



University of
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Memo from the Office of the President

To: The UWLA Family

From: Robert W. Brown

Date: June 1, 2020

RE: We Can't Breathe

Dear All,

I have been struggling trying to find the appropriate words to address our UWLA Family about the current strife affecting our country.

I have been struggling because I can't breathe! Nor should any of us be able to breathe right now.

The anger and injustice evidenced by the protest that our country is engaged in is one that has been long in the making. But insurrection is inevitable at times as the history of mankind has always demonstrated. Whenever one segment of our society oppresses and enslaves another, spiritually, mentally or physically, the human spirit can accept but so much before it is going to cry out and demand change. That is just the survivalist mechanism. Nothing is more human!

I am a black man who has lived his entire life as a subject of oppression. My daily life has been spent responding to the effects of being victimized by the society that I live in because of my physical characteristics. I had hoped that by now we would have overcome the ignorance of race and bigotry. I was wrong. Our society has not learned the lessons of history and thus we are bound to repeat them. This is the fourth insurrection that I have lived through.

Overly dramatic? Perhaps. However, let me share a little more of my story. I was raised by a single parent with four siblings. There were five of us and I was the "man of the house" at nine years old.

Every day for us was a struggle to breathe. We had to struggle to breathe for food; and for the rent; and for shelter; and for existence. That is too say nothing of how invisible we were to the rest of society. We watched as others had material comforts, conveniences and luxuries, and we struggled just to exist. Yes, that was south central Los Angeles in the fifties and sixties when I grew up the product of migrant parents from the east by way of the south. Every day, as I walked home from school shepherding my brothers and sisters, we were constantly vigilant to attacks from the gangs or the police.

I was able, through a deep desire to overcome my environment, acquire an education and attend UCLA law school. I worked every day of my life to support myself and earn the level of grades necessary to be accepted to UCLA. I always struggled to breathe! You might think, “well that is the way to do it.” It is not that easy. I was just lucky. My motivation to get out of my condition was the number of kids that I grew up with who perished at early ages for so many reasons and because of the perniciousness of poverty and oppression. Drugs, alcohol, poverty, no money, shootings, gangs, robberies, stabbings, fights, selling dope, murders, police brutality - Every day commonplace factors that made it a struggle to breathe for me, my immediate family, my friends and our community.

Do you know how it feels to be driving late at night and have the police see you from afar and then circle back to tail you and ultimately shine those hated red lights and pull you over? And how about the tense moments when they have their guns pulled and you don’t want to make the wrong move for fear that they will be overcome by their fear of the unknown and shoot you? How about the ensuing demeaning exchange where they ask you where you have been and where are you going?

You may say how about “probable cause”? That’s just it, “probable cause” rarely exists when you are a black man in our society. It was “probable cause” for them to stop me when I was born!

Growing up in the sixties was a time of protest and revolution. I evolved my consciousness in the civil rights movement. I always vowed to come back to my community and provide constructive mechanisms to help eradicate the terror of oppression and socio-economic deprivation. I just wanted to breathe.

However, yet again I watch as the systemic issues rooted in domination and

oppression of classes of people evidenced by the symptoms of race and reliance on differences of characteristics manifest before our very eyes as we witness a man die at the hands of the police who were supposed to protect him. It was done callously and unnervingly. It occurred coldly and without regard to empathy or compassion for the man that they were forcibly killing. Why? Because the police viewed Mr. Floyd as one of “them.” He was not a human being deserving of respect and consideration for his life in the police’s eyes. Our country has cultivated an environment where segmentation and discrimination have become accepted standards by which to value people and life and we have lost sight of the fact that we are all human and entitled to certain inalienable human rights! When we allow one human to be killed at the hands of another, we are sacrificing the most sacred of human rights for all and that is to be able to breathe and live. This cannot be allowed to occur, or we have lost entirely our humanness.

John Donne expressed it as *“No man is an island, Entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, A part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less. As well as if a promontory were. As well as if a manor of thine own Or of thine friend's were. Each man's death diminishes me, For I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know For whom the bell tolls, It tolls for thee.”*

The chilling consideration as our Dean Frykberg pointed out to me is that oftentimes these evils are made manifest by ordinary people carrying out their activities in the name of good. That is the most horrific format. The system has psychologically made these ordinary people believe that it is alright to perpetrate their evil in their ordinary circumstances. This is the banality of evil. We must be conscious of it and all of its forms and constantly vigilant to attack and defend against it at every instance.

