

Marching is easy; change is hard: Whites need to actively confront the power structures that protect their privilege

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What comes next? (Barry Williams/for New York Daily News)

As a cancer survivor, I am vigilant about not taking unnecessary health risks. Thus, protesting in the midst of COVID-19 for policing reforms in the aftermath of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others wasn't a good option for me. At times it pained me to not be marching in solidarity with thousands of my fellow New Yorkers, calling for the prosecution of the officers who killed Floyd and Taylor and for substantial changes in laws and practices that could greatly reduce the use of excessive force and unbridled power against black people.

Watching television and following along on social media, I observed the diversity of the demonstrators; often there were more white people than persons of color. Like many, I was encouraged to see so many non-blacks chanting and carrying signs reading, "Black Lives Matter." And yet I couldn't help but think, "Black lives matter, but how much?"

For most white people, joining the call to end systemic racism in policing costs relatively little. It takes nothing from their daily living and doesn't threaten their access to the resources that for generations have helped ensure their present and future privilege. But what if those same persons were called upon to help undo systemic racism in all facets of American life, resulting in the loss of their privilege? Would they be as quick to protest?

Our nation will never root out racism in education, health care, banking and finance, private-sector business, government and nonprofits until those who've long benefited inequitably join in the call for an end to the systemic practices that perpetuate it.

Let's take school achievement and public funding as an example of what I mean. Our city's worst-performing schools are in low-income neighborhoods, and they predominantly serve black and brown children. We all know that traditional public school funding is not enough to secure academic excellence in low-income communities.

Compounding matters, parents in affluent communities are able to raise substantial additional funds from school families through PTAs for school-based educational supports that significantly enhance their children's learning. Parents in low-income neighborhoods cannot. They simply do not have the money.

Would parents in affluent communities be willing to redistribute available public education dollars so that low-income communities effectively receive more to help close the achievement gap? Would they be willing to redraw catchment zones and send their children to school alongside underprivileged black and brown children, in truly integrated classrooms?

Wealth and income gaps between white and black Americans are yawning, and the only way to change them is to change our tax structure and otherwise give more to those who have been systematically deprived, possibly including some form of reparations. Are whites who march willing to support that kind of dramatic economic redistribution?

Too many people in the United States have either no or insufficient health care; in New York City, they are largely low-income black and brown residents. Are affluent New Yorkers willing to support redirecting funding for high-quality, affordable and accessible health care for these residents who have greater needs?

Affluent New Yorkers residing in predominantly white communities also need to ask why prisons, homeless shelters and landfills are almost never built in their neighborhoods. As our city seeks to close Rikers Island and build four new borough-based jails to support family connections for persons who are detained, and to build more affordable housing with improved access to quality health care and schools, would white and well-off New Yorkers be willing to live just a few blocks away from those facilities?

As the nation once again is forced to confront racism, changing policing so that black lives genuinely matter is crucial. But it must be only the start. If we are to truly overcome racism wherever and however it impacts our lives and reinforces privilege, we must continually ask, Black Lives Matter, but how much?

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