

UNDER OUR SKIN

GETTING REAL
ABOUT RACE—
AND GETTING FREE
FROM THE FEARS
AND FRUSTRATIONS
THAT DIVIDE US



BENJAMIN WATSON
WITH KEN PETERSEN

Benjamin Watson is one of the most intelligent and thoughtful men I have ever met, inside or outside of football. When he examines a topic, it is never from the perspective of societal norms or cultural traditions. His observations are always based on sound, biblical principles. I know you will benefit from his insights into race and religion in the United States today.

TONY DUNGY

Super Bowl-winning head coach and *New York Times* bestselling author

Packed with germane insights, this eye-opening book challenges current trends in American race relations, providing an important context for conversations about finding roads to racial unity. Read this book and be better prepared to narrow the gap between our national creeds and deeds.

BARRY C. BLACK

Chaplain of the United States Senate

Not many people can speak so honestly and eloquently about such a tough issue. From personal experiences and wisdom, Benjamin Watson shows great perspective on every side and challenges us all to embrace a higher moral and spiritual purpose in solving it.

DREW BREES

Quarterback, New Orleans Saints

If you thought you were moved by Benjamin's words in the wake of Ferguson, wait until you read this book. It is intensely personal, provoking real race discussions based on his own life and the issues still plaguing this nation. More importantly, though, my friend Benjamin leaves us with a sense of hope.

BROOKE BALDWIN

Anchor, CNN

Benjamin Watson is an important African American voice of balance and sanity in a world of racial chaos and confusion. He has used his platform as an NFL player to speak God's

perspective on race. In this work, Ben will encourage and challenge you to think rightly and righteously about addressing the sin that is destroying our nation.

DR. TONY EVANS

Senior pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship and president
of The Urban Alternative

A must-read for anyone who is frustrated by the racial strife and problems in our world—and ready to become part of the solution. Stop everything you're doing and read what Benjamin Watson has to say.

MARK RICHT

Head football coach, University of Georgia

I am honored to recommend my friend Benjamin Watson's first book, *Under Our Skin*. Ben has grabbed the attention of our nation with insightful writings on many of the issues that divide us. God has expanded Ben's reach way beyond the football field. I believe Ben is a voice for our time. In *Under Our Skin*, you will soon see why his wisdom on the issue of race in our nation is so needed.

CHRISTOMLIN

Musician, songwriter

This is a message every one of us needs to hear, and we're listening to what Benjamin Watson has to say. *Under Our Skin* is unflinchingly honest, strong, and authentic. You won't be able to put it down, and it will surprise, challenge, and inspire you in ways you never expected.

HOLLY ROBINSON PEETE

Actress, author, philanthropist

RODNEY PEETE

Former NFL quarterback, author, entrepreneur

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Under Our Skin: Getting Real about Race—and Getting Free from the Fears and Frustrations that Divide Us

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Designed by Alberto C. Navata Jr.

Edited by Dave Lindstedt

Published in association with the literary agency of Legacy, LLC, 501 N. Orlando Avenue, Suite #313-348, Winter Park, FL 32789.

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The stories in this book are about real people and real events, but some names have been changed for the privacy of the individuals involved.

ISBN 978-1-4964-1329-1

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To my mother and father, for teaching me the power
of words, to think before I react, to stand firm in my
beliefs, and to always speak the truth in love.*

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INTRODUCTION

ON AUGUST 9, 2014, I turned on the television in my hotel room at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, where I was at training camp with my team, the New Orleans Saints. I remember thinking, *No, not again!* as I watched the news reports about how Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, had been shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri.

Riots ensued and continued over the next several weeks as every news outlet in America descended on Ferguson during a summer when things seemed to be falling apart and no one could make sense of what was happening. Considering that Eric Garner had died in a police chokehold on the streets of Staten Island only a month earlier, and John Crawford had been shot to death by the police while shopping in an Ohio Walmart on August 5, the national consciousness was on high alert and ready to erupt when word came of yet another questionable death of a black man at the hands of the police.

As protests, mostly peaceful, sprouted up in cities across the country, the outcry against police brutality, coupled with looting and civil unrest, prompted my father to say that he hadn't seen

scenes like these since the upheaval of the 1960s. Things had gotten scary, and all the facts had not yet been released or even discovered.

On August 20, a grand jury began hearing evidence to decide whether there was probable cause to indict Darren Wilson for shooting Michael Brown. Over the next three months, eyewitness accounts and testimony from the hearings were leaked to the media, increasing speculation about what the grand jury would decide. *State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson* was often the number one story on the major news networks, with constant updates for each sliver of fact or opinion from a plethora of contributing lawyers, law enforcement officials, and civil rights activists. As week 1 of the NFL season turned into weeks 4, 5, and 6, anticipation mounted. Finally, by mid-November, week 12, we all got our answer.

It was a big week in the Saints' locker room. After stumbling out of the gate, we were a dismal 4–6 and in desperate need of a home win after two straight losses. Our chance to turn things around would come on November 24, on *Monday Night Football*, against a solid Baltimore Ravens team.

