

June 7, 2020

Dear Family,

I took the time to write down some things I would like to share with each of you. My one ask is simply this.... that you listen. My goal is for you to hear the words I am speaking. I'm not asking for your approval, rather, simply your attention. When I'm finished reading this letter, please feel free to respond or not. I understand there are times I have to sit with things to properly absorb and reflect upon them before I can offer anything in return. Thank you for your attention.

I've always been outspoken. I have always been comfortable being direct, candid and straight-forward. I was born that way. In spite of often being told my willingness to speak up caused others discomfort (meaning their feelings were more important than mine), I believe a voice like mine is essential. What if Martin Luther King was afraid to speak up? What if women were afraid to speak up? What if children were afraid to speak up? Look around in our present world. The current climate is full of people who are speaking up. Our current climate also illustrates what has happened as a result of not speaking up.

Are you aware of how diamonds are formed? They are formed under intense heat and pressure that cause carbon atoms to crystallize forming diamonds. Experiencing intense heat and pressure is uncomfortable, but necessary for change to occur. For change to occur, people need to become uncomfortable. They need to no longer accept the status quo. Too often, people want to quickly shy away from things that cause discomfort or inconvenience, without first sitting in that discomfort to analyze, absorb and experience something new.

What family means to me. Family means love – unconditional. Family means support. You may not agree with me but you still love and support me. Family means standing together – you may not understand but you can still stand with me. Family means fighting for one another – when one in my family has been wronged, we all have been wronged. Family means keeping in touch – the phone works both ways. Whether that's a call to say hello, to check in, with a specific purpose in mind, to just let the person know you're thinking of them, to share a story, a sorrow, a joy, laughter.... the point is to keep in touch. Family means protection and shelter – a safe place to land when feeling alone, unsafe, fearful, etc.

My family is unique. Unique in that we are comprised of an ethnically diverse group of individuals. That uniqueness was a choice, made by our parents years ago. With that choice came responsibility. Responsibility to ensure not only the basics of food, shelter and clothing, but also essentials such as unconditional love, ensuring a safe environment, teaching social awareness, teaching ethnic awareness, exposure to things, people and experiences that would enhance and support our growth and development. While there were opportunities made available to us to meet some of those needs, there were also missed opportunities.

You may or may not be aware of the racial slurs and racially motivated hate our family experienced while I was a child, but I am. You may or may not be aware of the racial slurs and racially motivated hatred I have personally experienced, but I am. Have you stopped to consider how the current climate of our country impacts our family/your family? Perhaps you have, but did it stop there? Did you consider reaching out to your minority family members to check in on them? Have you voiced your feelings about it in your communities? With your friends? With those you associate with? Have you been part of finding a solution? Have you been inconvenienced by the current climate? Have you been made to feel uncomfortable in the current climate/status quo of our country? Or, on the other hand, have you been

silent through all of this? To be silent, is to be complicit. Have you stood on the sidelines quietly watching and observing? Perhaps hoping it will dissipate? Does it trouble you that your own minority family members are living through a time of great upheaval, unrest, violence and hatred, all because of the color of their skin?

I cannot imagine the luxury of not feeling uncomfortable or inconvenienced. I cannot imagine a life where I am not daily concerned about the well-being of my children and my grandchildren simply because of the color of their skin. I cannot imagine the freedom to move about the country without being stared at with disapproving looks, whether I'm by myself or with my white boyfriend. I cannot imagine a life where I am no longer approached with a question of, "what are you" or "what are you mixed with"? I cannot imagine the luxury of not having to teach my son and grandson how to conduct themselves if ever approached by a police officer.

Can you imagine having to defend the color of your daughter's skin every single year while she was in high school? Can you imagine having to contend with the ignorant and racially insensitive remarks from people? Can you imagine your mother telling you and your daughter that Mrs. Joanne Goode in South Carolina freely shared that Tonya and Jason will always be seen as second-class citizens? Can you imagine being told I would love to date you, but I wouldn't be able to take you home? I can. My son can. Can you imagine hearing news cycle after news cycle with societal reinforcement that being black equates to lower incomes, higher crimes, higher death rates, increased incidence of abuse, decreased job opportunities, decreased wage, decreased promotion opportunities, increased incidence of heart disease, diabetes, fear amongst white people, and the list goes on and on and on. Can you imagine a full-time diet of those things and not receiving much to counter these messages? What is a black person to do with this? Live peaceably and accept the injustices and inequalities? Have you ever had to contend with that thought? Have you ever considered what that does to the inside of a person? The physical impact? The mental impact? The emotional impact? The financial impact?

The purpose of this call today was to bring awareness to my family of the impact of racial inequality and injustice that we face each and every day. It was also to create discomfort, because change is needed. The tragedy of George Floyd's death is sadly, nothing new in the black community. I've been outraged for years and devastated each and every time I hear another story about an unarmed black man/woman who has been shot. I am further outraged by our so-called justice system as many who have killed these individuals have walked away without paying with jail/prison time. What about the anguish and total decimation these families have felt? What about the shattered pieces they've been left to deal with?

I've found myself particularly restless over these past few weeks since the murder of George Floyd and the blatant display of white privilege demonstrated on video by Amy Cooper in Central Park. I've sat with that restlessness and feeling of discomfort as I pondered how can I help, what can I do. I struggled to identify how I could make a difference but continued to sit with my discomfort until a few days ago, I woke up and I had my answer. The answer was very clear. Tonya, you need to start with your family. Change starts in the home. Why would I focus my efforts on the outside when the inside is not in proper order? Mom, you have told me many times in my younger years you felt part of my purpose was to bridge the races since I was of two different and often opposing races. Well, here I am today, sharing my heart with my family. I'm being open. I'm sharing my truth. I'm being vulnerable, with hope that something I've said today will stir up a level of discomfort in each of you for needed change.

A person who I value tremendously once told me, Tonya, we do not have the option to choose our family, and that person is correct. Mom, Dad, while you made a conscious choice to choose me and

Jason to become part of your family and you did so for reasons you've previously shared, I would submit to you, perhaps there was even a greater purpose than you could imagine for why I ended up in your family. Remember, I'm outspoken, and proud of that. There is a place and a purpose for people like me. We are catalysts for change.

I will leave you with a few thoughts to ponder. Have you noticed the family members most notably and frequently missing from our family get-togethers are all minorities? Tonya, Jason, Dana, Vanessa, Josh, Aaliyah. Have you considered what you can do to help stop the systemic racism that our country is plagued with? Do you know racism is as insidious as a disease? While you may not know what you can do to help, here are a few thoughts you can consider offering to your fellow Americans who happen to be blessed with black or brown skin:

I'm not black, but I see you

I'm not black, but I hear you

I'm not black, but I mourn with you

I'm not black, but I will fight for you

Racism is not just a black thing and it is not just a white thing; it is a human thing and we are all humans! We should treat and support our fellow humankind as we would want to be treated.

I did not ask to be born in the skin that I have but I am proud of who I am and what I represent. I represent inclusion of all people, love of all people, acceptance of all people, fairness to all people and justice and equality to all people.

In closing, my ask is this. I recognize we cannot change history. An acknowledgement of my lived experiences would be nice. I am asking for my family to be considerate and thoughtful about my feelings and the feelings of my family. I sometimes feel I am an afterthought – out of sight out of mind. The last person to know. I would appreciate feeling more included and less like an afterthought. Lastly, I ask for recognition that you have minority family members who are deeply impacted by the racial tensions in our country. With that recognition, I ask for sensitivity that we may be having different and less desirable experiences than you are so something that demonstrates care and concern regarding this would be nice.

Thank you for listening,

Tonya