

The Source for Justice from Within Ourselves

- *Peace and Justice Day 2019*
- *Holy Names Academy*
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

Good morning on this your Peace and Justice Day. Thank you, students of Holy Names, for choosing the theme of this day, for organizing it, praying to start it off, and introducing me. It is customary for a speaker to say, "It is a privilege to be invited to speak to you" and I do say that but I want to say something more. This is my first time speaking to the students of Holy Names Academy and I want to say to you three things I regularly say to others when they ask me as president of Seattle University what I think of Holy Names. First I say, "This school gets right the balance of four important things better than any other school I know: academics, diversity, service, and community." Secondly, what I say is, "What I most admire about the women who graduate from Holy Names—like the ten who came to Seattle U. this year—is that they have a self-confidence and a self-possession about themselves". This I think is a remarkable accomplishment of the leadership and teachers of this school and even more so of the way you, as students, support one another and build one another up. And the third thing I say is, "I recommend Holy Names above any other school for students and families choosing secondary schools in this region." I simply think "you get it right at Holy Names!" This Peace and Justice Day—the whole of it, this gathering, the workshops and activities and service is another way you get it right.

I love the theme of the year you chose, Maya Angelou's "Nothing can dim the light which shines from within". I think I was asked to give this keynote talk because last year at an MLK Prayer Breakfast I gave a talk called "Commitments for White America" which received quite a bit of attention from your faculty. It was the toughest talk I ever gave. I tell people, "I give 250 talks a year, and I say something in five of them." I really said something in that one, perhaps too much. Google my name and "Commitments for White America" and you can see what I mean.

I want to say something quite different today, perhaps not my toughest talk but my easiest one, because it is about something I so deeply believe, in some way have given my whole life to promote, on which I am continuously reflecting. I want to talk about the soul of social justice, the spring from within the person from which justice and compassion flows, the song in the heart of the person who stands with and acts on behalf of the poor, the marginalized, those discriminated against, the abused and neglected. I want to talk about the source in the spirit of persons whose stories are the stories of commitment. I need to speak quite personally about this: the stories of the hearts of others, my story, and your story. I can speak personally to you today because I know you are searching within yourselves for the source of your own story of commitment to peace and to justice, which you have already begun to write and to tell with your lives. I hope and am confident that what I say about the soul and the song at the heart of justice and peace will help you in the rest of this day as you apply it in so many practical ways. So here goes.

I start with a poem, a poem by Mary Oliver who died just recently. It is a poem called “The Mockingbird” and is about how, like the mockingbird, we mimic the sounds and voices of all that is around us, but have a hard time hearing and listening to and loving and singing with our own voice. “The Mockingbird” by Mary Oliver:

All summer
the mockingbird
in his pearl-gray coat
and his white-windowed wings

flies
from the hedge to the top of the pine
and begins to sing, but it’s neither
lilting nor lovely,

for he is the thief of other sounds—
whistles and truck brakes and dry hinges
plus all the songs
of other birds in his neighborhood;

mimicking and elaborating,
he sings with humor and bravado,
so I have to wait a long time
for the softer voice of his own life

to come through. He begins
by giving up all his usual flutter
and settling down on the pine’s forelock
then looking around

as though to make sure he’s alone;
then he slaps each wing against his breast,
where his heart is,
and, copying nothing, begins

easing into it
as though it was not half so easy
as rollicking,
as though his subject now

was his true self,
which of course was as dark and secret
as anyone else’s,
and it was too hard—

perhaps you understand—

to speak or to sing it
to anything or anyone
but the sky.

Each of us has a voice, a song, a truth at the heart of us which is ours alone, which no one else has, and that is beautiful and powerful because it is from our very own unique life, the way we were created by God and family and by our own fashioning. Unfortunately, we—both I and you—spend all too much of our lives echoing, mimicking, repeating the voices of the people and the culture around us, even to the point that we can't hear or know our own voice. It gets buried or drowned out by the noise of the voices of others. This voice—the true song of the mockingbird—is the soul of social justice and the song of peace, because it is where these must come from in us and in others if justice and peace are to be true, real, deep, human, lasting, for all. What is your voice and how does it call you to commit to service to and with others?

