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# “Say Their Names”

Andrew Parker Schiffer

# SAY THEIR NAMES  
 ERIC GARNER • JOHN CRAW  
 FORD • MICHAEL BROWN  
 EZELL FORD • DANTE P  
 ARKER • MICHELLE CUSS  
 EAUX • LAQUAN MCDON  
 ALD • TANISHA ANDERSO  
 N • AKAI GURLEY • TAMIR  
 RICE • RUMAIN BRISBON •  
 JERAME REID • GEORGE  
 MANN • MATTHEW AJIB  
 ADE • FRANK SMART • NA  
 TASHA MCKENNA • TON  
 Y ROBINSON...

Layout by Cameron Macaulay. Photograph by Tim Demell. CC BY-NC 2.0. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sheffim/49989103906>.

“SAY HER NAME!”

Though I never met the woman leading the chants, I could hear the hurt in her weary voice. Her pleas for peace rose above the ground on which we walked and hovered over us for the remainder of our march. The voice above filled the silence and provided direction for newcomers in need of a guiding light. We met in my old high school’s parking lot. Hundreds of us gathered to protest the never-ending issue of police brutality in our country with so many others. This was my first taste of the Black Lives Matter movement. As it was my first protest, I was unsure of what to do with my gaze or whom to turn to for answers until I heard her voice. Her call silenced my inner thoughts, garnered my full attention, and put me in check. This wasn’t going to be a typical summer afternoon activity; we weren’t celebrating anything. This was a Black woman in pain, grieving the life of Breonna Taylor and fearful of the police. Get with the program or get out; the high school reunion could wait.

Call and response is a learned behavior that takes little practice and requires little thought. Initially, I hesitated to respond or even address her sentiment of remembrance. She demanded the tiniest fraction of what we could give, not money, power, or even recognition. Still, I was a closeted ally, afraid of being perceived as just another white person promising to fight for this woman and Breonna Taylor. The other protesters and I were a block away from the parking lot, and the concrete had yet to change colors. The question “What impact will I have?” rang in my head, causing all types of frustration. Showing up and speaking out are two entirely different entities, but in my case, they went hand-in-hand, and I decided then to use my voice to support Breonna Taylor, the focus of a groundswell of pain from Lexington, KY. At that point, I had drawn on a blank poster board, gathered some peers and





showed up, marched a couple of blocks, and lifted my voice. But what had I really done?

The ink from the permanent marker on my poster had not dried before I felt overwhelmed. I had trouble pacing myself with the other protesters, childishly stepping on the heels of those in front of me and standing in the way of those behind. The idea of turning around crossed my mind more than a few times, but the woman's voice kept my focus. I had to step outside of myself to realize that the Black community was suffering—she was suffering—and I needed to be there to show my support. A sign held up by a woman next to me read, “If you're not with us, you're against us.” My heartbeat steadied, realizing then that I was with the protesters; I was on the right side of history. Her sign, clad with scarlet red paint, reflected the look of dried blood. I believe that was her intention. This wasn't arts and crafts to her. I lowered my sign from my extended reach and reread my misshapen handwriting: “JUSTICE FOR GEORGE.” We were six blocks into the march, six blocks into my first real sense of Black Lives Matter, and I had almost forgotten what led me there in

the first place. My fingers traced my poorly written plea at a stoplight, and the light from the crossing signal bounced off of my glossed poster. The previous evening, three of the four officers involved were in custody, but the fourth, Derek Chauvin, remained at-large. I scoffed at the thought of Chauvin evading apprehension, and I was transported back to that fateful day in May.

