

The Violence in Our Streets: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Unitarian Universalist Responses

Rabbi Jonathan Klein, CLUE-LA <jklein@cluejustice.org>
To: erhea@cluejustice.org

Fri, Jul 14, 2017 at 3:34 PM

Elizabeth --



Nina Fernando leads a CLUE vigil held in Long Beach, December 9, 2014

As an economic justice organization, CLUE-LA staff and board see the direct tie-in between violence on our streets and the way people are able to lead their lives. When the ever-present background of gunshots leaves school children fearing for their lives, it damages their ability to advance in life; when those gunshots come from the police and result in unwarranted incarceration of friends and family and community trust is broken, those very same children can lose their dreams for a meaningful life, imagining that they, too, will suffer the same fate as those around them.

CLUE leaders remain heartbroken by our societal pandemic of lives lost at the hands of law enforcement, whose job is to protect and serve community members. The recent high profile stories of unarmed black men being snuffed out shocks us; in our grief, many faith leaders involved in CLUE work have put their pain into words, some to make sense of the senseless, others to console the bereaving members of their communities. Below, you will find the thoughtful responses of **Rabbi Aryeh Cohen** (Professor, American Jewish University), **Reverend Peter Laarman** (former Director, Progressive Christians Uniting), **Reverend Tera Little** (Minister, Throop Unitarian Universalist Church, Pasadena), **Reverend Timothy Murphy** (current Director, Progressive Christians Uniting), and **Shakeel Syed** (Director, Islamic Shura Council).

Nevertheless, there is hope here in Los Angeles. CLUE-LA's **Rabbi Jonathan Klein**, **Pastor Stephen Cue**, Board member **Robert Branch**, and **Rabbi Heather Miller** along with terrific allies **Rev. Peter Laarman** of Justice not Jails and **Najee Ali** of National Action Network testified

at the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, to demand that there be a Civilian Oversight Commission for the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, one with subpoena power and independence. **And guess what? We won!** Thank you to newly-elected Sheila Kuehl and Hilda Solis, who joined both Mark Ridley-Thomas and Don Knabe in a four to one vote in favor of Civilian Oversight!

One more thing:

**CLUE-LA HOSTS A PRAYER VIGIL,
PROTEST & DIE-IN
AT LAPD HEADQUARTERS**

Join clergy, labor, and community to help us honor the memory of Michael Brown, Eric Garner and too many others by participating in a peaceful protest, Prayer Vigil and Die-In at Los Angeles Police headquarters. Faith leaders will lead us in prayers and reflections, making demands as we seek justice in our streets. We will be conducting a "Die-In," but we are not risking arrest; LAPD has been notified of our action as well.

Monday, December 15th, 2014, at 4:00pm
LAPD Headquarters: 100 West 1st Street, Los Angeles, California 90012
Feel free to bring Visuals or Displays with Messages

Please let us know by emailing office@cluela.org if you would like to add your organization as endorser for the press advisory or event.

Abundant Blessings,
Rabbi Klein and CLUE-LA Staff



"The Long Road Home"

Rev Tera Little

Preached at Throop UU Church, Pasadena
December 7, 2014

We just walked through another week of heartbreak. Which followed another week of heartbreak. And in my two and a half years with you, I've started too many sermons in this exact same way.

Lifting up the collective pain and anger of a country that strives - and sometimes fails at proving - that "diversity need not mean divisiveness." (quote from the morning's reading from Rev. William Schultz).

*The dark is not yet done,
we search for a road that will lead us home.*

Two years ago the tragic news of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting ushered in this season of celebrating light and life in the midst of darkness. We struggled to hold a container for our grief that would also

allow room for joy and connection.

This December we light our candles and sing our glory alleluia's, tinged once again with anger, regret, sadness, disbelief over the most recent decisions to not indict police officers who killed unarmed black men, Michael Brown and Eric Garner.

Our worship theme this month is “simplicity.” But there’s nothing simple about the continued discrimination and disregard and dis-valuing experienced daily by people of color in the United States.

There’s nothing simple about the privileged response of the dominant white culture, when the conversation turns away from the very real hurt and pain and indignation that exists in black communities.

And turns toward a conversation rationalizing the actions of police officers and the policies of the institutions they work for.

These murders remind us that the more beautiful world we dream of ... is still so far away.

If you have spent the past two weeks, feeling as if these events plunged you into a darkness mirroring the longer nights settling upon us, you are not alone.

If you have no idea what you can do to hold the world a little more gently in your hands, you are not alone.

*The dark is not yet done,
we search for a road that will lead us home.*

We so desperately want and need love and belonging in our lives. We need to know we matter. This is at the core of our Unitarian Universalist faith. That every person means something.

That every person carries an inherent worth and dignity. The spark of the divine is alive in each one of us. In each one of you.

The continued violence against African Americans in the United States sends a different message, one that contradicts our central belief. This condoned violence sends the message that black lives in this country don’t matter.

And a through-line running amidst all the emotions we carry is the question: How do we move forward?

What can I do, How can I be, What might I say that will make a difference, that will put us squarely on the road toward Beloved Community?