Let me tell you a story about an encounter I had with students who were seniors at Seattle U. Fifteen of them in an honor society invited me and a woman named Michele to speak to them about how we prayed and how we discerned life choices. Michele spoke first from her experience, told her story, then I told mine. In the course of what I said to those fifteen 21-22 year-olds—I can still see exactly where we sat around a table—I said at the heart of my prayer and my making life choices is simply “being present to the truth of myself in silence... being present to the truth of oneself in silence”. When I said this I noticed a discomfort, like a breeze ruffling the surface of these students. So I stopped and I said, “I take it you all want to be present to the truth of yourself in silence.” There was silence! Finally, one woman student spoke, “They tell us that when we are present to the truth of ourselves in silence we will find peace... I find anxiety!” Every one of the group assented to, confirmed, her statement. You may understand better than I what they were saying, something perhaps about being so distracted or busy or in noise all the time that stopping and being silent is scary. It lets in spooky, uncomfortable, unaccustomed things. I was heartbroken in my love of and my hope for those students because I believe that we can only make the most important life choices by being present to the truth of ourselves in silence, from that depth, hearing that voice, listening to that song. I also believe that the true source or soul or spring of justice—if it is to be real rather than performance—is that truth of ourselves to which we must be present if our commitment is truly to be ours, be genuine, authentic, and—importantly—be effective. As you reflect during this Peace and Justice Day at Holy Names, how are you about how much peace and justice flow from the truth of yourself, your truth, no one else's? How are you in being present to that truth?

Henry David Thoreau—the author of Walden—once said that the mass of humanity go to the grave with their song still in them. What he meant was what we have been talking about, that we each have a voice, each have a truth, each have what he calls a song which only we can sing, that no one else can sing for us, and that we can sing no one else's song. By “song” he means the unique way life takes shape within us as it does not take shape in anyone else. The song is our own unique life, the only one we have, the only one we can live, the only one we are called by God and by nature to live. It is a tragedy that anyone dies without singing their song, living their own life—either not knowing their own life, or living the life of others, or having their own life squelched and squashed by oppression, lack of opportunity, war, injustice. A great tragedy, a great injustice—before humanity and before God—is that anyone dies without having lived their

own unique life, singing their own song. The greatest of all imaginable injustices is if Thoreau is right that the mass of humanity go to the grave with their song still in them. The discovery of our own song is the best place from which to calculate what injustice really is. How many people do you think, and which people, do you think are never allowed to sing their own song, and why? Isn't war and injustice and poverty and discrimination and abuse and negligence what stifle their songs?

I am going to tell you three stories: two of college students I have known well, and one, my own story. These are stories about how what ends up being our greatest personal strength for justice often comes from the most difficult place within us from our early lives, how early traumas become triumphs which allow us to place something unique about ourselves at the service of and with others.

Here's the first: Andrew.

Andrew is from San Francisco, Irish on his mother's side, Persian or Iranian on his father's. I don't know from which parent he gets his black eyes and his tight curly dark hair.

One day his Persian grandmother took him as a little boy into downtown San Francisco. They came upon some homeless people, living on the streets. Andrew was curious, intrigued, and started to run up and talk to them. His grandmother pulled him back and in Farsi said to him, "Don't, they're dirty!" From that seemingly so small incident Andrew's journey began. He was attracted by but afraid of the homeless.

When he came to Seattle U. he worked in a soup kitchen with other students. From the kitchen window he looked out and saw other students hanging out with, eating with, talking and laughing with the hungry homeless. For all his heart Andrew so wanted to be able to be among them, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. He stayed in the kitchen and stared out, wishing he had the capacity to just hang with the homeless. He was afraid; he was traumatized. They were "the other", and he couldn't cross the boundary to them.

Andrew was helped by an experience of an immersion in Ecuador and by fellow students in a faith-based program called "Justice Walking", a program in which students teach one another to "J-walk"—that's capital "J" for Justice or Jesus—which has as its goal to break the laws written into us by patterns of class and separation, to jaywalk to others. Andrew began to cross the boundary to the other. He volunteered to work with Real Change, distributing bundles of papers to the homeless, who would sell them on the corners of Seattle. One day Andrew walked up from the harbor to the top of First Hill and was able to salute by name six homeless people selling Real Change who were now his pals. He then made friends with homeless teenagers and young adults on Broadway, not to do something for them but just to be with them as they were and as he was.

Andrew says that what the homeless want is not that we give them something but that we be for them the gift of presence, and he quickly adds, "That, Fr. Steve, is what we all thirst for, the gift of presence." Andrew transformed his seemingly small trauma into a wonderful, wide triumph, developing from a childhood challenge a capacity for human presence with the other, even a

university president. It really wasn't about fear of the homeless, was it? It was fear of the person who is different from me. How about you? How about us? What's our story? Andrew's is a story common to all of us, the fashioning of something precious around the grit of our childhood. His soul for justice was shaped around an early fear he learned to be present to, which became his personal power for presence to others.

