How Is The Idea of America Doing Today?

*- Rotary #4*

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*- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

President Kim, thanks for inviting me to speak today. It is especially a pleasure to do so on a day which celebrates and thanks you for your service to us. You invited me to speak at the first meeting you led as our president on July 10th of last year. It is a privilege to bookend your year. I dedicate these remarks to you and hope they express your values.

The title of my talk last year was “Civility:  Reclaiming the Idea of America”. The main point of that talk was that we are founded on an idea, that while France, for instance, is a fact, America is an idea. What holds us together is the idea. I claimed that it is a very simple idea embodied in the first three words of the Constitution:  “We the people”. We belong to one another, we struggle with one another, we fight, we agree on how we settle our disagreements. As historian Jill Lepore writes:

Americans are bound by our past, but more powerfully, we are bound to one another… this America is a community of belonging and commitment, held together by the strength of our ideas and by the force of our disagreements… The nation, as ever, is a fight.

Without this idea of ‘We the people’, there is no America.

So how is the idea of America doing a year later? How has “We the people” been impacted by all that has occurred in this one year in our country? Are we more of a people, or less of one? Does the idea hold: does the center hold? Are we still struggling about it in the fight going on? Is the idea of America evolving?

I have a very hard time remembering that we even had a year before about March 10th. Oh yes, there was the issue of immigration, of whether a gay man with a husband could be a candidate for president, or a woman, or a woman of color. There was an impeachment of our president and a struggle over foreign meddling in the freedom of our election. But all of that was eclipsed—at least in me, and likely in all of us—by the pandemic that has raged in our country, sent us into lockdown and distanced from one another, closing our schools and businesses, putting 40 million Americans out of work, taking the lives by a cruel death of more than 115,000 Americans, exposing the seams in our society—especially of the working poor and persons of color—and leaving us all threatened now and uncertain of the future. And then I was going to say, “on top of this”, but I should say “beneath this”, the killing of George Floyd has justifiably traumatized us and shown us our unaddressed and virulent discrimination and racism—especially against Black Americans. It is like layers of America have been peeled back and “We the people” lies exposed. Is there a new substratum, a new foundation, on which to build anew the idea of America as “We the people”. I believe there is, at least I hope there is.

In these months we have learned—not in an intellectual or bookish way—but have experienced in a felt and sometimes anguished way as we had not before that we are all vulnerable, that we truly depend on one another, that we have to take care of one another rather than only of ourselves and that our precious elderly are our most vulnerable and most need our care. We cheer and applaud our first responders—God bless them—but we know that we are all first responders to the common wellbeing of our people. If “We the people” was being undermined by an excessive rather than a true individualism and the sense of a common goal erased for which we are all commonly responsible, we have learned, felt, experienced the compelling call for a common good shared and supported by all. A war has not shown us this but a virus that comes even into our homes and our bodies and those of our families and friends. We have all been grounded—as perhaps we once were by our parents—and in this we have found, been forced to experience, our common ground, our common need for and responsibility to one another. So, yes, the idea of America today, the one that alone holds us together as a people, is experientially stronger now than it was a year ago.

And then that other layer, that deeper layer has been ripped off, beneath the threat to our health, that layer of our unfelt, unacknowledged racism especially towards Black Americans whom we have refused to see as being part of us. Our eyes have been opened in a tragic and merciless way in a violent killing and by the insistent and persistent protest that “We the people” has not really included even today the “We” of black and colored people. They are not us; they are they. They are the Black Community, rather than of our community. Maybe we all know this intellectually or in an informed way; now we feel, experience, know it emotionally and bodily and we are undone by it. We, racists? Yes. Me, racist? Yes. Oh the healing that is called for on this deepest level that shows that our “We the people” is a lie. Remember Benjamin Franklin saying that a lie stands on one foot, but truth stands upon two. We have to admit that we have been standing on one foot in regard to “We the people” because it is only true if black Americans are truly part of the “We”. Or, as some speakers have said in these days, “All lives cannot matter, unless Black lives matter.”

Our students most frequently now insist when they introduce themselves on indicating their pronouns: he/his/him; she/her/hers; they/theirs/them… and they require others in introducing themselves to do the same. I always find it uncomfortable saying, “Fr. Steve Sundborg, president of Seattle U., he/his/him.” But I do it. Well, the pronouns of America are “we/ours/us”. We get the citizenship we deserve. We get the political leadership we deserve. We get the prison system we deserve. We get the education system we deserve. We get the care of our elders we deserve. We get the police force we deserve. We get the immigration policies we deserve. We get the social services, the homelessness, the poverty, the discrimination we deserve. We get the city, the community, the country we deserve. If America is American by being “We the people” then we make America to be what it is: we decide, we choose, we protest, we struggle, we shape, we include, we vote. The pronouns of America are important: a true “we”, not a bunch of individuals; “ours”, not “our children” and “their children”, but simply “our children”; and “us” not for some of us, but the opportunities and benefits—together with the responsibilities and the sacrifices—are for all of “us”.

