



# IN THE KNOW

Your Monthly Newsletter from The Black Exec

## American Unity is Still Elusive

“ Dr. King's Vision of Unity and America's  
21st-Century Challenges ”



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On Monday, January 20, 2025, the United States States celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday. Perhaps his most enduring legacy is his passionate plea for Americans to live together as one. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. King described a vision where, "All of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last...'" King's plea rang out loudly into the ears of a divided nation. He delivered the speech at "The March on Washington" in the year of my birth—1963. It was a tumultuous time in American history.

Also on the 20th, Donald J. Trump was inaugurated as the 47th president of the United States of America. It is fair to say that we are a nation still deeply divided. It has been sixty-two years since King's famous speech, and in 2024, a record high 80% of U.S. adults believed Americans are greatly divided on the most important values, while 18% believe the country is united. The result is up three points from 77% when Gallup last polled this question nine years ago.

This overall context provides the perfect backdrop for a discussion on unity. It greatly pains me to see our nation so divided. We all can agree that division is not a good thing. After a season of highlighting our divisions—that is, a national presidential election—we can now expect to hear a chorus of voices calling for unity. My question is: what will we do in pursuit of a unity which has proven to be most elusive?

In my view, we are not close to the vision of national unity Dr. King described. Our collective reticence to fully acknowledge our historical failure to unite is exhibit number one. Some of us feel the need to point out our disunity daily, while others are suggesting we can scrub away our past disunity simply by denying it.

I suggest we pause in this historical moment and reset our approach to national unity. We should begin with an honest accounting of the facts regarding our history. Ours is a nation whose intentional divisions on the basis of race and economic station have persisted for centuries. We are also, perhaps more importantly, a nation which has succumbed to the calculus that we can somehow solve our challenges by doubling down on division.

Today, virtually every challenge is framed by extreme positions. We are either democrats or republicans; capitalists or socialists; rich or poor; urban or rural; young or old; male or female; white or people-of-color. As a result, we are either right or wrong!

What can we do to change this? My suggestion is to seek ways to raise every discussion to a higher order. Instead of running away from each other into every imaginable extreme, we need to race toward common ground without sacrificing what should be our collective and common values: freedom, justice, equality, security. We have to stop forcing unnecessary choices between extreme “my way or the highway” positions and find “our way” by agreeing to pursue what is right above who is right.

Let us find a 21st century set of American values robust enough to support a people as diverse as any other place in the world. Let us find a powerful set of American ideals where we honor the best of our past and simultaneously prepare for the best possible future—for everyone. While we each have a set of individual attributes, we need new and effective ways to see ourselves as imbued with intrinsic dignity and freedom. Let us unite, not on the basis of acquiescence to whomever wields the most power today, but on the basis of common liberty and equal standing always.

To close, allow me to refer back to Dr King, who said “We must all learn to live together as brothers”. If not, he warned “...we will all perish together as fools.”

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<sup>1</sup>Gallup, “Americans Agree Nation is Divided on Key Values,” Jeffrey M. Jones, September 23, 2024.

# "The Complexity of True Unity"



## **BRYETTA CALLOWAY**

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podcast](#)



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In today's leadership landscape, there's an unspoken pressure to prioritize "solutioning" over genuine collaboration. Leaders often approach challenges with a subconscious drive to deliver swift, assertive solutions. While well-intentioned, this need to "solve" can stem more from a desire to be correct than from a commitment to understanding. In the rush to assert solutions, leaders may shortcut collaboration—the very pathway to unity.

Unity, for teams, organizations, and countries, is complex. It demands deep empathy for others; perspectives and a willingness to pause, listen, and consider diverse insights. Prioritizing "rightness" over relationship-building misses an essential element of effective leadership: understanding. Unity cannot be imposed; it's cultivated through grappling with complexity together. Collaboration, not control, is the cornerstone of lasting unity.

But are we, as leaders and individuals, so focused on asserting our correctness that we've lost sight of what unity actually requires? Unity isn't about unanimity—complete agreement—or everyone having the same opinion.

It's about creating a space where diverse perspectives can come together under a shared mission. However, I've begun to wonder if our culture of individualism, which celebrates personal achievement and promotes the idea that every voice should hold equal weight in all spaces, has actually steered us away from the true essence of unity. This isn't about stifling free speech or silencing perspectives. Rather, it's a recognition that when a multitude of voices competes to be equally prioritized without the context or perspective necessary for constructive dialogue, it can create a cacophony. Instead of fostering understanding, this environment risks becoming counterproductive, where the pursuit of equitable recognition for every viewpoint undermines our ability to move forward together under a shared mission.

This raises an important question: Are we so consumed with validating our own perspectives that we've lost sight of the value of aligning with a greater collective purpose? Has individualism taken us so far that we've forgotten what it means to come together for something bigger than ourselves?

Empathy is one of the most critical pillars of unity. It calls on us to look beyond immediate reactions and assumptions, seeking to understand the layers of experiences and emotions that shape people's beliefs and actions. This depth of understanding isn't easy; it requires setting aside our own perspectives long enough to connect with others on a human level, acknowledging the pain points, motivations, and histories that make their perspectives unique.

Leaders who rush to "fix" without grasping the full scope of an issue may harm morale and prevent effective problem-solving. When leaders lack the patience to explore the intricacies of a challenge, their solutions remain surface-level, leaving underlying issues unaddressed. This approach signals a lack of respect for the complexity of human experiences and often results in temporary patches rather than meaningful resolutions.

True unity requires alignment under a common purpose—a concept involving a form of submission. The word submission literally translates to being under the mission. In a broader sense, it means aligning oneself under a greater purpose or authority, often setting aside personal agendas for a collective goal. This isn't about diminishing personal value but understanding that the mission takes precedence. Effective unity calls for equitable contributions and mutual respect, fostering an environment where everyone shares in the sacrifices required to achieve progress.

However, the expectation of sacrifice cannot rest solely on those already carrying the heaviest burdens. Unity demands a willingness to compromise and focus on the mission rather than individual recognition. It involves a shared understanding that real progress often demands mutual sacrifices—not the disproportionate sacrifices of a few.

Ultimately, unity demands compromise, humility, and a commitment to something greater than oneself. By leading with humility, prioritizing understanding, and valuing collective progress over personal validation, we can create environments where everyone thrives. True leadership fosters not just fleeting success but lasting impact.



## Charities for LA Fire

The pain we feel watching the Los Angeles fires cannot be matched by the pain of those living through it. “Hellscape” is a word that I have often heard to describe the devastation.

Now, more than ever, unity is called for. Here is a list of Charity Navigator-approved non-profits that are assisting fire survivors. From relief supplies to animal welfare to baby assistance to food banks, there is a diversity of much-need sources from which to support.



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[Explore charities to Support](#)

## WORTH LISTENING TO

The idea of treating others as we want to be treated — often referred to as the Golden Rule — is indeed a foundational concept for promoting unity and understanding. The congregation in Bethel Park, PA, as featured in NPR’s Common Ground series, seems to embrace this principle as a way to foster connection in a divided world. By actively seeking to understand and treat others with the same respect and kindness they hope to receive, such an approach can help bridge divides that might otherwise seem insurmountable.

Take heed: it requires work. Unity doesn’t just happen because of a good intention; it demands consistent effort, empathy, and the willingness to engage in dialogue with people who might hold different views or come from different backgrounds. The Bethel

Park congregation’s example illustrates how living out the Golden Rule can be an intentional step toward understanding and solidarity, making it a meaningful tool for creating common ground where division once existed.

*Listen to how they exemplified the Golden Rule in their attempts to achieve unity and harmony within their community.*



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