

# Newly Emboldened

BY NIKI T. INGRAM

**J**ust before Christmas I attended a conference on women in New York City along with a colleague who is of color. We listened to Ashley Judd tell a compelling story about her life and how important it is for women to speak their truths and be heard. We left the conference together feeling empowered and stood in line at the hotel to catch a cab to go to Penn Station. It was New York at holiday time so cabs were in short supply. The hotel doorman was trying to get everyone to where they needed to be as quickly and efficiently as he could. There was a white older man in front of us in line, and the doorman asked "Sir, do you mind if these ladies go with you to Penn Station?" It was all but a rhetorical question as he started to open the door to let us into the cab. The white man stopped him dead in his tracks as he looked at us dismissively and if his lips could curl, they did. He said, "No, I don't want them. They can't ride with me." We were stunned, and our heads snapped as we looked at each other and said "Did that just happen?" He then turned to a young white man who was in line behind us and said, "He can ride with me." The young man had the grace to be embarrassed but shrugged as he got in the cab. The doorman, who was Latino, was undone and muttered some expletives under his breath and "Welcome to the new America." His position required him to maintain a façade of pleasantness to the offender and he did. He got us a cab and promised that he would hold the other cab back if he could, and that we would get to Penn Station before they did. We exchanged the spoken and unspoken words and looks that minorities often do in such situations, and off we went to the station.

I have been telling this story a lot. Sometimes it flows naturally into a conversation and sometimes it doesn't. That

piece of it doesn't really matter to me as it is only important to me that I tell what happened. When I tell people of color the story the response is "and what did you expect." When I tell it to white people the reaction is one of shock and horror or there is a look that suggests they don't know what to do with the information. These reactions are why I tell this story. This was certainly not the first time I have experienced racism nor will it be the last, but this was interesting because it was different. Racism, as I have generally experienced it, is usually more subtle than this. It is rare that it is that much in my face, but the reality is that since the presidential election many have been emboldened to say or do what used to be unacceptable. As Ashley Judd said "it's important for people to hear your truth," and one of my truths is that people who may have voted one way or who did not vote at all need to know that their action or inaction led to a specific result that has had an impact on specific people who they know. People are shocked this could happen to someone like my colleague, or like me, because they know us and wonder how can this be in our world. This can happen because there is now a new reality where differences are not always accepted and bad behavior is not discouraged. The reality is when many people look at us, they see people who look different and then treat us differently because it is now acceptable or not unacceptable to do that.

I grew up in the Civil Rights era. Some of my earliest memories include picketing and sitting-in so that we would get to some place of equality. I remember when the little black girls in Birmingham were bombed in the church and that was very real to me and my friends because if it happened to them it could happen to us. In my lifetime, the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act were passed, affirmative action has come and gone and we now talk about diversity and





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inclusion. We did, and have moved to a place where there could be an African-American president. Through these iterations there has always been a sense of moving forward and race relations improving. The arc of progress has been consistent. The presidency of Barack Obama taught both white children and children of color that you didn't have to be white to lead this country. It now feels as if there are those who would stop that progress.

What we must keep in front of us is the pernicious and personal impact that racism has on both sides. Events such as our New York experience diminish the two white men involved and exhaust the doorman, my colleague and me as we each absorb the words and the acts themselves and place them into a construct so that we can keep moving. Years ago, I saw the late civil rights activist Julian Bond

speak at a lecture. He was asked by a white person if he were exaggerating the effects of racism, as when whites looked at him and other successful black people how could you not see that he and they had risen above circumstances. His response was brilliant. He said, "Yes, but think what we could have been. Think what we left on the table because we had to spend so much time dealing with the effects of racism both individually and collectively." That one simple act just before Christmas translates into a ripple effect of opportunity lost at a time when our society can least afford it. We can never let that arc of progress be stopped. ■

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