



Dear Law Students,

I don't make a practice of writing to you all personally very often, but feel compelled to do so now. As it has been for many of you, this last week has been a difficult one for me to process. We have been dealing with inordinate stressors and uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 turmoil for months now, and that has been hard, to say the least. A week ago we learned that the United States had passed a grim milestone—100,000 of our fellow Americans have died due to the virus, a number that reflects the loss of individuals and heartbreak for their loved ones, as well as the failure of an adequate systemic response to this crisis. As we know, the virus has had a disproportionate impact on communities of color and poorer communities, with more death, more illness, and more economic loss in those communities than elsewhere. This is not said to diminish the impact that COVID-19 has had in all communities, but simply to acknowledge the reality of where it has hit the hardest.

This week has also reminded us of an awful but central aspect of the history of the United States and life in it today—one in which black people have been oppressed by state and state-sanctioned violence for 400 years, and in which that oppression continues in many forms, whether it be police violence, private violence that is sanctioned by the state, the threat of state violence being used to intimidate a bird watcher, voter intimidation and suppression, a lack of access to health care, or any of the other forms that the oppression of African Americans and other communities of color takes on a daily basis.

The recent killing of George Floyd, preceded by that of so many other African Americans, is, horribly, one aspect and a recent manifestation of that oppression. Part of my hesitation in writing this message to you in the first place is because unarmed African Americans are killed by police and with the complicity of the state so often that I could not possibly write a message to the community every time it happens. Please let that sink in, because that is the reality. Yet this moment is also different because of the protests that have been occurring in our community, around the country and, indeed, around the world, in response to Mr. Floyd's death. Although I fear that, at least in this moment, the protests will not change much, I hope that the public display of pain and anguish leads us collectively toward progress in the fight toward racial justice.

I hope that each of us takes some time to reflect on what it means to us and our work to say that black lives matter. If you prefer to suggest that "all lives matter," please use this moment to consider how that includes all lives, including that of Mr. Floyd and every other African American.

We, as lawyers, have enormous tools to effect change on an individual and structural basis. Justice is not the project of one moment, or even one lifetime; it is the work of generations. It is something that we, as lawyers, commit to in taking our oaths as officers of the court, and a lofty goal that, however far off, we must strive toward.

In community,

Dean Sudha Setty

Sudha Setty  
Dean and Professor of Law  
Western New England University School of Law