

SISTER CITIES INTERNATIONAL

Thank you, Roger-Mark, Chairman Tim, Kathleen and all who made this event possible, and to this wonderful, diverse and truly international gathering.

And here we are, from Ghana and the Bahamas, Canada and Cameroon, Germany, France, and China, United Kingdom and United States, South Korea, South Africa, Mongolia, Jamaica, Japan and India.

But more than Countries, we are here from the cities:

From New York to Newark, Columbus to Columbia. Atlanta, Arvada, Denver or Tulsa.

From LA, Miami, Nairobi, Tamale.

Littleton to Little River, Lake Worth to Lakewood

Forts Collins and Worth.

Beaches Solana, Virginia and Delray

Saints James, Louis or Petersburg.

Santas Barbara, Clara or Fe.

Whether you like your San with a side of Antonio, Diego, Francisco, Jose or Salvador.

Or your Cities Windy, Park, Culver, Ellicott, or Oklahoma.

And from magical sounding places like Stone Mountain, Sugar Land, Coral Gables and Hot Springs.

We come together like Canada and La Canada, like Salem and Wichita.

We rise like a Phoenix or we just Falls Church

From Taipei to Thunder Bay, Tampa to Tempe.

So sing a song for Lansing, be quirky for Albuquerque, hold a rally for Raleigh, a function for Grand Junction, name a star for Omaha or just marry a banker rococo in Casablanca Morocco.

And as my mother would say as I lay down to sleep: Shama, Sonoma, Seongnam, Tacoma. Oh me-o, oh my-o, oh Cleveland, Ohio.

And finally to our hosts, to the glory of the plethora of flora in beautiful Aurora

And most of all to you, each and every one, Denver City denizens and Sister City citizens, to those here that go above and beyond at every turn, the selfless few and many who are committed to peace, the workers not the shirkers, they are out there, they are among us here today, they are probably sitting next to you and if they are next to you then you should be beside yourself because you are magnificent, brothers and sisters in arms, give yourself a hand because you don't have a leg to stand on.... Good afternoon.

And to Sister Cities International I wish a happy 62nd birthday, but ever-green and ever-keen you don't look a day over 26.

By way of very brief background, I graduated from law school in '98 and from the University of North Carolina in 2004. Along the way I've worked in the courts, in counter-terrorism and in anti-corruption, as a lawyer, a political advisor and a humanitarian. I was a teacher for 4 years, worked in Afghanistan for nearly 2 years, and I was arrested in the Ukraine once. In that time, I've learned three things and three things only: (1) kids are honest, devious and hilarious, (2) I have genetic inability to grow convincing sideburns, and (3) the Ukrainian police have absolutely no sense of humour about their hats.

I have worked on issues both profound and profane. I provided political advice in Afghanistan in much the same way as a Jack Russell terrier provides financial advice to a burglar – loudly and in terror. I've sat in a meeting with a dungeon master imploring me to regulate the bondage industry, and had a strip club owner appoint me his lawyer because he felt we “had a connection”.

I was Chief of Staff to two Attorney's General in Queensland, Australia - two genuinely decent men who under my sage stewardship both successfully lost their seats, and I worked to improve policing in East Timor – police who, I'd like to think with my assistance, shot almost no one seriously during the 2012 elections.

I truly believe in service - in applying our gifts to the betterment of our community and not only ourselves.

I believe in equality - that the treatment we receive and the rights we can fight for in life should not be conditional on our gender, our religion, our race, our wealth or our sexual preference.

And I believe in optimism and opportunity - that it is possible, even during the darkest, most dangerous, terrible, stressful times, to make tomorrow better than today.

And today we live in challenging times. We are frequently told we live in a binary world – that we must be for or we will be against. We live in a world of contracting vision, in an age of looking away from the world, of looking backwards in time, or looking down into the black mirrored void of our phones, in the apparent hope that salvation lies therein.

But while we are looking away and backwards and down, the world is changing.

Massive challenges currently face us as a species and a planet. The 2017 Global Peace Index indicated a downward trend for the fourth successive year – 92 countries were less peaceful than the previous year, only 71 were more. Humanitarian need across the globe – driven largely by

conflict – is at an all-time high with 135 million people estimated to be in need this year. If this were a country it would be the tenth largest nation on earth. And in response, the UN has called for a record 22.5 billion dollars in funding to provide life-saving support to them. And if that sounds like a lot (and it is), consider that:

- MacDonalds Annual operating costs are ~ \$17 billion
- Global socks market is valued at \$42 billion
- Americans spend ~\$62 billion a year on pets
- Global military expenditure last year was \$1.7 trillion
- And finally, consider that the estimated annual **cost of violence** to the global economy last year was \$14.8 trillion, or nearly \$2,000 per person on the planet compared to less than \$3 person per spent on aid.

