

Magnitude and Intensity
A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation
By The Rev. CJ McGregor
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I was once a chaplain in a forensic unit in a Massachusetts state hospital. The patients in this unit were being held and evaluated to determine if they were competent to stand trial for their alleged crimes of murder, arson, assault, and other crimes. It was an intense job, but I loved it. Holding the hands of and comforting a person who allegedly murdered with those hands was quite an experience for me. No matter what those hands did, they were now reaching out in their most desperate moment and it was a privilege to hold those hands in mine. I put ministry above punishment.

As part of the evaluation team I met with each person admitted to the unit. I needed to spend time with each patient's record to produce a spiritual evaluation. While reading hundreds of records before I moved on from my role as Chaplain, I realized that each person had something in common. Most were functioning, at quite different levels, in the community for years. Likely considered the odd neighbor or the person children were told to stay away from. I noticed that each person had something in their life happen one day that tipped the scale, that brought them to a tipping point, pushed beyond their emotional threshold. It seemed they were able to keep it together until that one day something pushed them over the cliff, disconnecting them from reality and perhaps the right thing to do.

I often wonder what my tipping point is. What the magnitude and intensity of an event in my life would need to be for me to be pushed beyond my emotional threshold? I can tell you that I've been very close to finding out a few times in my life. I'm sure you can recall times on your journey when you thought you just couldn't take anymore, you felt like you were going to crack or even break. We all have watched someone in our lives reach this point and decompensate before our eyes. In my grandmother's day it was called a nervous breakdown. I know this because she was hospitalized after sending her youngest son off to Vietnam. She had already sent two others. It was at the same time she was being physically abused by my grandfather, filed for divorce, and was asked to leave her church because of the divorce. She broke. It was that one day she could no longer hold on. The experience was too big and too intense for her to remain emotionally healthy. She lost her grip momentarily, but eventually returned home healthy. She then had an idea of her limit. She remained emotionally healthy for the remainder of her life.

We all have limits. We have different breaking points. It bothers me when people question why others couldn't handle a situation when they went through the same thing and got through just fine. They are called weak, told to buck up, to get a grip. The most loving thing to do in these moments is to understand we all respond differently and to reach out and hold that person, not call them weak. Who knows? You might be the one who can take no more one day and rely on compassion.

We are experiencing an example of breaking points across our country now. Communities are rioting to protest the murders of several African Americans in just the past month. It might be

easy for me, a privileged white man, to condemn the rioters, to be outraged without being able to authentically feel the black experience in America. I see it a different way. I rely on the view of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. King's last book before he died was *Where do we go from here – chaos or community?* King saw clearly that something was brewing in this country, and he saw first hand individuals and whole communities suffocated. I think it is too simplistic to say the people chose chaos instead of community. King had a wise statement about rioting. He said "rioting is the language of the unheard." Racism is deeply embedded in our criminal laws and law making, which precipitate bias in our judicial system. Yes, activists are angry and their anger cannot be dismissed as illegitimate; for doing so would be a direct denial of the black experience in our country.

The beginning of community is truth telling. This is the promise and challenge of the Black Lives Matter movement. As long as we fail to hear people trying to be heard, as long as we stay blind to the stories of those around us (including the tragic ones), as long as we stay silent about institutional bias and perversion, our days are numbered. If our faith is going to continue to be a vital force in our life and the life of our community, we need to stand up and listen. The right time is always now, lest we miss the moment, and push a community, a people, to the breaking point.

There will be those who will say this movement is too limited, even that it's racist. They will ask us why don't we say "All Lives Matter?" Our answer will be simple – All lives matter when Black lives matter. We need each other completely. This our faith and our commitment. We can't afford to have anyone left out of the picture, gasping for air. All lives matter when black lives matter. Our life, the life of this congregation, the life of our schools, our work, our justice system, the people inside this sanctuary and the people outside this sanctuary, our entire community depends completely on everyone noticing the most basic truth – black lives matter.

Whether Unitarian Universalists should be allies to and involved in the modern black justice movement is not a question but a given. But what qualifies as an ally, from black and white perspectives, isn't universal. "I think a white person can only be a true ally if he or she works from the desire to dismantle white supremacy instead of merely being fueled by white guilt," says Katrina L. Rogers, the communications manager of an advocacy organization in New Orleans. Rogers tells us, "never be under the assumption that if a white person identifies as an ally that they're invested in my well-being." "Labels mean little" she says, and "if you're not working with us and taking our direction, you're not an ally." While some argue that institutional change happens only when white people get out of the way, seeing white people participate in the cause can lead to awareness. When white people see white people brutalized it stirs up the same fears and anxiety that black people have had to contend with daily for centuries.

While the role of white participants in Black Lives Matter shouldn't be left to black organizers to figure out, black Americans have had to contend with racism and it isn't the responsibility of blacks to show whites how to be good allies and comrades. White activists and sympathizers with the Black Lives Matter cause should take a page from white activists of the civil rights movement: that black people are the leaders, that the movement is centered around them, that it isn't about white people.. It is not up to Black Lives Matter, nor any movement led by and for communities of color, to make space for, or articulate a vision for white people. The expectation that black leaders and movements should automatically do so is a subtle extension of the sort of

white-centric entitlement that gives rise to the need for such movements in the first place. Then again, we haven't exactly blazed a path to enlightenment and liberation so far on our own

And so, with this new understanding we are able to muster compassion and not judgement when facing the rioting happening across our country. King was right, the magnitude and intensity of not being heard for centuries can bring a community to its breaking point. Just as you struggle sometimes to avoid becoming unglued, so do the people we are judging and criminalizing. Is the rioting impossible to justify, perhaps. Impossible to understand? Not at all. Police have participated in a quiet riot against black people for generations. Rioting may be the wrong way to persuade authorities or white Americans to bring about long-needed changes. But that raises the question: What is the right way? The problem for African Americans is that most whites have never been sympathetic to the methods used in the long fight for racial equality.

Most whites reject violent measures to combat racial inequity and reject disruptive, nonviolent demonstrations. But a majority of them agree that racism remains a big problem in American society. So you would think quiet, peaceful, non-disruptive protests would generate a positive response. White America is always insisting that African Americans find an appropriate way to register their complaints and demands. Alas, nothing ever seems to hit the sweet spot. The methods of protest bother most whites more than the abuses that generate the protests. Rioting may not bring about the changes that would establish genuine equality for black Americans. But neither has anything else.

Black and white alike, need to do the work to understand ourselves in the context of the anti-racism movement. White allies, it is not enough to say "I'm not racist." Prove it. Do the work. Understand white privilege without guilt. Black leaders, as white allies we will do the work but need your direction and grace as to what you need. As black leaders and white allies, as Unitarian Universalists, we have a responsibility to one another. The responsibility to love, to be outraged, to act, and to heal.

May it be so.