

**Our Response to Divisiveness and Anger  
during Uncertain Times  
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

When I began to write a monthly website article in 1999 I made the decision that I would not use my website as a platform in which to offer commentary about political issues and politicians, given my belief that the vast majority of people who signed up to receive my newsletter did not do so to read my views about the political arena. I also recognized that as I shared my thoughts about those values and practices that could help us and our children to lead more compassionate and resilient lives, some of the values I espoused might be associated with one political group more than another.

I mention this since this article is in response to the presidential election that was held last week. However, I hope my thoughts and observations are not viewed as a political statement or as advancing a political agenda. Instead, they represent my attempt to understand the divisiveness, stress, and anger that have accompanied both the election process and the subsequent results and, more importantly, to consider the responsibility we all have to insure greater empathy, calmness, kindness, and unity in our communities.

To be transparent, I voted for Hillary Clinton. Similar to many other voters, I had major reservations about Donald Trump's candidacy. I worried about his seeming impulsivity and whether he would be able to give careful consideration to the complex issues and decisions a president faces each day. I questioned his capacity for empathy and his ability to lead and bring people together in light of his continuous sarcastic, divisive remarks about different groups and those with whom he disagreed, including other candidates. I was angered by his derisive comments about women and the sexual harassment charges, including unwanted physical contact, alleged by at least 10 women. I found his explanation that his lewd remarks simply represented "locker-room talk" to be insulting to both men and women.

I might add that I was very dismayed when Clinton described half of Trump's supporters as "deplorables." I wondered how Clinton backers would have reacted if Trump labeled half of them with the same description. That kind of language breeds a "we-they" mindset that makes it more problematic to bring people together.

**A Stressed-Out Electorate**

Prior to the election I read a number of articles detailing the high level of stress reported during the election season (a season that seemed interminably long). One such piece written by Christina Pazzanese for the *Harvard Gazette* and titled “The Stressed-Out Electorate: Study Finds Much of Public Unsettled by Caustic Presidential Race” noted that stress in the United States was very high and not confined to a particular group but rather experienced equally by men and women of all ages regardless of their political affiliations. I can personally attest that the stress went beyond the borders of the United States, at least to our neighbors in the north. I spent five days in Canada the week prior to the election giving a series of presentations and visiting family. A number of the people with whom I spoke in Canada told me that they felt worried about the outcome of the election and what the implications might be for them and their country.

I think one manifestation of my stress was a feeling of exhaustion. My television viewing is typically restricted to watching local and national news as well as sporting events involving the Boston teams. However, these events were punctuated by the same political advertisements run over and over again. There seemed to be little, if any, respite from this bombardment. I assume that the vast majority of Americans regardless of their political views were very happy when Election Day finally arrived. About half of them continued to be happy when the election results were confirmed, results that were not anticipated based on the predictions of the political pundits and the polls.

Within hours of Trump’s victory being confirmed, articles appeared on the web and in print describing the many people who were experiencing intense emotions ranging from despair to anger to fear. The prevalence of these feelings was reflected in the large number of articles that appeared in which mental health professionals were quoted about strategies for dealing with stress and how to speak with children about the election results. Anger about Clinton winning the popular vote but losing the electoral college vote emerged, with some citing quotes from Trump after the 2012 election in which he wrote that “the electoral college is a disaster for a democracy.”

**Post-Election Fears**

Some people experienced the fear of a Trump presidency more intensely and personally than others, especially given his position about particular issues. My wife

Marilyn volunteers once a week at an elementary school in Boston and was at the school the day after the election. One of the teachers commented that at least two of the children in her class were in tears, scared that they and their families were going to be deported. Articles were published in the *Boston Globe* detailing the anxiety and sadness that took hold of entire neighborhoods that had a number of undocumented immigrants. Other columns described girls who felt that women were not regarded as highly as men.

The worries of the LGBT community are very understandable, intensified by Vice President-Elect Mike Pence's opposition to same-sex marriage and his reported advocacy for public funds to be used for "conversion therapy," a form of therapy intended to turn gay and lesbian individuals into heterosexuals that has been totally discredited by both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association.

Having witnessed many presidential elections, I don't recall any evoking as strong emotions as this one. In the past few days I have reflected a great deal about my own feelings and reactions as well as those of others in response to the election. As I read insights offered not only by colleagues in the mental health profession but by "ordinary" citizens, I thought about my own values and beliefs. I considered the values that serve as a foundation for my life, values encompassing a deep belief in the power of connections with others, the importance of hope and compassion, and the need to nurture resilience.