And even the concept of cities is, perhaps, being challenged, becoming mobile and malleable. Since August last year, a population of more than 706,000 people have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh – driven out by violence of the most horrific kind. To put that in perspective, that is the **population of Denver** landing in hilly, undeveloped countryside bounded by river and ocean and doing so en masse, the vast majority within a matter of weeks. And if we include the pre-existing refugee population that was there, as well as the struggling Bangladesh communities that are generously hosting some of the refugees, we can forget Denver or Boston, or DC or Seattle or San Fran. Now we're talking about a city rivalling the ninth or tenth largest in the US – with a population of **1.3 million people** in need of assistance.

And all of that doesn't even begin to touch on the clear and present dangers of climate change, the increased risk of pandemics and the continued rise of radicalisation and violent extremism, to pick just three more utterly terrifying headlines to dwell on.

And that is the world that Sister Cities International now exists, a world far different from when it was established in 1956 and facing far different challenges.

In 1956 the UN had 80 Member States, and there were 106 countries around the world.

In 2018 the UN has 193 Member States and there are 195 countries in the world.

In 1956, New York to London was a 15 hour flight and cost the equivalent of \$4500. Today, the flight is half that time and one tenth of the cost.

In 1956, the world's population was 2.8 billion people. By 2018 that has grown by more than two and a half times to 7.6 billion people in the world.

Average population density has gone from 19 persons per square kilometre in 1956, to 51 persons per square kilometre.

And finally, the urban population, the population of our cities, has gone from 32% in 1956 to 55% of the world's population. From just under a third, to more than a half.

So at the same time that all of those horrifying global trends – war, disease, climate change, disaster – are rising and falling and threatening to overwhelm us, faster and faster, headline by

headline, **our community has been growing and getting closer** and closer. It is no longer just those in our house, or our street or our neighbourhood. It's no longer even those in our city or state or our country. Our community now is defined – must be defined – by the challenges we face, these enormous, global challenges that necessitate a communal response. In this global age of the butterfly effect, where flapping in Manilla causes flooding in Miami, what we must consider our community to be is vast.

If we do live in challenging times, then we will only overcome that challenge if our community perspective adopts a worldview that is outward and forward, and not relentlessly inward and back.

We must reach out our hand – not to grab a prize in a competition that doesn't exist, stretching for a finish line that will never come, seeking to win at all costs – we must reach out our hand individually and collectively to meet the hand of our neighbour in unity, strength, and understanding, be that neighbour in the seat beside you, or a world away in a city you've never seen. This is the strength that is required to meet today's challenges. And building peace is quite a challenge.

In my humble view, never has the need for the Sister Cities International mission – *“To promote peace through mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation—one individual, one community at a time”* – never has the need for this mission been more acute than now.

We face a hinge-point in history where the gap between the haves and the have nots is growing, and more troubling, that the chasm between the humane and the inhumane, the dedicated and the indifferent, is a widening gyre that threatens to engulf us all.

If ever it was important to set a course for respect, understanding, cooperation, openness, dialogue and peace – no matter if that course be difficult, uncertain and strewn with a history of failure – then that time is now. Our vision must not focus on the shoes on our feet, it must chart a course to the horizon for a journey that no-one else has yet to take. It must surpass expectation, upend existing thinking, reject comfortable rest and challenge us to create a future that we will likely never see individually.

Sadly, the horizon for that journey can be hard to make out. Our world today is increasingly dominated by fear of “the other” - that which is different, unusual, unknown, other. Somebody's faith is different, somebody's skin is different, somebody's outlook is different. They pray wrong, they stand wrong, they look wrong, they love wrong. They are “other”. And it is frightening, because in the concept of “otherness” are the seeds of conflict sown.

When I think about this concept of otherness, my mind turns to me own experience in Afghanistan. This is a country that sits astride the ancient and modern Silk Road – home to the ancient empire of Bactria, conquered in part by Alexander the Great and currently a conflict-ravaged country of at least seven ethnic groups, who defeated both the British Empire and the Soviet Empire and where the Taliban are on the up and up, ISIS are looming and who don't like invaders but do like a full, flowing beard. And that's where I decided to go, to the very definition it would seem of other, as a wildly conspicuous white guy who can't grow convincing sideburns. Here, **I was clearly other**.

It's a country of two official languages - Dari and Pashto - two unofficial languages -Uzbek and Turkmen- and about 30 other languages, which was lucky, because I speak bad English, terrible Japanese and a smattering of obscure Portuguese profanities.

