It's been a rough week, following a rough Presidential election campaign. How can I tell, beyond my personal gut-check? How can we social workers living in the Bay Area or the California ‘bubble’ (oases of liberal-leaning inertia) respond? Let’s keep in mind that even our state has some serious divisions that beg for our attention. Have we listened to voices beyond our own – those that perceive insult to their expected life trajectories? If we weren’t listening before, they have our attention now. What will be our response?

Social workers, family members, faculty members, and students I’ve encountered have described themselves as initially (& some, persistently) reeling with feelings of nausea, fear, anxiety, sleep-deprivation, shock, ‘freaking out’, excitement, distress, trauma, depression, anger, despair, compassion, harm, grief, resentment, and profound sadness. They’ve found themselves weeping intermittently, reaching out for comfort and bolstering, or supporting family and community members who are more vulnerable, with both their words and actions. They’ve sent long or brief emails to their constituents and colleagues, reorganized work plans or class-content and offered alternative discussions and healing exercises, called and facilitated meetings and support groups, with more to come. Some have participated in local open meetings and/or demonstrations. Some have focused on creative constructiveness, to fight back against the emotions that could lead them onto destructive paths. I’ve been among them.

I was particularly distressed by early incidents of targeted bullying (a young woman student whose hijab was yanked by a passer-by) and threatening, racist/ intolerant graffiti newly displayed, as well as young children being upset by the outcome, wondering whether their families would have to face break-up or violence, some of which they’d already escaped from in other countries. There have also been protests in which some participants went off-script from the peaceful goals and admonitions of their organizers; such was their frustration and anger over yet another pointed assault on their collective well-being.

Before the election, I was staying abreast of the peaceful actions of the elders and tribal nations defending the water and protecting the sacred land at Standing Rock, North Dakota. I remain inspired by their persistence. I hope that my actions in the coming four years will be as far-sighted (seven generations), guided by peaceful aspirations, and dedicated to preserving our shared environment. Recently, I was also inspired by an allegory sent to our home by our son’s former karate sensei. If metaphor speaks to you more deeply, I encourage you to check it out at this link: https://myo-fu-an.com/2013/04/08/the-school-of-no-thought/.

And so now I write to you, perhaps with only half-formed ideas, but buoyed by the fact that so many are adding their wisdom to the discussion. Listservs are already mounting campaigns of ideas about how to be effective agents of challenge to intolerance. If they aren’t filling up your in-box yet, look for some suggestions elsewhere in this issue. If that doesn’t work, let me know and I’ll send you some links to get started!
Meanwhile, please write back to us and share your thoughts and suggestions for NASW, the California Chapter, other social workers, and all our colleagues, to rise from this latest threat to our professional values and ethics. Tell us what you are doing to survive, thrive, and help others, whether they are family members, clients, neighbors, communities, agencies, or our wider nation. Share real stories about your clients, to energize those who need a human interest angle outside of their experience to motivate them.

And above all, please strive for compassion, especially for those whom we disregarded, dismissed or defamed in the election lead-up, as you choose your path through these next few days, months and years. Make each day count, so that we can have a more encouraging outcome the next time we’ve got the opportunity to vote or otherwise make a positive difference.

In solidarity and peace,
Catharine Ralph