Social Justice: A Way Out of No Way

The pandemic took a massive toll on our social fabric by exposing racism and social inequities embedded across the nation. On May 25, 2020, cell phone video of a now former police officer holding his knee on George Floyd's neck for an interminable 9 minutes and 29 seconds became the tipping point for protests of the treatment of Black Americans by many police. Floyd's desperate cries "I can't breathe," were eerie reminders of people who feared themselves threatened or had seen others on ventilators in hospitals, also gasping for breath. In the northwest, many joined in the social unrest unleashed in the nation's streets, with some intent on violence and destruction. But it was impossible to ignore the larger protests-peaceful, multicultural, and multigenerational-that seemed to come together overnight in support of social justice. On May 17, 2021, after an interview with Afghan President Ghani, PBS reported "a recorded 35,510 civilian deaths" from the war in Afghanistan "between 2009 and 2019."[1] In the same month, the death rate from Covid in India was reported at @4,000 per day.[2] That means more than 35,000 human beings died in India–*not* in ten years of war, but in *ten days*.[3] As 2021 neared its end, PBS reported 800,000 deaths in the United States and 50 million cases of worldwide since the pandemic began.[4] Medical personnel and hospital staff worked beyond capacity and begged more people to get vaccinated. Despite desperate pleas to wear masks from the very doctors and nurses we hailed as heroes, many chose to follow their own thinking. Homicides rose to their highest rate in six decades, as battles over vaccine mandates for police officers collided with police shortages in Chicago, Seattle, Portland, and other cities.[5] large numbers were still dying from COVID-19, when the virus mutated into the Delta variant, and rather than having weakened, it seemed to have tightened its grip on the country. The Delta and Omicron variants of Covid-19 produced less severe symptoms, but also spread more rapidly. Far more sobering messages began spreading: Could we be safe from virus mutations before everyone in the world was vaccinated? Would Covid, or some form of it, likely to be with us well into the future?

Former director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Francis Collins reminded us, "We have tools we can work with. Here in the US we do have vaccines, we do have masks and tests, and we know to maintain social distancing in crowds, particularly when indoors. We can use these tools or ignore them to the detriment of ourselves and others."[6] So we were not all-powerful, but neither were we helpless. On the anniversary of his death, amid supporters and memorials in George Floyd Square, Floyd's family members advocated for the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act to address persistent problems with police brutality by rethinking and reimagining a different way to understand public safety. The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act passed the House in June, 2020, with a bipartisan vote of 236 to 181.[7] The legislation is a "comprehensive approach to hold police accountable, change the culture of law enforcement, empower our communities, and build trust between law enforcement and our communities by addressing systemic racism and bias to help save lives."[8] Floyd's family met with California Rep. Karen Bass, the House Democrats' lead negotiator on the police reform bill. It is supported by law enforcement as well as civil rights groups, but as of late 2024, the Senate still has not brought the act to the floor for debate. Communities are concerned those officers who may abuse their power are not being held accountable. But lives of police officers have also been taken, and the legislature's *failure to address the Justice in Policing Act* contributes to more and more treatment of police as if they are the enemy. In Florida, two FBI agents were killed by shots through the front doors after the agents were seen through a home device showing who is at your door.[9] A mass shooting in Boulder, Colorado killed ten people, among them a police officer and father of seven who had been looking for different work.[10] As of late 2021, more than 130 officers had died in the line of duty.[11] Despite the outrage heard against the abuses of some police officers during recent years, the majority of police officers perform heroically. After a car crashed into another car, an officer did not hesitate to rescue a mother and child by lifting the second automobile off of them.[12] After he was grazed on the forehead by a bullet, Philadelphia's Sergio Diggs remarked: "I'm still going to put my uniform on every day and come to work to serve because that's what I love to do. I'm...grateful I was able to come home to my family. They are the reason I go out here and try to make a difference."[13]

