

First Things First

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When Doyle Daves asked me back in November if I'd be willing to address the Las Vegas Citizens Committee for Historic Preservation at its annual dinner, I didn't hesitate. I told him it would be my pleasure.

And I meant it. Public speaking is actually something that I enjoy, especially when it might lead to an opportunity for thoughtful conversation. An opportunity to engage one another about ideas and issues that matter to our public life together.

But a split second after agreeing to speak, I realized that I should have asked first what Doyle wanted me to talk about. I am more a philosophical thinker than an historical one and I suddenly became self-conscious at the prospect of trying to speak on the topic of history.

But Doyle, looking like he thought he was setting me at ease, said I should just share my own history--talk about myself. Suddenly talking about history didn't sound so bad. I didn't have the heart to tell Doyle that he had just asked me to speak on my least favorite topic of all.

"So why am I my least favorite thing to talk about?" I asked myself on my drive back to the castle after lunch. After all, I often encounter interest in my history -- especially insofar as it is a history of "firsts"--first person in my family to go to college, first Hispanic woman to receive a doctorate in philosophy from Yale University, first woman and first Hispanic to serve as dean at St. John's College Santa Fe, first Native New Mexican to serve as president of UWC-USA.

This business of being "the first" can be heady stuff. It is part and parcel of the narrative that has come to be known as "The American Dream." And I certainly feel that I have been blessed to live that dream.

But there are two downsides to the fascination we have with "firsts." The first downside is that in focusing on "firsts," we tend to celebrate the accomplishment rather than everyone and everything else that made that accomplishment possible. In doing so, we risk missing the opportunity to

create or maintain the conditions that make that accomplishment possible for others.

Related to this risk is the second downside to our fascination with “firsts.” We can all be too quickly satisfied that once a “first” has occurred, whatever glass ceiling was shattered by that “first” is no longer a barrier. We breathe a sigh of relief and forget that the real triumph is when “firsts” no longer stand out because opportunity is shared by all.

If I may, I’d like to talk about each of these downsides in turn. In doing so, I’ll fulfill Doyle’s request to share a bit of my own history. But in doing so, I also hope to say something about history itself. Something I think to be important and worth conversation at our family dinner tables and within our communities.

When I think about the accomplishments I casually call “my own,” I am struck by the convergence of people and circumstances that made them possible. Take for example the single most important fact of my childhood that led to my love of learning -- my inability to nap, and my mother’s wisdom in finding a solution.

I am one of six children. Living in a small two-bedroom house, it wasn’t easy for my mother to find much in the way of peace and quiet. And so there was a strict napping requirement. Everybody had to do it, no exceptions. Except I never could nap, and since I wasn’t much good at keeping quiet, either, I made some trouble for my mother -- who needed the nap most of all. But recognizing that I would linger over the library books we’d bring home, even though I couldn’t yet read them, she proposed that if I laid down quietly with my books I didn’t have to nap. That was the beginning of a lifelong love of reading. A supportive parent, a public library within walking distance, and a little motivation to avoid napping started me on a path for which I couldn’t be more grateful.

And then there was my first mentor, a neighbor who took the time to encourage my love of learning. Marion Dudley lived in a small apartment next door. He was an older southern gentleman, retired military, estranged from his wife and children, and a binge alcoholic.

But when Dudley wasn’t on a binge, he was sitting on his porch, along with some of my stuffed animals, playing the pupil to my role as teacher. Dudley would sit for hours letting me “teach” him how to read, how to count, how to

examine a butterfly wing with a magnifying glass found at the bottom of a Cracker Jack box.

His simple, generous attention gave me, as a very young child, the confidence that I might know something worth sharing with others. He opened my heart to the joy of teaching, and I only wish that he'd lived long enough for me to tell him "thank you." He shaped my life in a powerful direction, even if he couldn't manage, finally, to get control of his own.

But it isn't just parents and neighbors who can make a difference in a child's lifelong trajectory. Government programs can have their role, too.

As you may remember, the federal Head Start program was launched in 1965. It began as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society campaign and formed one of the key components of his War on Poverty.

The Head Start program gave me more than I can express. In some ways, this beginning of my education was more important than its formal culmination at Yale. I still remember the joy I felt entering that colorful classroom, with books beckoning from stuffed shelves and spaces dedicated to numbers and natural objects and art supplies in abundance.

And I remember the day I learned about cabbage. Beautiful, green, raw, crispy cabbage. Miss Dotty came to our class from a division of health services, I imagine, bringing brightly colored toothbrushes, toothpaste, and cabbage. She talked about our teeth and how we could keep them healthy, and cabbage played a big role.

Raw cabbage impressed me. It was impressive in its own right, for reasons I have already given: beautiful, green, raw, and crispy. But it was impressive to my 4-year-old self for another reason; it was something I hadn't encountered at home.

I remember my mother serving cooked cabbage, boiled if I recall. But she'd never served raw cabbage, and I couldn't wait to go home to tell her, my father, and my siblings about the power of raw cabbage to keep our teeth strong and healthy.

