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Everybody makes mistakes, and yet there is a clear and violent difference in the vindictiveness with which they are sought and punished.

Vermont enjoys a reputation of being more progressive and more concerned with its people than other states, for which I love it. Yet, I have seen Vermonters at time become so accustomed to this title that we hesitate to acknowledge our most glaring flaws for fear of losing it. I expect the room knows we incarcerate people of color at many times the rate of white people in our state, including actually leading the country most black citizens incarcerated per capita. I expect the room also knows this is not because these members of our community are, by their nature, disposed to committing more crime. It is because these are the individuals that our law enforcement is trained to watch with the most suspicion, and imprison the longest the instant they make a mistake. I am here to remind us to address the biases that result in a culture of looking for an excuse to distrust and hurt these members of our community.

I have seen the eyes of my friends who will speak to me about their struggles that they are afraid. They know that they literally can not walk down the street without someone looking for an excuse to arrest them, and they are not exaggerating. In the latin community, I have seen my friends react with despair as ICE hunts for any reason it can to tear family and friends apart, and sometimes succeeds. My black friends have confided in me about having the police called on them just for waiting on the sidewalk for their parents, or how they had to avoid playing with their white friends growing up if the game was nerf guns or super soakers, because where white children wouldn't be bothered, a black child had to learn to fear being literally shot to death. We have seen that this fear is not paranoid because we have seen it happen.

To make change will take commitment. It is difficult to write rules that by themselves guarantee equality and safety, when those in power look for excuses to apply the rules in ways that guarantee the opposite. It is difficult to make rules that are strong when people in power, police or otherwise, act like enemies instead of friends, hunting for weaknesses in the rules. Because of that we must develop a culture of care, thoughtfulness, and routine examination of the structures and systems that lead to these injustices. We must change the way we educate one another and we must change the way we reflect on ourselves. Perhaps most importantly, we absolutely MUST change the way we listen. We must make commitments to hearing the leadership of people of color in our community and we must commit to being willing to be changed by it, and to encourage these voices wherever we find them.

Sometimes, it takes time and care to encourage my friends to speak. I have seen people who are white convince themselves that since they do not hear about these things too much, they are not that big of a problem. The silence is something we created ourselves. My friends who have been born black or brown have explained to me time and time again how any attempt to speak up for themselves is quickly crushed by varying forms of social and economic punishment too various and sometimes too subtle to explain in the time I've been given. And so my friends have learned to hide. I have had people come to me and ask to my face to speak on their behalf, because they knew a white man would be listened to where they would not. I have seen with my own eyes rooms full of white people roll their eyes at the powerful words of my friends who found the courage to speak, and then change their minds when I spoke up and said something!

We can not allow the voices of our community to continue being crushed. We absolutely must address our entitlement as white people to set the rules for other people on what is and isn't racism. We must listen when people of color in our community speak, and we must take them seriously. Perhaps most importantly, we must support their election to chairs and offices where they have the power to implement their voice and make change themselves or else our commitment is lip service as we continue to clutch our power over others.

By committing to change how we handle criminal justice, what we have is an opportunity to demonstrate that we mean it when we say that we, as Vermonters, care. It is not the only step necessary, but it is an important one. I urge us to invest not only in programs that improve our rules but also in those that address the motives and biases in following them held by our officials. In doing so we take a step showing that Vermont is committed to not just the idea, but also the actions, of justice.

Thank you.