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Viewpoint: A blind spot on race and justice

Darryl Heller South Bend Tribune

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One of the most searing memories that I have as an undergraduate at the College of Charleston (S.C.) is witnessing a white fraternity member lead a pledge around campus dressed as a slave with a noose around his neck. What was most striking about that incident is that no one batted an eye. I remember being deeply offended and confused, especially given that no protest was lodged and no public comment was made. I hadn't thought of this incident in many years. However, the events at the Columbia campus of the University of Missouri last week evoked that memory and made me think about how far we have come since my college experience with racism in 1979, and how far we have yet to go.

As I read through the commentary about the grievances of black students and their efforts to gain a response from the administration, a curious and provocative statement stood out; curious because it made a distinction between the fight for justice by black students and how white students view themselves in relation to it, and provocative because it exposes what I believe to be a blind spot that is fundamental to the issue of race and justice in America.

The statement that grabbed my attention was made by a white student who spontaneously joined the protest during the homecoming parade in which black students, who were part of the Concerned Student 1950 movement, blocked the car of former UM System President Timothy Wolfe. When asked about why she joined in the demonstration, Breanne LoPresti stated that, "I joined because white silence is compliance...It's not my fight, but I support it." This student got the first half right, but failed on the second half. Her statement that silence is compliance echoes an observation made by Martin Luther King, who wrote that "In the end, we will

remember not the words of our enemy, but the silence of our friends.” This is a powerful statement that reminds us that silence in the face of injustice is just as damaging as actively perpetuating harm.

However, the second part of the student’s statement totally undermined the first and hints at the blind spot, which is a manifestation of the very privilege and paternalism that LoPresti was attempting to counter. By distancing herself from the struggle against racism with the statement that “it’s not my fight,” she was expressing, I presume in an unconscious way, that this is not a fight that white people have to wage on their own behalf; they do so by choice rather than out of necessity.

Wolfe, on the other hand, also exercised his option by not engaging protesters, choosing instead to stay in his car and to remain silent. His failure to speak to students, to hear them and respond, even in a small way, to their grievances speaks volumes. The Concerned Student 1950 tweet explaining their actions said it best: “Justice is not convenient ... It is a privilege to have the option to stay silent about issues that do not directly affect you...”

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The harm caused by Wolfe’s silence is compounded by the fact that he wielded power, and had he chosen to exercise that power in a manner that engaged the issues of racism, his actions could have taken subsequent events, including his own resignation, in an entirely different direction. My point is that although LoPresti did become involved, in the end, they both retain their privilege to decide whether or not to join the long battle against racism.

The 30 black football players who initiated the team’s insistence that they “would no longer participate in football activities until President Tim Wolfe resigns” harkens another observation by King: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” This simple but true statement does make it LoPresti’s fight, as it does for every other white person of conscience. Today, the incident that I experienced as an undergraduate would never be tolerated on any college campus. Nevertheless, as

long as white people hold on to the belief that silence is an option, the struggle will continue.

Darryl Heller is director of Indiana University South Bend's Civil Rights Heritage Center.