

Musings on Justice in 2020

by Dennis Payton Knight

People of all colors and generations are marching daily in the streets of America and cities around the world, inspired by the death of George Floyd. The cause, not matter where the march, is but one: Justice. This writing is not so much an essay but a series of musings on justice in 2020, a year of pandemic and pandemonium.

Justice and Equality are synonymous ideals. Inequalities in everyday institutions like healthcare and education are always unjust. The present pandemic of COVID-19 is remarkably unjust when it comes to color.

The cry that black lives matter is often countered by the retort that all lives matter, a supercilious, empty idea when white lives seem to matter more.

What is it like for a parent of a black or brown boy or girl when it comes time to have that talk, the one where they share their own experiences and advice about how to behave when pulled over in traffic, rightly or wrongly, or how to react to unfounded suspicions in a place of busines, or whether ever to go out solo for an evening's jog.

I don't have the life experience to even guess what that talk must consist of, and for that I am glad. And then I wonder, what is it like for a black or brown boy or girl to not have a parent in their life to give them that advice for getting by in a white society?

Police are chartered to serve and protect everyone and anyone who occupies their immediate sphere of jurisdiction. Circumstances of color, gender, age and citizenship are all irrelevant to that mission.

Police are often in harm's way, and step forward selflessly, heroically, to deflect to themselves attacks by one person against others. The right of police to self-defense should not be held to an unreasonable standard. Police are entitled to justice, too, and it should be just as swift and just as blind as it should be for you or for me.

Retaliation for insult, disobedience or perceived disrespect is not self-defense, and the standard of reasonable force to accomplish an apprehension too often becomes a license to harm. Unnecessary force of any form or amount used in rage by police as punishment for perceived misdeed or resistance is not justice. Police are not the deciders of justice, that is the role of a judge.

And in the courts, that very institution founded on the notion that justice is blind, seated under the icon of a blindfolded Lady Justice, justice is not always done. The constitutional promise of trial by a jury of one's peers falls short when the defendant doesn't fit the community's demographic. Jail sentences are often based on circumstances of race, exacerbated by our nation's war on drugs, conflating the vices of marijuana with the destruction of heroine.

The term Equal Justice is an oxymoron, or it should be, because its opposite, unequal justice, is never Justice.