

# Dear Dad: A Long-Overdue Confrontation with Black and Blue

## *Preface*

Many individuals I have interacted with believe police officers to be good people with good intentions; yet the collective opinion seems contradictory. There exists an increasing amount of conflicts between African Americans and law enforcement (i.e., police officers). In reality, these conflicts have persisted throughout our country's history. The difference is its increased salience with the use of video recording devices that allow for its footage to be shared on news outlets and social media platforms.

The series of publicized killings of Black males by police officers in 2014—with few criminal repercussions on the latter—have contributed to worsening tensions between these two groups<sup>1</sup>. The nature of these tensions is described by Cynthia Lee of George Washington School of Law: “Just below the surface of apparent calm brews deep anger, resentment, and a feeling that the criminal justice system protects some segments of the population better than others” (Lee, 2004). The 2014 events have also caused public distrust in police officers and called civilians to question whether they are being protected or victimized by them, thus counteracting police effectiveness and efficiency (Hall, Hall, & Perry, 2016).

For most of my life, I hesitated to ask questions relevant to this issue. My father has been a police officer for over 25 years; and I have long feared deviating from the police perspective because of it. I was afraid of disappointing him. However, he has also consistently challenged me to learn more about the perspectives of people and cultures that I may be unfamiliar with. In this

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<sup>1</sup> 26-year-old Jordan Baker in Houston, Texas on January 16<sup>th</sup>; 43-year-old Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York on July 17<sup>th</sup>; 22-year-old John Crawford III in Beavercreek, Ohio on August 5<sup>th</sup>; 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9<sup>th</sup>; 25-year-old Ezell Ford in Los Angeles, California on August 12<sup>th</sup>; 28-year-old Akai Gurley in Brooklyn, New York on November 20<sup>th</sup>; and 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio on November 22<sup>nd</sup>. This list was compiled with the help of a visual timeline by Hall, Hall, & Perry (2016).

letter, inspired by Ta-Nehisi Coates's letter to his son in *Between the World and Me*, this is precisely what I seek to accomplish. In doing so, I am not discounting the presence of intentionally and explicitly racist police officers and clearly extralegal violence within the criminal justice system.

In his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in 1986, the late Elie Wiesel said, "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim." In most instances, I concur. However, this letter is not about my "taking sides" on firm African American or police stances, as I do not believe it is possible to do so—there are too many in-betweens, too many situations at the boundaries. I instead endeavor to emphasize the justifiable exceptions on both ends, based on academic literature, documentaries, news and social media outlets, books by African Americans, and recent conversations with peers, instructors, and my father. Information from these sources greatly contributes to the issue's ethical complexity.

In this letter, I refer to African Americans as Black and police officers as Blue on several occasions. Although I do not identify as members of either of these groups, I believe it is permissible to use these references since members that do identify as part of these groups continuously reclaim them, most evidently through the Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter movements. However, if anyone reading believes my thinking pattern is incorrect or my information is inaccurate, please reach out. Please help me to learn more. I am willing to do the work—and I challenge you all to do the same, whether Black, Blue, or somewhere in between. And Dad, if you're reading this, please do so until the end.

*You can't separate peace from freedom, because  
no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom.*

*– Malcolm X*

Dear Dad,

You are my hero. You always have been, and you always will be. I have assumed a similar image of police officers throughout the years, in large part, because they do what you do. Your son—my brother—aspires to be a police officer someday, just like you. You are his hero, too; but I can tell that he is afraid for his own future safety. “It’s a bad time for cops,” he has said. “It seems that so many people have grown to dislike them.” I suspect this fear is exacerbated with all the news stories that nowadays seem unavoidable.

Every day that you go to work, you are jeopardizing your life and the probability of making it home at the end of your shift. I cannot help but think of my brother’s fear in the context of publicized events such as the killings of the five Dallas police officers in 2016<sup>2</sup>. Like them, many other police officers have been killed by civilians in the line of duty. In his national address, President Obama described the event as “a wrenching reminder of the sacrifices they [police officers] make for us.” These are sacrifices *you* make for us.

You willingly thrust yourself upon dangerous, uncensored, and unpredictable situations to ensure community safety and order. You are allotted only a small margin of error in high-stress situations. You have become multifaceted in your intelligence of psychology, sociology, history, ethics, and politics, largely because society expects you to be. You do all of this under the watchful eye of the media and the scrutiny of the public, and we have witnessed the ease with which bad work overshadows the good. You have accepted the terms and conditions of your job. For this, I have been simultaneously worried, grateful, and proud—worried for your safety and

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<sup>2</sup> 48-year-old Lorne Ahrens, 40-year-old Michael Krol, 55-year-old Michael Smith, 43-year-old Brent Thompson, and 32-year-old Patrick Zamarripa.

emotional well-being, grateful for your service, and proud that you answered the call toward a job that few others possess the courage to do.

