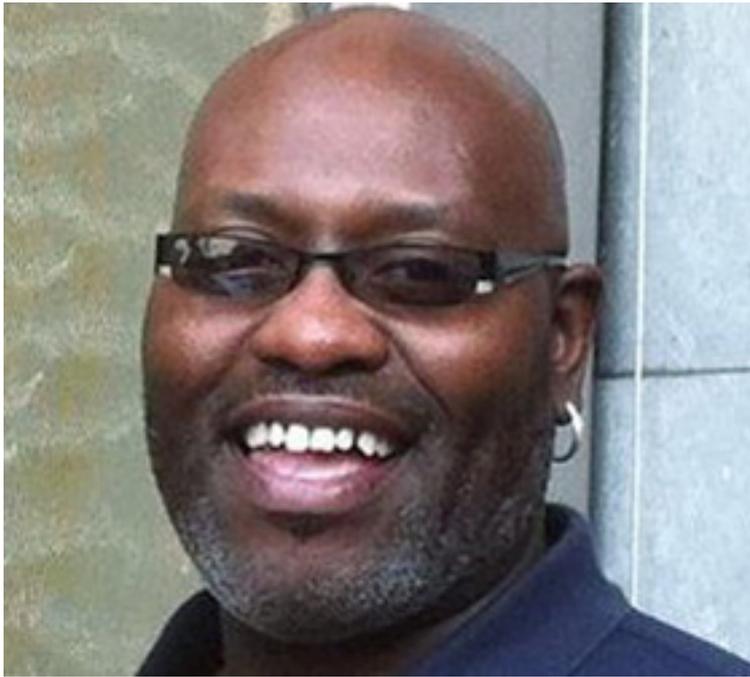


Ballot or the Bullet

Written by Corey Yeager, MA, LMFT
Monday, 05 November 2012 10:30



On Election Day 2008, I went to my polling site to participate in the most historical election since the origin of this country. I recall the excitement that coursed through me as I made way to my local polling station.

That morning I had made the intentional decision to vote early before I headed to work. My reasoning for voting early that morning held deep meaning. I am an African American male Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. For the last number of years I have had the pleasure of working with incarcerated youth at the Hennepin County Juvenile Detention Center, downtown Minneapolis. In this role, I see on a daily basis the "New Jim Crow" implications. Young men and women of color being "shackled" with the chains of felony and the subsequent loss of many rights, especially the 15th Amendment to the constitution, the right to vote.

The 15th Amendment states in part that it "prohibits each government in the United States from denying a citizen the right to vote based on that citizen's race, color, or previous condition of servitude." With this being said, my intention for going early that morning to vote was all important. I wanted all of the students that I would encounter that day to know how important it is to vote. It was my hope that the "I voted" sticker on my shirt, would spark conversation. It is important for these young men and women of color to see adults who look like them, in perceived positions of authority, exercising their right to vote, breaking the chains of voicelessness .

As I entered the polling station, I took in with every sense of my being this historic moment. I recall a statement that my father would use to describe his views on life stressors and the African American plight. In moments of high stress he would often say, "I'm sweating like a n---- going to election." How far we had come, I thought. Today we would elect the first African American President of the United States of America. I wondered what my father would say in this moment. The belief that we had progressed so far since the days of my father's existence was fleeting.

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As I stood in line, I had the realization that I was the only person of color. As I drew closer to the election officials, I paid particular attention to the instructions that were being conveyed to those that preceded me. There were a number of things that were being asked, i.e., "Does the address on your ID match your current address? Are you over the age of 18?" As I moved to my spot in front of the election official, I prepared for the very same questions that my voting peers were lobbed. I stepped in front of the 60-something, Caucasian woman. I received all of the questions that my peers had been asked, with one caveat. "Do you have any felonies?" This inquiry shook my very being. Why was this official asking me this question? I knew that this question was, at best, rhetorical.

This woman saw a 6'3 large Black man wearing two diamond-studded hoop earrings. He was dressed in the attire of a twenty-something, inner-city gangster. His Coogi sweater, crisp baggy Levi's and untied Timberlands, must be a clear depiction of a felon, right? What had the media told her about "my kind"? What was the common thread that bound "those people"? I knew that only she could answer these questions.

Life is a journey and through my experience I am keenly aware of what this woman may have been thinking. My mother and grandmother had assured me early on, that as an African American, I must develop the ability to discern symbols/signals that were conveyed by white people. A sixth sense if you will.

This woman saw a felonious, drug dealing gangster, daddy to many but father to none, lazy and shiftless, African American male.

She did not see the masters' level therapist, considering a PhD program. She did not see the God-fearing son of a hard-working single mom that wearily worked to support her family. All of this while working to instill the importance of honesty and integrity. She did not see the husband and father of a beautiful, fully intact family. This man was invisible to her, yet so apparent.

As I caught my bearings I answered with an emphatic, "No, I have no felonies." I thought, "If I stew on this much longer I may leave this place with a felony!" She continued on with her final parting blow. She had told the previous voters to go to the next table and grab their "ballot". However, she told me to go over and grab a "bullet". She quickly corrected herself, saying, "I meant ballot". Her white counterpart thought this was funny, and gave a bit of a chuckle. As a therapist, the thought that came to mind for me was, Freudian slip. Many times the power of the unconscious boils out, uncontrollably, to express our deep held truths. At best this was unintentional and subconscious but offensive nonetheless.

In summation, I was moved to write this piece with our country's persistence in avoiding the prominent issues of Race and Culture. In 1964 Malcolm X wrote "The Ballot or the Bullet", which centered on the very points expressed herein. Malcolm X espouses, "Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate. Being born here in America doesn't make you an American. Why, if birth made you American, you wouldn't need any legislation, you wouldn't need any amendments to the Constitution, you wouldn't be faced with civil-rights filibustering in Washington, D.C., right now." Are we diners or merely onlookers? Should we not demand our place at the table?

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"Until the color of a man's skin, is of no more significance than the color of his eyes, there is war" (Bob Marley, War). Ballot or the Bullet

Corey Yeager is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota. His current work, at the Hennepin County Juvenile Detention Center, is focused on incarcerated African American adolescents and their families. Social justice issues such as poverty and racism are the cornerstone to his work.