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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Why Black Lives Matter to AAPIs

I can imagine Sandra Bland's last three days, when she had her mug shot taken and was forced to wear an orange jumpsuit alone in a jail cell in Prairie View, Texas.

I imagine what it was like for her, travelling from Chicago where she lived to return to the small town where she attended college to interview for and receive a job as an outreach coordinator. She must have been excited at her prospects for the future. Maybe she was a little nervous. Maybe she was rehearsing in her head what she would say to her new boss and how she might present her best self on her first day of work.

I can see how Sandra Bland might have forgotten to use her turn signal. When the police officer pulled her car over not far from campus, she was probably as annoyed as anyone would be. I remember being a fiery 28-year-old starting a new career and how impatient and vocal I could be, especially if I felt threatened. After watching the dashcam video of Bland's encounter with state trooper Brian Encinia, I don't have to imagine what happened during the traffic stop. In my opinion, what's clear from the video is that the situation did not need to escalate nor turn tragic.

Here is a partial transcript of their encounter:
Encinia: Turn around. Turn around. Turn around now. Put your hands behind your back.

Bland: Why am I being arrested?
Encinia: Turn around —
Bland: Why can't you —
Encinia: I'm giving you a lawful order. I will tell you.

Bland: Why am I being arrested?
Encinia: Turn around!
Bland: Why won't you tell me that part?
Encinia: I'm giving you a lawful order. Turn around —
Bland: Why will you not tell me what's going on?
Encinia: You are not complying.
Bland: I'm not complying 'cause you just pulled me out of my car.
Encinia: Turn around.

Some people believe she shouldn't have been so vocal to the state trooper. But I wonder why this trained officer of the law did not simply issue her a ticket and be on his way. Why did the state trooper threaten her so she would get out of her car? Why did he not de-escalate the situation as he said he did when he talked to his supervisor? More importantly, why was she arrested in the first place?

I imagine what it was like for Bland, going from a happy day to a frightening series of events. Perhaps it seemed an absurdist nightmare for her to go from one moment feeling joy, to the next, incarcerated on a felony charge for assaulting a public servant. What was it like for her to make as many as seven phone calls, including one to her sister, explaining she needed \$500 for bail for a \$5,000 bond? As Bland's family tried to collect the bond money and awaited instructions to transfer the funds, authorities informed them that Sandra had died in her jail cell, allegedly by hanging herself with a plastic trash bag. The Texas state trooper who arrested her was put on administrative duty pending an investigation. Meanwhile, the tragedy of Sandra Bland has sparked national outrage.

Since 2014, spurred on by the shooting of Michael Brown and the death of Eric Garner, and more recently, with the shootings of Walter Scott and 12-year-old Tamir Rice, the Black Lives Matter movement has become a pressing issue for communities of color. The Twitter movement #BlackLivesMatter speaks against police brutality, specifically targeting unarmed African Americans who have died at the hands of law enforcement.

What does this mean for the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community? Young AAPI activists I've spoken with locally and in other cities tell me that Black Lives Matter is the most pressing issue. It isn't the economy or the environment. It's about the safety of communities of color who are racially profiled; it's about fearing for lives that seem to be less valued by mainstream society. Many AAPIs, including celebrities, are speaking in support of the movement by using a hashtag — #Asians4BlackLives — to show solidarity.

It's important for AAPIs to understand that when a person of color is needlessly taken into police custody and subsequently suffers a violent death, it is a reflection on the structural racism that allows such a tragedy to occur. Every life is important, yes. But as a country, we don't heed that. As seen in media images; the demographic makeup of our political system; the way a white gunman is often portrayed as a product of poor mental health while a shooter of color is a terrorist; and the greater likelihood an African American will be routinely pulled over for a traffic stop, it would seem that not all lives are valued equally. We need to change this thinking. Sandra Bland's life mattered. As a biracial AAPI, I stand by the Black Lives Matter movement and I hope you do, too.