

Faith After Ferguson:

Resilient Leadership in Pursuit of Racial Justice

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Saint Louis, Missouri

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Acknowledgments

I wish this book did not need to be written. I wish its impetus of white supremacy, systemic racism, and police violence against Black people did not exist. But it does. I wish all churches followed in the way of Christ and were actively resisting and dismantling racial injustice. But they do not. I wish that Black children were growing up in a society that recognized and valued their humanity in the same way as their white peers. But they are not.

It is through this split lens of the *ought* and the *is* that I share stories of individuals and faith communities that are pushing back against the forces of racism to help create a more just and equitable world.

My first acknowledgment is a prayer for all of the families and loved ones of those who have been killed and for survivors who live with the scars of emotional trauma. The stories we tell and the names behind hashtags are those of actual people who once lived, moved, and had their being in families, neighborhoods, schools, and communities all around this country. And they should all be alive today. Ferguson should still be a little-known suburb of St. Louis. But it is not. My prayer is for God's peace of mind, body, and spirit for families and survivors, a peace that transcends understanding and enables them to keep on keeping on in the face of unimaginable pain and suffering. My hope is for this book to shine a small light on some of the ways that people are working to end police violence and racial injustice and that their example will entice and encourage others to join in.

This project would not have been possible without the first one, *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community*. Leaders from Chalice Press and the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) got together and decided that we needed a book about clergy involvement in the Ferguson uprising and invited me to write it. The visioning and support of Brad Lyons and staff at Chalice

Press and of Stephen Lewis, Dori Baker, and Matthew Williams at the Forum for Theological Exploration helped make that book idea a reality. I remain deeply grateful for the support and confidence that Chalice Press extended to me for this current project. Thank you, Brad, for your unwavering encouragement, and Deborah Arca, for the kind ways that you helped me think about the potential impact of this work. To my editor extraordinaire, Ulrike Guthrie: I am forever grateful for your wit, wisdom, and the skillful way that you helped me bring the manuscript to life.

For the dozens of people who were willing to share their personal stories or those of their faith communities with me, I give thanks. It is not easy to permit yourself to become vulnerable and talk from a place that is intrinsic to the soul of your being. I loved spending time with each of you and listening to the different ways that you give voice to your experiences. Your stories made me laugh and cry, gasp, and grin. It was my deep honor and joy to hold space as you shared from your heart. Thank you!

When I wrote *Ferguson and Faith*, I lived in St. Louis and was a proud faculty member at Eden Seminary. The encouragement and support I received from the Eden community was exemplary. Now I serve as the dean at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Writing and “deaning” don’t exactly mix well. However, the support of our president, Dr. David Mellott, and faculty has helped my writing process significantly. I am also heartened that so many of our students are wrestling with issues related to racial injustice and their implications for faith communities. Many are already engaged in praxis-oriented justice efforts as students, and I look forward seeing the work that is yet to come.

Lastly, my heart is filled with gratitude for my family and friends. I am blessed beyond measure to have such a wonderful community of love and support. My parents, Dan and Martha Gunning, laid the foundation of love and justice upon which I stand proudly today. My last living grandparent, Louise Drake, continues to be a source of strength and wisdom for this leg of my journey. My younger siblings, Carla and Drake, are always at the ready to dole out laughs at their sister’s expense. And for the many friends that are much more like family than acquaintances, I am grateful for the heart ties that bind us together.

When I was in my early thirties, I wasn't sure if I would ever find a life partner. Then one day, out of the blue, my dear friend Greg Ellison said to me, "Leah, I have someone I want you to meet." And the rest is history. Rev. Rodney Francis and I have been married for fifteen fantastic years. Thank you, Rodney, for all of the love, support, and laughter you give each day. It would not have been possible for me to care adequately for Desmond and Evan, work full-time, *and* complete this project without all of your efforts. Thanks be to God for the wonderful gift of you.

Introduction

“Mommy, has Michael Brown gotten any justice yet?”

I froze. What was prompting our young son to ask this question?

Eight months had passed since a Ferguson police officer had killed Michael Brown. Had our son had a dream about Michael or about the ensuing Ferguson uprising? How should I respond?

I decided to tell him truth, gently.

“No, son. Michael Brown hasn’t received the justice we were hoping for. But we’re going to keep working at it.”

I didn’t burden him with the whole truth. I didn’t tell him that many people hoped the police officer who killed Michael would be held fully accountable, how they hoped that police departments around the country would immediately review their policies and protocols and enforce a de-escalation practice as a first line of defense. I couldn’t tell him of our hopes being dashed that we would not see this type of killing again—and again and again.

