**Letter to a young Black man from an old “white” guy.**

 I am ignorant. I am biased and racist in ways I do not yet realize. And I am open and willing to evolve my understanding. I am listening deeply, like one does at night in unfamiliar territory, with great attention. I hear your impatience, your frustration, your anger—and deeper below that your pain. I cannot imagine what life is like for you, to be both invisible in terms of social justice and at the same time be seen only as a threat—ignoring your genius, intelligence, creativity or humanity.

 I grew up in a working lower middle-class neighborhood on the edge of the ghetto in Brooklyn. I often helped my grandfather with his second job delivering telegrams, by walking up the many flights of stairs in tenement houses. Broken street lights, messy empty lots, rundown buildings, garbage strewn about, smelly hallways, dark and dingy apartments, bars on the windows and closed double locked doors. The school buildings we passed on our delivery route often looked the same. People there were definitely not starting on the same playing field that I was. Back then, I didn’t verbalize that reality as white privilege, but it was clear that I was witnessing a lot of poverty and human suffering.

 My large extended Italian family was, in general, very accepting of everyone. I did have one uncle who angrily used the “N” word. He was a barber who was often robbed, one time at gunpoint when, despite his begging, his Black assailants roughly stole his wedding ring off his finger. His only contact with Black people was negative. When I started medical school at the young age of 19, I began to encounter many more people who were different than me. Not just Blacks and Puerto Ricans but East Indians, folks from the Philippines and Middle East— who were often my instructors. My training was in a city hospital that covered most of Spanish Harlem and some of Harlem itself. As an intern, one of my best teachers was a Jamaican nurse who would roll her eyes whenever my inexperience was leading me off course. Eventually I became an attending physician in that same Pediatric emergency room. All the ravages of poverty and lack of social justice showing up in my face every day: rat bites, chronic asthma, infants in withdrawal or malnourished, more than once attempting to resuscitate a dead baby that had been abused.

 A Public Health job in New Mexico brought new levels of understanding. Because of widespread poverty, the levels of violence in our state were extreme. Poor people suffer more from any form of cancer or chronic disease, including the dis-eases of child abuse, homicide, suicide and domestic violence. And since more minorities – Hispanics, Blacks, Native Americans – are poor, they are the same communities experiencing adverse violent health outcomes. Although present at all socio-economic levels, poverty was the defining factor, not race or ethnicity.

 I had become interested in “men’s work,” a route to expand what I term *emotional fluency*, since most of the time men perpetrate violent behaviors. With some Black, Hispanic and Native American friends, we started a men’s multicultural group, trying to understand what separated us as men. The heartfelt stories shared only reinforced the generational, early life trauma, and ongoing abuse many have suffered. My awareness continued to grow, my first baby steps in learning to be your ally in the context of social justice.

 We are all oppressed, just in different ways. The response of many white people to Black Lives Matter is a form of wanting *their* sense of subjugation to also be heard. The “all lives matter” refrain – of course they do – is not helpful because it shifts the focus away from the loss of Black young men to gun violence and police misconduct, which is what is front and center at the moment. I feel your pain whenever there is an incident of brutality or a Black church mass shooting. Not in the same way you do, but I do feel it because I have been sensitized and informed. And those incidents are not acceptable.

 I have been blessed to have ongoing connections with people different than me—especially Black people who at their core held similar values and aspirations. And that exposure to each other is what will produce needed changes to benefit all of us. What I want you to know is that I will march with you, work shoulder to shoulder with you, that I have your back, that I see your beauty and your promise, and we need first and foremost to keep you safe so you can offer your gifts to all of us. Together, we can find ways to really see each other, and fertilize the ground of our joint deliverance.

Victor La Cerva MD is retired from the NM Department of Health. He is the author of many books, including *Letters To A Young Man In Search Of Himself*. He was honored as one of the 2019 Ten Who Make a Difference. Visit him at myheartsongs.org to sign up for a short free weekly podcast on issues of importance.