

For all we've lost: A liturgy for George Floyd

By Cole Arthur Riley

"Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the Black body — it is heritage." — Ta-Nehisi Coates

Letter to those whose breath was taken too soon.

They've taken so much and they're still taking. George Floyd; it didn't begin with his name and wouldn't end there. On May 25, 2020, Derek Chauvin, an officer with the Minneapolis Police Department, knelt on George Floyd's desperate body for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, as Floyd and a chorus of Black folk pled for Chauvin and the three other officers on the scene to stop.

I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't.

Before Floyd, there was Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, many others. And since: Daunte Wright, Robert Jones, Sonya Massey, many others. They've taken so much and they're still taking.

I write to the Black and beloved — all whose breath was stolen too soon, their bodies stretched out throughout time with no resolve.

* * *

I remember as many of you as I can. Which is to say, not enough.

I remember you, George Floyd. At first, the real. You in a cobalt blue tank top, holding your daughter. You aren't smiling. Your brow is furrowed. You hold her close. Later, as painted concrete. A mural of your face. Sometimes with wings, sometimes monochromatic, sometimes crumbling. I'll think of your body real but your face dissected from the wall and hovering over your still human shoulders. A static painted face now grips his daughter. Eventually, just the head. Just a floating iteration of the same painted head. This, through no fault of the art or artists. Any dissection reveals only my own heart, never theirs.

This is my confession: In time, some of you have become more symbol than real. Symbols used to feed all kinds of emotional emptiness. In your absence, something strange has happened. Your deaths, which have united so many, have also revealed new hungers. There is, and perhaps always was, a sinister appetite for Black trauma. Not just by those who would pull the trigger, but also in those who would be horrified by it; perhaps even march against it.

Whatever collective disruption of the heart manifested in 2020, there are some who experienced it as a kind of euphoria. To be a part of it all. To witness the record. An energy not of sorrow, but of strange and subtle delight. As if Black death and momentary outrage could save them from their interior boredom or their own emotional voids.

I know. We can't police these things.

For many others, reducing you to symbols is not so much a symptom of disordered appetite, but rather failed memory or exhaustion or the need to confer meaning onto the death of you. Perhaps, we think, if we make you large, you won't be so easily forgotten. But with that magnification, details don't come into focus; they blur. The larger I've made you, the less human you've become.

The truth is that you were each an entire world to those who loved you in life. I did not know you. And so to make you large is to distort and disfigure what little impression I have. I make you smiling. I put you in a respectable uniform. I place a baby in your arms. We make sure that you were faultless, above reproach. As if you never rolled through a stop sign. As if you could only ever be kind.

If you could read this letter, I would want you to receive it in part as an apology. I'd want you to know that whoever you were in life, no white person had the right to steal it. That our collective grief shouldn't require an erasure. That I'm releasing, or trying to release, the caricatures I've made of you. That I want to remember you as more human than symbol. You deserve that much.

Which is why I couldn't possibly write this letter to any one of you. I write to you for the anniversary of Floyd's death, knowing many more bodies, many more voices and hands and lungs breathing have been taken just as callously with varying degrees of collective protest and memory.

The truth is you are one. Of many. Too many. And there will be others joining you. I think of my brother. My second neighbor. The teenager bowed over a portable speaker on the subway. These are terrifying times for one's imagination.

The truth is we've marched and we've boycotted and we've painted the beautiful murals which have then been distorted and vandalized. We've tried. I won't pretend that many of us haven't tried. But with every attempt to reclaim our breath, it seems there is a renewed determination to smother it. What is left for us? Where else can we go?

Lately, I've been writing *your* name, Sonya Massey. In chalk as I doodle with the child I love. I don't know why. You remind me of someone. I write it big. I write it tiny. Sometimes in cursive. Sometimes all caps. Make myself pass over you like a threshold as I climb the stairs to my porch or get in my car. After a few days, the rain takes you away again. This is my ritual of you. With every attempt at erasure, I pick up the chalk. A minor defiance, but I think it's forming me.

I promise to retain this defiance. To resist erasure. To keep you as human as I'm able. To not sacrifice the truth of you in favor of a perfect god-like victim. I promise to breathe. As deep as I'm able. To learn my breath; to listen for more than just trauma in it; to realize our breath might actually contain a wisdom.

May what was stolen from you be recovered in us. *Inhale. Exhale.* Every breath, mysterious and defiant.

* * *

Prayer:

God who remembers,

They have stolen so much from us. Protect our memory from that same fate. Grant us agency over our stories, over our faces, that we would defiantly pass on all that they'd like us to forget.

We want more for ourselves. More than just altars and ceremony. We want life — imperfect, complicated, human life. Permission to be morally complex, emotionally disrupted. Permission to drive and stand outside corner stores and play with toys and sleep and boil water. Yes, and boil water without risk of being destroyed. Whiteness stalks our days and nights. We will not be prey. Meet us in our weariness and renew in us that sacred defiance which began in our ancestors. Revive our hunger for beauty, tenderness and steadied breathing. Keep the air in our lungs in pace with yours, knowing that, in you, justice is not far from us; no protest futile, no face forgotten.

May it be so.

Breathe:

INHALE: We reclaim our breath.

EXHALE: We remember what's been stolen.

**Faith &
Leadership**

An offering of faithandleadership.com