

# StirFry Seminars

March 2008

## A Unfinished Conversation

By Lee Mun Wah

In the year 2009, this country faces an historically momentous opportunity to possibly elect a woman or a man of color for the first time in the history of this country. Yet, the media and the country are pressing both candidates, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, to “transcend” their differences and not bring up the issues of gender or race in their quest for the presidency. Why is there so much fear in entering into such a dialogue? What are we afraid might happen if Hillary or Barack actually were to talk about what it is like to be a person of color or a woman in this country? Is there a fear that there just might be two Americas? That we may finally have to discuss what we haven’t talked about or allowed ourselves to acknowledge—that we have an ongoing problem with difference in America. We seem to have this incredible preoccupation with insisting on what we always have “in common” - that we are one nation, one country, one people. If that were true, then there would be a whole lot more representation of women and people of color in every facet of our government and workplaces but there is not.

To deal with the problems of racism or sexism or any of the other “isms” one first needs to know that a problem exists. Transcendence implies that we have dealt with these issues. My experience tells me that we are better at celebrating diversity than actually practicing diversity. A recent survey showed that 70% of EuroAmericans think that race relations have improved immensely, while 68% of people of color think it has gotten worse. Aren’t we even curious as to why there is such a disparity of thought and perception? We are so young in our understanding of race and gender relations in this country. It is so easy to simply say words like respect and understanding, and never have to meet people who are different from ourselves, let alone have a relationship with them.

We need to hear Obama’s and Clinton’s stories about what it has taken for them to get to this point in their lives. We need to hear what it was like for Clinton to have a man waving a sign “Iron my shirt!” in the middle of her speech recently, or learn what it is like for Obama to be the only black man in the United States Senate. We need to ask them what’s hard about each of their experiences and how they have been affected by them. There are hundreds of unfinished conversations all over this country begging to be shared, if only we are willing to ask. As someone once shared, “Curiosity is the gateway to empathy.” We’ve had five hundred years of “don’t ask, don’t tell” when it comes to diversity issues. Don’t you think it is time to break our silence and truly have an authentic relationship and conversation with each other? This election is not only about who is the best candidate, but it is also a challenge to our willingness to look at how our differences can also bring us together, not just what we have in common.

*Lee Mun Wah*

### **MARCH WORLDWIDE CELEBRATIONS**

March 1 - **International Women of Color Day** • March 3 - **Hina Matsuri (Doll Festival)** (Japan)  
March 10 - **Harriet Tubman Day** (U.S.) • March 17 - **St. Patrick’s Day** (Ireland)  
March 20 - **Purim** (Judaism) • March 21 - **Human Rights Day** (South Africa)  
March 26 - **Youth Day** (Vietnam) • March 31 - **Cesar Chavez Day** (U.S.)