

Political Integration of Minorities: Seeking Participation In an All-White Community¹

By Krishnan S. Chittur²

Despite significant progress, minorities seeking to participate in hitherto closed all-white enclaves still face significant hurdles. For an electorally significant portion of such enclaves, “diversity” continues to be an hobby indulged in for political correctness. While many others consider cross-cultural understanding as beneficial - or even necessary - they need to be louder and much more assertive to have any meaningful effect. Until then, minorities in such communities will continue to be marginalized by unspoken xenophobia, the hypocrisy being masked by much-trumpeted “diversity” events which have, put bluntly, nothing more than entertainment value. My experience as an Indian American in one such enclave is typical.

In late summer last year, a vacancy arose in our local school board. I decided to get involved to make some much needed changes to our schools. A publicly televised interview of all candidates followed, and the board picked me unanimously to fill a 9-month slot until the next elections in May 2010. Delighted at the opportunity, I plunged headlong into the task.

Many applauded my appointment; no rumbles of dissent. It appeared that I had been “accepted.” But I did pause to wonder, to paraphrase the old classic song, “Will you love me in May as you did last August?” Little did I know the petty politics brewing in the backyards.

¹©Copyright reserved. No part of this may be reproduced without express prior permission of the author.

²Krishnan S. Chittur is a lawyer in private practice in Manhattan.

Lightning Strikes: Willie Hortonizing the Minority

The schools were mostly all-white, reflecting the enclave but unaffected by the demographics of the County or the metropolitan area. This was not healthy from an educational perspective. We were not meeting the challenge of preparing children to thrive in an evershrinking world with people of various races and religions. I started exchanging ideas about activities to promote diversity and educate children about the “world outside”, among other things.

Meanwhile, the proposed school calendar for the next year was distributed to the Board. I raised a concern about the psychological effect on children of certain calendar entries concerning one religion. After all, children understand our priorities through the programs and schedules we set, and an isolated entry sent the wrong message. A series of emails followed, one building on the other. One of them summarized some of my thoughts, forthrightly stating that this issue called for deliberations with care and sensitivity, not for an ugly and divisive confrontation.

I thought these were confidential communications, part of the deliberative process where board members bounce ideas and concerns off each other. Boy, was I naive! One board member, in utter disregard of elemental standards of decency let alone legal constraints of confidentiality, took a few words of this email completely out of context, and converted this complex, vexing issue into an incendiary and grossly misleading 30-second soundbite in public, effectively communicating that a serious proposal was under consideration to abolish a

religious holiday! In other words, she Willie Hortonized me.

I don't need to detail what happened next. The fires of bigotry were lit, and I was inundated with hate mail and harassment, and spent several sleepless, anguish filled nights. One irresponsible rumor was all it took to have the flames leaping sky-high. The campaign to shut me out had begun - elections were due five months away.

I was stunned. At the advice of some friends, I sent an open email to the community explaining the real issues, and concerns that everyone should be focusing on. I also got several emails of support. Many people of goodwill exerted themselves to disseminate my explanatory email to the community. That gave me hope.

The "Diversity Initiative" To Make Me "Comfortable"

But this conflagration perverted the direction of what ought to have been a responsible dialog. Other groups - although minuscule in terms of numbers - sought a holiday for their own religious festivals. I suggested some diversity initiatives, every one of which was summarily dismissed with "we're already doing that." No, they were not, but I was not looking to pick a spat; I was trying to have some movement in the right direction.

In a politically astute move - which I did not realize at the time - the powers that be organized a "Diversity Initiative." The overwhelming majority - over 75% - of the persons who attended that event were minority parents, enthused at having me, a minority member, on the Board, and at the prospect of

finally being heard. These were not busybodies populating late night meetings to hassle the Board on picayune details. No, these were minority parents - people who had learnt to keep their heads low as a survival technique, but had been emboldened to come out with high hopes of being counted and of contributing to making a difference.

At that so-called “Initiative”, these minority parents made several worthwhile suggestions. They received the time-honored bureaucratic response: “Good idea. We’ll look into that.” But nothing happened. Not a single idea was implemented or even heard about thereafter.