I mentioned to you the insistence of college students that they be able to and can request others to declare their pronouns. If the pronouns of America as “We the people” are “we/ours/us”, there is a critique or challenge to the idea of America as we have known it from another angle. Every college student I encounter knows and uses two words that did not exist when you and I went to college. They are “intersectionality” and “positionality”.

“Intersectionality” means the way your identity is constituted by the intersection in you of the vectors of race, gender, ethnicity, economic status, geography, family, education, etc. Students demand that they be related to, respected in, and educated according to their intersectionality. So, in regard to “We the people, forget “the melting pot”! A new kind of “we” honoring intersectional identity is required. How is it possible?

The other word, “positionality” means the position, how one is placed, especially in regard to privilege and power, by and in society and what are the consequences of this in regard to equity, opportunity, influence, oppression. “White privilege” or “white supremacy” and much at the core of what is being protested about concerns “positionality”. The idea of “We the people” if it is to be truly a “we” must critique how we are one people and find a new way of democracy which repositions people more equitably, with a revision of power, taking into account “positionality”. How again is this possible? “Black Lives Matter” and what we are experiencing in this year in the upheaval of our society primarily empowered by the young are all about “intersectionality” and “positionality”. We had better get to understand what they mean.

You could say that the idea of America today is stronger than it was a year ago because of the common threat of the pandemic to all of us as vulnerable and depending on the other, and that the idea of America of a year ago has been unmasked and humbled by the exposure of our racism and violence. This is a very painful place to be but it is where we need to be as a people.

I have spoken to you before of walking to the most sacred place in America: up the Mall in Washington, D.C., from the Capitol, by the Smithsonian and Archives, and Native American and African American Museums, past the Washington Monument and the Holocaust Museum, by the World War Memorials, along the Reflecting Pool, by the Vietnam War Wall, to the Lincoln Memorial to Abe sitting, looking upon America, and at last I turn to stand where Martin Luther King stood to proclaim his dream for America. That is indeed a pilgrimage to the most sacred place in America.

There has been another pilgrimage for me in these strange months, a personal one, one that has begun in my isolation and in my heart. One weekend I asked myself, “Where can I go?” I decided to go to the Fern Hill Cemetery in Aberdeen where my parents are buried and to stand there at their graves and those of my mother’s family. I found a great peace, a beauty, a settledness, a holiness, a connection with history. So each weekend I have been slowly pacing the cemeteries of Seattle: Lakeview, Holyrood, Calvary, Pacific Lutheran, Washelli, Pleasant Hill, and Ft. Lawton cemeteries. I’m not depressed; I am not sad; this is not macabre. It is a meditative way to be in contact with truth, to stand on two feet, to be grateful for all those who have gone before us, to find peace in the common destiny of us all, to absorb the history of our lives engraved on those headstones, and to notice and be consoled by the most common word in cemeteries—not “faith” or “farewell”; not “see you soon” or “thanks”—but simply “love”. Is what I am grasping for in a time of isolation and distance and emptiness the connectedness to a common people, a “we” of then, and now, and tomorrow? I wonder what personal journey you have been making in these times and where it is taking you and with what and whom it is connecting you more truly and more deeply.

Speeches I have heard in recent days have often ended with a call-to-action. Here is mine:

- Let’s continue to reach out unexpectedly to ask others how they are doing.

- Let’s visit a senior care facility once we can get beyond the separating panes of glass.

- Let’s appreciate every meal with others, every movie, every sport, every assembly, every form of fellowship, every religious service, every freedom.

- Let’s honor and provide a decent livelihood and security to those—especially the undocumented—who work for us, making our lives possible and pleasant.

- Let’s tell our Black friends we’d enjoy being invited into their homes and invite them into ours.

- Let’s advocate and legislate to have the police force and the prison system we want for the kind of people we are.

- Let’s engage in active citizenship and let’s vote, every time, always.

- Let’s read and learn the true, two-footed, history of America.

- Let’s consider all American children our children and assure them the education they need as a foundation of their future.

- Let’s return to religion, to believing in something or someone bigger and more merciful and kinder than we have shown ourselves to be.

- Let’s take the pilgrimage to the most sacred place in our America, among our people past, present, and future, “We the people”.

So, President Kim, these are my remarks at the concluding meeting of Rotary #4 for this year after a remarkable and memorable year in our country and in our Club in your presidency and leadership.