

On being a human during the present crisis

I am very saddened and outraged about the brutal circumstances in which George Floyd was killed, as I also am about many others, including Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and Ahmaud Arbery, who faced the same fate.

The roots of the present crisis are centuries old. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, people were kidnapped from the continent of Africa and forced into slavery, working to produce crops such as tobacco and cotton. Martin Luther King Jr. noted the long-term effects of these inhumane origins when he said, "I believe we ought to do all we can and seek to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps, but it's a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps." (June 11, 1967). Though it might seem like a distant history, such attitudes, unfortunately, are prevalent in our country today.

The forms of this unequal treatment have changed; however, the same oppression continues in our country even today. This continuation is evident in our everyday lives, seen in the fact that black and brown people are affected disproportionately from COVID-19, not only in terms of the health consequences they suffer, but also in terms of the economic consequences they endure. The protests on the streets are not only an expression of anger about the way George Floyd was killed, but they are also an expression of how outraged many people in this country are by systemic racial and ethnic inequalities.

The Declaration of Independence was a commitment to create a nation with equal rights for all. It stated that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among which are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. It is high time to demand that the principles of the Declaration of Independence are followed to the letter.

In the same period that the Declaration of Independence was signed, philosophers were writing about what it means to be a human and to have compassion for others. Compassion is mixed with love and sadness. It is about recognizing others' suffering and desire to help them (Nussbaum, 1996, *Compassion: The basic social emotion*). Rousseau viewed men as naturally good and intrinsically compassionate. Compassion is a "natural feeling which by moderating the activity of love of self in each individual contributes to the preservation of the whole species" (*Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality (DI)*, 1755, p. 75). Caring for others is what makes us fully human. We depend on each other for our very being, not only for our survival.

To have a life as a decent human being, we must be able to identify with other people and allow them to identify with us. At the heart of being a human lies the ability to imaginatively identify with the pain, and pleasure of others, for which Adam Smith used the word "sympathy." Smith stated that our happiness is bound up with others' happiness. Even a selfish man is interested "in the fortune of others" and "their happiness [is] necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it" (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 2007 (1759), p. 11). Nature has given us a strong inner desire to care for the happiness of others. An interest in others can also be viewed as concern for others.

Living a kind life is done through sympathetic identification with the attractions and vulnerabilities of others (Phillips and Taylor, *On Kindness*, 2009). We are connected to others because of the pleasure of kindness. Unkindness threatens our happiness and our sanity. Seneca stated that “No one can live a happy life who regards himself alone and twists everything to suit his own advantage; you must live for others if you want to live for yourself” (*Moral Letters to Lucilius*, letter 48, 1917).

Rousseau, writing on repugnance in seeing others suffer, states that the “natural repugnance to see any sensitive being suffer” is a principle anterior to reason (*Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality (DI)*, 1755, III, p. 126). He concluded by saying that “it is in this Natural feeling, rather than in subtle arguments, that we must seek the cause of the repugnance every man would feel in doing evil” (*DI*, III, p. 156).

Equality is a human right and implies freedom from all forms of discrimination. Respect for human rights is a basic condition necessary for the survival of human beings. The UN defines human rights as those rights that are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings. These rights include right to life, equality, liberty and security of person, equal protection under law. Human rights belong to all of humanity. Human beings are equal due to their shared essence of human dignity.

Throughout human history, many great men and women fought against behaviors which take from us the very humanity we all need from each other. In 1955, The Russell–Einstein Manifesto called for scientists from both sides of the Iron Curtain to unite, so that they might press governments to renounce nuclear weapons (with a view towards the abolition of war itself):

There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death (p. 26).

Freud viewed the life instinct, Eros, as an instinct that unites people:

Civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into greater unity, the unity of mankind (*Civilization and its Discontents*, 1930, p. 122).

As human beings, we owe it to each other to protect those who are vulnerable to oppression, discrimination, and maltreatment. We would not be human beings if we were not to have empathy for the sufferings of our fellow humans or not to have compassion for them. There are times we are called to unite for a greater cause and for the greater good of the society. This is one of those historical moments.

At this moment, we should remind ourselves what Martin Luther King said in his “I Have a Dream” speech (1963, at the “March on Washington”):

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy...Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children. It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.

Şule Özler, Ph.D.and Psy.D.
Associate Professor, UCLA Economics Department,
Research Psychoanalyst
The New Center for Psychoanalysis, Los Angeles