

OPINION & COMMENTARY

MASSACHUSETTS SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT

# We must do more than express sadness, anger

*The seven justices of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court released the following letter to Bar leaders and the Judiciary:*

Dear Members of the Judiciary and the Bar:

The events of the last few months have reminded us of what African-Americans know all too well: that too often, by too many, black lives are not treated with the dignity and respect accorded to white lives. As judges and as lawyers, we are both saddened and angry at the confluence of recent events that have revealed how much more we need to do to create a just, fair, and peaceful society.

But we must do more than express our feelings of sadness and anger.

As judges, we must look afresh at what we are doing, or failing to do, to root out any conscious and unconscious bias in our courtrooms; to ensure that the justice provided to African-Americans is the same that is provided to white Americans; to create in our courtrooms, our corner of the world, a place where all are truly equal.

As lawyers, we must also look at what we are doing, or failing to do, to provide legal assistance to those who cannot afford it; to diminish the economic and environmental inequalities arising from race; and to ensure that our law offices not only hire attorneys of color but also truly welcome them into the legal community.

And as members of the legal community, we need to reexamine why, too often, our criminal justice system fails to treat African-Americans the same as white Americans, and recommit ourselves to

the systemic change needed to make equality under the law an enduring reality for all. This must be a time not just of reflection but of action.

There is nothing easy about any of this. It will be uncomfortable: difficult conversations, challenging introspection, hard decisions. We must recognize and address our own biases, conscious and unconscious. We must recognize and condemn racism when we see it in our daily lives.

We must recognize and confront the inequity and injustice that is the legacy of slavery, of Jim Crow, and of the disproportionate incarceration of African-Americans, and challenge the untruths and unfair stereotypes about African-Americans that have been used to justify or rationalize their repression. And we must examine the underlying reasons why African-Americans have suffered disproportionately from the COVID-19 pandemic, both in terms of the number of deaths and the extent of economic hardship it has caused, and, where possible, address the causes of those disparities.

Perhaps most importantly, it is a time for solidarity and fellowship with African-American judges and attorneys, to acknowledge their pain, to hear about the conversations they now have with their children, and to stand together when others may try to divide us. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote from a Birmingham jail:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

KARL W. SMITH | TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

## Keep troops at protests

GUEST VIEWPOINT

# A call to white people: Reflect, act

**I**N 1977 I WAS A LITTLE girl sitting in front of the television set with my large family when Alex Haley’s *Roots* aired on the ABC television network. This was way before access to the seeming endless number of channels on cable television. *Roots* generated a huge audience and, for many in the United States, this gripping series put a face to the horrors of slavery and the creation of our country’s economic system, as it unfolded through the life of Kunta Kinte. It may have also been the first time millions of Americans learned about the true history of slavery in our country.

I am sure as a 5-year-old at the time I was quite unaware of the privileges I was beginning to accumulate.

I still have a visceral reaction when I think back to the images of Kunta Kinte being slashed by a whip. As viewers, we saw through his eyes his kidnapping from Africa and being sold as a slave in Annapolis, Maryland. We felt the pain of him being beaten on the auction block because he resisted the new name of Toby as his “owner” further tried to dehumanize him.

As a white person and over the course of a privileged life, I have watched over and over again the same images of whites in power, individuals and systems, brutalizing and forcing things on communities of color – where they can and cannot live; the conditions of schools their children go to; whether or not there are grocery stores available; longer prison sentences for nonviolent offenses that whites frequently are not even charged with; neighborhood safety; inequitable healthcare. The list goes on and on.

I don’t know where to begin listing the 21st century Kunta Kintes: Treyvon Martin,



JESSICA COLLINS

Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Oscar Grant, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd ... the list goes on and on. All of them killed senselessly. The violence and brutality has moved from the auction block to our neighborhood streets. It must stop.

As a result of the systemic exclusion of African Americans and others of color to the privileges I have experienced, the result has been less wealth for people of color: African American World War II veterans were pushed to urban areas and rental apartments, while white veterans of the war more easily gained mortgages, moved to the suburbs and started building wealth. African Americans were denied the right or the ability to vote. Quality education was less accessible.

Communities of color are more at risk for diseases that are caused by poor nutrition, smoking and lack of physical activity: it’s hard to eat high quality diets if your neighborhood has fast food and no grocery store or fresh produce; smoking is more commonplace if a multi-billion-dollar industry markets tobacco products specifically to your community; physical activity is harder if you fear for your safety.

Communities of color may not fully trust the healthcare industry and therefore may not know or use it even when they should. Given our history, can we blame them?

It’s hard to forget Tuskegee and all the black men used as human guinea pigs and infected with syphilis and then watched by medical researchers as they spread the virus and deteriorated over decades.

The pandemic we are living through offers more stark evidence that something is wrong.

Over the past four months, more people of color have succumbed to the COVID-19 virus than whites, not because they are inferior or weaker than whites (it is not just white supremacists who inherently believe this), but because the overlaying realities of what puts people at risk for this virus is the everyday reality for many people of color in our urban communities. People who have less money; higher rates of obesity and chronic diseases, such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes; work in occupations that are essential and impossible to do from home; and live in more densely populated situations are more at risk of dying from the virus. From our Springfield Health Equity Report, 2019, we know that means African Americans and Latino/as, and COVID-19 mortality rates from around the country corroborate this.

For example, the report shows that people of color in Springfield were at disproportionate risk of being admitted to the hospital for cardiovascular disease. Latino/a Springfield children are five times more likely to have asthma than their peers and rates were slightly higher among Latino/a and Black students (Black – 43% overweight or obese; Latino/a – 44% overweight or obese) when compared to white children (40.6% overweight or obese).

We can all do more, and organizations, institutions

and businesses should lead the way. In 2014, the Healing Racism Institute of the Pioneer Valley was founded. The Institute offers a place in our region to explore and understand the root causes of racism in our society and in ourselves, and how to dismantle racist systems.

Its target audience is everyone, particularly white leaders in our community who have participated in impressive numbers. White leaders are critical because we have to acknowledge our own privilege and power and the pain suffered by people of color if real change is going to happen. There are also the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ) and the Undoing Racism Organizing Collective to turn to for more information about how to dismantle racist systems.

The Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts (PHIWM) requires all of our board members and staff to go through the two-day Healing Racism training. It’s a start to understanding white people’s historic advantage by design and to sit with others to talk about it and then commit to doing something.

The PHIWM board of directors and I are inviting you to join us in calling for action to stop the brutalization of people of color and the deprivation of resources and opportunities in communities of color. If you can’t spare two days for a seminar, there is a growing volume of material and programming to help all of us understand how we got here. Watching the *Roots* mini-series with your family and kids would even be a good place to start. But it can’t end there.

*Jessica Collins is executive director of the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts*