

By Steven Jones, Ph.D.

## The New Generation

### Living in a New Reality

It's 3:00 a.m. on the morning of November 6<sup>th</sup>. I find myself awake in this surreal space of living in a new reality. Two days ago this country elected Barack Obama as its Commander in Chief. Americans selected an African American man to be their leader for the first time in their country's 232 year history. Can it really be true? Did this really happen? Did we just unite across ethnic, gender, socio-economic, orientation, generational, and regional divides to change the face of American politics? Did we just create a new reality for our kids?

### "Not in My Lifetime"

On election night, I was the third of my siblings to call my parents. My father answers the phone with tears in his voice. I launched with excitement into asking him if he ever thought he would see this day. "I'll burn that schoolhouse down before I ever see those niggers sitting next to my kids." I decided to keep my confused

understanding of his response silent. As I continued to listen, I realized my father had transferred to a memory he held deep within him since



the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. These were the words he overheard while walking home from school on a dirt-road with tall rows of sugarcane on each side. An older white man repudiated the suggestion made by his friend who was sitting in a rocking chair on the porch beside him. The suggestion that one day Blacks would go to the same schools as his kids was repulsive to him. He yelled those words to make sure my father heard him and got the message clearly.

On November 4<sup>th</sup>, this country sent a message which drowned out the words my father carried with him for 60+ years. "No, Steve. Not in my lifetime did I ever think this day

would come. But, it's a new generation."

### **"A New Fuel and Aim"**

I spent November 5<sup>th</sup> sitting on my couch fielding phone calls from family, friends and colleagues. Reverend Dr. Paul Smith and I contemplated what the election results really meant. He talked about his experience of getting recruited by former Ambassador Andrew Young to work with a young minister by the name of Dr. Martin Luther King. He spoke of bricks fueled by hatred being hurled at him and others with such aim and ungodly accuracy. "No, Dr. Jones. I could not even fathom this day while having lived those days. But we are in a new time: it's a new day. We have a new fuel of hope/change and are now taking aim at peace, love and unity in a new way."

### **"A New Sense of Urgency"**

During a phone call with my mother, she passionately tells me how she felt as she watched Barack, Michelle and

their two girls walk on stage for his victory speech. "I felt like he was my son walking across the stage with his family. I was so proud!"

I tell my mom of some of the conversations I held earlier that morning. I let her know I am in search of acquiring an in-depth understanding of what the election of Barack Obama as President means for this country. She interrupts me mid-sentence, "I know what this means! I remember as a young girl having the worst toothache ever. It was early evening in December. I raced to the dentist to get there before it closed. They abruptly stop me at the front door and send me to the back entrance. I got placed in a small dimly-lit room with no windows or pictures on the walls. They didn't ask a word about my pain or why I was there. They also didn't realize I saw there was no one waiting in the front lobby. It took forever before anyone came to take care of me. I knew I was sitting in pain alone for so long in that room because I was Black.

They had no sense of urgency to respond to me.

Well, this country just let me know there is a new sense of urgency they are responding to now. Instead of ignoring Blacks they have chosen a Black man to lead the country out of its pain. This means what happened to me in that dentist office will never happen again. That is all behind us.”

### **“Conquer the Divide”**

Our challenge is to figure out how to keep my mother, father and Rev. Dr. Paul Smith’s experiences behind us. I learned an important strategy to better understand why those experiences continue to recur. While speaking at a Black History Month event a few years ago, I was discussing the “divide and conquer” tactics used to control and oppress. An elder in the audience respectfully stood in the middle of the speech to correct and upgrade my understanding of this tactic. He let me know the actual strategy applied is called “conquer the divide.” He

explained the oppressor or opponent will identify divisions or differences which exist among people, groups, communities, and countries. Strategies and tactics are then deployed to deepen these divisions. The actions result in a “divided we fall” dynamic.

During this election I saw several attempts at deploying the following “conquer the divide” tactics:

- White women will not vote for Barack. (*the gender division*)
- Barack is not Black enough. (*divisions within the African American community*)
- Hispanics won’t vote for him. (*the Black and Brown division*)
- He is an elitist and can’t relate to the everyday working class people. (*the class and social status division*)

### **Become Part of the New Generation**

Here are three actions you can take to become a part of the New Generation which does not fall prey to these “conquer the divide” tactics:

1. **Control your own thinking by recognizing when someone is trying to exploit the divides which exist.** Don't let others decide a difference among us has to automatically result in a divide between us, a divide which keeps us from understanding and supporting each other.
2. **Walk across the divide to expand your circle of trust.** Every day provides an opportunity to listen in order to understand a viewpoint of someone who disagrees with you. Every week provides a chance to learn about the experiences of a group of people whose lives or beliefs are different from your own. Every month gives you the ability to get to know someone new. These actions taken each day, week and month combine to create a year's worth of expanding your circle to include a larger group of people you know and trust.
3. **Lean in with curiosity about differences.** Learn to not step away from in fear, or run in negative judgment towards, the difference. We often engage the unknown with a fight or flight mentality. Fear of the unknown can drive us toward separation and even result in hatred. A great acronym for FEAR is **False Evidence Appearing Real**. We can learn to be curious about the evidence we are using to create our view of reality. By leaning in to examine our perceptions of what

appears to be real, we create a greater ability to benefit from a clearer understanding of the reality of others, as well as our own.

### **The New Generation Sends a Resounding Message**

In this new generation, which my father referred to, we are fueled by hope and change. We are taking aim at creating a country which heals and transcends the pain of the past. We are determined to create one United States of America. A country within which the least diverse state, Vermont, and the most diverse state, California, have united across many divides to elect Barack Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. This landslide victory given to him by the new generation sends a resounding message that the fear and trickery which has been used to divide us in the past is not going to work any longer.

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