

## The Promise of Black Lives Mattering

Amanda Udis-Kessler, Flame of Life Universalists, Pueblo, CO February 8, 2015

I spent part of my last birthday protesting police violence against Black Americans. It was a rewarding experience, though I think the weather gods ought to be nicer about the temperature when people are outdoors holding signs for an hour on their birthdays. Perhaps that's too much to expect for December. But the protest was going well, with intermittent bursts of the chant "Black lives matter", when suddenly a bunch of white participants started chanting "All lives matter! All lives matter!" The protest organizer, a Black American woman, looked disgusted.

I'd forgotten about this moment until a few weeks later when I was in a meeting with the Social Justice Team at my church and we were discussing the protest. Someone who had not attended said, "I don't understand why we can't say 'All Lives Matter.' We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, not just black people. So, we believe that all lives matter. Shouldn't we say that?"

Why should we say "Black lives matter" anyway? This is a great question, and I'll try to answer it today. I'll start by drawing a distinction between a faith stance and a description of reality, move on to the question of what we mean by lives that matter and how we can tell that someone's life matters, and then provide extensive evidence that, in fact, Black lives don't matter all that much in the United States today and never have. We'll end with that most important of questions, what can we do?

And let's be clear about one thing: I expect that we all have the best possible intentions when it comes to affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people. The whites in the protest who started chanting "All lives matter" were liberal white activists, not members of the Klan. My acquaintance on the Social Justice Team is passionately concerned about the well-being of poor people, who often include people of color. There are no accusations here today, just an examination of some painful realities. We may be uncomfortable with this topic; I know I am. But until we understand racism as something that has very little to do with intentions, we won't be able to do much about it. So, let's jump in.

To get at the difference between saying "all lives matter" and "Black lives matter" we first need to understand the distinction between an affirmation of faith and a description of reality. When we say "all lives matter", are we making a statement about what we believe based on, for example, the First Principle affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people, or are we saying that reality demonstrates that all people are treated as though they matter? The protestors chanting "all lives matter" were at the protest because they found police brutality against Black Americans morally unacceptable. They were well aware that Black lives are not as important as white lives in this society. But I think they ached for a society in which all lives mattered, and mattered equally. And so, they were chanting their belief, their claim, their trust that, contrary to all visible evidence, all lives do matter, or at least that in the world we want to live in all lives will matter. I think we can all agree with that. But it doesn't go far enough.

Here's the problem: there's something in the claim that all lives matter that suggests colorblindness, a common liberal stance and for many a goal for our society. Colorblindness is often well-intentioned, an attempt to see everyone as a human being and therefore the same without paying too much attention to the extraneous stuff like race. We imagine that Dr. King envisioned a color-blind future in his hope that his four children would eventually be judged based on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin.

Colorblindness, however, misses the fullest reality of who we are as people. We are each individuals with our own set of life experiences and our own particular ways of making sense of those experiences. We are all human beings, sharing certain common needs and able to offer certain common blessings to each other. So far, so good. Our individuality seems to point back to King's comment about the content of our character, which sounds like an individual matter. Our commonality as human beings seems to fit the assumptions of colorblindness, which have a lot to do with all people being the same.

But what's still missing here, and crucially important, is that we are not merely individuals and we are not merely human beings; we are members of social groups, groups that get valued differently from one another and treated differently from each other and thus have group experiences that differ in patterned ways. Men, for example, are paid more than women on average for the same work and women are much more likely to be raped than men. Heterosexuals can get legally married in all 50 states and rarely get gaybashed unless they are mistaken for gay. And Black Americans are treated less well than whites in many walks of life, not least by the police, precisely because they are still judged by the color of their skin.

Colorblindness has no way to address the reality that our group identities lead to different treatment. In fact, as Unitarian Universalist activist Alex Kapitan blogged recently, it's worse than that. If society is colorblind then any difficulties that I face are my own fault since we are all individuals and only individuals. All those women getting raped, they must have asked for it. All that violence against sexual minorities wouldn't happen if they didn't flaunt it. And Black Americans wouldn't keep getting shot if they weren't hoodie-wearing thugs. Colorblindness is, among other things, a way to blame the victim. Once we reject colorblindness as an accurate description of society, we can start talking realistically about the evidence that black lives don't matter too much in the US and then do more about it than we have yet done.

So, what does it mean to matter? How do you know you matter? Here are a few examples: People take you seriously. They believe you when you talk about your experiences. They treat you as the expert on your own life. They expect good things of you. They support your well-being and want you to flourish. You have access to high-quality schools, safe neighborhoods, all the things you need to make a life that matters, that is full of joy, that gives back to others. You know that you are valued by others, and valuable to them.

Beyond these examples, how do you know your life matters, that others cherish your very existence and want it to continue? Here are the two answers that seem to me most important: you have access to all the basic survival resources you need, and you are not in danger of being physically harmed or killed. You can breathe clean air, drink clean water, and eat healthy food. You have a warm place to live. You have access to good, affordable healthcare. You live in a

neighborhood with little or no violent crime. No one is looking to beat you up because you disgust them. People will interact with you in ways that look out for your safety if at all possible.

So, if I were a Black person surveying the scene in the US today, would I see evidence that I matter, that my perspective matters, that my flourishing matters? What about my life mattering? Based on a lot of self-education about the experiences of Black people, both personal stories and statistical studies, here's what I think I would know were I not Amanda but a Black person in the US today. Be warned: if you're not already familiar with this information the next few minutes may be tough.

