

REACHABLE FROM HERE

A meditation by Galen Guengerich
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In the summer of 1955, a 14-year-old African American youth named Emmett Till traveled from his home in Chicago to visit relatives in Mississippi. While there, he went into a grocery store to buy bubble gum. The store was owned by Roy and Carolyn Bryant, who were white. What exactly transpired between Emmett Till and Carolyn Bryant, who was working as a cashier at the store, remains unclear. Till was later accused of either whistling at or flirting with her, or touching her hand.

Four days later, Roy Bryant and his half-brother kidnapped Till in the middle of the night from his great-uncle Moses Wright's home. They brutally beat Till, shot him in the head, badly mutilated his body, and then dumped him into a nearby river. Three days later, his corpse was pulled out of the river. His face was so badly mutilated that he could only be identified by a signet ring on his finger.

Till's body was shipped to Chicago, where his mother insisted on having an open-casket period of mourning, which lasted five days, followed by an open casket funeral. She said she wanted to "let the world see what has happened, because there is no way I could describe this. And I needed somebody to help me tell what it was like."

Thousands of people streamed through the church to view Till's mutilated body. The images, printed in black-owned newspapers and magazines across the country, provided a glimpse into Till's suffering. The images enraged not only black people, but many whites as well. The outrage led four months later to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the modern civil rights movement was underway in earnest.

It's too early to know for sure, but the killing of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin may cause the arc of the universe to bend once again toward justice. Everyone has now seen what happened during the interminable eight minutes and 48 seconds that Chauvin had his knee on Floyd's neck, pinned to the ground. Everyone has seen Floyd's suffering in his final moments of life. With Floyd begging for breath, Chauvin remained utterly indifferent to his cries.

Chauvin's nonchalance put on full display the white supremacy on which our nation has been built. Chauvin isn't a cop gone rogue; he's both symbol and substance of the structural violence that has insured since the founding of our nation that people of color have had separate and profoundly unequal life prospects from white people. Tragically, they still do.

Let me be clear: I watched the video of George Floyd dying, and I saw his suffering. I speak these words today as a straight white male in a culture that has always privileged straight white males, and still does. I've never worried about whether I would

have a knee on my neck, my face beaten to a pulp, or my body shot full of bullet holes by a racist cop or a white vigilante. The structures of power in this country — political, economic, and even religious — were designed by people like me to protect the privilege of people like me. That’s why it’s my responsibility, and the responsibility of people like me, to do everything we can to dismantle the system of white supremacy.

When I watch the video of Derek Chauvin slowly killing George Floyd, I choke up. I feel ashamed to live in a country where some people think this level of heinous brutality is just another day at the office. I feel guilty that I haven’t done more to help stop this carnage. I feel embarrassed that these emotions ebb and flow in me over time — another sign of my privilege.

But I have seen what happened on 38th Street in Minneapolis. It’s the responsibility of me and other white people to use whatever power we have to work toward dismantling this system of injustice and oppression.

White people tend to focus on a different set of problems. Several days ago in the online publication “The Lily,” Nicole Ruthmarie Watkins wrote an article titled “An Open Letter to My Non-White Friends.” She writes, “When Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Philando Castile and Freddie Gray died, you screamed about businesses and broken windows instead of broken bones and ended life. You complained about Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during your precious football game but would not once speak up about the injustice he was kneeling for. When I said #BlackLivesMatter, you argued that #AllLivesMatter... You became a devil’s advocate. ‘See it from both sides,’ you implored. You fought more for your right to have an opinion than you did for me to be able to breathe. Instead of listening to me, you sat and formed your arguments.”

She continues, “You have not once faced that your ancestors have benefited from the racism against black people. That you still benefit from it. Not once have you acknowledged that white people were the looters first. That white people looted the whole world for spices, for black and brown bodies, for land. That white people are still the looters now... I am tired of you not doing the work. Not doing the work it takes to understand, to listen, to read, to be better, to challenge yourself. Not doing the work to see me.”

For the most part, we — white people — are guilty as charged. That’s not to say that we haven’t worked hard to make life better in some ways for some people of color, but the system that produces these horrors hasn’t changed. The problems of educational, income, and wealth inequality are getting worse. Health disparities and mass incarceration are getting worse as well.

Here’s the moral travesty: white people looked at what had happened to Emmett Till after he was dead, but they couldn’t be bothered to keep him safe while he was alive. We’ve now seen what happened to George Floyd in his dying. The question is whether white people will collectively work to safeguard black lives while they are still alive. The question is whether white people will insist that our nation live up to its founding creed — liberty and justice for everyone.

The Nobel prize-winning Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who grew up amid the sectarian troubles in Northern Ireland, once wrote a poem that's been a refrain in my mind and heart over the past few days. Heaney writes:

History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here.

Given the vicissitudes of human history, Heaney observes, we shouldn't hope that anything's possible on this side of the grave beyond what's already present. But once in a while, Heaney says, hope and history will rhyme: the great sea-change for which we long will, like a tidal wave, carry us from the land of pain to the land of promise. Our role, Heaney insists, is to believe: "believe that further shore is reachable from here."

Those of us who are white need to educate ourselves more deeply, engage ourselves more fully, and challenge ourselves more completely. We need to give more of our time and more of our talent. We need to have hard conversations with each other, face up to our blind spots and our shortcomings, and come to terms with our points of resistance. We need to get out our checkbooks.

Also, all of us together need to figure out how to get out the vote. By my calculation, we have exactly 150 more days to ride this tide of hope to a further shore of justice that will make history.

In my view, this may be one of the times when hope and history begin to rhyme. We may be seeing the beginning of a great sea-change — a tidal wave of justice. But it will happen only if white people become active anti-racists and reliable allies.

If we do these things, "the further shore" of justice is reachable from here. We need to have faith in our shared commitment to justice, hope in our common purpose of equality, and love for the spirit of compassion that holds us fast to one another.