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Police officers are my heroes, but how long can I justify my heroes' mistakes? It is difficult to ignore the disproportionate number of publicized killings of unarmed Black males at the hands of police officers, when it was their sworn duty to protect them. For a long time, I tried to. I did not want to remove my heroes from their pedestals. As a result, I have been quiet about my discomfort in discussing issues related to police brutality, gun control legislation, and race-related crime. I have spent years in neutrality on these topics, both to maintain a good relationship with you and to avoid arguments with my instructors and peers.

The reality is that I can afford to turn my attention away from these issues. They do not directly affect my comfortable, middle-class life. I have always felt protected by police officers, so these killings had never invoked terror within me. I have never been fearful that they would harm me. This, to me, is representative of the very definition of privilege: unwavering safety and security, even in one's own ignorance. We must recognize that this privilege was not made available to Tamir Rice in Cleveland. Or Eric Garner in Staten Island. Or Michael Brown in Ferguson. Or any of the other Black Americans who have been killed or constantly fear being killed by their protectors. For them, I can no longer stay neutral. It is my duty as a civilian, and your duty as a police officer, to learn more.

It is easy to make comments from the comfort of the room that you work to keep away from harm, with all the books, academic journals, and news articles at my disposal. Former

police reporter David Brooks cites the nature of police culture—that “no one understands police work except fellow officers” (Brooks, 2014). This is something you often tell me, too. I am aware of your weariness of academics, theorists, and politicians criticizing your profession, as they are not the ones out on the field. I have time to think about my actions in most situations. You and your fellow officers often do not. The security of a violence-free environment is replaced with your sense of urgency to keep your community safe by enforcing the law and providing repercussions (i.e., arresting or using “appropriate force”) for those who violate it, while giving yourself the greatest chance at safety.

The determination of “appropriate force” is situationally subjective. It is additionally influenced by an officer’s background, training, mental state, and level of experience (Alpert et al., 1994). Many of the reasons police officers use force are obvious to you. Perhaps they fear compromise of the safety of their community. Perhaps their training has led them to believe that force is the only way to ensure a civilian’s compliance. Perhaps they have seen and experienced too much throughout their careers, leading to a certain hypervigilance—a “justified alertness to danger” (D.K., 2015). Perhaps they put themselves in positions such that they had no other option *but* to defend themselves upon sense of threat.

The latter suggests that many publicized instances of police brutality are not predominated by explicit prejudice against people of color, but rather by ineptitude in tactical protocols—*mistakes of the mind*, as you call it. You and I have watched several pieces of footage of the killings of unarmed Black men in police altercations. “Well, he shouldn’t have fought back,” you would say. You often tell me that the use of force can be avoided as long as civilians comply with police officers’ requests.

You have also told me of exceptions—that sometimes, stereotyping based on race, appearance, demeanor, and other visual and interactional cues is necessary. I understand this, but I also understand that this repeated stereotyping gradually builds up our intrinsic prejudices, whether or not we are consciously aware of it (Lawrence, 1987). These prejudicial contributions blur the line between intentional *mistakes of the heart* and unintentional *mistakes of the mind*.

The influence of intentionality on *mistakes of the mind* place instances of perceived police misconduct at an ethical boundary. It complicates the degrees of both justification and ramification that can be used. It makes it difficult to rule out the possibility that police officers act on their subliminal prejudices during split-second actions, such as in shoot/no-shoot decisions involving Black males (referred to as shooter bias; Lee, 2004). This is accompanied by the mentality that all it takes is a moment of hesitation for a situation to become fatal.

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Racism against Blacks is rooted in our society's history. These collective attitudes and ideas—biases, stereotypes, prejudices—contribute to discrimination against them, whether intentional or not. We are both aware of the concept of implicit bias, or our attitudes and ideas of others at the subconscious level. I have learned of its biopsychological basis through my undergraduate neuroscience curriculum, and you have learned of its influence on your actions through your own required training. Professor Charles Lawrence provides his insight:

Most of us are unaware of our racism. We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions. In other words, a large part of the behavior that produces racial discrimination is influenced by unconscious racial motivation (Lawrence, 1987).

His work, along with the wealth of psychosocial research on this topic, suggest that we cannot place full blame of the killings of Black men on the police. To do so would be too simple.

However, do you think that our knowledge of the workings of the unconscious is sufficient to relinquish police officers' responsibility for the disproportionate amount of killings of Black men? Has the lack of repercussions been justified? Are good intentions enough?