As the week progressed and we prepared for the game, there was talk on the networks that an announcement about Ferguson was imminent; but as game time approached, I laid aside my apprehension about when that might happen to focus on the job at hand.

Though the Saints had fared well in night games in recent years, that Monday night game was not one of them, and we were beaten by the Ravens, 34–27. Disappointed about the game and the season in general, I didn't check social media after the game. And because *Monday Night Football* games are broadcast in prime time, they're usually not over until after 11 p.m. anyway. That night, all I wanted to do was meet my wife in the family area and go home.

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It was Kirsten who broke the news to me about Ferguson.

“They made a decision,” she said, and by the look on her face I could tell it wasn’t good. As we made the short drive from the Superdome to our house, she filled me in on the details and on the explosion of response on social media.

When we got home, I stayed up until the early hours of the morning watching the tears, screams, anger, and frustration of people across the nation as they flocked to the streets of their cities. I listened to the legal experts give their opinions and analysis regarding what the grand jury must have seen and heard—or not seen or heard—that led them to determine there was no probable cause to indict Officer Wilson.

After three months of waiting and wondering, I was shocked. I was upset. I was disappointed. I wanted to scream and cry at the same time. It wasn’t just about Michael Brown; it was about an entire summer filled with questionable encounters in which black men had lost their lives.

Sometimes, God lays something on my heart, and I have the urge to write. I had that feeling that night, and I tried to organize my thoughts; but I didn’t know where to start. Everything I wrote felt as if it didn’t quite capture the message I wanted to convey. I was angry, but I didn’t want to respond emotionally and later regret what I had said. I went to sleep thinking about how—and even *if*—I should say what I was feeling in my heart.

The next morning, I decided to simply start writing exactly what I was feeling. We were off on Tuesday, as is customary in the NFL, and I didn’t have to be back to work until early Wednesday morning. A teammate was hosting an event for the homeless that evening, so between family time with the kids and attending the charity event, my opportunities to write were sporadic.

Later that evening, we stopped at Target to pick up a few household items for a couple who had fallen on hard times. I sat

in the car with the kids while my wife went into the store. With my iPhone in hand, I put the finishing touches on the thoughts I had been typing throughout the day in my Notes app.

When I was done, I hesitated for a moment and thought about the response I would receive for engaging in such a divisive situation. Though I'm not proud to admit it, I even second-guessed whether I should mention the hope I have in God, even though it is truly the anchor for my life.

People always say, "*Think* before you push Send." Well, I thought, and then I pushed Send, forwarding my response to a friend who helps with my website so that he could post it to my Facebook account (which, at the time, I had no idea how to do myself). Sitting in the driver's seat, with our four kids behind me, I sent the following post.

At some point while I was playing or preparing to play on *Monday Night Football*, the news broke about the Ferguson decision. After trying to figure out how I felt, I decided to write it down. Here are my thoughts:

I'M ANGRY because the stories of injustice that have been passed down for generations seem to be continuing before our very eyes.

I'M FRUSTRATED because pop culture, music, and movies glorify these types of police-citizen altercations and promote an invincible attitude that continues to get young men killed in real life, away from the safety of movie sets and music studios.

I'M FEARFUL because in the back of my mind I know that although I'm a law-abiding citizen I could still be looked upon as a "threat" to those who don't know me.

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So I will continue to have to go the extra mile to earn the benefit of the doubt.

I'M EMBARRASSED because the looting, violent protests, and law breaking only confirm, and in the minds of many, validate, the stereotypes and thus the inferior treatment.

I'M SAD because another young life was lost from his family; the racial divide has widened; a community is in shambles; accusations, insensitivity, hurt, and hatred are boiling over, and we may never know the truth about what happened that day.

I'M SYMPATHETIC because I wasn't there so I don't know exactly what happened. Maybe Darren Wilson acted within his rights and duty as an officer of the law and killed Michael Brown in self-defense like any of us would in the circumstance. Now he has to fear the backlash against himself and his loved ones when he was only doing his job. What a horrible thing to endure. Or maybe he provoked Michael and ignited the series of events that led to his eventually murdering the young man to prove a point.

I'M OFFENDED because of the insulting comments I've seen that are not only insensitive but dismissive to the painful experiences of others.

I'M CONFUSED because I don't know why it's so hard to obey a policeman. You will not win!!! And I don't know why some policemen abuse their power. Power is a responsibility, not a weapon to brandish and lord over the populace.

I'M INTROSPECTIVE because sometimes I want to take "our" side without looking at the facts in situations like these. Sometimes I feel like it's us against them. Sometimes I'm just as prejudiced as people I point fingers at. And that's not right. How can I look at white skin and make assumptions but not want assumptions made about me? That's not right.

I'M HOPELESS because I've lived long enough to expect things like this to continue to happen. I'm not surprised and at some point my little children are going to inherit the weight of being a minority and all that it entails.

