

An Open Letter to Breonna Taylor's Mother and all our Mothers of Loss this Mother's Day

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Dear Miss Tamika,

A friend asked: What would you say to Breonna Taylor's mother on Mother's Day? I was stumped. I could not know your pain. It would be presumptuous of me to think I could. A mother, a grandmother, my children and grandchildren are alive.

Then, just as that thought came to me, my mind shuttered every door and window through which an answer might come. Seized with fear, I went mute. Like most of us, as African Americans, I know police brutality—America's centuries-old state-sanctioned terror against its citizens of color.

I know this too. Up until the moment you learned police had killed your daughter, we shared the same grief and fear: That America would take our babies from us; would pull them in only to spit them out. America would wipe its mouth, its hands; and leave the table to scrape clean its plate of all that went before—as so very much has.

Knowing what I did know, would I be tempting errant gods and their human emissaries to put me on the list of retribution? Would they take my simple statement of grateful fact as boast and steal my joy? That's what the shutters were keeping out: memories feared storming in; personal encounters and more—too many more.

I remember the [1955 photo of Mamie Till Bradley](#) collapsing under the weight of grief at the open casket of her fourteen-year-old son, his face swollen beyond recognition. Kidnapped from his granduncle's home, his eye was gouged out, his forehead was bashed in; he was shot and his body thrown into a river for “whistling at a White woman.”

Finding his body in the Tallahatchie, the local sheriff—without permission from Emmett's family—ordered his immediate burial. Emmett's mother called everyone up to the governor to stop the burial. The sheriff relented; shipping the child's body to Chicago with orders not to open the casket. [Mamie Till Bradley did](#). And what she saw so sickened her that she wanted the world to see it too. Lynching was not a victimless, nameless act. It bore the face of a fourteen-year-old child.

Neither are such shields of contract and custom as “qualified immunity,” “no-knock warrants,” the “blue wall of silence” and the refusal of local and state officials to prosecute and hold accountable the police officers who killed your daughter victimless, nameless acts. They bear the face of a bright, beautiful, energetic, hard-working, twenty-six-year old young woman with dreams for her future: your daughter, Breonna Taylor.

The [Jet magazine cover story](#) of Emmett, tattooed on the psyches of my generation, was our “George Floyd moment.” George Floyd’s primal scream calling for his mother did not reach the four officers involved in his killing, but was heard round the world. Mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, in cities and towns worldwide rallied to his call.

For centuries of legalized political, social, economic and physical brutality designed to “keep Blacks in our place” and exploited, people had accepted the official American take on the story: a fiction as seen through the eyes of the perpetrators of the terror—not through the lives of the terrorized. It was a story that banked on economic and political assets to cover moral deficits.

Some, aware of the reality, glorified it. Dare we forget that in the build-up to their “Final Solution,” [Nazi Germany took its inspiration from America in determining its laws and actions?](#)

With Emmett, the world began asking questions. With your daughter and George Floyd, such questions were answered.

Attempts to bury Emmett’s murder then was our “Breonna Taylor reality check” now. With every such official expression of racism and violence, the public is encouraged to tease out the guilt of the victim—not the contributing politics of our justice systems.

Louisville, Kentucky’s mistreatment of your daughter’s case stated unequivocally: You can come home from work, watch TV in bed, have your door stormed, be killed, have the System protect your killers without trial, and still—fourteen months later—see not one officer charged. This, even as police killings of demonstrators and supporters have continued.

Thankfully, Ms. Tamika, because of your tenacity and persistence, two weeks ago, your voice was heard at the federal level. Attorney General Merrick Garland announced the Department of Justice’s decision to open a “pattern or practice investigation” into the Louisville government and police department to “assess all types of force used by LMPD officers... including use of force on individuals engaged in activities protected by the First Amendment.”

In this reality check, I knew what I needed to say to you: Thank you Tamika Palmer, Miss Tamika.

- ★ Thank you for not succumbing to grief—no matter how deep the pain.
- ★ Thank you for making your story known—no matter how badly you may ache for privacy.
- ★ Thank you for holding The System to account—knowing, as we await the outcome, the struggle and your oversight must go on.

