

# Welcome Home: A Call to Action

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That morning, the rain fell heavily, draping the world in a cloak of grey. Looking back, I can't help but wonder if the bleak atmosphere was the universe's way of issuing a quiet warning—if only we had been attuned to the signs it was desperately trying to convey. After a long workday, Dante Williams got off the number 13 New Jersey Transit bus. Hungry, he decided to stop at a corner store near his bus stop but never entered. A car drove by, and gunshots rang out. He was shot twice, once in his neck and once in the back of his head. He collapsed on the ground in front of the store. Bleeding in a murky puddle, he struggled to breathe, but no one came to help; people simply ignored him.

The expression "Nothing will bring you greater peace than minding your own business" highlights the significance of prioritizing one's own life and responsibilities instead of interfering in the affairs of others. You all have probably heard some similar advice from your parents, relatives, or teachers. As a curious child, I often found myself drawn to adult conversations. I can still remember how difficult it was when my grandmother would remind me to "stay out of grown folks' business."

Now, as a young adult, I resonate with this perspective regarding minor conflicts. I believe that it's important to avoid unnecessary stress and disputes to prioritize our mental well-being. However, deciding whether to act or stay inactive when witnessing situations like Dante's can be tough. When someone's safety is threatened, it's natural to feel alarmed and hesitant to intervene out of fear for our own safety. However, the bystander effect, a phenomenon studied since 1968, shows that people are less likely to help when others are present.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, in these critical moments, I argue that the principle of minding our own business should take a backseat to our moral and ethical duty to assist those in need. It is every individual's responsibility to make that choice. After all, looking out for one another could save a life or significantly impact someone's well-being. We must embrace the wisdom of Elizabeth Baker when she says, "Peace is everybody's business," as we strive to build nurturing and compassionate communities.<sup>2</sup> That is the only way we will be able to achieve long-lasting social peace.

Inaction: I dedicate this speech to my cousin Dante, whose journey has shown me the true meaning of strength and perseverance. It's nothing short of a miracle that Dante survived the shooting,

considering the inaction of those who stood by, which resulted in an alarming delay in response time from emergency services. My family and I are relieved to know that he is still with us today, but it is extremely heartbreaking to acknowledge that his life has been forever changed, as he now faces the challenges of being paralyzed from the waist down.

Inaction is caused by a lack of compassion: The decision of bystanders to remain inactive during that tragic event was a pivotal moment for us. It highlighted the stark absence of support from our community in times of crisis, which had fueled the ongoing violence plaguing our neighborhood. This disregard had deeply eroded our faith in humanity and undermined our capacity to coexist peacefully. We felt a deep sense of betrayal, and it was hard not to take it personally. This neighborhood had been our family's home for years, where connections ran deep and everyone knew one another. It was difficult to understand why no one stepped in. This experience led us to grapple with feelings of frustration, making us consider the justification for not extending a helping hand to others. In our anger and disappointment, we chose avoidance and passivity.

It's not personal. But, after learning about a similar event, the tragic death of fifteen-year-old Lesandro "Junior" Guzman-Feliz, who was killed by gang members in the Bronx while trying to find safety in a corner store where those nearby made no attempt to help him, I then understood that the bystanders' lack of willingness to help Dante wasn't personal. We must confront the reality of the bystander effect; it's a global issue. Some truly believe that taking a passive approach in the face of violence is the best way to safeguard their personal peace, but ultimately this diffusion of responsibility harms us all.

Call to action: Direct violence is often misperceived as the primary obstacle to achieving true societal peace. But at the heart of the issue lies a profound lack of compassion within our communities. If this indifference persists, we will remain trapped in a never-ending cycle of social unrest, far from the peace we urgently seek. So, how can we ensure that we are effectively combating violence while prioritizing our safety and promoting peace? The answer lies in a collective commitment from everyone to take action.

When lives are at risk, intervention is the critical factor between survival and tragedy. Research indicates that immediate actions, such as calling 911 for assistance or administering CPR, can significantly enhance survival rates for individuals facing life-threatening situations.<sup>3</sup> These simple yet vital responses can be pivotal. Think about how you've reacted in the past. Now consider, what will you do in the future? Together, we have the power to forge safer environments that foster social harmony. But, to guarantee a peaceful future, it is important to ensure that everyone is held accountable for their actions as well as their failures to act. "Peace is everybody's business." I understand that it's a difficult decision, but this is just grown folks' business. Right now, it is your time to make a choice! Will you

choose action or inaction? Will you choose to stand by or stand up? Would you have helped Dante Williams? Right now is your time to choose between inaction and action.

#### NOTES

1. John M. Darley and Bibb Latané, “Bystander Intervention in Emergencies: Diffusion of Responsibility,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 8, no. 4, pt. 1 (1968): 377–383.
2. Elizabeth Gellman and Sarah Raskin, *Peace is Everybody’s Business: A Primary School Peace Education Curriculum* (San Francisco: Educators for Social Responsibility, 1991).
3. Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on the Future of Emergency Care in the United States Health System, “The Emergency Care System of the United States: Fragmented and Inefficient,” in *Emergency Medical Services: At the Crossroads*, ed. ley Gail L. Warden, Brian J. Stratton, and Bruce M. Altevogt (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2007).