



30 August 2020 Reflections: Black Lives Matter

by Drina Read

Imagine that you are a small child growing up in a neighbourhood where the only store where your family can buy groceries is the 7-Eleven? Your mom, who works three jobs to struggle to make ends meet, is gone from early morning to late at night. Your dad disappears from your life for years on end. You find out later that he is in prison. Your siblings hang out in a back alley because there are no community centres or parks near your small run-down apartment that doesn't even have a working refrigerator. You witness your 14-year-old brother and his friends being stopped by police, forced to remove their shirts, violently body-searched, thrown to a wall, and screamed at. Why? Because they are black. No crime has been committed; it's just intimidation of kids who have nowhere else to go. As you grow older, you realize that the pattern of intimidation and abuse of everyone in your community forces them into a spiral that can only lead to incarceration or early death.

Before I learned about the above reality for many African Americans (and Canadian people of colour), I wanted to know why the Black Lives Matter movement has become so big. What's it all about? I looked up Black Lives Matter on Wikipedia. I found out that it started with three women who joined together from different parts of America to start a movement in response to the numerous, ongoing shooting deaths of black and brown people in the US and Canada. I wanted to know more, so I checked out a book from the Vancouver Public Library, [When they call you a terrorist: A black lives matter memoir](#) by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele. Patrisse is one of the original organizers of Black Lives Matter. The book is her story.

Before reading her book cover to cover, I thought I was pretty well-informed about the issues. I have to admit that I was so wrong! Unless you are a person of colour, you cannot possibly understand what racism does to an individual and their community, but you can try. I highly recommend this book to everyone.

As I learned about the systemic racism in North America that has led to the Black Lives Matter movement, I was thinking to myself, "How could this happen? Why is this still happening?"

Patrisse talks about the history of the US when slavery supposedly ended. She referenced the Jim Crow laws. I had to look up what this meant: (from Wikipedia) "Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States. These laws were enacted in the late

19th and early 20th centuries by white Southern Democrat-dominated state legislatures to disenfranchise and remove political and economic gains made by black people during the Reconstruction period. The Jim Crow laws were enforced until 1965.” She points out that the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution which abolished slavery contains a loophole that created a new form of slavery: it allows for “involuntary servitude” as a punishment for a crime.

She notes that the US accounts for 5% of the Earth’s population, meanwhile the US has 25% of all the world’s prison populations. How can this be? We have heard the term “systemic racism”. Imagine everywhere you go, you live in fear of being stopped by the police, detained, beaten, incarcerated. Why? Because of the colour of your skin.

Prisoners, who are predominantly black, are forced to work for big corporations who profit from their labour, such as Starbucks, Whole Foods and Victoria’s Secret, among others. Not only does this reduce the jobs available on the outside, it hands more profit to corporations and perpetuates the prison cycle. If you can’t find a job, you may get desperate and turn to crime just to survive, and then you get incarcerated and they give you a job!

Living in Canada, we have been told that our country operates on the basis of peace, order, and good government. What if none of the above applied to you?

What if your home is not safe? Police routinely break into African American homes with the pretence of looking for “suspects”, breaking down doors, destroying property and, worst of all, shooting or killing the occupants.

Schools are not safe. Patrisse points out that black schools before the Columbine shooting (where a white teenager opened fire on his ostensibly white classmates) had no metal detectors, bars, or police presence, including drug-sniffing dogs. She points out that the LA County School District spends \$52 million USD on its own police force. The schools are designed like prisons because when you get out of school, that’s the logical next step.

The War on Drugs put a lot more black and poor people in prison. Instead of funding programs to help people with addiction and helping them to live in dignity, lawmakers and bureaucrats funnelled the resources into the prison business where the inmates have in effect become a modern slave population working for corporate masters.

In one of the more poignant recollections of Patrisse’s life, she is invited by a white classmate to come for dinner in their swanky Sherman Oaks, California home. They sit at a dinner table in a dining room with good food on the table. Her friend’s Dad asks her how her day went. What are her hopes and dreams for the future? Patrisse has never had this experience at her family’s small apartment where her mom is always out working and they are lucky to have

some micro waved food from the convenience store. During the conversation, she discovers that this smiling, jolly man knows her mother. He is the slumlord who was responsible for her family not having a working refrigerator in their home for the better part of a year!

As Patrisse grows, she becomes an activist. Her brother, who is arrested by the LA Police, is incarcerated in one of the several LA County Jails. It takes her mother over a month to locate where he is being held. Nobody in the police department offers to help her find her son. When she does find him, he has been repeatedly beaten and drugged. He has lost 40 pounds. The doctors tell her he has Schizoaffective Disorder but they offer him no treatment for his illness. The drugs they do give him are to keep him in line. He is drooling when his mom finally sees him. The voices in his head told him to try to get into someone's apartment when he was arrested. He was not successful in the so-called break-in, and he's never harmed anyone or anything in his life, but now he's in jail.

Patrisse joins with other activists to work for prison and police reform. Eventually, the frequent police shootings spur her and two other women to start the Black Lives Matter movement to bring everyone together. She worries that the name is too controversial, but it speaks to what she has always believed, that black lives do matter. She also works hard to have women of colour at the forefront, especially Queer and Trans Women who are frequent targets of violence and police brutality.

From a Canadian perspective, we look at the US and shake our heads. We think we're better than that, but we are not. Black Lives Matter takes hold in Toronto and Vancouver. In Ontario, the police were known to "card" people of colour where they would stop a person without any reason and start questioning who they were and where they were going. People of Colour with mental health issues have been shot and killed by the police or driven to jump out of an apartment building. In BC, there are multiple documented cases of police confronting Indigenous people and other people of colour, using weapons and physical force.

The book references many injustices to people of colour that repeatedly go unpunished. Enough is enough. As Patrisse says, "We are a generation called to action."

As I am thinking about the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement and how more people need to be involved to implement real change, I find out that the sports stars in the NBA, WNBA, some Major League baseball and soccer teams and some NHL hockey players are speaking out to stop the police brutality and killings, with some even boycotting finals games. My heart begins to soar!

The players are spotlighting Black Live Matter to help affect real change, legislatively and through encouraging all people of colour to vote. Back to

Patrisse's book, in the last presidential election, Black Lives Matter encouraged all Women of Colour in the US to vote, and 96% of them did!

When I contemplate the terrible things that are still happening to people of colour, I think why can't we all just love each other?

And take peaceful action...

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13:34-35

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