But as retirements increase, the level of mistrust between officers and many citizens is making it more difficult to recruit new officers and contributes to police shortages across the nation. In January 2023, the horror of yet another young Black man's death–Tyre Nichols in Memphis, Tennessee–reignited feelings the death of Floyd had thrust center stage. FBI data showed in 2020 Memphis was the most violent metropolitan area in the U.S.[14] Similarities between the two cases were haunting, but also sharpened awareness of the need for police reform. The beatings pointed to a culture of police brutality even more so than of racism. After video of Tyre's death surfaced, five of the six officers fired were Black. All of the officers were members of a specialized police squad for fighting violent crime, i.e, the Scorpion unit.[15] Radley Balko, author of "Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces" thinks that using "SCORPIONS" or other intimidating names for a community's elite police force creates fear in neighborhoods and attracts police officers who want to be feared. These police forces can end up with some of "the worst aspects of policing...abuse, excessive force, and this kind of militaristic attitude of seeing the sort of people they're supposed to be serving as an enemy."[16] We need to reject this kind of war mentality between police and community members. Otherwise, what difference is there between police officer and criminal? We have simply made the violence of one permissible. The many deaths underscore urgent need for change from a warrior model of policing based on fear to a guardian model based on civic respect and greater trust.[17] Some states have already begun more training on the use of force protocols. Virginia eliminated state arrest quota; Utah eliminated no-knock warrants. Minnesota has now banned chokeholds, racial and religious profiling, and created a national database for police use of force.[18] In addition to providing mental health and other resources to *support* police work across our communities, data shows there is also a need to upgrade police department training For example, "A 2015 report by the Treatment Advocacy Center, a mental health advocacy group, reported people with untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed during a police encounter."[19] According to a *Washington Post* database, since 2015, nearly a quarter of all people killed by police officers in America have had a known mental illness.[20] Strategies to counter misunderstandings about mental health and opioid abuse were developed in the city of Jacksonville for its "One City, Our City, My City" campaign to improve relations between its police and residents. [21] Twenty-five states now require police training in mental health responses.

The Appalachian Police Officer Development Program (APDP) at Appalachia State University is seeing positive results from about two thirds of police officers who also have college degrees. Additional studies, especially in the Humanities and Social Studies, seems to be providing officers with more mature skills when forced to make quick judgments.[22] Whether learning to de-escalate crisis situations, more training to recognize signs of mental illness, or having social workers optional when responding to possible mental health issues, these strategies can prove helpful in creating a new normal that seeks to build greater trust between police officers and the communities they serve. Undoubtedly, police departments remain valued and needed, but in a new normal, reimagining public safety also might take into account additions, poverty, and homelessness. In Austin, Texas, Chief Chacon repeats the police adage that "most of what we do is social work; only 1% of calls involve violent crime."[23] Vanita Gupta, Asst. Att. General of the U.S., advocates for more neighborhood cohesiveness–and shared responsibility with health and education programs. She sees a need for a more holistic lens than everything just being a criminal justice problem. "We don't want to defund or replace police departments," Gupta explains, "but rather, reestablish trust between police and communities and reject mutual demonization. If we use the same strategies from 30 years ago, we will be no better off."[24] Here we find a counter-intuitive movement towards increasing human respect for others that occurs by moving away from both sides of conflict (those often suspected of crimes and those with greater power and authority) in favor of more holistic solutions that might better serve communities.

Philip Atiba Goff and Trace Keesee, co-founders of the Center for Policing Equity, report the city of Ithaca, New York, has approved a "Department of Community Solutions and Public Safety that sends civilians, most who are unarmed, to address nonviolent conflicts."[25] PBS News reporter Hari Sreenivasan spoke with Phillip Atiba Goff regarding these and other civic guidance models of policing that could help create a new normal. Goff summarized what he hears from police chiefs across the country: "The best intervention is no law enforcement showing up in the first place where they don't need to be. In the last 25 years of doing this work, everything I hear from police chiefs is don't ask us to be school teachers, mental health experts, substance abuse counselors, homeless experts... Don't send badge and a gun when the crisis is homelessness. Send a roof and four walls.... Don't introduce a gun to a situation where someone needs shelter."[26] The outcome–say police chief? "It'll make a tremendous difference in how often we have to mourn our dead."[27] A new community response team in Denver, Colorado, is succeeding at doing just that. When calls involve mental health, substance abuse, homelessness and no weapons, a van is dispatched from a Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) program. Of the 1,351 calls STAR responded to over the last year, not one had to request backup from the Denver Police Dept,[28] which means fewer times the police department had to send out cost-incurring resources. As Chief Paul Pazen explained: "We can free up law enforcement to do what law enforcement...is good at... addressing crime issues, violent crime, property crime and traffic safety...I think it saves lives."[29] "This showed proof of concept," said Chris Richardson, associate director of criminal justice services for the Mental Health Center of Denver. "It was one of the most rewarding experiences that I've been a part of."[30] Carleigh Sailon, a licensed clinical social worker who staffs the STAR van, said "the program provides an important alternative to the one-size-fits-all approach."[31] Andrew Dameron, director of Denver 911, "credits a long history of partnerships with nonprofit community groups for STAR's effectiveness."[32] Police Chief Pazen calls it is a win-win solution. Durham, North Carolina launched its "Holistic Empathetic Assistance Response Teams (HEART) in June, 2022, a pilot program created a year after its Community Safety Department. The goal of this new department is to increase public safety and reduce interactions with law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Ryan Smith, Durham Community Safety Director, says 80% of the 6,902 calls to 911 were diverted to the HEART program during its initial trial. As did Chief Pazen in Denver, Smith saw more efficient allocation of police resources: "they can now 'refocus on other areas that may be about violent crime or criminal activity."[33]

