

UCLA BLM – VA Faculty Reflections, 6/5/2020
Dr. Christina Harris

I want to first acknowledge all the hard work and dedication of our students and residents who worked together to make these events happen. Thank you for all that you do. They have asked me to pick a poem that speaks to how I am feeling in this moment. I picked one that some of you may already know. It was written in 1951 -- 69 years ago....but it feels like it could have been written yesterday.

“Harlem”

Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

This week has been one of the hardest in my academic life. I don't say this because of the surge of emails and posts that have overloaded my inboxes—all the statements, the articles, the toolkits. I say this because of the overwhelming grief and sadness that has filled my heart and makes me feel like was walking in water, and sometimes quicksand, with a constant drag on my body. It's all been so psychologic with both an emotional and physiologic toll. I have been walking around the hospital wondering if others are also experiencing this pain. I look into the eyes of those I encounter and search for a glimpse of something, anything to see that I am not alone in these feelings. Sometimes I can tell....and sometimes I can't. Today, as I look out at all these faces, I know that I am not alone and that I am not ever going to be alone.

I have also realized a couple of things about myself this week that are hard to admit out loud. First, is that I am capable of rage. I guess I have always kind of known that...I do have kids. But more notably that it has taken me this long -- too long -- to get to this point. I have always advocated for justice and promised to be the voice for the voiceless, and as I sat on my couch with my daughters this past Saturday and watched the fires burning at the protests my gut reaction was not of sadness at the destruction on TV, but of vindication for the rage that I was feeling in that very moment. I too felt like I was going to explode. This was a new-ish feeling for me. I now realize that this is because of my own privilege that I have experienced in my life. I have been shielded and protected in a way that I don't think I fully appreciated before this week. Today I stand here for those in our community who, due to repeated acts of discrimination and injustice, have lived in this physiologic state of anger and rage for generations. This past week I have heard countless stories and experiences that really demonstrate how much anger and hurt exists EVERYDAY in people we work side by side with. And because many don't feel comfortable engaging in conversation about racism or injustice we never ask....therefore we never know.

We must remember this day and the way we feel in this moment to make sure that entire groups of people no longer have to defer their dreams so that other can achieve there. We need to engage in these difficult conversations, this is our only way to start to move forward. As Angela Davis said, "I'm no longer accepting the things that I cannot change. I'm changing the things I cannot accept". I hope you too can make this commitment. Thank you.