James Baldwin reminds us not to be surprised by this

Facing the “intolerable trouble” of antiblack violence

by Brad R. Braxton in the July 1, 2020 issue

James Baldwin, photo by Allan Warren, licensed under Creative Commons

Even as we mourn the incalculable loss of human life in the COVID-19 pandemic, we also mourn yet another onslaught of antiblack violence that highlights a long-standing sickness in the American body politic. The killings of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and George Floyd in Minnesota were tragic events on multiple levels. So was a white woman’s blatant attempt to intimidate Christian Cooper in New York City’s Central Park. These events have claimed national attention partly because of video evidence that shows the way some white people feel entitled to use violence and intimidation to control, and even kill, black people.

Am I deeply saddened by all this? Yes. Am I surprised by any of it? Absolutely not.

The justified sadness caused by events like these can express itself in lament. Lament is a ruggedly honest declaration that something is deeply wrong and

severely out of joint or that someone who is dearly loved is now significantly absent. In our family rooms, classrooms, cultural spaces, and private places, we must encourage personal and communal lament.

It takes many forms: guttural groans, copious tears, long stretches of silence, fits of rage, quiet questioning, bittersweet remembering, tension-riddled tossing and turning. We lament because people matter to us, because values such as dignity and the presumption of safety matter to us. We do it because there remains somewhere in us a faint hope that today's pain will not completely swallow tomorrow's possibilities. As an educator charged with cultivating the hearts and minds of emerging leaders, I lament the violence and death in these difficult times, and I encourage our students to lament.

I harbor a growing intolerance, however, for people acting surprised by tragic events like these. Why would anyone be surprised?

"Nostalgia is the enemy of history," insist sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark. "We frequently accept . . . tales that corrupt our understanding of the past and mislead us about the present." I know enough US history—and I have had enough encounters with racism—to never again be surprised by any form of aggression against black people.

We will slow the spread of the coronavirus by wearing masks. We will slow the spread of virulent racism by unmasking the presumption of ignorance. It's due only to willful ignorance that some people are surprised by the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 or by aggressive policing of communities of color.

Deep down, most adults and many young people in the United States know where the color and class lines are. These visible and invisible lines rope people into better or worse levels of economic, educational, personal, and communal well-being. While the landscapes and skylines of our communities have changed dramatically over the centuries, these color and class lines were laid down a long time ago by the architects of the American republic. Unfortunately, they have proven thus far to be indelible.

In 1963, as the United States was reeling from highly publicized episodes of racial violence, James Baldwin delivered his speech "A Talk to Teachers." With probing words, the literary sage exploded the myth of ignorance and, along with it, that of American innocence. Baldwin remarked:

> Black [people] were brought here as a source of cheap labor. They were indispensable to the economy. In order to justify that [black people] were treated as though they were animals, the white republic had to brainwash itself into believing that they were, indeed, animals and *deserved* to be treated like animals. . . . What I am trying to suggest to you is that it was not an accident. . . . It was a deliberate policy hammered into place in order to make money from black flesh. And now, in 1963, because we have never faced this fact, we are in intolerable trouble.

More than half a century later, we are still in trouble—but trouble need not last always.

Educational institutions—from colleges to elementary, middle, and secondary schools—are engaging in robust discussions about equity. While equity has many components, it certainly entails *intentional* individual and institutional efforts to counteract the disproportionate privilege and power that are unfairly afforded to some people while denied to others. Those of us who are teachers can create equitable places and practices by courageously dispelling ignorance—both the benign lack of knowledge that welcomes instruction and the malignant ignoring of knowledge that revels in nostalgia.

In these times of violence and death, our classrooms—whether in person or online—can be sites for sharing meaningful information and forming moral identity. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, a moral identity "is one that is relieved of pretensions to superiority. It lets go of any myths that suggest one people is more valuable than another. . . . A moral identity affirms the shared humanity of all human beings."

Let's create a world where everybody counts, irrespective of color, class, creed, or condition. Now *that* would be a most welcome surprise.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Sad but not surprised."