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Telling My Son About Ferguson

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Photo

Michelle Alexander Credit Ben Garvin for The New York Times

MY son wants an answer. He is 10 years old, and he wants me to tell him that he doesn't need to worry. He is a black boy, rather sheltered, and knows little of the world beyond our safe, quiet neighborhood. His eyes are wide and holding my gaze, silently begging me to say: No, sweetheart, you have no need to worry. Most officers are nothing like Officer Wilson. They would not shoot you — or anyone — while you're unarmed, running away or even toward them.

I am stammering.

For the past few years, I have traveled from coast to coast speaking to just about anyone who will listen about the horrors of our criminal injustice system. I have written and lectured extensively about the wars that have been declared on poor communities of color — the "war on crime" and the "war on drugs" — the militarization of our police forces, the school-to-prison pipeline, the millions stripped of basic civil and human rights, a penal system unprecedented in world history. Yet here I am, on Monday evening, before the announcement about the grand jury's decision has been made, speechless.

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My son wants me to reassure him, and tell him that of course Darren Wilson will go to jail. At 10 years old, he can feel deep in his bones how wrong it was for the police to kill Michael Brown. "There will be a trial, at least — right, Mom?" My son is asking me a simple question, and I know the answer.

As a civil rights lawyer, I know all too well that Officer Wilson will not be going to trial or to jail. The system is legally rigged so that poor people guilty of relatively minor crimes are regularly sentenced to decades behind bars while police officers who kill unarmed black men almost never get charged, much less serve time in prison.

I open my mouth to speak, look into my son's eyes, and hear myself begin to lie: "Don't worry, honey, you have nothing to worry about. Nothing like this could ever happen to you." His face brightens as he tells me that he likes the police, and that he always waves at the cops in our neighborhood and they always wave back. His innocence is radiating from him now; he's all lit up with relief and gladness that he lives in a world where he can take for granted that the police can be trusted to serve and protect him with a wave and a smile.

My face is flushing red. I am embarrassed that I have lied. And I am angry. I am angry that I have to tell my son that he has reason to worry. I am angry that I have to tell him that I already know Darren Wilson won't be indicted, because police officers are almost never indicted when they kill unarmed black men. I must tell him now, before he hears it on the school bus or sees it in the news, that many people in Michael Brown's town will be very angry too — so filled with pain, sadness and rage — that they may react by doing things they shouldn't, like setting fires or breaking windows or starting fights.

I know I must explain this violence, but not condone it. I must help him see that adults often have trouble managing their pain just like he does. Doesn't he sometimes lash out and yell at friends or family when he's hurt or angry? When people have been hurt over and over, and rather than compassion or understanding you're given lectures about how it's really all your fault, and that no one needs to make amends, you can lose your mind. We can wind up harming people we care about with words or deeds, people who have done no harm to us.

I begin telling him the truth and his face contorts. The glowing innocence is wiped away as his eyes flash first with fear, then anger. "No!," he erupts. "There has to be a trial! If you kill an unarmed man, don't you at least have a trial?"

My son is telling me now that the people in Ferguson should fight back. A minute ago, he was reminiscing about waving to Officer Friendly. Now he wants to riot.

I tell him that sometimes I have those feelings too. But now I feel something greater. I am proud of the thousands of people of all colors who have taken to the

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streets in nonviolent protest, raising their voices with boldness and courage, capturing the attention and the imagination of the world. They're building a radical movement for justice, one that would make the freedom fighters who came before them sing from the heavens with joy.

I tell my son, as well as my daughters, as we sit around the dinner table, stories of young activists organizing in Ferguson, some of them not much older than they are. I tell them about the hip-hop artist Tef Poe, who traveled with Michael Brown's parents to Geneva to testify before a United Nations subcommittee about police militarization and violence. I tell them about activists like Phillip B. Agnew, Tory Russell, Brittany Ferrell and Alexis Templeton, who marched in the streets and endured tear gas while waving signs bearing three words: "Black Lives Matter."

I've met some of these activists, I say. They believe, like you do, that we should be able to live in a world where we trust the police and where all people and all children, no matter what their color or where they came from, are treated with dignity, care, compassion and concern. These courageous young people know the tools of war, violence and revenge will never build a nation of justice. They told me they're willing to risk their lives, if necessary, so that kids like you can live in a better world.

My son is stirring his mashed potatoes around on his plate. He looks up and says, "Right now, I'm just thinking I don't want anything like this ever to happen again."

I'm tempted to tell him that it will happen; in fact, it already has. Several unarmed black men have been shot by the police since Aug. 9, when Michael Brown was killed. But I don't say another word. It's much easier telling the truth about race and justice in America to strangers than to my son, who will soon be forced to live it.

Michelle Alexander is the author of "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness."