

College of Arts & Sciences

One week ago, as people across the country celebrated Memorial Day and began resuming some semblance of pre-pandemic life, George Floyd took his last breath. At least, he tried to. His last words echoed those of Eric Garner in 2014 – “I can’t breathe” – and with those words, George Floyd joined an unacceptable list of innocent black men and women who have died at the hands of those sworn to protect and serve. Or the hands of our fellow citizens for no other reason than the color of their skin.

Trayvon Martin.

Michael Brown.

Tamir Rice.

Walter Scott.

Breonna Taylor.

Ahmed Aubrey.

And the list goes on.

For two months, I have been trying to find the words that would express the deep sorrow I feel about the disruption we have all experienced in our lives, and the unequal way it has occurred across our nation. That sorrow has turned to horror and anger as I witness the injustice and constant drumbeat of unnecessary death in our nation. These acts of violence are the most horrible display of irreverence for life and disrespect shown to our fellow citizens simply because they have black or brown skin.

This violence is endemic to a system of oppression that perpetuates white privilege, which plays out when the police are called because an

individual simply does not like how an under-represented minority spoke to them or looked at them, or simply occupied the same space for simple pleasures like bird watching. It goes on and on and on ... and it must stop. We cannot ignore the acts of violence occurring across the country. Intolerance of diversity – from race and identity to ideals and thought – is not a strength. It is a weakness and one that, when left unchecked, destroys communities.

Are we the United States of Anguish or are we the United States of America? These days, it is hard to tell if those are different, but I put my faith in you – my colleagues and friends of the Volunteer community – to stand for justice and call for action. If we were on campus today, we would gather at the Rock to support our community of color and express our sorrow and anger over what is happening in communities across America, including our own.

Since we are unable to gather and stand in solidarity, I ask you to recognize the biases we all carry and pledge to help make America a safe and healthy place for everyone to pursue the lives they want to live. Take action and reach out to your colleagues and friends who once again suffer an all-too-familiar assault on their identities. They may seem okay, but chances are, they are not.

As faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences, we seek to promote the values of free and ethical intellectual inquiry and effective civic engagement. We also seek to promote these ideas within the context of respect for diversity. We have the capacity to become better educated, to join communities that bring diverse groups of individuals together to discuss the rampant racism in our country. We can take a stand and call for action that includes a change in how our police are trained and make sure they are held accountable for failing to protect and serve every member of their community.

On our campus, Vol Means All is not just another slogan. It emerged as a call for tolerance and acceptance of another minority group – but its call is broader and includes all who are disrespected for who they are. Now, more than ever, it is on us to take a stand and renew the call that Black Lives Matter!

The year 2020 is a watershed year – take up your pens, your art, your banners, your ability to educate and organize – and let’s make a difference. If we don’t, who will?

In solidarity,

Theresa M. Lee
Dean, College of Arts & Sciences

“And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? ... It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity.”

— Martin Luther King Jr.

Contact Us

[College of Arts & Sciences](#)
Office of the Dean
312 Ayres Hall
1403 Circle Drive
Knoxville, TN 37996-1330
865-974-5332
artscidean@utk.edu



[View as web page](#)