

A Commitment to Resisting

“If you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it.” Zora Neale Hurston.

It all belongs to you. This fight belongs to you, too. This is the urgent message of JUSTINJUST. It echoes in every image, every voice, every scene. Like joy, art has always been used as a form of resistance. (Resistance exists on a spectrum—it can be as subtle as watching or as forceful as storming the Capital Building.) The works of this exhibit have a purpose beyond temporary consumption. Beyond an appeal to the white-identified gaze. Each piece reaches out a hand directly to marginalized communities; validates a shared grief. It also challenges people of color to search out our biases and prejudices for other communities. What you witness here is truth-telling.

Though the phrase has become synonymous with people of color and marginalized communities, social justice is for all of us. We should see needless loss of life as our collective failure to protect. Equality is human. The pursuit of empathy, love and human decency is psychologically healthy for all of us. If you feel like this job doesn't concern you, wake up. You may not have taken your place in the fight, but this was never beyond you: someone has been taking up your slack. Denying yourself or your children's right to understand, consider and employ fairness with people is psychologically damaging. “While there is no comparison with the effects on people of color, white people are also dehumanized and burdened by racism. The position of supremacy is inherently dehumanizing to individuals in the dominant group, in addition to the terrible costs to the subordinated group. Our full humanity can only be realized in full community with other human beings - in situations of reciprocity, equity, fairness, and mutuality...”¹ Feelings of superiority enter the minds of a dominant group beyond their control. Coupled with negative thoughts and stereotypes about people of color, this can be deadly. Racism is pathological; insidious.

Maybe we aren't being aggressive enough. We must view any form of racism as a deadly threat to human existence. We should instantly feel up-in-arms and defensive when we detect it. Racism is always up to no good. It should make us hold our breath as it passes. We should be deadly terrified of it, afraid of the possibilities of its force, its impact. We shouldn't give it an adequate chance to explain itself. If it fits the description, we should chase it down, tackle and subdue it until reinforcements arrive. When we see racism, we should assume it means to

¹ <http://www.macucc.org/racismhurtseveryonecoststowhitepeople>

harm us and steal from us. We should pull our loved ones closer and be ready to defend them. We have every right to be suspicious—inevitably—it will be covering part of its face. Perhaps masquerading as something else. We have the right to protect ourselves and the people around us. We should strive to root it out; take it on as a civil responsibility. Racism shouldn't be allowed to roam freely in our neighborhoods, and we should follow the spark of alert in our bodies—take it seriously. If it asks, we should tell it we are apprehending it because it fit the description.

When we abide prejudice, bias, or “passive” racism, we take a deadly risk. Our safety, mental health, and humanity is being threatened. Being aggressive means being an anti-racist, a person dedicated to countering racism. “No one is born racist or antiracist, these result from the choices we make. Being antiracist results from a conscious decision to make frequent, consistent, equitable choices daily.”² Being an antiracist will never be as simple as a donation or waving someone ahead of you in traffic. It is not an event, it is a lifestyle. It requires continual reflection and self-awareness, an openness to learning and listening.

Our attention is often misdirected. If we are intentional, when the same problems reoccur, we will look for patterns. Logic demands we analyze and pursue solutions. Symptoms and outcomes of problems are acknowledged, but then analyzed for prevention. A good scientist rarely blames the disease for existing because they know their work is in identifying causes and developing a cure.

I viewed this exhibit the day before the verdict of the George Floyd case. As I considered all I saw represented, I thought about what was missing. I couldn't help but wonder what this exhibit would look like if all the guilty were represented along with their victims: the “friendly” neighborhood watch, the person who called the police, the ICE agents. These people manage to fade into the background. They are almost all of them labeled as “exceptions” or “bad apples” because of the detrimental consequences of their actions. Recently, night show host Trevor Noah said, “If these are bad apples, where are the good apples?” The truth is: all of us have the potential to act in ways that are damaging. We must accept that we all have the potential to turn, to rot, to not be our best selves. We must pursue acknowledging humanity in others and making our country safe for everyone. Otherwise, we can easily become one of the guilty.

Racism can be infectious when its useful. It can move through your body as quick as 24-hour virus. Interpersonal racism and prejudice have always been

² <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist>

situationally convenient. It usually accompanies competition. In the heat of the moment, you may choose to leverage whatever form of privilege you have. When you call the police after a fender bender and expect them to side with you. When your child is competing for a position on the school soccer team. When you are on a job search committee and considering who is qualified. You fill in the blank. But challenge your thoughts. Question your thoughts. You need to challenge how you feel when you are the “only” in a crowd of people of color and you feel afraid. Logically, this doesn’t make sense. If you are in a crowd of human beings, you are safer, right?