

Justice Denied

By James Keown: MCI-Norfolk

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Once again, I, along with countless others, must put words to paper to chronicle the senseless death of a black person at the hands of a police officer. Once again, there are outcries. Once again, there are protests. Once again, there are prayer vigils. Once again, there are calls for peace and civility. Once again, I fear nothing of substance will change. Once again, I fear that real justice will be denied.

What is different about the murder of George Floyd by a white Minneapolis police officer and his accomplices? For me, it was the officer's weapon of choice: his knee. We have grown far too accustomed to seeing images of police officers and ignorant racists who think they are cops gunning down innocent black men and women in America. We have seen the images flash across our televisions so often that many of us have become numb to the pictures.

George Floyd's murder did not happen in a flash. Floyd's life was literally squeezed out of him slowly over nine minutes as he was pressed into the asphalt of a Minneapolis street. As one of the murderous cops crushed his knee into the back of Floyd's neck, he looked at the cameras being held by bystanders. The look on his face was not one of severe struggle or fear for his life -- the type of emotions that might lead one to lean toward the use of deadly force. No, this officer presented the look of a man knowingly asserting his power blended with the kind of aloofness one shows when trying to select a dessert from an Applebee's menu. This killer cop knew he was using his ultimate power against George Floyd and couldn't bring himself to care for one second what the outcome might be.

And what did George Floyd do as state sanctioned killers attacked his body? Did he fight back? Did he curse the criminals assaulting him? No, he cried out for his mother. He uttered that sentence that has become the final words for far too many black Americans. He said he couldn't breathe.

Let me be transparent. I am a white man. I am a white man who grew up in privilege totally unaware of the cloak of protection that enshrouded me. I am a white man who even in prison is privileged by the color of my skin. I often get the benefit of the doubt when questioned by authorities. I often am allowed to present my ideas. I often can challenge power with less fear of punishment. That's not white guilt; that's white reality. But, no matter how woke I may feel I am, I can in no way act like I understand the black experience.

I do understand oppression. I do understand what it is like to have a uniformed state actor care little for my existence. I live it every day in prison. To most staff members in here I am either a number: W92519; or a label: inmate, offender, convict. Few see me as a person. Even among the small group who see me as James or Mr. Keown, those feelings are often limited to working hours only. When many of these staff members go home, talk with friends, or vote, I am once again relegated to W92519, Inmate Keown.

This casual biased othering of people transforms bodies into objects. As an object, the state warehouses me with other objects in the state's possession. The state affixes a serial number to me for identification. And the state classifies me through an annual evaluation process that dictates how I will be used over the next year. When I push back against this othering, I am seen as a defective object that needs adjustment. Similarly, in the eyes of the police, they didn't kill George Floyd; they decommissioned a defective object.

The source of all oppression is an oppressor not seeing the oppressed as an equal. This is not some great epiphany. We have known this for centuries. Yet, we continue to build and support systems in America that are designed to unbalance power in our communities. We continue to allow cultures to fester inside these power structures that negatively reinforce these imbalances. The oppressed have no way to balance the scales.

One change that can be made in an effort to return power to the people, to all people, is to establish strong oversight of all state power structures. There have long been calls for independent oversight of the state police, local police, the Department of Correction, and the Parole Board. There has been little will to do so.

Are we waiting for our own George Floyd moment? We have already had many such moments. The Boston police shot and killed with a rubber bullet a young woman celebrating the 2004 World Series victory by the Red Sox. Video emerged showing correctional officers killing a man experiencing a mental health crisis at Bridgewater State Hospital. Following the Boston Marathon Bombing, a Harvard report detailed how dangerous and uncoordinated the police response was and that it was only by sheer luck that no one in a Watertown neighborhood was injured or killed by the reckless gunfire of officers. And, the Parole Board last year posthumously granted parole to a man who died during the unnecessarily long delay between his hearing and receiving a decision. These examples do not even scratch the surface.

Where is our outrage?

Let us not allow another murder by a state actor to pass without real action. We can start by balancing the scales inside the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security by establishing strong independent ombudsmen and oversight boards that are answerable to the people, not to the established power structure.

Justice only occurs when the scales are blindly balanced. The longer we allow the scales to tip heavily in favor of policing power structures, the longer real public safety and security is at risk. We need substantive change now. Delaying justice is not just a denial of justice, it is a deadly injustice.