

Ahmaud Arbery and the Trauma of Being a Black Runner

I wish the world saw me as a Christian first, not as a threat.

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I was on my morning run as the sun was rising in the blue California skies. There was hardly anybody out at that time. You learn real young not to run too early in the morning or too late at night.

I guess I forgot the lessons, the safety agenda my parents taught me. They knew what would happen. I brought my identification like my wife tells me to every time I leave. During the run, I wasn't worried about anything, and I felt good. I couldn't wait to check my pace on my fitness tracker.

Then it happened. I looked in the distance, and there was this white man on his porch taking photos of me. Every shot he took, I got more confused. I said, "It's a good morning out here, isn't it?" as if me being respectable was going to shield me in this situation or get him to finally see me as a human.

He didn't answer. Here we go again.

My fear quickly turned to rage. I wanted to fight for my dignity in the face of being documented by a stranger and being told I didn't belong here. Policed by a man standing on his front porch. Right there in Southern California, the ghost of Jim Crow's "What are you doing here, n—r?" showed up.

But ultimately, I felt powerless. I couldn't even call the cops because they might've mistaken me for the aggressor. This is what black men have to deal with, while others

can enjoy their runs. Again and again, year after year. This rage forces me to be angry about our reality and have the faith to believe that better is possible.

But on that day last year, my rage that turned into deep sadness. On the walk home, I stopped, bowed my head, and cried. These were not tears of weakness. I cried because I felt what many of those who looked like me have felt: the violence of an unloving world. He robbed me that day. He stole something from me in his cruelty.

I was a college athlete; now I run and bike. I've run half marathons and completed an Ironman. But I can't enjoy it like I used to. Where is the joy and freedom of getting out on the road, of training my body, when I have to wonder if one day I won't make it to the end? I've been running all my life, and in some ways now, I have to run to keep it. My wife is legit afraid of getting that call: Your husband is dead.

Many believe that cases like the attack on Ahmaud Arbery are isolated. Or that they're the kind of thing that can only happen in the South. No, this society has been taught anti-blackness. We see it in how they police our movements, criminalize our humanity, and avoid racial reckoning while enjoying the fruit that came from rotten trees—trees from which my ancestors hung lifeless.

Those wounds run deep even as I run today for my future, for my people, and even for my life. It's a trauma that black Americans are forced to face, the tragic conditions of oppression, the audacity of whiteness. I couldn't help but wonder: Why do they hate us so much?

The crime and tragedy of being black

Not long before I was accosted during my run last summer, I had written in a journal how I wished that when I stepped out into the world, the people around me would see

me as fundamentally Christian. But the truth is that no matter how many Bible verses I quote, how many great books I read and post, how morally excellent I am, what degree I hold, or any other trait that is “successful,” none of that can shield me from the tragedy of being black.

And don't we know tragedy.

In recent weeks, armed activists have stormed the streets to protest, protected by their whiteness, while innocent and unarmed black people are attacked for living their lives. Arbery's name joins a long list of black victims who never should have been killed, challenged, or even suspected, people who have done nothing wrong.

We have witnessed once again the public display of what Eddie Glaude calls the “value gap”: the belief that black lives are less valuable than others. The black experience with COVID-19 has revealed inequalities that have been there all along—in health care, power, wealth, education, income, and incarceration.

Arbery ran. He fought for his life, for his blackness, but white rage stole it from him. It's been two and a half months since he was killed, and his assailants have finally been arrested. When I watched the video, my heart sank. My mind went back to what that man did to me, the pictures, the walk back home, the tears. I made it, but Arbery didn't. He doesn't live to tell the story. He cannot be angry or do anything about it. He has become a hashtag, a memory, a prayer. He died alone that day. His last memory was lying on the asphalt.

After his death, the city's district attorney, George Barnhill, declared that Arbery's mental health and prior convictions explained his aggression toward an armed man

positioned to confront him in the street. Barnhill blamed the victim, not the bloodlust of a lynch crew. The cruelty.

Every year, something reminds us that black lives don't matter. At this point we are running out of outrage. History shows us that the greatest threats to black lives are white supremacy, white power, and white terrorism. Who will fight for us when we are fighting for ourselves and we still get lynched? Who will hold the murderers to account? How much black blood must be sacrificed to white supremacy? Why must our families be terrorized while they live at peace? These are the questions that find expression in my silent prayers and fearful tears. . . .

To be black and to be Christian is to remember the brutality of our experience and the brilliance of our resistance. . . .

We black people want change. Glaude, an African American religion scholar at Princeton, writes, "We have to break the racial habits that give life to the value gap, and that starts with changes in our social and political arrangements." We need a revolution of value—in government, in our communities, in our personal lives. We have done the work, and we are tired.

People like to say, "This is not the America / know." We heard it with slavery, Jim Crow, civil rights, the '90s, the white backlash to Obama, the brutal murders of children, women, and men in the Black Lives Matter era, and even the white rage in support of Trump. We've heard it before. And you know what? Those people are exactly right. The shield of whiteness has protected many from the devastating experience of a world we knew the whole time—one in which white lives and white communities and white pain

matter much more than ours. I just wish those thoughts and prayers were prayed against a world that has protected you and killed us. . . .

How long do we have to wait for progress? How many have to be brutally murdered before people believe that we are actually telling the truth? What is the cycle of violence and apathy costing us? Why are we the ones who have to believe God has a good plan for us in the future but the best plan for them in the present? How long do we have to endure these types of talks until people realize that white supremacy is not ours to solve but their problem, their children's problem?

For the complete text, follow this [link](#)