

## **Interfaith Works Board of Directors Meeting Reflection**

27 September 2017

### **1. Introduction**

On September 5, a day before the City of Syracuse school year started, I had the privilege to re-engage as an Alternatives to Violence trainer after a 17-year absence. While it was only for 2 hours at Bellevue Elementary at the corner of Bellevue and Stolp, it felt good to be back. It felt good to be in a school this time because for 10 years I had been going to Auburn Prison to do three-day AVP workshops for prisoners.

Our opening exercise had us sitting a circle with 40 K-5 elementary school teachers and staff. They looked so young to me! They seemed no older than the students in my classes at SU. This was my exercise to lead. What each person had to do in 20 seconds was to say their name, what they did at Bellevue Elementary, and complete the sentence, "If I had a magic wand and could make things better in our school community I would ..."

Their answers broke my heart. So many of them said:

- "... have my students come to school with a full tummy"
- "... have my students arrive at school and return home safely"
- "... have my students know they have value"
- "... have my students smile and laugh more"

Before me were people dedicated to making the world a better place one child at a time. No one asked for more money—well, only a few did. They were all eager to engage and forge connections. Maybe it was an act, but I don't think it was. They were optimistic.

I for one felt less so. It wasn't the feeling of defeat. Rather it was the feeling one has when leading a group of campers on a tough climb to a peak in the Adirondacks which requires good navigation skills using a map and compass, and the perseverance to find a path through "blow down", that is trees and crippling underbrush left in the wake of a hurricane.

I know we still must fight for what is right. However, it's daunting when it feels like we're refighting the Civil War, refighting the Civil Rights movement, and struggling to maintain our immigrant heritage and values that make America truly great.

Here are some thoughts from people that help me and I hope they help you, too.

### **2. From a Civil War Historian in Ken Burns: The Civil War**

*"I think what we need to remember, most of all, is that the Civil War is not over until we, today, have done our part in fighting it, as well as understanding what happened when the Civil War generation fought it. William Faulkner said once that history is not "was" it's "is." And what we need to remember about the Civil War is that the Civil War is in the present as well as the past. The generation that fought*

*the war, the generation that argued over the definition of the war, the generation that had to pay the price in blood, that had to pay the price in blasted hopes and a lost future, also established a standard that will not mean anything until we have finished the work. You can say there's no such thing as slavery, we're all citizens. But if we're all citizens, then we have a task to do to make sure that that too is not a joke. If some citizens live in houses and others live on the street, the Civil War is still going on. It's still to be fought and regrettably, it can still be lost.”* –Barbara Fields, Historian, Columbia University, in Ken Burns: The Civil War, Episode 9. The Better Angels of Our Nature, 1990

### **3. From the Strategies for Change Exhibit, Civil Rights Museum, Lorraine Motel, Memphis, Tennessee,**

*“Rather than force our way into someone else’s restaurant or public place that they have established, we should get our own. Once we have our own, we’re respected for the fact that we can create our own. That’s equality right there.”* –Malcom X, Audubon Ballroom, New York City, 24 January 1965

### **4. From a Mayoral Candidate on Winning**

*“When people ask me how the campaign is going, oftentimes I don’t know what to say. Most of running for office is nothing like what’s on TV. It’s about hours and hours of conversations with voters at their door in the summer heat: interesting stories, sore feet, and lots of sweat.*

*Last week was different. The tragedy of Charlottesville, our President’s deeply troubling response, and the incredible activism that followed: it all really re-grounded the campaign. It reminded me—and many others—of the true stakes. Winning this election is about demonstrating the possibility of an alternative path to the disastrous course our President and hateful extremists are charting.*

*At a time when it would be easier to just turn off the news and tune out, so many great people pledged to do great work. Thank you so much for the tremendous response to the email last week. I posted a bunch [here](#), and here are a few more:*

- *A music teacher revamping her syllabus to include how slavery is the “foundation of music in the U.S.”*
- *An activist committing to bring three friends to racial justice rallies*
- *A local indivisible group donating to criminal justice reform efforts*

*This energy translated into real street heat on Sunday. Maine People’s Alliance and over fifty other groups [rallied against white supremacy](#). Deqa Dhalac, from the Somali Community Center of Maine, spoke at the event, with one simple line that brought down the house: “I am a black, Muslim, immigrant woman. I am not going anywhere.” Hearing that line in a crowd of a thousand people giving roaring applause moved me to tears.*

*Where does all that leave us going forward? Here is my favorite definition of hope, from the philosopher Maimonides: 'Hope is the belief in the plausibility of the possible, not the necessity of the probable.'* — Ben Chin, 24 August 2017

## **5. Conclusion**

When so much in the world is conflicted, and people are seemingly divided along lines of race, class, gender, and nationality, InterFaith Works stands in stark contrast by integrating differences with dignity to build common ground for all.

Did you find the Malcom X quote jarring? I visited the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis earlier this spring and when I read it I realized that if I had been a young black man in 1965 living in Malcom X's neighborhood, I'd likely have joined his movement. I suspect his message resonates with many of our immigrant and refugee communities as they strive to carve out their place in America.

Thank God for InterFaith Works whose mission is to build community and common ground among different communities to Affirm Dignity.

Whatever our faith traditions, I am certain we share at least one belief: we believe in what the Quakers call *Transforming Power*. We believe that *each of us can transform any situation with our words and actions into a win for all, not just for some*.

I started with a story from my latest (and hopefully not my last) AVP workshop. I'll end with a story from my first as an AVP trainer in 1990. It was at Fowler High School. Leon Modeste, who headed the Urban League of Onondaga County from 1979-1994, was in the three-day workshop as a participant. Back then, as they do now, people said his name with reverence. Leon Modeste was a giant of a man who fought many a fight for good. His daughter Wendy had AIDs and was either recently passed or about to. During a break, I asked him why, with all his experience, leadership, hard-fought battles, and victories, why he didn't take a well-earned rest, or at least take the weekend off for himself. Why did he devote three days to a workshop as a participant when he should be schooling the rest of us?

He smiled, paused a bit, and said, "You can't give up. There is still much to learn and to do. We have to move forward together."