

# RESTORING THE SOUL OF AMERICA IN THE WAKE OF GEORGE FLOYD'S MURDER

Janet O. Hagberg

Photo by cottonbro from Pexels

Race relations and racial conversations in the United States, at least by white people like me, are usually overlooked, avoided or fraught with conflict. I think underneath all of it is fear. At least it was for me. So we either defend our positions, or try not to think about them and hope that nothing erupts. But now we are having a collective and heart wrenching experience of viewing up close and personal the tragic and senseless death of George Floyd at the hands of a brutal police officer while three other officers watched. Eight minutes and forty-six seconds of terror as George Floyd's breath was snuffed out of him. This is certainly not the first of these incidents but it has captured the passion of the whole world and it compels us to respond.

So we are facing once again a turning point in our country (and perhaps the world) in which we decide who we are and what kind of a future we want for ourselves and our children. Can we, at this turning point, reopen the race conversation beyond the protests and find new levels of justice and reconciliation? How do we embrace this opportunity and invitation and what will we do? We've been here before, many times. We've seen change happen and then we seem to get stuck. Now the outcry is larger, more widespread, more sustained than ever. We await the decisions of our collective conscience and beg for the courage to mend. Could we imagine finding a way even to racial reconciliation? If we could I believe it would restore the Soul of America.

I would like to reflect on what personal and collective power looks like in the aftermath of the Floyd murder, using my model of personal power from my book, *Real Power (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition)*. I am especially interested in the ways that times like this, times that try our souls, also invite us to deeper levels of healing and personal power both individually and within our whole culture. We have an extraordinary opportunity to tip the scales toward a new more inclusive experience of power. I will make this concise and, hopefully, invitational. My desire is to offer a larger viewpoint but not to be exhaustive. And my perspective is as a white woman living in the USA. I have also had the wise and generous mentoring of two black men over the last seventeen years. Their choice to be my friend and to share common interests (like quilting!) and faith moved me deeply. And their willingness to engage in racial conversations and racial reconciliation changed my life.\*

## Collective Power: The week of George Floyd's murder

It is clear to me that this tragic murder caused world-wide trauma, grief and loss, and thousands of people took to the streets in protest (and also in violence). They were voicing, loudly and strongly, their immediate reactions to the brutal killing of Floyd and to the systemic racist practices in our country. Many of these reactions reflected a sense of utter powerlessness and victimization. The main way, let's remember, that *powerless people move forward is to gain power collectively*, by joining forces with others. In this case activists and other protestors.

In the first days of these protests it sometimes appeared that the violence was overwhelming the peaceful protests, as if the rage and destructive behaviors were driving the train, so to speak, and it was out of control, roaring toward a crash. Then it became clear, within several days, as similar protests occurred all over the country and world, this was not just a reaction to an incident but a strong collective and powerful, predominately peaceful, reaction from a larger segment of the population to a whole series of incidents that all represented a pattern of systemic abuse and racism.

Simultaneously national civil rights leaders, new young leaders, and respected people who remembered the history of civil rights in this country all began speaking and the country strained to listen. As each voice weighed in and the government responded it was at times chaotic, at other times hopeful. But nevertheless the air began to feel thick with anticipation.

## Personal Power in the aftermath of the outbreak

Let me describe how I see people using power in my model of personal power reflected in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. I will also imagine a future of healing and reconciliation, as we choose to deepen as individuals and as a culture in this potential new chapter in our story. The stages of power are: Stage 1: Powerlessness, Stage 2: Power by Association, Stage 3: Power by Achievement, Stage 4: Power by Reflection, The Wall, Stage 5: Power by Purpose, Stage 6: Power by Wisdom.\* \*

**Stage 1: Powerlessness.** The question for this stage at the onset of the tragedy was **"How will I find my voice?"** Protestors and others collectively found their voices, overriding their individual powerlessness, and spoke loudly and clearly. They marched, sang, held vigils, painted murals, cried out for reform. This happened all over the country and across the world; big cities and small towns, young and old, and all races. There were still no promises of substantive changes yet the breathtaking collective peaceful protests testified to a wind of change.

There were also many immediate unintended victims of the protests who were without grocery stores or vital necessities and with no public transportation. In a broader view powerlessness and systemic racism includes black, brown and native people who have low wage jobs, are victims of police brutality, receive vastly unequal education, inadequate health care, and who do not trust the police, even if they are unsafe at home. In the past we have seen formidable resilience in the face of our cultural racism by urban mothers who have shown us, again and again, how the *resilience of the human spirit resurrects us* in the midst of trauma. Mothers who have watched their babies, now young men, gunned down. Yet they grieve out loud, they hold vigils, they gather together, they keep the beat. They remind us with their presence that justice, education, health care and jobs are all necessary for real change and movement. Let it be so.

