

Discerning the State of Seattle University

- *September 19, 2017*

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

I come to you tonight on the very vigil of the start of our academic year. The law school has been in session for weeks. Tomorrow all 7,500 students and all 1,600 faculty, staff and administrators will be in full operation. It takes so much to start a year. About 2,000 of these, our students, are new to Seattle U.—first year undergrads, transfers, grads, law. Recruitment, enrollment, orientation, advising, welcoming of all of these students is immense. I counted up that just for the 970 freshmen I was present and spoke at 12 different sessions for prospective students, accepted students, Sullivan Scholarship competition students, orientations for students, and finally last Saturday I spoke to parents and students as they said goodbye to one another and yesterday presented the new students to their faculty. It takes so much to bring in a new class. Of course, I love it and I am only “the closer” of a whole team which does the real work. So we are into it and it is good to speak to you on this visit.

I event went around to all the residence halls on Saturday’s move-in day to visit the rooms, see nervous students meeting their roommates for the first time, parents helping to reconfigure the room and trying to find a place for all the stuff they had brought, easing the transition for students who may never have shared a room before. One sophomore who was helping out said to me, “Hey Farther, I hear you are giving your talk to the parents and students this afternoon. I remember “your talk”. (I love that phrase “your talk”!!) Then he added, “I’ve heard you have five stories and just mix them.” I replied, “Not true... I have six talks and just mix them.”

I have a special fondness for this first year class because I have told them that I intend to graduate with them in June of 2021. They will graduate from Seattle U. I will graduate from being president of Seattle U. I plan on that occasion not to lead the procession out of KeyArena, but to march out with the students, cheering right with them, together is finishing our time at this wonderful university. They have accepted me into their class and I have signed the class banner.

I come to you tonight after having given a speech at Rotary on what I have learned about leadership in 20 years as president. You can find it on our site. I come to you after SU last week hosted and co-sponsored the debate between the two final candidates for mayor here in Pigott, and when this week we will host the Washington Roundtable of the top 50 business leaders of our state meeting on our campus. I come to you after last week celebrating the 18th Costco Scholarship Breakfast, which this year raised \$5,300,000 for underrepresented minority students to be split evenly between SU and UW. I come to you on a campus on which a new Campus Store is being finished at the corner of Madison and 12th, and a new residence hall—named Vi Hilbert Hall in honor of a Native American legendary woman leader of our region—for 300 student is under construction. Both of these projects are being built in anticipation of the biggest project of the future and the biggest ever, the new Center for Science and Innovation, for which we are dedicating our efforts of fundraising in order to secure \$100 million for that center. I come to you as our men’s soccer team holds the national record of 21 straight home wins. We are champs on Championship Field.

Yes, so much is going on at Seattle U. It manifests the strength and vitality of our university. It is exciting, it is hope-giving, it is facing toward the future. It is a great time to talk to you as insiders, as members of our boards, our president's club, our legacy society, and our very best friends.

Last year when I spoke to you in this annual State of the University, which was originated and sponsored by the Board of Regents, we were celebrating the 125th anniversary of Seattle University. At that time I highlighted our remarkable history and legacy of dedication and I tried to show how this gave us hope and purpose for the next 25 years.

This year the university has decided to recognize my twenty years of service as president. I am just a bit uncomfortable with this recognition but I accept it gratefully and I hope gracefully. What is more prominent in my feelings and thoughts is the sense of moving into a new chapter of service to and leadership of Seattle University. Perhaps this comes from having been appointed by the Board of Trustees to a new, a fifth term of five years. Perhaps it comes from now being the longest serving president of Seattle U. and by nine years the oldest and therefore comes from a sense of maturity, of confidence, and of richness of experience. I have learned that at the age of 74 I am now the age of the grandparents of a third of our incoming freshman. (I've been asking them to give to Fr. Steve the affection and to cut him the slack they give to their grandparents. We'll see if that tactic works!) In any case, I live daily with a strong feeling and an acute anticipation of beginning a new chapter—likely the last one—continuing and bringing to completion the story of the previous four 5-year chapters. As I do this I find myself gathering up the experience of the past years, remembering and savoring the experiences, examining them in their depth, recollecting them and allowing this recollection to collect the strands of the past in order for me to be all there, fully there, gratefully, and more wisely there for the future, for this new chapter.

