
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Dignity

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

Do you remember the last words of Jesus?

The Gospels record seven phrases, traditionally called words, that were uttered by Jesus during his crucifixion.

I recently heard a powerful new musical composition by a young composer named Joel Thompson. It's titled [The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed](#). Thompson published it while he was the Upper School Chorus Director at Holy Innocents Episcopal School in Atlanta.

Thompson uses the last words of seven unarmed black men who have recently been killed by police or other authorities. For example, the traditional third word of Jesus is, "Mother, this is your son. Son, this is your mother." Thompson builds the third movement around the last words of Amadou Diallo, a young African immigrant who in 1999 was shot 41 times by NYC police officers who mistook him for a serial rapist. He had just phoned his mother to tell her that he was going to college.

Thompson said that he was trying to create space for empathy. He does that by connecting us to a struggle that we might not feel is our own. Trayvon Martin asked the neighborhood watch volunteer who ultimately killed him, "what are you following me for?" I couldn't listen to those words without getting a sense of what it feels like to be followed.

But, to be clear, Thompson's work goes beyond politics. There is anger in it, but it's not about anger. You don't have to agree with any particular view of who is to blame for what happened to these men to feel the pain of their deaths. You just have to let the music speak to you about how their lives mattered.

Just listening to the music feels like a spiritual practice. You might think of it as practicing "ubuntu" – an African term meaning humanity that is often translated as "I am because we are." As one student who performed the piece in Boston said, "we listened to each other, and we grew together through song."

Restoring dignity lost starts with listening, I think.

Your affectionate uncle,

Ames