

DO ALL LIVES MATTER?



The Issues We Can No Longer Ignore
and the Solutions We All Long For

WAYNE GORDON
and JOHN M. PERKINS



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We dedicate this book to all the people
who have felt that their lives did not matter.
Our hope is that they will experience God's great love
for them and will know that their lives do matter.

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Foreword

Another heartbreaking headline: “A Grim Milestone: Chicago Surpasses 2015 Homicide Toll.”* By September 5, 2016, there had been over five hundred deaths—and counting.

Every morning paper, every evening news, brings us more reports of gun violence and death in Chicago. Videos showing unwarranted police violence. Stories of first-grade boys lured into alleys and executed in gang retaliation. Pregnant mothers shot. Grandmothers gunned down holding toddlers’ hands. After hundreds of such tragic stories, emotions start to shut down.

But for “Coach” Wayne Gordon, these are not numbers and random stories. These are his neighbors in Lawndale. These are his friends at his church. This battle against racism, poverty, and violence is his life.

More than forty years ago, Wayne Gordon and his wife, Anne, decided to live their faith and make their home in Lawndale, one of the most dangerous sections of Chicago. It was not an easy decision for this white couple to make their stand on those mean

*“A Grim Milestone: Chicago Surpasses 2015 Homicide Toll,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 2016, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/media/ct-a-grim-milestone-chicago-surpasses-2015-homicide-toll-video-20160906-premiumvideo.html>.

streets. But the Lawndale Community Church they started is now a positive force for change: renovating apartments, building a first-class fitness center, mentoring students, running a medical clinic, leading an effort to bring restorative justice to the neighborhood, and clinging to a Lou Malnati's Pizza Restaurant to prove this part of Chicago can sustain a mainstream business.

When you read this book, which Coach Gordon wrote with his longtime friend John Perkins, you can feel the pain and the promise in their words. Troubled, angered, challenged by the “Black Lives Matter”/“All Lives Matter” debate, they wrote this book to chart a path that looks honestly at our nation’s battle with racism. Their take on the “invisible people” in America and the common ground we must find is inspired by their faith.

When Coach Gordon struggled with the divisive national debate and the endless deaths, he found his footing by visiting the churches of his fellow ministers and praying with his neighbors and church family, and in the wisdom of his eighty-six-year-old “best friend,” John Perkins.

Wayne Gordon is clearly not lost in prayer. He is led by prayer. In chapter 8 he challenges us to change our hearts and practice what we preach. His suggestions of specific actions we can take to demonstrate that all lives matter is the heart of this short and powerful book.

Where many have lost hope, these two men have not.

As Coach Gordon writes: “Always live believing that what is good and right and true and just will, in God’s time, emerge victorious. All lives do matter!”

US Senator Dick Durbin

Introduction

A Sense of Urgency

I (Wayne) awoke on Sunday morning, July 10, 2016, with the deep conviction that something had to be done. Few would challenge the contention that violence in our country—including violence surrounding issues of race—has reached epidemic proportions. Police shootings of African American men and turmoil in our streets—including in the predominantly African American community of North Lawndale in Chicago, which I've called home for more than four decades—are so common it's becoming hard to consider them news.

The violence, of course, is not confined to issues of race. No doubt, many of the nearly 350 murders in Chicago recorded in the first half of 2016 alone had nothing to do with race. Nor are the killings limited to confrontations among individuals. Along with millions of Americans and others around the world, I experience some mixture of grief, fear, anger, confusion, and helplessness each time the TV screens and headlines are dominated by news of yet another mass killing—whether purposefully evil or completely senseless.

Over the years, in sermons to my congregation and in individual counseling sessions, I have from time to time encouraged people to resist feeling overly burdened by the problems of the world. After all, it's easy to feel completely powerless when contemplating the magnitude of the challenges we face. Knowing that we can't do *everything*, we can fall victim to a kind of emotional and spiritual paralysis that prevents us from doing *anything*.

Of course I know I can't solve the world's problems. But I awoke on July 10 with a profound sense of urgency and determination to do *something*—to exercise whatever influence I might have to push back against the violence, the hatred, the intolerance, and the insensitivity that results in some people feeling insignificant, inferior, and unequal—in short, feeling that their lives don't matter.