Tonight I would like to tell you what comes together for me from these past years, what I make of it, and how it gives shape and form to the future. I can only do this as a Jesuit priest in a prayerful, faith-filled, and discerning way. What immediately leaps to mind for me is the story in the gospel of Jesus appearing after his resurrection to the disciples fishing on the Sea of Galilee. It is dawn, not quite sunrise, and the risen Jesus stands on the shore of the lake, unrecognized. This is my image of Jesus, standing on the shore, the edge, of my experience and of Seattle U., with a hopeful day breaking, but unrecognized, while we toil away. When the disciples, who have worked all night and caught nothing, heed his message—still thinking him only a stranger—to cast the net on the other side of the boat, they get so large a catch that they cannot bring the net into the boat. Then they realize it is the risen Jesus, swim and row ashore, dragging the net, and are invited by Jesus to bring some of the 153 large fish to place on the coals where he has begun to prepare fish and bread for breakfast. There have been at least 153 large fish in these past twenty years of my experience of Seattle U. As a Jesuit priest I believe they have been caught because Jesus has indeed stood on the shore of our university and has directed, blessed, directed and called us in our work, even if usually we have not recognized him. Now he asks us to bring some of what he has enabled us to catch, to feed us at the sunrise of the coming day of Seattle University, the next, the new chapter. Tonight, let me describe for you in a personal, a priestly, a Jesuit way some of what I believe we have caught as his gift and with his grace and how I see this as food for the future.

Discernment

I start with perhaps the most important Jesuit word, which is “discern”. “Discern” means to go below the surface of experience, to reflect more deeply, to listen more alertly and fully, to try to find how we are moved by God. Most importantly, in these years we discerned the mission of Seattle U.: “dedication to the education of the whole person, to professional formation, and to empowering leaders for a just and humane world”. It was a true discernment which took a full year of listening to more than thirty groups, reflecting, reframing, coming together, going apart, allowing the Spirit to inspire, to articulate, and then seeking confirmation from the Board of Trustees. The fact that the mission is still alive today, still animates, inspires, unites, and directs us is proof in experience that it was and is indeed a grace, a gift of the Spirit. The name “Jesus” is not in that mission statement but he stands on the shore and can now be recognized as the one who directed us to catch it and to live from it. The mission is as fresh and powerful for our next chapter as it has been in animating our long, recent, vibrant history. It is the continuing thread into the new chapter.

In a similar way we discerned the core curriculum most needed, most challenging, most true to our Jesuit tradition, and most appropriate to a new generation of students in a new world. Determining a new core curriculum is like doing a heart transplant on the university because it is the heart of our deservedly famous Jesuit way of education, holds our values, puts in practice what we believe is Jesuit education. Again, this discernment took time, took listening, involved alternative and conflicting views. It came together in a coherent core curriculum strongly sequential in the building of the students’ learning and capacities, more immediately and deeply engaging of the interest of the students, more open to their global world, more cognizant of diversity, more respectful of students’ religious questionings and searchings, more connected to action and service, and more integrative of the intellectual and passionate pursuits of the students. We live and practice a discerned core curriculum for all of our undergraduates, and it is an inspiration by its values and structure of our coherent graduate and law programs of education and formation. The core curriculum is the life blood of Jesuit education. We discerned it and it has proven itself enlivening to our students, our faculty, our whole university, and it will continue in this new chapter to be a forceful enabling of our distinctive way of education. Experience shows that it is blessed, more fruitful beyond the hard work of discerning and fashioning it.

