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Let?s examine our whiteness

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So much of what needs to be said about the Black Lives Matter movement has already been written, and more importantly, written by Black and Brown voices (for the Canadian context, see, ex. Desmond Cole). While I don't think the world needs another white woman telling other white people that ?things are unjust,? I recognize that not everyone is on social media, so I'll take a bit of space here to broadly share my own awakening to what's happening.

First off, this movement isn't just about bad cops, although policing is the most clear microcosm of our colonial and brutalizing relationship with Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) communities. Indeed, the Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 after murderer George Zimmerman was acquitted. Justice for his victim, an innocent Black child, Trayvon Martin, spurred a massive movement. It began with an online hashtag and broader organizing community developed by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. And as Black people continued to die at the hands of police, (Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, and so many more), street demonstrations became a visual symbol of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the United States.

And since 2013, our Black friends, colleagues, and family have told us white people, time and time again, that life as a Black person in North America is painful. It is terrifying. It is unfair. It is hard. It is trauma-filled. And we didn't listen. Not really. Some companies, and even police forces may have engaged in some diversity and inclusion exercises. An effort so broad as to remain, for Black people, ultimately meaningless.

More recently, we have continued to ?center' our own experience as we witness racism. Statements like, ?I'm so shocked,? or ?I'm so angry,? or ?My heart is breaking,? or ?I can't believe this is still happening? are declared publicly. These tears and this outrage (while from the heart) are a barrier or shield that we white people use to protect ourselves from criticism. They aren't action-oriented.

We are not making the world safer for BIPOC. But there is of course an even more sinister variety of ?white-centering' and that is the ?All Lives Matter? response. If you, or someone you know, has used this phrase, it is crucially important that work is done to understand the dismissive nature of those words. This is why activists have been telling us that it's not enough to simply claim that we aren't ?racist.' We have to become ?anti-racist.'

George Floyd's murder at the hands of police has catalyzed a truly broad conversation that is so long overdue. Especially here in Canada, where we have built an entire national mythology around our liberal (small L) goodness, we must have this conversation. What do we say to ourselves? I know what we HAVE said: ?We never held people in slavery. We welcomed Black people escaping slavery. We aren't America?

Indeed, the first chapter book I read as a child was ?Underground to Canada' by Barbara Smucker. It tells the story of Julilly ? a girl who escapes from a plantation and follows ?the North Star' to Canada- where she will be free. This was how, in the 1990s, our education system uncritically built the mythology of Canada as fundamentally ?good.' We didn't learn about indentured servitude, about Africville, Nova Scotia, about the looting of this land by our white ancestors, about residential schools, about the death and destruction that ongoing colonial systems are waging in this country.

Let me be clear: this does not excuse our ignorance, our apathy and our inaction. We've upheld this narrative because it benefits us white people.

As I said here from the start, this isn't just about ?bad apple' police officers, because there are certainly many good people in policing. That's why what we are talking about is ?Systemic Racism': racism is the foundation of the system (historically and structurally).

As both the Robert Pickton case and the Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women has shown, the police often don't effectively investigate harrowing crimes, due to inbuilt racism. If the victims are non-white, the system deems it a non-priority. You can't change the system by simply changing the actors within it (hiring progressive officers). The system itself needs an overhaul.

Because we are white, we need to address all aspects of this crisis. Let's deal with the immediate issue: the BIPOC community is disproportionately policed, and makes up a disproportionate amount of our prison inmate population. Therefore, we need to take a large percentage of police budgets and re-allocate them to supportive, rather than punitive, services.

Included in that financial transfer, and even BEYOND that, we need to focus on 1) Clean drinking water, safe housing 2) Education and high quality educational programming for underserved communities 3) Mental health response teams and services 4) Truly free healthcare, including pharmacare, dental, vision 5) Community gardens and food security 6) tuition-free postsecondary education 6) A universal basic income 7) Electing people of colour into positions of leadership everywhere 8) Teaching our children about racism.

These are just some of the major areas where we can BEGIN to address systemic racism in Canada. I'm still learning.

To understand privilege, we have to examine our whiteness, and what it means. This is what activists call ?doing the work.?

We have to dismantle our own hidden biases, break down the layers of denial, and recognize the debts we owe to our fellow human beings.

Following this examination, we have to act. In other words, we must pay reparations. There are monetary reparations, and there are institutional, cultural, emotional, and spiritual ones to pay too.

Let's get started now. Stay tuned the next few weeks as I dig further into this topic.