In 2015, four days after a civic uprising in the streets of Baltimore in the aftermath of the death of Freddie Gray while in police custody, CityLit Project and the Enoch Pratt Free Library (then still under the director of current Librarian of Congress, Dr. Carla D. Hayden) hosted the 12th annual CityLit Festival.

Although the schedule had been set for weeks, one of the impromptu additions we included to acknowledge the death of one man and the lives of a majority of Baltimore citizens was to invite poet Melvin Brown to officially open the festival. Mr. Brown read “A Poem for Freddie Gray,” by fellow Baltimorean Afaa Michael Weaver, then he read his own piece “New Day Poem.”

CityLit is honored that Mr. Brown reached out to us with another stirring poem during this time of the second anniversary of Mr. Gray’s death and on the eve of the 14th annual CityLit Festival.

Read, reflect, act.

The Earth Quakes in Nepal / The People Quake in Baltimore
(In memory of Freddie Gray and the Baltimore Uprising)

By Melvin Brown

About 7,000 miles separates
the villages of Nepal
from the streets of Baltimore city

But one weekend in the spring of 2015
At almost the same time that the earth quaked underneath the villages of Nepal
At almost the same time the earth quaked in a distant land
A people in a major American city felt a quaking from way down deep inside

In Nepal the epicenter of the quaking was near Kathmandu
and it ended
with the killing of 8,000 people
In Baltimore the epicenter was near North and Pennsylvania Avenues
and it began
with the killing of 1 man

Of the earthquake in Nepal
Geologist confirmed that they have known for
decades that there were these underlying causes and
pre-existing conditions and below the surface reasons
They explained that about 50 million years
ago India crashed into Asia creating huge fault
lines underneath and when there is stress
and a sudden movement along these faults then
there are huge tectonic plates underground that drift
apart and collide against the earth's crust
cau sing the earth to quake

And so when the earth quakes we know that
It is because of things that have been known for decades
It is because of underlying causes
It is because of pre-existing conditions
It is because of below the surface reasons

But what does it mean for a people to quake from deep down inside?
And how do we measure its magnitude? What do we know about
seismic disturbances deep within a people? And how do we explain the
quaking inside of the people of Baltimore? If the earth quakes because there is
a movement that is a sudden drifting apart and a crashing of the earth's crust
Could a quaking inside a people be a brokenness from an awful lacking
and a shuddering injurious instability and shock and stress and a convulsive
angry violent heaving as in an absence of health and hunger unsatisfied
Would a quaking inside a people be a raw painful hurt and a trembling like
a prolonged dull gnawing aching eruption from a building up and a suffering
of deprivation extreme from conditions poor and a poverty of need
Could this empty space deep down inside be the cause of a people quaking
because of faults uncontrolled causing a bashing and a crushing out of lives
Black that matter refusing to be Black shadows of people underneath assault
And if the earth's quaking in Nepal resulted in people being killed and the quaking
deep inside the people of Baltimore was the result of the killing of people
Then could that be the cause and a pre-existing condition like a hardening scar
created deep in the earth's skin but festering beneath without hope of healing
and could these deaths wrongful and violent be a wrenching suffocation
and the denial of it be like a tear of flesh and a fault and a defect and a structural
destruction like the colliding and shattering when the earth quakes
And so maybe the people always feel tremors of murderous intentions
and a brutal forcing of and a total disregard for and an intentional moving
against ignored human blood and unlike the earth's crust the quaking
in a people's breathing is a choking agitation and fear and anger and rage
And that becomes the existing condition that becomes the quaking
because the causes that have wounded and killed below the surface seem
an extirpation of a people and the reasons that become the suffering are the signs
everyone refuses to see exist generation after generation after generation
And this reopening of wounds that were known and were never closed
create the sudden movement of the people against the harm they feel
year after decade year after decade year after decade which begins
the tremors and the rapid back and forth movement from agitation to rage
that becomes the quaking aftershock quaking aftershock quaking aftershock
which lays bare the fractured jagged aching from deep down inside
that heaves and boils over and cracks the surface and turns air into a flame
that has no regard for badges and barricades and curfews and buildings and borders and walls and so next time the quaking deep inside of a people could be the quaking inside of the people of Baltimore again or the quaking inside the people of Ferguson again or Charlotte or Oakland or Chicago or New York or Cleveland or Charleston or Los Angeles or any American city thousands of miles away from the villages of Nepal

But for now we watch and wonder and wait in the streets of Baltimore city just like the villages of Nepal not knowing when the day or hour or minute will come when we shudder again and we feel the tremors again and we look into each others faces in silences and in prayers

Melvin E. Brown is the author of two books of poetry, In The First Place and Blue Notes and Blessing Songs. He is a former faculty member of Sojourner Douglass College and Towson University where he taught African American Literature and Creative Writing.

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