

# Life and Death in the North Star State

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I've lived in Minnesota for twenty-five years. It's the longest I've ever lived anywhere. Like so many of the nearly four hundred thousand people of African descent currently living in the state or the folks who made their way here in earlier generations, I came to Minnesota to make a life.

My grandparents were the descendants of people who struggled within and survived slavery. They participated in the Great Migration, boldly leaving their rural childhood homes in North Carolina and Virginia to seek their fortunes in the big city of Washington, DC. That's where my parents met and where I was born and raised. Still, when I was looking at colleges, I thought, "Anywhere north!" Maybe it was epigenetic, an ancestral lingering in my blood of the desire to escape the terrors of racism in the South mixed with the dream of a better life.

I did go north. I went to Pennsylvania State University, graduated, then promptly joined the Peace Corps and left the country. After two years of teaching English as a volunteer in Thailand, I was thinking about where to go next. I felt uncertain and yet, I knew that I didn't want to move back to DC. I still thought the city was too political, too expensive to try to start a life, and too violent. In the 1970s and '80s, redlining and the human devastation brought about by crack cocaine made parts of

the city highly combustible. This was true for Southeast DC, where my grandparents had their home. At the time, the local news often started with the murder count for the day.

Kathleen, a Peace Corps buddy of mine, was lobbying for me to consider Minneapolis.

“Are there any Black people there?” This was my first question. At that time, the only things that I knew about Minnesota was that it was north, like next stop is Canada north, and cold. Nonetheless, I was open to exploring and felt a sense of adventure when considering my prospects.

“Sure,” Kathleen answered. She’d moved to Minneapolis from Wisconsin and her last name heralded a Germanic ancestry. “The mayor. And Prince!”

I looked at her and raised two fingers. “That’s two,” I countered. We laughed. Still, Minneapolis had just elected Sharon Sayles Belton, the city’s first Black woman mayor. That impressed me. And Prince . . . well, I did love me some Prince.

When I returned to the States in 1996, I visited the Twin Cities in July. There were a lot of jobs, colleges, and universities. People’s gardens were popping in neighborhoods throughout the Cities. Kathleen and I reunited with a cluster of my closest Peace Corps friends, many of whom had returned to the Midwest after our service. We went to art fairs and jazz festivals. We walked around lakes and through lush parks. At the time, it was hard to imagine that Minnesota wasn’t like this all the time or for everyone.

I was also thinking about pursuing graduate studies in psychology. Advisors at some of the best programs in the country had independently asked me, “Have you thought about Minnesota?” They were referencing the program at the University of Minnesota. The school had made a name for itself with groundbreaking research on twins as well as with the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI, a test that rapidly spawned new inroads in the field of psychology and was especially popular with corporate employers). The connections with my friends and my future studies weighed heavily in my mind. So I decided to move to Minneapolis. I figured if I didn’t like the Twin Cities after a few years, I could continue westward. San Francisco, maybe.

Now I’ve called these Dakota and Anishinaabe lands my home for nearly all of my adult life. Here in Minnesota, I attended graduate school; met and married my husband; and found meaningful work in the nonprofit sector—and eventually, my mother even followed me here. Over time, some of the habits I brought with me have also found a place to root.

The meditation practice that I'd initiated as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand led me to the community at Common Ground Meditation Center in the Seward neighborhood. I enjoyed early-morning sits at the center and gathering with diverse practitioners to learn from local and national teachers at retreats and other events. By the spring of 2020, in response to the isolation, grief, and anxieties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, I participated with a group of Black women practitioners at Common Ground that was intensifying its organizing with peers at other meditation centers across the Twin Cities.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd's journey north from Houston and his three years of working to make a life in the Twin Cities ended at the intersection of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis. When I saw the video of George Floyd being choked to death under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer, I was infuriated by the officer's flagrant abuse of power and the senseless taking of this man's life. I wasn't alone. The news of George Floyd's murder sparked a wildfire of protest across the U.S. and the world. In the outpouring of rage and grief that followed, corridors of commerce in neighborhoods throughout the Twin Cities went up in flames. Outraged people from near and far assembled in streets across the Cities. Fire engulfed significant portions of Lake Street, the thoroughfare that connected downtown Longfellow (site of the Third Police Precinct—home to the officers involved in George Floyd's murder) with Chicago Avenue and then continued westward to tawny neighborhoods in Uptown and around the city's lakes. By the time the streets settled down in Minneapolis and St. Paul, two more people had died, 617 people had been arrested, and 1,500 businesses were damaged or completely destroyed.

In the week following George Floyd's murder, I was initially consumed with organizing with my family and neighbors to offer mutual aid, safety and protection, cleanup and recovery from the uprisings and fires near my Longfellow home. When the fires were extinguished, I joined with several Black meditators and Buddhist practitioners from other cultural communities to organize direct-action sit-ins at protests, events, and memorials that were happening in neighborhoods and communities across the Cities. We were acting in solidarity with an increasing number of people across the globe who recognized an imperative connection between personal, spiritual, and social liberation. We called ourselves the Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) Sanghas for Direct Action, and our group committed to showing up together at protest sites and community events *"to meditate, to demonstrate, and to liberate."*

BIPOC Sanghas for Direct Action organized several sit-ins at 38th and Chicago, inviting others to breathe and to ground their energies amidst the turbulence of the space and time. We meditated in the grass outside of George Floyd's funeral service at Northwestern University. We marched in solidarity with other community members and groups along the burned-out blocks of Lake Street carrying a banner that read "Buddhists for Racial Justice and Compassionate Action." I have immense gratitude for this community of practice. For me and many of the other members of the group, these sit-ins were more than practicing in public. We were also bearing witness, positioning our bodies in acts of solidarity, and making spiritual and material offerings in the moment and to the movement.

