

Young black men are dying, and fear keeps us from love

By [Guy Sayles](#)

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Recent news, as so often is the case, has brought images and descriptions of young black men shot by police officers. The narrative is sickeningly familiar: a young person dies; protests take place; authorities promise a full and fair investigation and, if warranted, consequences for the officers involved; journalists and community leaders remind us of the long series of these deaths; voices call for mutual respect and genuine collaboration between minority communities and law enforcement agencies, and insist on reform of the justice system.

Hardly anything changes. Young people continue to die.

In such circumstances, it's harder and harder to remember that most law enforcement officers are honorable and motivated by a desire to serve. They put themselves in often-dangerous situations on our behalf. They deal with the effects of our nation's failures to meaningfully address generational poverty, despair-driven drug abuse, inadequate education, and de facto segregation. Violence against police, as we saw in Dallas last week, is tragic and wrong.

At the same time, it's vexingly true that among the majority of decent police personnel are racists and sexists. There are people too enamored of their authority and too mesmerized by violence. Additionally, some law enforcement agencies are systemically racist and classist, even when many of the individuals in it are decent and fair.

The young black men and women who die in police custody have names and stories. They have families and friends who love them, hopes and fears, dreams and disappointments. Their lives matter. Their deaths matter.

It's true that some of the people who have died in well-known cases over the last few years had criminal records; some of them were committing crimes when they had their last encounters with the police. Not all. Not most. What's more, even if force were required, it strains credulity to think that deadly force was called for in all the circumstances in which young black men died.

It isn't necessary for a life to be perfect for it to have value. None of us is faultless and flawless, but our shortcomings do not diminish our worth.

Young black men are dying. I lament, grieve, and feel outrage.

I also feel powerless.

Powerlessness, though, is likely an illusion cast in part by the spell of white privilege. Given my location in this culture, the illusion serves the status quo by convincing me that asking questions, speaking out, and seeking a just peace would be futile. The illusion of powerlessness absolves me of the responsibility to act. It's a shameful illusion.

Powerlessness is also rooted in fear, especially, I think, in the fear that love isn't strong enough to effect change, to heal wounds, and to enact justice. We fear that love isn't powerful enough to challenge and liberate us from the systems which blind or bind us.

"Perfect love casts out fear." That hopeful claim from the Christian scriptures is either a superficial bromide or it is the deepest truth imaginable.

I believe it is the latter, but I need help with my unbelief.

We who are privileged must help each other to act in ways which lead to our transformation; help each other to take up practices which will loosen our anxious grasp on our systemic advantages; and help each other to discover the kind of humility which makes possible genuine relationships with people who are different from us—people of other races, religions, backgrounds, orientations, and experiences.

Humility is not timidity. It's a bold willingness to listen receptively; to consider respectfully the stories, struggles, and aspirations of others; to change our minds and actions when our prejudices become clear to us; and to raise our voices on behalf of justice and reconciliation.

Such humility is a practice before it is a feeling, a practice which makes room in us for the love that casts out fear.

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