I can’t breathe.

Three words that encapsulate a feeling that I have experienced many times in my life, but most notably in the past week.

As a black male, the past week has been full of many complex feelings, emotions, conversations, and moments of reflection.

I want to begin by stating that I do not speak on behalf of all BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color), I speak on behalf of me and me only. In writings like this, I must begin with that.

I have received numerous calls, text, direct messages, and emails over the past week asking for guidance, perspective, a listening ear, and an opportunity to discuss the horrific events that have taken place in our country.

My heart is heavy… literally heavy. Which is why writing this blog may be one of the most challenging things I have done in my life. It is challenging because how do I properly speak to the pain? How do I speak to my past traumas that have resurfaced through this? How do I take the tears that I have shed and turn those into words of substance and meaning? How do I take as Don Lemon brilliantly described as my life in my “shell” as a black man and provide a narrative that is rich in providing context and meaning?

Here is what I have realized… I can’t. Each of us has a responsibility to learn, listen and grow as an individual. Much of my life is spent picking what mask and voice I need to use in order for my words to not be misconstrued or misinterpreted. It is not bi-poc’s job to be the educators of every nuance surrounding this. I believe this is one of my biggest challenges with writing this.

I used to teach band. One of the things we would teach and train musicians on is understanding different listening levels. **Level one** – your own sound (your voice), **Level two** – your section’s sound (your section’s voice), **Level three** – the ensemble’s sound (the ensemble’s collective voice), I believe this metaphor is the best insight I am capable of providing in this moment.
Level one: Focus on your own sound and voice in this. What words, actions and perspectives are you using. Are you listening and learning about other cultures? Are you acknowledging that you do not know everything? Do you lean into the unknown? Are you owning and finding ways to fill in your own blind spots? It always begins with you. Before you ask, “What can we do?” start with, “What am I doing?”

Level two: What is the voice of your section? What sounds are the individuals in your communities making? Are they partners in progress and growth, or does the soundtrack of your ensemble hinder your ability to be true to your values and speak your truths? I will admit, this past week I have eliminated a lot of the noise that no longer aids in my growth. I want my communities to be strong in sound and quality so that we together can move mountains. Yes, that means encouraging some to go hit the practice room and work on their individual sound before they return to the section.

Level three: This is where we want to be but can’t until we spend a lot of diligent, meaningful and substantial time in level one and level two. The greatest ensembles are made up of folks who spent hours in the practice room bettering themselves and being hungry for advice and tips to make them better players. I encourage all of us to think on this as we move forward.

I am angry.

I am sad.

I am scared.

I am numb.

I am tired.

Puddles of tears have streamed down my face this week, and they will continue to in the days and weeks to come. Let’s use this time to challenge ourselves to become better active listeners and learners as stories of injustice are told. Let us create a world where those who feel like they can’t breathe can finally exhale and have their stories, experiences, and time on earth be respected, heard and validated.

Let no one beg to be heard. Let no one beg to be seen. Let no one beg to be acknowledged. Let no one beg for the opportunity to finally exhale.

I just want to breathe.