

UW System President Ray Cross Floyd Comments

June 2020

- Thank you, President Petersen.
- Before I proceed with my report, I feel compelled to say a few words about recent events. I am referring, of course, to the tragedy that took place in Minneapolis last week, the death of George Floyd.
- I wish I could say this was a rare tragedy. Unfortunately, that is not the case. A Washington Post database that tracks police shootings shows that since January of 2015, 1,252 black people have been shot and killed by police in the United States. That doesn't include those who otherwise died in police custody or were killed by other means. George Floyd wouldn't show up in that count. He wasn't shot, he was asphyxiated by a policeman's knee – after pleading for his life, saying he couldn't breathe.
- In 2014, Eric Garner told the New York policeman who was sitting on his head right before he died that he couldn't breathe either.
- I did not issue a statement immediately following George Floyd's death because I felt my words would have rung hollow, shallow, meaningless. Truth is I didn't know what to say. I have made – we all have made – so many statements abhorring these atrocities that our remarks seem like token gestures. I could have said the same things I said before – just swapping out George Floyd's name for Breonna Taylor's, or Ahmaud Arberg's, or Dominique Clayton's, or Eric Reason's, or a thousand others. Words feel cheap right now. Nothing has changed as a result of my previous statements – or the fine words of many others – but things desperately do need to change. How else do we find justice for what happened to George, or Breonna, Ahmaud, Dominique, or Eric?

They should not be merely anonymous statistics. Memorialized in the latest twitter hashtag. They are real people, with families, friends, lives, and dreams.

- So how can I ... how can we make real change happen? Because the status quo cannot stand.
- Yes, the university can and should help to educate, to expand awareness, to shine light into the darkness. We must re-examine our programs and practices, our recruitment of students, faculty and staff of color, and our efforts to serve all the members of our respective communities.
- That's all important, but to achieve real change we as a society must change our culture. The problems we are facing here run deep. They go way beyond just reforming police practices. It requires not only changing minds but changing hearts.
- While we cannot condone the violent acts of those who are appropriating this tragedy for other purposes, I am truly heartened that so many thousands of people, from all walks of life, have taken to the streets all across this country to peacefully express their beliefs – especially in the midst of this unprecedented pandemic – and to reaffirm their passion for “one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”
- That is who we are – or who we want to be. The American republic was founded on a set of beliefs that all people are created equal, and that all people have fundamental rights, including liberty, free speech, freedom of religion, due process of law, a fair and impartial system of justice, and freedom of assembly.
- Most Americans agree with these beliefs, at least in theory. The challenge is putting these beliefs into practice – not just some days but every day, not just for some people but for everybody.
- We can still become the America our founders dreamed of and the America we all want. But we must truly commit ourselves to this vision and resolve to turn words into action. And we must persist, even when it gets tough.
- Because this is definitely worth fighting for!