

Because of Them, We Can: A Multigenerational Cultural Transformation

UCSF Black Caucus 26th Annual Gala – Keynote Address

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When asked to give this keynote, I was completely caught off guard. I was told I had a choice of saying, “No,” and I remember saying that wasn’t really true. I couldn’t tell the Black Caucus, “No.” That’s like telling an elder you’re not going to answer when you are called. The UCSF Black Caucus has everything to do with why I can be gainfully employed by this institution and I would like to thank those who came together in 1968 after Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination for forming this body to pave the way for future generations.

I was intimidated by the request, but of course I would do it. The intimidation comes from a perception of being too young and not being wise enough yet to properly address an audience this event is purposed with honoring. At 31 years old, I’m still ambivalently letting go of young adulthood. My grandfather used to tell me, “Stay a little girl as long as you can, because once it’s over, it’s over.” As a child, I foolishly did as all children do, dismissed what I thought was absurd and prayed for expedient maturity. But God, while hearing my child’s wishes, all knowing as he is, also guided my eyes’ reading of the Serenity Prayer that is first thing your eyes make contact with when walking into my grandparent’s home (where I was raised).

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

I read that prayer every single time I walked through that front door from the age of 8 to 16 years old. That’s how many times I requested that prayer, not knowing any better. I’ve come into a now knowing, that that’s exactly what would happen. Life has expediently moved no longer at a child’s pace. Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom are my life’s anchors and Granddaddy was right. Being a little girl is done and over. So, I hope I do, due diligence to a room of elders and carry my weight this evening.

Something happens when you become known as the person who will always speak up and speak firm. All of a sudden people either run away from you when they see you coming or all the other truth tellers come out of the closet and you flock to each other because creating a circle of support is crucial when you’re in the business of truth telling. Especially in the face and in the ears of the blind, dismissive, unaware, and privileged. Doubt, burnout, and hopelessness often creep in and I wonder if I should throw the towel in because it’s tiring and quite the load to carry.

But then I remember that I am a racial being. I didn't ask to be one, but I have been all my life. Zora Neale Hurston said, "I have been a Negro three times. A negro Child, A negro girl, and A Negro Woman." That was in the 1930's. It's 2016. I feel like I know exactly what she's talking about. I have an inescapable lens I view the world through and I refuse to abandon it as I am slowly granted access to sit at tables of privilege because of my education. My education is not mine alone. It belongs to the collective and it comes with responsibilities. One of those responsibilities is educating the educated about the insight of that inescapable lens and its true truth of how and why my people are in the positions we are.

With the time that I have, I want to speak to a message of hope. I want to speak to hope by giving voice to a multigenerational framework that puts cultural transformation into perspective, so that our current generation can trust that our efforts are not in vain. Although we live in a time where things move much faster than we can keep up with and we foolishly expect to see immediate results, we must not stop or give up just because we can't eat the fruits of our labor. Tonight's theme is *Because of Them, We Can*. It was the hope of those who came before us that allowed us to be where we are today and they did not stop nor did they give up. It's time for my generation to pay its dues.

The American Public Health Association (APHA) sponsored a four part webinar series titled *The Impact of Racism on the Health and Well-Being of the Nation* in July/August of 2015. Much respect to Dr. Camara Jones, as president elect of the APHA she is purposely, intentionally, and explicitly focusing on the impacts of race and racism during her term. It was during this webinar series that I was introduced to two visuals that got my wheels turning. First - the historical overview of African Americans in this country and Second - the Health Equity Action Research Trajectory. These two images triggered something. I knew I needed to hold on to them, and put them in my back pocket. I didn't reach a complete thought but I knew they were pieces to the puzzle I'm constantly trying to figure out. That puzzle being – what do we need to do, to better the quality of life for our people and our communities.