Maya Angelou expressed it as *“Throughout our nervous history, we have constructed pyramidal towers of evil, oftentimes in the name of good.”* Joseph Brodsky echoed the same sentiment: *“What we regard as Evil is capable of a fairly ubiquitous presence if only because it tends to appear in the guise of good.”*

My long commitment to transforming UWLA into a place where people of all backgrounds could find an educational vehicle to overcome the effects of oppression and socio-economic deprivation and imprisonment was borne of my early experiences. My personal successes bred a deep desire to help others to be able to breathe. I thought that the best positive change agent and antidote for



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the horrors, degradation, dehumanization and humiliation of oppression was education and strength in knowledge. I was fortunate to be able to link my passion with a career undertaking. God helped me find the way.

I would ask my UWLA family to come together now more than ever to find positive constructive ways to address the urgent injustices that must be fixed in our society. Please find ways to use your skills and knowledge as business leaders and lawyers to bring justice to the grass roots. Our society needs justice and we are the ones to be the champions of the causes of the under-represented, especially the under-served and oppressed. But we must also help to inform and enlighten those in power on how to better wield that power such that it is not oppressive, dominating and abusive.

We should use our professional influence to ensure that the exercise of such power does as little harm as possible to the adverse interest of all who might be otherwise affected. Let's use our training and education to encourage and influence our business leaders, judges and congressional representatives to make decisions, laws and regulations that respect the rights of all and balances the needs of our society to be fair and equitable. Most importantly, let's work to create a culture that does not discriminate based upon prejudice and bias formed out of a motive to dominate others to the advantage of one group versus another.

Justice really means equality under the law. That is all that everyone is asking. We will only be able to breathe individually, when everyone has a full and equal chance to breathe and no one is subject to domination and submissiveness at the hands of another! Never again!

But it starts with each of us. Not just as an abstract concept. Our consciousness must be pricked every time, we find ourselves allowing our general bigotries and prejudices to control how we treat any individual disconnected from our personal knowledge of the character and personality of that individual. We must be ever vigilant to conducting our everyday activities such that we do so with compassion and with regard to the human dignity that every situation and every person deserves, no matter their station in life.

What can we do? I want you to go out of your way to make associations with someone of another race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. Explore each other's differences and similarities. Inform and share with them those things in your background that make you uniquely you, and vice versa. I know that we are

all so busy. We don't know anyone who we can meet, etc. All of the usual suspect excuses. If you want to breathe and help others, we need to get off of the couch vicariously and conveniently addressing the issue from the protection and comforts of our own homes. We need to get just a little out of our comfort zones. Come on you can do it. Reach out to a classmate or colleague who you don't know or invite someone to connect with you through social media or the digital world.

We are experiencing a time of isolation so why not find a way to connect with someone who you probably would never connect with to explore and have that discussion? It's only a conversation, albeit difficult. Ask them how they feel about race relations? Tell them how you feel. Question the motives of the explanations. Are the answers borne out of generalizations and a need to dominate for fear that you will be dominated? That way if you don't like that person it is not because of arbitrary differences, generalized bigotry or prejudice or a desire to emotionally consider ourselves superior to anyone else. It will be because that person's individual character and personality are not compatible with yours.

But what if you find that you have a lot more in common? What if you find that irrespective of those immutable characteristics you have a lot in common with that person by way of approach to life and common values? Most importantly what if by that association you learn more and grow to be a stronger, better version of yourself not reliant or dependent on the need to dominate anyone! We will be empowered by the ability to rise up and to help others rise as well.

We should welcome equality and diversity. Equality implies that we will all become stronger by participating on the same playing field. It fuels an upward mobile spiral. Diversity of experience and background multiplies the wealth of knowledge that one can use to address any issue. Fear based insecure people desire to avoid competition. Listen to those who aspire to greatness. They are always seeking competition, because they know that people improve through equal access to the competitive environment and that the pressure of striving to be better as it breeds greatness. It is so ironic that the prevailing characteristic of this democracy, that we are all equal under the eyes of the law, has been stripped and neutered of its real meaning. It is only when we are all presumed equal and no one is dominated or oppressed, that we will individually and collectively be able to breathe. I can't breathe. But I want to live!



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Lastly, I will host a panel discussion via our zoom online meeting format to discuss these topics further within our community. An email will be sent inviting you to that meeting later.

I invite your questions and comments as I look to be a leader and active participant in the progress and growth that we hope will come from this.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert N. Brown". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Robert Brown