I'M HOPEFUL because I know that while we still have race issues in America, we enjoy a much different normal than those of our parents and grandparents. I see it in my personal relationships with teammates, friends, and mentors. And it's a beautiful thing.

I'M ENCOURAGED because ultimately the problem is not a SKIN problem, it is a SIN problem. SIN is the reason we rebel against authority. SIN is the reason we abuse our authority. SIN is the reason we are racist, prejudiced, and lie to cover for our own. SIN is the reason we riot, loot, and burn. BUT I'M ENCOURAGED because God has provided a solution for sin through his son, Jesus, and with it, a transformed heart and mind. One that's capable of looking past the outward and seeing what's truly important in every human being. The cure for the Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice and Eric Garner tragedies is not education or exposure. It's the gospel. So, finally, I'M ENCOURAGED because the gospel gives mankind hope.

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Within an hour, my wife asked me if I had posted something, because her Facebook was going crazy. Since I wasn't an active Facebook user, I had no idea what was happening online.

Over the next days and weeks, my post was "liked" more than 800,000 times, and I was asked to comment on our struggles with race in America on many major networks and talk shows.

In the locker room, many teammates, coaches, and staff members said, "That's what I was thinking; I just didn't know how to say it." Lines of communication began to open about this tough topic.

I wish I could have read all the comments on Facebook. Most of the ones I saw were quite moving. Many people talked about the tears running down their faces, and the pain they have felt because of racial tensions in our nation. Police officers—including one from St. Louis who contacted me—thanked me for acknowledging their side of the story. Even some celebrities shared my post on their pages, and players from other teams mentioned it on the field after games.

I was invited to speak in churches to urge congregations to address the issue of racism. And most important to me, my wife told me she was proud of me.

I didn't know what would happen when I wrote down my thoughts, but God saw it as fit to reach a multitude of people. If it opened their eyes, their hearts, and their minds in even the smallest way, I'm honored to have helped to narrow the racial divide, even for a moment.

This book, now, is an expansion of my thoughts about these serious and troubling issues. I'm writing not because I have all the answers, but because I have a lot of questions and concerns about how we as Americans with different skin tones relate to one another.

Ferguson was a crucible, where long-simmering tensions

boiled over. Though as black people and white people in twenty-first-century America, we share space and time, Ferguson and other similar situations have shown us how we view the world in totally different ways.

I'm writing because we need to have an open national dialogue about the hot-button issues of race that affect us all. I hope this book will challenge people to have serious, healthy discussions about race and racism. I hope this book will encourage people of all races to have these discussions without fear of saying the wrong thing, insulting others, or being condemned by people who don't agree. The time has come to peel back the layers of our own attitudes and beliefs about race and to be honest with ourselves about our issues when it comes to race. Only then will we experience the change we desperately need.

I am confident that you will agree with some of the things I've written in the book. I'm equally confident that you will oppose, or see differently, other issues I have written about from my personal perspective.

Part of my purpose is to address the emotions that I, and countless others, felt that night when the grand jury decision was announced—emotions that we continue to feel every time the issue of race is brought into the equation. I've changed the order of my original Facebook post, and I combined a couple of entries to allow the manuscript to flow more smoothly; but the message is the same.

My wife and I recently welcomed our fifth child into the world. During one of her doctor visits, I had to fill out some paperwork about myself. I wrote down my name, date of birth, and occupation without hesitation. But when I got to *race* and was asked to check the appropriate box, the options all seemed loaded. Each one immediately conjured up positive or negative images in my head. Some didn't even make sense if you really

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thought about it. For the first time on a form like that, I selected “other.” Not because I’m not proud of my skin color, my ancestry, or my heritage, because I am. I checked “other” because I know that the real humanity, the soul and spirit under our skin, is what makes us who we are.

And on the blank line next to “other,” I wrote *HUMAN*.

ANGRY

I'M ANGRY

*because the stories of injustice that have been passed down
for generations seem to be continuing before our very eyes.*

EVERY YEAR, my parents took us kids to see our grandfather in Washington, DC.

I always loved going to visit Pop Pop, who was my mother's father. He lived on the eleventh floor of a high-rise apartment building near the Watergate Hotel, and we'd walk out onto his balcony to see the lights and sights of the nation's capital. To the right, we could see the Kennedy Center. Straight ahead was the Potomac River. And if we looked left, we had a clear view across the plaza of the Washington Monument. To me, even as a kid, it was breathtakingly beautiful—a solitary spire connecting earth to heaven. Every time we visited, I couldn't wait to gaze on it once again.

Pop Pop's place was filled with what I call old-people trinkets—knickknacks, figurines, little statues, and all sorts of souvenirs—that Pop Pop had picked up here and there throughout his life. For us kids, these constituted a kind of toy store: rows of interesting objects that we could take down, play with on the rug in the living room, and use to create worlds and armies and stories about the lives of make-believe people. Hours of fun. I'm not sure whether we ever realized to what extent these "toys" represented real memories of the years through which Pop Pop had actually lived.