The second story is that of Rebecca.

Rebecca is Latina. When she was eight her father simply disappeared, ran away, left the home, abandoned the mom and three daughters. For Rebecca this meant that she had a very hard time trusting anyone, because the father whom she trusted, inexplicably, was no longer there. When Rebecca came to Seattle U. she started working with high school students in the neighborhood, then middle school kids, then elementary, then pre-school, until eventually she worked with 1, 2, and 3 year old children at Childhaven. These were children who were abused or neglected. Rebecca focused on the neglected children. The children were unwashed, wore dirty clothes, often could not speak even after two or three years of age. But above all they could not trust. In them Rebecca had come home to her own trauma. She taught these children, just by playing with and being with them, how to trust, not to trust blindly, which she saw as dangerous, but only to trust a caring adult and to be able to know when an adult is trustworthy. When I looked at Rebecca I saw a happy, bubbly, fun-loving, humble, young woman with a gift to help neglected children to trust. She climbed down the ladder of her childhood trauma to the place of the earliest trust in our lives, and stitched together anew her own ability to trust as she enabled the most vulnerable children to also do so. How about you; how about all of us? How has our song been composed? What's the melody? What's our particular power for action on behalf of peace and justice?

My own story is not nearly as interesting or traumatic as that of Andrew or Rebecca, but it is mine so it is precious, at least to me, and is powerful in its own way, and in fact you are witnessing something of that power right now.

When I was young, a boy in Juneau, Alaska, and even a teenager in Washington, D.C., I was almost pathologically shy and sensitive. I could not stand to be apart from my parents or else I'd cry. My four brothers and sisters could bring me to tears at will—though thankfully and lovingly they hardly ever did. I was so shy that at Boy Scout Camp—where I was dreadfully homesick the whole time but did not have the gumption to say, “I don't want to go this year!”—I did not have the assertiveness, while sitting with Troop 23 in mess hall, to reach out and take food from the platter of French toast placed in the middle of the table, but waited for it to be passed around, which it never was! I starved till Parents' Sunday when Mom and Dad would bring food: chicken, potato salad, and chocolate chip cookies, which I'd then hide under the bunk in our tent until rats and squirrels appropriated them! I needed a younger sister to invite her girlfriends from her all-girls school as my dates for the mandatory school dances at my boys' high school. I still remember painfully going totally blank barely into the recitation by memory of a piece in an elocution contest in front of the whole high school and needing to be called off the stage by the teacher after what seemed hours of silent, public humiliation.

My challenge as a child is nothing to write home about for sure. But what I believe I transformed this minor trauma into was an ability to go within myself in reflection, a depth of presence to myself, a drawing from a deep well within, a learning to speak from who I am and what I treasure interiorly, and the development of a life of daily prayer and poetry. That's my way of transforming a trauma into a triumph. I remember once saying in an offhand manner, as a sort of throw-away line in the middle of a 10-week college course on world religions which I was teaching, "Shyness is the most personal of all human emotions; it is simply the shadow side of the perception of the preciousness and vulnerability of relationships." (Rollo May) On the last day of that course one college student, a 20 year old young man, came up to me and awkwardly said—for he too was shy—that this one sentence was worth more to him than the whole rest of the course! Someone had told him that being shy is not only okay but can be a feeling of sensitivity and of treasuring something precious. Shy people don't give themselves away easily in relationships; they've got too much to give and they realize the risk of the giving. That's my little story, my little triumph.

I give these three stories of Andrew, Rebecca and myself because we tend to think our voice, our song, our truth, our personal power, is an unalloyed, beautiful, melodious tune. Often—maybe most often—what gives it beauty and power is our own struggle with what life gave us in how we were born, or in our family, or in some tragic experiences, or in that very anxiety my college students said they found when they were present to the truth of themselves in silence. Andrew, Rebecca, and Fr. Steve found their song not apart from, but from within their anxiety. And isn't this particularly powerful in working for justice because we know how to turn anxiety into song, personal problem into precious gift, which is what those who suffer from injustice, war, discrimination, poverty, abuse and neglect also need to do? Although we cannot sing the song of another, perhaps we can turn our own experiences into empathy with those who are struggling to have life and to find beauty in situations with which we can identify.

