

OPINION

Americans see police brutality in black and white

Comments about recent events in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray provide a glimpse at perhaps one of our greatest challenges — perception.

In this case, as in too many others involving police, perception seems to be black and white.

“I think that if you look at what’s happened over the course of the last year, you just got to scratch your head,” said House Speaker John Boehner on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” referring to the rash of fatal incidents involving police officers and African-American males.

“I heard your call for ‘no justice, no peace,’” said Baltimore City State’s Attorney Marilyn Mosby to demonstrators in her city and around the country, as she announced the charges. To the youth of Baltimore, she declared, “Our time is now!” and urged peaceful demonstration.

Both comments made headlines. And both, though well intentioned, carried subliminal messages freighted with racial (not racist) undertones.

Boehner’s overly cautious remark was as starkly white as his OxiClean-ed, hand-pressed shirts. A man more accustomed to golf courses and marble hallways than to gritty urban streets, he was plainly trying to acknowledge that we have a police and race problem in America. But he sounded like he’d just landed on the planet.



Kathleen Parker

Yes, quite head-scratching, all this police business.

Mosby’s remarks, jubilantly received by the Baltimore crowd, provoked high dudgeon elsewhere. Some of the words used to describe her performance have included “showboating,” “demagoguing” and “grandstanding.”

To some ears, Mosby sounded as though the cops’ convictions were a *fait accompli*. That she found the evidence convincing enough to justify the charges may ultimately also justify her bravura. Let’s do keep in mind that Gray’s offense was making eye contact with an officer and running away.

Gray’s voice box was crushed and his spine all but severed, according to his family. Anyone who watched the video could see that Gray was in terrible pain as he was led to the police van, where he was shackled and his pleas for help apparently ignored.

That his life ended in pain and horror is not in dispute. But no less a legal luminary than Alan Dershowitz has taken issue with the charges, saying, “There’s no plausible, hypothetical, conceivable case for murder under the facts as we now know them.”

Charges brought against the six officers included one count of second-degree murder, four counts of involuntary manslaughter, assault and misconduct in office.



Barrie Maguire/NewsArt.com

In other words, Mosby threw everything she could against the six officers. Many have asked: For justice? Or to quell the passions of the streets? Perhaps both. Mosby surely calculated that announcing the charges as she did — with a microphone in a public place — would have a dramatic effect. (She declined to be interviewed for this column.)

Mosby also was speaking as a member of her community, long plagued with a history of police brutality, including last year’s fatal beating of Tyrone West.

The medical examiner’s report concluded that West died of a prior heart condition that was exacerbated by dehydration, the July heat and his police encounter.

No charges were leveled against the

police in that case. Thus, from the perspective of many among Baltimore’s protesters, the current charges are long overdue. Even so, one does worry that the six officers are paying not only for their role in Gray’s death, to whatever degree this is determined, but also for the cumulative sins of others.

To the officers, the cheering and horn-honking following Mosby’s words must have sounded like the Colosseum mob’s cry for blood. To an older generation of Americans, they were reminiscent of the reaction 20 years ago when a mostly black jury found O.J. Simpson not guilty of murdering his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ron Goldman.

Whites: He totally did it.

Blacks: It’s our turn, in so many words.

This past week, whites across America spoke softly about the Freddie Gray case: “Thank God three of the cops were black.”

Perception.

President Obama, speaking after Mosby leveled her charges, called for truth.

How, indeed, do we get to it? In a diverse nation, we’ll never all see things exactly the same way, nor would we want to, but we might at least strive to recognize our own biases and judge our own perceptions as harshly as we do others’.

Kathleen Parker’s column is distributed by the Washington Post Writers Group.

Now there’s a place to inquire about life’s ultimate questions

Every reflective person sooner or later faces certain questions: What is the purpose of my life? How do I find a moral compass so I can tell right from wrong? What should I do day by day to feel fulfillment and deep joy?

As late as 50 years ago, Americans could consult lofty authority figures to help them answer these questions.

Some of these authority figures were public theologians. Reinhold Niebuhr was on the cover of Time magazine. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote about everything from wonder to sin to civil rights. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote a book called “On Being a Real Person” on how to live with integrity.

Other authority figures were part of the secular priesthood of intellectuals.

John Dewey advocated pragmatism. John-Paul Sartre and his American popularizers championed existentialism. Hannah Arendt wrote big books on evil and the life of the mind.

Public discussion was awash in philosophies about how to live well. There was a coherent moral ecology you could either go along with or rebel against.

All of that went away over the past generation or two. It is hard to think of any theologian with the same public influence that Niebuhr and Heschel had. Intellectuals are given less authority and are more specialized. They write more for each other and are less likely to volley moral systems onto the public stage.

These days we live in a culture that is more diverse, decentralized, interactive and democratized. The old days when gray-haired sages had all the answers about the ultimate issues of life are over. But new ways of having conversations about the core questions haven’t yet come into being.

Public debate is now undermoralized and overpoliticized. We have many shows where people argue about fiscal policy but not so many on how to find a vocation or how to measure the worth of your life. In fact, we



David Brooks

now hash out our moral disagreement indirectly, under the pretense that we’re talking about politics, which is why arguments about things like tax policy come to resemble holy wars.

Intellectual prestige has drifted away from theologians, poets and philosophers and toward neuroscientists, economists, evolutionary biologists and big data analysts. These scholars have a lot of knowledge to bring, but they’re not in the business of offering wisdom on the ultimate questions.

