

Dawn is Coming, Again  
Keynote Address: NCSU Equal Opportunity Institute Graduation Celebration, May 3,  
2017

by  
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Can you believe it?

Forty-three years ago, I started doing equal opportunity, social justice work. Forty-three years ago. Back then, I was a naïve black boy from the bayous of Louisiana, serving in the U.S. Navy (1972-1976). Back then, I was trained to facilitate interracial dialogue sessions for Navy personnel; for sailors. Why?

At that time the U.S. Navy was working to right itself. The Navy was working through some dark and difficult days. Imagine this: race riots aboard ships carrying weapons of mass destruction.

I don't have to imagine. January, 1973, onboard the USS Intrepid, carrying 5,000 men, of which I was one, while at sea in the Mediterranean we had three days of on again, off again, race rioting; three days of black sailors attacking white sailors, white sailors attacking black sailors, onboard a ship of war, weapons of mass destruction all around.



This was no isolated event in our Navy. From 1970 to 1975 in the US Navy, ashore and at sea, there were 350 documented, major, racial incidents<sup>1</sup>. Racial unrest was putting at risk the Navy's ability to accomplish its mission to protect the interest of our nation.

Racial unrest caused by inadequate equal-opportunity policies. Racial unrest caused by leftover Jim-Crow prejudice and bigotry that meant that too many white sailors felt free to refer to black sailors using racial slurs. Racial unrest caused by poor, inadequate equal opportunity policies that left that prejudice and bigotry unrestrained.

But under the leadership of Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, the Navy was correcting itself; righting the ship; turning and guiding the ship of the Navy out of the dark and stormy difficult waters of interracial disrespect. Policies were re-written; new policies were

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<sup>1</sup> Sherwood, John Darrell (2007). Black Sailor, White Navy: Racial Unrest in the Fleet During the Vietnam War Era. New York: New York University Press

written, established and enforced. Yet Admiral Zumwalt was advised that that was not enough.

Heeding that advice Zumwalt spoke loud and clear to the whole fleet through one of his Z-grams, a memorandum that all Navy personnel were required to read. About the changes he was enacting, in his most famous Z-gram, Admiral Zumwalt said to all of the Navy's personnel:

“This is the first of my reports to you on minority affairs. Secretary Chafee and I will be looking into all areas of minority affairs and will be issuing reports as our problems become more clear and their solutions become more apparent.

It is evident that we need to maximize our efforts to improve the lot of our minority Navymen. I am convinced that there is no place in the Navy for insensitivity. We are determined to do better.

Meanwhile, we are counting on your support to help seek out and eliminate those demeaning areas of discrimination that plague our minority shipmates. Ours must be a navy family that recognizes no artificial barriers of race, color, or religion. There is no black navy, no white navy – just one navy – the United States navy.”<sup>2</sup>

Following through on Zumwalt's vision for that one-Navy, his staff came to the idea that there was a need for more than policy change; there was a need for some interpersonal work. Sailors needed to be in race-related conversations with each other.

Black and white sailors needed to listen and hear from each other; to get inside each other's stories. White and black sailors needed an opportunity to get inside each other's frame of reference to change the atmosphere of the everyday work environment; to change the atmosphere of their social interactions with each other.

To facilitate those conversations, the Navy selected and trained plain, old everyday sailors. No special ranks; just every day, ordinary Navy personnel.

I was one of those plain old, every day, ordinary, sailors chosen and trained to conduct interracial dialogues. For 25 to 35 members of the Navy at a time, each dialogue opportunity lasted two and one-half Navy days. I was trained and did conduct some of those interracial conversations to help the Navy out of its dark and difficult days. Can you believe it? Forty-three years ago, and now today our nation is once again struggling through difficult days.

In 1968, Dr. King declared, “We've got some difficult days ahead...” In 1968, he was telling us to get ready. From the days of race-relations, Dr. King was speaking into our future, telling us to get ready for even more everyday intergroup contact and interaction.

Today his prophecy is our reality. Today's equal opportunity, civil rights, intergroup difficulties are much more complex. It's not just race-relations; it's not just

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid; pp. 46-47.

desegregation; it's not just diversity. It's neo-diversity. Today we live in a time of exploding diversity that has created a neo-diversity.

