



Dear St. Thomas Law alumni:

I grew up in a middle-class family in an overwhelmingly white middle-class suburb of Chicago. I viewed police officers as approachable and friendly community resources who were quick to help in ways big and small. I knew generally about instances of "bad apples" within police departments abusing their power from time to time, but the notion of systemic injustices were not on my radar screen.

My legal training, I fear, exacerbated my ignorance by shielding it through professionally defensible ways of viewing the world. When I learned to "think like a lawyer," I became quick to see two sides to every situation, slow to judge, and expert at constructing rationalizations for nearly any position. Too often, I have misused these skills as a shield for my comfortable view of the world rather than as a sword to pierce my own assumptions.

If an eyewitness would have described what she witnessed last week when a Minneapolis officer knelt on George Floyd's neck until he died, ignoring the desperate pleas of Mr. Floyd and bystanders, I would likely have thought, "It has to have been more complicated than that. I wonder what the other side of the story is." It is only because we have the video that I know there is no other side of the story. A police officer killed an unarmed, handcuffed man accused of a nonviolent crime and begging for his life, and the officer's colleagues focused on crowd management rather than intervention. And over the past week, the grief, anguish, and anger unleashed on the corner of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue have swept across the country and around the world.

When it comes to our nation's tragic history of racial injustice, we are each on a journey. For some of us - like me - it is a journey of gradual and long overdue awareness. For others - perhaps you - it is a journey marked by pain, pain, and more pain. To the extent that the silence of those of us in the first category has contributed to the pain of those in the second category, I'm sorry.

We are also on a journey at St. Thomas. I believe we are making progress, but it is slow and painstaking. If you experienced pain because of racial inequities or marginalization during your time here, I'm sorry.

A few years ago, after Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson,

Missouri, a group of black students came to talk to me. They told me that they felt isolated at the law school, not because classmates or professors were saying things about what happened that were offensive, but because no one was even talking about what happened. That was important for me to hear. We are working to make sure that St. Thomas Law never shirks from difficult conversations, and that those conversations lead to concrete action steps. We don't always get it right, but we will keep learning from our mistakes and trying again.

Last Friday, I received an email from a member of our class of 2020, and he wrote, "If there's one thing that St. Thomas has taught me that no other law school would have is that lawyers should not be numb, that they should feel as much as they think." This has been a horror-filled week for our city and country, and it is difficult to avoid a general numbness right now. As this graduate reminded me, though, we are called to feel the pain of those whose life experiences we do not share so that we can more effectively meet their needs.

During the tumult of recent days, some members of the St. Thomas Law community have been on the front lines of the protests. Some have been on the front lines of law enforcement. Some have struggled with fear as disruption threatened their homes or family businesses. Some have done their best to manage daily responsibilities under the weight of significant trauma. Whatever their path, they are part of a law school community committed to reclaiming the wisdom of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who taught that "justice" is about more than lifting up the marginalized and oppressed; it is also about healing the relationships that are broken by marginalization and oppression.

As our alumni, we are accountable to you to make sure we are doing what we can to help build what Dr. King called "the beloved community." If you have ideas, questions, or concerns, I would be honored to hear from you.

With warm regard,

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