

**THE PASSION OF THE PATRIOT:
MAKING THE CONDITION OF OTHERS OUR OWN
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Let me say at the outset how delighted I am to be back in Claremont where I have so many fond memories, and especially at Pilgrim Place where I have had so many good friends over the years. I want first to congratulate both those who are honored tonight and those who are keeping alive the spirit and passion of the Napiers for building a better world. I first met Davie Napier as a student at Yale Divinity School where I had the distinct pleasure of taking his Old Testament class, but our relationship blossomed over the years into one in which he became a friend and a mentor.

When I thought about how best to bring together the public values of Davie Napier and the public spirit of those whom we honor tonight, I thought about what John Winthrop called making the condition of others our own. But the civic virtue I had in mind was much deeper than simply civic engagement, so I decided to describe it as the passion of the patriot. I know that this phrase might seem odd to those of you who remember my days in Claremont primarily as that of a fervent critic of deficits in our democracy. But like the Old Testament prophets and the Greek philosophers, I have always believed that the most effective critic is the one who is willing to be a servant while the most effective servant is the one who is willing to be a critic.

The ancient historian Tacitus once described patriotism as praiseworthy competition with one's ancestor. I recall that definition of civic virtue tonight because it reminds us that each generation has an opportunity, and indeed an obligation, to contribute something as meaningful, as significant, and even as extraordinary as the generations that preceded them.

I emphasize the notion of the passion of the patriot for another reason. I served my country as a military officer and as a diplomat abroad, but I felt an equal and sometimes more powerful civic passion when I was helping to organize and lead the civil rights movement in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in the 1960's. I felt just as patriotic when I was chairing the Corporation for National and Community Service and helping to establish AmeriCorps in the 1990s, and I felt just as patriotic when I was chairing the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in the last decade.

Our constitution begins with the words we the people, but while people who look like me were not included as full persons in this revered, almost sacred, document, those who wrote it had

the language right when they suggested that if we were to form a more perfect union we would have to establish justice and if we were to ensure domestic tranquility we would have to promote the general welfare.

Even among those who insisted on the inclusion in the statement of the public values of our nation the idea of promoting the common defense, there were in their ranks patriots who understood that the best way to demonstrate the efficacy of our democracy to critics abroad was to demonstrate that it could equitably for all of our citizens at home. And that is why I dare to suggest that those of you here tonight who have spent a life time calling Americans to their better selves and seeking to form a more perfect union are the true patriots.

I use the phrase the passion of the patriot for a third reason. It has been my experience that getting involved in the needs of the neighbor provides a new perspective, a new way of seeing ourselves, a new understanding of the purpose of the human journey. When that which was “their” problem becomes “our” problem, the transaction transforms a mere association into a relationship that has the potential for new communities of meaning and belonging.

In other words, doing something for someone else – what John Winthrop called making the condition of others our own – is the most powerful force I know in building and sustaining community. I am sure it has been the experience of many of you, as it has been my own, that when neighbors help neighbors and even when strangers help strangers both those who help and those who are helped are transformed. When that which was their problem becomes our problem, there is a new connectedness and new forms of community are possible.

I learned many years ago that when you experience the problems of the poor or troubled, when you help someone to find housing or regain their health, when you help someone to fight bigotry and to embrace difference, when you help a community to find its own strength and to release its potential, you are far more likely to find common ground and you are likely to gain a sense of self-worth in the process.

We meet tonight at a time described by psychologist as a time of free-floating anxiety. 9/11 was such a moment. The assassination of presidents and great moral leaders have been such a moment. But what we are experiencing today is not the result of one event, but a confluence of events that have made us so anxious that we are even anxious about the fact we are anxious. These are without doubt difficult and dangerous times, awesome and almost apocalyptic times. Yet, there is reason for optimism because moments of crisis and great change are often the moments of greatest possibility. They are the moments when we have to see and create possibility where there appears to be none, moments when we have to call upon the strength within, moments when we have to draw upon our faith in something bigger and more mysterious than the self.

So if my first observation is that we need to reexamine and reaffirm the true meaning of civic virtue, my second is that we need to reexamine and reaffirm the true meaning of the American narrative. If the first has to do with deficits in our idea of democracy, the second has to do with

deficits in the way we tell the American story. This month is designated as black history month for some very good reasons, to remind Americans of the role that African Americans have played in the development of our country. People gather in solemn assemblies across the country to say as Fortinbras did to Horatio in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "We too have some rights of memory in this kingdom." But the memories we celebrate often help to sanitize a history that has many unpleasant experiences that also need to be remembered, especially at a time in which we see the emergence of new voices in public life claiming to be concerned about inequality.

Isabel Wilkinson's Pulitzer winning book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, takes a step in that direction as she chronicles the epic story of America's Great Migration from 1915 to 1970. This exodus of about six million Americans of African descent from the South to places north and west changed the face of America, but it remains for most Americans simply a footnote in the selective history that passes for the American story.

Wilkinson reminds us that this mass relocation would come over time to dwarf the California Gold Rush of the 1850s with its 100 thousand participants and the Dust Bowl migration of some 300 thousand people from Oklahoma and Arkansas to California in the 1930s. But more remarkably, it was not simply a mass act of people seeking a better place to live and work. It was in many ways a forced migration of people fleeing terrorism and seeking a place to be more fully human. And I recall this history tonight not simply because this is an important part of the African American history we observe each February. I tell this story and call it a flight from terrorism because herein lies a significant part of the roots of modern day racial bias in the criminal justice system.

