

Black America...in three words

It is interesting that the life for the African American has often been shaped and summarized in three words. From the early sixties during the civil rights movement, our leaders preached them, we marched and sang them and they were our battle cry: **we shall overcome**. They were made to appear as something profound and within a stretch of realism when a president of the United States (Lyndon B. Johnson) spoke them before both houses of Congress and in doing so it lifted our heads and gave us a hope that perhaps America realized that *we* included all of us and that the words of its greatest son (MLK) was being understood and accepted as true that we are interconnected, *tied in a single garment of destiny*.

And as time and trials would make those three words seem tired and without merit, along came a man who would reinvigorate our fading hopes with his three words to make us believe that in the face of disappointment, disparity and disillusion that the response to the pressures of racism and voter suppression and resistance to the highest levels of power was **yes, we can**. Those three words drove us to the poles in great numbers and strengthened our feet and joints to stand in lines for hours and days to elect someone who looked like us but could do very little for us and whose time at the top would shine a great light on the rest of us at the bottom exposing the distance...and difference between the two. Oddly enough it was during his time in that gilded seat where the three words of this generation would scream the truths that he and all Americans needed to hear: **Black lives matter**. Yet the signs carried in the streets of protest and the t-shirts adorned by thousands would not be nearly enough for those words to be heard as more than a slogan because the men in blue would continue to slay at will the men of black even as they, in exasperated tones cried out the words that would truly speak to the level of diminished hope, failed promises, inequitable justice, inadequate housing, ignored medical needs and insufficient education: **I...can't...breathe**.

Different from the other words, our good white citizens could join us in chorus though in cacophonous tones because despite their well meanings and good intents, their garments always had more thread, their privilege let them do whatever they wanted because they really could and the value of their lives were never in question. But staggered breathing is ours alone, a technique we've perfected in an attempt to keep the lives of our communities functioning and appearing as near normal. But the consequences of this shortness of breath has left us with the underlying weaknesses in health and made us prone to illnesses that lead to our shortened life spans - diabetes, high blood pressure, kidney disease, strokes, heart attacks and of course...asthma. Hundreds of years of racism and white privilege have left us exasperated, our chests pounding, our veins bulging and eyes watered as we try to maintain our lives in the worst and most toxic climates of hatred, injustice and inequality because we...can't...breathe. The programs offered to us in the past (affirmative action, empowerment zones, etc.) have never matched the widespread damage done by the institutionalization of racism that held its knee to our throats and

thus have served as mere oxygen tanks, breathing masks, temporary measures to keep us gasping while the weight of it remained in place and we still...can't...breathe.

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