

Are We Better Yet?

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Okay, here's a question: Who said, "I can't breathe"? Most people would probably answer by saying, "It was George Floyd on the day he died, May 25, 2020—the day that he was murdered by police." They would not be wrong. However, those were also the last words uttered by several other black men who died while in police custody: Eric Garner (2014), Christopher Lowe (2018), Byron Williams (2019), and John Elliott Neville (2019). Have we forgotten that the United States of America was founded on the principle that everyone has unalienable rights to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness? A shared sentiment amongst many people is that everyone should be able to live freely and have equal opportunity. Where you come from should not matter, what you look like should not matter, and what religion you follow should not matter. Everyone should have the same opportunities and no one should suffer discrimination for who they are. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

One reason this problem is so difficult to tackle is that racism, intolerance, and hate are sometimes hard to see and are therefore difficult to understand and address. I, for one, have failed to witness any forms of harassment. Granted, I am young (I only graduated high school a couple of months ago). This is, however, an important point to make; people are not always aware of what goes on in the lives of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. Maybe I do not hang out with people who are racist, or perhaps racism was not a thing at my school. Either way, if people are ignorant of the injustices that others face, they may not realize that they need to do

something about it. While in high school, I wrote several papers on the topic of intolerance and the resulting violence. Through my research, I discovered that these problems are widespread but we can combat them with education.

Rather than merely claiming that this is an issue, some numbers might help to put things in perspective. According to Anna Presnall of the University of Alabama at Birmingham Institute for Human Rights Blog, hate crime is not something that is going away. “In 2020, the FBI released their annual hate crimes report for the previous year, 2019. This report showed that hate crimes rose by 3%, a number that may not seem that significant at first glance but breaks a record for the highest number of hate crimes in a year. Of the more than 7000 hate crimes reported, 51 were fatal, another record breaking number.” Hate crime is considered by the FBI to be “a committed criminal offense which is motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender’s bias(es) against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, and/or gender identity.” Hostility towards those who are different is something that is still a problem, and an ever-growing one at that. More people are being attacked and more people are dying from these attacks. Of course, a discussion about hate crimes cannot be complete without talking about the death of George Floyd, the black man killed by police in 2020. In a piece written by Holly Bailey for the Washington Post, details of what the officers arresting Floyd did are revealed. “Body-camera video shows Floyd complaining of claustrophobia and ultimately being placed face down on a city street, with Chauvin [the senior officer at the scene] pressing his knees into Floyd’s neck and upper back, Kueng [a former officer at the scene] at Floyd’s back and Lane [a former officer] holding the man’s legs. Thao [a former officer] stood a few feet away, pushing back bystanders who increasingly pressed the officers to get off Floyd as he began to lose

consciousness.” If this wasn’t bad enough, the ex-officers seemed to be making light of the situation. According to the prosecutors during the officers’ trial, video evidence showed Keung laughing when Chauvin told Floyd that it takes “a heck of a lot of oxygen to keep talking,” which he said after Floyd uttered, “I can’t breathe,” more than 25 times. The officers showed blatant disregard for Floyd’s safety; he was pronounced dead later that day.

With the ongoing violence against people based on racial, religious, and other factors, it may seem as if people simply do not care and are willing to live in a world with these injustices. However, people may not realize what is going on around them. Kids can be surveyed in order for us to see how the next generation views hate crimes. Margaret Hagerman, an assistant professor of sociology at Mississippi State University, did just that. While some kids made comments about a need for change, many others thought differently. One 11-year-old said that racism was a problem in the past but things have changed. Some kids believe that there is no such thing as privilege and that everyone gets what they deserve in life if they work for it. Lastly, and perhaps the most shocking remark, a 16-year-old said that she “did not care” about black people being killed because they “obviously did something to deserve it.” This narrow-minded way of thinking plagues society and is why there are such wide-scale problems with tolerance. In an article from the New York Post, Gabrielle Fonrouge, a national correspondent and investigative reporter, shares some data that may reveal why some people felt motivated to attack people of Asian descent. “Before those attacks not a single hate crime against Asian Americans had been reported to the NYPD in 2020. But by the end of the year, there were 30 — a 900-percent surge from just three recorded in 2019.” The aforementioned attacks include a 23-year-old woman who was slugged in the face after being asked where her mask was. Another other

attack was a 59-year-old man who had been kicked to the ground and told to go back to his country; the attacker was upset by the “Chinese coronavirus.” The assailants in these crimes believed that all Asians were responsible for causing the pandemic because the coronavirus came from China. Their actions were rash, impulsive, and illogical. The likely explanation is that they were driven by fear. A management and program analyst at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Sravya Tadepalli, explains, “Ignorance is a big cause of intolerance, hate, and violence against religious groups” When people are ignorant of something, it creates fear. Consequently, they feel threatened, which leads to resentment and hatred. The accumulation of these emotions results in intolerance and violence.

So, what can we learn from this, and what can we do about it? Repeated instances of racially motivated attacks, indifference toward others, and religious persecution show us that we need to educate people. A compelling argument for the value of education can be seen in the effects of a required course in world religions in the Modesto California school district. A study revealed that these students became more tolerant of other religions. “Although harassment of Muslim students escalated across the country after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, not one act of harassment was reported against Muslim students attending school in the Modesto school district.” Teaching respect for all people is necessary in the struggle against racism and bigotry. I can personally attest to the value of education. I have been training in karate for nearly ten years. The one thing we discuss in every class is character building. The ultimate goal of karate is to cultivate great human character. I have experienced more diversity (racial, ethnic, religious, economic) in my karate classes than I have experienced anywhere else. Everyone has the ultimate respect for one another. We work together and help each other. As a result, we have

become a thriving community that embraces our differences. I think the Dalai Lama said it well in *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, “If you develop a strong sense of concern for the well-being of all sentient beings and in particular *all* human beings, this will make you happy in the morning, even before coffee.”

This country was founded by people who wanted to escape persecution. It was designed to protect the basic rights of its people. After all these years, we need to do better. We need to teach our youth to value all people and to appreciate our differences so that we can live in peace and build a better world for everyone. Those of us who are reasonable, compassionate people need to make our values known. Those of us who are reasonable, compassionate people need to make our voices louder than the voices of the bigots, the racists, and the haters. Everyone should be free to breathe. We must do better!