

Can these dry bones become a movement?

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Langston Hughes challenged our consciousness by asking, “[What happens to a dream deferred?](#)” What results when hope, aspirations, callings, and promises are delayed, put off, postponed, or thwarted? Were they flawed expectations? Do such deferred dreams become burdensome desires that fade and never manifest, forever haunting us?

Six months after Michael Brown was fatally shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri—where I serve as a pastor—there are families still wrestling with the question, “What would have happened if...?” Since August, our nation and our humanity have had to confront the critical question of dreams deferred. Countless direct actions, judicial proceedings, investigations, religious exercises of all sorts, political pandering, burned businesses, and awkward conversations have resulted in more questions than answers—and in relatively no change. More time has been spent processing, planning, and politicking than effectuating change to the systems, leadership, and culture that gave rise to this communal crisis.

[Ezekiel 37](#) explores the “what if.” The bones in the valley are the remains of a community torn apart by tragedy, not unlike Ferguson. Both the dried bones and the drought-stricken landscape suggest trauma of historic portions. The scale of such devastation points to a systemic cause. It also indicates that cultural practices have perpetuated violence and an attitude that others are disposable.

The results of collective negligence in Ferguson and elsewhere have left us in a dispirited state, struggling to regain our ability to coexist, understand, listen, trust, or sustain hope in one another. All the while we wonder, “What happens to a dream deferred?”

Ezekiel is led to a dispirited space not simply to observe, but to reflect. It is an invitation to thoughtfully consider his relatedness, responsibility, and relevance to the tragedy. He is called upon to imagine what was while envisioning what can

be. He is not simply given over to boundless ideas or out-of-control emotions. Neither does he compose a wish list of outrageous, futuristic, and arbitrary demands for himself. Ezekiel is called not simply as a dare to dream; rather, he is called to the task of determining the vision.

Likewise, we are invited into reflection about Ferguson and beyond. Conversations about healing have begun, but are they doing any good? Have people already forgotten and moved on? Commissions have convened and political campaigns have commenced, but neither the systems nor leaders have changed. In an age of instant gratification, it takes time and effort to start addressing community and societal challenges of this magnitude. Have we forgotten how to do this already?

The question for the church to answer is, “Can these bones live?” Yet we are not left to do so alone. Ezekiel replies, “O Lord God, you know.” What follows is an imperative to speak divine inspiration to the dispirited, a command to proclaim hope to a place and a people deemed hopeless, hapless, and helpless. As *The Message* puts it, “Prophesy over these bones: ‘Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!’”

In other words, predict, declare in advance, speak to those things that are not as though they are! It resides within each of us to determine if a difference can and will be made. Six months from now will anyone be better prepared, informed, and engaged? Six months from now will the redress of systems, policies, and culture result in the empowerment of people through education, economic equity, and reshaped social environments?

To eradicate and eliminate racial disparities, we need a movement of people both within and outside governmental structures. We need to push for an agenda that addresses how race intersects with other aspects of social location to further marginalize communities of color. Such an agenda includes

- [Creating a national database](#) on police stops or use of force in policing
- [Mandating that police officers](#) use body cameras and obtain further training on the ways racial biases influence policing
- [Lobbying Congress to support "baby bonds"](#) as a way to reduce economic disparities
- [Ensuring that](#) workers are not subjected to low-wage jobs
- [Acquiring funding](#) to address the unique experiences of people of color in the United States, including the [disproportionate number of black male deaths](#)
- [Assisting individuals](#) in combating the health-related consequences of racial discrimination

More time spent creating a successful movement may give rise to the realization of change in America. Otherwise, our living will have been in vain.

[Ryon J. Cobb](#) *contributed to this post.*