I talked with my wife, Anne, who immediately supported the idea that something had to be done. Anne and I have been moved to tears many more times than we can count. Our hearts are often heavy and our spirits often burdened from more than forty years of shootings and other tragedies in Lawndale. This includes the tragedy of people we love being treated in ways that communicate—in subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways—that their lives don't matter.

On the morning of July 10, I also called John Perkins to share with him the sense of urgency and conviction I was feeling. Now eighty-six years old, John has been my mentor for more than thirty-five years. At some point along the way he also became my best friend. As an African American, John has many times throughout his life—especially as a child and young man—been on the receiving end of messages that communicated his life doesn't matter. I asked him if he would be willing to share his story and perspectives for this book, and he immediately agreed, proffering, "Let's do it now. Let's do it fast. We've got to do something to right the direction we've been heading in."

This short book is our attempt to do just that: to help change the direction in which we are headed. And to do so as quickly

as possible. For our current state of affairs pits law enforcement against the public and individuals against each other. And inasmuch as things seem to be getting worse instead of better, we cannot procrastinate any longer. The time for justice is now. The time for proclaiming and living the truth that *all* lives matter is now. The time for building a culture of peace and respect to replace a culture of violence and hatred is now. In short, now is the time for becoming the “beloved community.”

Anne and I have experienced a taste of what I believe Dr. King had in mind when he spoke or wrote about the beloved community.* We have found our North Lawndale community on the city’s West Side to be a place dominated by love and kindness. People have cared for us in ways too numerous to detail here. They have come to our rescue in the middle of crises.

In a country where so many suburbanites enter their homes through garages and thus don’t even know their next door neighbors’ names, we know and love all of those who live nearby. Mr. Carson, the Lewises, the Littles, the Townsells, the Worthys, Willie, James, Michael, Tony, and Jerry could not be more loving or kind neighbors. In all we do, they look out for us and we for them. Especially when I am away from home, our neighbors watch out for Anne, making sure she is doing well and is safe. At Lawndale Community Church, every other week we stand so people can share their prayer requests and praises. This is one of the many ways in which we feel knitted together as a church family and a community.

Yet we know that danger lurks not far away. In fact, I consider it the height of irony that in the midst of the poverty, chaos, and violence of a stereotypically tough urban area, we experience daily the blessings of a warm, caring, beloved community.

*For more information, see “The King Philosophy: The Beloved Community,” The King Center, accessed September 16, 2016, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>.

Introduction

These are blessings John and I long for others to know and experience. And it begins with the genuine understanding that all lives truly do matter. It is our hope that this book will help to build this understanding, in part by recognizing and fully appreciating why some people have come to feel their lives don't matter.

We acknowledge up front that our purpose is not to provide an in-depth study of the issues we introduce. Some will no doubt be frustrated by the lack of analysis of issues or events we mention in the book. To the extent this happens, we suggest making it part of your discussions and interactions with others, including those whose perspectives might differ from your own.

Our purpose is simply to get people talking and coming together with an openness to new understandings and perspectives. We want to be part of the process of healing the racial and cultural divides that have led to so much violence and pain. And we pursue this goal by exploring the ramifications of the affirmation, "All lives matter."

1

A Movement Is Born

Do all lives matter? On the surface, the answer seems obvious. Of course all lives matter! This conviction lies at the core of America's identity and has since our nation's beginning. The Declaration of Independence states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."

The affirmation that all lives matter is consistent also with Christian faith and core theology. All human beings are created in the image of God, and the Scriptures could not be more clear that all are equal in God's eyes.

What we must recognize, however, is that the concept of all people being equal—and all lives mattering equally—exists as an aspiration, not as a reality. To put it another way: it exists in theory but has never existed in practice. After all, many of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence owned slaves. And the document they signed specified equal rights only for one gender. We can either call the Declaration's signers hypocrites or credit them for holding up an ideal for the nation to pursue.

Of course, much has changed in the nearly two and a half centuries since that Declaration was signed. Slavery ended more than 150 years ago. Today, women not only can vote but can hold any political office. Yet if we are to be honest, we must acknowledge that in 2016 people are still routinely treated unequally—both legally and socially—based on factors ranging from how much money they make to social status and family pedigree to ethnicity and skin color to physical ability or disability to height and weight and how good-looking they are. Does anyone really think that television weatherpersons got the job based on how well they did in their college meteorology courses?