That raised questions about how serious were the organizers in fostering diversity. Several aspects of that event were telling. The so-called “initiative” was held in a private residence, not in any of the many auditoriums, cafeterias, classrooms, gymnasiums, or libraries in our two school campuses with three schools. Why? Some minority parents believe that was because of concern about bespoiling the lily-white image of the community by having too many colored people in the school. Others thought it was simply a method to launch the political career of a supporter of the powers that be, a person who would not raise inconvenient questions but let business continue as usual with a charade of such meaningless “initiatives.”

I finally learnt the truth several weeks later, on the eve of the election for the seat that I had been appointed to in August. A key organizer of that event revealed that in fact, the event was organized so that I “would feel comfortable.”

In other words, their organizing the “Initiative” was akin to getting a doghouse comforter so that the new puppy “would feel comfortable.” That puppy probably had a better chance of making it to the living room than I did.

What was even more disturbing was the circumstances under which this revelation came about. My wife had sent an email to someone questioning the Teachers’ Union’s endorsement of one candidate, who was supported by the key organizer. And the key organizer’s question, full of self-righteous indignation was, how dare my wife send such an email? Apparently they believed that my wife, the spouse of a minority member of the board, should have been genuflecting before them for their efforts to “make me comfortable.”

We minorities had been naively believing all along that we were being invited for enhancing opportunities for cross-cultural understanding. But after all the platitudes over the months - never mind that we have been residents of the community for about a decade - the powers that be still did not consider me one of “them”. I had to stay in my dog house, and could come out only when someone else blew the dogwhistle. I was sick to my stomach.

An Ambitious Program for Cross-Cultural Understanding

Meanwhile, at my own initiative, I laid the groundwork for the school to launch an ambitious initiative, Student Exchange Digital Learning, and International Collaboration, which was a whole new dimension in education. We would collaborate with schools abroad to develop student and faculty exchange programs, expand curriculum offerings with joint or cross-school teaching

ventures, and encourage first hand cross-cultural understanding.

The program would considerably widen our students' and teachers' cultural horizons, present them unique opportunities for personal growth and for forming friendships across the oceans, and prepare them to meet the challenges of the next decade. It would catapult our schools to the top in national and international rankings and also improve property values significantly.

I got polite applause. And a couple of supportive emails. "Great idea!" "Terrific proposal!" But no action.

"If tan were the criteria, I'd be number one"

Then came the "Meet the Candidates" night. Televised live, in a crowded auditorium with a couple of hundred people in attendance. A candidate looking to unseat me unabashedly declared to thunderous applause, "If tan were the criteria, I'd be number one."

I was sitting one chair away, and was the only person of tan. Just what did he mean? That but for my skin color - and, I suppose, the visual need for some color in the Board - I would not even be there? To say that quite a few people were highly offended at that would be an understatement. A lot of minorities were stunned.

In the face of such overt racism, should I dare a confrontation which was guaranteed to be ugly? We live here. My child goes to the same school. Every day is spent in this community. What price am I willing to pay - or ask my family to pay - for the minority demand to participate, to have a place at the table equal to everyone else?

To have minorities treated with *genuine* respect, not lip-service? To have all children - majority and minority - prepare to thrive in the world of globalized commerce and security?

Where are we headed?

A good family friend, who I had known for several years, backed out of hosting a campaign event supporting my election. “I have to live here,” he explained. “I fully agree with your platform, and what you’re trying to do. I will certainly vote for you, but please understand, I cannot host this.” Yes, I understood, and that imbibed fear of a minority parent who has lived for over a couple of decades in this “land of the free” has haunted me.

So, although I initially chose discretion as the better part of valor, I have decided to raise these uncomfortable questions now. As the minority CEO of a major construction company said, “You should raise your hand when you want something, . . . it’s not always about you — it’s about opening doors for others” - Linda Alvarado, *The Boss: Keep Opening Doors*, N.Y. Times, May 30, 2010.

If we are serious about preparing our children for the next decade, diversity is neither a choice nor an entertainment, it’s a necessity. Shutting out minorities hurts everyone, minorities and majorities alike, and perpetuates ignorant stereotypes rendering people incapable of engaging persons from other backgrounds meaningfully. While I appreciate those who supported me, we need to be more assertive to avoid being drowned. In 20th century United States, living in a cave is a choice, not a compulsion.