Justice on the Land

Where Do We Go After George Floyd?

Standing on the Sidelines in the Racial Justice Debate Should Not be an Option

Note: In the wake of the police killing of George Floyd three blocks from the Land Stewardship Project's Minneapolis office on May 25 (*see page 13*), individuals, communities, states, and entire nations have struggled with coming to terms with yet one more deadly result of systemic racism.

Four months later, how to address one of the most troubling, and unsustainable, issues of our time is still dominating discussions at home, on the streets, in legislatures, and in communities large and small, urban and rural. Clara Sanders Marcus, membership coordinator and social equity organizer at LSP, recently interviewed three people about how they are grappling with this issue — an LSP staffer, member, and ally. Below is a summary of the stories they told Clara.

As they make clear here, there is no one magic solution to ending systemic racism. But their reflections provide a glimpse at how important it is to start with individual action, learn from others, and then figure out how to join a wider community working for structural, long-term change.

By Clara Sanders Marcus

Buildings Can Be Replaced — Lives Cannot

At the end of every fiscal year, the Land Stewardship Project's Membership and Individual Giving Program sends a series of e-mails to potential members, asking them to join LSP. You may have received similar e-mails as a member, including a recent one from membership director Megan Smith, which included the following language:

> "…The brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers and the events that unfolded on the streets of Minneapolis ignited a global movement to dismantle systemic racism and unchecked power. Now, emerging from the collective expressions of pain, righteous anger, and grief is a groundswell for transformational change."

In the last days of June, Megan received a response from someone that read:

> "Really??? Megan what is your address? How about I come block your driveway and prevent you from leaving, destroy your property, and then burn your house down and tell you I was just expressing my pain, my righteous anger?"

While it's not unusual to get one or two of these sorts of negative responses from an e-mail or letter to new supporters, this one hit home for Megan — she lives three blocks from the Third Precinct building in south Minneapolis that burned the night of May 28.

"My first reaction was this person must be lashing out at me to win some made-up argument they thought we were having. It wasn't until later, after sharing the e-mail with others, that I realized how threatening this note was," recalls Megan.

Megan consulted with other staff and chose not to respond to the e-mail. But she did think about what she would say if she had.

"If I had chosen to respond, I would have let them know I did have my street blocked off. My husband's music studio a few blocks away was badly burned. We had cinders from the burnt buildings all over our yard. We could not be outside due to the smell of burning buildings and tear gas that had filled the neighborhood each night. I thought about telling them about the threats of white supremacists planting incendiary devices at businesses and in alleys night-after-night. I thought about telling them about how I could hear the flash grenades, helicopters, sirens, and gunfire all out my window while I worried about keeping my two small children safe. I thought about telling them about the surreal experience of Hummers and armed military patrolling our neighborhoods each night."

That was Megan's personal experience of that last week of May. But she also tried to look outside of her own reality as a white woman for deeper understanding of the context of her experience.

"I wanted to tell the writer of that e-mail that even though I was scared and worried about the safety of our family, I knew that it was just a fraction of the fear and worry that people with different skin color or less privilege than me have to live with on a daily basis," she says. "The week of protests and uprisings was a call to action for changes in our society, so everyone can live safe and healthy lives."

Many people, members and non-members alike, responded positively to the language around racial justice in Megan's e-mail. But she feels that this particular negative response is an example of where some people in our communities are at when it comes to reckoning with racism in our society.

Megan Smith

"It's a reminder that we — white people — have a lot of work to do," says Megan, adding that she's been giving a lot of thought to what that means for her both personally and professionally.

"George Floyd's murder and the events afterwards have reinforced for me the need for me to use the privilege I have as a middle-class white woman to stand up against the systemic injustices in our society. It has also shown me that I always need to be educating myself about how racism and other forms of oppression are showing up in our communities and dedicating my time, resources, and energy into dismantling those systems and building new systems that benefit all people."

In her role as membership director, Megan wants to be sure that LSP is explicit about how racial, gender, and economic justice are critical to building a truly just and sustainable farm and food system.

"Without one we cannot have the other," says Megan. "We need to keep leading with our values and be guided by our mission as we stand up to injustices against marginalized people. I think as a primarily white and both rural and urban organization, LSP's role in this social justice movement is to continue to learn from, be led by, and listen to our allied organizations led by people of color. Then we need to bring what we learn, hear, and see back to our programming, our fundraising, our communications, our meetings, even our kitchen tables."

Even as she witnessed so much burning and destruction, Megan is clear on where the

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focus should be.

