

# Reflection On Civic Action

## FROM MY PERSPECTIVE - Geoff Stone

When we arrived at Penn in the fall of 1964, it was a truly dramatic and bitterly divisive time in American history. John F. Kennedy had been horribly assassinated the year before and the next four years saw bruising divisions over the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement and the devastating assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Our years at Penn were marked by street protests, demonstrations, rioting, civil unrest, antiwar protests, and what in many respects seemed like the beginning of a true cultural revolution. The federal government enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and President Lyndon Johnson launched what he termed The Great Society. The Women's Rights Movement took hold and for many of us a profound transformation of our nation seemed imminent. In the end, though, although a great deal was accomplished, the most fundamental failures of our democracy – most notably, racial injustice – remained largely intact.

Over the next half-century, we made progress on such issues as women's rights, gay rights, and the rights of racial minorities, but we still have a long way to go before we come close to achieving our national aspirations and what we no doubt once assumed would be accomplished by 2020. In recent months, much of our nation has once again focused on our treatment of the "other" – most especially, African Americans. We have had an African American president and more African American federal, state and local government officials than ever before in our nation's history. There has, indeed, been progress. But what we have increasingly come to confront in recent months is the deeply ingrained, unjustified, immoral, pervasive and continuing discrimination that scars our nation.

When people started talking about "white privilege," I have to admit that I tended to dismiss, or at least to discount, the notion. But upon reflection in recent months, and after talking more forthrightly than ever before with my African American students, colleagues and friends, I have come to better understand what should always have been obvious to me.

I think to myself – I earned my achievements. I worked hard in high school to get into Penn. I worked hard at Penn to get into an excellent law school, and on and on and on to get me to where I am today. But then I ask myself, where would I have been today if my parents had been poor? If I'd grown up in a poor and unsafe neighborhood with lousy schools?

Genetically, I would have been the same person I am, but realistically my life would have been radically different. And, of course, it would have been much worse if I had not only lacked the advantages I took for granted, but if I was also a “type” of person who others regarded with disdain just because of who I was. Where would I have wound up then? If I had been born to poor African American parents in the Bronx, would I be writing this essay today? I doubt it.

If we are honest with ourselves, we have to face this reality. Ours is not by any stretch of the imagination a fair or equal society. Consider Lyndon Johnson's thoughts on this question in a historic speech he delivered at Howard University in 1965, when we were still students at Penn:

Men and women of all races are born with the same range of abilities. But ability is not just the product of birth. Ability is stretched or stunted by the family that you live with, and the neighborhood you live in -- by the school you go to and the poverty or the richness of your surroundings. It is the product of a hundred unseen forces playing upon the little infant, the child, and finally the man. . . .

[We] do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please. You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, “you are free to compete with all the others,” and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.

[We] seek not just [equality as] theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result. [Our challenge] is to give [African Americans] the same chance as every other American to learn and grow, to work and share in society, to develop their abilities [and] to pursue their individual happiness.

Of course, all of us are smart enough to understand this insight and all of us are thoughtful enough to care about the injustice that scars our nation. But fifty-five years have passed since Lyndon Johnson gave that speech, and we have made only modest progress over those years. The forces that push in the opposite direction range from the evil to the immoral to the indifferent. It is time for us, before we leave this earth, to make a final effort to confront this issue in a bold and forthright manner and to leave a legacy that we as students at Penn would have been proud of.

It is to this goal, I suggest, that we should now devote ourselves. If we can make a meaningful difference on this front in the years we have left, we will make our children, our children's children, and our children's children's children proud of us. Now is the time. . . .