A police officer shot Ezell Ford in the back after being stopped while walking down a Los Angeles street.

Kajiem Powell was shot twelve times on a St. Louis sidewalk.

Laquan McDonald’s seventeen-year-old body lay smoking on a Chicago street, riddled with six bullets.

Within three seconds of arriving on the scene, police officers near Cleveland shot and killed twelve-year-old Tamir Rice who had been playing alone on a playground with a toy gun.

A police officer shot Walter Scott in the back in Charleston, South Carolina, and planted a taser next to his lifeless body.

Near Atlanta, a police officer shot and killed a completely naked Anthony Hill, a US Air Force veteran.

Freddie Gray died of spinal cord injuries police inflicted on him while in police custody in Baltimore.

Police stopped and arrested Sandra Bland for an alleged traffic violation. She died mysteriously in a jail cell in the tiny town of Waller County, Texas.

Police stopped Philando Castile, a Montessori school employee who knew every child's name, for an unknown reason near St. Paul, Minnesota, and shot him six times in his car with his girlfriend and daughter only inches away.

Instead of helping him, police shot and killed Terence Crutcher beside his broken-down car in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

None of these incidents happened in the same city, town, or state. None of them happened at the same exact time of day. The victims varied in age and circumstance. The one thing they all had in common was the color of their skin. They were all African American. This is a hard truth to tell a child—and even an adult—but it is a truth that adults must confront if we are going to create a society that makes possible liberty and justice for *all*.

Just when we could not imagine how police contact with Black people could get any worse, in 2020 the world witnessed a Minneapolis police officer kneel on the neck of George Floyd, a Black man accused of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill, for 8 minutes and 46 seconds as Floyd begged him to stop. *“Please man...I can’t breathe,”* Floyd muttered as he gasped for air. Bystanders begged the officer to stop. *“He is a human being!”* shouted one of the onlookers. For 8 minutes and 46 seconds the pleas fell on deaf and uncaring ears until Floyd took his last breath and lay unconscious on the asphalt at 38th and Chicago Avenue.

This public execution came on the heels of that of Breonna Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old ER technician in Louisville, Kentucky, whom police fatally shot in the middle of the night after they burst into her home allegedly looking for drugs, and the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a twenty-five-year-old who was jogging in the middle of the day while Black, whom neighborhood vigilantes deemed “suspect” and shot to death in Brunswick, Georgia. All of this happened in the middle of a global pandemic known as COVID-19.

In the aftermath of Brown’s killing by a Ferguson police officer, a movement of resistance and resilience emerged, the likes of which had not been seen since the Civil Rights Movement. Young people took to the streets of the St. Louis region and were soon joined by people of all ages, colors, and abilities. News media outlets from around the world stationed themselves in the area for months. Social media platforms like Twitter (whose CEO and co-founder happens to be from St. Louis) became a go-to source for the most current and accurate information.

This movement for racial justice sparked by the killing of an unarmed young Black man was broadcast around the world in unprecedented ways; however, in this era the story was not controlled solely by corporate news media outlets. The pictures, videos, and live interviews that were provided by people who were participating in the marches or vigils offered an unfiltered look into the events as they were. There were no production managers or editorial directors working to frame their narratives to fit the goals of a news company’s agenda. Instead, the agenda of the street “reporters” was to tell the truth as they saw it and give context and voice to what was happening.

It was the first time in history that the public was not largely dependent on news media outlets to learn about such a massive event.

In 1994, renowned Nigerian author and poet Chinua Achebe in an interview with the *Paris Review* talked about his journey to becoming a writer, storyteller, and social critic. He emphasized the importance of telling our own stories and said, “There is that great proverb: until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

The victims of the hunt now have their own historians—bloggers, vloggers, Twitter users, and so on. The narratives about what happened that fateful day on Canfield Drive and the movement for racial justice that was born again in Ferguson were not confined to the news media and its pundits, to police reports, or to the writings of professional journalists. The stories that the people most intimately affected by the tragedy and those committed to the struggle for racial justice in this country were producing, the public deemed to be trustworthy and valid. Even after the news cameras left, protests and various acts of resistance occurred...and the truth continued to be told.

