



Race to the finish

African Americans still trying to achieve King's dream

On Monday the nation celebrates the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The civil rights advocate gave his life fighting to advance the cause of equality for all. While the movement he led made progress in changing laws and attitudes on race, personal and institutional racism are still very much alive.

Race relations have been making headlines the last several years. Stories and videos depicting the abuse and killing of black men and boys — and occasionally women and girls — have surfaced on a fairly regular basis.

BlackLivesMatter.com is the website of a group formed in 2012 after the death of black teenager Trayvon Martin at the hands of neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman. His acquittal, and the subsequent deaths of other black males at the hands of police — such as Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Eric Garner in New York City and Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio — fueled outrage in black communities across the country. Black Lives Matter is attempting to channel this passion into positive change.



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InSites

Trying to empathize

As a middle-aged white man, who grew up in a mostly Irish-American middle-class neighborhood, I have no idea what it's like to live life as a minority. My life experience is so different from someone who grew up with dark skin in a low-income, urban neighborhood that there's no way I can see the world through those eyes. Or even through the eyes of a minority who grew up middle-class or high-income.

While I'm of course aware of racism, my experience with it has mostly been secondhand, through stories in the news or relayed to me by others. Spend a few minutes on Black Lives Matter and it becomes obvious that the pain and anger of racism are real.

The language, imagery and even the hornet-like black and yellow color palette of the site all project an aggressive attitude of defiance. The movement was born in a cauldron of anger, and the seemingly never-ending episodes of blacks suffering at the hands of police keep the coals stoked.

It's not black and white

The home page features a full-width banner with a stylized photo of Tamir Rice — the 12-year-old shot by a cop while holding a toy gun — and a link to a "Statement on Justice" for

him. The statement is a one-sided indictment against the cop and also the county prosecutor, for failing to convince a grand jury to bring charges against the officer.

The case is obviously heartbreaking. A young boy was killed and many lives have been damaged. Here's where the different life experiences I mentioned earlier come into play. I see a police officer who was forced to make what he thought was a life or death decision in a split second with incomplete information. His actions were reviewed by the system of justice we have in place and found to be tragic, but not criminal.

The people in Black Lives Matter — who have had a very different experience with the criminal justice system their entire lives — see a police officer callously murdering a boy whose life didn't matter to him. He was then protected by a system that placed less worth on the black boy's life than the white officer's career.

It's hard to know the truth from afar. Media reports are not the same as being there, knowing the people involved, interviewing witnesses, examining evidence and sitting through court proceedings. Even doing all of those things doesn't always get you to the truth.

Not just us and them

The Who We Are section of the site describes who founded the organization and why, its history and its guiding principles. It was founded by three black women, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors. Their mission is not just a response to police violence against blacks. They also write a lot about inclusion in the movement for black women, gays, transgenders and those with disabilities. They lament black-on-black discrimination.

Other sections of the site list events, local chapters and other ways to get involved. The design of the site is a mixed bag. It looks good, but some of the navigation and organization is clunky.

You can argue Black Lives Matter's positions on some cases where the facts are not completely clear. But the movement is not about a single case. It's about a pattern of systemic abuse and neglect targeting blacks. They feel their daily experiences with government, employers, businesses and all the other facets of daily living are slanted against them. They're sick of it and insist on equal treatment. So while they may be wrong on individual cases, it's hard to argue with their main objective.

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