

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  
causing 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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