My grandfather was born in 1920. *His* grandfather was born in 1860, at the beginning of the Civil War, into an America where slavery had yet to be abolished. And so, as I have sometimes thought about it, I dodged slavery by just five generations.

To some, that's a long time. Then again, it really wasn't that long ago. Pop Pop lived right in the middle of that not-such-a-long-time between slavery and me.

[My grandfather's grandfather was born in 1860. . . . As I have sometimes thought about it, I dodged slavery by just five generations.]

He grew up in Culpeper, Virginia—only seventy miles from DC, but light-years away in terms of racial attitudes. The limitations that were placed on blacks didn't set well with him, even when he was a young boy. Like many kids, he was just a bit rebellious, but a lot of white people might have called him a delinquent. One hot summer, at the age of thirteen, he decided to jump into the public swimming pool, which of course was designated as whites-only. He went ahead and

swam in it anyway. Later, his father got a call from the authorities, who demanded that the family pay for the cost of draining the pool and refilling it with “pure” water.

Before my grandfather reached his midteens, he moved from Culpeper to DC. His parents didn't believe he'd live to see his twenties if they stayed in Culpeper, where, on Saturday nights, Pop Pop was able to see burning crosses in the distance—white people “having fun” on the weekend with their own brand of terrorism.

A full six decades after the abolition of slavery, Pop Pop's world still had separate toilets and drinking fountains for blacks and whites, a distinction validated by the “separate but equal” standard approved by the US Supreme Court in 1896 in its landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. And as Pop Pop became an adult, he faced limitations in the working world as well. He often told me that I could do whatever I set my mind on doing. “But,” he cautioned, “understand that because you're black, there's always a ceiling. You can go only so far up the totem pole.”

He ran into that ceiling often enough in his life, I think, but he didn't seem to let it stop him. He served his country for several years in the army, and though he never was sent overseas, he put in his time as a supply officer and was honorably discharged. Later, he got a job as a pressman in the Government Printing Office, which became his main employment for much of his life until he retired in 1976. He also maintained a side job as a bartender, working at an officer's club in town and catering various events.

Pop Pop took pride in himself. He was five foot seven, slender, and always well dressed. He wore a handsome Kangol hat, which was a variation on a beret but with a wider brim. I think people back then dressed better than we do today, but Pop Pop especially cared about his appearance. That went for his apartment, too. He kept it meticulously clean—to this day, when I smell Listerine I think of the antiseptic smell of his place—and he maintained everything in neat order, with all his old-people trinkets lined up and in their places. It was as if he had a plan for his life, was living it out, and was tracking his progress on the shelves in his apartment.

He was popular. I remember him always knowing a lot of people while I was growing up. He was very social. Many people along the street would acknowledge him by name as he walked by. He had lived in Washington most of his life and had accumulated friends for a long time. People—black and white—loved him.

For all the social limitations faced by a black man in the 1940s and '50s, Pop Pop had made a good life for himself.

For all the social limitations faced by a black man in the 1940s and '50s, Pop Pop had made a good life for himself. If there was a ceiling for a black person, so be it; Pop Pop seemed intent on making sure his life filled as much of the space under that ceiling as it possibly could.

Pop Pop had several passions. One was golf. He loved playing the game. Some of the little statues he kept at home were of golfers positioned in various stages of their swing. He also had golf balls lying around his place. As a kid, I thought about taking one of his Champion golf balls, going out onto the balcony, and throwing it as far as I could toward the Washington Monument. Later in life, Pop Pop gave me a set of golf clubs, hoping perhaps that I'd become a golfer like him. But it never took. I pursued this other thing instead—football.

Pop Pop's second passion was Cadillacs. Black people weren't supposed to be able to afford one, and that may have been the source of his passion. He owned a forest-green Caddy and was extremely proud of it. He had a lead foot and always drove fast—because he *could* in that thing. He would take us to Safeway, and it was so much fun to sit in the back seat of the Caddy (without seatbelts) and slide back and forth while he drove fast and took hard turns. Dangerous, maybe, but loads of fun. And we all survived, with glee, what was otherwise just a simple trip to the grocery store.

Finally, Pop Pop had one other passion: dental floss.

When he turned fifty, Pop Pop got braces. It certainly wasn't pleasant for him, coming so late in his life, but after the braces were taken off, he developed a new appreciation for good teeth. Part of his daily tooth-care obsession involved the near-constant use of dental floss. He was always flossing.

Sometimes he actually fell asleep with floss still in his mouth. When he'd nod off like that, sometimes there would be a single string of floss hanging out over his lip and down to his chin.

When my sister, Jessica, and I saw him asleep like this, we'd giggle. Sometimes, we'd quietly walk up to him and get really close to his face, and one of us would carefully put a finger close to his mouth to touch the hanging strand of floss. It would move,

and we'd stop, trying not to laugh and hoping it wouldn't wake him up. It wouldn't, and we'd get bolder, actually taking the hanging strand of floss between our fingers and starting to pull it. We always thought that maybe sometime we could slowly pull the whole strand of floss out of his mouth without waking him up. But we never went that far, always chickening out at the last minute.

