

# I Can't Breathe

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## Refinery fumes, George Floyd and COVID-19

Since purchasing my home in Benicia, over five years ago, I have witnessed, in addition to the extended wildfire season, two horrific flaring events and several smaller ones from Valero. Black plumes of smoke, containing petcoke and other harmful pollutants, such as sulfur dioxide, spewed into the air for days without timely reporting.



On May 25, 2020, we watched in horror the lynching of George Floyd: "I can't breathe." It was not the first time we heard these words from the mouth of a dying Black man being suffocated by White police. Just six years earlier, we saw Eric Garner plead for air in the chokehold of New York Police Officer Daniel Pantaleo: "I can't breathe."

With Covid-19, in the U.S. alone, over 600,000 people took their last breath.

Being choked out by polluted air, under the knee of systemic racism, or by a pandemic may seem unrelated. But, in many ways all three, which disproportionately impact vulnerable communities hardest and first, stem from the same malady: unchecked fear. If love, not fear, was our primary motivation, then power grabs, greed, violence, and other forms of destruction would no longer rule our communities, local and global. We would have enough, more than enough, air, water, food, shelter, medical care, and jobs with safe working conditions for one and all to flourish. Rather than consuming and hoarding more than we need, we could put our resources – energies and ingenuity – into creating an even more beautiful planet.

It is said that a community can be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members. How are we doing when it comes to our treatment of People of Color, the LGBTQ+ community, women, the elderly, the infirmed, children, future generations, the other-than-human?

All those who are finding it hard to breathe.

I will start with myself, for example, by doing the work to transform my traumas so that I do not transmit them to others; by living more simply, gratefully, and creatively; by finding ways to reduce my use of fossil fuels and products that depend on them; by continuing to see and change my own complicity in racialized injustice.

To make real change, however, requires that we work together. We already have stunning local examples of what is possible when people of goodwill come together: the Good Neighbor Steering Committee (GNSC), Benicia's Black Lives Matter (BBLM), the recent hiring of the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Manager. There is still much to be done: diversifying our tax base, continuing to be aware of and to stand up against Valero's meddling in our local elections, to make more affordable housing available without destroying natural habitat, to transition to renewable energy and to find other ways to ensure that clean air and water is available for ourselves and future generations, police and criminal justice reform, protection of voting rights, and reparations: to honor the dignity, value and rights, of all living beings, so that all can live and breathe.

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