An antidote to violence in communities is a greater love and respect for the humanity of the other. In 2020, an estimated 2.7 million Americans protested after Floyd's death.[34] Floyd's brother Terrence said, "George's legacy is his spirit of optimism that things can get better, and our family wants to bring that hope to the community where he died."[35]Floyd's family wants his death to be a catalyst not only for police reform, but also...broader changes such as poverty, addiction, and mental health. We can be proud that these are the kind of changes police departments in Denver, Durham, and other communities are trying to implement. There is a strong parallel between community-based kinds of policing and the Black Church that, throughout African-American history, has benefited its people from violence while also seeking to meet complex social needs. As chronicled by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the PBS documentary *The Black Church: This is Our Story*, the journey of African-Americans to advance freedoms in a society that had enslaved them traces a parallel development with the institution of the Black Church.[36] Among African-Americans, music has not only unified, but also served as powerful testament to the courage and endurance of human beings in their struggles against different kinds of social pandemics–slavery, segregation, and racism. The Black Church not only became a place of belonging in which both freed and enslaved African-Americans could worship. When laws forbad educating African-Americans, church basements served as "invisible institutions" where Gospel studies were used to teach people reading and writing. The American Church Emmanuel (AME) "made formal education a requirement for ministry, discipleship, and collective worship."[37] Enslaved African-Americans were drawn to the Biblical message of a God who sacrificed himself to liberate the oppressed. In response to this history, African-Americans integrated the Bible with prior beliefs and reinterpreted its message with the lived reality of their own oppression as slaves. They "adapted Christianity...and "made it their own," most notably in its intimate intertwinement with music.[38]

In fact, music, Gates states, is the language of the Black Church: "Spiritual and Gospel are woven into the foundation of the church."[39] "Rev. Michael Curry adds: "When they were improvising on the literary that they had heard on Sunday morning... you hear the idiom of those spirituals...It's where folks inside; they start responding... spontaneous movement...but that heartbeat comes straight from Africa, no question about it.[40] The exhortations of Black preachers paired with enthusiastic responses of congregations created call and response patterns that are also found in Greek pastoral poetry and western folk music–as well as in "tradition from the African past.[41] Thus, from its beginnings to now, the Black Church is a hybrid construct, rich with tributaries of traditions from different continents that flow into a river of faith that becomes a powerful celebration of the human spirit and sustained enslaved ancestors as well as many of today's African-Americans. Rev. Jonathan L. Walton expands on the idea that as "music begins to frame the worship experience: "We all get caught up in something greater than ourselves... People are in their minds ... connected spiritually to one another."[42] At the turn of the 20th c. sociologist and historian William E. Du Bois observed such call and response patterns at what came to be known as revival meetings–and found the experiences "intimately connected with the divine."[43] Revival meetings not only served as places of worship, but also as gatherings to share in communities and further, to address social justice issues. When the idea that *Christianity* could be compatible with slavery lost credence, arguments to justify slavery shifted to the concept of whiteness and white supremacy. "This root of a systemic racism is one society still struggles with today, and in the exhausting years of the pandemic, race relations landed front and center. For years, the Black Church has worked to tackle prejudices that underlie racism. The Rev. Ron Buford, leader of Sunnyvale Congregational Community United Church of Christ in California uses the twelve-step program of AA groups to confront people's fear or a lack of awareness of the racism that makes it easier "to look down on certain people who are different."[44] today the group he began in 2016 is inspiring similar groups around the world. Another advocate for change, Rev. Dr. William Barber II, is a leader who continues the unfinished business of Martin Luther King Jr's dream cut short by focusing on the intersection of poverty and racial inequality to include a broader base of social justice, like that advocated by the Floyd family. As President of Repairers of the Breach and Co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign, Rev. Barber calls for "investments for the bottom, because when we talk about who's dying, poor people, whether...Black, Brown or white, are the ones that are dying."[45] Barber offers a way to build bridges in a new normal by reaching across segments of poverty and races in society rather than pitting groups against each other.