Even today when I think of Pop Pop, I smile a lot, and I laugh at some of the memories.

But I remember other things as well. He didn't often reveal it to me because I was just a kid, but he was angry about the racism he'd encountered as a child, as a young man, and as a proud black man in the prime of his life. He didn't usually express his social activism to me, but he would talk to my mom and other adults in the family. I think I could sense it, though, around the edges of his smile, his playfulness with us kids, and his immense joy in the simple passions of life. There was hurt and anger there.

It makes me wonder.

I wonder about this dapper man in a Kangol hat who made a lot out of himself despite the limits society imposed on him. I wonder why he so often said to me, "When you're black, there's always a ceiling." Was it because he knew he was living a life destined for limitations and he was just making the most of it?

When he said, "You can go only so far up the totem pole," were his words a challenge to me, or were they a warning? Did he want me to know that even today I don't have the same opportunities as white people? Or was he calling me to step up and overcome the obstacles, just as he had?

Isn't that the real dilemma of the race problem?

Were his words a challenge to me, or were they a warning? . . . Was he calling me to step up and overcome the obstacles, just as he had?

What was the message of Pop Pop's life? Was it all of the above?

I wonder.

And I wonder why the Washington Monument seems to stretch only halfway up for black people. Why is it that, even today, in the United States of America, we as a race are so often kept from touching the sky?

• • •

I'm angry because white people don't get it.

I'm angry because black people don't get it, either.

And now that I've ticked off everyone equally, let me say my piece.

Five generations and 150 years have passed since the abolition of slavery.

**I'm angry
because white
people don't
get it. I'm angry
because black
people don't
get it, either.**

You'd think that after all this time we'd have reached real parity between the races, that there would be *truly* equal opportunity, and that we'd be seeing and experiencing fairness in society between blacks and whites.

A lot of white people believe that's actually where we are. A lot of black people know we aren't.

Certainly by the time of Pop Pop's life—smack dab in the middle between slavery and the present—you'd think there would have been a lot of social progress, a shaking out of the issues and biases, and a lessening of racial conflicts. If you pinpointed a specific year of his adult life—let's say when he was thirty-five, some *ninety years* after the abolition of slavery—you'd think we as a nation would have reached some level of equality and social fairness between blacks and whites.

But Pop Pop's thirty-fifth birthday was September 24, 1955. Rosa Parks had not yet refused to give up her seat on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama. That wouldn't happen for another two months. Ninety years after slavery, blacks were still segregated from whites. They still had separate drinking fountains, separate restrooms, separate neighborhoods, and separate schools. They still were expected to sit at the back of the bus.

Ninety years is a long time. And yet not such a long time.

And here's what many people don't really understand.

Though the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in the post-Civil War union, it really didn't end it. A new era of slavery—or as Douglas Blackmon so poignantly describes it, an “age of neoslavery”—had begun.¹ This became an age of human trafficking, forced labor, Black Codes, Jim Crow, and the ever-present terror of white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

This was not freedom.

Rather than milk and honey, the Promised Land for many black Americans was filled with more blood, more tears, and more repression. And so, ninety years after abolition, Rosa Parks was still required to sit in the back of the bus.

Much of my anger arises from the largely untold stories of men and women who faced a legal system that arrested, tried, and sentenced them for crimes they did not commit (if they were fortunate enough to even have a trial). I come to a slow boil when I watch documentaries or read memoirs about these post-slavery generations whose lives have been largely disregarded in history books.

There's a feeling in white America that everything is equal now. But black people know in their bones that there's still a residue of neoslavery that sticks to so much of life.

Yes, today, 150 years after slavery, it's true that we're not as segregated as black people were in Pop Pop's day. But perhaps I should say “not segregated *in the same way*.”

Black people still are limited by the quality of schools they're able to attend. Black people are often grouped into segregated voting districts.² A disproportionate number of black people

It's true that we're not as segregated as black people were in Pop Pop's day. But perhaps I should say "not segregated in the same way."

are rotting away in prison, its own form of segregation.

"Twenty-first-century segregation exists overtly in our school systems, communities, and prisons," writes Reniqua Allen in *The Guardian*. "It also permeates our society in ways we don't even realize."³

Many today might agree that a lot of official segregation has been eliminated (though some would quarrel even with that), but certainly segregation is still here, embedded in

social systems, cultural biases, and prejudice. In an article in *The Atlantic* titled, "Is Racial Segregation Legal, If It's Not Deliberate?" Garrett Epps writes, "The sunny, 'look how far we've come' view seems particularly hard to justify in housing. Anyone who can look at American cities—their housing patterns, their employment figures, or their police policies—and see a new dawn of color blindness is wearing glasses unavailable to me."⁴

And then there's church. The church, I believe, has the greatest opportunity to effect change in our communities. Yet it remains the most segregated institution in America. *Christianity Today* reported in January 2015 that "Sunday morning remains one of the most segregated hours in American life, with more than 8 in 10 congregations made up of one predominant racial group."⁵

I'm angry that so many still try to argue against the truth of these basic facts.