Let me raise another issue around this key way I as a Jesuit reviews experience in light of discernment. When we set out to list our values we listed the very first one as “We put the good of students first”. I don’t know another university which says it so clearly, so succinctly, as its first and overriding value. It has stood the test of time as what should be first. However, I would say that twenty years ago, or ten years ago, we much better understood what was the good of students than we do now. This is because we understood our students better than we do now. There has been such a profound cultural shift in the shape of families, in pervasive technology, in developments about sexuality and gender, in cultural and racial sensitivities, in an ever-increasing polarized society and politics, in the loosening of all religious affiliation and practice, in emerging American values, in serious environmental concerns, and in a globalized economy and society that it is so very much harder to understand who our students are, to take into account their full reality, and to know today what makes for the good of students, which we

place first in our own values as a Jesuit university. I am very proud as I look back over twenty years that Seattle University really has put the good of the students first, has done so following the Jesuit motto “cura personalis”—i.e., personal care of the student. I also believe that the hardest and most urgent thing for us now to discern is how do we today put the good of the students first. What is their good today and how is it delivered by our education? This is underlying the struggle of our university and will be a dominant challenge for our discernment and practice in this next chapter which we are beginning.

Joy and Peace

If discernment is the central word for a Jesuit reviewing experience—as I look at twenty years of fishing on the Galilee of Seattle University with the of vision Jesus standing on the shore and pointing to where there is abundance—the touchstones of discernment are joy and peace. We believe that when you let down the nets of your discernment into deep waters and there find joy and peace, there you find the presence and the work of the Spirit. Where have we above all found joy and peace in our university in these years?

So many deep experiences of joy stand out. I look, first of all, to students able to be at Seattle University—to belong, to succeed, and to thrive—because of the Costco Scholarship Fund, the Sullivan and Bannan Scholarships, the almost miraculous Fostering and Alfie Scholarships, and dozens more. Our university leaps up in joy to be able to have these kinds of students among us, a diversity of deserving, needy, and dedicated students. They have transformed our university and made it so much better and more truly Jesuit because of who they have allowed us to serve. These students, who we would not otherwise know, are our joy.

I love all our students. I try to get to know as many of them as I can. Many stand out. Perhaps I most of all remember Osbaldo Hernandez, who as an undocumented high school student wrote to me personally asking if he could come to Seattle U. Of course. We helped him; he came; he won the hearts of his classmates, who called him “Ozzy”. When the Dream Act failed in the Senate under President Bush even though it had 57 votes, Osbaldo and I went to work to push for the Dream Act. Our law professors put together a remarkable case which allowed Osbaldo to legalize his residency. He graduated, taught for two years in Teach for America along the Rio Grande and now works here in Seattle, hoping one day to be Superintendent of the Seattle Public School District or Mayor. We still owe Ozzy and our many undocumented students and best friends of all our students a chance to attain their dream. May God help us to get a Dream Act. I owe it to Ozzy. We all owe it to our own.

I find joy in and I cannot account for the totally unexpected development of several programs except for the blessing of the Spirit. The School of Theology and Ministry continually surprises me in its ever-evolving and widening embracing of persons of all faiths, religions, commitments, and its remarkable bookfest, Search for Meaning. The College of Nursing—one of the very best in the Northwest—joyfully keeps me busy giving a priestly anointing to the hands of graduating bachelors, masters, and doctoral nurses; and, occasionally, gives me unanticipated joy when the college actually accepts a student I have advocated for entrance in the toughest program to be admitted to in the university! You would find across the university great pride and joy in the Seattle University Youth Initiative as a primary initiative of our Center for Community

Engagement. Our Youth Initiative was truly blessed by God as it grew out of our being the first university in America to host a homeless encampment on campus. May God help us to stay faithful to our special commitment to the homeless in our city. Already 35 other university have come to see what we are doing in place-based community engagement, both transforming a neighborhood and at the same time transforming our university and its students in their service, their commitments, and their learning. No college at Seattle University has more clearly claimed its place in these years in carrying out our mission than has the College of Science and Engineering, demonstrating how much science and engineering can do for the good of people. In effect, they have claimed their share and place in empowering leaders for a just and humane world and have proven it on the ground. As a Jesuit university we are positioning the building of a new Center for Science and Innovation as the largest item in our current campaign not only because of the growth of this college and the needed careers for which they prepare their graduates, but also because Science and Engineering have shown us how they are already at the heart of our Jesuit mission as a university. I sometimes feel as a Jesuit priest who specializes in spirituality a bit like a fish out of water—like the 153 caught by the disciples?!—attending the always-of-the-highest-quality-and-prestige Albers Executive Speaker Series. I find there joy even in what I don't understand. I find the same joy in the cohorts of the Center for Executive Leadership, which I understand somewhat better. I believe these and our other programs would not give such joy unless they were blessed by the Spirit.

