

MY AMERICA – D. Rico Munn

My father has a lead foot. On many family road trips across this country he would get pulled over and receive a well-deserved ticket. I have a vivid childhood memory of waking up during one such overnight trip as a state trooper pulled him over yet again. I watched as my father politely handed over his license and registration while simultaneously keeping his hand close to the loaded .38 he kept tucked next to his seat. My father is now 89. As a black illegal immigrant from the West Indies, he grew up in a very different America than I did. In his America, a traffic stop was a life and death encounter. In his America, there was no expectation that the police were there to help you or to be fair to you. In his America, even an Army veteran like him did not expect that his country would treat him like a man.

Injustice was the norm and he faced it down every day. He taught me how to live in America based on those experiences. He taught me I would always have to fight for what was mine. He taught me that the system, and its enforcers, would actively oppose me. He taught me to fight for my life every day. Thankfully, and most importantly, he taught me that my faith and my education would be my greatest weapons.

I am a man. I am a black man. I am a black man in America. I am a black man in America who holds a position of relative authority and privilege. All of these things are true and all of these things hold meaning for me, especially at this moment in time. I love this country. America has afforded me the opportunity to worship as I please; to get a college degree and a law degree. In America I have been able to earn a living, marry the girl of my dreams, raise two beautiful children and participate in the civic and cultural life of my community. But also in America, I have been spit on, called a nigger, harassed by the police, denied opportunities and watched black friends and loved ones systematically jailed, impoverished and dehumanized. My relationship with America is complicated; I am outraged by injustice but never surprised by it. I celebrate what is good about America but I never forget the lessons my father taught me.

My son is 12. He thinks he lives in a different America than the one experienced by his father and grandfather. In his America, school and church are multicultural experiences. In his America, he thinks he can trust the system; after all, the system (K12 education) in which he has spent the majority of his life was run by his father. In his America, he thinks things will be fair and just. Today, I must break his heart by teaching him the name and story of George Floyd. I have to teach my son the lessons my father taught me so that in the future he can be outraged at injustice but not surprised and paralyzed by it.

I share my American experience not because my story is special or unique but because as a leader I think those around me have some right to know the lens through which I see the world and make decisions. I am challenged by the recognition that every decision I make is about resolving the duality between living in the greatest country on earth and living in an America that cruelly and intentionally dehumanizes and discards people based upon the color of their skin.

I am moved by both Lee Greenwood and Gil Scott-Heron. I see no conflict in expressing gratitude for the military and in supporting Colin Kaepernick. At its core, the American Dream is about freedom and to paraphrase Nelson Mandela, true freedom cannot be experienced unless you “live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” To me, the movement we are seeing today and the work I am committed to is about true freedom and the desire we should all share to live in an America where there is no duality; an America which is the same for all of us and for all our children.

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