MY 2020 TEEN EXPERIENCE

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It is currently July 2020, and although we're halfway through the year, it hasn't been an easy one. From having to quarantine in hopes of surviving a deadly pandemic, known as COVID-19, to rampant police brutality and a surge in racially fueled violence in the U.S., being a teenager hasn't been a walk in the park. My outdoor adventures ended as early as March 13, 2020, when my classmates and I were all sent home early from school. Following the early dismissal, there was national hysteria over toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and face masks. My classmates and I initially believed this was all a hoax. You could imagine my surprise when I realized that not only was this a worldwide emergency, but more tragedy would follow.

A man by the name of George Floyd was murdered in police custody during the month of May, after police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck, resulting in death by suffocation. His murder sparked hundreds of protests worldwide, but also opened the eyes of millions to the widespread racism and inequality in our country.

Prior to the tragedies of 2020, I myself was ignorant to most of the racism within our society. I was raised in a predominantly black neighborhood, where I was generally rejected for being "too white." From a young age, I had an issue accepting my race, believing that if black people didn't want me, I wouldn't fight it. When I began high school, there was a mix of different races and ethnicities. I was much more comfortable, but I didn't stop there. Although I never hated myself for being black, I avoided things typically associated with black people. I cut my thick, long hair as a way to keep my mother from braiding it. I also disliked Black History Month; singing the same songs and learning about Martin Luther King Jr. annually. I was convinced that if that was all there was to talk about, maybe black people weren't as special as I was told. I tried to make myself feel better by thinking that the only reason I was excluded was because I was more than just my skin color. It wasn't until 2020 that I began to see the truth.

Living through 2020 opened my eyes to a great deal of microaggressions disguised as compliments. I had classmates who would target the black students at my school, then look at me and say, "I'm so glad you're not like them." Looking back at it all, I can clearly see where the love lied. I had friends shouting "All Lives Matter,"then retreating to their blissful ignorance. No one cared when George Floyd was murdered in pure daylight, or when Breonna Taylor was shot within her own home, but everyone "pressed F" to pay their respects when Elijah McClain died because he was "a good guy." The original problem wasn't even the fact that they sympathized with McClain and not the others, but the fact that their support was nothing more than a *comment* on a post. There was no search for answers; no questioning why this happened. It was torture.

I contacted everyone I thought would listen: classmates, long distance friends, even complete strangers. Out of everyone I spoke to, only about a tenth of these people cared. "Death is inevitable," some replied. "They probably did something wrong," others concluded. There were even people I knew who would ignore me altogether or say that they didn't want to hear it. The silence I had been praying for to return eventually did so, but its return was haunting. The silence wasn't from peace in our country; the ones fighting for justice and equality were eradicated. They were erased from our school books, our news reports, and our history. We were taught what we were allowed to know based on white supremacy, not the full truth of who we are.

I began trying my best to educate myself and help everyone I could, but I'll never forget the fear I felt when I started. Does the black community want my help? What could I even do? It wasn't until then that I realized that I didn't have to be accepted to stand up for what was right. I'm an African American woman living in the United States. If my voice can be heard, I will use it! 2020 has been a year of discomfort and destruction, but all in hopes of making a better America for everyone. My experiences don't have to mirror lifelong injustice to advocate and elevate the voices of others.

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