

The weight of silence presses down

*Stephanie
Porter-Nichols*

Letter from the Editor

My memories of these two Saturdays are about 30 years old, but they came flashing back on a much more recent Saturday as I helped cover the Black Lives Matter protest in Marion.

The memories were of another march. I was walking a few steps behind a state trooper. Police presence was heavy just as it was on June 13. Just as it was on the 13th, a Nikon camera was slung around my neck, though the older one required that I stash film canisters in my pockets and there certainly wasn't a smartphone with video capabilities available.

Yet, the difference that struck me most sharply was noise level. The BLM protest was often loud with chanting, music and toward the end angry yelling as the protestors faced off with counter-protestors.

Yet, as the memories flooded back, my shoulders sank under the weight. I was remembering the oppressive silence of the 30-year-old marches.

The streets were empty on those Saturdays. Oh, perhaps you'd seen a curtain flicker as the flatbed trailer went by a home, but no one stood on the sidewalks. Weekend traffic didn't buzz in the downtown area. So deserted were the streets, a visitor might have easily imagined he'd arrived in a ghost town.

While white sheets weren't a stretch, the reason for the abandoned downtown was a very real, living monster.

The KKK was making one of its sporadic visits to the area to remind everyone of its terrorizing presence.

The Klan's members didn't need to shout to make their message heard. All they had to do was show up and ride through the town.

In recent weeks, I've read numerous social media posts complaining about the noise of the 13th protest, the profanity and the disruption. Yet, when I put it beside the KKK parades, I'll take the BLM rally any day. Those voices were calling for change, for healing, for hope -- maybe not in a way that appealed to our Southern sensibilities, but perhaps that discomfort is just what we need.

No, I didn't like hearing anyone, saying, "F*ck the police." I fear our tendency as a society to demonize

other human beings by labeling groups leads us to devalue human life. It's too easy to hate and vilify the "police," the "protestors," the "media," "the counter-protestors." Behind all of these labels are someone's little boy or little girl.

While as a white person I can't know the feelings behind those screams, I can try to put myself in the shoes of Black Americans and begin to understand what's prompting those cries.

Just last year, our country marked the 400th anniversary of the first slaves being brought to this country.

For all the generations since, a sense of impending terror has hung over our Black brothers and sisters.

Oh today, it's not slavery. It's having someone charged with upholding peace hold his knee on your neck for nearly nine minutes, slowly suffocating you as you cry out for your mother. Or, it's having police break into your apartment and shoot you while you lie in bed sleeping. Or, it's having strangers shoot you while you're out jogging.

It's being pulled over when you didn't commit a crime or being denied a loan or someone crossing the street out of fear -- simply because of the color of your skin. It's going to the toy department to buy your child a doll and finding an amazing selection of white babies but only a handful of dolls of color.

It's going to buy your child a Bible or faith-oriented books to find Jesus overwhelmingly portrayed as white when he was most certainly a man of color.

It's going to the makeup department to buy your teenage daughter hair products to find the selection limited to a tiny corner of the appropriate aisle.

It's knowing that studies show your health care and related research pales to that of whites.

It's a lifetime of such experiences. It's generations.

I suspect if most of us had to live with such challenges and downright terror for generation upon generation, we'd be screaming too. Profanity would probably pour from our mouths if it

could get out beyond the choking sobs.

While I've read some horrific threats in recent days of people promising violence during the next protest this Friday, I know that many, if not most, of you reading this column would loudly proclaim that you're not racist. I know that in your heart that's true, but I also know we sometimes miss circumstances right in front of our faces.

Individually, we may not be racist, but our country is rife with systemic racism -- that which has settled in slowly over time and isn't obvious to those of us who it doesn't directly impact unless we look closely.

A fellow pastor explained it well with this analogy. Suppose you go walking and come upon a pond with a dead fish or two. You think, "There must have been something wrong with that fish."

If you keep walking and come upon another pond in which many fish are dead, you may rethink the situation and conclude, "There's something wrong with this pond water."

If you walk farther and come upon even more ponds filled with dead fish, you may realize there's something seriously wrong with the ground water filling all these ponds.

If you stop exploring at the first pond, you'll never know something is critically wrong.

I hope all of us will explore systemic racism with the intention of learning what's right in front of us.

Numerous books, movies and a host of online materials are available to help you. A good place to start is the website of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture - <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race>. This site offers an abundance of materials to help us learn to talk about race. As our social media posts of recent days show, it's not an easy subject, but talking about it is essential for a healthier future. As we learn, we come to understand that for our country and community's wellbeing, it's not enough to not be a racist. We need to actively be anti-racists.

For our community, I hope that we'll celebrate the Fourth of July not just

on the Fourth but also on July 3 when the next protest is planned. Independence Day marks the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 2, 1776, that led to this country's freedoms.

