Because Black Lives Did Not Matter

Yes, all lives do matter—but some have been valued a lot less highly for quite some time.

A friend and colleague asked me to help her understand why I used the term Black Lives Matter rather than All Lives Matter. I knew that her request was sincere. In her education and worldwide travel, she had not been exposed to the trauma to which some of her friends had been subjected. Although she was aware of racism, it was not within the range of her own experience.

Martin Luther King, Jr., defined racism as the false “doctrine of the congenital inferiority and worthlessness of a people.” I have had to reconcile myself to the fact that the education system has mainly muted conversations about the discrimination of, violence against, and censuring of a socially constructed group of people, as well as the fact that many within academia remain uninformed about structural racism and how it emerged unscathed beyond the civil rights movement.

When I was a child, I told my colleague, I became acutely aware of the insignificance of my life when our weekly issue of Jet magazine arrived displaying the mutilated body of 14-year-old Emmett Till on its cover. The murder of this teen in Mississippi was terrifying (and terrorizing), and justice was not served. If it could happen to him for no reason, it could happen to me, because Black lives did not matter.

When I was a child during the Jim Crow era, my father and brothers were sometimes stopped by local policemen for walking through a white neighborhood. It happened when they were walking home from work, taking the only possible route. Public transportation ceased at 9 PM and their shift ended at 11 PM. During that same era, it was not uncommon for policemen to walk into our home at night and shine flashlights in our eyes while we were in bed. They were always “looking for someone.”

When I was a nursing student at a historically Black college and university, my first clinical practice rotations were in a hospital with old or nonexistent equipment, one designated for Black patients only. Because of segregation, my junior class was forced to travel out of state for a semester of pediatric and obstetric clinical rotations. Clinical rotations during our emotionally exhausting senior year were spent integrating the “all white” hospital, where nurses, and sometimes the patients, were hostile.

A real estate agency refused to sell me a house I wanted because it was in a White neighborhood. I was a college graduate, a military veteran, and employed full time. After the realtor showed me the property I had selected, he insisted he had another house that would be more comfortable for me. The neighborhood had smaller homes and nonexistent yards.

As an RN at a Department of Veterans Affairs hospital, I was often told by White male veterans to send them a “real nurse.” On one occasion, one of the veterans—in a very gleeful manner—introduced me to three of his visiting buddies from the Ku Klux Klan.

When I was a graduate student in a child development class, my White adviser informed me that nobody wanted to read about my topic on the five-to-seven-year-old behavior shift of Black boys. As an administrator in higher education in a predominantly White institution, I was routinely excluded from meetings that directly affected my academic unit. And when I was invited to meetings, my voice was ignored. The message I received, over and over again, was that Black lives do not matter.

For my colleagues who still question the basis for Black Lives Matter, I ask, “Does your historical lens allow a view of dismissed Black lives?” Can you see the perpetuation of racism through such historical developments as mass incarceration replacing slavery and lynching transmuted into police brutality?

Saying All Lives Matter is a proxy for acceptance of the status quo. Exclaiming that Black Lives Matter is just that. Today and tomorrow, for my descendants and for those who will hear of my existence, my life matters—and Black Lives Matter.