As a Black person I am less likely to be shown apartments and homes in certain neighborhoods than a white person would be and more likely to be offered the highest-risk, highest-cost type of mortgage. I'm more likely to live in a segregated neighborhood with poorer housing stock, failing schools, inadequate municipal services, lower-quality food in the stores, fewer banks made up for by expensive check-cashing outfits, less information about potential high-paying jobs, more concentrated poverty, and more violence (mostly due to the concentrated poverty). And there's not too much I can do to change this. My house is worth less than a house in a white suburb, so I'm accruing less home equity and the property tax base can't pay for a well-funded school.

As a Black person I hear that Jews are never to forget the Holocaust, that Americans are never to forget Pearl Harbor and 9/11, but that I'm just playing the race card or acting like a victim if I bring up slavery, lynching, the failure of Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the violent repression of voting rights in the South in the 1960s, or today's mass incarceration of people of color.

As a Black person, if I send in a resume for a job, I'm only half as likely as an equally qualified white person to receive a callback or job offer. A white person just released from prison has as good a chance as I do to get the job even if I have no criminal record. I need more education than a white person to receive equal consideration for the same job in many cases.

As a Black person I was probably quoted a higher price for the last car I bought than a white person would have been quoted for the same car.

As a Black person I know that a number of states are trying to restrict my voting rights and that the Supreme Court is letting them get away with it.

As a Black person I may know that South Central Los Angeles has one primary care physician for every 13 thousand residents; the nearby white town Bel Air has one for every 214 residents. Southeast Washington, DC has one pediatrician for every 3700 children while nearby white Bethesda has one for every 400. If I go to the doctor, I may well be given less pain treatment than a white person would be, and if I have a heart attack, I'm less likely than a white person to receive best-practice care.

As a Black man, even being upper-middle class and teaching or studying at a prestigious university is no protection against police suspicion toward me and mistreatment of me, or against white assumptions that I'm a criminal. I can be a television producer and still be made to sit on

the curb, handcuffed, in my expensive suit, because I'm bald and some bald Black guy just did something illegal. A trip to a department store is likely to result in my being followed by security. Regardless of my gender, a trip to an expensive jewelry or clothing store may result in my simply not being let in at all since it's presumed that I can't possibly afford to shop there.

As a Black male I'm more likely than a white male to be stopped by the police because I "fit the description" of a criminal, regardless of how I'm behaving. I'm more likely to be arrested, charged, and convicted than a white male, and if convicted I'll face a longer prison sentence for the same crime. If I live in Colorado Springs, I'm more than three times as likely to be arrested as a non-Black person – a higher ratio than in Ferguson, Missouri. If I live in Albuquerque, I'm more than twice as likely. If I were born in 2001, I have a one-in-three chance of being incarcerated at some point in my life, up to six times the chance a white male born the same year has.

As a Black person I know that if I were white, I could do all sorts of illegal things, from underage drinking to aggravated assault to felony theft to possession and sale of narcotics, to participating in a riot, without necessarily paying much or any penalty for it but as a Black person, carrying out petty theft or selling loose cigarettes in the street, or doing absolutely nothing illegal at all, is enough to get me killed by police. White people can open carry and not get shot, point guns at police officers and not get shot, and shoot up a movie theater, killing 12 and wounding 70 others, and somehow be taken alive by police. In contrast I can be twelve years old and be holding a toy gun in a park and be shot to death by police within two seconds of their arrival.

As a Black person I recall Ella Baker's comment in the Civil Rights movement about the killing of Black men, Black mother's sons, not being as important to white society as the killing of white men, white mother's sons. And I know this is still true. So, I teach my children, especially the boys, exactly how to behave in case of an encounter with the police, who are more likely to shoot them than they would be if my boys were white. And I have to tell them they can't assume that the police are on their side. Doing this is utterly heartbreaking but the alternative is worse. If I have a son and he spends any time on the highway or in white areas, I know the odds are incredibly high that he will have a run-in with the police eventually no matter how innocent, well-dressed, or wealthy he is, and I can only hope that he will survive with no physical injuries.

If I'm a Black male shot to death by a police officer for whatever reason, the media will describe me more negatively than they describe white mass murderers, including the Aurora theater killer, Ted Bundy, and Elliott Rodger.

That's the world I would see if I were a Black person in America today. Yes, that is a long, disturbing, infuriating, depressing description. Those of us who are white mostly have the luxury of ignoring these realities, but Black people don't. And over and over, the message is hammered into their heads: You don't matter. Your well-being doesn't matter. Your life doesn't matter. We white people don't really care much how well you do in life or even whether you live. Now, again, I don't think we white people in this room today feel this way. We absolutely affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people. We really do want all people to flourish. But until we acknowledge the realities above, our effectiveness as change agents of flourishing is limited.

What can we do about this? First, I think we must be willing to be uncomfortable, something you all just did a great job with for the past few minutes. Thank you for that, by the way. Then we have to make a commitment to this particular arena of justice, not to the exclusion of other justice struggles but as an important place to live on the side of love. Once we know that Blacks are treated as though their lives don't matter as much as white lives, we can focus on changing the equation. We white people can be part of the struggle to make Black lives matter, though we can never be at the center of it.

Here's some of what we who are white can do: we can educate ourselves about black history and present-day reality, through reading and other forms of learning. We can be in solidarity with Black people and believe them when they tell us what their lives are like. We can donate money to organizations that support Black flourishing. We can write letters to the editor that get people thinking. We can vote for politicians who acknowledge racial inequality and are committed to doing something about it. We can join organizations that address these issues, and we can develop church projects along these lines. We can educate other white people about the realities of racism and the opportunities of justice. Anything we do that invites more whites to be part of the solution rather than keeping their distance is an act of living on the side of love.

My friends, if you are already doing this work, may you be blessed in it. If you are ready to do it, may patience and courage be yours. And may we all be part of the building of a future in which, when we say all lives matter, we are describing reality and not just making a faith statement. Amen and blessed be.