The shift has meant there is less moral conversation in the public square. I doubt people behave worse than before, but we are less articulate about the inner life. There are fewer places in public where people are talking about the things that matter most.

As a result, many feel lost or overwhelmed. They feel a hunger to live meaningfully, but they don’t know the right questions to ask, the right vocabulary to use, the right place to look or even if there are ultimate answers at all.

As I travel on a book tour, I find there is an amazing hunger to shift the conversation. People are ready to talk a little less about how to do things and to talk a little more about why ultimately they are doing them.

This is true among the young as much as the older. In fact, young people, raised in today’s hypercompetitive environment, are, if anything, hungrier to find ideals that will give meaning to their activities. It’s true of people in all social classes. Everyone is born with moral imagination — a need to feel that life is in service to some good.

The task now is to come up with forums where these sorts of conversations can happen in a more modern, personal and interactive way.

I thought I’d do my part by asking readers to send me their answers to the following questions: Do you think you have found the purpose to your life, professional or otherwise?



John Overmyer/NewsArt.com

If so, how did you find it? Was there a person, experience or book or sermon that decisively helped you get there?

If you have answers to these questions, go to the website for my book, “The Road to Character,” click on First Steps and send in your response. We’ll share as many as we can on the site’s blog called The Conversation, and I’ll write a column or two reporting on what I’ve learned about how people find purpose these days.

I hope this exercise will be useful in giving people an occasion to sit down and spell out the organizing frame of their lives. I know these essays will help others who are looking for meaning and want to know how to find more of it.

Mostly the idea is to use a community of conversation as a way to get somewhere: to revive old vocabularies, modernize old moral traditions, come up with new schools and labels so that people have more concrete building blocks and handholds as they try to figure out what life is all about.

David Brooks is a columnist for The New York Times.

GUEST VIEWPOINT

UO can move beyond institutional betrayal

By Jennifer Freyd
For The Register-Guard

On the evening of April 28, hundreds of people packed the Global Scholars Hall on the University of Oregon campus for a premier screening of “The Hunting Ground.”

A compelling exposé of rape and sexual violence on American college and university campuses, this documentary captures through real-life stories what my students and I have been researching for many years: the horrors of betrayal traumas — trauma resulting from events such as sexual assault but by a trusted other.

One particularly harmful betrayal trauma is institutional betrayal. Institutional betrayal is caused by institutions that we trust and depend upon — like colleges and universities — when those institutions take actions that harm us and when those institutions fail to protect us in ways we expect.

In one study, UO graduate student Carly Smith and I discovered that when a university betrays survivors of sexual violence — for instance, by making

it hard to report the abuse — this institutional betrayal causes significant additional harm to victims of sexual assault.

Sexual assault is bad for people; institutional betrayal makes it even worse. Our universities are supposed to protect their students, not harm them.

In a campuswide survey study conducted last summer at the UO, graduate students Marina Rosenthal and Carly Smith and I found not only high rates of sexual violence on this campus, but also that institutional betrayal was experienced by many students. Our survey revealed that those students who had been betrayed by the institution were also more likely to withdraw from educational opportunities.

After more than two decades researching sexual violence, I know that sexual violence is a substantial problem in every part of society and that stopping it entirely is a challenge. Universities, though, have the knowledge and resources to reduce sexual violence. Instead, it appears that universities are a place where these problems are amplified.

Stopping institutional be-

trayal is not rocket science; in fact, we could do this very quickly if we made it a priority. If we did stop the institutional betrayal we would then substantially reduce the rates of sexual violence on campus and the related gender inequity. If we did really stop the institutional betrayal, we would reduce a vast amount of human suffering. We would save lives.

“The Hunting Ground” captured some events at the UO. In one segment, former President Michael Gottfredson said that speculations that student safety has been compromised or that the administration did not act in the best interests of students were “very, very inappropriate.”

I was sitting in a large auditorium when Gottfredson said these words. It was at a Senate meeting last May. On that same day it had become known that I had filed a Clery Act complaint regarding the university’s handling of a sexual assault case. I felt horrified by his words then, and do so all over again now. Questioning the actions of the administration was said to be: “very very inappropriate.”

Our university president was

wrong. Silencing dissent is what is inappropriate. Silencing dissent is institutional betrayal.

Where are we today? We have made some progress but not nearly enough. It seems obvious that if this university actually prioritized protecting the civil rights and safety of students things would be very different by now.

What have sexual assault survivors and their allies learned at the UO this year?

◆ From the counterclaim in the lawsuit — which was later withdrawn under the pressure of students, professors and others — survivors and allies have learned what happens if one brings a complaint forward and tries to exercise one’s Title IX civil rights. It is called “shaming and blaming.”

◆ From the improper disclosure of the therapy records of a survivor, we have all learned what might happen should we talk to a therapist.

◆ From the statement that the counseling center’s policy was not changed, and then that the policy is not a policy, we have learned truth is not important. Yet as an institution

of higher education, truth is everything.

◆ From the retaliation that appears to have occurred toward employees who stand up for students, employees have learned to keep their mouths shut and students may have learned they are not important.

◆ From the neglect of crucial recommendations by the Senate Task Force — and from the recent announcement that the university will be hiring a Title IX coordinator who will be paid less than a new expert in public relations, also just advertised, we have learned — well, I will let you finish my sentence.

I realize that what I said may sound bleak. However, there is hope if our allies, inside and outside our institutions, work together to make changes. Apathy can be replaced with empathy and caring. Victims can become survivors. Truth-telling can replace public relations. And our hard-working administrators can move away from institutional betrayal.

Jennifer Freyd is a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon.