



Reflections on Civil Discourse after the Election

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November 10, 2016

It seems like a fool's errand to directly compare yourself to the President of the United States at the end of a presidential election, but I'm about to do that. Yesterday morning, I woke up after about two hours of sleep, and I found myself in a situation that I couldn't help reflect was effectively exactly the same as President Obama. My wife and I sat in our bedroom, and we were trying to figure out how we were going to have a really hard conversation with our two daughters.

We knew that there were three things that we needed to tell them. First, that a woman could be President of the United States, but it wasn't going to happen yet. Second, that a man who had said more than a dozen different things that directly conflicted with some of our family's most deeply held values, morals, and ethics had won enough electoral votes to become President of the United States. And they have seen enough TV that they knew what that meant. And three, that for the good of our country, it was important that we give President-Elect Trump the opportunity to demonstrate that he can lead our nation with grace and wisdom. Anya and Kayla, my daughters, are ten and eight years old. They're exactly the same that most of you were the last time there was a transition of power in this country, eight years ago when President Obama came into office.

And at the intersection of all of those things is what it means to strive to become a more perfect union as a country. This is what our country is uniquely able to do in the world, what we've done before, and what we'll need to do again. And yet, the sixth presidential election in our school's history was certainly different than the other five. I wasn't here, but I'm sure each of those had aspects that were challenging, and discussions in our school community that were hard.

But never has there been a more divisive election since our school's founding, and never has an election left our country so divided. And yet, this peaceful transition of power and what we heard Tuesday night from President-Elect Trump, what we heard Wednesday morning and afternoon from Secretary Clinton and from President Obama, is in many ways the defining aspect of the American political process, and what -- it is what keeps us a beacon of hope across the world, as long as we keep striving for it.

Some of you walked into the building yesterday happy about the election results, while others of you woke up deeply and profoundly and genuinely fearful. Some others of you reacted differently. We have 175 students in this school; there were probably 175 different reactions. We have to be a place,

and we should be a place, where each of those perspectives is valued and respected and heard, even when it's hard.

And this election was hard for that, because we had a candidate, and now a president-elect, who not only had policies that we could talk about, but also said things that we would never tolerate within our school community, and should never tolerate within any community. And separating those things is really complicated. I can imagine it's complicated for you, I promise you, it is complicated for every member of our faculty, and it is absolutely complicated for me.

As head of school, I believe it's both right and appropriate for us to engage in this open, respectful discussion, as hard as it is. And I think we need to also acknowledge what a scary time this is for a lot of people in this room. Not because one party won over the other, not because one candidate won over the other, but because of the things that were said over the last months and years. Things that spoke really personally and deeply to lots and lots and lots of the people in this room.

And when we talk to one another, it's really important we remember that, because lots of us speak from positions of great and profound privilege. I'm one of them. So let me be plain about that for a minute. I'll never in my life face the sexism and objectification that approximately half of the people in this auditorium face most every day. The color of my skin means that I will never face the systematic racism that some of the people in this room face each and every day. The religion that I feel led to practice isn't misunderstood, feared, and attacked. My ancestors happened to come to this country more than a generation or two before I was born. I happen to love someone of the opposite gender. My physical body happens to be aligned with my gender identity. And I happen to work at a university that, as an employer, provides guaranteed healthcare to me and to my family, and because it is a healthy place, the rate of increased costs for that healthcare is roughly in line -- in fact, this year, a little bit less -- than the very modest rate of growth of our income.

Those are rare things in this country. And that leads me to be incredibly privileged. And I think if you think about it, most of you will find yourself in most of those situations. And so as you are talking to one another, I ask you to think deeply about from -- the seat from which you speak. Because when you are not so fortunate, when you face the obstacles that come with each of those things that I don't have to experience on any individual day, and when you think deeply about that means, I think it's easy to understand why this election can be experienced really differently. Why this wasn't just about policy, but about the way that people get to live their lives.

And at the end of the day, the way that we treat each other following this isn't just a microcosm of how we hope to bend the conversation in our conversation, although it is. It's really about what kind of people we want to be. It's about how important it is to you, that you are someone that treats each other with respect and kindness and dignity.

We are going to keep talking to each other, I keep saying that. We are going to have hard conversations, and we're going to all make mistakes when we're having them. Questions of diversity and equity and inclusion are really hard. We need to talk more about privilege; we need to talk more about racism, sexism, xenophobia. We need to think about the tangible things and the broader things that we as a school and we as individuals need to do. And as a school, we have to keep looking for the ways in which we don't reflect the school that we want to be, and also the ways in which we are becoming the school that we want to be. Just as a society, I think we need to do the same thing.

In the days and the weeks ahead, emotions are going to run high. It is imperative that we treat each other with kindness, with tolerance and respect, both in person and online. I want you to know that as teachers and administrators, we're here to listen to you, we're here to talk with you. And at the end of the day, please know that we're people too. We're going to do the best we can, just like we ask you to do the best we can. And when we make mistakes, we're going to say we did.

There are hard conversations for us to have as a school, and there's hard conversations for us to have as a country. I hope that you want to be part of those with us. I hope that you are committed to having them respectfully and openly and thoughtfully. I hope that you're willing to push yourself, even when you think somebody is wrong, to listen to what they have to say. And that when somebody has said something that is challenging to you, that you can give them the opportunity, even if they've made a mistake in how they said it, to come back the next day and try it again. That's part of what it means to be the kind of school I think each of us want us to be.

I will have open office hours today, as I do each week. I'll be meeting with SJA in a couple weeks, I think, to talk about ways in which to begin to continue to move these conversations forward. And we'll be looking for opportunities from you all as students and from us as a faculty about how to keep having these conversations in different forums as we move forward away from the election.

In the meantime, I would ask you to take good care of yourselves and each other, and our community, and our country.