

May 2022

Greetings Beloved Tacoma Pierce County Community,

Continuing with the question I raised in my April letter: Why refer to Tacoma Pierce County as a Beloved Community?

Last month, I discussed the definition of a beloved community: A dearly loved unified body of individuals with common interests living in a particular area, derived from Webster's definition of the words beloved and community. I reviewed how our medical expert recommended response to Covid was essentially isolation which produced some unhealthy side effects that has eroded individual wellbeing, community connections, individual mental health, as well as contributed to a narrowed definition of who comprises our community. In this letter I discuss how, for many, a more constrained lifestyle made us more available to recognize another long existing pandemic, police violence against black men, that for many, has been hidden in plain sight.

First, a brief review the physical changes our bodies undergo during periods of higher stress. High stress produces an array of changes in our physical and intellectual ability. When internal and external actions occur that trigger stress responses, we experience; increased heart rate, a rise in blood pressure, and production of stress hormones such as—adrenaline and cortisol. As our bodies release increased levels of stress hormones our ability to access our frontal cortex is limited as we prepare to fight or run for our life. Is it possible that the isolating conditions of Covid combined with real or imagined threats has produced, in many, higher than normal levels of stress hormones? If so, it would explain why so many people are in spaces where they do not feel safe and many are hypervigilant. None of us can be fully aware of what others have experienced before we encounter them. Until they present and we engage with them we don't know what circumstances they may be experiencing. However, in a time of many crises they are experiencing something. To the casual observer, a person may appear to be extremely agitated speaking in a loud voice or otherwise, out of control. During the more than two years of the Covid pandemic many in the helping and public safety professions can reflect on many encounters with people exhibiting such behaviors. Dare I say that the pandemic has eroded the physical and emotional health of nearly every person and profession. I believe, many are attempting to engage others in a "normal context" when what we are experiencing is anything but normal. In a world where hypervigilance, irritability, short tempered, combative, and increasingly rude behavior have become normalized, this is not the "normal world" .

Such an environment, to me, is not a candidate for a beloved community. However, recently, I overheard a conversation between a librarian and a patron. The patron was agitated about maintaining his personal online security on a library computer. In a calm respectful voice the librarian intentionally listened and acknowledged hearing the patron and acted to investigate the patrons claim. In essence, the librarian engaged his patron in a cordial conversation allowing the agitated patron a chance to feel heard in a calm safe space. In just a few moments

the patron's voice lowered as the external signs of stress dissipated. Aha, the behavior of this librarian is completely compatible with the ethos of a beloved community.

When we contrast the librarian's behavior with the positional authority demanded by the cultural underpinnings of law enforcement, I shudder to think what may have happened had the librarian demanded immediate compliance with his positional authority while his patron was experiencing a fleeting moment of fearful insecurity. Unfortunately, engagements with people in authority at times of crisis often end with unspeakable drama. Which brings me to another pandemic, one that has been hiding in plain sight for decades but was shockingly revealed to many for the first time during the Covid pandemic.

This pandemic does not radically change the landscape like a hurricane, or earthquake. Thus, many are unaware of it until it, the pandemic, impacts you or someone you know. Therefore, this pandemic is well known by those impacted but was mostly ignored by those who believed they were immune. There are few known ways to mitigate the spread of this, often deadly, malady. However, once much of the world was heading toward isolation to prevent the spread of Covid, many who were oblivious to this attack on humanity were awakened to the pandemic that impacts mostly black men.

On May 25, 2020, the world, through video captured by a 12-year old witness, experienced a Minneapolis police officer using his positional authority to demand immediate compliance. After subduing him he extinguished the life of Mr. George Floyd. The cold detached matter of fact way that the officer multitasked while pressing his knee into Mr. Floyd's neck, rejecting the cries of the public, for 9-brutially-agonizing-minutes exposed what most African Americans have known for as long as we have been in America. When I watched the video, in the context of a larger background investigation, I saw Mr. Floyd fearfully showing signs of stress. I suspect his stress hormones were raging and the demands for him to immediately comply. Knowing what Mr. Floyd knew about a culture of violence against black men, his fears were justified. Yet, the standard for people like Mr. Floyd was immediate and unconditional compliance, even if he exhibited signs of extreme stress. The price for his resistance was deadly retribution even when Mr. Floyd was subdued and powerless to resist.

The fact that this episode of violence was captured on video was not new. America has countless examples of excessive violence being exerted by police against black men and women on video and film. The fact that this episode took place under the special circumstances of a worldwide pandemic where world business, education, live entertainment, participative recreational activities were shutdown, in my opinion, made it stand out. Portions of the nearly 9-minute video penetrated spaces and places that previously were exclusively reserved for the busy lifestyles in which many enjoy. With the world mostly idle this particular episode exposed the smoldering framework of a system that demands submission and compliance even if the person is unable to reasonably comply due to factors outside of their control.

Just two months prior in Tacoma WA, March 3, 2021, at 11:21 pm, Mr. Manuel “Ellis was hogtied, face-down, with an officer on him, for at least six minutes, and a spit hood was placed on his head in this position, stated prosecutors. Ellis died at the scene while receiving medical aid from paramedics.” Until a security video was released June 4, 2020, by the Tacoma Action Collective racial justice organization, the official reports did not match reality.

To those that saw the undeniable violence visited on Mr. Floyd, Mr. Ellis, their families, and every person whose conscience was traumatized by the reality of these reoccurring violent episodes, I ask the question, are these the kind of behaviors that reflect a beloved community?

*Beloved community: a community in which everyone is cared for, absent of poverty, hunger, and hate.* —Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

We have a choice at a time of disorienting crisis, many real and imagined fears which trigger fight or flight responses to abandon our community and hunker down ready to fight each other or to recognize, and act on the possibility, perhaps we were born for such a time as this. Yes, a time when the Chinese symbol for crises implies this is our opportunity. Communities, like republics don't just happen. They are nurtured by individuals willing to set aside self-interest to make a beloved community more than a visionary dream, a living thing in Pierce County. As we know, success breeds success so let the seeds of our beloved community find their way to other communities throughout our nation.

What do you believe?

We believe all people deserve access to all forms of power including physical, emotional, intellectual, and political.

If you believe in the possibility of a Beloved Community, let's start by defining the small steps each of us can take to make it so.

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President