"Buildings and property can be rebuilt and replaced. Lives cannot. I wish everyone could understand that what was happening in the Twin Cities was not just the result of George Floyd's murder by cops. It was a culmination of decades and generations of oppression and violence by police, and of neglected and under-resourced communities."

Use the 'Aha Moment' as a Starting Point

LSP member Aimee Haag has also been seeking to keep the focus on justice. Aimee and her partner, Andy Temple, live in Litchfield in west-central Minnesota, where they have a small auto mechanic shop, assembly business, and vegetable farm. Aimee also works as the farm-to-school liaison for the school district.

Aimee and Andy became LSP members not only because of the beginning farming resources and land access resources the organization has available, but also because the organization is trying to have big conversations in rural spaces on issues like healthcare and racial justice.

"Taking care of our place, whether land or people," says Aimee, "that's our ethos." And for Aimee, taking care of land and people means that racial justice is always at stake.

Aimee grew up in nearby Hutchinson, where her experience was far from racially diverse. "I've always had an open mind and an open heart, but not a completely open understanding of the issues that faced other communities," she says.

But two years ago, she went to a national Young Farmers Coalition convergence as a delegate. The main theme of the convergence was racial justice, and as she sat listening to a panel of farmers of color, she had her world absolutely rocked.

"For the first time it was thrown in my face how severe and harsh their experience is, not just as farmers," says Aimee. She sat there in tears, feeling she didn't have the tools to handle such a realization, and immediately called LSP staffer and farmer Nick Olson. Nick encouraged her, saying that it is hard, but she was now on a trajectory. She was awake, fired up, and had to remember that this is a journey, he said.

"It suddenly wasn't enough to have an open mind and know that injustice exists. I realized I have to continue to push forward for justice when I have the energy and mental capacity," says Aimee. "I have to learn more, listen more, and accept the power that I do have as a white middle class woman in rural Minnesota, even if I didn't ask for that power."

The week of George Floyd's murder, Aimee was having chaotic dreams and, even though she felt paralyzed, knew she had to try to process this in community. When Hutchinson had a virtual vigil a week after the murder, Aimee doubted there would be more than 15 people on the call. In fact, over 90 people joined the call with less than a 24-hour notice. "It's easy to think that you are alone in this, in wanting justice and peace, but there are people that are on the train, and there are more getting on board every week."

Aimee worked with other LSP members and several recent high school graduates to convene an in-person vigil in Litchfield a month after George Floyd was killed. They worked to create a space where people could show up; maybe not know what to do, but start growing the conversation around racial justice and share ideas and struggles and thoughts.

"For me, it was a necessary piece of the processing, to recognize my place in all that," says Aimee. "Here we are in rural Minnesota, where we are so connected to the issue of racial justice, but it feels so far away."

A memorial has been erected by members of the community at the intersection of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in south Minneapolis, the spot where George Floyd died in police custody on Memorial Day. It is visited daily by people from across the country. (*LSP Photo*)

LSP members Aimee Haag (*left*) **and Jenna Sandoe spoke during a George Floyd vigil held in Litchfield, Minn., in late June.** (*Photo by Brent Schacherer,* Hutchinson Leader)

She knows that it isn't far away at all, but it's challenging to find ways to talk about it. "I think that for a lot of people, when they hear 'white privilege' or 'patriarchy' or 'white supremacy,' they feel bad and get defensive — 'I didn't do that!' " she says.

But the past two or three months have felt a little different, like there is less defensiveness, and Aimee thinks that because of COVID-19, people are having more time to process issues like racial injustice privately. "There's more awareness that we need to trust the experience of other people and let them speak, and we need to do what they need us to do," she says.

If there is one thing Aimee hopes LSP members can take away from her story, it's to embrace the "aha" moment. It can be easy to feel shame about having taken so long to wake up to injustice, and it can also be easy to flare up in action at an intense moment and then go back to exactly the way things were before. It's not "okay" for George Floyd's murder to be your "aha" moment, says Aimee, since there is nothing "okay" about being blind to injustice. But at the same time, "aha" moments happen to almost all of us, and it's important to make sure that the moment is the starting point of a continuous journey.

For Aimee, this work feels like sprinting and recovering. There will be days where she's totally plugged in, and there are days when she has to pause, process, learn, and reframe. She's reading Black voices, leveraging her consumer power, and working hard to understand that place she occupies in white supremacy and how to actively resist it. She's grateful for emerging groups that are speaking out at Hutchinson City

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Council meetings, and she hopes to grow in her involvement in such broader community spaces.