### **Adhering to Core Values and Principles**

A core value and guiding principle in my life and work, about which I have written and lectured extensively, involves what I call "personal control." It is a key feature of resilience. Personal control represents focusing our time and energy on situations over which we have control or influence rather than on things that are beyond our influence. I have frequently advanced the belief that when faced with difficult situations, resilient people do not blame the situation, they do not blame others, nor do they blame themselves. Instead, they assume a proactive rather than passive or victim stance and ask, "What is it that I can do differently to manage or correct this situation?"

I might add that in terms of exercising personal control I found it disquieting that approximately 45% of eligible voters chose not to vote in the election, the highest percentage of non-voters in 20 years. This is surprising given all that was at stake in this

election. It is important that we strive to understand those factors—both internal and external—that contribute to people not voting.

Just as the pollsters could not predict the outcome of the presidential election, I am not certain any of us can predict what will transpire with a Trump presidency. I know many believe his gracious words about Clinton after her phone call conceding the election or about Barack Obama after their 90-minute meeting were not genuine. They may not have been. However, there are those who hope that his post-election sentiments signal his appreciation that his words have a large impact, both positive and negative, on millions of people and that if he is to insure a smooth transition of power and truly represent all citizens of the United States he must cease using bombastic, hurtful language that divides us. This may be even more urgent when he considers that more than 50% of those who cast ballots in the election voted for his opponent.

We cannot change the election results; they are final. While I believe that those who supported Clinton's candidacy have every right to be upset, saddened, and worried about the results in light of the tenor of the election, we must not let those emotions serve as obstacles to initiating actions that will help us to move forward in a constructive way. We must embrace the notion of personal control and engage in activities that will enrich our lives as well as the lives of others. Let's examine some of these activities.

### **Opposing Acts of Harassment and Hatred**

If policies are proposed or implemented about which we disagree, we must voice our concern and not remain silent. Taking constructive action to express our views allows us to move away from an attitude of helplessness and despair, bolstering a sense of control. Another source of strength is when we take these actions with others, which reinforces our connections and lessens our feelings of isolation.

Regardless for which candidate we voted, we must attempt to be empathic and understand the perspective of those who voted for the other candidate. While Trump's rhetoric has certainly attracted some questionable groups (I read an article that the KKK was planning a march in North Carolina to celebrate Trump's victory), I believe that the vast majority of his supporters are caring people just as are the vast majority of Clinton supporters. In reading and listening to interviews with those who supported Trump, many described feeling left out of the economic progress that has taken place in our

country. Some felt that politicians on both sides of the aisle displayed little interest in them—perhaps another reason for many not voting at all.

I have been dismayed by reports of an increasing number of incidents of bullying in schools since the election. At one middle school in Michigan students chanted Trump’s well-known phrase “Build the wall” in the presence of Latino students who were crying. In Pennsylvania, students holding Trump placards marched through school shouting “white power.” In California, a girl was physically assaulted because her family voted for Trump.

Just a few miles from where I live, two male students from Babson College in Wellesley rode their car through the Wellesley College campus (Hillary Clinton’s alma mater), displaying a Trump flag and shouting what were described by Babson officials as “racially offensive and gender demeaning” remarks. The fraternity of the two Babson students immediately ousted them, noting, “This type of abusive, misogynistic behavior has no place in our society and we’re proud of our chapter swiftly removing these men from our organization.” The president of Babson apologized to the Wellesley College community for the behavior of these two students. One of the students involved in the incident issued an apology as well.

It is imperative that school officials not only ensure that all students are protected from bullying and feel safe but that they also initiate an ongoing dialogue with students, parents, and other members of the community to begin to change mindsets and actions of bigotry. A *Boston Globe* editorial strongly recommended that Trump could begin to heal the divide facing Americans by taking “the simple step of directly condemning the outbreak of harassment and hate,” noting that “undoubtedly his election as president has unleashed a new kind of assertive racism.” I hope that Trump offers such a statement of condemnation against hate.

Given the lightning rod issue of immigration, I recommend that people read the article by Robin Shulman in the November 14 issue of *Time* magazine about the Tameen family, a mother, father, and their five children who are refugees from Syria and have settled in Des Moines, Iowa (<http://time.com/desmoines/>). For those concerned about the vetting process, learn what the Tameens faced. They were “screened by the National Counterterrorism Center, the FBI, the Defense Department, the State Department, and

U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Syrians also go through the Syria Enhanced Review, conducted by analysts knowledgeable about the networks of armed groups in the civil war. Vetting takes 18-24 months.”

