

Celebrating and Elevating Black Public Employees

Past, Present, and Future

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Warm greetings to each of you. It is my honor and pleasure to share with you today. I am continually humbled by the invitation to use my voice to inspire and uplift others. I do not take these opportunities for granted. Thank you.

I stand before you today with the weight of a world that has clearly indicated its value of Black life—a value that condones anti-Black racism, White supremacy, and white nationalist groups. And while the weight I am holding and many of you listening to me today hold is heavy and overwhelming, I also want to give you a message of light, hope, and love—of resilience and beauty in the midst of all the ugly.

I have been in many spaces lately speaking to Black employees about what they are experiencing each day, personally and professionally, as they watch the world take sharp twists and turns at the blink of an eye. A reoccurring theme rest in one key question that Black colleagues in these spaces keep asking:

How can I continue showing up?

How can I continue to show up when I am filled with pain, trauma, confusion, and anger? How can I keep doing my best job, being my best self when everything inside me is screaming run, hide, cry, fight? So, I want to talk to you today about what it means to continue showing up---in spite of. And, I hope my words remind you of the light, hope, and love we carry inside of each of us.

For as long as I can remember, I have been impacted by words and more specifically the spoken word/poetry. So today, as I share with you, I will also gift you with the words of Black folks who have and continue to inspire me.

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1. **Show up as the complete, unapologetic, authentic YOU!** I know many of you are thinking---how can I do this when everything about my work environment, work culture tells me that the real me is not workplace appropriate. Here is the reality—it takes a lot of energy and is an emotional toll to “wear the mask,” as the famed Black poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar told us.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

Recently I have been asked what compelled me to share my feelings in an email to City of Portland staff back in May press conferences after the murder of George Floyd, or editorial pieces written over the past few months; I can only attribute this to my refusal to “wear the mask.” I feel that my reflections on everything that is happening around us is not only part of my professional obligation as a

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champion for equity, but also as a part of my personal growth and healing. I am learning that it does not benefit me or the work if I hide behind the words and images that dominant culture approves.

I recently wrote an op ed piece that received a ton of criticism from white nationalist; honestly, I was heavily impacted by the words—angry and hurt. I had several moments over the course of a 3-day period where I asked myself, “Did I say something wrong? Was I too real?” Then, a colleague of mine reminded me that if you have “haters” in the work of equity and social justice, you must be doing something right. It reminded me that I can’t grin and lie as I watch communities of color continue to suffer trauma from our systems. It takes up too much mental space to pretend, so I have chosen, with conviction instead, to continue showing up as my authentic self.

- 2. Show up by asking the tough questions!** This is a tricky balance because once we have decided that part of continuing to show up means embracing our true selves, this comes with the added responsibility of speaking up even when we feel exhausted. I have often asked myself the questions--- do I have the strength to educate people about themselves today? Do I have the stamina to help somebody do their work? Do I have the patience to have my knowledge and skills extracted and used as though original ideas? The simple answer is no. The continuing to showing up answer is--- I need to keep rising. In the words of the late poet laureate Maya Angelou:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.
Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

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Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain

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I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

It is imperative that Black employees hold leadership accountable. If there are policies or practices that are inherently inequitable for Black employees—tell leadership and request changes. It is critical that Black employees advocate for shifts in recruitment, hiring, and retention practices, equitable compensation, and career advancement. Black employees must vocalize what they need from the City—the Mayor, Council, directors, managers—to experience an increased degree of safety, openness, productiveness, and trust. We must continue showing up by asking the tough questions and demanding the answers.

- 3. Show up by recognizing when you need to take a break and take care of yourself!** Audre Lorde wrote, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." I would never tell you to continue showing up by being your authentic self, asking the tough questions, and not also acknowledge that Black folks are tired. We need a break. We need to take care of ourselves, and we don't need to ask permission or be made to feel guilty about it. There has been an increased focus on wellness in the workplace—especially given the impacts of COVID-19 and

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a forced adjustment to a new normal. There are plenty of tips and tricks to recognize when you need a break and what to do for yourself when you get it. I have found myself using a variety of self-care practices to re-center, to re-focus when the feeling of overwhelm starts to creep in. Prayer, deep breathing exercises, laughter with friends, playing with my children, watching horrible reality TV, listening to old school 90s music, and cooking a new recipe for my family are all practices that are helping me navigate through these uncertain, turbulent times. But the reality is sometimes that is not enough. It is especially not enough when I am in the middle of my 5th Zoom meeting, tired and frustrated. These are the moments when we need to know it is ok to just step away—even in the middle, even in the midst. And, we must find the courage to tell our colleagues and our supervisors that we need a break or that we need help. This is not a sign of weakness nor should it be used against you professionally. Continuing to show up means continuing to center YOU—to take care of YOU.