Two weeks after George Floyd's death, art school graduates from Pennsylvania along with a dozen local volunteers installed the *Say Their Names* memorial for the victims of police violence. The entrance to the site was a block north of 38th and Chicago. Masked and continuing to convene in August, I and several members of the BIPOC Sanghas for Direct Action had decided to meet at the memorial for a Saturday morning sit. To enter the site, I passed through the concrete barricades on Chicago that still blocked off the avenue. I passed the medical bus and the volunteers who offered hand sanitizer and water in plastic bottles. I found the memorial installation in a sunken field at the end of a short side street.

This was my first time at this memorial. I stopped at the edge of the field. On the east side of the site, there was a small reservoir with a single-spout fountain that ducks somehow managed to find despite its location in the middle of the city. In front of me were a hundred white yard signs cut into the shape of headstones, each inscribed with the name of a Black American who had been killed by police. The depression in the land cupped the weight of both the cemetery and my heart. The humid morning air pooled over the space like evaporated tears, sweat, and breath.

The names on the markers were from every state, but I was astonished to see how many markers held the names of Black people killed in Minnesota. One marker was placed in front of the others. It read:

*George Floyd*  
*Aged 46 years*  
*Minneapolis, MN*  
*Rest In Power*

In front of the marker was a bouquet of dried roses, some fresh long-stemmed white carnations, a high-topped basketball shoe, a metal water bottle, small pieces of painted plywood, and other art objects. Beside the marker was a *Black Lives Matter* sign. And another marker reading *How Many Have There Been? How Many More Must There Be?*

*How many?* I remembered my question before coming to Minnesota. The natural beauty of the lakes and parks, good times and connections with my friends, and the sense of possibility that had once inspired me also rushed back to my mind. As I looked out over the field, my mouth filled with the bitter taste of contradiction. Behind the cluster in front of me were markers for:

*Philando Castile*  
*July 6, 2016*  
*Aged 32 Years*  
*St. Anthony, MN*

*Isak Aden*  
*July 2, 2019*  
*Aged 23 Years*  
*Eagan, MN*

*Thurman Blevins*  
*June 23, 2018*  
*Aged 31 Years*  
*Minneapolis, MN*

*Jamar Clark*  
*Nov. 15, 2015*  
*Aged 24 Years*  
*Minneapolis, MN*

*Marcus Golden*  
*Jan. 14, 2015*  
*Aged 24 Years*  
*St. Paul, MN*

*Mark Henderson*  
*Aug. 31, 2012*  
*Aged 19 Years*  
*Woodbury, MN*

*David Smith*  
*Sept. 17, 2010*  
*Aged 28 Years*  
*Minneapolis, MN*

*Tommie Baker*  
*April 1, 2008*  
*Aged 39 Years*  
*Minneapolis, MN*

*Dominic Felder*  
*Sept. 20, 2006*  
*Aged 27 Years*  
*Minneapolis, MN*

*James Cobb*  
*June 9, 2004*  
*Aged 42 Years*  
*St. Paul, MN*

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*Lorenzo Doby*  
*May 26, 2004*  
*Aged 28 Years*  
*Minneapolis, MN*

*Anthony Williams*  
*Aug. 23, 2003*  
*Aged 28 Years*  
*Minneapolis, MN*

*Christopher Burns*  
*Nov. 1, 2002*  
*Aged 44 Years*  
*Minneapolis, MN*

The markers continued back in time and across the geography of states.

*How many?* I thought about the generations of Black people who moved north in search of something better. People like me and others, living and dead, who have brought our stories and scattered the essence of our days across this continent including in the state of Minnesota. We are here and we are still coming. I felt the warmth of a fresh ray of sun on my skin followed by a gentle gust of cool air. My clenched jaw loosened with my next thought. I considered the living and those of us who choose to stay. *What we do not find, we will make.*

The markers filled my field of vision as I walked to join the other group members, African American, Latinx, Asian, and Native women and men, who were spreading blankets on the north side of the installation in the shade of a large willow tree. In the grass in front of our line of blankets, I set out a small candle holder in the shape of the hand of the Buddha and I lit a tea candle in the palm. I pressed a stick of incense into the ground beside the candle and ignited the tip as the other group members arranged themselves. Then I took a seat on a blanket and struck a small Tibetan bowl. The sound of the bell echoed over the field and I felt myself centering down, connecting to the ground beneath me. My mind slowed its running. Time and distance, life and death, ancestors and progeny converged in the here and now of each breath.

I watched as a slight breeze caught the thin plume of smoke rising from the incense and bent it south. *How many?* echoed in my thoughts as the air slowly took on the scent of roses. My gaze came to rest on the markers. They rippled across the ground in every direction. Atop the markers, where normally there would have been crosses or stars, I saw waves of small black fists.

