

Many of you are aware of Neil deGrasse Tyson, astrophysicist and Director of the Hayden Planetarium in NYC as well as host of several PBS NOVA science programs, prolific author, and Princeton professor

As an FYI he will be speaking at the Norfolk Forum: October 26, 2021 -7:30 p.m. Chrysler Hall

We know of the public face of people like Dr. Tyson and Dr. Henry Louis Gates, but we don't often know of the private aspects of their lives. For instance, the arrest of Professor Gates by the Cambridge, Mass. police for suspicion of robbery of his own home.

In June 2020 Dr. Tyson wrote an inciteful article, ***Reflections on the Color of My Skin***, in which he recounted incidents he had with police and the conversations with he had with other Black colleagues and their experiences.

His article follows. Please take a few minutes to read this over. He makes several observations and suggests.

The article includes many perspectives I never thought about or encountered. As I've said before, ***you really don't know what you don't know***.

One statement in particular struck me, particularly since I've never felt the need to have such a discussion with my boys or feared for their safety at such a basic level:

"Since childhood my parents instilled in me and my siblings, via monthly, sometimes weekly lessons, rules of conduct to avoid getting shot by the police. "Make sure that when you get stopped, the officer can always see both of your hands." "No sudden movements." "Don't reach into your pockets for anything without announcing this in advance." "When you move at all, tell the officer what you are about to do." At the time, I am a budding scientist in middle school, just trying to learn all I can about the universe. I hardly ever think about the color of my skin. It never comes up when contemplating the cosmos. Yet when I exit my front door, I'm a crime suspect. Add to this the recently coined '[White Caller Crime](#),'"

Reflections on the Color of My Skin By Neil deGrasse Tyson June 3, 2020

At a physics conference I attended long ago, while sipping wine left over from the final dinner, a dozen of us peeled off and started arguing about fun geeky things. Why does Superman need a cape? And why do cans of Diet Pepsi float while cans of regular Pepsi sink? And how would the Star Trek transporter actually work? As the evening progressed, just after a discussion of momentum transfer in car accidents, one of us mentioned a time when the police stopped him while driving. The officer ordered him from his sports car and conducted a thorough search of his body, the car's cabin, and the trunk before sending him on his way with

a hefty ticket. The charge for stopping him? Driving twenty miles per hour over the local speed limit. Try as we did, we could not muster sympathy for his case.

My colleague had other encounters with the law that he shared later that night, but his first story started a chain reaction among us. **One by one we each recalled multiple incidents of being stopped by the police. None of the accounts were particularly violent or life-threatening, although it was easy to extrapolate to highly publicized cases that were.** One of my colleagues had been stopped for driving too slowly. He was admiring the local flora as he drove through a New England town in the autumn. Another had been stopped because he was speeding, but only by five miles per hour. He was questioned and then released without getting a ticket. Still another colleague had been stopped and questioned for jogging down the street late at night.

As for me, I had a dozen different encounters to draw from. There was the time I was stopped late at night at an underpass on an empty road in New Jersey for having changed lanes without signaling. The officer told me to get out of my car and questioned me for ten minutes around back with the headlights of his squad car brightly illuminating my face. Is this your car? Yes. Who is the woman in the passenger seat? My wife. Where are you coming from? My parent's house. Where are you going? Home. What do you do for a living? I am an astrophysicist at Princeton University. What's in your trunk? A spare tire, and a lot of other greasy junk. He went on to say that the "real reason" why **he stopped me was because my car's license plates were much newer and shinier than the 17-year-old Ford that I was driving.** The officer was just making sure that neither the car nor the plates were stolen.

Among my other stories, I had been stopped by campus police while transporting my home supply of physics textbooks into my newly assigned office in graduate school. They had stopped me at the entrance to the physics building where they asked accusatory questions about what I was doing. It was 11:30 p.m. Open-topped boxes of graduate math and physics textbooks filled the trunk. And I was transporting them into the building, which left me wondering how often that scenario shows up in police training videos.