"I think back to conversations I've had, thinking I was saying the right things, but now realizing I wasn't," Aimee says. "It's been such a journey. But we also can't wait to say the exact right thing at the exact right time. Try to show up in your own imperfect way. Continue to be awake."

Linking Racism & a Broken Food & Farm System

Zoe Hollomon is the organizer for the Twin Cities chapter of the Good Food Purchasing Program, a national initiative that encourages large institutions to direct their buying power in a way that focuses around five values: local economy, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, animal welfare, and nutrition. LSP was a founding member of the Twin Cities coalition and serves as its fiscal sponsor.

Zoe also lives within a half-mile of George Floyd's murder. Three days after the killing, Zoe started working with community groups and some of the Black-led organizations leading the local uprising efforts to provide emergency food and health supply distribution to 20 different sites around the Twin Cities.

"Communities of color that were already experiencing a lack of economic investment, access to health and medical services, and access to wholesome, natural food had lost additional places to buy food and address their basic needs," says Zoe. "Many people were out of work due to the pandemic and were in dire straits. We were organizing grassroots mutual aid services before most of the city or hunger relief organizations came online."

The community was on edge in the wake of the killing, she says.

"There was a lot of fear: of the police, who had just killed another unarmed Black person, and of white supremacists, who came from other cities and states and were setting explosives and fires in buildings, attacking our food and supply distribution sites, leaving death threats for those who put up Black Lives Matter signs, placing accelerants behind houses, in dumpsters, and under cars," says Zoe. "We had no public safety or fire protection, so many blocks started organizing walking patrols and mutual aid services to keep people safe. Under the curfew order, state police were attacking protesters, members of the media, kids, people standing in their own doorways… they were applying brute force to an already scary situation."

Zoe Hollomon (*back row, in gray sweater*) **is shown here with a gathering of the Midwest Farmers of Color Collective, a group working for racial justice and the development of food and farming systems that honor communities. In a region where the majority of land and agricultural resources are controlled by white farmers and policymakers, it is critical for Black and brown farmers to have spaces to build social connections with each other, and to organize for economic and political power. For more information and to support MFCC, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/midwestfarmersofcolor.** (*Photo courtesy MFCC*)

She adds, "It was a horrible and very stressful time. But activists and local residents were coming together to help our own communities get by: farmers donating produce, restaurants serving as supply donation drop-off points, people transporting groceries and medicine, volunteer counselors and healers providing trauma care, people doing COVID safety training. I wish the media had shown more of that, but they didn't."

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— Zoe Hollomon

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The weeks and months since have been full of anguish and pain.

"As a Black queer woman, I feel the fear for my family, friends, and loved ones who have been in direct danger at the hands of police," says Zoe. "I worry that no justice will come for George Floyd or any of us, despite our pain, despite our organizing. Police violence against Black and brown people has been sanctioned and excused for so long, it's like a reminder that the majority of white people in this country are okay with it."

For Zoe, police brutality, systemic racism, and food systems work are all intertwined. One of her current organizing efforts includes the Midwest Farmers of Color Collective (MFCC), which, in a region where the majority of land and agricultural resources are controlled by white farmers and policymakers, is creating a space for farmers of color to deepen social connections with each other and to organize for economic and political power.

This past fall, Zoe walked LSP's Racial Justice Cohort through a "Racial Equity in Food Systems" training, a political education experience looking at 500 years of policies pertaining to land, immigration, labor, voting rights, health, and farming policies in the United States.

"Seeing it all together, you begin to see the patterns and the intentionality of all the ways that communities of color have been subjugated while others were lifted up," explains Zoe. "We can only ever hope to create equity and fairness if we acknowledge what has been taken. If we look past the sentiments and see what the actual history shows us."

She adds, "Essentially, a very small group of white industrialists and national leaders decided that they could ensure their wealth and dominance if they could have endless access to cheap labor. They created

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racism — and many other "-isms" — in order to justify and systematize a hierarchy that would help subjugate labor, and this country's food and agricultural system has operated on that principle since its inception. It's part of the DNA of many of our systems."

Racism was and still is an intentional, powerful tool in dividing people who share similar socioeconomic circumstances. Similarly, big business interests have used policy as a tool for dividing urban and rural communities that once had mutually beneficial economic relationships.

"One of the terrible things that has happened since giant food corporations have taken over farming is that the symbiosis that used to exist in our regional economies between rural food production and urban markets has been severed," says Zoe.

A lot of intention has gone into the destruction of local food systems, to the point of making the system and the people who work in it invisible. There must be a mutual relationship between the people who live in cities and our local farmers, especially as we think about how to make our regions more resilient in times of crisis, according to Zoe.

