

Law Commencement December 2020

- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Each time I give a welcome at a School of Law Commencement I am allowed to make a few remarks on a subject of my choice. I would like to do so today. But first welcome and congratulations to you on your graduation from Seattle University and from its School of Law. They tell me that over my last 23 ½ years I have given out and had my name on 49,871 diplomas from Seattle U. I think it will be the Law School Commencement in May that will push me over the 50,000 mark, but you will get me closer. Thank you for being a Seattle U. student, welcome to this special commencement for you, and congratulations. Now for my remarks.

At a virtual Christmas party last Friday there was a set of questions we could be asked. Mine was, “What is the worst gift you have every received?”! The question I wanted was “What is your favorite quotation?” My favorite quotation is “Don’t believe everything you think!” I like it because it takes me to what I am most interested in which is how much does the culture in which we live condition our thinking so that it is not really ours but is our culture thinking through us. There is no such thing as thinking outside of culture: one is always culturally conditioned; there is no culture-free place to stand. So how do we know if what we think is really our own thinking and how do we know what is true?

Benjamin Franklin comes to the rescue here. He says, “A lie stands on one foot; truth on two.” For example, our American history is a lie if it stands on the one foot of history as written by the dominant or privileged class. Or the political views of the coastal elite is a lie if the only accepted or acceptable view is what we think on this one-hundred-mile-inland strip on the coasts of our country. Each is a lie because it stands in one predominant culture alone.

We can only approach truth and can only approach knowing what we really think on our own if we can also stand in another culture. This is the advantage not only of visiting another culture but going deeply enough to actually think and feel within it. That helps us find two-footed truth. It is this which drives me on July 1st next year, the day after I finish my term as president of Seattle U., to set off and drive across America. I want to know America. As I often say, “It is good every once in a while to leave Seattle and visit America.” I am searching for how 74 million Americans think who voted differently from how I did in November. How, if I stood in their culture, might I have come to the two-footed truth about America and discover the truth of what I truly think? For as that favorite quotation says, “Don’t believe everything you think!”

I believe that law and legal studies is a culture, a way of thinking and deciding and acting that has its own values, principles, accepted procedures. So you’ve been standing in two cultures: the one you and I live in—with all its varieties or different cultures—and the culture of law and legal studies. Balancing or Stradling now fairly securely on this other standpoint of law and legal studies and standing in your own life, do you have a better chance of coming to two-footed truth and of discovering the ways in which your culture has impeded you from knowing and trusting what you truly think?

Doesn't this underlie the greatest challenge of our country today, its polarization, which is all of us standing on one foot, living a lie, but believing we have the truth? How much all of us need to listen to, know, appreciate, think within, see reality from another place, not just for some hoped-for reconciliation or shared understanding, but just as much for the credibility to others and to ourselves of our own thinking and views. We may not need, as I want, to drive across America so that it can really sink in, but in some way we need to be immersed in the world of others different from ourselves whether in politics, or race, or gender, or economy, or religion, or homelessness, or immigration status, or nation or the profession of law.

As I will set out to drive across America, where are you setting out for in order to find and think within two-footed truth? Good luck on your journey and again thanks and congratulations.