Here in the United States, Black and Brown populations were especially vulnerable to the coronavirus, but ironically, were also those at greatest risk because many were poor but essential workers needed to harvest and deliver goods, or staff and clean stores and hospitals so that goods and services remained available for others in their communities. Economic divides had become glaringly and sympathetically evident for those who could not remain on lockdown, particularly when many of these workers proved themselves everyday heroes by showing up, day after day, to provide the essential services on which the rest of us depended. Gates grants that the Black Church has struggled to adapt to changes in women's roles in society, as well as changes in the institution with LGBTQ members seeking acceptance.[46] In African-American churches, "the Church became a space where Black men (could) be that concept of man in society which is about power, power over."[47] By contrast, at the end of the 19th century, the National Association of Colored Women's Club in Washington D.C. adopted as their motto for helping the oppressed: "lifting as we climb.[48] Gates credits women, whom he calls "the backbone of the church," with creating and expanding "egalitarian space" within the church.[49] This different attitude points towards a feminist model of sharing power with others more so than the traditionally male model of wielding power over others. In regards to power, a global pandemic is humbling–because although it has disproportionately affected the elderly and Brown and Black citizens, the virus has spread its power over . . . *everyone*. Midway through 2021, PBS reported a once unthinkable 600,000+ Americans had died from Covid–more than in any other country.[50] By September 2021, Covid-19 had killed 675,000 people–which was equal to the number of Americans who died from the 1919 Spanish flu that "infected one-third of the world's population–and caused 50 million deaths worldwide.[51] Despite having lost seven of his own family members to Covid-19, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy feels "called to serve" others in the effort to combat the pandemic.[52] Like Martin Luther King Jr., Murthy is keenly aware of something that the health of citizens in the United States is "caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny... inextricably linked to the rest of the world.[53] It is Murthy's hope that "we will leave our communities and our connections with one another stronger, more resilient than before this pandemic even began."[54] In May of 2021, Murthy shifted to a more agile "community-based approach" that brought doctors, nurses, and other trusted sources to places closer to where people lived.

His community-based approach succeeded in bringing care to those without transportation, especially in rural areas. People were urged to go to their churches, drug stores, and any medical source they trusted to get vaccinated and/or receive care. Troy Staton of Baltimore and founder of More Than a Shop, hailed this new approach and explained that barber shops and beauty salons are trusted sources bringing resources–from vaccines and free Wi-Fi to overdose prevention training–directly to communities.[54] "The barbershop and the beauty salon," Staton says, "is the only place that you can come in and you can leave your title for whom you're supposed to be, for whom others expect you to be, and you can solely be yourself. How are you really feeling?"[55] He continues. "We did over 5,000 health care screenings because in every community...there wasn't a Walgreens, but there's a barbershop."[56] In addition to community barber shops, The Black Church is another place that has not only unified, but also imbued its people with the kind of courage and resilience Dr. Murthy hopes to see–qualities that are needed to endure a pandemic as well as to move forward and get beyond social injustices so that we can strengthen trust in each other and in our communities. Despite the challenges it faces, then, Gates remains proud of its remarkable resiliency: "The Black Church was the place where our people somehow made a way out of no way."[57] That is no mean accomplishment; it is something we might expect from superheroes, like Superman or the late Chadwick Boseman–something not lost on Rep. Warnock (D-GA), who draws on the same hope and transformative power of the Black Church for insight: "Our God makes a way out of no way."[58] Perhaps the courage and resilience present throughout so many African-American struggles, buoyed by the hope and spirit of its music, will lead to a new normal in which the nation as a whole will revitalize Dr. King's focus on character more so than on race or even economic status. Citizens will show compassion for *whomever* is marginalized in society in order to more actively address Rev. Barber's intersegmental fight against inequality because, in fact, before the God who makes a way out of no way ... we are all equal.