

# An Open Letter to the Community

Stephen Sideroff, PhD

Dear Friends and Community;

The last few days have been difficult; as I'm sure it's been for all of you. As the Wallenberg Institute's mission is the fostering of cultures of peace, the tone of the presidential campaign was antithetical to this mission. As our goal is supporting societal factors that contribute to a sense of calm and personal and community safety and security for all people, the words of the president-elect are alarming. Where we strive for enhancing empathy, compassion, and the resolution of conflict, we are concerned when the rhetoric promotes the very opposite feelings of hate, and fear. Where we support and promote the interconnectedness of our world, its environment and its people, we abhor any effort to pit one against another. Where we strive to treat the "other" as we would treat ourselves, we know, in the long run, making the "other" the enemy does not work. We abide by the Golden Rule and believe it's The Path to greater harmony in the world.

So how do I and you adjust to the new realities of our society? My initial reaction has been to stop listening to the radio and to have my newspapers pile up – unread. I have refused to listen to the news! Of course part of this is not wanting to be reminded of our present reality. But, more than that, it's not that I'm burying my head in the sand, I have needed to do what our very commercial, noisy and sensational environment interferes with – deep meditation, thought, healing and working through the many feelings that have come up inside me so that I can move forward in a constructive and not fatalistic manner.

I am reminded of the work I do with individuals who have gone through personal trauma; people who are having great difficulty accepting what appears to be the unacceptable. I find that those who stay in denial, stay in mourning → stay depressed and stay stuck. Frequently these individuals will be stuck at the "I can't understand it" stage. This is where the unspoken hope or fantasy is that if it can be understood, it will make it ok. This approach never works.

No matter the level of the trauma, the goal must be the process, The Path, of moving forward, of progressing – somehow. With individual trauma the process is clear: 1) accept the reality of what has happened, 2) allow all the related feelings to emerge, be felt and expressed, 3) identify what there is to learn from the experience as well as what needs to be avoided, 4) let go, and 5) determine how to put these new lessons into practice along with a renewed commitment. As I review and go through these five steps myself, I am adapting them to our current crisis. The statement "As above, so below" is an apt sentiment for the moment, and it goes in both directions.

## 1) Accepting the reality of what has happened

Acceptance in this stage does not mean being ok with what happened, but simply accepting its reality. My first tendency has been to agonize, realizing that perhaps a bit more work in Pennsylvania or Michigan or Wisconsin could have made a difference. I have to catch myself, remind myself: that is no longer a reality. We can't turn back the clock; we can't make the results any different than they are – at least for this present moment. Continuing to remind myself of what could have been done, actually perpetuates my agony and delays the process of moving forward and getting personal resolution. We can't turn back the clock however much we

would like to. Every time I begin to go there, I remind myself “Stephen – a waste of time and energy” – and pull myself back from this dead end path, back to my feelings. For the moment I need to stay with the tremendous discomfort of mine - and my community’s – reality. This puts me squarely into step 2.

2) Allowing all the related feelings to emerge, be felt and expressed.

There is no way of avoiding the pain of this reality (which is what we typically try to do: avoid the pain). Today, Saturday, is the first opportunity I’ve had to put my work aside and be with my feelings. I’m very angry. I’m angry that someone who treats people so poorly has, for the moment, succeeded. I’m angry that someone who points out people’s weaknesses and then puts them down has won this election. I feel the pain and foreboding of those less fortunate who now are fearful of what life under this new rule will entail. Since I embrace our beautiful yet fragile environment I’m very concerned for its continuing viability under a ruler who says that climate warming is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese.

I am spending much of the day today allowing these and other feelings of sadness, loss and pain to be experienced and move through my body; not because I enjoy these feelings, but I know that they are inside me and must be felt and expressed in order to have them move through my body so ultimately I can let them go. These, as I’ve said, are my lessons of working with individuals. It’s important to separate out the problem from the emotional reaction to that problem. Even though we cannot change this reality, we can move through our own mourning process.

I suggest that this same process needs to be engaged by our community. The spontaneous protests in many of our cities over the last few days is a part of this process: expressions of rage and sadness. It’s important to view this process as constructive; not to simply concede, but to gather strength to move forward.

Our inner process of emotional cleansing and healing is part of the rhythm of life. Every thrust out into the world, the masculine – get things done - process, must be accompanied by a complementary and feminine inner journey of recovery, soothing, gathering strength and solidifying foundation. If this is done properly, it creates the stage for greater positive thrusts out into the world. We all must prepare for the next positive thrust.

3) Identifying what there is to learn from the experience as well as what needs to be avoided.

