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SPEAKING OUT

Ahmaud Arbery and the Trauma of Black Runner

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

DANTÉ STEWART / POSTED MAY 8, 2020

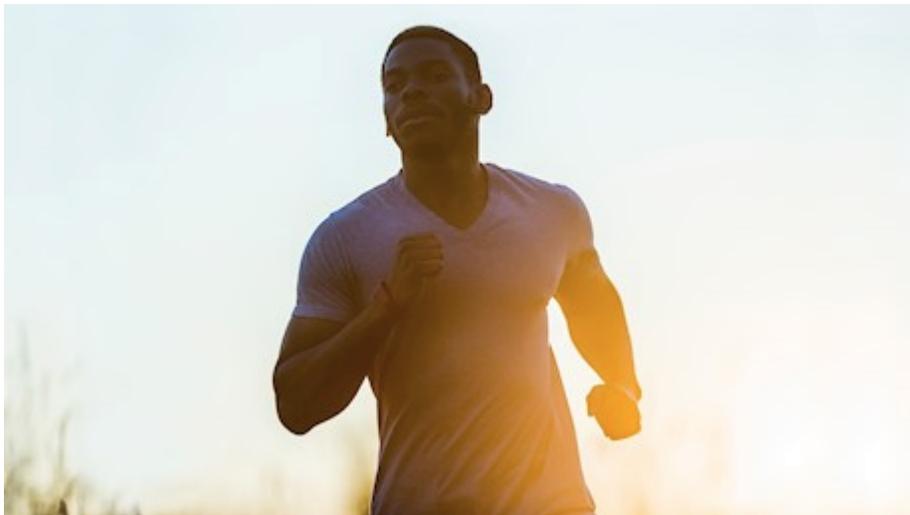


Image: FatCamera / Getty Images

I was on my morning run as the sun was rising in the blue California skies. There was 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 my identification like my wife tells me to every time I leave. During the run, I wasn't 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. Every shot he took, I got more confused. I said, “It’s a good morning out here, isn’t it? It’s respectable. This white man was going to shield me in this situation or get him to finally see me as a human being.”

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 dehumanized and being told I didn’t belong here. Policed by a man standing on his front porch. Right here in 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 been the aggressor. This is what black men have to deal with, while others can enjoy their run after year. This rage forces me to be angry about our reality and have the faith to believe that change is possible.

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

I was a college athlete; now I run and bike. I’ve run half marathons and completed a triathlon. I used to enjoy it like I used to. Where is the joy and freedom of getting out on the road, of training? I have to wonder if one day I won’t make it to the end? I’ve been running all my life, and 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 can only happen in the South. No, this society has been taught anti-blackness. We see police movements, criminalize our humanity, and avoid racial reckoning while enjoying the shade of the 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 country. I know that black Americans are forced to face, the tragic conditions of oppression, the audacity of the police, and 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 stepped out into the world, the people around me would see me as fundamentally Cl that no matter how many Bible verses I quote, how many great books I read and post am, what degree I hold, or any other trait that is “successful,” none of that can shield being black.

And don't we know tragedy.

In recent weeks, armed activists have stormed the streets to protest, protected by th innocent and unarmed black people are attacked for living their lives. Arbery's nam victims who never should have been killed, challenged, or even suspected, people w wrong.

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

Arbery ran. He fought for his life, for his blackness, but white rage stole it from him. months since he was killed, and his assailants have finally been arrested. When I wat sank. My mind went back to what that man did to me, the pictures, the walk back ho but Arbery didn't. He doesn't live to tell the story. He cannot be angry or do anything hashtag, a memory, a prayer. He died alone that day. His last memory was lying on th

After his death, the city's district attorney, George Barnhill, declared that Arbery's n convictions explained his aggression toward an armed man positioned to confront h 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 1 History shows us that the greatest threats to black lives are white supremacy, white terrorism. Who will fight for us when we are fighting for ourselves and we still get ly murderers to account? How much black blood must be sacrificed to white supremac be terrorized while they live at peace? These are the questions that find expression i fearful tears.

As Miroslav Volf wrote about remembering rightly in a violent world, “To remember struggle against it.” To be black and to be Christian is to remember the violence and as we look at our children, and to struggle as we ask these questions. It is to remember “God’s message of liberation in an unredeemed and tortured world.”

Memory calls us to work for a better future. It forces us to stand in the world as Christians to change it.

Still waiting for change

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

People like to say, “This is not the America *I* know.” We heard it with slavery, Jim Crow the white backlash to Obama, the brutal murders of children, women, and men in the and even the white rage in support of Trump. We’ve heard it before. And you know we exactly right. The shield of whiteness has protected many from the devastating experience the whole time—one in which white lives and white communities and white pain matters. I just wish those thoughts and prayers were prayed against a world that has pro

If our theology today has nothing to say or do about the terror of being black in a world and the tragic structures of oppression, as one of my friends said, “You have nothing

I’m far less concerned about what people put on a hashtag. Every year comes another it keeps happening. I’m more concerned with how we’re advocating in our congregational meetings, and with what happens in the ballot box. It is those places where the integrity demands of liberation. Now is not the time for quaint phrases, empty calls to unity, or white people feel good. No. This is not a call to salvation, a belief that whiteness can save. This is a call to liberation and a call to love.

How long do we have to wait for progress? How many have to be brutally murdered before we are actually telling the truth? What is the cycle of violence and apathy costing us?

have to believe God has a good plan for us in the future but the best plan for them in the future is that we have to endure these types of talks until people realize that white supremacy is not their problem, their children's problem?

I want my son to survive. I want to know that many of your children will stand up for their rights. I don't want the fear of him not returning home. I don't want to tell him how to protect himself to live. I want him to be free as Christ has promised. I want to know that change in history tells another story.

Thank God the final word about black life in America is not death on the lynching tree but the cross. The cross was God's rebuke of abusive power—white power in America—“powerless love, snatching victory out of defeat.” Cone powerfully argues that the lynching tree is a metaphor for white America's destruction of black people. Yet God took the evil of the tree and transformed them both into the triumphant beauty of the divine. God can turn our pain into power.

The transformation is what James Baldwin speaks of when he writes, “It demands grace for us not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception to teach your children to hate.” I really don't know how much more we can take.

We have faith, but we need to fight.

We have prayer, but we need to protest.

We're trying to love Jesus, yes, but we're also trying to live.

We're trying to survive the run. Because some of us don't.

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