The Great Migration was partly a forced migration in which many black families fled the complicity of law enforcement in racial terror lynchings and expedited legal executions used for social control and to prevent resistance to racial repression. You could be lynched for simply walking the streets with dignity or you could be executed because someone framed you for daring to resist unjust Jim Crow laws. When I was growing up in Louisiana in the 1940s, there were literally "carnivals of death" in which a lynching or execution was publicized and drew hundreds and even thousands of spectators to what was treated like a sporting event.

That story needs to be told as well, both to remind a younger generation of the sacrifices on which their successes stand as well as to demonstrate to others how much has changed and how much change is still possible. The descendants of the architects of intentional under development need to know the extent to which those policies failed in some areas as well as the extent to which they succeeded in others.

Last week the FBI director, James Comey, startled many when he added his voice to the conversation about the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color. One of his "hard truths" was an admission that the history of law enforcement in this country was not only part of the architecture of oppression but also a brutal tool of that oppression. As

Comey put it, "One reason we cannot forget our law enforcement legacy is that the people we serve cannot forget it either" This is the part of black history that has been almost erased from public memory. But this history needs to be understood and more widely discussed before policymakers and opinion leaders can fully understand the causes and origins of both the racial injustice and the racial distrust that complicate our efforts to form a more perfect union.

There is also a recent part of that history that is not being told. In the 1960s, we saw the rise of what some called a revolution of the underprivileged. Today we are seeing a counter revolution fueled and financed by a select group of the over privileged. In state after state, we are seeing the dismantling of what so many of us fought for, and for which so many lost their lives. In the 1960s when I was here in Claremont trying to develop a new realism about deficits in our democracy, some of us spoke of democracy as a system of government in which the people have the power, but in far too many places it soon came to mean that the people had the vote, which was not the same as having the power. In 21st century America, there is now a concentrated effort to dilute the power of the vote by re-defining and reducing the privileges of citizenship.

And it is here where I want to close by offering my third observation. These are difficult times to celebrate and affirm what unites us as a people. We live in a world that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time. The more interdependent we become, the more people are turning inward to smaller communities of meaning and memory. As I travel around the world, I hear more and more people saying that until there is respect for their primary community of history and heritage they will find it difficult to fully embrace the larger community in which they must now function. Yet, while some find this emphasis on remembering and regrouping a reason for despair, it may be that the search for beginnings is really the first stage of the search for common ground.

The events of the last several years have caused us to think often and deeply about whether national community is really possible. I am convinced that it is, but it will require us to think and act differently. The paradigm of community that will best serve our efforts to build relationships in the new America was best described by the black mystic, poet and theologian Howard Thurman who was a mentor to Martin Luther King. Thurman was fond of saying "I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you." Can you imagine how different our world would be if more Americans were able to say "I want to be an American without making it difficult for Asians to be Asians, Africans to be Africans or Arabs to be Arabs?" Can you imagine how different our communities would be if more Christians were able to say "I want to be a Christian without making it difficult for Muslims to be Muslims, Jews to be Jews, Buddhists to be Buddhists or Hindus to be Hindus?"

Making the condition of others our own can help develop that sort of discernment, but it goes without saying that we will need to find as many ways as we can to help demonstrate that diversity need not divide, that pluralism rightly understood and rightly practiced is a benefit not a burden and that the fear of difference is a fear of the future.

We need a new sense of our connectedness and community that reflects our shared interdependence. In South Africa, where my wife and I have lived or worked full time for most of the last nineteen years, there is a concept of community called Ubuntu. It is best expressed by the Xhosa proverb “People are people through other people,” which is to say that my humanity is bound up in yours. What dehumanizes you dehumanizes me. I belong to a greater whole so I am diminished when others are diminished by oppression or treated as though they were less than who they are. It is not I think, therefore I am, but I am because you are. It is I am human because I belong. I participate; I share because I am made for community.

The highest praise that can be given anyone in South Africa is to say he or she has Ubuntu, which means that they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. And, of course, they are forgiving.

So let me conclude with a final comment about making the condition of others our own. It has been my experience that in providing help you also provide hope. But it is the kind of hope that Vaclav Havel had in mind when he wrote, “I am not an optimist because I do not believe that everything ends well. I am not a pessimist because I do not believe that everything ends badly, but I could not accomplish anything if I did not have hope within me. For the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.” When you think about the battles you and I fought years ago, please remember that we changed the nation once and we can do it again if we are willing to stay the course. When you think of the years spent in helping others, I hope you will remember what Davie Napier understood so well, that in providing help you are also providing hope, and the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.

(Ambassador James A. Joseph, a former chaplain of the Claremont Colleges and a former trustee at Pitzer College, is presently an emeritus professor and leader in residence at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. He has served in senior executive or advisory positions for four United States presidents, including Under Secretary of the Interior for President Jimmy Carter and U.S. Ambassador to South Africa for President William Clinton. He has also served as president of the Cummins Foundation and president and CEO of the Council on Foundations.)