The first image – the historical overview of African Americans – charted the percentage of conditions that impacted our existence. Let's say the numbers are give and take, not exact, but trust they give a good ballpark. It showed that our beginning context of America, Slavery, occurred from 1640-1863 – a total of 244 years. Next, Reconstruction & Jim Crow, from 1863-1965 - a total of 102 years. And the final context as post-Civil Rights, from 1965 to now (2016) – a total of 51 years. When you line these up, you see how the current era we are in, is new. Practically still a baby in comparison to the others. Approximately 62% of the African American experience in America has been characterized by the horrors of Slavery, 26 % of our existence has been characterized by the harsh conditions of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, and our current era's existence only accounts for 13%. And it's confusing to some as to why we haven't gotten it together yet or why do we still feel the need to talk about this all the time. This image gives a visual frame of reference. Our cultural traumas have yet to become a thing of our past. As a

collective, all of these conditions were practically just yesterday. Our today hasn't lived long enough. They are still in our collective memory; our psychological, spiritual, and physical memory. The memories of dehumanization, devaluation, de-identification, assimilation by force, and unspeakable volumes of violence. These are hard truths. True truths.

Hope now has a context.

The second visual I took was the Health Equity Action Research Trajectory – a four generation intervention geared towards eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities. Each generation was tasked with a reachable goal: First Generation – Detect; Second Generation – Understand; Third Generation – Provide Solutions; Fourth Generation – Take Action. When I initially saw this, the tension in my shoulders started to loosen and I was able to sit back in my chair. I felt a sense of relief and the urgency I carried from day to day had found a reasonable pace. But of course. No one generation can hold the burden alone. Change occurs in developmental stages and growth happens in increments. In order to detangle the social and racial hierarchy that organizes who has access for a better quality of life, we've got to dismantle not only the hierarchy but also the hierarchy's insurance. Because racism has insurance in this country. Dismantling these doesn't happen in a less amount of time than it took to build it. There at least has to be an investment in putting in the same amount of time, if not more, to see it come tumbling down.

Hope now has a vision.

Together these two give context and vision to aspirations of a cultural transformation for the Negro, the Colored, the Black, and the African-American. They put hope into an attainable perspective.

Cultural transformation is the dynamic process whereby the living cultures of a group are changing and adapting to external or internal forces. Changing a pattern of thoughts, feelings, behaviors and their utilizations as adaptive mechanisms. How does one change these things when the landscape and climate of one's context remains the same? As a people, our journey has been long. We come from hard times that can't seem to stop coming and yet still, here we are. The journey has been weathered by trauma and colored by injustices. This has led to functioning like branches without roots and quoting Zora again, "That makes things come 'round in queer ways."

All behavior has meaning. One must find the benevolence underneath the rage because underneath rage is pain. You are not crazy. You have been through something. And that something has shaped your adaptive coping. That something is those hard times that can't seem to stop coming. These are key concepts of trauma.

Additionally, it is not by mistake that these hard times fall upon some more than others and the weight is different depending on what you look like. That's fact. There's data. There are numbers. All kinds of numbers. Our society has invested a lot of money needing to find these numbers to prove to their unconscious selves there is a responsibility that needs to be taken up. A

responsibility our society is still playing hot potato with. These are the external forces of our cultural transformation – the trauma of systemic oppression and institutionalized racism. Daunting forces.

But let me redirect us back to hope. Hope is where we can rely on internal forces that can combat the external and still allow us to continue on this long journey, always seeking better.

Calling black people,
Call all black people, man woman
 child
Wherever you are, calling you, urgent,
 come in
Black People, come in, wherever you
 are, urgent, calling
you, calling all black people
calling all black people, come in, black
 people, come
on in.

This is a poem by Brother Amiri Baraka.

Here, is where I take the two images out of my back pocket and I use their context and vision to call attention to the developmental stages of a multigenerational cultural transformation.

