

A Reflection On My Relationship with Fire

By Kristen Beckles

“When you are a have and when you are a have-not, you see the world in very different ways.” We all saw that photo of an NYPD van on fire.

An image like that can elicit a visceral response from a lot of people for different reasons. I believe in non-violence and I try my best to internalize Christ’s words to ‘turn the other cheek.’ I believe in nonviolence, but when I saw that image my visceral response was a sense of pride, of justice, and of peace. My first thought was simply the word “good.” I wasn’t the only one who had this conflict. This was a generally shared feeling among myself, my friends and my family. When we first saw it, we laughed. A lot that can be said about the events around this fire, the people who started it, why it happened, etc. But those things don’t change the fact that our feelings about the image in its own right are in conflict with our core beliefs.

In his video, Trevor Noah breaks down the social contract of our society and references “the principles of legitimacy.” He says, “Black Americans have seen their principals completely delegitimized” and I felt that to be what I was struggling with. I had to ask myself, *why do I feel good when I see that image, even though I’m against the action?* Then I remembered the feeling I always get when I see an NYPD car normally. Those vehicles have become a symbol of trauma. The sight of those cars put us in fight or flight mode. When we’re having a barbecue in the park and one passes by we all sit up straighter. We all talk lower. We all try to remain calm and act normal. We begin preparing ourselves. We prepare for the possibility that we’re about to endure violence. We prepare for the possibility that the officer in the car will be antagonistic and hostile. We prepare for the possibility of being restrained, beaten, sexually abused, murdered or all of the above.

Me and my fellow have-nots agreed that the image felt like a work of art. Flannery O’Connor once wrote “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs as you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock, to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large startling figures.” We call it a work of art because

it is a 'large startling figure' that provokes a response that cardboard signs don't because it's clear our audience does not hold the same beliefs, despite their words. People have been marching in the streets for years chanting, "No Justice, No Peace, No Racist Police." I've been chanting that since I was 16. It was a warning of what was to come if people reach their breaking point. Generations of trauma, of lives lost at the hands of racist police, met with no accountability results in chaos. They didn't listen to the protesters' words when we chanted the ultimatum. By not granting justice and allowing the continuation of a racist policing system, they chose no peace.

"Flame", "fire", and "burning" are words we use in church regularly. I cried instantly at the sight of this altar on Pentecost Sunday, covered in candles as we sang "*we are marching in the spirit's love*". It brought to mind all the sidewalk memorials and vigils we've been witness to, that I've walked past my entire life. My eyes have always been drawn in awe to the flame of a candle during prayer. For many children, the stories of creation in Genesis are favorites. As a child those stories meant almost nothing to me. Since I was a young child, the book of the bible I've loved most is Revelation. There was never a time when I don't remember being aware of injustice and violence, and feeling powerless. It was the image of Judgement Day that gave me comfort in that powerlessness. I was comforted by the story fire and brimstone that provided me with the knowledge that God is just and the sins of the world will be judged.

Black communities in New York have an intimate relationship with fire. We all know the infamous phrase "the Bronx is burning" that came out of the city's economic recession in the 1970s. But it wasn't only the Bronx that burned, it was all Black neighborhoods in the city. The home I've lived in since 2002 was built on empty lots where other homes were left to burn. Everywhere I went I was acutely aware that I walked on ground where the blood of my parent's childhood friends was spilt. "Bushwick was a warzone; This city was a warzone," is what my parents always said. In a post-industrial NYC that was struggling to climb out of the recession, the city needed a new industry to stimulate the economy and decided on a "FIRE economy." 'FIRE' is an acronym for 'finance, insurance, and real estate.' All things people of color, but

black people in particular, almost never reap the benefits of. That's not a coincidence, it's a choice. I grew up watching our neighborhood change, watching real estate developments rise up on those empty lots. And I saw that those homes being built were not for our community, but rather for the white people who were moving in while my friends moved out. I grew up very aware that housing, education, health, and environmental policies of the city are not in the service of the people who look like me. We should never forget that 'real estate mogul' Donald Trump is from Queens. Never forget that that racism, that hatred, that evil, you see in him was bred and nurtured in this "progressive" city.

We believe in nonviolence. We are against robbery, looting, arson and assault. We have to be when they were rampant in our neighborhoods not so long ago. We know the effects it can have on a community. We know the dangers of arson, and yet we still felt catharsis at the sight of an NYPD van in flames.

Listen to the cries of the protesters. What we want is systemic change. What we want is basic human rights. What we want is the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What we want is for the promises of the American Constitution to be upheld and applied equally. We want to be able to protest against police brutality without being met with police brutality and chemical weapons banned from war. We want an end to being treated as less human than corporations. We want an end to qualified immunity. We want better schools. We want SYEP expanded, not cut. We want affordable housing. We want the defunding of the NYPD, because there are plenty of other proven ways that the money can be used to decrease crime rates without the presence of a militarized systematically racist police force. And that's just to name a few. We've had some wins but we have a long way to go. So no Governor Cuomo, we have not "accomplished our goals."

I try to live by Jesus' words to "turn the other cheek." But I'm also reminded that the Christ who nonviolently turned the other cheek on the cross is the same Christ who called for the destruction and rebuilding of the temple when he saw it filled with sin. I think part of the reason that the image of an NYPD Van engulfed in flames fills us with a sense of justice and peace is

because as an image, as art, it symbolizes the destruction of a system that has sinned against us. It is a symbol of our trauma being burned. Because when generation after generation never see the just image of an officer who broke the law in handcuffs, the simple but powerful image of that police car becomes the cathartic symbol of justice for us. That NYPD Van on fire is a large and startling image that, on its own, sums up what us protesters are calling for. We deserve better and we know this city can do better. Because a child shouldn't grow up thinking she has to wait patiently for the apocalypse in order to see justice.