Before she moved to the Twin Cities, Zoe worked at an organization in Buffalo, N.Y., that focused on bringing youth and families of color, immigrants, and other people living in a neglected urban core together with struggling local farmers from nearby rural areas.

"We were struggling with closing grocery stores and people having to buy food at corner stores, when nearby we had such a bounty of incredible food from these amazing small farms," says Zoe. "We brought our youth out there to pick cherries and carrots and garlic and learn where food came from — not a store, but the ground. We created great community events, helped find distribution sites for CSAs, and facilitated conversations around how the food system has been taken away from the people by corporations, and about the necessity of coming together to plan for a food system that serves people. We advocated for regional food system planning and informed city and state policy."

Building connections between cities and rural areas is important work for organizations like LSP. It's vital for racial diversity and justice, and for developing the kinds of relationships between LSP and organizations led by people of color that leads to strong links, accountability, and an opportunity to make sure our work is relevant.

A key foundation for these connections and relationships is a deep analysis and understanding of how both our food system and our system of policing are rooted in the idea that white lives are of higher value than non-white lives. Today's police system grew out of mercenaries and slave patrols who were paid to protect white landowners' interests, says Zoe.

"The same intentional forces that are responsible for the extraction and exploitation of people in our industrial food system —whether it's farmers, meat processing plant workers, or other food chain workers — have also allowed our police and penal system to exploit and kill people of color," she says. "It's the same underlying motivations, it's actually at the root of U.S. dominant culture."

And this is where the need for "aha" moments like Aimee's emerges, no matter how belated or humbling they are.

"If white people are still questioning whether or not racism exists, then they are not going to work together with oppressed people of color to overcome it," says Zoe. "I have a white friend who was trying to get her family members to understand how racial injustice is still happening every day, and it made me think…it must be really nice to be able to stand on the sidelines and contemplate whether or not racial injustice still exists, instead of being a person of color who has to encounter and deal with it physically, emotionally, and mentally every day. It's really hard to deal with the fact that much of our ability to change things in this country is up to white people looking at a reality they don't want to admit is true."

Zoe has seen a lot of white people trying to process their feelings around racial injustice, just like Megan and Aimee are doing. LSP members helped spearhead demonstrations in the Minnesota communities of Marshall, Alexandria, and Montevideo, as well as other small towns such as Amery, Wis., and several are starting up conversation circles to begin reckoning with white supremacy.

"I think that's really important," says Zoe. "Racial equity work has to happen at the personal level in your own spirit and mind, and then you can move to the larger concentric circles of your community or organization, and then to society."

But there is pushback, especially when it comes to significant policy changes.

"Some people think the idea of defunding the police is 'crazy,' but are not investigating how 'crazy' it is that a state-sanctioned group of people can kill Black and brown people and not be prosecuted," says Zoe. "We have been conditioned away from abolition as achievable, when in reality that is what we should all have, freedom to not be exploited by others. We've been fed a romantic story that liberation is what our country's history is about, but in reality, America is built on stolen land and stolen labor."

And now, she says, we are at a point where people are not believing and not admitting that what they have had is privilege. "Or maybe they understand they have privilege but are unwilling to return or restore what their ancestors set up, to give land back to Black and brown people, or to work with us to dismantle the structures that not only keep some people down but lift other people up."

As both Megan and Aimee reflected, each white person's experience of privilege brings the personal responsibility of anti-racist work very close. That's why it is so important to actively work against the policies and structures that perpetuate racial injustices. That's why it's important for organizations and individuals to participate in racial equity training and actively work to repair and restore what's been taken. Racial justice work is not just a box to check — it's essential for having a positive impact on the future.

"This COVID-19 pandemic has a lot to teach us about the state of racism in this country," says Zoe. "We will never be a strong country if so many of our people are sick or unable to live freely and independently. We have to take individual responsibility and collective responsibility to prevent an unacceptable future." ❐

LSP's *Vision for the Future* & Racial Justice

The Land Stewardship Project's current long-range plan, *Vision for the Future*, outlines steps the organization will take during the next five years to promote a more sustainable, regenerative, and just food and farm system. One area the plan addresses is the dismantling of racism, patriarchy, and economic injustice. A digital copy of the long-range plan is at **www.landstewardshipproject.org/about/longrangeplan**. Paper copies are available by contacting one of LSP's offices: Lewiston (507-523-3366), Montevideo (320-269-2105), or Minneapolis (612-722-6377).