

Blog #7

Searching for Answers

As is evident in my previous Blogs, I have expressed concern over the state of political discourse and campaigns in this election cycle. Now, as a result of the presidential election on November 8th, my concerns have quickly evolved into a deepening sense of dread, as if the wall of a dam has just given way and is unleashing torrents of destruction overwhelming everything in its path.

This election has raised many questions and challenged many of my assumptions about whom and what we are as a society and a nation. I am left searching for answers. Many of my questions involve why certain things happened that I did not expect.

For example, whatever happened to civility and respect? When did character assassination replace honest answers to serious questions that confront us and threaten our future? I find it disturbing that so many people ignored truth and facts, and believed accusations and innuendoes without questioning. I am finding it hard to fathom that a candidate's obvious embodiment of racism, sexism, misogyny, xenophobia and narcissism would have so little influence on so many people's perceptions about being qualified to run for our nation's highest office. It baffles me how so many people who call themselves religious could vote for someone who worships the god of money when a fundamental tenet of their faith is that there is only one Supreme Being and worshipping other gods is one of the worst sins that can be committed.

These are phenomena I never expected to become so powerful as to influence the outcome of a presidential election in a democratic society. Am I to conclude that these are examples of a worsening decay of the moral fiber that holds our society together, and evidence of a spiritual bankruptcy that I had not wanted to accept was actually expanding at such a rapid rate? Is it possible that the number of individuals who believe that things like racism and misogyny, which should be abhorred in a free and just society, is far greater than I thought? Or, did too many people simply ignore the potential consequences of deciding not to vote?

Much was made in this election about making America great again, but America cannot be great based on fear, intolerance and prejudice. Greed and arrogance are not a recipe for greatness. American greatness suffered a major setback in this election and the road back will be difficult. So what can we do?

First, we must recognize that the problems which fueled the rage and hatred evident in this election need to be addressed. People need to feel secure and have a sense of belonging to something that is greater than them, something that provides purpose and meaning and hope to

their lives. We all need to belong. As a society we need to address these problems. It must also be recognized that rage and hatred are not sustainable solutions, that divisiveness and finding scapegoats to blame for all our woes will never lead us to greatness. The solutions we need are inclusive. They must be equally relevant to members of the white race which is increasingly feeling disenfranchised, as well as to members of all races in our diverse nation, especially those that have been historically disenfranchised.

For those of us who see the dangers inherent in the outcome of this election, the answers we are looking for can be summed up in one word: action. We cannot afford to sit on the sidelines and watch this unfold. Participatory democracy is not a spectator support. Silence is not an option.

We need to be observant. We need to carefully observe what is unfolding and seek to understand how it impacts us as individuals and our nation as a democracy. We need to watch whether policies and practices are for the common good or are designed to benefit only a few. We need to watch whether social programs intended to protect the most vulnerable in our society are expanded and not dismantled. We need to watch if meaningful jobs are created and the minimum wage is increased to allow families to survive and live with dignity. We need to watch to see whether genuine efforts to resolve issues related to equality (e.g., racial, income and gender inequality) are being made.

We need to watch whether social justice concerns are addressed and whether the government is proactively working to eradicate the existence of societal evils like racism, sexism, misogyny, and xenophobia. We need to watch whether the threat of climate change is addressed before it is too late so as to ensure a sustainable planet for our children and generations to come. We need to ensure that our way of governance and life is a democracy rather than oligarchy. We need to watch whether promising and evidence-based educational programs are identified and funded at higher levels to help ensure an educated citizenry.

And, in addition to watching what others are doing, we must watch what we ourselves are doing to find workable solutions to complex problems and to help reestablish a set of norms and values required for a civil and sustainable democratic way of life. We need to manifest the types of ideas and actions we value and not fall prey to the same levels of hopelessness and hatred which got us into this mess in the first place.

But merely being observant is not enough. We need to be vocal. We must find our voice, a unified voice that is not afraid to speak or be heard. We can no longer tolerate or accept lying as a substitute for truth. Lies must be exposed and the dire consequences of believing those lies revealed. We must demand accountability on the part of our elected officials so they cannot get away with making empty promises for political gains that they have no intention of or capacity to fulfill.

In addition to being observant and finding our voice, we need to take action. For school counselors, this involves using the school counseling program to help students develop the skills necessary to be self-reflective, critical thinkers and responsible citizens. This does not suggest school counselors advocate for one political party or candidate over another, only that it is part of the role of school counselors to help students learn how to make reasoned decisions about people and issues that will have a major impact on their lives and well-being. Much was made in this election about “educated” versus “uneducated” voters. A citizenry informed by truth is the

lifeline of a democratic society. If “uneducated voters” pose a problem in a democracy, then school counselors and educators can and must be part of the solution.

A CBA can help school counseling programs focus on developing students’ skill in critical thinking and making decisions informed by a set of values that promote personal growth, responsibility and community development. A CBA is aligned with the core values of a democratic society. It is our responsibility as school counselors and educators to promote these values. One of the core democratic values is discernment. A CBA focuses on students becoming critical thinkers who are capable of making informed decision through reflective processes that reveal the truth and expose falsehoods. Blind acceptance of what others say without seriously reflecting on what is said and its consequences is the antithesis of an informed citizenry.

This election has been intriguing when looking at the relationship of hope and hatred. People can lose hope because what they have been comfortable with is disappearing. Lack of work, increasing insecurity, loss of a sense of usefulness and belonging, and an inability to protect one’s family and way of life are all contributing factors. These lead to frustration which leads to anger which can be easily transformed into hatred. People develop a need to find someone to blame and the finger of blame is always pointing outward.

When these conditions persist and are perceived to be getting worse, and hope is stripped from their lives, people begin looking for someone to save them, someone who will articulate for them who they can blame and beyond that, make them pay for what they have done. The thought of a savior in their midst energizes them. Blind acceptance replaces reasoned thought. People end up giving others power over them in exchange for a restoration of hope in their lives. Hatred becomes a defining force in political discourse.

But what happens if their conditions actually get worse because those they entrusted did not use their power to help them. Hope again is stripped from their lives and people are left filled with an even greater rage and hatred looking for another savior. It would be one of the great ironies of history if it turns out that by voting to elect the next president to save them that people will in reality have been complicit in their own demise.

As noted in a prior Blog, democracy is a grand experiment that is a work in progress, and as an unfolding experiment it can still fail. To ensure that democracy will not fail, we need to be ever vigilant and ready to speak out and act to ensure a just society that celebrates equality and diversity and proactively works to ensure a just and inclusive society. It is time to restore hope and address the problems that confront us, but not a hope fueled by hatred. A core principle of a healthy democracy is people working together, not against each other, for the common good. Let us all act to ensure our efforts are inclusive and not divisive.

History is filled with examples of individuals who came to power through hatred and divisiveness. A friend shared the following quote with me (source unknown) which seems very relevant to our discussion: “Mankind is the only creature smart enough to know its own history, and dumb enough to ignore it.” Let us not ignore the lessons of our history or lose sight of our vision for the future which we can still achieve.