

Life without parole?  
Society's lost its soul.

Did it ever have one?  
I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.  
But what's the goal? What's the goal? What's the goal?  
And what's the toll? What's the toll? What's the toll?  
And what's at stake? How much more can we all take?

And I don't want to make a stupid mistake. Come off as a fake.  
And so...perhaps asking the questions is something. Perhaps a question,  
(A poem, a painting, a song, a conversation...)  
Can begin to peel away the pall and veil that covers reality, and we might begin to see  
The true totality  
Of a common humanity. That might help disrupt an ounce of the insanity.

I wrote this poem during an Online Virtual Session of RJPA in response to a conversation with Truth, an artist, activist, and formerly incarcerated individual. Truth brought forward to our discussion the history and persistence of white supremacy and how the institutionalization of whiteness and white society at large continues to hold in place false and damning representations of Black men as criminals and inhuman. A clear and crisp line can be drawn from chattel slavery and the genocide of indigenous peoples to the current prison system and wider systems of oppression that populate it. White society consistently uses its privilege to be ignorant and oblivious and refuses to confront or examine this. Truth's personal testament was very raw and eye opening. In our society, many can come to believe that the justice system has nothing to do with them, so long as they are "good" people, and follow the law. It is easy to look the other way and allow a pall or veil to remain in place over our eyes: out of sight, out of mind. There is a refusal to see one's own hand in systems of oppression. During our conversation with Truth I was reminded of writings by Harvard professor Kaia Stern, director of Prison Studies Project, who joined us during our visits to Suffolk. In her essays on prisons Kaia makes clear (like so many others) that the justice system is not about reforming or rehabilitating someone but rather about punishment and control.

To pivot to something else Truth discussed though, is how necessary art and poetry is. A poem or painting or piece of music can feel like an insignificant thing in contrast to the weight of history and oppression; however, it became clear during the discussion that art's capacity to express humanity, affirm humanity, and also function as critique make it a valuable tool and resource. In my poem, the use of repetition and questions was meant to be a rhetorical device to get the reader to think about what Truth got all of us thinking about, what he got me thinking about. Expanding the conversation through questions, art, self reflection, and community action and activism does, I think possess real value. For me, I did pass through a phase of really questioning if stepping into anti-

oppression settings was something I can do, should do, if I even belong there. Our discussion with Truth made it clear that while the focus is most certainly on those impacted by systemic racism, anti-Blackness, poverty, oppression, and implicit biases, it is also true that our common humanity and relationality is at stake. To close, Truth's testimony reminded of a quote shared with me some years ago. It is from Lilla Watson, an Indigenous Australian artist, activist, and educator: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."