



In the PINES

By T. Lee Brown

BLM Statement

Some weeks ago, a friend invited me to check out a statement his company had posted online. It began “Black Lives Matter” and went on to say earnest things about race.

He and his business partner are White men with a successful enterprise near Portland. The statement looked out of place amid photos of agricultural items and posts about weather conditions. I felt curious and nonplussed.

I’ve met friends and customers of the two owners, people of various races and ethnicities. The owners experience prejudice and discrimination; I could imagine them responding to injustice with sympathy. They weren’t anti-law-enforcement, I knew. I grew up with one of these guys; his dad was a cop.

I decided I liked their statement, which was short and sincere. Others, I feared, might dismiss it as window dressing, the “vacuous virtue signaling” or “performative wokeness” against which Sisters Country likes to stay vigilant.

In the wake of George Floyd’s death, I wasn’t immersed in liberal group-think. I was on COVID lockdown with health issues and I’d abandoned social media years before. I read the news selectively, carefully. I wept. I felt horror, guilt, and shame — for my country, for complacency and racism, my own and that of others.

My email inbox began to fill with awkward statements from White people, pledging with varying degrees of believability to

really do something about that whole race thing. Every organization and corporation, however pale its leaders, whatever its business practices, had something to say.

I read a few, then began to delete them unopened. The combination of naïveté and showiness made me uneasy. The statements seemed tailor-made to invoke accusations of bandwagon-jumping and inspire backlash.

People hit the streets in protest. Talking to friends, I found that some thoughtful, White activists didn’t consider themselves racist — as though they were immune to the forces of image, media, culture, economy, history and neurology.

Did any of us White and mostly White people know a damned thing about racism and our part in it? Did we understand the situation well enough to be making big statements, or were we knee-jerk responding to a trend? I couldn’t tell.

A long walk along the Deschutes grounded me in the earth, the living planet under my feet. I breathed and listened to birdsong. I recognized the fortune of being able to take such a walk, as a mostly White person in a mostly White region with rising property values and rents, the kind of place where “BLM” usually refers to tracts of public land.

Our fair state (double entendre intended) was founded on principles that included a ban on slavery but also a ban on Black people settling here. One exclusion law specified that “any free negro or mulatto” who failed to quit the area in a timely fashion would “receive upon his or her bare back not less than twenty nor more than thirty-nine stripes, to be inflicted by the constable of the proper county.”

That’s Oregon, my home state, the place I love.

At the river, I met up with a friend, a White business owner. She gently explained that people were posting statements because they’d been asked to. The only request I’d received came from a white-appearing woman like me. We

both create woo-woo spiritual materials online. She suggested we stop posting to make space for Black voices.

I thought of the handful of listeners who appreciate my mini-podcast, among them a heroic hospice chaplain in California, a wheelchair-bound musician in Wisconsin, a hard-working environmental activist in Sisters. I wondered how denying them a dose of weekly woo would benefit Black Americans.

Folks in Sisters had asked when I was going to write about all this, whether I was participating in the BLM protests. I blamed my health; in truth I was stilled by ambivalence and cynicism. I thought of the race-related column I wrote in *The Nugget* a year ago, how the responding Letters to the Editor suggested denial.

Thoughts swirled in my head as the Deschutes eddied around rocks and tall yellow irises. Climbing up the hill, I ran into a young woman I know, a person with sparkling energy. She showed me where to harvest nettles.

She also thanked me for my woo-woo podcast. I was honored to discover that it inspired and soothed her during the chaos of COVID.

I should mention that she’s Black.

Back at home, I didn’t find anything about statements and podcasts on the Black Lives Matter and NAACP websites. I skipped a week’s podcast anyway, not so much a bold show of solidarity as a quiet absence.

No statement was posted. I felt I hadn’t done the deep work adequately. Sure, I’ve written about racism a bit, done some activism over the years. I’ve learned from Black friends and bosses and artistic collaborators.

I’ve also whitesplained, generalized, failed to be inclusive, and wended my way through life in oblivious privilege. In other words, I am racist — aware, ashamed, and despairing of it, but racist nonetheless. What kind of statement could I possibly make?

It feels better to do something than to remain silent and immobile. So white people make statements. Pause podcasts. Stand along Highway 20 holding signs.

Others do work that cannot be seen. They make donations. Talk to community leaders behind the scenes. Do the uncomfortable and sometimes terrifying inner work required to comprehend privilege.

Days rolled by. White

people’s voices and actions didn’t appear to be pointless. White police chiefs stepped down to make way for Black police chiefs. Officers marched alongside Black Lives Matter protesters or took the knee in solidarity. Symbols of overt racism were rejected.

A Black woman on the radio said White participation mattered. I joined the mostly White protesters on the corner of Cascade Avenue and Larch Street.

As for my statement, I guess this is it: Black lives definitely matter. Racism is real. I’d like to fight it, internally and externally.

I’m a writer. Maybe that can be of use. If you’d like me to write about a personal experience regarding race in Sisters Country, get in touch (tiffany@plazm.com).

Beyond that, I’m unsure.

Perhaps, amid spasms of mostly White fragility, I will become a better ally. Work on the ancestral trauma in my multiracial bloodlines. Help my son come to terms with the genocide that almost wiped out one branch of his family.

But there’s a chance I’ll bail. There’s a chance I’ll sink back into privilege and wring my hands at the violence and bigotry in our world, too horrified to make a difference.

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