

Lift every voice and sing

With white supremacists surrounding the University of Virginia, what is our role?

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

August 12, 2017

Last night, I settled down into my bed and glanced at my phone. It's become my custom to check the news and Twitter, although the fire fury of the latest headlines doesn't help much with my dreams. My Twitter feed was awash in homemade videos, depicting torches stomping across the campus of University of Virginia.

I could not bear it. The white supremacists crawled out of their basements, where they salivated in Internet chat rooms and photoshopped vile pictures of Barack Obama, onto campus for a "Unite the Right" rally. They protested the removal of a statue honoring Confederate Army commander Robert E. Lee.

The torches alighted something in me: fear. They didn't have the monstrous hoods that the KKK wore in our history lessons. Yet the racists still skittered like roaches in a Southern kitchen—in the dead of night.

The existence of such a rally didn't shock me. I never believed that we inhabited a post-racial America. I live in Tennessee. Which means I have a chance to constantly learn from civil rights leaders. I worship on the land where a white Presbyterian minister married an African American organizer. They celebrated the first interracial marriage in our town, among violent threats. When our church was built, they didn't fill it with stained glass or windows. That was too dangerous, with all the hostility they received. So, the sanctuary has a bit of a bomb shelter feel.

My daughter goes to school with a boy who wore a full-blown authentic Confederate soldier uniform to school every day for two years. My husband, Rev. Brian Merritt, [protested a white supremacist gathering](#) less than two weeks ago. He said that at the conference (led by Richard Spencer, the same UVA grad who led the torch

parade) the Klanish participants had a strict dress code. They had to wear suits and name badges (though many had fake names on them).

My fear was for the black bodies whose lives were on the line. It was the anxiety that the arc of history did not bend toward justice, or at least that it would not turn the corner while I was alive. My dread grew as I realized that that the last of the Boomer generation—that generation that seemed chock-full of idealists—was leading a government of regression. Would golden showers drown out the rainbow coalition?

Of course, whether it's white pillowcases or burning lawn crosses, intimidation is the tactic. Creating fear is their goal.

This morning, I woke up with refreshed determination and renewed hope. I would do what the Presbyterian minister Mister Rogers would do. In the midst of tragedy, I would look for the helpers. They were there.

Rev. Seth Wispelway, a pastor at the local United Church of Christ, was there to [proclaim](#) that “white supremacists rallying in our town is an act of violence.” Dr. Cornel West, Harvard professor, was there, at a prayer service. [Rev. Traci Blackmon](#), a UCC pastor, was there, singing and praying. [Joshua Eaton's Twitter](#) feed told a different story. Some UVA students are holding counterprotests. The helpers are there.

In this time, churches are closing and many people wonder, “If our church shuts down, will anyone miss us?” In this moment, many congregations are stumbling through the dark, wondering if they have any gifts to give to the community and world surrounding them. During this course of events, David Brooks is [pining away for WASPS](#).

Yet we know that we have an important history and a present job to do. It is not to go backwards to a time before civil rights or before we had a black president. It is not a moment for denominations to clamor for the time of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant glory. It is a moment when we must stop and listen to the historic voices of civil rights, continue to wade in the water, and uplift the present chorus of our African American brothers and sisters. We cannot simply celebrate the heroes of our past; we must be lifting up the future generation. We have to be that resounding force that firmly states “Black Lives Matter.” We must continue to be the helpers in the midst of violence and turmoil.