Nothing gives me greater joy than to witness the intellectual passion of faculty and also of students—across all of our colleges and schools—in their scholarship and research. A university is, after all, a matrix of intellectually passionate professors inviting and showing the way for students to find their own intellectual passions. No Catholic religious community so prioritizes the intellectual life as a service of God and of God's people as does the Jesuit religious order. It is of our charism to find the presence of God and so to find joy in deep and creative thinking, in intellectual passion, in “connecting the mind to what matters”, as our motto says. We are unapologetic about this priority and we take joy in its realization.

The greatest joys of these twenty years and the greatest blessings are some extraordinary people. Jim Sinegal has been with us from handing out Costco hotdogs at my inauguration celebration to today helping kids in Bailey-Gatzert as part of the Youth Initiative. John Meisenbach, his friend and our alumnus, has been right there with Jim all of these years and I was filled with joy to help John and friends celebrate Ginny's life. Ann Wyckoff, in her always gracious and humorous way, brought tears to my eyes by her generosity and personal confidence in Seattle U. All of the Pigott family have stood by Seattle U. in my generation as they have in the previous generations at Seattle U. We would not be Seattle U. without them. Perhaps a dearest friend of all these years—and one who, if I asked him how he was, always said “If I was any better, I couldn't stand it”—was Rhoady Lee, together with Jean Marie and family. The joy of God overflowed in Rhoady Lee.

People say “it is lonely at the top.” I don't find it to be that way. Perhaps in my Jesuit way of being president I primarily feel I am a partner in mission with others. How many people have clustered together over the years: trustees, regents, advisory boards, donors, cabinet members most closely together of them all, leaders, athletic directors, professional staff, campus ministers, leaders for justice and for Jesuit initiatives, fundraising volunteers in the hundreds, alumni advocates, student government executives, civic board members, and personal friends supportive

through it all. As I have lived these years I have found greater and greater joy in relationships, in people, in their spirit, goodwill, kindness, and affection.

My deepest joys have been in our Jesuit community, how much all of us as Jesuits are brothers of one another, in it together, no one more important than another, praying with and for one another, supportive, considerate, discerning how to be a community on mission in this university. My Jesuit brothers could tell you that they know it is with them that I find my life and my daily belonging and that in community I relish just being one of them. I find deep joy in early morning prayer as the most important hour of the day, a prayer populated with the students, the families, the alumni, the people of the university, and all of our beloved who now live in God. You know how I was given an exceptional grace, together with a wonderful family, to have a familial conversation with Pope Francis, as if he were Uncle Pope Frank. A grace not just for us who were there, but also for our university to grow in its mercy, its loving consideration of our students, its commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. That kind of event does not just happen; it happens because God wishes to bless in a special way our university in its Catholic and Jesuit purposes. I continue to discern how the joy of that encounter is a gift for what we together are about.

In Jesuit discernment peace is just as important as finding joy when one is faced with important decisions. It is a peace which, in my experience, is a deep sense of rightness even when the decision has been hard to arrive at, is highly conflictual and is criticized. Seattle U. has had its share of these decisions. Whether in the decision to appeal unionization of adjunct faculty in order to be free to pursue our religious purpose as a university on our own Jesuit and Catholic terms, or the decision to return to Division I athletics and to invest in it in order to place our Jesuit university more strategically and prominently, or the decision to stand up and protect the university's assets in the time of the bankruptcy of the Jesuit province because of sexual abuse of minors by Jesuits, or the decisions to invest precious capital in the purchase of properties for the development of the university decades from now, or the decisions involved in how to deal responsibly with the student occupation of Matteo Ricci College—in all of these decisions, deeply weighing the issues, listening attentively to advice from many and guidance from the Board of Trustees, taking all of them to prayer and to discernment as much as we could in the midst of the challenges, I have found peace, rightness, in the decisions made and a kind of unexpected courage to stand up for them and to see them through. Discernment is not easy, and it is not always accompanied by joy. Sometimes the sign of the Spirit is this peace, this rightness, this unaccountable confidence.

