

How I'm Talking to My Kids About the Derek Chauvin Verdict

We must walk a fine line between truth and hope.



By Esau McCaulley

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Carlos Barria/Reuters

“I do not understand why there is a trial,” my 13-year-old son said to me last week. “There is a nine-minute video.”

He was talking, of course, about the trial of Derek Chauvin for the murder of [George Floyd](#), which resulted in Mr. [Chauvin being found guilty](#) on all three counts brought against him, including second-degree murder. There were all kinds of legal questions to be adjudicated about different

charges and sentences. But in the binary world of guilt and innocence in the minds of the young, the answer was plain enough.

I lacked good answers for my son, especially in a moment when Mr. [Chauvin's trial](#) was not the only reminder of our country's deep racial injustice: The deaths of Daunte Wright in Brooklyn Center, Minn., and Adam Toledo, a 13-year-old, in Chicago, have been added to an ever-expanding list of tragedies that have occurred when people of color encounter the police.

The United States demands too much wisdom from Black parents. We must walk that fine line between telling the truth about how cruel America can be toward Black bodies and souls and the hope that our children can be their free Black selves. America requires too much of its clerics, who must minister, console, lead and organize a people weary of Black death. Millions of African-Americans have to educate, cook, clean, practice law and govern while processing a series of traumas. The irony of Mike Elliott, the first Black mayor of Brooklyn Center, being called upon to explain what went wrong during Mr. Wright's arrest is not lost on any of us. The mayor is among the traumatized.

We must press on. At work last week, I stood in front of a group of masked undergrads who made it out of bed and to class by 8:30 a.m. to learn about the beliefs of early Christian communities in Rome and Corinth. As has often been the case for the past few months, their minds were elsewhere. A few weeks ago, after the shootings in Atlanta, I began class with a discussion of anti-Asian racism. Earlier in the year, we processed together the storming of the Capitol. Now their minds are on the events that took place in Chicago and Brooklyn Center. What have I told them? What have I told my children?

I told them the truth. Speaking to an ethnically diverse and politically divergent classroom about our racial divisions is complicated. I know some will be skeptical of any conversations about race and injustice.

I also know that my vocation is education, not punditry. Students need a way of thinking, not a series of conclusions. But I also believe that students deserve the truth as charitably and carefully as I can deliver it. To ignore these issues is a privilege too many of my Black and brown students lack.

So we waded into the troubled waters. I let them all know that there is no escape from these issues. There is no place to hide. There is no world where they can live, learn, fall in and out of love, other than the one they inhabit. A basic teaching of Christianity is that humans are capable of profound and confounding evil. That is not a truth that exists only outside the students. It also exists within them. They must see the world for what it is. Then they must get about the work of living in a world that too often devalues Black and brown lives. There have been and will be times when that disregard will stun them to silence. In those moments, they may be able to lift only half-coherent prayers and laments to God.

My children and the students committed to my care have to live in this world and be frustrated by it, but they do not have to accept it as unchangeable. They do not have to give way to apathy. They are free to weep and mourn as long as they need to do so, but they can also resist. They can plan, organize, protest and march. They have to resist not because any one event will bring the change that they seek. They must resist as a declaration of their worth and humanity. The resistance to injustice, then, isn't only for America. It is for their own souls.

There is a version of Black pessimism that says that all that remains is the struggle itself, a shouting into the darkness that our lives matter but real change is impossible. There is a version of Black pietism that assumes our only hope is the sweet by and by, in which God swoops in at the end of all things to solve our problems. But there is a third way, rooted in the idea that a just God governs the universe, and for that reason, none of our efforts are in vain.

Resistance in a seemingly impossible scenario is a deep act of faith. It is a belief that God is not limited by our insufficiency, but perhaps might even be glorified through using limited human instruments for his purposes.

But the only way to have that kind of faith is to tell the truth about the nature of the problem. We have to talk about the world in which George Floyd has his neck compressed for nine minutes and Daunte Wright gets shot to death while unarmed at a routine traffic stop.

I am relieved about the guilty verdict in Mr. Chauvin's trial. "Happy" is the wrong word when a life has been lost. Juries can't raise the dead. One court case can't eradicate the distrust that lingers in the hearts of many Black and brown Americans. A single decision is important, but it can't fix a system. There is still work to do. Mr. Floyd's family may have some measure of peace, but he was taken from them nonetheless.

I told my son the story of Adam Toledo's death as I drove him to baseball practice. It slipped from my lips unexpectedly. The gospel singer Kirk Franklin was playing in the background, and we sat in silence for a while as the choir lauded the glories of God. In that moment, we were not just father and son but a Black boy and a Black man trying to make sense of the task of living that stretched out before us.

When I could wait no longer, I asked him, "What are you thinking?" He told me, sounding somber and somehow older, "I want to do some good in the world, to make it better." That's it, I thought. That pain never breaks us. We push forward.

At some point, I will sit down with my son and tell him that justice has been served in the Chauvin trial. But I am not sure that the playfulness in his voice will immediately return. He has experienced something that has changed him. That point eventually comes for all Black boys and girls — the moment when the monster reveals itself and the shape of the fight becomes clear. I pray that the resolve he displayed during that car ride will remain.

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