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates candidly and effectively communicates his experience as a Black man in America. His book accounts his experiences with the criminal justice system, which are embedded with warnings to his son: to be extra vigilant, to adjust his demeanor, to behave twice as well as everyone else so as to not “give the police a reason” (Coates, 2015, p. 90). The necessity of Black people's employment of these warnings is a consequence of the inherent disadvantage in their relationship with law enforcement, which has been built up for years prior.

These practices come at the expense of the Black man's control of his body and reservation of energy. He loses fragments of time itself—time that he instead is forced to spend “readying the mask” for the America that upholds preconceived notions of his people (Coates, 2015, p. 91). He writes:

The police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction was the result of an unfortunate reaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy [...] The destroyers will rarely be held accountable (Coates, 2015, p. 9).

Control over one's body provides him or her with a sense of empowerment—something that everyone should be entitled to. However, Coates's account serves as evidence that social structures and attitudes can prevent access to bodily control and instead promote bodily destruction for specific groups of people. In America, the Black body has historically been under

the control not of the person within it, but rather of its oppressors<sup>3</sup>. Thus, full rights to their bodies have been compromised; and we have become complacent with this reality.

Violence and terror have become normalized within the Black community. At a panel discussion that I attended, Dr. Gray, a professor at my University and one of the speakers on the panel, emphasized the daily instances of terror in the lives of Black Americans. As a Black man who is open about his experiences with this form of terror, I presume he would agree with Coates in many ways. For instance, they both equate their feelings of terror during the 9/11 attacks with the collection of smaller terrors that they experience daily as minorities. Black Americans have been made to fear the criminal justice system and these other normalized, yet widely unacknowledged, terrors—terrors rooted in a “philosophy of the disembodied, of a people who control nothing, who can protect nothing” (Coates, 2015, p. 82).

Their remarks should not be construed as a reference to the lives lost on 9/11 as less important or less relevant. Rather, their perspectives urge us to rethink our classical definition of terrorism, as its meaning is subjective among different groups. We must also pay greater attention to the sociocultural structures that have given certain groups the power to invoke feelings of terror and disembodiment upon others.

It is reasonable to believe that noncompliance and resistance suggest a civilian’s guilt for a criminal offense. Often, this is the case. It is not my intention to rationalize criminals’ actions; but perhaps in other instances, noncompliance and resistance have little to do with guilt. Given the perspective discussed, why would a young Black male choose to run from or otherwise resist police officers and their orders? Perhaps he is aware that people who look like him are 21 times

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<sup>3</sup> In this context, I am not equating police officers with oppressors, as it is obvious that I believe in the danger of collective judgments. Oppression can come from multiple sources that are influenced by both overt and covert systemic prejudices, although individual explicitly racist police officers can play a role. I perceive the system as the most common oppressor, rather than the individual.

as likely to be killed by police officers, in comparison to young White males (Gabrielson, Jones, & Sagara, 2014). Perhaps he has witnessed police officers using excessive force on his friends or family members and was afraid of suffering injuries. Perhaps he expects that police officers have already negatively stereotyped him, and thus inherently fears police encounters. This could affect his reactions in a given situation. People like Dr. Gray and Ta-Nehisi Coates are more familiar with these situational possibilities than you and I ever will be—we must listen to them.

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I did not write this letter to inform you of the ways I believe policing can be reformed. You likely know how this can be done better than I, or anyone who has not been in your position, would. Sometimes, I ask you what policemen do to amend perceived flaws in their practices. You have responded with acknowledgements of your training on diversity, mental health, and implicit bias. You believe the mandate of body cameras would work in favor of accountability of both civilians and officers. While I agree, I have been grappling with the justification of actions for both Black and Blue. Despite the evidence that would be made available with the widespread use of body cameras, a physical action is only one component of a controversial police-civilian interaction. We must also consider intrinsic fears, biases, and motivations on both ends—all of which cannot be documented in the same manner and cannot simply be eradicated by training. Instead, my goal in this letter has been to provide you with a broadened perspective.

I once asked you of the reservations you had regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, whose mission is to “build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on

Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (“Black Lives Matter: About”, 2017). It works to reverse a societal structure that fosters and tolerates the marginalization, discrimination, and demise of individuals in the Black community. “It promotes violence against police officers. That puts *us* at risk,” you responded<sup>4</sup>. This stance is justified, especially when considering both the 2016 killings of the police officers in Dallas and the regularity of the loss of police lives in our country during civilian altercations. However, it is important to contextualize the violence against police officers Dallas and other instances of its kind.