- ★ Thank you for keeping your daughter’s name in our sight for the sake of lesser-known Black women victims of police killings and misconduct. #SayHerName
- ★ Thank you for telling us that Breonna was one-of-kind and one among peers; that she is all our daughters—and our sons.
- ★ Thank you for loving your daughter enough to protect mine in the only way we have come to know how: by keeping our own counsel no matter what the powers-that-be would use their power to do—and not do.
- ★ Thank you for taking your unwanted place with grace, determination, and dutiful rage—link in an unbroken chain—Sister of Sorrow from 1619 to Mamie Bradley Till to tomorrow. For we know more will come.

And, thank you for the opportunity to come to my own reality check. As I write this letter to you, I know the question isn’t *what will I say?* It’s *what must I do?*

Throughout the Caribbean—possibly other regions, too—there are traditional ring games where a “ring” (or circle) is formed. As the players chant a rhyme and clap in time, someone is called into the ring; never knowing who will be next. One such game says, “Come in and show me your motion.” Whatever you can do is your contribution to the game; is “showing your motion.” A casual observer watching the center player, might miss the role of the ring: to keep the ring whole and cheer each other on.

Just one—among growing numbers of mothers, fathers, families, friends, caring fellow human beings who do not know when or if, but fear that we, too, may be called into the circle—I know I must be mindful of things often taken for granted.

I remind myself to:

- ★ Watch my language. Be careful the words *black* and *white* —when “black” is used for all things negative and “white” for purity and innocence.
- ★ Rethink how words mask truths. You don’t “import” people like just cheese or olive oil. Africans were kidnapped; the American Slave Trade human trafficking. African Americans were not “born slaves,” they were enslaved at birth. Enslaved people and their descendants are not inanimate objects, *nothing*. We are people. We are, like Breonna, some one’s child.
- ★ Reject denial. The issue isn’t imposing 21st century ideas on 18th century life. What 21st century people are demanding is that we remember that while some 18th century people believed in enslaving others, other 18th century people—notably those enslaved—did not.
- ★ Reject policies enacted in the name of religion to cover-up the trampling of fundamental human rights. There is not a recognized religion in the world that does not have at its core: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

- ★ Hold police accountable by holding us all accountable for how we raise, train, and hire police officers. Training does not stop police brutality; screening our people with pre-existing racist tendencies does.
- ★ Listen. Learn. Respect everyone.

When I write or speak about such things as these, I'm always asked to offer a message of hope. I'm often reluctant—not because I don't believe in hope (*who doesn't need hope?*) but, because the ask skips a step.

All too often, what some really want is a first-class ticket on an express train to hope; bypassing stations of conscious thought, self-awareness, responsibility, moral imperative, and the participatory demands of what is truly required of a “citizen.”

My job is not to make excuses for my country, nor to offer revisionist denials of culpability. It's to help us get past our past through healing. It's to give us the fuel we need to confront the uncomfortable: to own what is happening around us, confront it, atone for it, heal from it, and grow, so we can all move on.

From that vantage, I think back to 1999 when four plainclothes New York City policemen killed an unarmed African immigrant, Amadou Diallo, on the front porch of his own home. A hail of forty-one pumped into his body set him twirling on an axis of history. A bench trial heard by a sole judge exonerated the officers, finding their acts “reasonable.” The four testified that the man they knew they had wrongfully killed “slithered” around his porch. He was a snake.

I was in studio with my producer, preparing a show about the event. Each time she spoke Diallo's name, before she could catch herself, she'd call him “Diablo.” He was a devil.

This week, sending off a quick text on a cellphone manufactured (as most are) abroad, I began typing the letters G-R-E-O-N when my spellcheck replaced my typo with BREONNA.

Reluctant to call it hope, I'll call it consciousness. My thanks to you, Miss Tamika, and to your far-too-many Sisters of Sorrow who know what you have come to know. Because you insisted that we remember your daughter's life, because the Circle #SayHerName, the truth of police violence in America has gone global—putting the story at the world's fingertips for all to see. From that, I take hope.

Happy Mother's Day to you and your family; to your Sisters of Sorrow. You have given birth to more than we may ever know.

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Dr. Janus Adams is an Emmy Award-winning journalist, author, host of public radio's “The Janus Adams Show.” Her website is: JanusAdams.com