“*SAY HIS NAME!*”

I'd like to say that it all started on May 25th, 2020, when George Floyd was murdered by police sworn to protect him, but that is not the case. I'd like to say that this tragedy was my call to action, the signal of distress that awoke me from the haze of ambivalence, but it did not. George Floyd's death at the time was, to me, another name added to the list of Black people killed by police in our country. I watched George Floyd's murder unfold from the comfort of safety, the comfort of being white in America, but a seed of guilt was planted. My eyes glossed over from screen-staring, watching the curbside execution unfold repeatedly—and I kept scrolling. It's excruciatingly painful now to look back on that moment and not want to scream and shake myself from the grasp of my negligence. To other white people in my community, my lack of compassion and care might not have signaled anything alarming

Photograph by Wikipedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Black\\_Lives\\_Matter\\_protest.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Black_Lives_Matter_protest.jpg).

or noteworthy. But now I see that version of me for what it was: silent and ignorant. Nothing had changed in me since learning about the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and many others. I had done nothing to change anything, less than the bare minimum. How many murders would it take for me to finally speak out against it or just say anything at all?

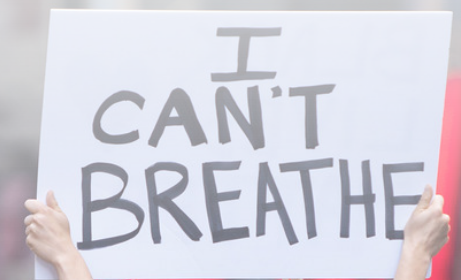
On May 29th, my family and I gathered to watch our mayor, Keisha Lance Bottoms, speak at a press conference and condemn the prior three days of violence, rioting, and looting. Only then did I finally wake up. She was eloquent, direct, and furious about the violence while still encouraging the peaceful protestors to use their voices. She spoke about the benefits of peaceful protesting and voting, two of the best ways to send a message without violence. Up until this point, I had taken a vow of ignorance and ambivalence, siding with conflict aversion instead of action. It was the more comfortable approach; because it didn't directly affect me, I believed I should stay out of the way. But the protests had reached my hometown of Atlanta, and I knew then that it was now or never. Standing with our Black community was no longer a choice. It was mandatory. What I was seeing before me was real change, and I could no longer look the other way. That same night, I learned about a peaceful protest scheduled for that Sunday, and I signed my name to be there.

“*SAY THEIR NAMES!*”

As the Governor's Mansion and Atlanta Police came into view, our steps became heavier and our voices softer. The police

weren't there to incite fear, wore no extra protection from my perspective, and assumed the position of traffic control officers; this was entirely different from the narrative pushed on television. It was clear they understood our message—that Black Lives Matter—and were trying to do their part by assisting us. Once we were engulfed by the shadow of the Governor's Mansion, the marchers in front began to kneel on the concrete, as instructed by the march organizers. Soon enough, we all knelt. We were informed of a moment of silence that would take place; 8 minutes and 46 seconds to honor the life of George Floyd and spotlight the police brutality that took that life. As we were in the middle of a crowded public road, this moment of silence sounded different than others. One lane of cars drove past, some opting to slow down and take videos or pictures of our group. It was unfortunate that the road remained open, but it was also a reminder of what it probably sounded like when George Floyd had a knee on his neck.

Some beside me started praying; some decided to lie down entirely and give themselves to the moment. Some were crying, some had a fist in the air, and others, both. With every face my eyes landed on, a piece of my heart chipped away. The guilt that began as a seed-



ling had grown into a towering, magnificent force, growing larger with every new face that came into view. As the minutes went by, I continued to observe my fellow marchers, focusing on those who were most emotional. I saw hurt, pain, suffering, and animosity toward the police and the man who lives across the street. Finally, I looked inward. I closed my eyes, my mind in panic mode, a new thought with every beat of my heart. After a few deep breaths, I settled on my being there and the accompanying feeling of guilt. Quickly the pressure mounted as I began to sweat, and not because of the summer heat.