Determining how fair things are for individuals or groups can be complicated. After all, it's possible for the same people to be discriminated against in some settings while being favored in others. For example, it's well documented that an African American male is more likely to be treated unfairly by our justice system than a Caucasian person. But when applying for a job, that same African American male might get preferential treatment from an employer committed to hiring minorities, even if he grew up with more social and financial advantages than his white counterpart.

Because there are so many angles from which to analyze particular cases of alleged injustice—and different criteria for determining what is fair and right—it can be challenging to reach definitive conclusions. But the complexity should not prevent us from recognizing trends and realities that are difficult, if not impossible, to deny. It should not, for example, stop us from asking why—more than 150 years after the demise of slavery and several decades removed from the Civil Rights revolution—so many African American people in our country feel the need for the movement “Black Lives Matter.”

Consider that many African American people would testify that there has never been a time when they haven't been mistreated by law enforcement. Modern technology, including cell phone videos, has only brought the issue more squarely into the public eye.

The highly publicized 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, was a turning point, one that gave birth to the term “Black Lives Matter” and to organized protests calling for justice. A vigilante named George Zimmerman shot and killed Martin, a teenage boy, while he was walking home from a store. Of course we know how this story ended. Zimmerman’s acquittal spawned outcries from African American communities across the country.

In July 2014, forty-three-year-old Eric Garner was stopped by New York City police for selling loose cigarettes. He was wrestled to the ground as a police officer put his head in a chokehold. The incident was captured on video. Garner can be heard saying “I can’t breathe” eleven times. The New York medical examiner officially ruled this case a homicide. But in December 2014, a grand jury decided not to indict the officer, sending the message to African Americans across this land that their lives do not matter.

After Michael Brown was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014, “Black Lives Matter” evolved from slogan to movement. Brown, though unarmed, was killed by Darren Wilson apparently for stealing a few dollars’ worth of merchandise. The movement added the slogan, “Hands up, don’t shoot.”

There are many more cases, but these three alone establish that being black in America can be difficult and dangerous. Each of these three persons received a death sentence for walking home, selling cigarettes, or minor theft. The effect of their experiences has gone far beyond their grieving families. It has sounded a chord that resonates deep in the lives of African Americans and many others as well. These incidents have launched a dialogue on the topic of whether—and to what extent—black lives matter in the United States of America. The Black Lives Matter movement has given hope to many African Americans who have often been told in different ways that their lives don’t matter—that, despite our country’s highest aspirations, they are not equal in the eyes of others.



Our country's racial divide is evidenced in part by how some have responded to the Black Lives Matter movement, specifically those who have countered with the slogan, "All Lives Matter." As noted at the beginning of this chapter, no good person can dispute the affirmation that all lives matter. In American culture, it ought to be, as the Declaration's signers put it, "self-evident." But the use of the slogan as a response to Black Lives Matter dilutes the meaning and significance of the Black Lives Matter movement. It does so by suggesting there is no need for a movement or dialogue focused specifically on the challenges African American people face in our country. This subtly suggests that black people are treated the same as everyone else.

So why the protests?

Why the complaining?

Their situation is no different from anyone else's, so why the need for a movement?

Simply stated: *All lives can't matter until black lives matter.*

Our opposition to the clearly implied message of the "All Lives Matter" response is simply, "True, all lives matter, *but* we have to wake up to the reality that our country remains divided over issues related to race. We have to own up to the fact that African Americans and other ethnic minorities in our country are mistreated far more often than most of us care to admit. Along with this, we must acknowledge that not all the problems minority groups face are the result of white racism and that some have been too quick to cite racism as the sole cause of their struggles, thus avoiding or downplaying the role of personal responsibility."

Where does all this take us? It gets us on the journey of treating all people like their lives matter. It takes us to a place in which we all have a lot to learn. A place that demands we listen more carefully to the experiences, perspectives, and feelings of others. A place we need to approach with humility and an openness to

change. For some, this might be an unfamiliar place; for others not so much. But it's a place where we all need to be if we want to change things for the better.

No book has all the answers; certainly this one doesn't. It's only a start. This is not an easy journey but it is an important one. We invite you to come along.