

The only thing we have to fear is ourselves

Can you smell it? There's a pungent odor in the air. It smells like a smoldering cesspool. The stench of racism, bigotry and political extremism is wafting on the national airwaves. News commentators and political observers are boldly accusing each other of being racists and demagogues. The pretense of civil discourse is being stripped away. The old polarizing issues of race and abortion have been smoldering dung heaps for years, but lately, the smoky wisps seem to be thicker and darker. Smoke is obscuring the Sun. Can the metaphorical flames of social unrest be far behind?

Headlines are screaming the unspoken subtext of deep political and social division in our land: A Black guy in Arkansas shoots and kills a White soldier in an Army recruiting office to make a political point; an abortion doctor in Kansas is shot and killed in a church presumably by a Right-to-Life culture warrior. Then (allegedly) a White 88-year old anti-Semite shot and killed a Black guard at the Holocaust Museum in



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Washington, DC. Such tragic and horrendous events make me wonder if the patients have taken over the asylum. With a shaky national economy, massive layoffs, reduction in government services, higher taxes and two unending wars, our emotions are running high. The smell in the air is... fear.

At a recent political function in Williamsport, a prominent community leader greeted me with a hearty handshake. As is often the case, I was the only African-American in a crowd of about thirty people. Someone asked me, how did I know the White community leader. "Do you know him from the Center?" She was referring to community leader's stint as a member of the Board of Directors of the Campbell Street Family Center (AKA Bethune-Douglass Recreation Center). The Center, as it has come to be

known, is like an "Indian reservation" for Blacks. The vestiges of a segregated Williamsport are hard to erase. To many, the Center was designed for the low income African-Americans of the surrounding neighborhood. (Despite the perception, the Center opens its doors to all groups and races.)

Was the woman a racist? Did she assume that because I was Black, my association with the community leader had to be related to the "Center"? Did it occur to her that I might have known him from a hundred other possible social connections? Why did she ask the question in the first place?

Here's the problem: It is hard to tell who is a racist and who is not. In fact, some racists are not aware that they harbor racial prejudices. No one openly admits to being racist.

Was the woman a racist? I think not. Her innocent question belies a more subtle point; African-Americans in Williamsport rarely involve themselves in civic matters. Politically, they are almost invisible. A Black man, in a crowd of

White community leaders on a weekday morning was... unusual.

Last year, I lived in Loyalsock. I lived with a loving, devoutly religious, middle-class White family for three months. It was quite a learning experience. My Black friends cautioned me about being in the upscale neighborhood of well-kept lawns and tree-lined streets. They said it was dangerous for a Black man to be walking alone through an exclusive White neighborhood – especially at night. I became fearful. I traveled back and forth through the neighborhood without incident. Actually, several residents smiled and acknowledged me with a friendly, "Hello!" or "Good afternoon!" My fears were unfounded. I felt accepted. I realized a curious fact. Blacks and Whites have been working together, side-by-side, on this continent for 400 years, but we still don't know each other. We are still separate communities divided by entrenched behavior patterns, cultural mythologies, and social and legal constructions of dis-

crimatory practices.

Today, the seams of the American Flag are worn and frayed. These uncertain economic times have resurrected old fears. Widespread racial violence threatens to re-emerge. The hot buttons of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, abortion and women's rights, racial discrimination and the denial of equal opportunities in the work place are front page, above the fold, once again.

Perhaps the election of Barack Obama as the first African-American President of the United States is a harbinger of the end of white male supremacy. Perhaps the vitriolic rhetoric and hateful incriminations on cable TV news is a "class backlash" by white males. Perhaps we have reached a critical juncture in American History. Fundamental change is not easy; let us not fear each other.

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