Michael Brown’s mother, Lezley McSpadden, shared one particularly compelling story. In 2016, she published a book titled *Tell the Truth &*

Shame the Devil: The Life, Legacy and Love of My Son Michael Brown, in which she writes candidly about her life and family, raising “Mike Mike,” and pivotal moments before and after Mike’s death.¹

In what was undoubtedly the worst day of her life, she described the scene on Canfield Drive after she’d tried for hours to get information about what happened to her son. She writes:

Me and Brittanie slowly moved toward the bloodstained pavement where Mike Mike’s body had been left under the baking sun and stood in a daze, and I began shaking my head. “Why?” I called out. The police had left him out there like he wasn’t nobody’s. But I needed them and the rest of the world to know that Mike Mike did belong to somebody, a whole damn family, and he was mine before he was anybody else’s. A crowd of strangers gathered around, chanting, “Hands up! Don’t shoot!” A hand reached through the crowd and handed me a bouquet of roses. I pulled off each rose petal and dropped it on the pavement, covering what was now sacred ground to me.²

McSpadden goes on to describe what happened when a local news reporter asked her what information the police had given her thus far. She responded:

They haven’t told me anything. They wouldn’t even let me identify my son. The only way I knew it was my son was from people out here showing me his picture on the Internet!... “He threw his hands up! He ain’t have no gun. The boy threw his hands up, and the police just shot him,” I heard a woman yell from the crowd....I was begging the police for answers, but my words fell on deaf ears. The cop who killed my son had vanished into thin air. My son was gone.³

Michael Brown was Lezley McSpadden and Michael Brown Sr.’s son. He was loved by his parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. He was a human being. As his mother said, he *belonged* to them, and she details the contours of that belonging throughout

¹ Lezley McSpadden, *Tell the Truth & Shame the Devil: The Life, Legacy and Love of My Son Michael Brown* (New York: Regan Arts, 2016).

² McSpadden, *Tell the Truth*, 182.

³ McSpadden, *Tell the Truth*, 184.

her memoir. Her account and the many other accounts by those who knew Mike Mike differ sharply from the police report and the media accounts. It's impossible to say with certainty what we would know about this tragic story if the news media outlets were our only source of information. We don't know for sure what our understanding of the situation would be if there had been no tweets, no Facebook posts, and no Periscope livestreams. However, my hunch is that the truth was generated from the on-the-ground perspectives in St. Louis from everyday people who, as Fannie Lou Hamer says, were "sick and tired of being sick and tired." That truth struck a chord with thousands around the world.

There was too much collective memory about Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, and Rodney King—to name a few—for these on-the-ground accounts to be dismissed easily. The young people in Ferguson took to the streets and declared "Enough!" and there was a worldwide chorus that responded "Amen!"

* * *

As I write in early 2021, seven years have passed since Ferguson became what we now know as #Ferguson. Many people have asked, "What's happened in St. Louis since the Ferguson uprising? What has changed? Did all of those protests make a difference?" While neither I nor anyone else has a comprehensive answer to these questions, I was interested in learning more about what has happened in St. Louis related to racial justice since the uprising and about what's happened in the lives of some of the people I interviewed for *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community*.⁴ That book is collection of narratives from more than two dozen clergy and young activists who were active participants and leaders in the movement for racial justice in Ferguson. Through their stories, we saw aspects of the movement and its events through their eyes and learned about the faith that fueled and inspired them to get involved.

In the years since then, I followed up with more than a dozen of the people I'd interviewed previously, and included a few new ones. All of them were clergy and young activists who spent a significant amount

⁴ Leah Gunning Francis, *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2015).

of time, energy, and resources engaging the movement for racial justice in St. Louis and beyond. I wanted to know how their involvement has impacted their lives, what they have learned, and what pathways to a future filled with hope look like. And I wanted to know what role faith has played in their lives. In *Ferguson and Faith*, they detailed the ways in which their faith compelled them to take action in the movement. What have they learned since then about faith-filled living in response to social injustice? What can the church and communities of faith learn from their experiences about God’s ongoing call to join God’s transforming work in the world?

One of the ways that people referenced the movement for racial justice was as an *awakening*. This was especially true for many people who are not considered members of a racial or ethnic minority. They hadn’t realized how pervasive and systemic the problem of racial injustice is in our country. Many assumed that the election of a Black president was an indication of the country “moving beyond” racism and discrimination. Ferguson shattered that myth for many and revealed in our collective body a fissure in urgent need of attention. The hashtag #staywoke began to circulate among social media platforms encouraging people to not go back to business as usual, but to use their awakening moment as a catalyst to work towards eradicating racial injustice.