Neo-diversity is today's interpersonal situation in which we all have to encounter and interact with people from many different groups. Race yes, but in our social interaction opportunities, there any number of intergroup dimensions including, bodily-condition, political-affiliation, sexual-orientation, sex-of-person, ethnic, socio-economic status, gender-identity, religion, age.

I just had to inform my students that when I was growing up in the Jim-Crow South of legal-racial-segregation, there was no respectful way to talk about transgender people. And now, every day, people on our campus, openly talk with respect about transgender people in the abstract, and transgender acquaintances and friends who go to school, walk the campus and are in classes at NC State.

"Welcome to the future I tell them." "It ain't coming," I say; "it's here. Welcome to the age of neo-diversity."

And that neo-diversity interpersonal situation is activating the same kind of intergroup anxiety, prejudice and bigotry that was tearing up the Navy forty-three years ago. Except now, neo-diversity, intergroup, anxiety is engulfing our whole nation.

Forty-three years ago, in the Navy, I began my equal opportunity work in the age of race-relations. Today, I am an activist-scholar working to help Americans understand and adapt to our nation's neo-diversity. That is the hope I have for my newest book; "Taking on Diversity."<sup>3</sup> With my book, I am trying to create a new set of conversations that fit the new intergroup situations of America, that fit our neo-diversity, in which we all find ourselves having to interact with people not "...like us."

With that new, more complex, intergroup struggle, once again America needs equal opportunity workers who live and work in the everyday environments where all that intergroup anxiety and tension is interpersonal. We need plain, old everyday people who are educated about equal opportunity issues.

North Carolina needs, America needs, plain, old everyday people who are educated about equal opportunity issues. Why? Well it is those people, with that education, who will bring us out of the darkness of intergroup disrespect that is making too many of us anxious about, afraid of, and sometimes angry with people we work with and who live in and around our neighborhoods.

I have always been impressed with NCSU's Equal Opportunity Institute. For a few years, in fact, early in my career here at NCSU, I taught sessions on the social psychology of affirmative action for the institute.

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<sup>3</sup> Nacoste, R. W. (2015). Taking on diversity: How we can move from anxiety to respect. New York: Prometheus Books.

I was impressed with and taught for the Institute because I saw a connection to the powerful, effective strategy the Navy took. Train everyday people about equal opportunity, access and diversity issues. Then send those educated everyday people back into their work and living environments to be a trained voice for social justice.

Today lots of Americans are worried and wondering, how will we get through the new, 21<sup>st</sup> century, intergroup tense, difficult days? I am not worried.

With people like you (graduates of NCSU's Equal Opportunity Institute), who are trained to understand what is going on at the policy level, dawn is coming. With people like you, who are trained to see where the interpersonal work needs to be done in your work environment (and neighborhoods), dawn is coming.

With and through you EOI graduates, we will do more than just get through these dark and difficult days. We will move our communities toward America's day-break where that dawn will let us see that our work to create a "...more perfect union" is having success.

Dawn is coming... again.

Forty-three years since I got involved in equal opportunity, race-relations work, I believe that with and through you and all those who seek this education, we will work through the darkness to reach the dawn of a new day of interpersonal, intergroup, respect. With your training, you have done more than you realize. You have not just become educated. You have made yourself ready to take on neo-diversity and all the challenges it presents to our everyday interactions at work and to our everyday life situations.

You have now become day breakers.

Hear the Harlem Renaissance poet Arna Bontemps poem "The Day-Breakers."  
Hear this:

"We are not come to wage a strife with swords upon this hill  
It is not wise to waste a life against a stubborn will  
Yet would we die as some have done  
Beating a way for the rising sun."

Today, on your graduation, I offer you my sincerest congratulations. In the Navy, when something is well done, we say "Bravo Zulu."

Today, on your graduation from NCSU's Equal Opportunity Institute, I offer that salute to you, the new day-breakers.

"Bravo Zulu"!

Congratulations!

Dr. Rupert W. Nacoste,  
May 3, 2017