It is a devoutly Muslim country, so I knew I'd fit in. After all, I was born a Methodist, raised Uniting, schooled Anglican, married a Catholic and was once asked by a former employer to go to a strip club with an atheist and a Buddhist nun.

And it's a country where politics is a full-contact sport. But I was ready, I said to myself, I've danced in the rough and tumble of Australian politics, this is just a different tune. But if it's true that the difference between kinky and perverted is the difference between using a feather and using the whole chicken, then Australian politics, even at their most kinky, can barely hold a candle to the full chicken freak-out that is Afghan politics in full flight.

But when you strip all of that noise away – all the headlines and the horror and the political discord and the faux-religious posturing – and you connect as people, the reality is crystal clear. No-one was interested in killing me, at least not in an organised or personal or professional way. No one was worried about my religion, my patchy beard, my terrible Dari. Everyone is fundamentally worried about the same things we all are: putting bread on the table, sending the kids to school, expanding their business, exploring their horizons, ensuring for their children a better tomorrow than today. And, above all, they want peace.

Engagement as individuals, as citizens, as citizen diplomats is the very distillation of moving beyond the headline and embracing the humanity. It is a search to find commonality, a kindred spirit, a better way forward. And it is, by very definition a quest to reach out and embrace otherness. If you are seeking peace – truly seeking peace – then you must reconcile yourself to the truth that you will not create it with your friends. You won't forge peace with those who believe the same things that you do, with people you agree with, who share all of your beliefs, all of your concerns, advantages and challenges. You forge peace not with your friends, but with your enemies – you forge peace with the other. That is why it is difficult. But it is also why it is so vital.

I posit three reasons why citizen diplomacy is so important:

First - Quite simply, it is the right thing to do. It remains the most direct line to expanding our individual horizons and truly embracing life's richness of experience. An intangible elixir for exploring the breadth and depth of the human condition and in doing so, find greatness within ourselves. Reaching out of embrace a broader world is the natural response to seeing a horizon and asking what is beyond it. In a planet where few terrestrial horizons remain to be explored, it is the constant, ever-changing edge of the unknown, and we must forever be looking to conquer it.

Second – It is cheaper. It is more profitable. Peace costs less than war, cooperation divides our costs and collaboration spreads information and amplifies our voice. Businesses grow through peace and exchange. Markets open, customers increase in confidence, CEOs expand their world-view, and what was once “other” becomes “another”.

Third – And more fundamentally, it is the only way to ensure that our future and that of our children and our children's children is meaningful and sustainable. Through reaching out to our neighbour and making new neighbours, we fortify our own lives, building strength from collective experience and broader opportunities from collective understanding. Constructing walls, retreating into the bunker, laying waste to one's enemies, that might make you feel safe today, maybe, but it will leave your children only ashes and isolation. It will not build lasting strength. And it will never build genuine prosperity.

Sister Cities International should be proud to set your sights on building that better future, whether through local initiatives or global ones.

Despite this approach from Sister Cities International, what saddens me about the state of politics across much of the world that is represented here tonight is now how small we want to become. Less aid funding, more fear of the "other", of immigrants, of refugees, marginalisation of those who are different, the embracing of a nationalist, jingoistic rhetoric and a viewpoint of the world that seeks to exclude rather than embrace. At a time when many around us are most in need, we appear to be shrinking away in fear, becoming ever less relevant, ever less compassionate, ever less leaders. In short, we appear obsessed with those very few differences in order to divide us, rather than embracing that multitude of shared experiences that should unite us. And while there are genuine terrors in the world, we can't let the justifiable concern about that small aspect of humanity diminish our desire to join, embrace and aid the rest.

I end, as I have in the past, with an Emo Phillips story – apologies if you have heard it - about walking across a bridge and coming upon a man who was about to jump off

So I ran over and said "Stop! don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

He said, "Like what?"

I said, "Well...are you religious or atheist?"

He said, "Religious."

I said, "Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?"

He said, "Christian."

I said, "Me too! Are you catholic or protestant?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

He said, "Baptist!"

I said, "Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist church of god or Baptist church of the lord?"

He said, "Baptist church of god!"

I said, "Me too! Are you original Baptist church of god, or are you reformed Baptist church of god?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist church of god!"

I said, "Me too! Are you reformed Baptist church of god, reformation of 1879, or reformed Baptist church of god, reformation of 1915?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist church of god, reformation of 1915!"

I said, "Die, heretic scum", and pushed him off.

I thank and commend all of you for joining together today to search for difficult answers, for expanding your communities and your horizons. It has been a great honour to join you, and for all our sakes for our children and our children's children who will inherit each of our failures and each of our successes magnified by history and degree, I sincerely hope that Sister Cities International will continue to embrace the true believers, the heretic scum and all those of us in between.