

Because he was vulnerable, he may not be protected.

That's what keeps running through my head as the defense attorney for Derek Chauvin prepares to present his arguments.

Because George Floyd was vulnerable, he may not be protected.

Americans are not conditioned to see a man like George Floyd as vulnerable. Since 1915 with “The Birth of a Nation,” Americans have been barraged with popular media representations that cast black men of his stature and color as either superhuman or super villains. This social conditioning is so powerful, so pervasive, that even black folks are susceptible to being influenced by such stereotypes.

Americans are not conditioned to look at a 6’4”, 223 pound black man and see a profoundly vulnerable, fragile human.

His size and skin color made George Floyd more vulnerable in America, not less.

We who know and love and call black men our fathers and uncles and brothers and sons and husbands worry for them constantly. We know they are relentlessly surveilled. We breathe easy only when they walk through the door and we can close it against the world outside.

It’s hard for people who don’t experience that kind of worry to understand what that might feel like. Imagine a loved one being deployed during a deadly and invisible war, one where the battle lines are constantly redrawn as you sleep, a battle in which you never know where the safe zone is, because there isn’t one. You never know they’ve reached safety until they are in your arms. And too often they never come home.

I recently spoke with a child who experienced racist bullying at his school. He told me that the bully was “everywhere and nowhere all of the time.” I was stunned by how accurately he described the pervasive threat of racism in our country. You don't know where it’s coming from or when it might happen, but the possibility is constant. And if for a moment you forget, you’ll go to see a play or a movie and suddenly you’ll be reminded of your otherness as those around you laugh at something that makes you want to cry.

Living like this—under constant surveillance, not knowing when or from what direction threat is coming—induces profound stress. Humans respond to threat with an unconscious activation of our stress response system; our bodies are flooded with hormones to assist us in life-threatening situations so that we can fight or flee. When that stress response system is repeatedly activated throughout a person’s life, it causes inflammation in the body which can lead to chronic conditions like hypertension, heart disease, neurodegenerative diseases, even metastatic cancer. Chronic stress can also cause brain changes that contribute to anxiety, depression, and addiction.

These are symptoms of weathering racism in this country. The stress people of color experience living in the United States is making us sick. These are not opinions; these are facts.

Because George Floyd was vulnerable, he may not be protected.
Because he had hypertension and heart disease, he may not be protected.
Because he struggled with opioid addiction, he may not be protected.
Instead, his vulnerability will be used to attempt to exonerate the man who killed him.

Before the moment that breath left George Floyd's body under the unambiguous weight of a white police officer, the circumstances of his life as a black man living in America had caused adverse health conditions in his body. This is no defense for the brutality Derek Chauvin exacted against him.

Scars from our survival of racism should not be used as exculpatory evidence.
They are a testament to our will to survive.

Because he was vulnerable, George Floyd may not be protected by our judicial system.

I can only hope that because he was not protected, because so many witnessed the brutality that claimed his life, more Americans will make a resolute pledge to safeguard those whom racism makes vulnerable.

We still need the Railroad.

Light the beacons.
Stand in front of those in danger.
Don't leave them alone.
Bear witness.
Signal love.
Do what you can to help a beloved make it home.

To sanctuary.
To freedom.

Alive.

With abiding love,
Sarah

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