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Opinion

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Justice For All?

By BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

The judge instructed the jury to put themselves in the shoes of the police officers. But when did they put themselves in the shoe of Amadou Diallo? A lone, undoubtedly frightened black man from another country trying to get into his apartment in the early morning hours and facing four armed white men in plain clothes. Maybe he was trying to get out his keys—from his wallet. Maybe he was trying to get out his identification papers—or maybe just trying to hand over his billfold to those he believed were robbing him.

We will never know what Amadou Diallo was trying to do in his last moments of life before those 19 bullets entered his body, apparently even including the soles of his feet after he had fallen over. We do know that at least one of his neighbors testified that she did hear the police officers identify themselves before she heard the barrage of bullets. We do know that Diallo had no gun, as the police testified they thought he had. We do know that what they mistook for a gun was that wallet.

We do know that all that Amadou Diallo was guilty of was, in the words of New York Times columnist Bob Herbert, breathing while black. In

other words, he was guilty of being a black man in America. The police officers were, they said, looking for a possible rape suspect who was a black male and Diallo, a black male, just happened to be coming home at the wrong place and time. He looked suspicious, they said. What man in New York City, alone at night and being approached by four unknown men, would not be looking around? What white male, entering his own apartment late at night, would have been shot at by police 41 times when he reached for his wallet? The problem is that we have so criminalized black men in America that not only did those four police officers feel they had to fire not once or twice, but 41 times. We have so criminalized black men in America that a jury, including four African Americans, believes that such action is justified as self defense.

For many African Americans, the Diallo verdict felt like the wind had been kicked out of our stomach. We live knowing that this is a racist society, but the depth of that racism is to much sometimes for our brains even to accept. Many African American mothers will clutch their sons a little closer after the Diallo verdict. Many young African American men will feel a harder knot in the pit of their stomach when they

see police officers after the Diallo verdict. Many older black men who may have been willing to give the system the benefit of the doubt in the past will try to pass on survival skills to their sons after the Diallo verdict.

Thankfully there weren't feared riots after the verdict. But that doesn't mean that the case of Amadou Diallo's murder is not important for our communities, not only in New York but across the nation.

Instead of rioting, many African Americans have lost what little hope they may have had that they would see in their lifetime a day when black children would be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin, in the words of Dr. King. Amadou Diallo, that hard-working young man with the big smile who came to this country to make a better life for himself and his family, was not judged by the content of his character that morning in his lobby. The Diallo case, together with the abuses by the Los Angeles police department that I will write about next week, should give pause to all Americans about our criminal justice system. An unjust system which criminalizes any group of people does not bode well for anyone in a democracy. It makes us ask the question, will there be justice for all?

A glut of law, a dearth of order

By JOE KLOCK
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"Let the punishment fit the crime" are words from a patter song in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, which is a work of fiction.

Equally fictional, an even marginally cynical observer might conclude, is much of our so-called system of "justice," a term that has been shamefully mauled and disfigured by the some of the very Esquires and Honorables sworn to uphold it.

Justice is supposed to mean fairness, but what takes precedence in the real world of "Oyez, oyez, oyez!" is jurisprudence, or knowledge of the law.

It is also important to make a clear distinction here between law and order.

Although these words are often used together, they are as disparate in the

real world as flotsam and jetsam and the opposite aisle-sides in the United States Senseless and House of Reprehensibles.

As time goes on, America experiences an increasing number of laws, but a shrinking amount of order.

Aristotle wrote that "law means good order," but closer to reality was G-Man/she-dresser J. Edgar Hoover, who noted that "justice is incidental to law and order."

Getting back to our opening point, the punishment fits the crime these days only when the accused can't hire a lawyer who's more clever than the typically underpaid, overworked and lesser-talented advocates for "the people"—i.e., you-all and me-all. If you're looking for an Exhibit A (for atrociousness), check the upscale golf courses until you find Orenthal James Watzizname, a poster boy for inept prosecution, equally inept

judging, super-slick lawyering and, in the end, nullification of a monumentally unqualified jury.

If that swaggering specimen of villainy isn't a double murderer, Hugh Hefner is a virgin and the pope ain't Catholic. Yet O.J. is as free today as his victims are dead...and our system of "justice" has run its course ("Oy-oy-oy!")

The Esquires and Honorables will argue passionately that this apparent inequity is a vital safeguard against even an occasional miscarriage of justice (as defined by the intricate network of law and precedence).

The E's and H's frequently cite this admonition of Sir William Blackstone (1723-1780), the Howard Cosell of the English Law on which ours is based: "It is better that ten guilty persons escape than one innocent suffer." Were Howard around, I think that he'd agree with me that, from our point those are unappealing odds.

Stop, look and listen for Miss Maude

By JOE KLOCK
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: 'it might have been.'"

Thus did John Greenleaf Whittier focus on the remorse that attends doing "too little, too late" in human relationships.

How often have we heard (or said), "if only I had known," or "if only I had seen," or "if only I had heard," after a misfortune befalls someone, when it is too late to lend a helping hand?

Becoming aware of another's need after the fact is an emotional experience that usually brings out the noblest traits of human nature, including compassion and a genuine wish to be of assistance, but at a time when less - if anything at all - can be done about it.

No matter how sincere or heartfelt a belated expression of regret might be, it is a frail substitute for anticipating others' problems in advance of their suffering, and taking appropriate action.

One of the more familiar highway signs is the "STOP-LOOK-LISTEN" icon that challenges us at railroad crossings as a reminder of latent danger. It might also serve us as a valuable checklist in our daily doings..

Do we STOP to find out what's going on in the lives of our relatives, friends, co-workers and neighbors? Do we LOOK for problems that are not easily seen and/or might be concealed due to their embarrassment and/or our reluctance to "get involved?" Do we LISTEN for the unspoken words that can reveal inner hurt and silent screams for support?

Sadly, we moderns have a tendency to "mind our own business," which dictates that we do no more than wave to our neighbors and query our friends with superficial greetings like "howzitgoin'?" - accepting responses like "OK" as though they were announcements that heaven had suddenly come to their earth.

This is not to suggest that we should pry open the innermost secrets of the people next door or psychoanalyze our friends and family. Rather, we just need to be alert to subtle signs that might point to an opportunity to be of assistance to someone who's hurting.

Nor is this a subject restricted to the material needs of others. There are times when a hug, a compliment, a word of encouragement or a shoulder to cry on can mean more than even great chunks of money - and such random acts of charity should, as the old saying goes, begin at home.

Someone once wrote that, if it were suddenly announced that the world would come to an end in 15 minutes, every telephone on earth would be held by someone calling someone else to say "I love you." More's the pity that we don't seize every opportunity while the dreaded Apocalypse is still on God's "to do" list.

Noted philanthropist Mrs. John Dilbert is said to have told this story on herself: Leafing through a magazine in the comfort of her home on a bitterly cold winter night, she came across a stunning cartoon. It depicted two old women dressed in rags and shivering at a small fire. One asked the other why she was smiling, to which question came the reply: "I'm thinking about all those nice warm clothes that the rich ladies will give us after winter is over."

As the story goes (and I don't care whether or not it's true), Mrs. Dilbert immediately plundered her closets and gave everything she didn't absolutely need to a local charity.

Stop, look and listen...there may be a Miss Maude somewhere near you right now!



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