

**Become a Seeker**  
**Administrator of the Year Speech 2004**

by Charles E Johnson

I want to describe a few of the people who surrounded me at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). My deputy has a PhD in Islamic Philosophy. The person in the office next to mine is a former reporter for National Public Radio. A woman in our administration office is a concert pianist. This past week, I received an email from a woman who is stepping down from our payroll section. She is going to become a full-time minister. I called her and said, "What's the situation?" She replied that she is getting her doctorate in theology, and she now knows her calling isn't payroll. This is a very diverse organization. Washington, D.C., is said to have the greatest diversity of thought in the entire world, and I believe that. Certainly, the EPA has a conglomeration of thought and people unparalleled with anything I have dealt with.

This could be a very difficult situation. We could get into an EPA meeting where the reporter asks trick questions, the concert pianist is off in her own little world, and the deputy is telling me how the ancient philosophers would solve our problems. But that doesn't happen. What happens is you meld this group of people with these diverse thoughts and backgrounds, and you bring them together in a common cause and understanding. The results are fantastic. I love sitting in meetings with these people. This is a positive example of bringing together diverse people and making it work.

With that positive story as a background, I would like to tell you another side of the story. Overall, there are more situations in which our country and world are divided. It could be politics, religion, race, economic circumstances, or a dozen other issues. Over the next several years, some estimates indicate that 70 percent of our population growth will come from individuals who are both in countries other than the United States. Many of the first and second-generation newcomers feel far from certain about their future. This is a land of opportunity, but many of these people do not feel that way. They do not have the hopes and dreams we have.

Diversity is our greatest strength, but it also is the greatest weakness we face. Upward assimilation will capture the tremendous energy of diversity. But nonassimilation will bring about disaster. For those of you moving into the setting of public policy, I would say your opportunities are endless, exciting, and wonderful.

We learn from the past what it takes to make changes for the future and to build a bridge over the various divides. It is hard work and takes personal responsibility to achieve.

A couple years ago I read a book called *The Seekers: The Story of Man's Continuing Quest to Understand His World*, by Daniel J. Boorstin. Seekers are people who look at where we are today, at this moment in time, and say, "Are we going in the right direction?" They often challenge current convention. They cause specific events to occur, or they have a great ability to change the hearts and minds and individuals. The book emphasizes the ability to change the

thought process. Let me give you some of the examples that the author shares. In philosophy, he talks about Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato- all people who changed the thoughts of man. He refers to Alexander the Great, who sat with Aristotle and subsequently changed entire civilizations. In science, he refers to Einstein, who made all of us think in a bigger way. In government, the references are to Machiavelli, who gave us the good and bad government, and to Thomas Jefferson, who helped form governments and expanded exploration. He refers to many religious leaders who have been seekers and who have reached out to tread new paths. He mentioned Moses and the Ten Commandments- the rules that would change the heart of the believer. He references Jesus Christ and how He looked at the current convention and said there is a higher law, a better way to live and to serve. His work has changed history forever.

What does that have to do with us? I believe we are all seekers in some sense and someone out there could be one of the big seekers. But we are all at least little seekers. We all have an obligation to bridge the many great divides we face.

What do seekers have in common? They see a need waiting to be met. They are bold and don't shy from extra effort. And finally, they are in a position to change policy or thinking in a significant way.

Where do we start? I'd like to give you three areas: your neighborhood, community, and nation.

### **Neighborhood**

If we solved the divisions in our own backyards, we would come a long way. I have kept a *Salt Lake Tribune* news story from about three years ago that reminds me of what can happen in our own neighborhoods.

*A thirty-four year old divorced mother of three girls who lives in a quiet, well-kept neighborhood in the Cottonwood area of Salt Lake County and who shares the home with a man who has long hair and several tattoos received this anonymous letter last week.*

*"I don't know your background and the problems you've been through, but things are done differently here in our community. I wonder where you get off assuming that your girl is always welcome at our house. We're not comfortable with our daughter being in your home with that long-haired, tattooed thing you've got living in your house. Your neighbors who are in our ward can't believe that you would dare to start up the mower on the Sabbath. They are tired of bottom-feeding riffraff renters polluting their neighborhood. Your girls are not welcome in our community on this kind of basis and neither is your kind. Go back to where you came from if that's how they let you live there. You are not welcome here."*

The bishop, upon hearing about this, became a seeker and a doer. He took the letter to his meeting and that following Sunday, read the letter over the pulpit, and asked the perpetrator to come forward. I don't know if the perpetrator came forward, but this bishop took the issue and didn't let it sit and didn't let people simply talk about it. He went after it immediately. That's a seeker. That's a doer.

### **Community**

Let me talk about the community. For this one I would like to give credit to my wife, Sue. We have now moved downtown Washington, D.C., and Sue has volunteered to be a mentor in a start-up education program. The free program provides tutoring for middle-school-aged students who want to get a college education. They have to do two things: 1) agree to a rigorous course of study that will prepare them for college; and 2) agree to live a life relatively free from error and demonstrate high standards. Sue comes in to help mentor students in that process.

We were talking with one of our friends who happens to be a youth counselor and he said, “The young people you work with will have the most opportunity to make a lot of money without going to college. They are smart enough not to use drugs but quick enough to learn they can make up to \$2,000 per day selling drugs.” He said to Sue, “You have your work cut out for you.” The answer back, “Seekers always have their work cut out for them.”

## **Nation**

Most observers of our political system are of the view that life in our nation’s capital is much harsher politically than it has ever been. Many observers think this is because we have fewer and fewer statesmen- those who are willing to step up, seekers who look for ways to bring us together. The call is out for more statesmen. If you want to make a big impact, it means a genuine study of how others things, reconciling it, and then doing something about it.

Let me talk about individual responsibility. If we fail to assimilate people into society, the results are going to be disastrous. If we succeed, we create the power of diversity- diversity of thought and diversity of people. By assimilation I don’t mean making people think just like us. I mean bringing people to the table with their own unique backgrounds and thought processes; the type of energy and synergy you get at a place like the EPA when you bring people together in a common purpose. You not only get great at decision making, but most importantly, you elevate people beyond anything you thought possible.

Life is simply about opportunities. This is an opportunity in Washington, D.C. An opportunity to bring people together, bring their opinions together for the common good, and I am given a chance to make a difference. I don’t have any illusions that I’ll be a big seeker. I just want to change a few people’s lives.

I recently stood before a Senate committee hearing my nomination to be the chief financial officer for the EPA. You lay out your heart and your soul when you’re in the circumstance. I stated: “Mr. Chairman, in the grand scheme of things this very moment is extremely brief, but I’ve spent a lifetime building trust, confidence and respect for a moment just like this.”

My advice is become a seeker. Help bridge the divides. Prepare yourself for those brief but very important moments to change the hearts and minds of individuals.