

Remarks to the Physics Community at Lunch

Peter Fisher
June 4, 2020

I have something important to say, but first I'd like to ask everyone, if you are comfortable doing so, to turn on your video and spend one minute in silent acknowledgement of the events of the last week and to remember George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others. Please remain silent for a minute.

(One full minute)

That was one minute. Think about how long 9 minutes feels.

The murder of George Floyd by four police officers has stricken our nation and been yet another example of how the United States has failed its citizens of color. I and the Department fully support the peaceful protests that have followed his murder and condemn those who are not moved by this latest tragedy and caused violence in during the protests, leading to even more harm. I want to be very clear: I am speaking of those who engaged in violence and looting had nothing to do with the peaceful, decent protests taking place. I and the Department can only image the pain the past week has brought to colleagues of color in the Department and want you to know we stand with you in every way we can. Physics Council, the

Physics Values Committee, our student groups, faculty and staff will work to improve our efforts to support our under-represented minority colleagues and I will personally push the MIT Administration to work more to help us support you.

Since March 14, I have sent 78 messages to the physics community. In those messages, I have been careful not to use one word: Trump. The core of my being insists that, in this moment of shared pain, I say that my personal view is that Donald J. Trump is a despicable human being who, instead of bringing our nation together in its worst moment, one of the worst in its history, certainly the worst in my lifetime, has used our hopes, fears, and pain in a vile and cunning way. I have no doubt his Presidency exacerbated the terrible situation for our citizens of color and others whom he must despise. He is the distillation of the worst elements of humanity. Trump is not the only problem, but at this moment, his venality¹ amplifies everything else. We cannot allow his incumbency² as President to continue.

Where does the Physics Community go from here?

We are in the midst of making decisions that will determine the future of MIT. Make no mistake: the threat we face from the pandemic is existential to MIT. How we conduct ourselves in the coming months will determine the

¹ <https://www-oed-com.libproxy.mit.edu/view/Entry/222036?redirectedFrom=venality#eid>

² <https://www-oed-com.libproxy.mit.edu/view/Entry/94131?redirectedFrom=incumbency#eid>

course of the rest of our lives. We are making a phased restart of research and must plan equitable instructional choices for the Fall. We have to do this following months of isolation, a 50% increase in work-load over the last three months, and while caring for ourselves and our families. We also have to do in the added pain the murder of George Floyd and others had caused us.

When Fall arrives, we will have to execute a complex educational plan that will involve both in-person and online teaching and possibly several departures and returns of our students. We hope to continue to ramp up our research efforts. During this time, some of us may fall ill from COVID-19 and some may not survive, there will be an election of historic importance and the pain and confusion let loose the murder of George Floyd will continue. We will do this feeling the great pain from the last week and the exhaustion from months of uncertainty, hard decision making, and hard work.

The best I can tell you now is that we must acknowledge the pain we all feel and that for some, because of the last week and hundreds of years of history, the pain is extreme and perhaps unbearable. Some may have to lash out and right now, the best response is to turn the other cheek and offer what comfort can be offered. We can only work, as a priority, to treat each other with kindness and decency while we make the decisions and do the hard work forced upon us.

The hope I have for the future is that all you are here. I love this Department and I love all of you. Without that, enduring moment would not be impossible. Thank you all for being here.

I will conclude by re-iterating the Department and I stand with our colleagues of color and try to image the pain you must feel. I wish the world were otherwise.

I'd like to ask Ryan to return us to the break-out rooms for 10 minutes to be together in smaller groups. After that, I have some updates and we can have some discussion.