



## WE SHALL OVERCOME

Julius Lester

For those who chose Trump by voting for a third party candidate or by not voting at all, for those who believed that Hillary Clinton's transgressions were tantamount to evil and thought the election was a choice between two evils, with Hillary being the lesser one, you are about to learn what evil really is. With the Republican Party in control of the presidency, the Senate, the House of Representatives, and soon, the Supreme Court, they now have the power to do whatever they want. They've been trying to get rid of Planned Parenthood. It's gone. Obamacare. Gone. Roe v. Wade. Gone. Gay marriage. Gone. The Environmental Protection Agency? Gone. The Paris Accords? Gone. Any acknowledgment that climate change is real? Gone.

Legislation that will put in place any provisions for gun control? Don't even think about it. A raise in the Federal minimum wage. Don't even think about it. I shudder to think what else they will come up with, but I am sure it will be far worse than I can imagine.

The Republican Party wants to destroy the federal government. It was Ronald Reagan who said that government was the problem, and that became a Republican article of faith. Now it is a call to arms. The Republican Party is going to shut down the government, gradually, quietly, in ways that few will notice, until many of those who have voted them into power will be without services they need and will have no idea what happened.

I feel very alone today. My fellow citizens have given power to a way of thinking that is a direct assault on my being. For some time to come, I will look at people and be silently asking, "Did you vote for Trump?" Those people who have given the Republican Party what amounts to absolute political power are perpetuating a lie that nothing good happened during the previous eight years. They are perpetuating a world view that says their way represents absolute goodness. Any other way is "a disaster," to quote Trump. (I will not call him "President.") There is no way to underestimate the extent to which those who voted for Republican domination hate us. To vote Republican in this election meant that those voters willfully, deliberately, and consciously ignored Donald Trump's admission that he grabbed women's genitals, his hatred of women, his characterizations of Mexicans, of equating Muslims with terrorists, the support he received from white nationalists groups, and on and on and on. These voters not only ignored every Trump calumny, they decided that anything Hillary Clinton did (whether true or not) made her less less trustworthy than Trump. Those who voted for the Republican Party did not pretend to care about honesty and truth. They did not pretend to care about anyone other than themselves. Ultimately, they cared only about their resentments, and making themselves feel great again. Trump used the old tactic of creating group cohesion by giving people a common enemy, and that enemy is us - the liberal media, the politically correct, women who want to be respected and to make their own decisions about their lives, black people, Muslims, and anyone Trump deemed to call "a loser." And let it be said, loudly and clearly, that the election results were an expression of racism in its repudiation of Obama's years as president, and they were an expression of misogyny. That the White House would be occupied by a woman after eight years of it being occupied by a black man was simply more than those voters could live with. Making America great again meant putting blacks and women back in the places those white voters believed they belonged.

But as I have thought about what has transpired, something about it began to feel familiar. At what other time in my life have I felt abandoned by the government? At what other time in my life have I felt like I was hated by a significant number of my fellow citizens? Indeed, at what other time in my life did I feel like a significant number of my fellow citizens wanted to do me harm?

When the answers came to me, I smiled. "Oh," I said to myself. "I know how to get through this." My mind went back to growing up under racial segregation in the 1940s and 1950s, a time when political power rested with the states, and the states were free to discriminate without fear of intervention by

the federal government. It was a time when how you lived your life was defined by the state. I remember vividly as a child listening to black audiences sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the song known as the "Negro National Anthem," and even as a child, the opening stanza of the second verse pierced my heart:

"Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died...."

"...the days when hope unborn had died." I suppose those words should have frightened me, but their truth was reassuring. My reality was that I was living in a time when hope that hadn't even been born was already dead was my reality, and this little black child's inner response was, " O.K. Good to know what I'm dealing with."

So, how did black people survive during such times? How do we survive now?

First, do not expect change to come quickly. Nothing is going to change for at least four years, and maybe not then. That is a difficult reality to have to accept. The Republicans have total power. Senate Democrats have parliamentary maneuvers and tactics at their disposal to delay or stave off some Republican legislation, but Senate Democrats do not have any significant power to create change. Change in our system comes through the electoral process, which the Republicans have been manipulating for their benefit by making it more difficult to vote, by gerrymandering to insure Republican majorities, not only in the House but in state legislatures. Expect the Republicans to do even more to control the electoral process. When Trump said the process was rigged, he was right, but it was rigged in his favor.

Second, because change will not and cannot come quickly, do not despair. This is crucial. Despair undermines the spirit, and the results of this election are an assault on our spirits. It is difficult not to feel despair. But despair erodes the spirit. Despair helps the Republicans because through despair we defeat ourselves. But I never heard my parents or anyone in the black community of the 1940s and 1950s express despair. Despair gives your adversary power over you. Despair defines you in relationship to your adversary. You do not want to be defined by a relationship that is detrimental to your well-being.

What I learned as a child from my elders was what William Faulkner said about Dilsey, the black cook, in his novel, 'The Sound and the Fury.' He describes her in a two word sentence: "She endured." What does it mean to endure? It means to live with your spirit intact. It means that I will be even more politically correct, because to do so is to treat others with respect. To endure means that I will let my "little light shine," especially when others try to put it out. To endure means believing that "we shall overcome," even though we don't know how, but because I don't know today doesn't mean I won't know tomorrow, or the day after. To endure means to never stop believing that we shall overcome.

Fourth, I will respect my anger. Anger is a difficult emotion. It can manipulate its carrier; it can destroy its carrier. Respecting my anger means that I will regard it as raw energy to be used purposefully and when its use can be most effective. I will not dissipate that anger in meaningless tirades or displays of self-righteous indignation. Instead, I will join with others to talk about and plan how to use that anger in political actions. President Obama's post-presidential initiative to focus on electoral politics at the local level becomes even more important now. For anyone who has lamented not being around in the sixties to protest segregation and the Vietnam War, the Republican Party is going to give us a lot to protest, including, perhaps, our constitutional right to protest.

Fifth and Last. It is mandatory that we live in such a way that our souls remain whole. How do we live, day-to-day, so that our lives and relationships are ones of joy? When I think about my growing up years,

yes, I remember the psychological terrorism of racial segregation and racism. I remember the fear for my life during a time when lynchings still happened. But I also remember laughter. I remember joy.

I love the title of the Negro National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing!" I understand that at this moment, many of us do not feel like singing, may feel that we have nothing to sing about. But that is not so. At a time like this, an important emotion to express at least once daily is gratitude. In expressing gratitude we shift our attention and emotions from what we don't have to what we do have. Focusing on what I don't have leads to despair and fruitless anger. Focusing on what I do have leads to joy, and joy is to embrace one's self and others with energy that affirms life.

This is what these times call for - the joyous affirmation of all that is good and decent in us as we wait patiently for the day when all that is good and decent will also be expressed in public policy.

I understand that it is not easy to be patient. I understand that asking ourselves to endure, to be grateful, to sing with joy sounds woefully inadequate to the dangers that confront us. They are not. These are values I learned from those who went through times more dire than even these. And they are values that have seen me and many others, 'black and white together,' through times of unborn hope.

We Shall Overcome.

And, we shall.

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