**Stage 2: Power by Association.** The question for people at this stage is **"Who is my neighbor?"** Within the first several days after the murder the wider community found out about the grocery store closures and loss of public transportation. Again neighbors and volunteers *reclaimed the human spirit* and gathered thousands of bags of supplies and groceries, provided other essentials, and immediately started cleaning up the bricks and mortar from the destroyed buildings. Collectively everyone put pressure on those in elected positions to start making change happen--now. Along the way heroes emerged: consider the young black activist leader who took the driver of the speeding oil tanker truck, heading for the group of protestors on the bridge in Minneapolis, from his cab immediately so that *he would not be killed*. The young man said that

they did not want to respond in kind to what they were protesting. Or consider the managers of an essential service organization who personally picked up workers who could not get to work because of suspended bus services. Or the inner city bike shop that brought repair supplies and offered free bike service to protesters.

Who is my neighbor in a deeper sense? People all over the country who were fearful or angry about the murder yet unknowledgeable about the facts of racism and inherent inequality began taking baby steps to learn how unequally and unjustly black, brown and native peoples have been treated over the last hundreds of years. It means that we woke up and started asking what this meant for us personally, even in the middle of what was still a world-wide health pandemic. Public health professionals agreed that the issues of racial equality were as important as the health measures needed to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. Whether we felt a personal call to do something, whether we detached from or disagreed with what was happening, or whether we just watched, we were still in this one together. Why? Because it will affect us all.

Then many people got their first inkling that this time may be different from other murders that had happened recently and were unheeded. So they tentatively began talking to friends, praying, listening to people whose stories were different from theirs, reaching out to those who were more involved, asking questions, reading. Some, understandably, chose to withdraw or to try not to engage since it was just too hard and there was too much at stake. Yet a vast number of people in the country awakened to a new awareness and there were more possibilities arising as each day's news emerged.

**Stage 3: Power by Achievement.** The question for those at this stage is **“How will we create a just society and achieve what matters most?”** The people who are finding the human spirit are also finding that, on a broader and more personal scale, working together across cultures towards something that makes a *lasting and meaningful difference* is more deeply satisfying than they may have realized. This behavior may include rebuilding the structures that have crumbled, addressing immediate concerns, passing urgent legislation, taking on a related cause, donating goods, changing hiring practices or funding grants.

Individuals who have power may even foster a gentle revolution with the idea of *leveraging that power for others* and therefore harnessing more opportunity as a culture. What if a woman who had a heart for young children and found out that Head Start is a highly successful program for helping prevent any number of later issues in school, chose to help get more funding and even got personally involved in a Head Start program as a tutor? One man actually chose, several years ago, to invest in an elementary school class in an inner city, offering to pay the entire college tuition for any of the class members who graduated from high school. A much higher number of classmates in that class graduated and their whole lives were affected. Another example was the black players in the National Football League deciding to speak out against the unfair treatment of black and brown people. After an apology from the commissioner for not heeding them, many specific changes moved forward. Or consider Andre Rochester, a prominent black artist who painted a mural that depicted the names of many black men and women who had been murdered by police, with blood dripping from their names. In the painting a black preteen boy stands blindfolded in front of the mural holding his teddy bear and wearing a white tee shirt with a red target on the front. The title of the piece is “Next in line.” Andre uses the money from selling his art to fund positive solutions. Of course, not everyone is leaning in this direction. The backlash against civil rights is strong and powerful. Fear does that. It can give license to more resentment, revenge and violence. But that is another essay!

**Stage 4: Power by Reflection.** A primary question for those at this stage is **“What are the deeper questions I need to be asking?”** Troubled times call for deeper reflection. People at this stage are finding *humility* to be the key to the future for them. It means *giving up our defensiveness* so we can be open to learning. We can then move beneath the surface feelings and behaviors like fear, anger, sadness, guilt, denial and shame to the deeper issues. *We can choose to listen and learn. We can choose to go inward and ask what is the deeper meaning of this time of multiple tragedies and loss.* Addressing race issues is not easy but it is necessary. We cannot overlook the build up of resentment and fear on both sides that will need to be healed.

And yet, we can do our part, to ask what changes and new behaviors may be asked of us. This goes beyond physical rebuilding and restoring resources to consideration of personal emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. What is my experience of race relations in my life? How has it affected me? How have I been complicit in racism without being fully aware of it? What needs to shift or heal in my life, family, community, country in order to live more effectively together and to thrive? Where does forgiveness and reconciliation need to happen between individuals, cultures or nations? How can we deepen our personal experience of being with one another? What is my role in helping these changes come to fruition? How do I gently counter the false and fearful counter attacks coming so forcefully? What creative ideas will help form this new future? Where is my hope and how do I maintain it?

