
EQUALITY
BLACK LIVES MATTER

# MOVING Forward

As she grappled with grief for her family and community, cycling in place helped **Taylor Harris** put one foot in front of the other.

**I STARTED TAKING** spin classes in 2018 at a local gym because I felt sexy riding in the dark, my quads firing, my feet finding the songs' beats. I kept spinning because the studio's darkness became a sanctuary, a place I could bring my burdens. When I awaited my then 7-year-old son's test results after a seizure, and when my friend prepared for her heart transplant, I dragged myself onto the bike. Pushing against the weight of the flywheel, silently praying beneath the noise, lightened the emotional load I carried in my chest.

But in mid-March 2020, days after my son and I flew home from his appointment at the Cleveland Clinic, the world shut down, taking my gym with it. It took about four minutes of unsuccessful kettlebell wielding in my basement to inspire me to shell out $2,000 for a Peloton, the trendy exercise bike that promises a cutting-edge virtual cycling experience through live and on-demand classes.

To say I quickly became a fan of instructor Tunde Oyeneyin—Peloton's red-lipsticked, chiseled-armed queen—would be an understatement. Riding out of the saddle, hitting my cadence, and breathlessly singing along to a spicy remix of Tamia's 2001 R&B hit "Stranger in My House," I *was* Tunde. (Until I caught a reflection of my basic moves and pale, saggy arms in the HD screen and realized I was the mom-jeans version of her.)

Under normal circumstances, Tunde's confidence and eclectic taste in music would have been enough to get me on my bike several nights a week. But as spring turned to summer and personal suffering melded with collective pain, I needed more than your average endorphin boost to keep going.

In early May, my husband was notified that his university's provost had upheld the decision, by an all-white committee, to deny him tenure (fortunately, we rallied supporters online and got the decision overturned a few months later). Meanwhile, my son started voicing his fears, asking more questions about his seizures: "Mommy, what if I have to ride in an ambulance to the hospital now that it's the coronavirus?"

Sorrow and worry at home folded into grief and rage from the outside world as I watched Ahmaud Arbery killed by white men in broad daylight. I wondered how many times his mother had taken him to the doctor as a child, had kept him alive only to lose him to racists. I grew weak under the weight of George Floyd's final call for his mother as he fought for breath under the knee of a cop, killed over a $20 bill. I read of a young Breonna Taylor, sentenced to death by firing squad for sleeping.

On the night of June 4, I clipped my spin shoes into my bike pedals and selected a recording of Tunde's first "Speak Up" ride, the start of a series of classes that address racism and empathy. Dressed in black, surrounded by empty bikes, she rode alone in Peloton's New York studio, but together with those of us who understood that George Floyd's murder was a sharp echo of a sound we'd heard before. A few minutes in, she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and emerged, as if from prayer: "Black lives matter. They've always mattered. The question is," she said, stretching her arms out at her sides, "why did it take this long to figure that out?"

I pulled back the resistance and allowed my legs to slow. Grabbing a towel, I covered my face and wept, unable to fight the thought of losing my son to racism after having spent so many nights hoping his own body wouldn't betray him.

Panting, her legs pedaling rapidly, Tunde quoted a colleague and philosophized: "We don't just hurt in times like this. We don't pause our hurt and our pain until the next George Floyd situation. Black people," she said, spacing her hands out in front of her, "we hurt in the in-between...."

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With the pandemic, the racism, and the longing to reassure my son that he'd be safe whether lying in bed or walking on the sidewalk—I'd been hurting in the in-between. What I needed in 2020—what I've always needed—was a space centered on my experiences as a Black person in this country. A space where I could process layers of pain before anyone dared command me to "hope."

Tunde skipped the typical one-minute cooldown, urging us not to leave our emotions and convictions on the bike, but to use them as a force for change in the world. As "Peace Train" by Cat Stevens began, she tilted her head back, lips parted. Then she repeated the lyrics, *Someday it's going to come. Come on, peace train.* For the first time in 30 minutes I saw her smile, and it felt like an invitation, not a betrayal of my pain, to join her.

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ILLUSTRATION BY Barbara Ott