

The Essential Brotherhood We All Share

TOM LANTOS

President Monson, President Faust, President Bateman, distinguished faculty, special guests, family and friends of the graduates, and, most important, members of the class of 2001, my fellow students: I shall take as my theme a speech delivered just a little over a year ago on March 8, 2000, by President Gordon B. Hinckley to an audience at the National Press Club: “Human suffering anywhere and among any people is a matter of urgent concern to us.”¹ Let me try to relate this powerful and wise statement to the Brigham Young University community, to other communities much less fortunate, and to my own experiences—positive and negative—with respect to communities I have lived in and I have come to know.

BYU is a unique educational institution. It is a remarkably homogeneous place where students share values and beliefs to an extent that I believe is unprecedented globally. Many of the students also share the experience of a mission, and most of you share the Mormon sense of belonging to a

like-minded community. The kind of communities, the kind of associations, that you share as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are the kinds of voluntary associations that are the building blocks of a healthy, democratic society in this country and across the globe. The values you share are vital for a free and open society. The experience of a community of like-minded individuals is invaluable, and the shared sense of community is priceless. Yet at the same time, there is a profound danger in becoming too much focused on only those with the same values and the same beliefs.

Early in my life, when I was just a few years younger than the graduates here today, I had an experience that offered a different kind of perspective. I was a member of the Hungarian community. I was very proud of my Hungarian heritage. I was very proud of my Hungarian citizenship. I loved my native tongue. I relished my Hungarian literature, music, culture, and civilization. Yet it did not take me long to recognize that much of

Tom Lantos, a congressman for the state of California, delivered this commencement address on April 26, 2001.

that community in the late 1930s and 1940s was not a community of shared values but a community of hate or, minimally, a community of noncaring—a community of indifference. In a period of a few short months, some 600,000 Hungarian Jews—men, women, and children—were packed into cattle cars and shipped to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, where most of them perished. There were young men and young women like you, with hopes and dreams and aspirations and lives not fulfilled; wise, sage, kind old men and women who could not fathom their fate; and toddlers and, yes, infants, as innocent as anyone could be, experiencing en masse man's most nightmarish experience, the horror of the Holocaust.

A week ago today I was in the rotunda of the Capitol with President George W. Bush as he spoke at the annual commemoration of the Holocaust. He spoke powerfully, with conviction, and from the heart. And he pointed to me—to my great surprise and considerable embarrassment—as one who survived the Holocaust and who came here to build a life and a family and to be privileged in the concluding years of his lifetime to serve his country in the Congress of the United States.

The fact that George W. Bush would single me out is not my achievement. It is the achievement of a Swede, a man by the name of Raoul Wallenberg, who was the most extraordinary figure of the Second World War. He was the son of Sweden's most distinguished, most outstanding, and most powerful family. He had before him endless horizons. He had become a diplomat, a businessman, a banker, a professor, and an architect—which was his profession—but he voluntarily left behind the security, the safety, the comfort, the affluence, the joy, and the fun of peaceful Stockholm and came to the hell where we lived. With courage that defies description, he placed his own unarmed body between the Nazi war machine and the intended innocent victims. He saved more than 100,000 innocent men, women, and children whose only crime was that they were born into the Jewish faith.

Wallenberg did not come to Budapest because the people in Budapest were part of his community. He spoke Swedish and we spoke Hungarian. He was a citizen of Sweden and we were citizens

of Hungary. He was a very wealthy man and we were destitute. He was a Christian Lutheran and we were Jews. Yet he came of his own free will and he came eagerly to Hungary and daily offered his life as he confronted Nazi leaders such as Adolf Eichmann and the Hungarian fascists in an attempt to save innocent people with whom he had nothing in common except his humanity. And he saved more than 100,000 of them.

What makes Wallenberg's story so extraordinary is that he taught us a lesson that reaches beyond our own community, whatever it is. The lesson he taught us is that as fellow human beings, we, by virtue of that very fact, are part of a community, and each of us is in fact a brother's or a sister's keeper.

As you go out from this magnificent but very sheltered place, as you leave this very stimulating but very cloistered community where you are surrounded lovingly by others who share your faith and your values and your beliefs, you will face a world in which most do not share your faith and many do not share your values. It is critical that you preserve your own faith and your own values, but it is equally critical that you rise above those narrower bonds and recognize your responsibility not just to the community that you know and in which you feel so comfortable but also your obligation to the wider community.

I would like to finish my thoughts with one of my favorite stories that has been handed down over many generations from an old and, by now, anonymous rabbi. This may be a rabbinical story, but it is a story that was lived by a Christian called Raoul Wallenberg.

This wise, old rabbi had his students gathered around him one day, and he asked them the following question: "How can you tell the moment at which the night begins to turn to day?"

His brightest student raised his hand and said, "Well, I think it is when you are walking through the village and it is dark and you are still far off, but you can tell the roof of your own home from that of your neighbor."

The rabbi said, "No, that is not the way to tell when night begins to turn to day."

A second student spoke up and said, "It is perhaps the moment when a man who is walking

through the woods at twilight sees a large animal approaching him and he can tell whether it is a bull or a large dog.”

The rabbi shook his head no and gave this answer: “The moment when the night has begun to turn to day is the moment when you can look into the face of a stranger and you recognize that he is your brother.”

That is the meaning and message of Raoul Wallenberg’s life. In the midst of the darkest night the world had known, he looked into the faces of strangers who looked so different from himself and saw that they were his brothers and his sisters. In recognizing this, he brought light into the terrible darkness and hastened the coming of the dawn.

So as you go forth in the spirit of Raoul Wallenberg and the righteous men and righteous

women of all nations who understood and understand the essential brotherhood we all share, some of the faces you will look into will be of a different color than yours; they will be of a different race and of a different culture and of a different faith. But if you will always remember that they are your brothers and your sisters, you will have reached a level of enlightenment so few of us ever have the privilege of reaching. God bless us all.

Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, National Press Club address, 8 March 2000, in “Full Text: President Hinckley’s Speech at the National Press Club,” *Deseret News*, 27 March 2000, deseret.com/2000/3/27/19780223/full-text-president-hinckley-s-speech-at-the-national-press-club.