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OPINION

We are People of Distinction - Not Extinction

We are the American society



BY M. LINDA JARAMILLO

Author's Note: I wrote this commentary in 2006, but in light of recent disparaging remarks, it seemed appropriate today with some minor updates added in response to the current situation.

Personal honor was a fundamental value in my upbringing. However, honor was not about arrogance or conceit; it was about humility, honesty, and respect for oneself and others. We were to avoid boasting, yet there was no question that we were to be proud of our family heritage and ancestry. We were taught that we are a people of distinction.

Our parents recognized that social systems would tear us down, so they worked extra hard to instill a sense of history and dignity in us. As children, we were constantly told that we were not as smart or important as the Anglo children in our schools and neighborhoods. As a child, there were times that the discriminating practices in our segregated schools seemed insurmountable, but our parents modeled the belief that we could make a difference in our own destiny and so we did.

My grandfather, many generations removed, was born in 1601 in the New Mexico Territory, which includes the southern border states of Arizona and New Mexico extending into Colorado and parts of

Texas. Yes, it was before the Plymouth Rock landing. Yes, it was before 1776. Yes, it was when the land was part of Mexico before being claimed by the United States. Yes, further back than many American history books and would be politicians account for. The truth is that many of us did not cross the border, rather the border crossed us.

I am proud to claim this ancestry and refuse to be accused of "being a problem to American society." When discussing immigration we should review the history of the settling of this land now known as the United States.

We must not forget that the land was the homeland of American Indian brothers and sisters and stolen by European invaders, ending authentic civilization for thousands of peo-

ple. We should not forget that much of the western region of the United States region was Mexico. We must remember that 99 percent of us are immigrants who came in search of the American dream. These historic realities are often discounted because our cultural elitism declares that we are entitled to anything we want.

Disparaging descriptions of immigrants, such as murderers, rapists, criminals, free loaders, leeches, illegal aliens, are thrown around without regard for their humanity or the potential for inciting hatred and neighborhood warfare. Generation after generation wages war; however, these days the wars are not confined to nation against nation. Sadly, the war now being waged against immigrants within the boundaries of the United

States is resulting in fear and hatred of one racial group against another.

As a Latina and a Christian, I reject these accusations. Inciting fear and hatred is certainly inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus who taught love, compassion, and human understanding. Claiming a special preference for one race above another absolutely contradicts the basic Christian message of "loving our neighbor as ourselves."

Despite current soundbites, I will not be told that people who look like me are the problem of American society. We are the American society. We are people of distinction, not extinction. And we vote.

M. Linda Jaramillo is executive minister for the United Church of Christ's Justice and Witness Ministries.

Protecting the Lives of our Young People

God did not make two classes of people

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Democracy cannot breathe, and will die, if those enjoined to protect and uphold the law snuff it out unjustly and without consequence. Justice cannot breathe when black men and boys and women and girls are routinely profiled, abused, arrested, and killed with impunity by police officers. We must stop this. We must protect the lives of our young people—all of them. God did not make two classes of people or children and America continues to do so at its peril.

Like so many I have been deeply disturbed by the senseless loss of black male lives at the hands of law enforcement officials. I was particularly affected by Tamir Rice's senseless death—a 12-year-old sixth grader who loved drawing, basketball, playing the drums, and performing in his school's drumline. When Tamir was shot and killed last November, who was there to protect him?

Not Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann—the man who shot him. Tamir was sitting outside a recreation center near his home holding

a friend's toy gun when Loehmann careened up in his squad car with his training officer. The surveillance video shows Loehmann took less than two seconds between getting out of the barely-stopped car and shooting Tamir. Worse, this child was left mortally wounded on the ground in agony for nearly four minutes while neither Loehmann nor his trainer Frank Garmback administered any first aid.

An FBI agent who happened to be nearby responded to the police activity and was the first one to try to give Tamir help. When Tamir's 14-year-old sister ran to see and comfort him she was tackled by a police officer, handcuffed, and put in the back of a squad car unable to comfort her stricken brother. When Tamir's mother arrived at the same time as the ambulance the police wouldn't let her get close to her son and she said they threatened to handcuff and arrest her too if she didn't calm down. She was then denied entrance to the back of the ambulance to ride with or hold the hand of her son on the way to

the hospital.

I can only imagine the deep terror of both mother and child isolated from each other. Tamir died from his injuries the next day.

Who was there to protect Tamir? Not the Cleveland Police Department, who supposedly hired Officer Loehmann and put him out on their city's streets before fully reviewing his previous record as a police officer. His personnel file from the Independence, Ohio Police Department shows he resigned in December 2012 just five months after he started training when he learned a disciplinary process of separation had already begun—appearing to have quit before he was fired.

His previous supervisors said he displayed "a pattern of lack of maturity, indiscretion, and not following instructions," a "dangerous loss of composure during live range training," and an "inability to manage personal stress." These red flags for the Independence Police Department should have been warning signs for Cleveland or

any police department in assessing fitness for service. The

Cleveland Police Department has a long history of bad policing that harms black boys and men and those with mental illness. Just days after Tamir was killed the U.S. Department of Justice released harshly critical results of a civil rights investigation on overuse of force by the Cleveland police department and called for massive reforms.

The scene that unfolded in the minutes Tamir lay on the ground bleeding without comfort from anyone is perhaps the hardest part to understand. What kind of human beings and responsible law enforcement officials would act this way? Gunning down a 12-year-old, threatening his distraught sister and mother, and standing by watching a child just shot lying on the snowy ground dying?

Who was there to protect Tamir? In the end, no one. Now a child who might have become a musician or an artist or anything else he wanted to be is dead, and his mother has joined a long, long list of black mothers crying out for justice. A few

weeks after Tamir's death she stood at a Washington, D.C. rally with Trayvon Martin's mother and the families of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and other unarmed black boys and men killed by police and told the crowd: "I have one thing to say to the police force: Don't shoot. Our children want to grow up."

Our children want to grow up. Our children deserve to grow up. And it is the responsibility of every adult in every sector to see they grow up safely and respected and seen and are not subject to "othering"—as someone less than or apart from ourselves.

Until we can achieve a profound change in law enforcement culture and their taking as much care in protecting black boys' lives as white boys' lives, our children are going to remain at risk. That places a burden on black parents and faith congregations and community leaders and educators and everyone who believes in justice to stand up and do everything possible to make sure our children get home safely and can reach adulthood.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