The Next Chapter

When I survey the discerned experience of the last twenty years, my overwhelming feeling is one of an immense and pervasive gratitude. It is a personal gratitude, of course, for the privilege of being at the heart of the experience of these twenty years. Even more so it is the gratitude of the university itself, its students and community, its alumni, and all of you for how God has blessed what we know is his work in which all of us have our part. This gratitude is the confirmation of how we have discerned our way through these years, these very good years, maybe the best and most blessed twenty years in the whole history of Seattle University.

I want to let you in on a personal and private practice I have as a Jesuit priest. Very early each morning, long before the start of the workday, I sit back in my chair in my room in the Arrupe Jesuit Community. I have made the coffee for the house. I sit back with a cup of coffee and I pray. Every day, without exception, I come in my prayer to a special moment in which I call to mind by name and present before God in gratitude those who have died in recent years. I keep a list. Of course, there are many who are my family members, Jesuits, faculty, students. In addition there are many, some of whom you will know. Some from that list of just the last two years I pray for:

Paul Johnson
 Jim Hollomon
 Mari Stamper
 Bill Cate
 Jack Sullivan
 Peter Grimm
 Paul and Bette Ratliffe
 Doug Walker
 Rocky Rothrock
 Don Hoba
 Joan Razore
 Dick Cooley
 Jim and Joan DiJulio
 Dave Irwin
 Jeff Brotman
 John Moga
 Ginny Meisenbach
 Mary McCann
 Harold Daubenspeck
 Docky, Prudy and David Rolfe
 Lester and Marianne Sauvage
 Nancy Pleas
 Doug Scheumann
 Leo Costello

I lift them up as my Communion of Saints. I lift them up in gratitude. I lift them up as part of the ongoing life of our university.

It is from this gratitude that I look forward to the new chapter for the university and the next chapter for me. Here some of the elements of what this chapter will be:

1. Fulfilling the dream of truly becoming Seattle's university, the independent university worthy of and matching the vibrancy of our city and region.
2. A recognized and prized partner of, and contributor to, the corporations and institutions which are shaping our lives and futures.

3. A voice of ethics, values, justice, and compassion issuing from our Jesuit identity for a region needing these anchoring attributes.
4. Increasingly the first-choice university for students who want academic depth and life-transformative decision-making and action.
5. Championship athletics, with the facilities to match, which puts our university on the national map of students, alumni, and supporters.
6. An aggressive development of technology to enhance the learning of our students and to provide access to students who want our kind of Jesuit education.
7. An assured enrollment, success, and graduation of students on all levels of our education, which will allow us to build our academic reputation and our programs.
8. A distinguishing student experience which combines challenging academics, service to community, preparation for careers, and a strong sense of belonging, fun, and community.
9. A clarity and integrity in how to be a Catholic university in the Jesuit tradition which is inspiring for students of a new world and of a new mindset.
10. A university community and its friends unified by our Jesuit history and values and increasingly capable of discerning its future together.

This is what we want to be about in the next chapter. If it is more abundant or bolder or hard to believe as possible, I invite us to return to the image of the risen Jesus on the shore of the lake directing his followers to lower down the nets and to find abundance beyond expectation where he directs. We have all worked hard these past twenty years. We can trust that the bigger catch is still ahead of us.

Our Cabinet together with the Board of Trustees this year will take these 10 elements, sculpt them into a compelling vision, and describe in a concrete way what our Seattle U. will look like at the end of my term and beyond.

Speaking of beyond, I hope that my legacy will be a Seattle University reassured and revitalized in its Jesuit, Catholic educational mission, a first-choice university where students belong, succeed, and thrive, and a university supported by people like you and a thousand others we have won to our cause and who make us to be what we are. I hope in short that my legacy will also be your legacy.

Thanks for listening to this state of the university as I move beyond twenty years of leadership. It's now time to come ashore not for breakfast of bread and fish with Jesus, but wine and food with one another. I'm sure he will be with us.