In my attempting to reflect with you during this Peace and Justice Day about the soul or the voice or the song or the spring within us for effective and committed action, I have taken you into some fairly deep and perhaps dark areas within ourselves. What are the joys of justice-making?

I wonder if you have had the experience I have had, perhaps for some of you going to rural Mississippi, or on a service project among impoverished people, or being with the homeless, or with hungry families at a foodbank, kids in hospital, lonely shut-ins or residents in elderly care. Do you have the experience I do that I am surprised by the joy I find in those people, a joy not based on what they have but on who they are and what they prize? I remember coming back from being with the poor, the desperately poor, in Nicaragua and being surprised to discover an unaccountable joy among them. I came back thinking I would feel guilty for what I had, and instead feeling that I had discovered in them something that was missing in my own humanity, that they held a part of my humanity I could only discover in them, be gifted by them, find joy in receiving from them a greater humanity I had not previously known. What if each of us is not fully human, but that others very different from ourselves hold an important and missing part of our humanity, a part of humanity that belongs to us but which we cannot access except through them? Those with whom we serve can surprise us with joy, can help us to sing more fully. There is joy in justice work.

Let me tell you another story about an encounter I had with college students which opened my eyes to their song and their confidence. I was asked to teach a one-hour class as a guest visitor in a course on leadership. I happened to mention to the 25 students in the class that the so-called “greatest generation” was the generation of the men and women of the Second World War. One woman student raised her hand and asked, “Why were they the greatest generation?” I responded, “Because they had the greatest cause.” “What was that?” she asked? I said, “To save civilization in a worldwide war.” She replied, “Father, I hate to disagree with you, but we are the greatest generation!” “Oh yeah.” I said, “Why is that?” She replied, “Because we have the greatest cause which is nothing less than saving the planet itself and there could be no greater cause than that!” She had me! At that moment the whole class, by exclamation and movement, clearly assented to her. What I learned was that what was a conceptual thing in me about climate change was a viscerally felt thing for her and for them. In other words, it came from their truth, their very life, their song, their voice. Unlike in me, it was felt, it was confident, it was powerful, it was determined to triumph. There was a voice for justice—environmental justice—which I not only did not have but I believe I cannot have. I believe this is a joy of justice. I don’t know what better word I could call it.

Where should we look for this power, this life, this joy, which is the soul of our commitment? I believe we often look in the wrong place, we look at big things, important things, grand events, marches, protests, political movements, crowds and masses. This came home to me recently when I read the excellent autobiography of Michelle Obama, Becoming. I am a great admirer of her but I had always seen the public person, Michelle among the masses. I expected her autobiography to be about that. It isn’t; or at least that it is not what Michelle’s song is really about. She tells the story of giving the speech at the National Convention at which her husband would be elected the Democratic candidate for the presidency. Let me quote her:

“It was a big moment for us—grand and public and to this day readily findable on YouTube. But the truth is, for those exact reasons, it was also strangely kind of a small moment. My view of things was starting to reverse itself, like a sweater slowly being turned inside out. Stages, audiences, lights, applause. These were becoming more and more normal than I’d ever thought they could be. What I lived for now were the unrehearsed, unphotographed, in-between moments where nobody was performing and no one was judging and real surprise was still possible—where sometimes without warning you might feel a tiny latch spring open on your heart.”

Wow! Those moments, “where sometimes without warning you might feel a tiny latch spring open on your heart”. I happen to think no man could have written about feeling “a tiny latch spring open on your heart”! It asks us, what is within our hearts if a tiny latch can spring open and so much joy and purpose and life can spring out to startle us? Certainly the soul of justice and the source of peace is behind that tiny latch. Maybe, as Michelle would claim, we need to pay more attention to the little experiences “the in-between moments”, the small encounters, the humble joys with persons, the hidden acts when no one is looking and no one is performing, to tap into the sources which can sustain a lifetime of action on behalf of peace and justice.

I am 75 years old and I have been a Jesuit for 57 years, starting when I was 18, the age of some of you. I believe I have been dedicated to others all these years; at least I have tried. But only recently have I discovered that you can be driven to be dedicated and you can be free to be dedicated. I think of it as how much space is there within you for your truth, your true self, your soul to roam free. I've thought of this space, within which I have begun to discover my freedom, as a playing field, or a sanctuary, or a house. More recently, I have come to see it as "a cabin for the self": a cabin where the self can dress down and relax, a cabin where the self can be at home and look out on a lake or a forest, a cabin where the self can sit in a rocking chair for prayer or for conversation with another person. Essentially, it is an image of being really free to be me within myself, my truth free to roam, to rock, to nap, to relax. Why did it take so long to be free, rather than to be driven in my dedication, in living from myself and my song? I would hope that all of you might come to it sooner than I did so that your dedication to justice and to peace might be more free and hence more powerful and effective.

