

Dear America – Khano Smith

I want to start this off by saying I am deeply hurt by what happened to George Floyd a few days ago. Furthermore, I continue to be saddened at the thought of countless black people in this country who, over centuries, have suffered at the hands of law enforcement officers. Cries for equality and fair treatment have fallen on deaf ears, accountability has been scarce, and these transgressions carried little to no consequences. I have thought about it for a few days now, and it is difficult to put my thoughts into words. It is an emotional subject that evokes a cocktail of feelings including anger, hurt, and sadness. It baffles me that in 2020, we are still working tirelessly to bring awareness to a defect in society that has somehow evaded remedy.

At the age of 14, my mother sent me from Bermuda to the United States with the hope that I would take advantage of the opportunity to realize the American Dream. I now consider the United States my home, and as a citizen of this great country, I am forever grateful for the opportunities it has afforded me. When I watch the video of George Floyd fighting for air and crying out for his mother, I go to a place that no words can describe. Mr. Floyd was of a similar age to my brother, who lives about two-and-a-half hours away from me in Atlanta, and honestly, I think about this every day and ask myself– what if

something like this happened to my brother? What would I think? How would I feel? What would I do? For a large part of my life, my brother has been my protector and a father figure. What if he was the one lying there, fighting for his last breath, and crying out for our mother. The sad reality of it is, because of our skin color, this could happen to him, this could happen to me, this could happen to anyone who looks like us. That should not be the case.

I hope that this ill-fated incident turns out to be the straw that breaks the camel's back. We can no longer stand idly by and let this blatant disregard for human life continue. This is the United States of America and for another black man to die at the hands of law enforcement officers is incomprehensible. What makes it worse is the added fact that he was handcuffed, face down, and we all saw the officer's knee slowly squeezing the life out of him without a care in the world. We need to strive for progress and make change. We are not going to reach everybody, and there is no easy answer or perfect solution as to how to make the change. Change will require a concerted effort by as many people as possible in order for the country to live up to its founding principles, expectations and values. Unfortunately – and evidently at this time – a large part of those core principles, expectations and values, for a large population of people in this country are not being fully embraced. We must do better.

As a black man, a United States citizen, a person who now proudly calls this country my home, all I ask is to be treated as equally and fairly as everyone else. Living in the land of opportunity, where prosperity is not guaranteed and success is not handed out, my desire is to be given the opportunity to work hard and be a good citizen without continuously living in fear or a state of apprehension at the sight of a law enforcement officer. I am fortunate that I have personally met and befriended some great law enforcement officers and truly believe that they do not all have bad intentions. Unfortunately, like every population group, there are members in the group who are not necessarily good people. We have got to do better to educate these people, implement structures that facilitate accountability, and write policies that require good behavior.

Education starts in the home but continues at schools, and in our workplaces. From an early age, we are taught how to coexist in society, however, it is clear that many people have not mastered this. This leads to an environment where certain communities and their members suffer disproportionately. Coming to the United States at the age of 14, settling down was made a lot easier with the help of my friends and their families (who happen to be white). They were my extended family and welcomed me into their homes. I was invited to spend special

occasions – Thanksgiving, Christmas, Fourth of July – with them, and they have supported me in my career and offered me employment. I am eternally grateful for these people who have shown me love, because even though I think it is the right thing to do, they did not have to. As humans, our nature is to love and help one another. If we don't work together to leave this world in a better state than how we found it, then, what are we doing?

Everyone has a role and must do their part to rid society of this systematic problem of inequality. We must all strive to ensure that equality prevails for all. Using COVID-19 as an example, the year 2020 has shown us that, as humans, unless we work together for the common good, we can be the architects of our own demise.

We need leadership throughout the community, whether it is at home, in school, or from public officials at all levels to help find a solution, or at least push the nation towards equality for all. I love the diversity and the unity shown with the large number of peaceful protests in almost every state and even in most major cities around the World. As citizens, we need to do our civic duty and turn out to vote when the time comes. Everyone's voice needs to be heard. We need progressive thinkers who can unite the country in leadership positions and public office.

It is our duty to make sure that we do not look back and say that George Floyd was killed and died in vain. As a nation, we are living in emotional times right now, so speak up and be heard because it is the right thing to do. Speak up because you believe it, not because it is the in-vogue thing to do. Educate those who do not share those sentiments. Do it for George Floyd, do it for the countless other black men and women whose lives have been tragically cut short, without mercy, without justice. Do it for George Floyd's six-year-old daughter Gianna who quite-rightly believes "Daddy Changed the World". Let us make her dream come true.