As we think of this country's history and the path to freedoms, we recognize the Boston Tea Party and think how cool it was. We shouldn't forget that it was a political protest. Angry American colonists dumped 342 chests of tea into the harbor. Today, we applaud them.

It's a fair guess that the British East India Company didn't appreciate its property being trashed because colonists were pissed off about taxes and tyranny.

However, here, property destruction is unnecessary. There's no reason for the monument remembering the Confederate dead to come down, but there is reason to install a sculpture or another monument nearby acknowledging that human beings, even little children, were sold as property at our courthouse.

Over recent years, Marion has earned a label as one of the country's most patriotic communities. I hope Friday the town lives up to that reputation and shows its support for all protestors seeking a revolution of change in our hearts.

The protests and gatherings are absolutely no place for weapons. They are instead a place to show the Christian cross in its strength.

A cross was burned at the home of BLM protest organizer Travon Brown, a 17-year-old rising high school senior following the June 13 protest. While many are horrified that this KKK tactic gained new life, we who profess to follow Jesus Christ, who was executed with a cross, should demonstrate that the Cross has nothing to do with hate and everything to do with Love.

Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The cry of anguish from someone who feels completely abandoned comes from Psalm 22.

One of Jesus' ancestors obviously was personally acquainted with desperation.

Silence

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It would seem many of God's children feel such desperation today.

A later verse of that same Psalm begs: "Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help."

As Jesus' disciples, those he directed to love others as he loved us (and he offered us no exceptions) are we not called to help?

Mountain View United Methodist Church Pastor John Graham, who also serves as the clerk of Smyth County Circuit Court, spoke about this situation recently. He said the path forward may not be clear, but he knows it involves two things. First, he said, the community would have to listen to the voices in the black community, and listen to understand. Secondly, he said, "The way forward is rooted in love."

"The way forward is rooted in love. Love and respect to these young men who have just spoken. Love and respect to the officers, who have a

The ultimate tragedy is not the brutality of the bad people but the silence of the good people.

Remembering
Martin Luther King, Jr.
1929-1968



very difficult job, as well. The way forward is rooted in love. If we want healing, if we want our community to be marked with peace and justice, then we've got to listen. And love."

The weight of silence three decades ago still presses down on my heart and mind. Silence speaks of fear and complicity -- German citizens staying quiet as the Nazis crammed Jews into train cars and transported them to concentration camps; family members and friends not speaking out when someone is being abused. I hope and pray that now, we won't be silent. I hope and pray that we will cry out in Love.

Stephanie Porter-Nichols serves as the editor of the Smyth County News & Messenger and as associate pastor of Marion Baptist Church. She may be reached at sportern@smythnews.com or 276-783-5121.

On the front lines of democracy

No arrests.
No property damage.
One physical injury that occurred when a man collapsed.

The tally from Friday's protests is impressive given that hundreds of people and weapons were combined with heat, anger and passion in Marion.

The credit for the lack of destruction largely goes to the town of Marion, its police chief, John Clair, and a couple hundred law enforcement professionals who withstood all those conditions while illustrating what fine professional police work looks like.

The evidence was clear. Trouble was brewing for Marion.

Following a June 13 clash between Black Lives Matter protesters and counter-protesters that came close to violence and a cross burning at the Marion home of the BLM demonstration's local leader, social media boiled with anger, hate, blatant racism and carefully worded posts that implied threats of violence.

Town officials didn't wring their hands. They took action.

Long before he knew protests were coming to his town, Clair had been studying the official report on lessons learned from a violent protest in Charlottesville that left one woman dead and others injured. As well, before this summer's protests were announced, he

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had begun working with surrounding agencies on incident command and coordination. He'd also simultaneously been working with his department on less-than-lethal approaches to subduing suspects.

While no one really anticipated such activity in quiet Marion, Clair's preparation paid off.

But, it wasn't just his department on the ground in our town Friday. Officers from the Virginia State Police and police departments in Abingdon, Bristol (Va.), and Saltville responded to a call for mutual aid as did the sheriff's offices of Smyth, Washington and Wythe counties and personnel from the Virginia Department of Corrections; the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and the Southwestern Virginia Mental Health Institute.

For much of the day, the LEOs were easygoing, standing on the street talking and laughing and developing a rapport with citizens.

However, when tensions mounted, the LEOs responded with impressive speed, often putting their bodies between opposing sides and in harm's way. It didn't matter whether

the LEOs were local or not. They had a job to do and they did it - well.

Town Attorney Mark Fenyk noted that as situations escalated and reached a potential flashpoint, the LEOs were able to keep it from exploding.

When they stood in between the crowds of opposing protesters, the LEOs faces remained perfectly impassive regardless of what insults or ideas were hurled.

With people only a few feet or less from their faces, they knew they were also facing an additional danger - exposure to COVID-19. Still, they served.

