

All I Want

Published in the Martinsburg *Journal*, July 07, 2019

I asked a man I know, a 69-year old Black Vietnam Veteran whose great-grandfather was born into slavery during the Civil War, what he thinks reparations should look like. His response was a long one; actually, it's a conversation that's been going on for the 41 years we've been married. This time, I'll give him the next 700 words, with no interruptions from me:

“Money is cheap and easy. It won't begin to make up for all the losses we've incurred since we were forced to work for nothing. It won't begin to make up for what we've lost in our own lifetimes, because if people keep doing the same things they've been doing to us for the past 150 years, nothing will change. What keeps us a “disadvantaged minority” isn't the lack of a one-time settlement. The denial of the value of our contributions is what has sealed our fate, and made this a poorer country, in spite of all its riches.

Present-day Americans blame the ghosts of their ancestors for creating this problem. And for that, you'd think we would be mad, or full of hatred and self-pity. But mostly, we are simply trying to find a way to fit into our own country. We see ourselves as Americans first, Black second. Then we remember that others see us as Black first, Americans---maybe later.

Not all of us want restitution or an apology, or even want a conversation about what is fair and what was not, hundreds of years in the making. What I'd like is a reconciliation; a reckoning. That wouldn't cost anybody anything except, perhaps, a little bit of pride. So here are some of my suggestions for reparations that require no cash---just a small change of perspective:

First, just let me carry my TV out of my house to my car if it needs repair, without being accused of being the burglar. And let me commit a minor traffic violation without having a SWAT team called to tell me that my tail light is out. Let me get my cell phone or wallet out of my pocket without being afraid I'll be shot at.

Also, don't blame me for urban blight, slums, or poverty. We once were skilled craftsmen, expert farmers, trusted childcare workers, and talented seamstresses and chefs; those were the trades we mastered while working for our owners. But once we had to be paid to do those professions, the “Black Codes” made it impossible to find jobs unless we worked, again, for practically nothing.

Next, just let us live where we want to; don't assume that we all live in the same neighborhood because we are more comfortable around other Black people. And for once, let me be the one to complain about your loud parties, late-night music, relatives moving in, and junk piled up in your yard, bringing down my property values.

Let us fail without blaming it on our Blackness, and let us succeed without blaming it on our Blackness. Don't make Black History Month the only time we get asked to do something. Don't

THE BYSTANDER



make MLK's birthday the only weekend you turn down a paid holiday. And never, ever say that having a Black president for eight years makes us even.

And by the way; in the Civil War section of your library or bookstore, don't give us our own separate but equal shelf across the aisle. We belong right there alongside the white soldiers, politicians, activists and heroes. We were there, too; we just never left the battlefield.

Please don't tell me that you're also being discriminated against unless you can cite the law or statute that states you were, or are now, barred from doing something as basic as reading and writing, buying a home, attending the nearest public school, or to marry who you love, drink from any fountain, use any bathroom, or swim in any pool you want to.

Finally, when I do something stupid, just let me be an idiot without making me feel like a Black idiot; that's all I want---to feel like a regular, ordinary idiot for once.

There is one other small thing: It's fine to cross the street if you see someone like me walking toward you late at night. That's what I would do, and even Jesse Jackson admitted that he does it, too.

Lastly, I'm like a lot of other Americans; there's nowhere else I'd rather live. So I guess that shows that we have a lot in common with each other, after all."