We wonder, how much longer must we wait before the beautiful world we dream of is our lived reality?

In the Christian liturgical calendar this is the second Sunday of Advent.

A time of waiting.

As a spiritual practice, Advent is not a four week indifferent, numbed-out, passively waiting for Christmas Day to finally come so we can open up presents type of observation.

Advent is an intentional, expectant time of spiritual preparation.

A passage from the Book of Isaiah says:

They who wait for the LORD
shall renew their strength

Perhaps the question isn’t “How much longer must we wait?” That question breeds more frustration, because there is no clear, easy, measurable answer. We can’t get there soon enough.

But “How will I use my time of waiting to strengthen my heart and mind, my sense of love and belonging, my commitment to ensuring all lives matter, including black lives?”

That’s something each of us has the power to do something about.

Turning our own hearts and minds closer toward the divine, closer toward our values.

As stark as the recent events have been ... we can see a flicker of hope. One found in the incredible mosaic of people who are voicing their outrage and disappointment.

Hope is felt when we see it is not only African Americans who are engaging in this conversation, but people across all demographics, across faith lines and racial divides and socioeconomic boxes. We are raising our voices. Hungry to engage in some meaningful way.

People have stood and sung and shouted. They have prayed and witnessed in silence, with candles or with signs proclaiming “Black Lives Matter” “I Can’t Breathe.” Roads toward home and Beloved Community are being built. But before we rush into a hopeful optimism. Before your minister gives you homework to do, or asks you to join her out on the streets, raising our voices against injustice, all wearing our green Throop t-shirts and proclaiming that we stand on the side of love. Because I will do that and I expect you to be there with me. But before we rush into hope and action. In the spirit of the Advent season, I welcome you instead into an uncomfortable place of waiting. Soon enough the menorah candles will be lit. Soon enough Winter Solstice will come and the days will grow longer once again. But until then - let the darkness of this particular time of year embrace you. Let us find a place where we might ask hard questions of ourselves, of our God, of our community, and in the place of quiet waiting, hear the still, small voice, guiding us on our way. Amen.

A Lament for Eric Garner
Rabbi Aryeh Cohen

[Justice in the City](#), December 3rd, 2014

Eric Garner is the unarmed 43 year old black man, who was killed by the NYPD in Staten Island in July. The whole incident was recorded. He was placed in a choke hold and can be heard saying 11 times: “I can’t breathe,” before he died. The officer who killed him was not indicted. The coroner had ruled it a homicide.

Then the Lord God fashioned the human,
dust from the earth,
and blew into his nostrils the breath of life,
and the human became a living creature. (Genesis 2:7)

I can’t breathe.

God blew into his nostrils the breath of life,

into that dust,

like a female impregnated by a male,

for they join and this dust is filled with all.

With whom? Spirits and souls. (Zohar 1:49)

I can’t breathe.

Dust from the earth,



this dust is the holy land

and it is the place of the Holy Temple.

God blew into his nostrils the breath of life,

this breath of life is the holy soul that is drawn from that supernal life. (Zohar 3:46)

I can't breathe.

Dust from the earth,

from the lower realms,

God blew into his nostrils the breath of life,

from the upper realms. (Breishit Rabba 12:8)

I can't breathe.

Thus the dictum of Scripture, *By the word of the Lord were the heavens made*, is analogous to its dictum, *And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth*, in the same verse. For the terms *His word* and *His saying* are used figuratively in the same way as the terms *His mouth* and *the breath of His mouth*, the intention being to signify that the heavens have come to exist through His purpose and will. (Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:65)

I can't breathe.

Breathing in, I calm body and mind.

Breathing out, I smile.

Dwelling in the present moment I know

this is the only moment. (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*)

I can't breathe.

At the core is the breath, instinctive, not given

not taken, it is not a privilege or a right, it is

even independent of oneself, even on those

dark nights when in the loneliness of an empty bed

you try harder than you ever have not to breathe

you do, and the breath breathes you, and you are

again.

I can't breathe.

I hate, I despise your feast days,

And I do not savor your sacred assemblies.

Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,

I will not accept them,
Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings.
Take away from Me the noise of your songs,
For I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments.
But let justice run down like water,
And righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5)

I can't breathe.

Learn to do good.
Devote yourselves to justice;
Aid the wronged.
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow.
Alas, she has become a harlot,
The faithful city
That was filled with justice,
Where righteousness dwelt—
But now murderers. (Isaiah 1)

I can't breathe.

The violence then of the decreation
of the moment when the breath no longer
comes. What did that feel like? What
unearthly panic? What desperate rage
and struggle brings to the surface
the cry for the basic elements of life.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

#AllLivesMatter Is a Theological Cop-out
Timothy Murphy
Director, Progressive Christians Uniting

Right now the United States is reverberating with the shouts of voices and the steps of marchers demanding justice for unarmed Black citizens killed by police officers. If you use Twitter, you may



have seen the hashtag: **#BlackLivesMatter**. It is carried on signs and declared in chants. I've got a theological newsflash for you: this proclamation *is* the gospel.