The five police officers were killed during protests in response to the recent shootings of Black men in Minnesota and Louisiana by police officers. It was difficult to ignore the “Black Lives Matter” slogan. President Obama stated, “When people say, 'black lives matter,' it doesn't mean that blue lives don't matter [...] But right now, the data shows that black folks are more vulnerable to these kinds of incidents. There is a particular burden that is being placed on a group of our fellow citizens” (Liptak, 2016). This is something that we need to push ourselves to understand, especially in the context of society’s tolerance of injustices against Black people. “Black Lives Matter” communicates feelings of inequality within the Black community and emphasizes the need for society to address this disproportionality.

I am, by no means, using this to justify the shooters’ wrongful actions. I am simply reminding you of a lesson that you often teach me—there are multiple sides to conflicts and arguments. We must hold this true even when it is difficult to do so—that is, when others’ opinions do not converge with our own. It is easy for a police officer’s loyalty to Blue and an

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<sup>4</sup> In response to another common objection, “Why not ‘All Lives Matter’,” the Black Lives Matter Global Network states, “We work vigorously for freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension, all people [...] To love and desire freedom and justice for ourselves is a prerequisite for wanting the same for others” (“Black Lives Matter: About”, 2017).

African American's loyalty to Black cloud his or her judgment. I challenge you to recognize this fact and then empathize with the perspectives of others despite it.

Dr. Gray reminded us of the importance of listening to the opinions of the people affected by our actions even if they look or think differently than we do. Intergroup dialogue may cause us to question our own values, assumptions, and thinking patterns. Perhaps this can lead to the gradual weaning of our poisonous and outdated "us versus them" mentality and our tendency toward outgroup homogeneity—not just in the criminal justice system, but throughout all other societal structures as well. Perhaps this is how we can define progress.

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"Police reflect America in all of its will and fear [...] And so to challenge the police is to challenge the American people," Coates says (Coates, 2015, p. 79). Social and political attitudes are fleeting, technology is evolving, and behaviors that were once permissible may no longer be; but systemic racial imbalance has persisted for all of American history. It is unfair to use you and your fellow officers as scapegoats for this problem—one that has been present for generations, in various forms. Holding a microscope over the actions of individual police officers will not rid this country of this imbalance—this disservice to our Black community.

We must look at the disproportionalities in the actions of police officers in a systemic context, rather than on individual, case-by-case bases. Prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and racism against Black bodies—these injustices are not new. They are certainly not limited to the police force. Rather, these realities have fostered a system in which killings and mishandlings of Black people by the police is permissible, inevitable, and almost instinctive. The solution is

larger than community policing and increased training. We should begin with a deeper analysis of the system itself, as we now have an idea of the factors that led to its current state and the ways this system may affect individual police-civilian interactions. The sociocultural history of oppression and marginalization of Black Americans and the psychology of implicit bias and prejudice, on both ends, contribute significantly to this issue's ethical weight. I hope this is more obvious by now.

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It is not just you and your fellow officers that must peer within. We are *all* human, and we are *all* imperfect in our judgments and reactions. We *all* have work to do. You should not have to assume the roles of psychologists, sociologists, historians, ethicists, political theorists, or any of the like. These are not in your job description, but the overlaps of these fields with yours are difficult to ignore. Thus, I propose you not assume these roles, but rather pay closer attention to the inputs of those who do.

My regard of police officers as heroes was unfair to both of us, at least with my previous definition. To call someone a hero meant to expect perfection—to always make the correct decisions, to never have their moral and ethical judgments fail them, to always make the most sense. I believe it is time to further communicate the salient observation that you and your fellow police officers, like the rest of us, are fallible. I have since adjusted my definition of a hero: a person who acknowledges his or her fallibility<sup>5</sup>—ignorance, ineptitude, or a combination of

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<sup>5</sup> My references to ignorance and ineptitude throughout this letter were influenced by my reading of “Toward a Theory of Medical Fallibility” by Samuel Gorovitz and Alasdair MacIntyre. Although it analyzes fallibility in a medical context, I believe it has various overlaps with contributions to fallibility in many other settings, such as in police work.

both—and makes an extensive effort to minimize interactional errors, especially with the generalized other. We all possess varying degrees of ignorance, and we should not be ashamed of this. We should embrace our ignorance and then get to work—to read more, converse more, *engage more*. Not doing so is counterintuitive to any future toward social cohesion. All of these efforts stem from noble, yet tangible and modifiable, qualities that I know that you and your fellow officers either possess or are capable of attaining. For this reason—for this belief—you are still my hero. You always have been, and you always will be.

Sincerely,  
Your Daughter

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