We went on for two more hours. But before we retired for the night we searched for common denominators among the stories. We had all driven different cars—some were old, others were new, some were undistinguished, others were high performance imports. Some police stops were in the daytime, others were at night. Taken one-by-one, each encounter with the law could be explained as an isolated incident where, in modern times, we all must forfeit some freedoms to ensure a safer society for us all. Taken collectively, however, you would think the cops had a vendetta against physicists because that was the only profile we all had in common. In this parade of automotive stop-and-frisks, one thing was for sure, the stories were not singular, novel moments playfully recounted. They were common, recurring episodes. How could this assembly of highly educated scientists, each in possession of the PhD—the highest academic degree in the land—be so vulnerable to police inquiry in their lives? Maybe the police cued on something else. Maybe it was the color of our skin. The conference I had been attending was the 23rd meeting of the National Society of Black Physicists. We were guilty not of DWI (Driving While Intoxicated), but of other violations none of us knew were on the books: DWB (Driving While Black), WWB (Walking While Black), and of course, JBB (Just Being Black).

None of us were beaten senseless. None of us were shot. But what does it take for a police encounter to turn lethal? On average, police in America [kill more than 100 unarmed black](#)

[people](#) per year. Who never made it to our circle? I suspect our multi-hour conversation would be rare among most groups of law-abiding people.

As I compose this, about 10,000 chanting protestors are filing past my window in Manhattan. And because of the intermittent looting and related violence, the curfew for this evening has been pushed earlier, to 8 p.m., from 11 p.m. in the preceding days. The most common placard was “Black Lives Matter.” Many others simply displayed the name George Floyd, who was handcuffed face-down on the street with a police officer’s knee on the back of his neck, applied with a force of at least half the officer’s body weight, resulting in his death. Curious irony that NFL star Colin Kaepernick offered a simple demonstration of care and concern for the fate of black people in the custody of police officers. He simply took a knee during the Star Spangled Banner before football games. (One media outlet mangled the moment by describing him as protesting the national anthem itself.) The outrage against his silent act of concern for a national problem persisted through the 2017 season when, as a free agent, he went unsigned by any team to continue his livelihood.

So, we went from a peaceful knee on the ground to a fatal knee on the neck.

The way peaceful protesters and the press are being shoved, maced, tear-gassed, pepper-sprayed, and tackled [in the streets](#) of our cities (when the police should have focused on arresting the looters) you would think the protestors were doing something illegal or un-American. But, of course, the U.S. Constitution has something to say about it:

Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom ... of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Which amendment was that? The First Amendment. So, the founders of this nation felt quite strongly about it. As such, protesting for redress of grievances is one of the most American things you can do. If you are the police, pause and reflect how great is the country whose Constitution endorses peaceful protests.

What do we actually expect from our police officers? To protect the peace and arrest the bad guys, I presume. But also, to be armed with lethal force that they can use when necessary. That part clearly [requires training](#) on how and when to use (and not use) the power of your weapons. The rigorous Minneapolis Police Academy training lasts 4 months. The slightly more rigorous NYC Police Academy lasts 6 months.

Yet to become a certified pastry chef at a [prestigious culinary academy](#) requires 8 months. The perfect croissant needs it. So maybe, just maybe, police recruits could benefit from a bit more training before becoming officers.

In 1991, Rodney King (age 25) was struck dozens of times, while on the ground, by four LAPD officers, with their batons, after being tased. The [grainy 1990s video](#) of that went media-viral, inducing shock and dismay to any viewer.

But I wasn’t shocked at all.

Based on what I already knew of the world, my first thought was, “We finally got one of those on tape.” Followed by, “Maybe justice will be served this time.” Yes, that’s precisely my first thought. Why? **Since childhood my parents instilled in me and my siblings, via monthly, sometimes weekly lessons, rules of conduct to avoid getting shot by the police. “Make sure that when you get stopped, the officer can always see both of your hands.” “No sudden movements.” “Don’t reach into your pockets for anything without announcing this in advance.”**

“When you move at all, tell the officer what you are about to do.” At the time, I am a budding scientist in middle school, just trying to learn all I can about the universe. I hardly ever think about the color of my skin. It never comes up when contemplating the cosmos. Yet when I exit my front door, I’m a crime suspect. Add to this the recently coined “[White Caller Crime](#),” where scared White people call the police because they think an innocent black person is doing something non-innocent, and it’s a marvel that any of us achieve at all.

The rate of abuse? Between one and five skin-color-instigated incidents per week, for every week of my life. White people must have known explicitly if not implicitly of this struggle. Why else would the infamous phrase, “I’m free, white, and 21” even exist? Here is a [compilation of that line](#) used in films across the decades. Yes, it’s offensive. But in America, it’s also truthful. Today’s often-denied “white privilege” accusation was, back then, often-declared.

