

“Black Lives Matter, Police Lives Matter”
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota
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As you recall, nearly four years ago, about 160 miles away from us, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer. Martin was unarmed. Zimmerman was charged and tried in Martin's death. A jury acquitted Zimmerman of second-degree murder and of manslaughter in July 2013.

Alicia Garza was watching television in an Oakland, Calif., bar with friends when news of the acquittal was broadcast. In response to the news, Garza wrote on Facebook that “black lives matter.”

The phrase spread quickly because it expressed the feelings of many people. It is simple, positive and easy to remember. “Black Lives Matter.” The phrase “reasserts the importance of recognizing African-American lives as part of the common good of America.,” according to James Taylor, professor of politics at University of San Francisco and author of *Black Nationalism in the United States*. It is a decentralized protest movement that has grown across the country.

A year later in July 2014, 43-year-old Eric Garner, an unarmed African-American man, died in Staten Island, New York City, after a New York City Police Department officer put him a choke hold for about 15 seconds while arresting him. A friend of Garner's recorded the incident on a cell phone.

Next, in August of 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, Michael Brown, an 18-year-old unarmed African-American man, was fatally shot by a Ferguson police officer.

Other killings of unarmed African Americans have been documented in the past year. The words BLACK LIVES MATTER have been heard over and over again. The slogan, appears on posters and on T-shirts. Churches started to post it on signs. In December 2014, we put the words BLACK LIVES MATTER on our church sign. After it was up for a time, we took the words down and replaced it with our usual announcements of concerts and sermons.

Obviously the phrase raises strong feelings. Is it appropriate to single out one group in our culture? Should we say “All Lives Matter?” I have heard this argument in a different context. In the 1980s when Gay activists called for more funds for research for the treatment of AIDS I heard a few people say “What about other serious illnesses? Why do you only care about AIDS? Why do you not call for more funding to cure all diseases?” When women activists campaigned for more research funds for Breast Cancer, I heard the same comment. What about all the other cancers? Why do you only care about curing Breast Cancer?”

We are afraid that if other causes are successful in getting more attention, the causes that we care about will lose out. This is possible. In human communities, the squeaky wheel gets the oil. The loudest problems are the ones most likely to get attention. It is necessary, therefore, for each of us to look at the facts and decide if the issue deserved our attention, or is it is something that we should ignore.

Documenting racial profiling is difficult, because a multitude of factors — including elevated violent crime rates in many black neighborhoods — makes it hard to separate evidence of bias from other influences. The news stories of police killing armed African Americans are dramatic and tragic, but

they could be isolated events, and not the sign of a pattern. The best evidence is in statistics.

Over a year ago journalists realized that in the United States there was no central accounting for the number of people who were killed by police. The annual average number of police killing people each year was estimated by the FBI at about 400.

Starting January first of 2015, *The Guardian Newspaper* and the *Washington Post*, working separately, tried to document police killings in 2015. *The Washington Post* only looked at police shootings. This is the conclusion.

Although black men make up only 6 percent of the U.S. population, they account for 40 percent of the unarmed men shot to death by police this year, "A year of reckoning: Police fatally shoot nearly 1,000," *Washington Post, Dec 24, 2015*.

The Guardian looked at all deaths cause by police, nor just shootings.

According to *The Guardian*, in 2015, 1,134 people in the United States died at the hands of law enforcement officers. Young black men were nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by police officers in 2015.

Despite making up only 2% of the total US population, African American males between the ages of 15 and 34 comprised more than 15% of all deaths by police.

Young African American males rate of police-involved deaths was five times higher than for white men of the same age.

In 2015, black people were killed at twice the rate of white, Hispanic and native Americans.

About 25% of the African Americans killed were unarmed, compared with 17% of white people.

Again, documenting racial profiling is difficult, because many factors — including elevated violent crime rates in many black neighborhoods — makes it hard to tease out evidence of bias from other influences. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a problem.

Shortly after President Obama took office, in July of 2009, an African American and Harvard University professor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., returning from a trip, found the front door to his home jammed shut. With the help of his driver, they tried to force it open. A local police officer responded to a 9-1-1 caller's report of men breaking and entering the residence. Professor Gates was arrested for the crime of entering his own home.

In the days that followed, President Obama invited both the police officer and the Professor to the White House to discuss the issue over beer. Afterward the professor was asked about his opinion of the police officer. Professor Gates said, "We hit it off right from the very beginning. When he's not arresting you, Sergeant Crowley is a really likable guy."

