WASHINGTON — It is easy to understand how everyone in the Trayvon Martin/George Zimmerman case feels.

If I were Martin's mother, I'd want his killer's heart on a platter. If I were Zimmerman's mother, I'd be grateful my son escaped greater injury, however he managed.

If I were African-American, I would fear for my sons and be furious at a system that condones vigilantism, and then acts as though naming a teen's death a "tragedy" ends the discussion.

The list could go on. The point is that this is one of those rare instances in which everyone is right within his/her own experience. Blacks are right to perceive that Martin was followed because he was black, but it is wrong to presume that recognizing a racial characteristic is necessarily racist. It has been established that several burglaries in Zimmerman's neighborhood involved primarily young black males.

Picture Zimmerman's neighbor and defense witness Olivia Bertalan hiding in her locked bedroom with her infant and a pair of rusty scissors, while two young males, later identified as African-American, burglarized her home. They ran when police arrived.

This is not to justify what subsequently transpired between Zimmerman and Martin but to cast a dispassionate eye on reality. And no, just because a few black youths caused trouble doesn't mean all black youths should be viewed suspiciously. This is so obvious a truth that it shouldn't need saying and yet, if we are honest, we know that human nature includes the accumulation of evolved biases based on experience and survival. In the courtroom, it's called profiling. In the real world, it's called common sense.

One thing we can all agree upon without much strain is that this incident — this senseless, heartbreaking death — never should have happened. Zimmerman, who began acting as a watchman in 2004 and had made more than 40 calls to authorities over the years, never should have left his car once he had notified police, who told him to stay put.

We also can surmise that Zimmerman would not have followed Martin if Zimmerman weren't carrying a gun. If Martin were perceived as dangerous, wouldn't an unarmed individual keep his distance until police arrived?

Thus, we conclude that Zimmerman's actions led to the confrontation that ultimately resulted in a fight that ended with the fatal shooting.

It never should have happened. And it didn't have to.

The jury obviously felt that Zimmerman acted in self-defense or, at least, that the state failed to prove otherwise. It must have been a terrible conclusion to reach because, no matter what the legal definitions that guided them, it seems impossible that someone's young son, guilty of nothing, should die while his killer walks. Adages become such for a reason: The law is an ass.

By the definitions, instructions and evidence — in other words, by the book — the jurors ruled as they could and justice feels ill-served.

So, yes, we understand how everyone feels. But feelings are like weather — they come and go and shift with time. Part of maturity — and fundamental to civilization — is learning to process feelings through thought, reflection and, in this case, debate.

Instead, in the wake of the Zimmerman verdict, feelings have been magnified and exploited by enablers — from certain members of the media, who seem more like rapacious rabble-rousers than journalists, to professional activists who, in fact, thrive on disorder. This is a good time to recognize that activists with television shows are not, in fact, journalists. When Al Sharpton went to Florida to organize demands that Zimmerman be charged, he was acting as the civil rights activist he is, not as a broadcast journalist he plays on television. Now, as he proceeds to organize protests in 100 cities, he has a global bullhorn with which to sound his fury.

With such instigation, grass-roots quickly erupt into wildfires. News organizations can't ignore news, obviously, but which came first: The death threats? Or the TV correspondent speculating whether Zimmerman would need to fear for his life?

As soon as passions cool, assuming we let them, the discussion that needs to take place surrounds a question: What was George Zimmerman doing walking around his neighborhood armed and loaded? In what world is this normal behavior?

The answer: Not a world most of us want to live in. Let's start there.

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