



Finding Hope in the Midst of Fear

By Educator Barnes – April 20, 2021

On May 25, 2020, we were in the midst of a global pandemic and two incidents took place that held up a mirror to our society. The reflection back was not pretty. Christian Cooper, a Black bird watcher, was in Central Park when he crossed paths with Amy Cooper (no relation) a white woman who was not following the rules of the park because her dog was not on a leash. Cooper told her to follow the rules and her response was to call the cops and lie. She said, "I'm going to tell them there's an African American man threatening my life." Cooper recorded part of the incident, and it went viral. Neither one was there when the cops arrived.

Before we could process that incident, another incident took place, on the same day, that would impact people around the world. We only know about it because a 17-year-old girl pulled out her cell phone and recorded police officer Derek Chauvin with his knee on the neck of George Floyd who eventually died. Although there have been some discrepancies about how long Chauvin's knee was on Floyd's neck, it really does not matter because his knee should not have been on his neck at all even for one second.

On the evening of April 20, 2021, almost a year after George Floyd's death, a verdict was reached in the Derek Chauvin trial. My husband and I stood in our family room as Judge Peter Cahill read the verdict. Chauvin was found guilty of second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter. I wish I could say we both felt better, but the verdict simply felt like breadcrumbs being tossed.

Black screenwriter Kashana Cauley stated after the verdict was read, "Talking about verdicts as steps toward justice sounds like talking about putting flour in a bowl and leaving it there for 24 years as a step towards making a cake." ABC legal analyst and lawyer Sunny Hostin, who is Black and Puerto Rican, stated through tears, "This is what justice looks like for my community" after sharing that she believes her 18-year-old son, who is currently in South Africa, is safer there than in the United States. I can relate to this sentiment.

Yes, I am glad Chauvin was found guilty on all charges, but this does not mean I will worry less when my Black husband or my Black sons go out into the world. It took a pandemic to keep us at home for some people to slow down for a moment and truly see what life is like for Black Americans, what life is like for me. If the 17-year-old youth had not filmed the murder, would there have been a trial? It took a video and worldwide protests to bring extra energy to the fight for justice for Black people in America. We have been fighting for justice, fighting for the right to simply exist and pursue the American dream for generations. Because some Black people have obtained a slice of the American pie, some people thought Black people were doing alright. A few years ago Words Dance published this poem I wrote:

Progress

emancipation

civil rights

affirmative action

Obama
generational
progress
Is a blindfold
To mask
the dead bodies

I wonder how long it will be before some people put the blindfold back on and return to business as usual.

Where does this leave me as an educator? What is my obligation to my students who may want to discuss the verdict? That's simple. My place is to listen and provide hope.

Ben & Jerry's, the ice cream company, released a statement that partly read "Finding one officer guilty does not exonerate a legal system that has perpetually brutalized Black and Brown communities. Let this be a turning point for us to stop addressing our society's challenges with over-policing and begin to build a new system of public safety that create healthier and safer communities for all."

As much as there is fear about the incidents that could occur, there is also hope that if an officer conducts misconduct, there will be justice. Additionally, there is hope because of legislation that has been passed. Cariol's law which passed in Buffalo, New York requires police officers to intervene if another police officer uses excessive force. The law also provides protection for the police officer who intervenes. This law was named after Black former police officer Cariol Horne who was terminated after she tried to intervene when a white officer used excessive force. Earlier this week, a judge overturned a previous ruling that sided with the police department's decision to terminate her. This overturned ruling means that Horne will receive back pay and her full pension.

Chauvin being found guilty and Cariol's law gives me hope in the midst of the fear I feel when I wonder if my husband and sons are safe in this world. Our students need to know there is hope. They need to know that our classrooms are safe places for them to discuss current

events. They need to know that it is okay to have questions. They need to know we will listen, that we will hold space for their thoughts.

We cannot change the world in one day, but building safe places where hope can grow and thrive is what is needed. When students feel hope, they will be more invested in their lives, their goals, and their education. Who knows? They might just be the generation that moves us from small steps in the right direction to big steps in the right direction.

Resources

[How to talk to your children about the Derek Chauvin trial in George Floyd's death](#)

[How to Talk with Kids About Racism and Racial Violence](#)