Look to the outpouring of stories, writing, art and photos of people who are transforming their own and others' lives as a result of this remarkable time. Consider the governor of Minnesota who, immediately after the murder of Floyd, drew a cadre of black, brown and native leaders to counsel him on the best approaches to take in moving forward. Or consider two black men who were willing to befriend me, a white woman, over many years and through our friendship engage in conversation, healing and racial reconciliation. Doing this healing work collaboratively makes the most difference because *intentional relationships transform us from fearful people to hopeful people*.

**The Wall.** The Wall is where we come to terms with truths well hidden but now revealed. Our country is hitting the Wall. A question for people at the Wall is **“How do I actually mend myself and the world around me?”** This is where we let go of ego and control. It is where the healing happens and deeper change takes hold. It is very difficult because none of us wants to lose anything or to consider how our lives may have been lived at the expense of others. We anticipate what the future of race relations might look like. We listen to stories of others and we tell our own stories of pain as well. We share in our humanity. It is a truth-telling place and ultimately a place of internal mending, racial mending and more lasting restoration. It is a place where we deeply engage with the Holy to heal us. It is the place where forgiveness, compassion and reconciliation matter most. It takes courage. And it results in resolve and creativity beyond our imagining. At times like this we can actually watch this transformation happening. Hearts are opening wide enough to heal. The Soul of America is being restored.

**Stage 5: Power by Purpose.** I would suggest just one word that best personifies hope at this stage as we engage in the deeper racial healing we all need; **RENAISSANCE.** The question for those at this stage is **“How do I live from my soul and view my life in solidarity with others?”** This renaissance, if we do our work, will make truth out of our claim to the universal golden rule, which is so simple to say but hard to live. *Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.* So as we experience a renaissance in our hearts and in our spiritual principles, it will naturally spill out more creatively into arts and culture, our economy, education and health care, problem solving, and into our mutual regard. We become active in whatever ways we are individually called upon to act and we will take great care to do it with intention, with *purpose*. We give out of our essence, our being. We are life-giving, in whatever large or small role we are called upon to play. We *know* that all will be well, no matter what. And we pass that hope along. Can we imagine that world? True friendships across cultures. Creativity let loose. Black and brown parents no longer having to counsel their children how to act in the presence of white people or police, but now diverse cultures empowering one another in life and work. It will be the fulfillment of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech, “I have a Dream.”

**Stage 6: Power by Wisdom.** A question for people at this stage is **“How and where is my healing presence most needed?”** And that is the frame from which we live out our being in the world, offering our presence, solace, insights and observations. We live life self-sacrificially but not in jeopardy. We are the grounded presence that people can count on in the times of stress and uncertainty. We practice wise self-care. We may or may not be present on the front lines or in active service yet we are present in poignant ways. Pillars of the community. Power by Wisdom. We have come to see that a life worth living includes liberty and justice for all.

## A few reflective questions as we close

Our country and world are still in peril. We are somewhere in the transformation process. How will we continue to move forward? We all have different ideas about this. Yet we are all making choices every day about how we live our lives during this poignant time. My questions to you are these; **“What is this tragic murder inviting or asking of you that you might not have otherwise considered? What is it allowing you to stop doing or discard that you did not have the courage to do before? What stage of power do you identify with at this point in the systemic change process? What will be your most important personal story concerning this time?”**

## Epilogue: My personal philosophy for this time of tragedy and healing

One of the most familiar Biblical chapters is the Shepherd Psalm (Psalm 23). Two verses that speak to me during this time especially are “you restore my soul” and “my cup overflows.” The first one I used in the title of this essay. I cling to the other verse too because, after walking through the valley of the shadow of death and trusting in the shepherd, I see that “my cup overflows.” I’d like to think that as a result of the healing work we do to restore the soul of our country our cup will overflow.



**Janet O. Hagberg, spiritual director and author of *Real Power: Stages of Personal Power in Organizations* (3rd Edition).**  
Janethagberg@comcast.net | www.janethagberg.com

*©Janet O. Hagberg, 2020, Permission given to reprint. (With special thanks to Fay Choban for inviting me to write about personal power in the midst of these remarkable times).*

\*A podcast reflecting the transforming conversations with my two black mentors.

A Safe Place to talk about race and faith

<https://soundcloud.com/thecriticaljourney/a-safe-place-to-talk-about-race-and-faith>

\*\* A description of the stages and a free profile to measure where you are presently in the stages.

Real Power Stages and descriptions

<http://www.janethagberg.com/power-stage-descriptions.html>

Real Power Profile

[http://www.janethagberg.com/uploads/3/9/3/4/39346357/personal\\_power\\_profile\\_112710.pdf](http://www.janethagberg.com/uploads/3/9/3/4/39346357/personal_power_profile_112710.pdf)