Some say that blacks themselves choose some forms of segregation, preferring to live and worship among themselves in their own communities and their own churches. Some of that may be

true, though research indicates that black people are much more inclined toward diversity than white people are.⁶ Whatever the case, the point is unchanged.

We're still segregated.

Some say that there is a disproportionate incarceration rate for blacks because blacks are more likely to commit crimes than whites. It's hard not to interpret that assumption as inherently racist, but either way we still must account for the fact that there are *six times* as many black people incarcerated as white people.⁷ Really? You mean there's nothing in that number to even remotely suggest that blacks are disproportionately targeted and arrested?

But again, regardless of the argument, *we're still segregated.*

Not many people would suggest that education isn't a serious problem; however, some have argued that it's such a complex problem that nothing can be done about it. I agree that it's complex, but many also say that nothing *ought* to be done—that it's a "poverty problem," a "money problem," or a "ghetto problem," and that any effort to change the status quo would disadvantage people who are wealthier.

And while people argue, *we're still segregated.*

I'm also angry that this has become about one side or the other winning an argument. Therein lies another hidden attitude toward the race problem. Why is this about winning and losing? Doesn't anyone else see that *we're all losing*?

Why don't we get it? Why can't we grasp the truth that, by separating ourselves as whites and blacks, we are so much less likely to understand one another, show compassion, and prevent violence?

I'm also angry that this has become about one side or the other winning an argument. Therein lies another hidden attitude toward the race problem.

Why can't we get past the talking points of the debate and see clearly the young boy who was shot, the mother who tragically lost her son, and the confusion and fear of the cops involved—some of whom, too, were black?

Why can't we drop the posturing, the media skirmishes, and the shouting arguments and do something about this? If not for our own sake, then at least for our kids'?

A hundred and fifty years is a long time—and yet, apparently, not such a long time.

■ ■ ■

Then there's the quiet echo of Pop Pop's life.

His life says, "Make the most of what you have."

It says, "Be proud of who you are."

It says, "Don't let the obstacles and injustice and unfairness limit you. Overcome them."

Well, I'm angry because too many young people—black and white—*live down* to the lower expectations people have of them.

I'm angry because systemic prejudice and bias, though just as real in our time as in Pop Pop's time, have become crutches for young people today and excuses for underachieving.

I'm angry because the brooding hate that paces the streets of a small town is a cowardice that leads nowhere. It's cowardly because you can do better, achieve more, and rise above, but you're afraid to try. It leads nowhere, because it never accomplishes anything—it doesn't lead to pride or respect or opportunity. It just leads to destruction.

I'm angry because this is a negative cycle, a downward spiral. It begins with social situations that seriously disadvantage black people. But the cycle extends and continues because so

many black people *settle into* their disadvantage and don't ever rise above it. Why can't more blacks grab the opportunities that *do* exist, rather than gripe about opportunities that don't? And why don't more young black people take hold of what they have and rise above?

Yes, I'm really big on personal responsibility. Sometimes I want to take some of these kids and—well, let's just say I want to give them a real hard talking-to.

I want to say, "Okay, so all this has happened to you and set you back in life. You were born into a race that was victimized by slavery. That legacy follows you even now, and life today isn't fair to you. You started out behind the eight ball.

"But what are you going to do about it?"

I want to say, "You know, a lot of people face serious disadvantages in life. You're not the only one. Some were born with disabilities. Others suffered paralyzing accidents. Still others here and around the world were born into severe poverty, at a level you cannot imagine. You're not the only one to face unfairness and hardship. I can tell you stories of many other young people who chose to *do something* to overcome their circumstances.

"So you don't have everything you'd like. But what are you going to do with what you *do* have?"

I want to say, "I know it's hard. And yeah, I know *they* make it hard for you. But are you afraid of doing the hard thing? What's it going to take for you to step up, step out, and step apart?"

"Are you going to be one of the ones to change this generation?"

I want to say, "Search for opportunities to learn—find them, scratch and claw to get them. The question is not, 'Why don't *they* do more for me?' The question is, 'Why don't *you* do more for *yourself*?'

Why can't more blacks grab the opportunities that *do* exist, rather than gripe about opportunities that don't?

“How are *you* going to get yourself an education? Are you willing to go after it?”

I want to say, “News flash: This is not about what white people do to keep you down. If you live your life in reaction to that, then they *will* keep you down. No, this is about pulling yourself up. Are you willing to rise above?”

Yes, you can overcome and do something good and great. But that’s something only *you* can do. No one else can or will do it for you.

I want to say, “What is your vision for yourself? How can you make the most of what you have? What opportunities out there can you grab hold of? Yes, you can overcome and do something good and great. But that’s something only *you* can do. No one else can or will do it for you.

“Will you do something great for yourself?”
Yes, I want to say all these things.

I guess I just did.