The deadly LA riots associated with the Rodney King incident are often remembered as a response to the beating. But no. Los Angeles was quiet for 13 months afterward. Everyone had confidence, as did I, that the video was just the kind of evidence needed to finally bring about a conviction in the abuse of power. But that’s not what came to pass. The riots were a response to the acquittal of the four officers in the incident, and not to the incident itself. And what is a riot if not the last act of helpless desperation.

The 1989 film by Spike Lee “Do the Right Thing,” which explored 1980s black-white-police tensions in Brooklyn, New York, ends with a dedication to the families of six people. [Eleanor Bumpers](#) (age 66), [Michael Griffith](#) (age 23), [Arthur Miller](#) (age 30), [Edmund Perry](#) (age 17), [Yvonne Smallwood](#) (age 28), and [Michael Stewart](#) (age 25). All are black. One was killed by a white mob. The rest were unarmed and shot by police or otherwise died while in police custody. All deaths occurred within the 10 years preceding film, and all occurred in New York City. None of the police-induced deaths resulted in convictions, as [continues to be true](#) for 99% of all police killings.

We know of these events because they each ended in death. But even so, back then, it was just local news. Was this just NYC’s problem? I asked myself. But for every police-related death anywhere, how many unarmed victims are shot by police and don’t die, or are wrongfully maimed or injured? Most of those cases didn’t even make the local news. But if you lived in those neighborhoods, you knew. We all knew. For what it’s worth, NYC now has the [lowest police-caused death rate](#) per capita among the sixty largest cities in the US. Could it be those extra two months in the New York Police Academy?

The corrosion and ultimate erosion of our confidence in the legal system in cases such as these, even in the face of video evidence, has spawned a tsunami of protests. With sympathetic demonstrations across the United States and around the world. If the threat of prison time for this behavior does not exist—acting as a possible deterrent—then the behavior must somehow stop on its own.

Some studies show that the risk of death for an unarmed person at the hands of the police is approximately the same no matter the demographics of who gets arrested. Okay. But if your demographic gets stopped ten times more than others, then your demographic will die at ten times the rate. But even after we get the bias factor down to zero, there’s still the matter of police killing unarmed suspects, [white people included](#).

I talk a lot. But I don’t talk much about any of this, or the events along this path-of-most-resistance that have shaped me. Why? Because throughout my life I’ve used these occasions

as launch-points to succeed even more. Yes, I parlayed the persistent rejections of society, which today might be called micro-aggressions, into reservoirs of energy to achieve. I [learned that from my father](#), himself [active in the Civil Rights Movement](#) during the 1950s and 1960s.

In a way, I am who I am precisely because countless people, by their actions or inactions, said I would never be what I became. But what becomes of you if you don't possess this deep supply of fuel? Who from historically disenfranchised communities, including women, LGBTQ+, and anybody of color, is missing—falling shy of their full potential, because they ran out of energy and gave up trying.

Are things better today than yesterday? Yes. But one measure of this truth is a bit perverse. Decades ago, unarmed black people getting beaten or killed by the police barely merited the local news. But now it's national news—even breaking news—no matter where in the country it occurs.

So how to change all this? Organizations have surely put forth demands for police departments. Here, I offer a list of my own, for policy experts to consider:

1. Extend police academies to include months of cultural awareness and sensitivity training that also includes how not to use lethal force.
2. All police officers should be tested for any [implicit bias](#) they carry, with established thresholds of acceptance and rejection from the police academy. We all carry bias. But most of us do not hold the breathing lives of others in our hands when influenced by it.
3. During protests, protect property. Protect lives. If you attack nonviolent protesters you are being un-American. And we wouldn't need draconian curfews if police arrested looters instead of protesters.
4. If fellow officers are behaving in a way that is clearly unethical or excessively violent, and you witness this, please stop them. Someone will get that on video, offering the rest of us confidence that you can police yourselves. In these cases, our trust in you matters more to a civil society than how much you stick up for each other.
5. And here's a radical idea for the Minneapolis Police Department—why not give George Floyd the kind of full-dress funeral you give each other for dying in the line of duty? And vow that such a death will never happen again.
6. Lastly, when you see black kids in the street, think of what they can be rather than what you think they are.

Respectfully Submitted,

Neil deGrasse Tyson — trying hard to Keep Looking Up.
New York City