

Dorothy Clarke Wilson Peace Writing Prize 2021

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Do Not Tell the Oppressed How to Seek Justice

At no point in history has justice been achieved without sacrifice and a collection of our unrelenting ancestors who detested subservience. As a descendant of brave Indian men and women who endured and often perished in the dark pits of British prisons on the Indian island of Port Blair, I refuse to rest until justice and peace are universally secured.

When Dr. King wrote to his oppressors in 1963, he was not surrounded by luxury. He was writing from a position of extreme discomfort and lack of leverage in societal power dynamics. Above all, he was writing to justify his struggle to the oppressors who deemed the Civil Rights movement “unwise and untimely”. When people content with the status quo of pre-Civil Rights United States were “lamenting” the demonstrations to end segregation, something that Dr. King addresses in his letter, Black and Brown bodies were writhing in pain from batons cracking against their skin, bones, skulls, and above all, their human identities. We live in a world that has been left to us by those men and women, and ensuring just treatment for all is the only proper way to honor their legacies.

“Justice delayed too long is justice denied.” Dr. King quoted this in 1963, but the relevance of his words shall never fade. As a financial economist in training, I study the time value of money and discount for the value lost due to lags in cash flows. If we are methodical enough to assign a cost to delays in cash flows, we must be humane enough to assign a cost to justice delayed.

Ronnie Long, a Black man, was imprisoned in 1976 after a trial decided by an all-White jury. The rape charges against him were found to be false after he had spent 44 long years in prison. The value of \$1000 at the current discount rate of 7%, according to a Net Present Value calculation, becomes \$50.95 in 44 years. Few of us would be interested in investing \$1000 for 44 years to get a return of \$50.95. Understanding this example, we can imagine how deeply traumatizing and irreversible 44 years in prison for a human being can be. This kind of profane delay, I state without any reservations, is justice denied.

Criminal justice reform has been an evergreen issue in not just the American, but the global political context. Living as an Indian in the United States, I often note flaws in the two justice systems by comparing them to each other. Of course, this method is not the most preferred one, but it gives me an angle that assists my

comprehension of this social issue. In the United States, the death penalty remains in the picture with over 2500 inmates on death row in 2020, according to Pew Research. I grant that certain crimes warrant the harshest punishments, but as long as the death penalty remains an option, there will always be a chance, statistically measured, of innocents such as Ronnie Long being sentenced to death. As long as a corruptible and often failing governmental system can decide who lives and who dies, we cannot call the struggle of our ancestors a success.

Dr. King mentions how freedom is never voluntarily given and must be demanded without regard for whether a struggle is “timely” and acceptable to the oppressors. In my understanding, the oppressors do not get to dictate to the oppressed the terms of the struggle. Determining the proper course of a social movement is the prerogative of those who suffer from injustice. Dr. King’s words apply globally. In some countries, governments have protocols for protesting, violating which can warrant jailtime. The curbing of free speech and individual liberties are systemic injustices that can only be fought with free speech and individual liberties. A struggle to ensure these elements of social justice cannot be bounded within a supposed protocol that oppressive entities stipulate.

As a Hindu, I often turn to the Bhagvad-Gita for wisdom and guidance. The Gita professes peace but encourages confronting evil so as to overcome it. Dr. King describes in his 1963 letter the first step of a social movement – identifying injustices. I connect with this letter spiritually owing to the faith that has nurtured me and my refusal to accept injustice because fighting it would be “inappropriate”. I will forever be grateful for my ancestors who were passionate in their love for peace yet firm in their resistance to hate. We shall attain peace in a civil manner, but on our terms.