

To Our Division of Student Affairs:

The news cycle in recent weeks has revealed images and stories of death and tragedy and blanketed many of us in a sense of confusion, anger, and hurt. The shootings of Ahmaud Arbery, Brionna Taylor, and Tony McDade as well as the killing of George Floyd have been personally challenging for me and I've been reflecting for a long time of what my responsibility is as an African American and Asian American person, as a man, as a friend, as a college administrator, and as a human. Frankly, figuring out my responsibility has been hard because this is so deeply personal and no clear answers have revealed themselves still. However, I do feel I have a responsibility to acknowledge what's happening and to also acknowledge that I may not be the only one managing these emotions.

"I can't breathe" and cries for his mother were among some of the last words spoken by George Floyd as he died last Monday in Minneapolis. This has been a disturbing reminder of similar stories on news outlets in recent weeks and even years. I've tried to have meaningful conversations with friends and family about the impact of Floyd's death and it's been impossible to make sense of images that defy basic understanding and human decency.

Such tragedies have hit me and my loved ones hard and I know it elicited strong emotion with a multitude of you as well. Many of you have reached out to me and others expressing concern, rage, despair, and support, and that kindness is tremendously appreciated.

The anguish that is palatable is one caused by trauma. I've personally survived numerous experiences that could have ended in the same tragedies played out on national television. I was stopped by a neighbor while checking a fuse box who asked if I lived in my home, I was stopped by law enforcement and directed to have my passengers show their IDs outside of protocol, I was stopped for speeding and the first comments from the officer when I kept my hands visible on the wheel were "I can tell you've done this before" in which I replied that I have family in law enforcement and I want him to see my hands out of respect for his safety. I have several other stories I could share.

Outside of these media images that elicit disturbing familiarity of a fear of negative consequences of engaging in common activities (e.g. bird-watching, cooking, running, etc) while being Black - It is simply draining. And I'm tired.

I do not speak for all African Americans or people of color, we all have our own lived experiences. To ask me, or others like me, to represent the sentiment of an entire culture is a burden others don't have to carry and shouldn't. Our overarching goal should remain focused on caring for one another as people and showing it in our words and actions sincerely and consistently. This includes reflecting on our own efforts to be the community we aspire to be from Georgia, to Tallahassee, to Minneapolis, to Louisville, and even in our home state of Oklahoma.

James Baldwin once said, "I can't be a pessimist because I'm alive. To be a pessimist means that you have agreed that human life is an academic matter, so I'm forced to be an optimist. I'm forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive."

This quote from Baldwin inspires much of my reflection and responses to friends. While I am deeply hurt, I maintain hope and gratitude for you and other people in my life and the work we do to help provide access to education and promote civic engagement. This is the challenge laid before all of us in relation to the future of our country and our diverse communities.

Thank you all for your continued commitment to our students and to one another toward a future rooted in justice and love.

Sincerely,

David

David A. Surratt, Ed.D.
Vice President for Student Affairs & Dean of Students
Division of Student Affairs
900 Asp Ave. Room 265
Norman, OK 73019
University of Oklahoma
Pronouns: he/him/his