

**PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTION:
Awakening Humanity and Moving Beyond Labels
Russell Delman November 2020**

“Welcome Back America” - Paris Mayor, Anne Hidalgo

I was surprised that so many friends and students from Europe wrote with joy, relief and hopefulness about the results of the presidential election. When I read the above quote from the Parisian mayor, my eyes teared. As a person who visits Europe four times each year, in recent years I have been embarrassed for my country. Hopefully, now, there can be some healing within this country and perhaps in the world.

Even with the overwhelming challenges ahead, I notice that the ground is more buoyant under my feet; I sense a lighter step, my eyes adjusting to a brighter sun. A veil lifted, many can now see that the emperor has no clothes. When the African-American news commentator Van Jones (see attached video <https://youtu.be/9eMoCW1Pq54>) cried as he talked about it being easier to be a parent now, to speak with his children of character and honesty as essential virtues, we all could feel the depth of meaning in his voice.

Still, my heart feels for those who are profoundly, even defiantly, disappointed in the result. For some, their worldview is shaken; they sense greater danger. When human beings put so much life energy into a belief, it can be totally disorienting and destabilizing when it falls apart. These human beings, perhaps some reading this now, have the same needs and essential values as those of us who are celebrating. Many of us who are happy now felt similar, painful feelings four years ago. Our collective task is to move beyond labeling and demonization and, for those happy about Biden's victory, to experience a more mature joy that includes the sorrow and disappointment of our brothers and sisters from the “other side”.

***E Pluribus Unum* (out of many, one) – motto of the United States**

This magnanimous attitude requires a largess of spirit and deep insight. Recently, I heard an inspiring radio conversation between two powerful, progressive women. One was arguing that asking people of color to forgive the “Trumpists” was disrespectful for all the generations of abuse. She argued that first - “the other side” - needs to show remorse and ask for forgiveness. The second woman, also an African-American, was saying that,

of course, she understood this view but that, for her, healing must begin with whoever has the most capacity. It may not be fair- it is not fair- still it is the only way forward.

I was reminded of a conversation with Ram Das many years ago. Meeting with him on New Years Eve, as we often did, I shared a challenging situation I was having with my wife. She and I were very polarized in a quarrel, neither willing to let go. He simply said, "*Whoever has the higher consciousness, in that moment, puts down their weapons first*". This sentence has always stayed with me. Sometimes I am able to stop valuing "being right" and place greater emphasis on understanding how the other sees the situation. "Before judging, walk in their shoes " as the saying goes. This act of empathy is a noble path and almost always leads to healing.

Healing (making whole) a nation and healing a world is not about the elimination of differences. It means becoming large enough in spirit to welcome great diversity. We must be generous to those who see the world differently while also standing against violence and intolerance. An essential piece is to eliminate reductionist labels. Each of us is complex, much more than our worst characteristics. Our words have a remarkable power to effect the world for good or ill.

Understanding Shared Human Needs and Values

Marshall Rosenberg, PhD, the originator of "Non-Violent Communication" made a great contribution to human understanding when he explicitly stated that all human beings share the same core needs. His view can be summarized in three principles:

- We are always trying our best to get our shared human needs met, based on our life history.
- Look to the need that the person is trying to meet, even by the most destructive behavior, to connect with them and understand their heart.
- Separate the need from the behavior, (which he called the strategy), that is being used to meet that need.

We can and must vociferously rail against destructive strategies while simultaneously understanding the natural, shared, human need living in the other. In this way, we stop demonizing people yet stand strongly for our values. Fundamental human needs and core values are the same in this context. These values are not simply cultural but go deeper – examples include respect, safety, freedom, understanding and connectedness.

Looking for the shared humanity while maintaining this attitude is difficult. Demonizing the “other” makes it much easier to mobilize our combative energy. This is why warring countries and even sports teams create negative images of the “enemy”. Labels like “racist” or “elitist” serve this function. In the 1994 Rwandan genocide, even the newspapers and radios called the Tutsi’s “cockroaches”, making it easier for the Hutus to “squash” them. I have not seen anyone changed by being given a negative label. If we seek a more caring society, demonizing does not help.

When we stop creating enemy images of our opponents and see them as human beings with differing views, we will create conditions for a more equitable culture. What about people harboring violent intent? As I said, this is hard. Unilateral verbal disarmament challenges us very deeply. Differentiating “standing strong in ourselves, from knocking down the other” requires some deep listening. We can defend ourselves without belittling another. People will kill for respect.

In my journey to Rwanda for the 20th commemoration of the genocide, I witnessed a Tutsi woman forgive a Hutu man who was part of the group that killed her family and cut off her arm. Through various listening circles, with tears and anger, I saw the healing possibility of the human heart. He had come out of this cultural trance that labeled her less than human and she saw him beyond his worst actions and the labels she was taught. The actions were not forgiven, the actors were!

When I worked for a year in a drug rehabilitation center and halfway house, I learned that people can do horrific actions yet also have hearts of gold in other moments. I counseled a man, Charlie, convicted of child abuse who cried from the depths of his soul about those he hurt as well as the terribly abused little boy in himself. Surprisingly, he went on to become a brilliantly effective counselor.

I learned three essential lessons from Charlie:

- we are all more than our worst actions
- when we listen with care to anyone's story, understanding opens from heart to heart
- we all need someone to see the good that is living within us.

We will always have differing views and strategies. Throughout most human history, we used hatred, demonization and "othering" as fuel for the battle. Now, is the time for other ways.

Why is this so important?

We might be at a turning point in the United States and perhaps around the world. For a true leap in consciousness, in any situation, whoever has more capacity needs to bear witness to the humanity in the other. **As we delete labels from our vocabulary, and do the hard work of "seeking to understand before being understood", the world will change.**

We all want to be safe, happy, free, and feel both respected and valued. We share these human needs/values. To reach the collective "farther shore" where this is universal, we need to see from the mountain top. In his own way, Joe Biden is speaking this language and standing for these values. He authentically wants to be the president, not of Blue states or Red states, but of the United States. May it be so..... *E Pluribus Unum*

Welcome back America!!