

*"In My Opinion..."*

## When difference means wrong...

By Valerie Batts, VISIONS Executive Director

At the cultural level, the U.S., I would argue, still encourages all of us to ascribe to a "melting pot" philosophy. Being alike, assimilation, sameness are the aspirational goals in this worldview. To the extent that we have accepted this notion of what it means to be "an American", it is difficult to hold major differences in philosophy and perspective and stay engaged with others who may fundamentally see things differently than we do. It feels at a psychological level that we (or they) are doing something wrong. It also may be experienced as a violation of sacredly held values.

Such a perspective becomes even more complex, given that we are also likely taught that most things are "black and white", "right or wrong", "good or bad." Again, at a psychological level, such socialization makes it hard to see differences in general as positive—and especially in such a complex arena as politics.

I encourage the reader of this bold e-newsletter to start at the personal level in exploring the topic, "communicating across political differences", by becoming aware of when we are feeling anxious, angry, and/or unheard in discussions of difference generally. When that happens, notice, *what are the messages that are going on inside of me?*

VISIONS work invites us to see that the cultural lens we hold about the meaning of difference is just that—a cultural lens. It is NOT the only way to view differences. Hawaiian artist, Herb Kawainui Kane, writes, "Perhaps only when people can enjoy their differences as a resource of cultural enrichment do they become truly civilized."

This is a different perspective from our own, as U.S. citizens, to be sure. In this view, differences enrich us and are not a threat. The process of learning to "try on" this and other worldviews in addition to what we hold as beautiful and true, is another way of describing the multicultural process of change.

All of the above is further complicated by the fact that in the U.S., it is often those with the most economic resources who have the power to frame our dialogue, debate, and discussion on these topics. The indigenous cultural perspective on difference and variety as strength, for instance, does not guide or even impact U.S. corporate economic life in any significant way. As long as we keep institutionalizing the cultural belief that "difference" is inherently divisive, scary, or a problem to be solved by creating winners and losers, we will struggle with this question, personally, culturally, and institutionally.

We invite you to "try on" continuing the work of exploring this worldview culturally and to learn skills needed to genuinely "hear" another person's view. In so doing, we put meaning to the words, "We can agree to disagree agreeably" and, to quote India Arie, "we'll be better people all around." The writers in this issue's newsletter are showing us how they are practicing to do this!

Enjoy.