as not being exercised through simplistic statements of blind love and praise, but instead through a dedication to doing the hard, challenging and almost parental work of rearing and growing, guiding and developing the communities that we love. I do believe that the ethic behind being free and open to critically challenge one's country in an effort to make it better and more accountable is something to be encouraged because it illustrates authentic love. Anyone who is a parent, a wife, a husband, a sister, a brother or a friend knows that real love goes far beyond chocolates and roses, fun and games. It is actually hard and critical work. We did not give birth to the country we live in, but we have adopted the responsibility to continue to raise it. And like any good parent, we must be actively present, engaged and vocal through every step it takes.

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