Many stood in the sweltering heat in heavy protective vests and uniforms from morning til evening.

While protecting everyone's life and limbs, protecting freedoms was also a high priority.

When crowds of protesters on both sides stood less than a block apart with metal barricades and lines of police officers separating them, Clair could be heard reminding everyone via law enforcement radio that what was happening was legal and democratic.

Monday evening, the Marion Town Council praised Clair, Lt. Rusty Hamm and Lt. Andrew Moss, the MPD's strategy leaders, and the entire department, giving the agency at the center of the protests a standing ovation.

In talking about Friday's events, Clair reflected, "Letting democracy happen usually works."

Democracy often isn't pretty. Friday, it was right before our eyes, dripping sweat, hurling insults and profanity, guns enough for a battle, while people stood for what they believed.

Thank you Marion, LEOS, and all those who made safety and democracy priorities.

We remember the words of John Adams, "Liberty must at all hazards be supported. We have a right to it, derived from our Maker. But if we had not, our fathers have earned and bought it for us, at the expense of their ease, their estates, their pleasure, and their blood."

On a weekend when the United States was celebrating its democratic freedoms, people in Marion were depending on them. Of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment's five guaranteed freedoms for citizens, four were put to the test Friday: the freedoms of religion, speech and the press, and the right of the people peaceably to assemble. The Second Amendment was right there too.

All were secure. That's a happy Fourth of July.

Stephanie Porter-Nichols is the editor of the Smyth County News & Messenger.

To know how badly Light is needed, we must recognize how dark it is

Death.
Death.
Death.
Death times 42.

Saturday's edition of the Smyth County News & Messenger included one of the darkest front pages we've published in a long time.

The tragic and unnecessary loss of life served as the center of the three articles on that page.

Briefly, I considered moving one or another article inside the paper, trying to balance the darkness with something lighter. I couldn't. The people in the articles and those who love them deserved our foremost attention. Our community deserved the truth of the despair and grief that exists in our midst.

Our articles told of the murder-suicide in Thomas Bridge in which a 27-year-old woman ultimately killed three of her children, ages 3, 7 and 10.

Another report told of an involuntary manslaughter charge being filed against a 21-year-old for the July death of 20-year-old Gracie Dimit. The beloved Marion woman died when the vehicle being driven by her friend hit a tree.

The third article reported on the local and regional deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus far, the Mount Rogers Health District has tallied 165 deaths from the virus that a year ago we didn't know existed. Of those deaths, 37 of the people called Smyth County home.

Each of those who died was blessed with a name and was dearly loved.

More than a little judgment has swirled around these deaths. Some question how a mother could kill her children. Some cast aspersions on the

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driver in the July crash, doubting her judgment. Some people will tell you that the novel coronavirus is a myth. Some refuse to wear masks or wear them properly. They take lots of risks with an invisible-to-our-eyes, life-ending virus.

It's easy to judge the COVID-deniers. Yet, who among us hasn't forgotten our mask at an inopportune moment or failed to wash or sanitize our hands as quickly as we could or touched our face?

Who among us hasn't driven too fast or when we shouldn't – maybe when we were crying, angry, too sick to think straight, exhausted?

How many of us have felt overwhelmed?

We all make bad decisions. Much of the time, the devastation left in their wake isn't so stark.

Many people tell me that it's articles like these that stop them from keeping up with the news. They'd rather not know. Yes, it's heart-wrenching to know and to acknowledge such despair; ignorance truly does equal bliss.

Arguments, on the other hand, can be made about learning from these tragedies, working toward prevention and the like.

Today, my thoughts are elsewhere. We can only know how badly Light is needed when we understand how dark it truly is.

In these divisive, angry times, we've hurled enough stones at one another on social media, during civil protests, through the media, and in conversation to do real damage to our

Dark

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psyches, individually and collectively, and build some incredible walls.

We're blocking out the Light.

(Yeah, I'm mixing metaphors. I'd throw in a dozen more if it might help.)

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving, the earnest beginning of the holiday season. For Christians, Advent begins Sunday, a time devoted to preparing ourselves for the arrival of Jesus Christ, the one St. John calls "true light."

The Jewish festival of Hanukkah, which begins Dec. 10, is also known as the Festival of Lights. After the second temple had been trashed in battle, Jews rededicated it, witnessing a miracle. Only

enough oil was present to burn the menorah's candles for one night. However, the candles burnt for eight nights – time enough to get more oil and hence the length of the festival.

Speaking to the New York Times, Rabbi Adam Kligfeld observed that "some have argued the real miracle of Hanukkah wasn't that a temple's oil lasted for eight days, it was that someone had enough hope to light it on the first day."

In these days, let us have enough hope to light a candle. Even more, let us be the light for others.

One of us will ease the darkness. All of us can transform it.

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