- 4. Showing by staying ready.** Ready for what you might ask? Ready for the reality that things might get tougher before they get easier. What tools do you have in your toolbox? How are you prepared to ride out whatever comes next? This is just as much about your personal life and taking care of your loved ones as it is about your professional life and having a sense of direction. My college biology teacher would often remind us that “Proper planning, prevents poor performance.” I understand what he meant now, and it wasn’t just about the quality of work, it was a message about showing up with the necessary tools to do the job. Continue to plan, even in all the uncertainty around us. What will be your next career move? If you aren’t satisfied with your current role OR your skills and expertise are not being utilized to their full potential, have a plan to advocate for yourself and think about what’s next if the results are unsatisfactory. Don’t hesitate to raise concerns about your compensation, your work plan, your future. Our history of slavery in this country has impacted us so deeply, we don’t often recognize the plantation mentality that manifest itself in us on a professional level—we keep our heads down, don’t want to cause any trouble, are often worried about losing our job or position in an organization, we fail to advocate for ourselves, and we are reluctant to speak up when we experience or witness inequities. I am here to tell you today—we can longer enslave

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ourselves mentally, emotionally, and physically. And while our true freedom in this country is questionable at times, I can assure you giving yourself the permission to be free from the shackles of our tortured past will be the best defense you have in a system that was designed and functions with white supremacist ideologies. Continue showing up by staying ready and be willing to make a move if what you are experiencing is not just or equitable.

5. **Show up by acknowledging your WHY.** Ask yourself: What is my purpose? We often answer our why with our what—I am a director, assistant, coach, mentor, trainer. I am challenging you to contemplate your why. My what is the Director of the Office of Equity and Human for the City of Portland. My why is my maternal and paternal great-grandmother and grandmothers: Lula Mae, Arlessie T., Jessie Mae, and Martha. My why is my mother Brenda and my father Charles. My why are my children Cadence and Bryson. My why is Black life, Black community, Black brilliance, Black excellence, Black joy. My why is equity, social justice, dismantling systems of oppression, and providing space and voice for Black and Brown folx. The poet Claude McKay speaks to a why:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,

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Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

So, I ask you today, what is your why? How are you moving beyond the simple “what” and digging deep into your purpose to continue showing up.

- 6. Finally, show up by loving and encouraging each other.** Now more than ever, we need each other. Black people are not a monolith, we are unique in experience, background, beliefs, and values. And, yet, we are a collective. Connected and intertwined by a shared history, shared trauma, shared grief, shared joy. There are moments in time where we have been forced to think otherwise, to be at odds with one another, to exhibit an attitude and mentality that promotes divisiveness and competition—we have been told it is more acceptable to hate on each other rather than bond together in love. I am here today to tell you that we need each other. As we watch the crises of this world play out before us, we need each other. And to continue showing up in spite of, we need each other. I leave you with the Black Family Pledge by Maya Angelou. It is my sincere desire that you continue showing up knowing you are not alone and that by simply being Black, you are drenched in light, hope, love, and beauty.

BECAUSE we have forgotten our ancestors,
our children no longer give us honor.

BECAUSE we have lost the path our ancestors cleared
kneeling in perilous undergrowth,
our children cannot find their way.

BECAUSE we have banished the God of our ancestors,
our children cannot pray.

BECAUSE the long wails of our ancestors
have faded beyond our hearing,
our children cannot hear us crying.

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BECAUSE we have abandoned our wisdom of mothering and fathering,
our befuddled children give birth to children
they neither want nor understand.

BECAUSE we have forgotten how to love, the adversary is within our gates,
and holds us up to the mirror of the world shouting,

“Regard the loveless.”

Therefore We Pledge

to bind ourselves again to one another,

to embrace our lowliest,

to keep company with our loneliest,

to educate our illiterate,

to feed our starving,

to clothe our ragged,

to do all good things,

knowing that we are more than keepers of our brothers and sisters.

We ARE our Brothers and Sisters.

IN HONOR of those who toiled and implored God with golden tongues,
and in gratitude to the same God who brought us out of hopeless desolation,

We make this pledge.