

# 'I can't breathe': why George Floyd's words reverberate around the world

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By Ben Okri



These few words should become the mantra of oppression – and spark the real change our world so desperately needs



*'That police officer who pressed his knee on George Floyd's neck snuffed out one life, but lit a universal fire.'* Protesters and mourners march with Terrence Floyd, George Floyd's brother, across Brooklyn Bridge, New York, on 4 June 2020. Photograph: Marie Le Ble/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Never in my lifetime has the case of such visible injustice moved white and black people, moved them as human beings. There have been protests all across America. But there have been huge protests in Britain, in Spain, in Nigeria, in fact all across the world. Why has the killing of George Floyd struck such a profound chord in us? Maybe it was that phrase: "I can't breathe."

5 The consonance of the phrase with the very root of our pandemic fears is uncanny. The phrase linked the coronavirus with the ubiquitous and implacable nature of institutional racism. "I can't breathe" – yet people were prepared to risk being afflicted with coronavirus just so they could express their protest at the chokehold killing of a black man.

10 There have been many times when black people have been gagged, strangled and choked by the police in the US, and even in Britain. The names of those who have died unjustly at the hands of the police are legion. And the police officers have mostly always gotten off entirely free. What happened to George Floyd isn't new. "I can't breathe" was uttered by another police victim, Eric Garner, less than a decade ago. But now there has been a crossover protest on a universal scale. This time is different. This time it is epochal. Language taps into primal fears.

15 We don't really empathise when we understand. People understand racism. It isn't difficult to understand. But still people don't behave as if they understand. Perhaps we empathise best when we can enter into the condition. "I can't breathe" suddenly equates racism with the deprivation of air, which is what it always was. Previously we saw racism, if we saw it all, as a diminishment of a person's humanity. But that was always too vague. "I can't breathe" goes beyond saying that you  
20 are depriving me of freedom, of humanity, of respect. It says: "You are depriving me of the right to air itself."

"I can't breathe": we need a new language to express the fundamental clarity of what happens when people are demonised, excluded, deprived, oppressed, and killed because of the colour of their skin. We need a new language, a phrase for that condition.

25 Only an extreme, and terminal agony could have expressed the very heart of what racism does as when George Floyd said, almost in a whisper: "I can't breathe." Not even William Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, James Baldwin or Toni Morrison at their most eloquent came out with anything as simple in the genius of its truth as: "I can't breathe."

30 Maybe it should be the phrase that people who are oppressed should use. It should become the mantra of oppression. Maybe every time the police stop you in your car for no other reason than that you are a black man or woman, you should say: "I can't breathe." Maybe every time people cross the road in the evenings when they see you, one should hold up a placard that says: "I can't breathe." Maybe when jobs are denied you, deserved promotions elude you, or when the police come to deport you, like the Windrush victims, one should record the moment on one's phone  
35 while saying: "I can't breathe." Maybe the true response to all the subtle and deadly forms that racial discrimination takes should now have a new code: "I can't breathe."

The truth is that "I can't breathe" hints at the apocalypse of human values. When George Floyd said "I can't breathe" and still the police officer applied the chokehold to his windpipe, it was

40 declared in that moment that a human life means nothing in that country. That's where the  
apocalypse begins.

"I can't breathe" will become the condition of the world. We ignore the deadly warnings of  
climate catastrophe. It took the worldwide outcry of the #MeToo movement to signal to the world  
that millions of women are in situations where they can't breathe. Boris Johnson had oxygen  
support, delivered through a tube under his nose, lingering for days between life and death –  
45 perhaps he knew the meaning of "I can't breathe"? Across the world right now we are asking  
ourselves what it means to be human.

When people say they are colour-blind they are being naive. They are in sweet denial. History is  
not colour-blind. Examine the history of slavery and of colonialism and of genocide. Education is  
not colour-blind. Otherwise the objective facts of what a people have done and what has been  
50 done to a people would be as much part of the curriculum as the death of Socrates, the plays of  
Shakespeare, and basic mathematics. Culture is not colour-blind. Otherwise the history of art  
would include the rock sculpture of Zimbabwe, the radical interventions of David Hammons, and  
the paintings of Ben Enwonwu.

Maybe the real trouble is colour deficiency. We know what racism is. It is, finally, the reduction of  
55 the human race to the validity of one race. Put another way, it is saying that there is a hierarchy of  
being human, that some are more human than others, or that some are less. The moment you can  
think, even unconsciously, that one race is superior to another, that is the beginning of murder. It  
is the beginning of genocide. By small degrees what is innocently thought of as minor variations of  
a hierarchy of being human slowly becomes degenerates into allowing one set of people to suffer  
60 and endure conditions that another set of people would not tolerate, for a second, for themselves.

Racism is a human thing. It is a human problem. It can be solved. All it takes is facing the truth that  
many of us have been lied to about history and about other people's humanity. All it takes is  
realising that to passively sanction the diminishment of anyone's humanity on any ground is to  
begin to sanction your own diminishment too. This really isn't rocket science. Racism is a failure of  
65 humanity. It is a failure to be human. This lack of empathy is part of the problem that is destroying  
the world. The lack of empathy extends not just to humans but to other species, and even to the  
planet as a whole.

That police officer who pressed his knee on George Floyd's neck snuffed out one life, but lit a  
70 universal fire. It is deeply moving that the world has responded not to the death of a great man or  
woman, but to the killing of one of the Earth's poor and seemingly insignificant people.

We know what to do. We must tear out the unconscious racism in our spirit. We must insist on the  
human rights of all peoples. We let people live their freedom, and their possibilities, within the  
law. This is a great moment in the life of humanity and it is rich with the possibilities for change.

75 Maybe "I can't breathe" will begin the real change that our world so desperately needs. Let's all  
breathe. Freedom.

*Ben Okri is a Nigerian novelist and poet. His latest novel is Prayer for the Living.*