

# Reflection on the Summer of 2020

*By Associate Eleanor Fleming, Ph.D., DDS, MPH*

I have struggled to find the words to describe how I am reflecting upon the summer of 2020. There is a pandemic, Mr. Floyd died, Breonna Taylor's murderers still walk free, and most recently, the shooting of Jacob Blake. People are taking to the streets to demand justice.

In the midst of this, I am meditating, praying, and being still. Rather than bore you with a litany of my pain as a Black woman, please know that the experiences that many Black women have faced, so have I. Instead of Black pain, I want to share Black art in the form of this poem:

## **Why I Don't Write About George Floyd**

*By Toi Derricotte*

Because there is too much to say  
Because I have nothing to say  
Because I don't know what to say  
Because everything has been said  
Because it hurts too much to say  
What can I say what can I say  
Something is stuck in my throat  
Something is stuck like an apple  
Something is stuck like a knife  
Something is stuffed like a foot  
Something is stuffed like a body

I am a dental officer at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (yes, *that* CDC). My work is very specialized in dental public health. While I have, in theory, the entire U.S. non-institutionalized population as my “patient” to care for, I pretty much spend my days with data. As the data during the pandemic fills with Black people, poor people, and many underserved people dying from the coronavirus, it isn't easy to find great value in the work that I do.



So, I am making a change, and exploring other ways to use my training to be of service. My new ministry will take me back to Nashville, Tennessee, and my alma mater, Meharry Medical College. I have accepted a new position to serve as the Director for the Center of Education Development Services for the college and to work as an Associate Professor at the School of Dentistry in the Department of Dental Public Health.

Founded in 1876, Meharry is a historically Black college that, in the 21st century, continues to graduate more Black dentists than any other dental school in this country. It was the first medical college in the south for Blacks. Meharry is one of the nation's top five producers of primary care physicians and is a leading producer of Black Ph.D.s. in biomedical sciences.

My job will be to support these medical and dental students and public health and biological scientist doctoral students in their training. I like to think that I have the privilege of supporting them as they train to become health caring professionals. Yes, you read correctly: “health caring professionals.”

Meharry educates medical and dental professionals to provide care *and* caring. Meharrarians are taught to practice with empathy. Meharry alumni often practice in underserved communities (rural and urban settings); many see Medicaid and other poor patients in federally qualified health centers.

During the pandemic, a Meharry-trained physician in Miami was arrested for providing COVID-19 testing and other services to homeless communities. That's just one example of how Meharrarians practice health caring. In Nashville, the college offered free testing on campus and at many community gatherings. Nashvillians knew that if they wanted to be tested, Meharry would test them.

When I applied to dental school, I only applied to Meharry. I knew that I wanted to be a Meharrarian. When I decided to change careers and become a dentist, I found myself meditating on the ideas of service and worship. I wanted to make sure that whatever I did was in service to other people and also allowed me to worship God.

After meditating and meditating and meditating, I finally took a tour of Meharry. I saw on the wall on the first floor of the dental school: “Worship of God through service to mankind,” Meharry's motto. I literally saw the service and worship that I was looking for and knew that I had found my place in the world.

In returning home to Meharry and Tennessee, I am coming back with a mission to mentor the next generation of healers, to prepare them to be the compassionate health caring professionals and leaders that this world needs, and to encourage that in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, they can defy the racist and classist assumptions that say they are not smart enough, competent enough, and could never be a doctor.

COVID-19 has shown the world that health inequities kill. Black people are not dying solely because of the consequences of individual choices. They are dying because living in poor communities places working-class people at increased risk for disease, hospitals in their communities are under-resourced, health providers don't always listen to Black patients and treat them in the same ways that they treat White patients, and the combined effects of racism, poverty, and a pandemic have become a death sentence.

At Meharry, I will share what I have learned from working at CDC and training to be a public health dentist to help these future doctors save lives and support their communities that COVID-19 is shining a light on for the world. Going home also gives me a chance to shine my spiritual light. My current work is very structured, and at times my every word has to be approved by someone else. While the work has resulted in professional success, personally, it is crippling.

At Meharry, I will have the freedom to be my full self. When asked, “What does it mean to be Black and Catholic?,” Sister Thea Bowman explained, “It means that when I come to my church...I bring myself, my Black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I'm worth, all I hope to become. I bring my whole history, my traditions, my experience, my culture, my African-American song and dance and gesture, and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility as a gift to the church.”

To my new ministry at Meharry, I can bring my full and authentic self, all experiences, every ounce of my culture, and all of the spiritual capital, including how I live the Franciscan charism.

I find great hope and opportunity in the days ahead. If the men, women, and children marching in the streets are successful, this country will improve. If COVID-19 has taught us nothing else, the nation's healthcare delivery system and public health system have to change. I have no doubt that the students whose training I support will be in the hospitals, clinics, government agencies, and decision-making bodies practicing health caring. In the meantime, I pray for the intercession of St. Martin de Porres for an end to racism and liberation of all people. I hope that by shining my spiritual light, I can be a part of the changes that bring better health, greater equity, and justice to all communities.

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