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I’ve been reporting on race for 40 years. Can we ever fix what’s broken?

By Sylvester Monroe October 20, 2016

“I can’t keep calm. I have a black son!”

When my daughter, Sherita, posted this Facebook message the day after a white police officer in a Minneapolis suburb fatally shot 32-year-old Philando Castile during a minor traffic stop, she echoed the fear and anger of so many African American parents.

I know that anger, have felt that fear.

Professionally, I have covered the issues surrounding it for more than 40 years as the nation has continued to wrestle with race and inequality. I’ve traced the lives of black men who grew up with me in a Chicago housing project. I saw up close the Los Angeles social unrest after the not-guilty verdicts in the Rodney King case. And I was there when a jury acquitted O.J. Simpson and felt the divisive reactions of blacks and whites.

Now here we are again. We are a nation shaken anew by the age-old issue of excessive force by police against communities of color. In its wake lies brutality and death and a level of trauma for the survivors that we have yet to fully understand or even to acknowledge.

Trayvon Martin. Michael Brown. Walter Scott. Freddie Gray. Eric Garner. Tamir Rice. Alton Sterling. Terence Crutcher. Keith Lamont Scott. These are just a few of the names on a seemingly endless list of the dead. Crutcher and Scott just in September. By the time these words reach you, there may be more.

The names of the dead that we know, and the names of others that we do not, cry out for solutions to America’s race problem. African American complaints about bad policing are as old as policing itself.

At the heart of this crisis are our nation’s continuing challenges regarding race. After decades of watching the same story played out over and over in city after city, I wonder if it will ever stop, whether we really can fix what is wrong.

I hear the desperation in my daughter's voice, the fears of my sisters with 20-something sons in Chicago and Milwaukee, the exasperation of my police officer brother, the anger in my son's and grandson's words.

I hear them and more than ever I feel a burning need for the country to act decisively.

And I fear we're running out of time.

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I felt a sense of urgency 30 years ago as a Newsweek reporter when I returned to the Chicago housing project where I grew up to write about my childhood friends. I wanted to explain through their lives what it was like to grow up black and poor and male in the United States. I wanted to explain why black men were then six times as likely as white men to be murder victims, 2½ times as likely to be unemployed and why overall black men finished last in practically every socioeconomic measure, from infant mortality to life expectancy.

Today I find myself still reading stories about black males under siege and trying to write about why everyone, not just some of us, needs to pay attention. President Obama's initiative My Brother's Keeper will not be enough. For a large segment of black men in inner cities little has changed, and black men everywhere still bear the burden of too often being dehumanized and categorized as more violent, more dangerous, more deviant and less valued than their white counterparts.

My mother gave me "the talk" as a young boy. In my world I never met the "Officer Friendly" I read about in schoolbooks. Instead I was taught that police officers were to be avoided.

I gave my son, now 39, the talk, too. He still recalls the time as an adolescent when he was profiled by a Los Angeles police officer and given a ticket for what amounted to walking while black in the predominantly white Westwood neighborhood of Los Angeles.

It gets passed down from one generation to the next, this "talk," an inheritance that no American should have to have.

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We watched it again and again on the evening news — remember the evening news? — and waited for the justice to come. What more evidence could any jury ever need in the police beating of Rodney King? It was a story we African Americans always knew; now it was on tape for all to see. All that ended in a 1992 uprising that left more than 50 dead, 2,000 injured and nearly $1 billion in property damage. In its totality, it was the worst civil unrest in U.S. history.

The scenes of beatings and chokings and shootings, many of them fatal, show up on YouTube now nearly as frequently as cat videos, bombarding the senses and the spirit.

When the Charlotte videos emerged, we had a new kind of narration: the wife, Rakeyia Scott, urging her husband, Keith Lamont Scott, to comply and desperately trying to let the police know that he was no danger to them. (The police say he had a gun; the family has denied that.)

"Don't shoot him. Don't shoot him. … Keith, get out the car."

But it's also as if she's resigned.

Finally, when the shots ring out — from a black officer's gun — she shouts: "He better not be f------ dead. … I'm going to record you. … He better live. He better live."

Has our basic right to live become negotiable?

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Obama arrived at the White House talking about a "national conversation on race."

Many African Americans saw a ray of hope in his election, a day many never believed they would see in their lifetime. Many white Americans saw absolution in his election and grasped naively for a post-racial era.

