The 1955 torture and murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till by two white men for reportedly flirting with a white woman in Mississippi in part sparked the urgency that led to the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. answered a call to lead the Civil Rights Movement, and today, as we look for another leader of such prominence, we ask, #WhoWillBeNext?

Who will be next to spark a well-organized protest the way that Rosa Parks did? Who will be next to stand steadfast and boycott for 381 days, as was done for the Montgomery Bus Boycott? Who will be next to urge us toward an accountable democracy through the annals of law the way that Thurgood Marshall and Julian Bond did? Who will be next to pave the way just so that change may have a chance, as Shirley Chisholm did for Barack Obama? Who will fight for oppressed people of varied nationalities and ethnicities when it was unpopular to do so as Yuri Kochiyama did? Who will use their voice to speak on behalf of poor people of color and women as Grace Lee Boggs did? Who will continue the fight for equal rights at uncomfortable, yet necessary, intersections of activism for lesbians and women of color as Audre Lorde did? Who will continue to blaze trails for the LGBTQI communities, specifically people of color in the trans community, as Laverne Cox has done?

We have often heard that our communities need a new leader. There has been talk and wonderment around who would be the next Martin Luther King, Jr., or the next Cesar Chavez, or the next Fannie Lou Hamer. The challenge today, however, is less about who will lead us and more about how will we lead? We can all be vital allies in the fight for social justice. We all have talents, skills, thoughts and ideas to contribute to solutions for today’s pressing social justice issues. We must all look to each other and to ourselves in this new quest for leadership, instead of relying upon saviors. We should constantly be
asking ourselves, “What am I doing that adds value to the betterment of my community? How do I stand with compassion, push for progress and help foster the difficult conversations we need to have? How will I step up to hold accountable those who continue to practice deep-seated policies of prejudice and exclusion? How will I bravely call out the wrongdoings and work towards viable solutions to rectify years of blame-the-victim mindsets?”

The question, “Who will be next?” has at times left us paralyzed with fear and disbelief at the sheer horror of racially motivated attacks that have repeatedly occurred throughout our nation’s history. The tragic reality is that racist attacks are so commonplace in this nation that we ask this question with a constant sense of despondency and weary expectation.

On February 26, 2012, when neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman chased down, shot and killed unarmed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida, protests over the way the authorities handled the investigation into Trayvon’s death resulted in the launching of the Black Lives Matter movement, reminding us once again that there is no such a thing as a “post-racial” society. Much like the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Lives Matter campaign is a strategic, nationally organized network working to combat the terrorism wreaked on poor communities and communities of color. Much like the Civil Rights Movement, these protests have never been about marching just for the sake of marching, but about protesting publicly as a means of heightening awareness of ongoing injustice. And much like the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter seeks a deeper discussion of issues this country still needs to face, a discussion about the ways we view one another, how we can treat one another with consideration and respect, and humanize one another. Such conversations must occur on a continuing basis if we are to achieve real and lasting change for the better.

Despite a constant blanket of apprehension cloaking our communities, almost paralyzing us with worry about who, when and where the next victim(s) of injustice will be, we must look within and towards each other for leadership in this struggle. We do not have the luxury of waiting for someone else to be the hero. We are the heroes. And every day, in the way we live our lives, raise our children, mentor and teach others, how we do the work in our field of choice, determines whether or not justice prevails. We must use
our skills, talents and resources to carve out our own space—however that may look—in which we can stand as advocates for justice, and we must use our voices to speak for those who are being silenced.

The so-called war on poverty policy that began during President Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration has dangerously warped into a war on the impoverished! We hear voices from certain corners of the government, media and academe callously blaming all of those stuck in a cycle of economic disenfranchisement for creating the harsh circumstances that afflict them. What our nation’s agenda needs, instead, is an exploration of how the circumstances of poverty are the product of years of systemic racism rooted in every structure of our social life, public and private, from housing, to education, to healthcare, to employment. We hear code words like “lazy” and “thug” carelessly tossed around to justify bigotry and violence. Who will toss those out of office who continue to deploy such divisive tactics and instead elect individuals who want to unify the deeply divided communities within our country? Will you be part of the charge?

“...We need to appropriate, embrace the idea that we are the leaders we’ve been looking for.”

– Grace Lee Boggs

It is easy to look at the world around us—the conflict that surrounds us—and think, “Someone else will fight for this…someone else will create change.” It can feel overwhelming to contemplate such global problems, especially the ones that do not seem to affect us directly. More than four million Syrians are registered refugees desperately trekking into countries across Europe, some of which have closed their borders. Worldwide, nearly 60 million people are refugees or displaced. Most of these persons have been forced out of their homes due to war, conflict and persecution. And think, too, in many countries still, children cannot go to school, the majority of them girls. More than 783 million people globally have no access to clean water. In America over 16 million children go hungry. Viewing such alarming and challenging problems, one wonders, “What good can I possibly do? I am just one small person…” The good news is this:
- You do not have to be Malala Yousafzai to work for the empowerment and education of girls.
- You do not have to be Angelina Jolie Pitt to advocate on behalf of people displaced by conflict.
- You do not have to be Svetlana Alexievich to report on the humanity of those whose lives were irrefutably altered by war.
- **You can use the gifts you have right here, right now, to make an impact.**

#BlackLivesMatter was founded through use of social media platforms by three friends who wanted to spark a nationwide discussion around the ways that African-Americans are consistently devalued, especially within the criminal justice system. Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, all social activists within their own communities, had no idea at the time that a few short years later their hashtag would become a nationwide movement.

The “We Are the 44%” coalition was created by a community of Black and Latino activists in response to sexual assault and violence against adolescents. Statistics show that approximately 44% of youth under the age of 18 will be sexually assaulted or raped. The coalition is giving voice to survivors and increasing national awareness of the problem.

Locally, the Interfaith Council for Peace & Justice educates and mobilizes people with a shared vision for peace and for social and environmental justice.

Thousands of organizations such as those cited above are desperately seeking people just like you to aid them in their mission.

We have only recently witnessed what an organized student movement can accomplish. At the University of Missouri, after systematic racism had gone largely ignored and their anger neared the breaking point, students started a conversation on race relations in an effort to cultivate a new climate of change. One outcome was the resignation of the university’s president and its chancellor amid growing protests led by African-American students, and a strike by Missouri football players. Two notable facts stand out within this powerful narrative: student movements have always been an integral part of social progress as in the Civil Rights Movement, and, as in the past, a protest in
one locale has sparked a nationwide response, as students in all regions of the country have risen up in solidarity with Missouri students while also addressing inequities at their own schools.

#WhoWillBeNext can be interpreted in a number of ways. We can live in fear and anger over who may be the next child to be cruelly tossed around a classroom by an authority figure, or the next person shot and killed by a police officer during a routine traffic stop, or we can use our voices and our resources, and devote our time and our energy, to ensure that there is no “next time.” As we ponder upon #WhoWillBeNext let us look into the mirror and recognize that we have the strength to bring about healthful change. #WhoWillBeNext is our calling to have the courage to do so.

We invite you to commit to an action as you move through this new year, and to share your commitment with us on our Facebook page (Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives – University of Michigan), or on Twitter (@OAMI_UMICH), hashtags #WhoWillBeNext #OAMI #University of Michigan.

"Courage is an inner resolution to go forward despite obstacles; Cowardice is submissive surrender to circumstances. Courage breeds creativity; Cowardice represses fear and is mastered by it.

Cowardice asks the question, is it safe?
Expediency ask the question, is it politic?
Vanity asks the question, is it popular?

But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when we must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right."

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sources:
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