Start – Stop – Keep.

I remember the first time I realized I was treated different because of my skin color.

Before I share this story, let me contextualize my experience. I am a black male, adopted into a single-parent white family. My mother later adopted two other black children who became my brother and sister. The family next door to us was a white couple with one biological child and two adopted black children. So, conversations about race was commonplace in my household for as long as I can remember.

Explaining to my classmates that my mother was the white woman with a perm, walking into our classroom with Converse tennis shoes with ringing little bells on them, wearing a denim dress with embroidered flowers, and several African necklaces on became an ever-familiar conversation.

I remember the scene vividly. I was in 3rd grade. At recess my friend was going around chatting with different classmates but was intentionally avoiding me. I would go up to him and ask, “What were you telling everyone?” He said, “I can’t tell you.” He would then run off. It was a weird moment, and I remember feeling like something was up. Later that day in PE, I asked my friend again, “Can you please tell me what you were talking about with everyone? I promise I won’t get mad.”

He sighed, and said, “Okay, but you told me you wouldn’t get mad. I am having a birthday party in a few weeks, and I can’t invite you to it, because you are a n*****. My dad says you can’t be in our house, so I wasn’t supposed to tell you about the party.”

He held in my tears because I had assured him, I wouldn’t get mad. Truthfully, I wasn’t mad…. I was destroyed. I went about my day and walked home mulling over the moment. That night I told my mom about it. She called our neighbors, and they came over. They sat all six of us kids down and explained that word… the N-word, racism, and that unfortunately there are people in the world who will make us feel less than.

Me, forever the inquisitive person asked, “Will it ever get better?” My mom with tear-filled eyes said, “There is someone like you in the world right now that you probably don’t know and won’t ever meet that is doing work so that you never have to feel that way again. When you are big, it will be your turn to do that so some child your age can have a better experience than you.”

I was spoiled in many respects. Living in a multicultural family and getting to share in the beauty of that with our neighbors is something I forever cherish. This was a jarring and pivotal moment in my life, as it taught me that the love and acceptance that we shared in our neighborhood did not exist everywhere.
Fast forward to last week. I had a person call me up to discuss the events that are unfolding in front of us. Within our exchange, I replied, “I have been called a n***** twice this week.” Their response, “Well maybe stop sharing your feelings.”

In that moment, that same feeling of devastation and trauma I experienced in 3rd grade crept back to the surface. I transported back to myself in 3rd grade sitting there with my high-top sneakers, and Ninja Turtles t-shirt hearing about the ugliness in the world. My answer came from the love, support and awareness embedded in me in that moment. I responded:

“Somewhere in the world there is child that looks like me who doesn’t have the platform or privilege I do to speak up and out regarding this. I don’t want that child to be my age and have to live through the same type of pain that I, and many others have. So, I cannot and will not be quiet.”

When I would design marching band shows, one reflective activity I would commit to doing with the design staff was: Start – Stop – Keep.

Each year as we would begin to create our next production we would explore through this lens. What is something we are going to start doing? What is something are going to stop doing? What is something we are going to keep doing. It allowed us to both reflect and make meaningful changes in the way we would develop, act, and live out our goals.

This exercise is something I have adopted into my personal life, especially as it relates to equity. The big question that I have continued to be asked in recent days is, “Where do I even start?”

I inherently use this exercise without realizing it, and it has allowed me to start mapping out decisions and intentional choices. I have made the commitment to start owning my blackness and not shying away from it. I have made the commitment to stop living on a diet of unhealthy social media posts. I have made the commitment to keep being the person that I needed when I was younger.

What are things you can start doing?

What are things you can stop doing?

What are things you can keep doing?

Let us all realize there is no perfect roadmap to understand how to navigate through these waters. Let us all remember that comparison robs us of growth, as no two equity journeys are the same. Change begins when those with privilege and power say, “tell me more” to those most greatly affected by these horrific moments. Understanding begins when the brave say, “I have a desire and willingness to learn.”

To 3rd grade James, asking if things will ever get better, to him I say: “I’m working on it.”