Sometimes I sound like an echo of Pop Pop’s life.

■ ■ ■

This problem of black and white in our world is not a black-and-white issue.

It’s complex. It’s not about winning an argument. It’s usually not about either/or—“this person should have done this” or “that person should have done that.”

It’s about *both/and*.

Around noon on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, a white police officer, Darren Wilson, shot an eighteen-year-old black man, Michael Brown.

We know that Brown was unarmed. We also know that, minutes earlier, he had stolen cigarillos from a nearby convenience store. We know that Wilson spotted Brown walking with a friend in the middle of the street. Wilson drove his cruiser in

front of the two, and there was an altercation through the window of the car. Two shots were fired. One apparently hit Brown in the hand.

Brown and his friend took off running. The friend hid behind a car. Wilson got out of his car and pursued Brown.

From that point on, reports of the incident conflict with each other. Some say that Brown stopped, turned around, raised his arms, and was shot by Wilson anyway. Others say that Brown never raised his hands, suggesting that Brown's turning to face Wilson was a threatening move.

Wilson fired his gun twelve times. At least six bullets hit Brown, and the last bullet was likely the one that killed him.

In the legal proceedings later, there were anomalies regarding evidence, including the chain of custody of Wilson's gun and the state of Michael Brown's body, which lay at the scene for four hours.

The shooting sparked unrest, protests, and violence in Ferguson.

On November 24, 2014, the St. Louis County grand jury decided not to indict Darren Wilson, citing lack of evidence and suggesting that eyewitnesses supporting Wilson were more credible than those supporting Brown.

The grand jury announcement sparked more unrest in Ferguson, more violence, more protests. And it started anew the national conversation about race and racism.

As I write this account of these events, I struggle to tell it based on facts and not opinions. I realize that, at every turn in this sequence of events, there's a pro-Michael Brown version of what went down and a pro-Darren Wilson version. I don't assume that all blacks

The grand jury announcement sparked more unrest in Ferguson . . . and it started anew the national conversation about race and racism.

see it one way and all whites see it the other way, but we know that it splits substantially along those lines. We're all biased, aren't we? So much is based on long-developed and deep-seated racial attitudes—some of which we didn't even realize we had. I understand that *somebody* reading this is likely to argue with whatever I suggest about the events of this tragedy.

Truth is, I really don't know what happened, other than what's been reported. I wasn't there. And even if I had been there, my own version of the events would have been based on what little part of the scene I actually could see, and it might have been twisted by my own biases and by the fact that I didn't have all the information and didn't see everything.

But I'll tell you what I believe. I believe in *both/and*.

A *both/and* view of events . . . reflects the complexity of the issue. That's why the problem of black and white in our world is not a black-and-white issue.

I believe that it should be possible for blacks and whites to live together peaceably in the same small town. *And* I believe that any town that is two-thirds black and has a police force that is 94 percent white is more likely to have a race problem that erupts in violence.

I believe that it must be very difficult for white cops to maintain order in a predominantly black town without legitimate police work being perceived as racially motivated. *And* I believe it's likely that sometimes police work

is racially motivated and biased. *Both* can be true.

I believe that white people look at law enforcement and assume it is good, based on their experiences and interactions with the police. *And* I believe that black people look at law enforcement and assume—based on patterns and history and experience—that someone is out to get them. I believe *both* are true.

I believe that Michael Brown committed a theft and ran away

from Darren Wilson. *And* I believe that if a white man had committed the same theft and acted in the same way, he'd probably still be alive today.

I believe we are still segregated. *And* I believe that if we were less segregated, some people would be less likely to run and others less likely to shoot.

I don't say these things in order to straddle the line or avoid the controversy. I truly believe that often there is a *both/and* view of events that reflects the complexity of the issue. That's why the problem of black and white in our world is not a black-and-white issue.

Both/and captures the anger and agony of Ferguson. But this story is not just about Ferguson. It's about America. It's about you and me.

You see, there's one more thing I believe. Though I may not know everything that went down on the streets of Ferguson that day, I know one thing for certain: No one here is innocent. The town is guilty—*and* the cops are guilty. Darren Wilson is guilty—*and* Michael Brown is guilty.

And you and I are *both* guilty.

We all have malice deep down.

We all harbor wrong attitudes toward others.

At its core, the issue is not about race. It's about the human heart.

We can talk forever about desegregation; about what cops are justified in doing or not; about what a young black man should have done or not done; about what a town should do or not do on the front lines of a tragedy. But for all the talking heads, all the online chatter and media churning, this will happen again. It already has. Nothing will change . . . unless . . .

Unless God changes our hearts and minds.

God, hear our prayer . . .



Anger is okay. The question about anger is, what do you do with it? Do you use it to throw fuel on the fire? Or do you use it to fix the problem? Every angry person, myself included, should ask this self-directed question.

Maybe a more difficult question to ask is whether you can use your anger as a motivation to change yourself. What do you need to do to change your own attitudes? What are the biases and prejudices hidden inside you? What are the blind spots you're not willing to look for?

