

Commencement (December 2018)

- December 15, 2018
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Welcome to your Commencement from the Seattle University School of Law on this December morning. Congratulations on your accomplishments, the long years of dedication, and your commitment to the service of others on behalf of justice through your knowledge and practice of law.

I welcome you on this day in the middle of the month of December, a day between Hanukkah and Christmas, between Thanksgiving and the New Year. This is a time of gratitude and hope for all of us. Gratitude especially for our families and our freedoms, hope for what each of us can do to shape a more just, more equitable, more compassionate community, country, and world. To be between gratitude and hope is a very good place to be on the day of your Commencement.

Beyond welcoming, congratulating, and celebrating you this morning, let me remark on one thing I've been reading and thinking about.

I seem to be like Bill Gates in that we, independently, have the same reading habits and recommend to others the same books. Over the last three years, I have been more impacted by the one author about whom Bill Gates each year says, "This is the best book I have ever read... this year", Yuval Noah Harari in his trilogy of Sapiens, Homo Deus, and 21 Lessons for the 21st Century. It is a grand sweep of history past and future by a masterful macro-historian. If your favorite word in the English language is, like mine, "perspective", this trilogy is for you. It places us in the widest possible perspective.

So how are we doing here, where we are in the centuries stretching behind us and before us? Two other books recommended by Bill Gates, again "the very best books I have ever read in my life...this year" convincingly show us by every measure and by all data possible that the world is much better than we think or feel or say, better in every conceivable way, except for environmental degradation. Steven Pinker's Enlightenment Now and Hans Rosling's Factfulness through hundreds of data sets, graphs, and comparisons attempt to show that in all measurable ways the world is much better than our instincts to exaggerate and dwell on the negative would indicate. All of us flunk the objectivity test about how the world really is in regard to war, health, equity, education, longevity, hunger, opportunity, poverty, violence, etc. Objectively, the world is better than it has been and far better than we think. Hard to believe, isn't it?!

There is, however, a flaw in this argument which David Brooks points out in a very appreciative and agreeing review of these books. Brooks says the thing that is left out in this objective account is "relationship". What this comes down to is: can the world can be objectively better and yet, not subjectively be better because persons are human by means of relationships, and relationships are not better, but worse, so that there is good reason why subjectively we not only feel the world is worse but our own subjective world is worse for us as persons. I believe this is the true and I believe this is crucial.

This came home to me in a very different context. I was serving on the Governing Council of the Committee to End Homelessness when an expert in this subject after several had spoken of encounters they had had with the homeless, exclaimed, “The plural of anecdote is not data.” I, in my somewhat cynical Jesuit mind, immediately said to myself, “yes, and the singular of data is not person ... but number.” What if the measure of how the world really is is not measurable by data, but is “persons” and the “quality of their relationships”?

This is what I have been reading and thinking about. I speak of it to you today on your commencement morning from Seattle University’s School of Law – not just to open up my mind to you about an interesting subject of my reading and reflection, but because I believe both you and I and your professors and your families want the central focus of your “life in the law at the service of justice” to be on persons, persons in their humanity, persons in relationship, on the wounded center of an objectively better world. Of course, in order for your career of service to have this focus, it must begin with your focus on yourself, your person, your person in relationship, your humanity. This is a good season between gratitude and hope to be encouraged to commence not just from this ballroom but from this core of who you are and what you want for yourself and for others in your career.

Thank you and congratulations.