



It's Going Back Into The Closet

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A couple years ago, I bought black t-shirts for the four adults in our family. Each had a silly message appropriate to that family member. I got to choose my own, of course. Because I'm a science dilettante – I enjoy science but dabble at best – I chose something that played on Einstein's famous equation $E=mc^2$. The message reads: "You matter. Unless you multiply yourself by the speed of light squared. Then, you energy." Two years later, it still cracks me up. I love the use of science and the grammatical twist.

This weekend, I donned my funny black t-shirt. Then, it struck me. A black t-shirt that begins with "You matter." is going to be read in a very specific context these days. People are protesting relentlessly in the streets for the acknowledgement that Black Lives Matter, while a counter-refrain of All Lives Matter pushes back.

My t-shirt would create confusion at best and probably hurt. A part of me wanted to protest that I know what my t-shirt message means, and if people are offended that's their problem. A part of me thought I could just try to explain the message and why it wasn't offensive – that it wasn't trying to diminish the movement toward a full recognition of the value of black lives – that it was just a funny science thing. (Maybe that part of me is still hoping to do just that in this article!)

No one has told me not to wear my t-shirt. I have the *right* to wear it. Nonetheless I've chosen to put it back in the closet for now.

We are a country that values the principle that all lives matter. We have done pretty darn well insuring that white lives matter. I have been the beneficiary of that ... until recently without my awareness. As a country, however, we are in this moment being asked to acknowledge that black lives have not mattered: not during slavery, not under Jim Crow laws, not during the Civil Rights movements of the 1960's, not when we see a disturbing pattern of violence against black people for which people are not held accountable in our criminal justice system. Because all lives matter in principle, we must in this moment pay special attention to how we have failed to show that black lives matter. That is how we move closer to the ideal we all share.

So, I'm not wearing my t-shirt right now because I don't want there to be any confusion about the message that we all need to hear. I'm not wearing my t-shirt because I want to acknowledge the untimely deaths of people like George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, Elijah McCain, Stephon Clark, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castille. I'm not wearing my t-shirt because I want to honor the lifelong commitment and legacy of Sen. John Lewis on civil rights. I want his words, rather than a silly message on a t-shirt, to be what echoes in the halls of Congress and in our hearts:

"Be bold. Be courageous, stand up. Speak up. Speak out and find a way to create the beloved community, the beloved world, a world of peace, a world that will recognize the dignity of all humankind. Never become bitter. Never become hostile. Never hate. Live in peace. We're one, one people and one love."