I want to believe that all Americans who read what the Tameen family endured before finally being permitted to come to the United States would be very welcoming to them. The Shulman article quoted a man who is a Trump supporter and lives across the street from the Tameen family. At first he had “misgivings about living near Syrians but has come to realize his worry was misplaced.” He told Shulman, “Obviously, they’re not bringing anything but children playing outside. I see kids kicking a soccer ball, riding their bikes, playing with each other. They wave to me and say ‘Hi’ and want to pet my dog.”

### **Seeing People as People and Not Categories**

As I read this account, I thought back to a workshop I gave for teachers many years ago in which I emphasized the importance of empathy and seeing the world through the eyes of one’s students. Several days later I received an email from one of the teachers who simply wrote, “Thank you for your presentation. It had a significant impact on me. I will no longer see those in my class as ‘students’ but rather as ‘people.’”

In a few words this teacher expressed the very powerful message that when we go beyond viewing others in categories, whether more emotionally charged or not (e.g., Syrian refugees; immigrants; students) but instead get to know them in a more personal way, many of our misperceptions and fears disappear. This kind of person-to-person connection, including among those who voted for different candidates, allows us to find common ground for enriching our communities and our country.

Relatedly, I was heartened to watch a TV news report of the actions taken by the Manchester, NH Motorcycle Club in response to racial harassment directed towards seven-year-old Eze Stimson and his mother Jaci at their Derry, NH home. The latter’s car was egged and watermelons and fried chicken thrown in her yard. One of her neighbors is a member of the Motorcycle Club and wanted to do something. The Club greeted Eze after school, gave him his own leather jacket and helmet and took him for yogurt. Eze’s mother was extremely grateful and observed that just a few days earlier she

and Eze were afraid to go to bed; they now both felt more comfortable and she realized how many good people there are in this world.

I am certain that the members of the Motorcycle group did not ask Eze's mother about her political preferences before engaging in the actions that they took nor did she ask them who their favored candidate was. Acts of kindness as shown towards Eze transcend political choices and provide meaning and purpose to all of our lives. In addition, as I have expressed in numerous writings, involvement in what I call "contributory activities" in which we help others, strengthens empathy, compassion, and resilience and is an antidote to the forces that pull us apart.

In my clinical work I have often found that during times of anxiety and depression, people are more vulnerable to abandoning the very practices of self-care that will help them to cope effectively with negative thoughts and feelings. Exercising, meditating, and eating a healthy diet are but a few examples of self-care activities that should remain part of our regular routine. Some people have told me that they feel too exhausted to focus on self-care and I can appreciate what they are experiencing. However, to neglect such activities diminishes further our physical and emotional health.

### **We Have a Choice**

If we are committed to adopting personal control in our lives, it is essential that we focus on the choices we can make on a daily basis that reinforce values of compassion, responsibility, caring, and respect.

Many others have voiced similar views to those I have attempted to convey in this article. One such person is Martellus Bennett, a tight end for the New England Patriots. In an interview reported by Nora Princiotti in the *Boston Globe* Bennett expressed feelings and thoughts that deserve serious consideration by all of us.

Bennett voted for Clinton. On the day after the election he wrote a letter to his young daughter that he posted on Instagram in which he observed that he "wasn't totally sure" how the election results would impact on her life but promised to help her "love, accept others for who they are, think for yourself, help others in need, achieve what the world deems possible."

Bennett continued, "Everyone's a little nervous about, you know, about the whole presidency, but it is what it is. . . . The people have spoken. The only thing I can do is be

the change I wish to see in the world and for me that starts at home and that starts in myself.”

I will end with a quote I have frequently cited from Viktor Frankl’s incredibly insightful book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl, a psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, described the kindness of individuals imprisoned in a concentration camp, those who comforted others and gave the little food they had to those even hungrier than they were. Frankl observed, “Everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

### **A Parting Hope**

During this time of uncertainty and anxiety in the United States and throughout the world, it is my hope that as we choose our attitude, we choose a path that will diminish that uncertainty and bring a sense of safety, connectedness, and hope to ourselves and our children. I would also like to wish all of my readers in the United States a very peaceful Thanksgiving, celebrated with close friends and family in an atmosphere that reminds us of all the things for which we are grateful.

**<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>**