I felt responsible for the pain and suffering that my Black brethren endure. Derek Chauvin and I share one thing in common: the color of our skin. I felt my heart sink deeper into my chest, my thoughts and emotions becoming one. I shook my head, disgusted by the thought of Chauvin and I in the same sentence, the same room, or even the same race. Having realized that he and I are inherently different people, I moved on, not wasting a second longer of this moment of respect for George Floyd. The moment of silence had morphed into a moment of truth.

I spent the remaining minutes road-mapping my plans moving forward, asking how could I better support Black people in my community. In Georgia, voter suppression is synonymous with Governor Brian Kemp, whose front porch was a stone's throw from our protest. In the 2018 Gubernatorial Race, Kemp was both the Secretary of State and the Republican candidate for Governor of Georgia, and he used his position of power to actively suppress Georgia voters, closing polling locations in predominantly Black neighborhoods and purging Black citizens

from voter rolls. One report notes that “214 precinct closures in Georgia since 2012,” when Kemp became the Secretary of State, “often occurred in counties with high poverty rates and significant African American populations” (Niesse). He is one of many who put up hurdles for thousands of Black voters wanting to use their voices.

We're taught at an early age that the right to vote is one of our greatest civil liberties, as it is the only way to determine who speaks on our behalf from a lawmaking perspective; so I concluded that it was my responsibility to encourage others to vote as well. It was time to show up, speak out, and lift up other voters. No timer rang, and no alarm clock buzzed at the conclusion of the moment of silence. Chants started to emerge quietly, growing from a soft hum to conversation level to exclamation. We took a collective pause to remember George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and those who walked before them, and rose from that pain to collectively fight for their lives, for our lives. A Black student donning a football jersey of my high school's rival took the megaphone, quieted the crowd, and began to speak about the importance of using our voices and our vote for positive change. He, a student whom I did not know, had the courage to take the megaphone and to voice his thoughts for the world to hear. This was the affirmation that I needed; I can't think of anything or anyone more deserving of such a platform. He brought to light the voter suppression of the 2018 Gubernatorial election that awarded the man across the street his seat, as we were seeing his heart open up for us in real time. He spoke of the hundreds of thousands of new voters that would be using their voices for the first time in November,

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and I realized then, through his words, that my plan to encourage my peers to vote could work. Lastly, he spoke about encouragement, about using this moment and movement as fuel to spark real, positive change. He no longer seemed to be just another kid from another high school, he was someone from the Black community, someone who was suffering. The childish nature of our high school rivalry became trivial for me, as I now had more respect for him than most of my own former classmates.

These moments led me to become an advocate for voting in a state that has faced some of the worst voter suppression in our country during the 2020 election. I began posting bi-weekly to my social media accounts about polling locations and voting opportunities in Georgia. I urged some of my closest friends to register to vote. Some have already cast their ballots. Days after our march, Rayshard Brooks was killed during a confrontation with Atlanta Police. As the nation's gaze turned to Atlanta, I looked within myself to see if anything had really changed. I educated myself on who he was, who his family is, and who they are supporting for office, as that speaks to the candidates who have earned the respect of his family.

As we marched back, the chants echoed into the night, and they still echo in my brain today. The only way to truly seek real, positive change is to never forget their names. Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks will live on—not just for the next year, but for decades into the future. The next day, as I browsed social media, my thumb stopped on a video of George Floyd's daughter, Gianna. “Daddy changed the world,” she said, and her sentiment

still sticks with me almost five months later (Ritschel). If not for her father, I would not have attended that march, promoted voter registration to my peers, or even voted in this year's election, and I am not alone in that. The activists who have worked tirelessly to educate the world about the wrongful deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks have reminded us of the need to reform our policing system and voting systems entirely. Before I departed from the parking lot, I grasped my rolled-up poster, unfurling and straightening it in the backseat of my car. In the months since, the words “JUSTICE FOR GEORGE” look a bit more tattered than when they first saw daylight, but the message remains the same. I glance at the poster every time I open my car door, refusing to let myself forget the message and that march. I hope you don't either.

“*SAY THEIR NAMES!*”

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