We've been at this a long time now, and even Obama gets tired of talking about *talking* about race.

In his eulogy for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney , after Pinckney and eight other African Americans were slain in South Carolina by Dylann Roof, who sat during Bible study before opening fire, Obama said: "Every time something like this happens, somebody says we have to have a conversation about race. We talk a lot about race. There's no shortcut. And we don't need more talk."

But in July Obama found himself in an ABC News town hall about race. It was after the Dallas shooting of five police officers who were monitoring Black Lives Matter demonstrations, which had been launched after the back-to-back deaths of Alton Sterling and Castile.

Obama is looking for concrete steps to manage police reform. And taking every moment he can to point to what is possible. His remarks, along with those of George W. Bush and others at the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in September, spoke about the past, the present and the hope for tomorrow.

My daughter isn't thinking much about a national conversation.

Every time she sees another report of police brutality her thoughts turn to her 24-year-old son in Atlanta.

“All I could think about is that could have been my son, and I couldn’t breathe,” Sherita told me after seeing the video of Castile. “Those last spoken words of Eric Garner while being choked to death never meant more to me than when I first heard him say, ‘I can’t breathe!’ ”

Watching Castile’s death, over and over, she couldn’t breathe herself. And she couldn’t eat or sleep for many days.

“As a mother, I love my son and I value his life,” she told me. “I just don’t know why it is a question for others. I can’t keep calm because I have a black son whose life, synonymous with all black men, means very little.”

Then she got angry.

“Philando Castile and countless others did not deserve to die,” she said. “Not when the lunatic who shot and killed church members got a meal and is still alive, or the man associated with the New York bombing was taken alive, only being shot in the shoulder. But the black men, they get to die.”

“All I know is it hurts.”

Not long after she shared this, my grandson, a recent graduate of Savannah College of Art and Design, was handcuffed and detained by a white Atlanta police officer during a routine traffic stop. Keenan says he had done nothing wrong. But he says the officer accused him of not yielding properly as he passed him to exit the freeway. The officer discovered that my grandson, who had forgotten his identification, did not have a Georgia driver’s license.

“Sitting on the front of the police car in handcuffs, in your head, you’re thinking, ‘Am I going to be made an example of tonight?’ It was nerve-racking , but I was calm, and I was really just trying to hold myself from showing any anger. All I could hear was Ma saying, ‘Just be respectful and don’t talk back or act arrogant.’ ”

He ended up with three citations: not having a Georgia driver’s license, not carrying identification and failing to yield. The talk worked. His mother had a moment of relief.

But this generation of young black men, in the age of Obama, is different than mine or even my son’s. They often don’t defer when they feel their rights as American citizens are being violated. They are not going to take the humiliation and abuse that past generations endured. Sometimes that can lead to serious consequences.

My grandmother issued a kind of addendum to “the talk” when I complained that the police would often stop us for no reason. “I know,” she would say. “You could be in the right. But you could end up dead right.”

My brother, a police officer in Gary, Ind., lives in between these worlds. He has had to confront the anger of young black males who see only his blue uniform. And he is a black man who worried that the killing of officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge could mean that police departments across the country would feel under siege and close ranks even more. Following his department’s protocol, he said it was inappropriate for him to say more.

So many of us live in a vise that squeezes and squeezes. On one side people are squeezed by potential deadly encounters with police; on the other, depending on where they live, there is the risk of intra-community violence. My brother, who risks police violence when he is out of uniform, faces potential trouble when he is in uniform.

Here is what is true: We have always been in a conversation about race in America. So much of it is nonverbal, in what we don't say to each other.

It's in what we do, in what remains reality. In how we worship separately, accept housing discrimination and tolerate school segregation. And how we live with who ends up facing a police officer's gun.

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Columbia University professor of history Eric Foner puts it this way:

"To understand race in America, you must go beyond race. Racism is deeply embedded in American society. It has been from the beginning. And it's still out here in many institutions and encounters. What we are seeing today is the long-term consequences of the successes and failures of the civil rights revolution and the economic changes that have occurred in this country in the last generation or two."

It's been said that you can't know where you're going unless you understand where you've been. So I have turned to historians to talk about how we got to this place.

Foner's analysis is uncomplicated.