Good news only can be declared in light of a problem. And the problem is that in far too many instances, our society's actions reveal that Black lives don't matter. Extrajudicial killings, police harassment, and intimidation of Black people is a this-worldly anti-gospel. **#BlackLivesMatter** offers itself as a succinct, holy antidote.

Some people are put off by such specificity – don't all lives matter? Isn't all life sacred? The result is the counter-hashtag popping up everywhere as a critique: **#AllLivesMatter**. It tries to universalize the answer. While it is a "true" statement, it is also completely irrelevant and contributes nothing as a response to Black oppression. It actually obscures the problem. It forgets that the gospel *always* addresses concrete problems. The problem is not that everyone is a target of the police; hands are not reaching for weapons when persons like myself, a white man, interact with them. **#AllLivesMatter** drains the specificity out of the good news. A generic gospel is no gospel at all.

There is no better time to remember this fact than during Advent. Jesus was born in a specific time and place, and lived a specific life amidst Roman Empire and occupation. This birth helps us prepare for the divine revealing itself in our world as good news for *our* problems today. Good news is Black lives being respected by authorities. Good news is accountability when oppression and executions occur. Good news means bringing down powerful prosecutors from their thrones and lifting up the lowly, for **#BlackLivesMatter!**

We can best show that all lives matter when we address **first and foremost** the places where that good news is denied in the lives of our sisters and brothers. The gospel is in the streets this Christmas – go and do likewise.

Sin Grows With Doing Good

Shakeel Syeed

Executive Director, Islamic Shura Council of Southern California

"Sin grows with doing good," wrote T.S. Eliot, the major twentieth-century poet who was born in St. Louis, the city of which Ferguson is an outgrowth.

"My conscience is clear," said Darren Wilson, the Ferguson officer, after the grand jury verdict and before resigning with full benefits.

"I did not mean to hurt Mr. Garner," said Daniel Pantaleo, the New York cop, after the grand jury verdict and while remaining on job with full benefits.



Both officers firmly believed they were doing good. Both grand juries believed that the deceased—Michael Brown and Eric Garner—were in the wrong.

A large number of Americans, mostly people of color, agree with T. S. Eliot. They believe that the cops sinned in imagining they were somehow doing good.

As investigations of particular incidents continue, America must ask itself:

- How could and for how long white cops will keep on killing black and brown unarmed men and children?
- What makes juries vindicate the killer cops?
- Why does the nation prefer to remain in slumber?
- Who will wake the nation?
- When will America begin to see itself from the eyes of a widow or a wailing mother?

Unless we seek answers to these questions, sin will keep growing. The bullets and the chokeholds will kill more black and brown men and children, and sin will keep growing.

Preachers will keep on preaching. Pundits will keep on barking. Politicians will keep on pacifying. And sin will keep on growing.

There is only one way to stop America from sinning. America's redemption lies in the words of a black man, spoken nearly five decades ago:

"We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

We must become a person-centered society in which all persons are valued and respected. Or else we must prepare for the day when the wretched and despised rise up against those who persist in sinning.



**Putting a Price on Black Lives
Civil Settlements in Bias Cases Rub Salt in Ancient Wounds**

Peter Laarman
Justice not Jails

An offhand remark in a media interview with the Brown family's lawyer, Benjamin Crump, got me thinking about a little-discussed abomination. Mr. Crump acknowledged that the family will press a civil suit over Michael's death, but he made it very clear that any civil settlement won't address the justice issue—the issue of accountability for the shooter of an unarmed Black man.

I invite you to look without flinching into the matter of civil settlements for both false arrests and police shootings of Black people. It's an eye-opener. New York City alone has shelled out *half a billion dollars* over the past five years in cases of this kind. But lots of other U.S. cities—Philadelphia, Denver, Chicago, LA—also have handed over fistfuls of taxpayer money to "settle" suits brought by injured individuals and grieving families in cases that allege racial profiling in the wrongful conduct of police officers.

There is much more to this story than the well-known near-immunity from criminal prosecution enjoyed by law enforcement officers. There is the hideousness of the fact that the repeated official "clearing" of racist misconduct is so clearly falsified by the fact that lots of money keeps getting handed over in civil settlements.

If the conduct of an officer or officers in a particular incident had been all good and proper, would all this money be going out the door? Hardly. Settlement money is the bitter fruit of ongoing racial injustice. It's a kind of declaration that white people have the right to abuse and even take the lives of Black people as long as some payment is eventually offered. It's salt rubbed into an ancient wound.

In the book of Jeremiah, God is disgusted to see that "everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace."

That was twenty-seven centuries ago in far-away Judah. I can't help thinking that God must be still more disgusted to see how very far from peace with justice we remain in 21st century America.

Rabbi Jonathan Klein, CLUE
<http://www.cluejustice.org/>

CLUE: Building a Just and Sacred Society · 464 Lucas Ave, Suite 202, Los Angeles, CA 90017, United States

This email was sent to erhea@cluejustice.org. To stop receiving emails, [click here](#).

You can also keep up with Rabbi Jonathan Klein, CLUE on [Twitter](#).