

Dear Loved One,

To begin, I love you and I appreciate everything you've done for me throughout my life. You have been an incredibly supportive force and it has meant a lot to have you cheering me on as I have traversed life's ups and downs.

And I agree, we have been watching and listening to the folks who have lost everything. For eight minutes and forty-six seconds I watched as a police officer, sworn to protect his community, slowly asphyxiated a Black man repeatedly pleading for his life. I watched as two men accosted and murdered a Black man in Georgia, because he had the audacity to allegedly look at a construction site. I listened as a Black man pleaded for the police to protect him after plain clothes police officers executed a no-knock raid on his home and fatally shot his girlfriend as she lay in bed – a no-knock raid looking for an individual the police already had in custody. In fact, for my entire life I've watched and listened as my community has fallen victim again and again to a militarized police department too quick to pull the trigger and too slow to police itself.

The recurring atrocity of a police officer killing an unarmed Black American has persisted from the very founding of our Nation to the moment your eyes touch this sentence. At our Nation's founding, night watches and paddyrollers, the early manifestations of our modern police force, roamed plantations searching for and killing slaves who had the courage to run from the indignities of slavery. After slavery, police forces continued extrajudicial murders of our Black citizens, in many instances working alongside domestic terrorist organizations such as the KKK to lynch Black Americans who dared to speak up against the tyranny of segregation. And even after 1964 and passage of the Civil Rights Act, little has changed. Black Americans are still killed by the police, and too often our killers are not held accountable for their actions. We get death for allegedly forging a \$20 check, for selling cigarettes, for legally owning a gun, for being 12 and playing with a toy. The police are given paid time off, and after self-investigation, too often found non-culpable; too often found not guilty; and too often placed right back in our communities where they remain a threat to our very existence. We still speak the names of those unjustifiably killed, of those whose empty, unarmed hands provided little shelter from the target painted in melanin across their soon-to-be still bodies.

This past weekend, I was the "creature" you spoke of. I was the "so-called protester" who stood with thousands in the street demanding an end to the devaluation of my life and those of my community members. We called for action. We called for our government to allocate the resources necessary to fight a pandemic disproportionately affecting the Black community. We called for a more equitable justice system, a more compassionate healthcare system, and for our leaders to put their constituents' needs before their own. And as we raised our voices to protest the inequitable conditions that seem to become more and more evident every day, we did so as Americans cloaked in the protection offered by the 1st Amendment to our Nation's most sacred text. The protesters I stood with called for the end of violence, not its propagation. The protection of our community, not its destruction. And we faced tear gas. And we faced flash-bang grenades. And across this Country, we watched as our fellow protesters were met with the very police brutality we were there protesting against.

Please understand, our community members who are looting, those who are setting police cars and buildings on fire, and those who use unlawful force against the police are not representative of the vast majority of protesters who fill our streets. I want to be clear: I do not advocate for looting or for unlawful attacks on the police. But I understand it. I understand the frustration of my fellow community members. The echo of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Junior's words is inescapable: "A riot is the language of the unheard." We have decried police violence for generations, and for generations we have been met with overpolicing, a broken, indifferent, and often pointedly racist justice system, and of course, continued police violence.

You call this "mob" unamerican, yet this "mob" is as American as this Country's very founding. The Revolutionary War was fought in the shadow of the Boston Tea Party – a riot in which soon-to-be Americans destroyed the private property of the world's then-largest corporation, the East India Company, to protest taxation without representation. In 1913, a riot marked a key catalyst in changing public perception surrounding the 19th Amendment. Seven years later, women were constitutionally guaranteed the right to vote. The Chester School Protests, decried by government leaders as acts against the public peace, preceded the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and in 1968, it was the King Assassination Riots that gave President Lyndon B. Johnson the political capital to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1968. To say that riots are unamerican is to deny the actions made necessary for Americans to enjoy the relative freedoms we hold inalienable today. And so riots persist against the wanton killings of our loved ones at the hands of an indifferent police force because we dream of a future where calling the police is not a death sentence – of a future where the survival of our children is not dependent on whether we gave them the "talk" soon enough.

But we should also be clear that to decry the loss of economic capital while staying silent about the continued murders, assaults, and rapes of Black community members at the hands of the police, represents a key reason the riots are occurring. A store can be rebuilt. A fire put out. An economic loss regained. However a life, the single most important gift granted to each of us, can never be replaced. There will never be another Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Amadou Diallo, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Walter Scott, Breonna Taylor, John T. Williams, Fred Hampton, George Floyd, or the myriad fellow Americans and community members whose blood has fed the great body of citizens now demanding action. Whether intentional or not, a message focusing on looting makes economic damages paramount to the extrajudicial police killings of our community members. When this is the discourse, my peaceful voice of protest remains unheard.

You ask "when does this stop?" yet surely you know the answer. We do not march blithely in the streets, nor randomly erupt in protest. The origins of our discontent come in eight-minute videos and pleading cries of "please, I can't breathe," of a history riddled with slavery, Jim Crow, and stories of Emmett Till, Rodney King, and the 16th Street Baptist Church. Our protest will end when we no longer have a need to march in the streets to obtain justice for our community. Our protest will end when Black voices and brown voices and women's voices and LGBTQIA+ voices and disabled voices and immigrant voices and veteran's voices and all the other voices of our subjugated community members are finally heard. I don't know when that will be and I don't anticipate I'll have the good fortune of seeing it in my lifetime. But I know one thing: It will end sooner if you join us.

The open letter above was written in response to the following post published by a loved one:

“We have been watching and listening to the folks who have lost everything – not from the dreaded virus but good Americans at the hands of the so-called protesters. This mob is anti-American in every sense of the word. When we see or hear about hard working Americans losing their life savings at the hand of one of these creatures it makes you cry. And the American flag: I almost lost it when I heard about that one. When does this stop and how are we going to survive as a nation. I have discussed this with God and so far there has been no reply.”