

June 1, 2020

A Conversation for Change

Like you, I was horrified by the image of watching another African American man being literally crushed to death by a white policeman who clearly was so comfortable seeing a defenseless man die under his knee that he did not even take his hand out of his pocket. Perhaps this is the reason why the video of George Floyd, more than any other of the many videos we have seen, has become so emblematic of police brutality.

But it is, of course, not just about George Floyd. It is also about Michael Brown, an African American teenager who was shot to death by a white policeman in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. It is about Eric Garner, who was choked to death by a white police officer in the streets of Staten Island, New York, also in 2014. And most recently we were shocked to watch the vigilante-type shooting of another unarmed black man, Ahmaud Arbery, who was killed by two white males because black men apparently have no right to jog in white neighborhoods. And their names have to stand for countless others here.

It is also just as much about Amy Cooper, a white woman who called the police on an African American male solely because he reminded her that she had to keep her dog on a leash in an area where she was required to keep her dog on a leash. It is about a white graduate student at Yale University who called police on a fellow graduate student, Lolade Siyonbola, who was napping on the couch in her common room, because Lolade Siyonbola is black.

Most of all, it is about The Conversation. We have heard a lot about The Conversation over the past few days. It is The Conversation African American fathers or mothers have with their children, particularly their sons. It is The Conversation in which African American parents warn their children about how to behave in a world that is intrinsically hostile to them, simply because of the color of their skin. Above all, it is The Conversation about The Anger – The Anger at being singled out for suspicion in a store, as one of our Manhattanville faculty members, George Schreer, has documented in his 2009 article, “Shopping while Black;” The Anger at having the police called on you solely because a white person feels that your black presence in the vicinity empowers them to do so; Above all, The Anger at having your body crushed, your windpipe choked, The Anger at being beaten, shot, or tortured even after being arrested. And then, this Anger is followed by the maddening realization that, in the vast majority of these cases, the perpetrators go free. Why would it surprise anybody that African Americans have come to the realization that there is no justice in this land?

As a white male, I have never had The Conversation. And maybe that is where our Conversation, here at Manhattanville, needs to start. It is another Conversation. It is a Conversation in which we acknowledge the centuries of African American experience in this country for what they add up to: genocide. It is a white Conversation of accepting responsibility for the white genocide against black people. And then it must be followed by a productive conversation among all of us, all members of the Manhattanville community, about how to bring about genuine change.

On the high school and college levels (and this includes Manhattanville College), this means that The Conversation about the responsibility for genocide needs to become part of our required curriculum. Books such as Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* can lead the way. Just as my generation of Germans had to find ways of coming to terms with the horrifying legacy of the Holocaust, so this generation of white Americans needs to ask the question – of themselves, of their parents, of their friends – where they stand on The Conversation of Responsibility that white folks need to have.

At Manhattanville, we have a proud tradition, going back to Mother Dammann's courageous 1938 address, "Principles Versus Prejudices." We have Sister Mary T. Clark, RSCJ, in whose honor we have named our Center for Religion and Social Justice, who personally encouraged our then predominantly white students to join the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's March on Washington in 1963. We have our Center for Inclusion, established in 2017. And, starting last year, we have made Mother Dammann's speech one of the foundational texts for every incoming class.

That is a good start, but we cannot hide behind our traditions. If we really want to be true to Mother Dammann and to Sister Mary T. Clark, then it is time to insert The Conversation into our curriculum as an ongoing project. Students have already begun reaching out to faculty to begin a conversation. One student would like to start a discussion group in which we engage students, local law enforcement, residents, and elected officials to talk about bridging the gaps between police and people of color to shed light on their experiences. I would like to challenge each returning and incoming Manhattanville student to work with me, with the Manhattanville faculty and staff, with the Center for Inclusion and with the Mary T. Clark to engage in this Conversation with us. This will complement the work already being done by the Manhattanville Presidential Task Force on Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity that I established last year to identify how Manhattanville will continue to advance diversity, equity and access for all members of our community. Because it is only when we acknowledge our failures that we can truly say that, at Manhattanville College, black lives matter.

It is then, and only then, that we can start building a better world for our children. It is then, and only then, that the violence will cease.

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President

