

Yes, We Can... Yes, We Must

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – July 22, 2012

A crinkled page dangles from a whiteboard in my home office, just beyond my peripheral vision as I work at my desk. The top corners are curled from nearly four years hanging by the same twine that secured it around my neck on the morning of November 5, 2008. While always in sight, this relic was out of mind for years. Lately, though, it haunts me. I hear scratching sounds that make me look up to see only an aging piece of paper fluttering ever so slightly against the blinds in my office window.

I made that sign on the morning after the 2008 elections, cobbling it together with a laptop and an inkjet printer before heading to the Covington Square for a Unity prayer service. Like all elections, 2008 was divisive both nationally and local. Unity was in short supply, but was longed for in many hearts.

In the center of my home-made sign are three words: “Yes We Can!”

With unity in mind, “we” is underscored. Around the edges are images of a donkey and an elephant, a black hand grasping a white one, symbols for male and female, street signs for the intersection of Wall St and Main St, and a red-white-and-blue map of the United States with no state lines.

I still remember the hopeful optimism of seeing Newton County Commission Chairman Aaron Varner on the Square that bright, sunny morning. Aaron’s act of coming out on the morning after a tough defeat in his reelection bid inspired me. It told me this man understood the unification of our community was more important than his personal pain and disappointment. He knew, as I did, this moment should not be about winners and losers. It had to be about where WE would go next together.

However, my optimism was soon eclipsed by puzzling encounters with others who approached me, looked at my sign, and said: “Oh... Yeah. Rub it in.” I was troubled to realize no amount of imagery or explaining would change these minds. It was, for them, about winning and losing, and they didn’t like losing. They weren’t yet ready for unity. Some still aren’t.

“We the People” are the opening words of our beloved Constitution, written boldly in text too large to ignore. The phrase is the essence of what this nation is about. Sadly, it’s also an ideal as fragile and threatened in modern times as the golden parchment upon which those words were penned.

Look no farther than our current election cycle to see how deeply divided and far apart we’ve become. On one side, many persist in seeing our nation as a place with “real Americans” and

everyone else: the liberals, gays, Muslims, immigrants, and fill in the blanks. The other side wants to isolate us into camps of one and 99 percent. A recent poll and report by Pew Research Organization says American values are more polarized along party lines than at any time in the 25 years PEW has conducted the annual study. In fact, the partisan divide stands in stark contrast to race, gender, religion, income, and education levels, which show nowhere near the same schism.

That split plays out daily in the current race. One campaign makes hay lifting words out of context to suggest the President told business owners they didn't build their own businesses. (Read the full speech with an open mind, and it's clear that's not what he said at all.) The other campaign wants us to stay awake at night worrying about the paper trail for where Mitt Romney really was from 1999 and 2002. We have birth certificates and stories of college shenanigans. Neither camp seems interested in an adult conversation about real solutions to truly complex problems. And, it's killing us.

In my 30-year career, people haven't been rewarded for fighting, finger-pointing, or making the other guy look bad. Team results matter in the real world. I only wish we had political system that valued the same.

If I held a debate, I would ask only one two-part question.

"Look your opponent in the eye and tell us one of his current ideas or past actions you believe has merit. Now, demonstrate the conversation the two of you would have at a table in a small room, with sleeves rolled up, discussing how to make each idea even better."

Yes, we can work together. And, yes, we must. Whoever you vote for, whoever wins, it's still just We the People. Let's roll up our sleeves.