



Greetings,

Like many people I've talked to, I find lately that my dream-life has been rich, and my sleep has been fitful. So it was not surprising last Friday when I woke up from a dream repeating the line, "a man screaming is not a dancing bear." It was familiar, something I'd semi-consciously memorized once, poetry for sure, and thanks to strong coffee and google, I recalled that it is the English translation of a line from Aimé Césaire's book-length poem written in 1939, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, a text I had studied closely and written about many years ago.

Here is the larger passage:

My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth,
my voice the freedom of those who break down
in the prison holes of despair [...]
And above all, my body as well as my soul,
beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator, for life is not a spectacle,
a sea of miseries is not a proscenium,
a man screaming is not a dancing bear ..."

I recalled, reading the passage after many years, that it speaks to Césaire's passionate ambivalence to the violent and dehumanizing impact of French colonialism in his native Martinique. And I knew I had been dreaming about watching the video of George Floyd's murder.

For the past two weeks, I have been angry, deeply depressed, profoundly aware of my privilege, and as my unconscious mind revealed, concerned about contributing to a spectacle without contributing to solutions. I am profoundly aware that these events are not felt in the same way by all members of the Lewis community. Many in our community have experience that make these events much more difficult to process. Many in our community have lived through racism, racial violence, and some have experienced those things on our campus. Many in our community have committed their lives to keeping communities safe. I've been humbled and honored these past two weeks to hear the voices and stories of so many members of our community, and I hope they continue to feel the freedom to do so. I am also acutely aware that there is no mode of empathy suitable to match the magnitude of despair some are feeling.

Right now, we are struggling to make sense of things that are overwhelming because they are both deeply complex and deeply personal. As we continue to move forward in dialogue and recognition of our core values of service, solidarity and justice, I want to remind us also that universities are designed to tackle deeply complex issues. As our faculty have already shown, sociology, theology, criminal justice, history, economics, literature, biology and chemistry, data science, and many other disciplines have valuable perspectives and a responsibility to make contributions to the national and international dialogue on these issues in the coming months and years. As a university grounded in the liberal arts and Lasallian traditions, we must marshal the commitment to interdisciplinarity inscribed in the general education and take on some of our society's most persistent challenges, including racial disparities in income, wealth, employment, education and access to healthcare.

Our other responsibility is to continue to face our own contributions to, and participation in, systemic racism, recognizing that both our university and our national and international academic communities are systems that have sheltered and fostered racism for decades and centuries. As Claudia Rankine wrote five years ago: “Anti-black racism is in the culture. It’s in our laws, in our advertisements, in our friendships, in our segregated cities, in our schools, in our Congress, in our scientific experiments, in our language, on the Internet, in our bodies no matter our race, in our communities and, perhaps most devastatingly, in our justice system.” In a message to the community in April, I wrote that diversity is an institutional imperative (while inclusion is a pedagogical one). This is what I meant: Lewis University needs to continue to reckon with its own culture and embedded organizational practices, find ways to work actively against racism, and create new systems to foster diversity and equity.

Thriving universities know how to invite and value contributions from all members of society and in all positions – faculty, staff, students, alumni and other stakeholders—and they know how, through dialogue and engagement—often through difficult conversations—to work through bias and exclusion to produce the best ideas and the best programs. One manifestation of our mission values in action is the Sanctified Zone, which calls for the “active promotion of diversity and the opposition to all forms of prejudice and bias.” The practice of these values and goals lives vividly in the President’s vision and strategic plan, and specifically in attention to inclusive excellence, which is only possible when academic achievement is elevated through engagement with diverse communities and where all students have an equitable opportunity to succeed.

I’ve been so pleased to work with Dr. Kristi Kelly as a colleague on the President’s leadership team and to serve as a member of the [Diversity Engagement Committee](#). Thanks to them and others, we have many accomplishments to be proud of this year: the incorporation of [bias incident reporting](#); the approval of a Front Door Policy; participation in [Dream.US](#); the development and execution of climate surveys; increased training on unconscious bias for faculty search chairs; and great programming throughout the year, including a successful (virtual) Diversity Week and an emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion in the May Institute and others events hosted by the Faculty Center. Thanks to the work of Dr. Kelly, Dr. Laura Franklin and others, I’m pleased that Lewis has been selected as a finalist to be a Regional Collaboration Partner for CIC’s [Legacies of American Slavery](#) project.

But these actions are not nearly enough, and much more can come out of community dialogue, resolve, and commitment. Much is laid out in the [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan 2020-2022](#), and we can go even further in matters of curricular reform, retention of African American students, recruitment and enrollment practices that amplify the value of diversity and build graduate pathways, and increased sophistication in our practices for hiring and supporting faculty of color. I am dedicated to supporting this work in collaboration with students, faculty, staff and campus leadership.

And so, we set an intention to engage, and most especially, we will continue to listen.

May we all find healing, justice, love and freedom.

Yours in association,

Christopher Sindt
Provost