I'm talking to white people and black people. Both. . . . Let's use our anger to fix the problem. Let's allow change to happen, starting with ourselves.

I'm talking to white people *and* black people. *Both*. I'm talking to myself. We all need God to change our hearts and minds. So let's use our anger to fix the problem. Let's allow change to happen, starting with ourselves.

Can we do that? Can we talk and listen with open hearts and open minds?

I want to talk about the historical legacy of slavery that black people carry inside themselves today. I want to talk about the indelible images of African slaves, kidnapped and brought to America, that are imprinted in the consciousness of so many black people. I want to talk about the overarching truths that black people today are still not treated as equal to white people and that insidious prejudice and segregation still remain all these years after abolition.

Black and white, are we willing and ready to talk about these things?

I want to talk about personal responsibility. I want to talk about the need to let go of some images and legacies—those

parts that fuel anger and violence. I want to talk about the present and the future, and about how we would do well not to dwell so much on past hurts but rather to build for ourselves a new future. I want to talk about the embarrassment of racial violence and about how so many angry responses simply reinforce the stereotypes that many white people have of black people.

Black and white, are we willing and ready to talk about these things?

Most of all, are we—both black people and white—ready to admit when our anger is simply unfounded or a result of our cultural lenses? Can we be honest with ourselves and about ourselves?

The question about anger is, what do we do with it?

Let's do something constructive with it.

■ ■ ■

Parents just want their children to come home.

I saw an interview with Anderson Cooper and the mothers of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner, four black men (or boys in the case of Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin) killed in confrontations with law enforcement over a period of two and a half years. They talked about some of the things I've been saying—namely, the disparity between how white people and black people perceive these tragedies. They argued about the injustices their sons endured in death. They spoke of how the justice system failed them and their sons.

I happened to glance at the comments section below the video on the website. It listed a number of hateful statements, including these:

“This is not racism; this is justice!”

“These men were all criminals and deserved what they got!”

“If these women had raised their kids better . . .”

My mind went into debate mode, internally arguing with these naysayers and skeptics: the indignant, self-righteous responders who were calling out against what the mothers were saying.

Then I came back to focus on the four women. Now I saw them differently. They were just moms. And the pain in their voices was so evident.

**As a black man
with black sons and
daughters, I'm very
aware of the dangers
for my kids in a
society so divided
about race.**

One thing cannot be argued: These mothers lost their sons.

As a father of four, I understand at least a little of their pain. As a black man with black sons and daughters, I'm very aware of the dangers for my kids in a society so divided about race. My wife and I will teach them as best we can to make good choices for themselves, to be the most they can be, and to follow God with all their hearts. But as they get older, we don't know exactly where they will go, what steps they will take, and what might happen in this world of black and white that is never quite so black-and-white.

Ultimately, I just want them to be able to come home.

Some years ago, as Kirsten and I started having kids, we took them to meet Pop Pop in Washington, just as my parents had taken me once a year. I remember one time when we had our newborn Grace with us. Pop Pop was holding Grace in his arms. Her still-tiny head rested fully in the palm of his hand. He whispered to her softly, “I carry all my babies just like this. I carried your grandmom just like this. I carried your dad just like this.”

You see, in the end we're not white or black. We're families. Each of us is just someone's dad, someone's mom, someone's son or daughter.

And someone's grandchild. As my career flourished, Pop Pop was so proud of me. He would look at me with a smile and say, "So now you're a pro football player." He'd say that, and he'd nod. It was a statement of approval and pride. At some point, he started collecting souvenirs and football cards of the teams I played for. They found the most prestigious spot—alongside the other old-people trinkets on his shelves.

Pop Pop died when he was ninety-three. He passed on six months before Michael Brown was shot.

I don't know what he would've said about Ferguson. He never talked much about social issues with me, maybe because he hoped and prayed I would not be affected by them as he had been. But he expressed his opinions and anger to others. He would have had very strong emotions about Ferguson.

I expect he might have seen himself in the person of Michael Brown. He was thirteen when he moved to Washington, DC. Brown was shot at the age of eighteen. Maybe Pop Pop would've imagined himself—that restless, rebellious young kid in Culpeper—living for five more years in the flickering shadows of those burning crosses. What a different path his life might have taken.

I expect that Pop Pop understood the significance of choosing the right path and building a different and better life.

And I expect that, had he lived to see the events in Ferguson unfold, he would have said to me, "Just remember. Remember us. Remember me. Continue to make us proud. Keep going."

After all the arguments, after all the debates, after all the anger, I think that may be the best advice of all.

Pop Pop, I do remember you. And I will keep going.

I expect that Pop Pop . . . would have said to me, "Just remember. Remember us. Remember me. Continue to make us proud. Keep going."

UNDER OUR SKIN

■ ■ ■

I saw Pop Pop literally on his deathbed, one week before he died. He looked at me with tired eyes, but even then they had a slight twinkle. With the faintest smile on his face, he said, “So now you’re a pro football player.”