I'm heading towards a conclusion to set you free to be about the rest of this annual Peace and Justice Day on the theme "Nothing can dim the light which shines within you". Before I conclude let me say that the kind of peace and the kind of justice which I believe flows from our personal soul and source most clearly seen in the gospel. It is a peace and justice which is meek and humble, which is merciful and compassionate, which is a leaven and a mustard seed, which prays and praises God, which thrills to and protects nature, which honors women as equals and as closest friends, which embraces especially children and outcasts, which heals through community, which suffers and sacrifices for the life of others. There are many kinds of peace and justice. All of them are important; we need them all, they have different inspirations. The person we call "Jesus of Nazareth", but whom we might just as well call "Jesus of Seattle" shows us what he means by peace and justice. It is a gospel peace and gospel justice; it flows from our song, our voice, our truth, our faith, and it surprises us when the tiny latch on our hearts springs open.

I mentioned that in the talk I gave last year I gave ten commitments for white America. Let me be more humble today and give five commitments so that "nothing can dim the light which shines from within" in our work for peace and justice.

First, let us commit ourselves to quiet. Each day let us find at least a brief time of quiet to be present to the truth of ourselves, to the wellsprings of our dedication to others. In quiet the true self takes root and germinates and breaks forth from the soil of ourselves. A favorite prayer of mine by Edwina Gately may help us to be quiet:

Be silent.
 Be still.
 Alone. Empty
 Before your God.
 Say nothing.
 Ask nothing.
 Be silent.
 Be still.
 Let your God

Look upon you.
 That is all.
 He knows.
 He understands.
 He loves you with
 An enormous love.
 He only wants to
 Look upon you
 With his love.
 Quiet. Still be.
 Let your God – love you.

Secondly, let us commit ourselves to conversation. In true person-to-person, face-to-face conversation we learn how to put ourselves in the shoes of another, to see things from their view, to feel the world with them. It is in actual conversation that we learn empathy, the ability to truly care for the other. All justice and all work for peace depends on empathy.

Third, let us commit ourselves to contact. When someone tells Pope Francis they gave alms to a beggar, he asks them, “Did you look the person in the eye?” Few say “yes”. He then asks, “Did you reach out and touch the person?” Almost no one does. Yet, he says, that contact, that being seen, and that touch is what the poor most need and crave. Let us practice contact with the other.

Fourth, let us commit ourselves to a well-educated solidarity. Solidarity with others is important, but not an easy solidarity of feelings alone, a cheap solidarity. Justice and peace are complex issues. People living in injustice, war, discrimination, poverty, prison, oppression are living in situations with complex causes, most often systemic ones. We can only really be in true solidarity with them, if we study, read, learn, discuss these realities so that we live a well-educated solidarity. Holy Names and college help you develop this commitment, this habit for a lifetime of informed understanding of others.

Fifth and finally, let us commit ourselves to work for peace and justice from gratitude, not guilt. Gratitude allows us to act from the whole of ourselves, from the truth of ourselves; it has staying power. Guilt acts from a narrow, constricted self and does not last and has little true force for good or for change. If we act from “The Source for Justice from Within Ourselves”, from our voice, our song, our truth, our anxieties transformed into triumphs, if we let the latch on our hearts spring open for others, we indeed will be acting from gratitude, from what is deepest in us and the best gift to share with others as they share their gifts with us.

These five commitments to quiet, to conversation, to contact, to well-educated solidarity, and to gratitude should not be seen as something other than the work of justice and peace but as making that work possible and true.

The last word today in this keynote should belong not to me but to a woman, the kind of woman you are becoming in your growing self-confidence and self-possession; to Marianne Williamson. How ironic that what she says has been incorrectly attributed to a man, even if that man was Nelson Mandela. In her poem “Our Deepest Fear” she says what I have been trying to say, but

in her own way. She wonderfully articulates what Maya Angelou meant by “Nothing can dim the light which shines from within”. Marianne Williamson, I give you the last word.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness
That most frightens us.

We ask ourselves
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.

Your playing small
Does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine,
As children do.
We were born to make manifest
The glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us;
It's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we're liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others.