Over the past few years I have thought a lot about the idea of *awakening* and the need to #staywoke. While no two awakenings look exactly alike, I’ve learned that there are some particular things we should do to remain awake. After many conversations, forums, workshops, and engagements, I have concluded that once we perceive ourselves to have been *awakened*, *staying awake cannot merely be a cognitive exercise*. In other words, if we are to wake up and recognize all of the ways that racial injustice exists in our everyday lives—personally and systemically—and work to end this injustice, we must employ all of our senses to do so. It cannot merely be an intellectual exercise where one says, “Oh, I believe that racism exists.” Instead, we must bring all of our senses to bear—sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell—in order to help us discern and understand where and how racism exists and what we can do to eradicate it.

Throughout the book, I invite you to engage in sensory work as a way to delve deeper into the scope of racial injustice in our world. To remain

awake to the presence of racial injustice and the ways we can eradicate it, we must awaken and engage all of our senses in this transformative work. The wisdom that emerges out of the following stories challenges us all to awaken all of our senses, and it equips us to join God's transformative work of racial justice.

Timeline of Selected Events Since the Ferguson Uprising

2014

August: Kajieme Powell, 25, shot and killed by a St. Louis police officer

October: Laquan McDonald, 17, shot 16 times by a Chicago police officer

October: VonDerrit Myers, 18, shot and killed by a St. Louis police officer working as a security guard

November: Tamir Rice, 12, shot and killed by a Cleveland area police officer on a playground

2015

April: Walter Scott, 50, shot in the back and killed by a Charleston, SC police officer

April: Freddie Gray, 25, died of spinal cord injuries after being in Baltimore police custody

June: Mother Emanuel Church massacre where 9 people were killed in Charleston, SC

July: Sandra Bland, 28, died in Waller County, Texas jail after a police traffic stop

2016

April: Dakota Access Pipeline protests began at the Standing Rock Reservation

June: Pulse Nightclub Massacre in Orlando, Florida where 49 people were killed

July 5: Alton Sterling, 37, shot and killed by two Baton Rouge Police officers

July 6: Philando Castile, 32, shot and killed by a Minneapolis area officer during a traffic stop

July 7: Five police officers killed in Dallas by an Army Reserve Afghanistan war Veteran

Sept. 1: 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick first kneeled during the playing of the National Anthem

Sept. 16: Terence Crutcher, 40, shot and killed by Tulsa police officer beside his disabled car

Nov. 8: Donald Trump, elected president of the United States

2017

Jan. 21: Women's March in DC and across the country to protest Donald Trump's election

June 29: Aaron Bailey, 45, shot and killed by two Indianapolis police officers

Aug. 11–12: Unite the Right protests in Charlottesville, VA against Confederate statue removals

Sept. 15: Officer Jason Stockley acquitted of murdering Anthony L. Smith in St. Louis in 2011

Oct. 1: Shooting at concert goes outside the Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas left at least 58 dead

Oct: #METOO Sexual assault and awareness campaign goes viral

Nov 5: Shooting at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX left 26 dead

2018

Feb. 14: 17 students and adults shot and killed at Marjory S. Douglas HS in Parkland, FL

June: 700 protests across the country against migrant family separations

Sept. 6: Botham Jean, 26, shot to death in his own apartment by a Dallas police officer

Oct 27: Tree of Life Synagogue shooting left 11 people dead

2019

Jan. 14–22: Los Angeles teachers strike as part of the Red for Ed movement

Aug. 3: A mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, TX left 23 people dead

Aug. 25: Elijah McClain, 23, stopped while walking down the street by Aurora, CO police and died after being injected with ketamine

Oct. 4: Joshua Brown, 28, a key witness in the case against the police officer who killed Botham Jean, was shot and killed two days after the trial ended

2020

Jan. 26: Basketball legend Kobe Bryant, daughter Gianna, and 6 others killed in a helicopter crash in CA

Feb. 23: Ahmaud Arbery, 25, shot and killed by two white men while jogging in Brunswick, GA

March: Schools and businesses began to close due to the emergence of COVID-19

March 13: Breonna Taylor, 26, shot and killed by plainclothes officers who burst into her home in the middle of the night

May 6: Dreasjon Reed, 21, shot and killed by an Indianapolis police officer

May 25: George Floyd, 46, died on a Minneapolis street after a police officer pinned him under his knee

June 12: Rayshard Brooks, 27, shot and killed by an Atlanta, GA police officer

Nov. 7: Joe Biden and Kamala Harris elected as president and vice president

Dec. 25: Christmas Day bombing in downtown Nashville, TN displaced more than 400 residents and affected at least 45 businesses

2021

Jan. 6: Insurrection at the US Capitol in an attempt to stop the certification of election results



Memorial to Michael Brown, Jr.
Canfield Apartments, Ferguson, Missouri (Photos by Leah Gunning Francis)