"It wasn't the fault of the civil rights revolution," says Foner. "It achieved an enormous amount, but it ran up against resistance also in many areas. That's where the anger is coming from, especially among young people who are tired of waiting, which you can hardly blame them for."

There's the matter of the growth of a black middle class, and those who have accumulated great wealth, and of course, the first African American president.

But "progress is never absolute," says Jelani Cobb, a historian who is now a professor of journalism at Columbia. "What we have in this society is net progress. Not gross progress. When we have something huge happen, something beneficial, we always have a backlash to it, and we hope the backlash doesn't eliminate all the progress that has been made."

"Emancipation happens and there is a backlash," he says. "The Great Migration happens and there is a backlash. The civil rights movement happens and there is a backlash. And then Obama happens and now we are living through that backlash."

A photo of a black woman holding a sign at a demonstration against a recent police shooting summed up the frustration. The sign read: "Why am I still protesting this s---?"

Terri Lee Freeman, president of the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, adds, “What is particularly angering to black people is that we have to tell our kids to respond in a certain way when approached by the police, because I guarantee you that conversation is not being had in white homes.”

There’s no consensus on solutions.

“We are 13 percent of the population in a country that has historically been built on race, founded explicitly on principles of race with very little intention among many people of relinquishing that,” says Cobb.

Foner thinks that part of the answer is non-race-specific policies aimed at helping the poor: “At times of economic distress, people’s attitudes toward others tend to get rather hostile. They see a pie that is shrinking, and if someone else gets more, they get less.”

We are at an impasse, he believes. The country desperately needs the kind of economic growth we saw in the 1960s that helped provide an atmosphere that made the gains of the civil rights movement possible without white people feeling like they were losing something.

“It’s possible to attack these problems, but today there is no political will to do so,” Foner says.

Freeman is more hopeful. She says that while education and dialogue alone cannot solve the problems of race, they are a significant step in the right direction.

“I believe that dialogue is action because before you can actually get to doing something, you’ve got to talk about what isn’t getting done or what isn’t happening,” Freeman says.

She adds that there could be value in such a national dialogue in the same way that South Africa’s “truth and reconciliation” talks after apartheid helped offer a starting point for healing. Racism is still a problem in South Africa, but the effort was a start.

Just having police officers saying that what other police officers did was wrong would make a difference, Freeman says. “But the black community is not seeing good cops calling out bad cops.”

Cobb doesn’t see much value in dialogue. If that could have resolved this, he says, “it would have been resolved.”

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Anger. James Baldwin said it best. “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.”

It is everything and it is this: A sense of being ignored and devalued.

I got the talk again as an adult when I moved to Los Angeles in 1988. A female friend warned me about how to be black in L.A. I laughed. She did not.

"Rule Number 1: Do not mess with LAPD! Rule Number 2: Do not mess with LAPD!"

In the almost 15 years that I lived in Los Angeles, I, unlike my son, was never stopped by LAPD. But I eventually understood what my friend meant.

And covering the 1992 unrest after the acquittal of the four officers who beat Rodney King was one of the first times that I faced my anger head-on.

Sitting in the Time magazine offices, where I was one of a handful of black journalists, I watched the verdicts with my white colleagues, most of them also friends. Every time I heard the court clerk say the words "not guilty," I heard "Forget black people," only in my head the language was far more graphic.

We were all surprised, but my white colleagues had no idea that in that moment I wanted to jump up and scream and smack somebody white.

Later on the street, watching as 40-foot flames engulfed a building, I heard a black man yell over and over, "Burn, baby, burn!" Then, "How you like me now, Mr. Policeman!"

I understood his words.

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Three years later, it was white people left in shock and disbelief at the O.J. Simpson trial. They were appalled at seeing many black people so happy with the verdict. If they knew the history of black people and the criminal justice system, they would have understood.

Today, more people are coming to a new understanding, it seems, as one video after another after another demands it. I also wonder, though, how many people don't look at the videos because for them they are just an example of one more African American refusing to do what he's told.

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There are no easy fixes. And not everyone agrees on what's broken or whether it can be fixed. When the celebrated civil rights leader Vernon Jordan surprisingly stepped down as head of the National Urban League in 1981, he said that the civil rights movement had made great strides toward equality. The next phase of the movement would be "dealing with the debris." And that, he said, would be much more difficult than everything that had come before.

That's where we still are today.

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