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Open Letter to the Public

Modified from a personal blog posted May 31, 2020

We have a choice. If not now, then when?

After watching the grotesque killing of George Floyd, and the aftermath – and viscerally feeling the brutality – I say we have a choice. We can accept the status quo, or we can accept anarchy, or we can do something about all of this.

Even as a white person I've seen racism first-hand at work and socially, both when out with my friends who are people of color and in casual conversation among all-white groups. I have also had my own experiences with crowd frenzy and police dysfunction. After centuries of history with racial abuse, when will we say, "it has to stop"? If not now, then when?

We have a long history of protesting. Even looking at only my lifetime, there have been decades of it. In the 1960's, there was a long-overdue civil rights movement. But we still don't have equity in our socio-economic structure 50 years later. In the 1970's, the women's movement began pressing hard for equality in work and elsewhere. We still don't have it: no equal rights amendment to the Constitution, women still make 80 cents to the dollar of men's wages, and sexual harassment is alive and well. We also had protests against the Viet Nam war that were just as bad as what we see this weekend. People of color and people who were poor took the brunt of that war. And we still have wars that are not necessary.

In the 1980's and 1990's, some people did very well economically, and as a result, equity was put on back-burner. But nothing changed for many, especially for people of color. Families of color still had to train their children, especially boys, to behave certain ways to avoid police conflicts.

Today, people of color still have substantially lower assets and wages than people who are white. Many white people still express implicit bias in their conversations and behavior not even realizing it. And now our government is terrorizing immigrants as well as local police systematically continuing to practice racial harassment. Think about how much worse it will get as climate change progresses and we start fighting over natural resources. But we have a choice. We can change. If not now, then when?

Crowds always have the potential to turn ugly. There is something in a crowd mentality that allows the "herd" to follow even misplaced leadership. People start out peacefully and then get exploited by anarchists. We end up with cults, rioters, damage and looting, even among the most peaceful group, when it gets too large and the group doesn't check itself. This weekend's demonstrations got co-opted by people who came not to peacefully protest for racial justice, but to cause harm – damaging the protest and the objectives of the protests in the process.

And while there are many good police, there are always some bad apples in every force. Police are self-selected for their interest in control. Police have a high rate of spousal abuse as well as abuse of people of color. But the police culture rebukes those who want to do things by the book.

Now we have the added glaring racial imbalance in the impacts from coronavirus, in unemployment resulting from the pandemic, and continued injustice in how the police treat those at the bottom of the income scale, those who are mentally ill, homeless or who are people of color.

Our choice now, especially white Americans, is to say, enough is enough. After hundreds of years of racial injustice, it has to stop. The economic system has to be reformed; so does the police culture. It is incumbent on those of us who have some political power to wage war on the status quo.

Instead of feeling helpless, we need to rise up and say, NOW is the time. Those of us who care need to write letters to the editor, join activist groups, call on city and county councils and the state legislature to prioritize solutions to racial imbalance and lobby our friends to do the same. The lack of revenue is no longer a valid excuse to avoid addressing these problems. The financial, social and psychic cost of unjust murders, riots and looting and continued systems to perpetuate racism far outweighs the cost of remedying this ill in our country.

The League of Women Voters is prioritizing equity in its work right now. But nothing will change unless the majority of us say, **if not now, then when?**

--Cynthia Stewart, President
League of Women Voters of Tacoma-Pierce County