In these chaotic and very troubling times with the pandemic, economic depression, racial unrest, and painful trauma, it is heartening to see and hear so many nonprofit voices from every corner of the sector express their commitment to fighting racism at the interpersonal, workplace, community and systemic levels. As we know, however, stating values and living values can be two different things. We all need to deeply reflect on how we avoid the trapping of the passage of time and translate what we say in our personal and work lives into meaningful and achievable action.

There are few words I can offer at this time that others have not already said and in much better ways than I can ever say. So I thought I would offer instead powerful observations made some time back that can add some insight to where we are today as a society.

In his 1968 autobiography "Soul on Ice," Eldridge Cleaver observed that America is "a schizophrenic nation" with two conflicting images of itself which were never reconciled because never before has the survival of its most cherished myths made a reconciliation mandatory. The conflicting images he stated were the belief that "all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights—life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," juxtaposed with the reality of racism being deeply embedded in our institutions and culture. Cleaver thought that the time of "mandatory reconciliation" was present back then, but history and the events of today have proven that he was mistaken. The victories many of us thought we won back then and the progress that we thought we made in the decades that followed, are far shallower than we ever imagined.

In the book, Cleaver turned to a Fourth of July speech that Frederick Douglas gave in 1852 in Rochester, NY, where he said:

"What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham, your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, more bombast, fraud, deception, impiety and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages!"

Later in this speech, Douglas observed how we as a nation prided ourselves on welcoming and honoring fugitives of oppression from other shores but for those oppressed within our own land, we "advertise, hunt, arrest, shoot and kill." In today’s socio-political environment, things have changed dramatically in just a few years as the voices of fear and demonization have dominated our discourse and policies. Xenophobia is widespread as immigrants and refugees are no longer welcomed or treated humanely. Chinese Americans or really anyone who looks East Asian are blamed for COVID and subject to assaults and attacks. For black lives, and males in particular, the evidence is now undeniable before the years and ears of everyone in this country and the world that our law enforcement, justice system and modern day style vigilantism, our society still hunts, arrests, shoots and kills.

As nonprofits and citizens, it is imperative that we do our damnedest to use our voice and influence to calm the anger and frustration that has rightfully erupted but has boiled over; but we need to do so while staying steadfast on the path of forging constructive systemic solutions to the sickness of racism and hate. Our nonprofit community has the diversity in missions and people, the values, and the institutional power, voice and scope to lead the effort at the local, state and national levels to heal the open wounds: physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. But, without true systemic change, calming the waters now without effective action is the equivalent of kicking the can down the road hoping that at another time there will be mandatory reconciliation. It is in these times that we need to face the hard realities before us and do what is needed. We cannot let another generation go by without having ridded our society of racism and xenophobia.