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9-29-2017

### A Father's Lament: UVA Law Professor A. Benjamin Spencer on Charlottesville

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#### Repository Citation

Spencer, A. Benjamin, "A Father's Lament: UVA Law Professor A. Benjamin Spencer on Charlottesville" (2017). *Popular Media*. 490.

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## *A Father's Lament; UVA Law Professor A. Benjamin Spencer on Charlottesville; News/Columns*

The National Law Journal (Online)

September 29, 2017 Friday

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THE NATIONAL  
LAW JOURNAL

**Length:** 758 words

**Byline:** A. Benjamin Spencer

### **Body**

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Here is a conversation that I

never thought I'd

have with my daughter:

"Daddy, where is Chaps?"

"The ice cream place? That's on the Downtown Mall. Why?"

"Can we go there tomorrow?"

"No, the white supremacist rally will be going on there."

That weekend in August, Charlottesville, Virginia, where I live, became unsafe for me and my family because of our race.

This interchange reminded me of a story my mother told me from her youth. She asked her father to take her into a local amusement park. He had to tell her he couldn't because only white people were allowed there.

On that Friday of the rally, as I was collecting my children from camp, another father asked me if I was going downtown that evening. I said we were, because my daughter was performing in a musical theatre production there. He told me to be careful because, "those alt-right guys are already out there roaming around with guns." Huh?

Later, we learned of torch-bearing white supremacists who flooded the University of Virginia grounds, chanting racist and anti-Semitic remarks. I said to my wife, "That's where I work. This is where we live."

The next morning, we awoke to images of confederate sympathizers, white supremacists and neo-Nazis beating people in the streets and brandishing guns. We watched with horror as we had to explain to our children what was happening.

I reminded them of the documentary on the civil rights movement that we had watched the previous month, with its images of civil rights protestors being attacked at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, or the nine students who integrated Little Rock Central High School as throngs of whites screamed, pushed and spat upon them. "Some things haven't changed," I told them. They asked me, "Where are the police, daddy?" Sadly, I didn't know.

I couldn't bear to show them images of a car mowing down and killing and injuring people just a block away from Chaps Ice Cream, nor could I show them the photograph of the young black man being beaten by white supremacists with poles in the parking garage adjacent to the police headquarters where we regularly park to go downtown. They would notice in those images, too, that the police were absent.

Since Charlottesville, many have focused on the outrage we should all rightly feel that white supremacists were violently making their racist views heard and felt. But what is equally outrageous is the lesson that my children received after that weekend: That people of our race are treated as second-class citizens in this country, under threat from those who revile us, and unprotected by - if not under threat from - those charged with protecting us.

My parents, who were both lifelong public servants, dedicated their lives to serving this country notwithstanding their experience with Jim Crow so that I might live in a better America. That led me toward public service - as both an educator and as an Army reservist - to be a part of making this country better, and helping it move closer toward racial justice.

I've had to explain to my children that a black boy walking through a neighborhood in Florida was shot by a neighbor who paid no price for his crime.

Now, after that weekend in Charlottesville, I've had to explain that raging hordes of white supremacists who believe that we are inferior, do not belong here, and are no better than animals can terrorize and physically attack people without any intervention from those who are supposed to protect us.

These two parallel realities tell my children all they need to know about what value is placed on them as African-Americans in this country: Not only is there a virulent, open and violent group of people who hate them because of the color of their skin, but also that those same people are given more respect, dignity and privilege than society (including our leaders) will ever deign to show them.

I am a law professor. So when things happen, I search for meaning that can lead to better understanding. But in times like these, I also turn to poetry for inspiration and guidance on what to tell my children.

Langston Hughes discussed hope despite adversity in "Mother to Son." The mother says to her son that "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair" but "I'se still climbin'." In another, the great muse of Harlem proclaims, "I, too, sing America." That is the ultimate message I want to share with my children: We are Americans. Generations of African-Americans have had to live under the burden of American racism. My parents. My children. Likely their children. Like the mother in Hughes' poem, we will keep climbing.

## **Classification**

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**Language:** ENGLISH

A Father's Lament; UVA Law Professor A. Benjamin Spencer on Charlottesville; News/Columns

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Subject:** WHITE NATIONALISTS (89%); RACISM & XENOPHOBIA (89%); RACE & ETHNICITY (88%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (75%); PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (73%); CIVIL RIGHTS (72%); THEATER (64%); ANTISEMITISM (63%); POLICE FORCES (60%); MUSICAL THEATER (50%)

**Organization:** UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA (55%)

**Industry:** PARKING SPACES & FACILITIES (71%); AMUSEMENT & THEME PARKS (66%)

**Geographic:** LITTLE ROCK, AR, USA (79%); VIRGINIA, USA (92%)

**Load-Date:** September 29, 2017

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