



Dates to Remember

By Steve Hanamura

As I stood before my church choir on Sunday morning to give a short talk, I asked them to recall where they were on certain days.

Where were you November 22, 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated? What were you doing on September 11, 2001? In both instances, people were able to tell exactly where they were or what they were doing. I told them that November 4, 2008 might be another important time when we remember where we were.

I told them about other key times in history that have impacted my life: December 7, 1941 - though I wasn't born yet, the events of that day have shaped my life forever as a Japanese American.

May 1943 - a little boy was born to a young Japanese couple in an internment camp in the Arizona desert. He only lived four days due to the stifling heat and no air conditioning in the nursery (although the officers had it in their quarters). Hugo was my older brother.

July 1969 - while working at Lane Community College in Eugene, OR I met Paul Armstrong, who had been placed in an internment camp in Japan during WW II. He and I came together for the common purpose of serving all students at the college.

March 1980 - I met Elden Lake, a rehab teacher at the Oregon Commission for the Blind. At the age of 19, he was blinded from Japanese mortar. He had lots of hate and prejudice toward Japanese people until he met me. We had to have a meeting of the minds in order to work together. He became my best friend in the agency.

June 1997 - I sat next to Jim Frees in the bass section of our church choir. One night he told me about how the Japanese killed his brother and I tell him about Hugo. Due to the commonness of our faith we can worship together. The point in all of these stories is that hate, war and prejudice is bad; yet there are ways for those who have been hurt to come together for a common purpose or common cause beyond hurt and loss.

What does this mean for the diversity practitioner? First we must come to grips with our own reactions to this historical day. My oldest son shared the following quote that comes from a hip hop rapper: "Rosa sat, so Martin could walk, so Obama could run, so children could fly."

Many African Americans I talk with tell me they never thought they would see the day when an African American would be elected as president. Some still don't



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believe it. Actually they believe it but they are not sure whether or not they should allow themselves to feel good about it for fear that Obama's life could be taken.

Secondly, for those who have been crying for change, we must be careful not to expect that Obama would address all of our agenda items. What's most important to us may be number 20 on his priority list.

Third, for the diversity practitioner, it is our time to reach out to those who think alike as well as those whose opinions are different. It is a time to truly work toward reconciliation, healing and teaching. We can play a vital role in helping this country to get itself back together. We must not gloat if your candidate won or whine, if your candidate didn't get elected. Truthful authentic dialog will need to take place for the common good of all of us.

Fourth, for those who are not proponents of diversity, President Obama's election does not signal the end of racism, but it does mean that we are taking a step in the right direction.

Fifth, given the stress of the economy and major concerns about health care, may we strive to take a little more time to demonstrate compassion and understanding to those around us.

On November 5th as I was being introduced to the audience, my client shared that he and his children had watched the election results the night before. His ten year old son asked him, "Dad, does this mean that a Chinese person (like me) could run for president some day?" Already children are seeing new possibilities of thinking and hoping.