Changing the World

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George Floyd’s six-year-old daughter Gianna looked on quizzically while her mother gave a heart wrenching description of what the death of her father would mean throughout the child’s life. Roxie Washington, Gianna’s mother, described the future. He won’t be there to soothe hurts, to answer hard questions, to host the graduation party or the wedding reception. The scene was all the more painful because Mr. Floyd did nothing sufficient to deprive him of the rights and responsibilities of fatherhood, which Ms. Washington said he relished. Let’s say he was in possession of a counterfeit bill – the punishment for that crime is not execution without a trial.

Our nation and indeed the world are gripped by the story of Houston native George Floyd, who moved to Minneapolis looking for better job opportunities. Piled on top of the pandemic, 40,000,000 people unemployed, Black people dying at three times the rate of White people, the murder of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old African American woman in her own home and the hunting down of Ahmaud Arbery, the execution of George Floyd lit a keg of powder that was overdue to explode.

As a women’s organization, NCNW and our allies are particularly sickened and saddened by the growing number of Black women who lose their lives in police custody. Breonna Taylor was killed in her own home, Tiara Thomas was killed by the police officer who fathered three of her children, Sandra Bland is alleged to have hung herself after being arrested on a traffic charge, Natasha McKenna, who had schizophrenia, was killed with a stun gun when she “refused to comply.” Although no unarmed Black person is exempt from excessive use of force, it is shameful that the death of an unarmed Black woman just does not receive the same attention from the public, the police or the media.

Ten days of global protests have so far proven insufficient to exhaust the rage so many of us are feeling. And so far, the evidence suggests that rage is the right response. The dueling autopsy reports do nothing to dispel the horror of Derrick Chauvin’s knee and body weight pressed onto George Floyd’s neck, but the preliminary reports confirm the commonsense conclusion that the cause of his death was homicide.

Peaceful protests from New York to San Francisco were marred by looting and intentionally set fires, threatening to detract attention from the issue at the core of our pain – race based bias against African Americans by law enforcement and in virtually every other human endeavor. It is heartening to see veteran civil rights activists, basketball stars and peaceful protestors calling out looters with phrases like, “that’s not why we are here.”
Now that Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison has taken over the prosecution, the charges against Chauvin have been upgraded to 2nd degree murder (as opposed to the awkwardly conceived 3rd degree charge that requires no intent.) And the other three officers “complicit” in Floyd’s death are under arrest and criminally charged with aiding and abetting murder.

Meanwhile, the Minneapolis Police Department will undergo an investigation of any patterns and practices of abuse. Had we not scrapped President Obama’s 21st Century Policing Policy, George Floyd might still be alive. Perhaps if Minneapolis had been subject to a pattern or practice of investigation for discriminatory practices, no officer would have dared to brutalize Mr. Floyd. Hindsight is 2020.

Despite the rage and pain this incident has caused, we must look forward. It is good to read the many statements being published by corporate, and non-profit organizations that are declaring that Black lives matter. And it is good to see Black and White people championing the same cause, shoulder to shoulder. But as we know so well, these declarations and marching together in protest must be reinforced with sustained actions that call for the kinds of legal, policy and everyday changes in people’s behavior that will genuinely attack the root causes of systemic racism.

We are cautiously optimistic that finally, our nation might begin not only to speak the words but engage in the countless actions that might finally exorcise the devil of racism that has eaten at the soul of America from before its inception. It is good to hear calls for the “good people” to stand up and speak out. It was good to see clergy, including Bishop Mariann Budde say. “we need moral leadership.” It is good to see chiefs of police on bended knee next to protestors. (We owe Colin Kaepernick an apology. We should all have been taking a knee with him.) It will be far better if we take that outrage to the ballot box and insist on the changes we have needed and deserved for so long.

We must insist that the courts, the Congress and the state legislatures of our great nation curtail qualified immunity, a legal theory that forms the thick blanket of legal immunity that protects government officials from prosecution for their criminal actions. We must hear women’s voices with the same clarity and urgency that we hear men. We must also insist that prospective police officers undergo psychological evaluation to weed out unreconstructed racists before they can be sworn onto any force. And there must be implicit bias training for those who are unconscious that they are the beneficiaries of white privilege. There must be an accurate national data base of excessive force complaints so that no police department inadvertently hires a candidate against whom multiple complaints of brutality have been proven. Officers who know about illegal deprivation of civil and human rights must be encouraged to freely report what they see and what they know about fellow officers, without fear of reprisal. And there must be truly independent citizen review committees empowered to protect the communities they live in. We are not naïve. Assuring justice in criminal investigations and prosecutions is a gargantuan task. But if we persevere and if we put human rights above political expediency and tribalism, love above hate, we may one day join with Gianna in saying that her daddy did not die in vain, for he truly changed the world.