

Black Lives Matter: **The Parenting Edition**

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To read more of her work, visit NowApproachingProvidence.com*

These are heavy times. As a mother, teacher and writer, it can all feel like too much if I let it...

My son, half Palestinian, half Black is 11 years old this year. We have so many folks checking in on us during this historic time of global pandemics, police violence and protests. While people's hearts are heavy at this time, mine is carefully cautious, even a bit calm.

White supremacy is not a new concept in our lives. As a 9-year-old, my immigrant mom sat me down to watch the Roots series to "see what America did to Black people." A child during the Black Power movement of the 60's (even though in Kuwait), she knew enough to inform me of the unique racism of the United States.

Flash forward decades later, I married my college sweetheart, a Black man-and gave birth to Ali. The micro (and macro) aggressions we faced as a couple from everywhere like family members to even my midwife deserve their own book, let alone a blog post. I have been writing for 32 out of 36 years of my life and don't feel like I have the energy to tackle that subject. I know that some readers need a lot deeper education than I could- (or want)- to supply. I decided long ago that I was no longer responsible for everyone's political or racial education, only my art and creative practice. Therefore, until it strikes my creative fancy, I will not delve into details of what that relationship was like for me and my family.

So why the calm heart? This is a marathon, not a sprint. I need to pace myself.

About 5 years ago, my oldest son was 5 years old and in Kindergarten. The year was 2015. According to [an article in The Washington Post](#), nearly 1000 people were fatally killed by police in 2015. This was the time period of harrowing phone video footage, which people hoped would help bring about swift justice. Unfortunately, justice still awaits us now in 2020. A year before that in 2014, 12-year-old Tamir Rice (God rest his soul) was killed 2014 while playing in the park. 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin (God rest his soul) was killed.

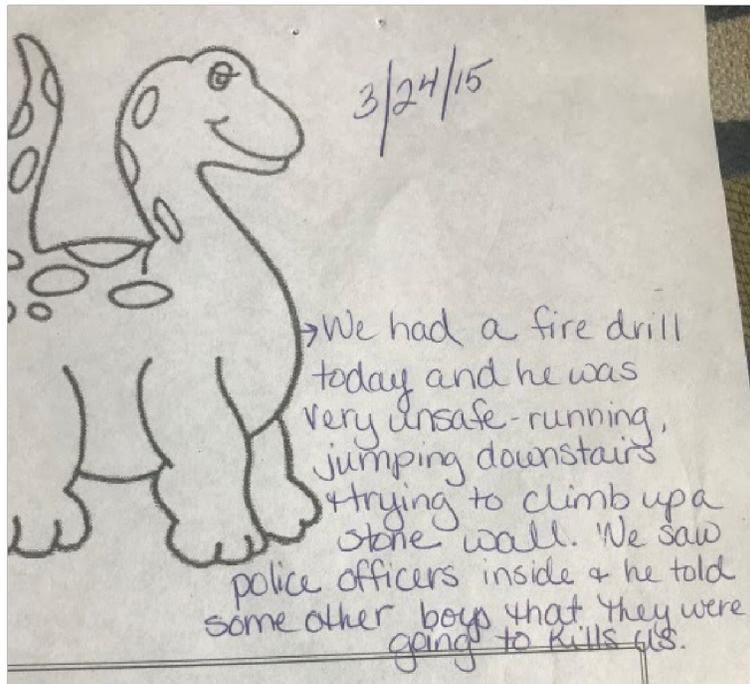
These names BARELY scratch the surface.

My son's kindergarten teacher was a kind, well-meaning white woman with a decade of experience teaching Black and Brown kids at a Providence elementary school. I remember feeling so grateful for her support and organizational skills. I was 8 months pregnant with my second son and needed to transfer Ali to her school after a hellish experience at a new charter school.

This charter school's racism ran so deep that it literally felt unsafe for him to continue to attend it. For example, Ali would often spend the whole school day in the Head of School's office and who else was treated this way? The other handful of Black boys at that small school as well. The head of school- a white woman from the affluent community of Barrington with no experience educating city kids- eventually threatened him (A FIVE-YEAR-OLD) with suspension and even had him physically restrained for what I (a teacher of 6 years at that time) saw as normal five-year-old behavior.

His new kindergarten teacher was great. She was kind, smart, and had good strategies to help my son balance out his physical energy and his busy body personality in a classroom environment. She sent home progress reports with smiley faces to share how his day went and we often checked in after his school day during pick up. He thrived during this school transition, which in large part is due to her hard work. It was just as I'd suspected: the problem was not with my son.

Interestingly, even this woman with all her experience of teaching in the inner city lacked awareness of systematic racism and just how differently her students' lives were from her own. We received this note on his progress report the day of a fire drill where police officers were (For what reason exactly? Um y'all better already know the answer) present at the elementary school. Picture below reads: "We had a fire drill today and he was very unsafe - running, jumping downstairs, and trying to climb up a stone wall. We saw police officers inside and he told some other boys that they were going to kill us."



How would getting a note like from your 5-year old's teacher make YOU feel? Annoyed? Angry? Frustrated at the state of the world we live in where a 5-year-old thinks police outside his school will "kill us?"

How did it make us feel?

Annoyed

Type in kids in Palestine into a search engine and the first result that comes up will be something about them being victims of war, stuck in an endless cycle of trauma and poverty and lacking proper health care and education.

Angry

Run a search for Black childhood and what might you find? In America, Black children don't get to be children? Find me a parent of a Black child that is actually surprised by any of this and I'll sell you a bridge. According to the Washington Post article: In 1955, after 14-year-old Emmett Till was beaten and killed by a group of white men, one of his killers said Till "looked like a man." I've found this pattern in news accounts of lynchings of Black boys and girls from 1880 to the early 1950s, in which witnesses, and journalists fixated on the size of victims who ranged from 8 to 19 years old. These victims were accused of sexually assaulting white girls and women, stealing, slapping white babies, poisoning their employers, fighting with their white playmates, or protecting Black girls from sexual assault at the hands of white men. Or they were lynched for no reason at all.

Frustrated

That same Washington Post article also cites the issue that glaringly mirrors our experience with Ali's charter school kindergarten: The overestimation of a Black child's age begins even before age 12. A study published this year in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology — which long ago published racist studies on Black children — linked the higher use of force by police on Black youth to the common perception that, by age 10, they are less innocent. The study also cited Department of Education data that said Black students are far more likely to be harshly disciplined at school than students of other races who commit the same infractions.

So how does it still make us feel reading that progress report with the silly cartoon dinosaur? How does it ever feel raising a Palestinian Black boy in America?

We laughed.



Ali's artwork depicting a giant "chicken" bringing about the end of world.