There is a tremendous “cost” to what has just happened. In the healing process it’s always important to identify the lessons that at least begin to balance out the cost. In fact, the greater the cost, the bigger the lessons need to be. I suggest that there are many lessons each of us can discover for ourselves, and I encourage each of you to engage in this process to help in your journey moving forward. Here are some of my own personal lessons:

- a. Don’t take anything for granted. If there is something that is important for me to work for, I must not get complacent, or make any assumptions. Always try my hardest and do my best.
- b. There is tremendous fear in this world, and some people are going to capitalize on it. This actually happens all the time. Our news programs are based on this as indicated in the expression “if it bleeds it leads”.

Our brains have an evolutionary bias toward looking for danger. Promoting fear and danger is not a new election approach, and as we have seen, it works. Unfortunately one of the consequences of this focus is the impairment of the functioning of the brain. Fear tends to shift control to the lower or survival centers of the brain. The more we reside here, the

more likely we will get regressive ideas and actions. My own work in optimal functioning strives to develop a person's ability to maintain the functioning of the most evolutionary advanced parts of the brain – the prefrontal cortex. The Wallenberg Institute is committed to finding approaches that help individuals, groups and communities to follow this notion, because, as we have seen, fear can trump hope (no pun intended).

- c. How do we find a way to make Hillary Clinton's oft used phrase "when they go low, we go high" more effective? When the low road is successful, there's a tendency to continue to go there. This tendency must be avoided and fought at all costs. **We can take solace in two important statements as my friend Ron Klemp reminds me: "We shall overcome," was the cry of the Civil Rights Movement and is applicable today. Additionally, on the Bill Maher show on November 11, 2016, his panelists donned a hat that read, "We're Still Here!" We can also reflect: the people who represented the majority popular vote for Clinton are still a majority and the new "regime" will have to answer to us!**
- d. Someone reminded me that most lost jobs in this country have not been lost to overseas workers, but to robots. I don't have the numbers to verify this, but we are certainly entering a new phase of society's evolution and the economy keeps shifting. As an example, I understand that the new Tesla car factory will be using just a fraction of the number of workers that the old car plants used. This is a reality. How do we help those affected by it?
- e. Development and evolution don't only go in one direction. Expansion beyond existing boundaries will always be accompanied by discomfort and some foreboding. Entering new territory will be difficult for those who are unprepared and the energy of "push-back" is inevitable. As we are currently experiencing, part of the growth process needs to be the support of those who are fearful of being left behind.
- f. I'm reminded by my friend, Allen Darbonne, that this is also a time to reflect on how i/we are similar to those "others" whom I'm in rage and in judgement of. How do I make them the enemy and what stereotypes do I use that blinds me to their pain and suffering?
- g. The evolutionary and spiritual lessons: Here is where it's important to take a more expanded view of what's happening. In a previous article entitled, "The Spiritual Continuum" I suggested that our species is at a pivotal moment in our evolution. We are a unique balance between animal and spiritual selves. Our animal nature that has brought us so far is influenced by a "survival of the fittest" and scarcity perspective. We might even say that it's been this instinctual part of ourselves that has gotten us to this point. But I would suggest that our "higher" self is a more spiritual self that knows that somehow we are all connected. If we are all connected, then there needs to be a shift from survival of the fittest, to the Golden Rule. We at the Wallenberg Institute believe this is the direction society needs to be going in. We need to do all we can to support treating the "other" as ourselves and recognizing that we are all part of a larger whole.

#### 4) Letting go

I will be honest; I believe I will have to go through these steps a few more times before I'm ready to let go. But I'm committed to the process. To get closer, I know I will need to share my feelings with others – as I'm doing in this open letter. I'll need to ask others how they are coping; and perhaps learning some additional lessons in this process; but I'm committed to getting through this step of letting go. I must. I know that to be more effective, to do my best to make sure the next thrust of our society is in a positive and constructive and all-inclusive manner, I must take this process to its conclusion.

#### 5) Determining how to put these new lessons into practice

Over the last few decades we have seen money drained from our educational system, as well as from other important community and social support networks. At the same time more money continues to go to a war economy. Does it make sense to have a growing disparity of wealth and a shrinking support for those in need? I think a meritocracy has its, well, its merits. But how do we balance this with a more comprehensive and equitable support system for all? I must do a better job and the Wallenberg Institute must also recommit to making our society a better place for all. It will take some time to move through this process, but it must happen. I encourage all who share these beliefs to make contact with me and the Wallenberg Institute, share your thoughts, and join our efforts. (You can email me at: [Sideroff@UCLA.edu](mailto:Sideroff@UCLA.edu) )

And this might be my most important message in this time of turmoil: there must be the intention by all of us, the will, to find a way to move forward. One perspective on wounding is that it creates an opening for greater growth. We must not fool ourselves or be complacent in doing "just enough". This notion of having the "will" is most important. Again, I go back to my lessons of working with individuals in their own healing and growth process. In the healing process, there is no substitute for the effort of continually reaching deep inside – and striving to keep reaching deeper – that develops a strong will which, ultimately, is what we all need in order to overcome the present "loss" and move to higher ground. This is each of our responsibilities; individually and collectively.

In Peace,

Stephen Sideroff