We come from hard times that can't seem to stop coming and yet still, here we are. I do not stand up here because of my own doing. You all do not sit in this room because of your own doing. It's *Because of Them, We Can*. The generations before us has survived many gauntlets that allow us to do the things we are capable of today – not to downplay the many echoes of our yesterdays that still are present today; the evils that come fourth in the guise of good; or moments of regression/relapse we experience from within. But, we are on our way. Over the generations we have advanced beyond the initial dark depths of the trenches, climbed into foundational building that grants better well-being and stabilization, carved pathways for access to learning and skill development, and mobilizing, embedding, translating what we learn back into our communities. Because of them, we have an innate internal force. We are still on our way.

So where are we today? I believe we are in the generation that is finding its way to be in strategic positions to leverage our perspectives. We are inserting our truth and how it has and does impact us. We are taking our seats at the table with these truths. At many different tables actually, on many different levels, and in many areas of expertise and knowledge. We are taking positions of power and leadership in politics, education, entertainment, science and medicine, technology, reporting and journalism, and business and finance. Our voices are creating agendas and contributing to how decisions are being made. Current and recent examples of this are the

Black Lives Matter Movement, the students at the University of Missouri, Kendrick Lamar's Grammy performance, and Beyoncé's Super Bowl halftime tribute to the Black Panther's 50th Anniversary. I specifically mention these last two because I've been waiting for this generation's entertainers to task themselves with a message of social justice that can reach the masses. It feels good to see politics and consciousness creep its way back into our music. I believe music can be our today's underground railroad. We just need to do a better at translating our own code language.

It has been a developmental journey – a multigenerational effort. Each generation has picked up the baton from the generation before, and we are still on our way.

Here's what I've come to know in my short time thus far in picking up the baton: the vision has to be long, the plan has to be strategic, and it has to include a multigenerational solution. The goals cannot be selfishly accomplished for your own eyes to see. I will trust my grandchildren's grandchildren will breathe differently because of what I contribute today and I will prepare my children to continue the legacy. The future generations will be tasked with a greater challenge of their own. They will eventually be tasked with optimizing what we have learned through unity and develop internal and external infrastructures that can secure sustainability of justice and equity. One generation cannot carry these burdens alone.

Because of Them, We Can, we must and we will reach a cultural transformation that liberates and restores our psychological, spiritual and physical well-being. There's hope here. I have to hold on to that hope and so do you. We cannot wash our hands of hope when facing dismal moments of despair.

As the Martin Luther King Holiday was approaching this year, I thought it would be a great idea to give the Doctoral Clinical Psychology and Post-Master students of our Child Trauma Center's Training Program an opportunity to partake in substance of why this is a national holiday and not let it pass by in vain as just another day off. So, I had them listen to a recording of one of his speeches, in complete silence for an hour. I intentionally resisted "I have a Dream" because what is not publicly promoted or marketed is Dr. King's evolution from that dream. In his speech titled, *The Three Evils of Society* - delivered in 1967, he asks the question, "What happens to a dream deferred? It leads to bewildering frustration and corroding bitterness. The dream that I sold to those willing to readily accept it, is turning into a frustrating nightmare." He lists the three evils of this nightmare as: racism, capitalism, and militarism. He spoke eloquently to the rights of humanism and justice for all being caught in the maze of congressional inaction, double talk of men in high places who use deceptive rhetoric and lack concrete performance, refutes a post racial society, and declaring a civilization engaging in moral lag and facing moral bankruptcy. Far from that dream, had he come. His words from 1967 are parallel for today's climate.

I want to close by paraphrasing his last words from this speech:

A true revolution will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth, with righteous indignation... These are revolutionary times... men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and out of the wombs of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world, declaring eternal opposition to poverty and racism. So let us stand in the convention in knowing that on some positions: cowardice asks the question, is it safe; expediency asks the question, is it politic; vanity asks the question, is it popular, but conscious asks the question is it right. And on some positions, it is necessary for the moral individual to take a stand that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because it is right.