

## “A Brutal Legacy That Continues”

By Scott Dickman, Op Ed, Concord Monitor, June 7, 2020

I write on the heels of George Floyd’s murder by white police officers, the ensuing riots and demands for equality and justice. I am buoyed by the outpouring of solidarity across the racial divide, and heartbroken by those whose white privilege leads them to perceive this latest “law enforcement” action as an isolated incident devoid of deep-rooted cultural context.

Like so many others, I gasped in horror watching the video of Mr. Floyd’s protracted murder by law enforcement officers sworn to protect and defend. Listening to Mr. Floyd’s plea for help - “Please, I cannot breathe” - left me unable to dissociate Mr. Floyd’s plea from the thousands of blacks lynched and memorialized at The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, located in Montgomery, Alabama. All those lynched and brutalized also could not breathe.

I visited the Memorial in early January accompanied by 23 other participants associated with the Compassionate Listening Project. We engaged individuals, black and white, on both sides of the racial and cultural divide. The experience was heart-breaking and spiritually uplifting. Listening to the life-experiences of others, the truths they adhere to, and examining our own implicit/explicit biases was extraordinarily challenging. That said, if we are to deepen our own understanding of how biases and racism operates isn’t that our obligation?

As a former History and Philosophy major, the Memorial brought the abstract literature I read in college to life. Briefly, pre-Civil War, blacks were too valuable as chattel property and murder was economically disadvantageous. Later, during Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era and beyond, lynching claimed thousands of black lives and was utilized to enforce white supremacy and social control. The dreadful history of these extra-judicial killings is too lengthy to address in this context. I did, however, note several documented murders at the Memorial that underscore the underlying racial/social intent.

- Dozens of black sugar cane workers were lynched in Thibodaux, Louisiana, in 1887 for striking to protest low wages
- Seven black people were lynched near Screamer, Alabama, in 1888 for drinking from a white man’s well.
- Caleb Gadly was lynched in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in 1894 for walking behind the wife of his white employer.
- David Walker, his wife, and their four children were lynched in Hickman, Kentucky, in 1908 after Mr. Walker was accused of using inappropriate language with a white woman.
- John Stoner was lynched in Doss, Louisiana, in 1909 for suing the white man who killed his cow.

- Hundreds of black men, women, and children were lynched in the Elaine Massacre in Phillips County, Arkansas, in 1919.
- Jesse Thornton was lynched in Luverne, Alabama, in 1940 for addressing a white police officer without the title “mister.”
- A black construction worker was lynched at Camp Blanding, Florida, in 1941 for insisting that a white co-worker return his shovel.
- Emmett Till, was a 14-year-old African American was lynched in Money, Mississippi, in 1955, after being accused of offending a white woman in her family's grocery store.

A remarkable achievement, The National Memorial for Peace and Justice is dedicated to the victims of American white supremacy. A searing experience, the Memorial includes a walkway with 800 weathered steel columns bearing the names of blacks victimized by this racial carnage. The columns descend from the roof at varying heights, each one taking on the physical embodiment of a gallows, leaving a visitor to walk uneasily in the shadow of deliberate governance dedicated to the self-preservation of white supremacy.

The relevance of this continuing American cultural tragedy to the death of George Floyd, uttering “Please, I cannot breathe”, and to the systemic racism apparent in the disproportional rate of deaths, poverty, failed education systems and the reduced economic opportunities during the current pandemic is glaringly self-evident. For this reason, I will close with commentary I transcribed at the Memorial, as follows:

“This era left thousands dead; significantly marginalized black people politically, financially, and socially; and inflicted deep trauma on the entire African American community. White people who witnessed, participated in and socialized their children in a culture that tolerated gruesome lynchings also were psychologically damaged. State officials’ tolerance of lynching created enduring national and institutional wounds that have not yet healed. Lynching occurred in communities where African Americans today remain marginalized, disproportionately poor, overrepresented in prisons and jails, and underrepresented in decision-making roles in the criminal justice system”.

“At this memorial, we remember the thousands killed, the generations of black people terrorized, and the legacy of suffering and injustice that haunts us still. We also remember the countless victims whose deaths were not recorded in news archives and cannot be documented, who are recognized solely in the mournful memories of those who loved them. We believe that telling the truth about the age of racial terror and reflecting together on this period and its legacy can lead to a more thoughtful and informed commitment to justice today. We hope this memorial will inspire individuals, communities, and this nation to claim our difficult history and commit to a just and peaceful future”.