Not all such racial profiling ended with a reconciliation. After the killer of Trayvon Martin was acquitted in July 2013, President Obama talked about the racial fear in our country. He said,

“You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me, 35 years ago.

“And when you think about why, in the African-American community at least, there's a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it's important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn't go away.

“There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happened to me—at least before I was a senator. There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often.”

It is good to have a President who understands the issue first hand from the perspective of an African American. Whatever the color of our skin, if we live in this society, we have an obligation to try to understand the experience of African Americans.

At the same time, whatever the color of our skin, we need to understand the perspective of law enforcement.

Here in Florida I have seen a bumper sticker on the back of a car that says, POLICE LIVES MATTER.

And this is very true. I have visited the law enforcement memorial in Washington D.C. Granite walls hold the names of nearly 22,000 police officers, women and men of all races who have died in the line of duty.

Early in my ministry I went on a 10-hour ride-a-long in a police car with a police officer in Lexington, Kentucky. Before the ride-a-long I spent several hours in a class taught by a police officer who was trying to teach clergy about the dangers officers faced and how they trained to avoid them. We watched and discussed training movies that reenacted actual events such as when police officers were shot approaching a car for a traffic violation. We were told that if we wanted to do a ride-a-long, we need to learn to think like a police officer, to view every one we encountered as someone who might suddenly try to kill us.

In my 10-hour ride-a-long we investigated a \$10,000 jewel theft in a hotel parking lot. I learned that when unpacking your car to carry your luggage into a hotel room, do not leave your car unlocked. We helped a woman, who had lost her keys, break into her house. We investigated a hit and run auto crash. We tracked down the drunk driver who had driven the car that had not stopped. Because he was a soldier on leave and passed out drunk on his couch, and because no one had been injured, we were instructed not to bring him to the jail. When we were not busy, we talked. “I have no friends who are not also police officers,” the officer I rode with told me. “When I go to a social event and someone asks me what I do for a living, and I tell him, I am treated differently, I am treated as separate, apart from the others at the event. Only when I am with other police do I feel like I am treated like a normal person. Because of our role, police are isolated from the rest of the community.” I learned that night of how isolated this police officer felt—he felt separate from the community of people he protected.

If this church was broken into, I would call the police. If someone tried to disrupt this worship service, several of you would call 911. I am enormously grateful for those men and women who are willing to serve as police officers and who do their best to keep order in our community.

So my sermon title this morning is BLACK LIVES MATTER and POLICE LIVES MATTER. For me both statements are important.

In November of 2014 in Cleveland, Ohio, a 12-year-old African American boy with a realistic replica toy gun, was shot and killed by police. This child's life mattered. But I also remember my ride-a-long experience. I remember how I was taught to view everyone we encountered as someone who might suddenly try to kill us. There are so many guns in America. It is tragic, but not surprising that a police officer mistook a replica toy gun for a real gun.

In 2015, 1,134 people in the United States died at the hands of law enforcement officers. This simply does not happen in other countries. In 2015 in the United Kingdom of England, Scotland, Wales, and North Ireland, the number was three. The total number of citizens killed by law enforcement officers in Canada in the year 2015 was 22.

A difference is in the number of guns in the United States compared to Canada or the United Kingdom. Because there are so many more guns in America police have good reason to be afraid. And because our police are afraid, civilians, especially young African American males, have a reason to be afraid of police. **The solution is fewer guns.** It will be many years before the number of guns in our country decreases.

Still I have hope. The attention that is being given to this problem as the result of the widespread use of cameras, with images posted on the world wide web, with the willingness of newspapers and television news to draw attention to the issue, we are making progress. Many people in our society, including churches, call for accountability and for reforms. All of this is good.

On this Sunday as we celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I want to close with some words from our President. He said:

(video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ss_eZzh2Hfc&nohtml5=False starting at 15:15. Transcript is below.)

“I don't want us to lose sight that things are getting better. Each successive generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes when it comes to race. It doesn't mean we're in a post-racial society. It doesn't mean that racism is eliminated.

“But, you know, when I talk to Malia and Sasha and I listen to their friends and I see them interact, they're better than we are. They're better than we were on these issues. And that's true in every community that I've visited all across the country. And so, you know, we have to be vigilant. And we have to work on these issues. And those of us in authority should be doing everything we can to encourage the better angels of our nature, as opposed to using these episodes to heighten divisions.

“But we should also have confidence that kids these days, I think, have more sense than we did back then and certainly more than our parents did or our grandparents did, and that along this long and

difficult journey, you know, we're becoming a more perfect union, not a perfect union, but a more perfect union.”