Cabbage was the occasion for the first time I can remember stopping to reason for myself. Because of cabbage, I realized that health isn't something that happens to you; it is something you meet halfway by your choices and habits.

I realized my parents didn't know everything, which made me both sad and more sensitive to their being human just like me, equally capable of ignorance and of learning. And I realized that education meant something I couldn't yet name, but that was very real nonetheless; the freedom to choose based not just on tradition, and on what you already know, but based on what you learn and what might be even better than what you already know. Based on something that might become a tradition going forward.

I could go on naming the people and programs that made a difference in my life by making my educational journey of “firsts” possible. A fine and upstanding priest who introduced me to philosophy and theology in the sixth grade -- the seeds leading to my doctorate in philosophy over a decade later.

A biology teacher who showed me that there is beauty in the dissection of a cat, opening up the power of science to me and poising me for a wonderful federal fellowship that allowed me to work at the VA Hospital during all my breaks from college.

A speech and debate coach who taught me how to present my thinking publicly without fear of being perceived as a pushy female, giving me confidence for every speaking occasion going forward, whether in the classroom, the boardroom, or in the exercise of my civic responsibility on a jury or in a public hearing.

A Presidential Scholarship and Pell Grant that allowed me to go to the University of New Mexico as a first-generation undergraduate, a great source of pride for my mother and father who had completed the 11th and 8th grades, respectively. President Ronald Reagan's Food Stamp Program that allowed me to work a federally-funded work-study job no more than 20 hours a week so I could dedicate myself to my studies.

The list is long, but my point is simple. No one gets to be “first” alone. The American Dream is really about all of the ways people pull one another up, through simple acts of compromise, generous gifts of time and attention, expressions of confidence, and participation in civic life that determines whether policies and programs build people up or keep them down.

It is up to all of us to continue to live in a country where “firsts” remain possible. In our parenting, in our roles as neighbors and friends, in our workplaces, in the voting booth; each of us has the potential to build people

up or keep them down. Each of us has the potential to create opportunities for someone's imagination to take flight. Each of us has the opportunity to recognize that we are part of the story of "firsts" that makes this country great.

This brings me to the second potential downside I mentioned with regard to our fascination with "firsts." We can be lulled into thinking that the barriers that have been overcome by the "first" no longer stand in the way of others. Or maybe we start to think they never did.

We can be lulled into thinking that maybe success is really a matter of individual perseverance and hard work. Success and failure are derivatives of these things alone, wholly on the shoulders of the one who succeeds or the one who fails.

But overcoming barriers is about more than perseverance. It is about more than hard work. It is about the convergence of countless things precisely *not* in one's control. The parents one is born to, the neighborhood one grows up in, the quality of teachers in one's school, the politics of one's time that determine policy and programs.

If my mother had been more authoritarian than willing to compromise creatively, if my parents had condemned a neighbor for his shortcomings rather than allowing him to offer something of himself under safe circumstances out on that front porch, if President Johnson hadn't recognized that early childhood education is a cornerstone of a Great Society, if some of the brightest people I've known hadn't been driven by a desire to serve in callings that weren't lucrative but that could make the difference in a young person's life, if our government failed to recognize that money shouldn't be the difference between the fulfillment of a university student's potential -- if not for all of these factors, some a matter of chance, some a matter of luck, some a matter of free will, some a matter of policy--I wouldn't have achieved any of the "firsts" that make up my personal history.

And of course history itself is in some sense the sum total of all of the personal histories that make up our families, neighborhoods, communities and nation. We seem to have entered an age in which information flies across the globe faster than we can digest it and history is being shaped in real time by social media, including Tweets from heads of nations which, in

140 characters, preempt the usual channels through which policy is determined. And human lives hanging in the balance.

Perhaps now more than ever each of us needs to embrace our role in creating the possibility for “firsts” that has made this nation great all these years, in spite of our challenges during dark times. What we say and what we do in private and public life really does matter. It matters for the youngest among us, those 4-year-olds in preschool and their brothers and sisters in elementary, middle and high school, whose earliest experiences of family, community, education, political discourse and public policy are being shaped by us and by our elected leaders. Their ability to imagine themselves as the “first,” whatever “first” that might be, truly is in our hands as much as in theirs.

I know this from my personal experience. And I know this by talking with countless others who have overcome hardship or who have transcended the history into which they were born. I have no doubt that the greatness of this country is deeply intertwined with the living possibility of “firsts” that has been its gift to children like me.

My educational journey, along with my husband’s, which have now become part of the family history that my children have received and that shapes their expectations for their future, is indeed a fulfillment of the American Dream.

But when you think about it, the dream to be “first” isn’t unique to the citizens of the United States. It is shared by myriad honest, hardworking people across this earth which we inhabit together and through which we are inextricably linked. It is shared by myriad children who want to better themselves and their families through their efforts.

Many of the students at UWC-USA *were* just such children, *are* just such young people. Whether American or from one of the 75 countries represented within our student body, they are united in their commitment to peace and a sustainable future. And they are committed to being the “first” to stand up on behalf of that peace for all of us, no matter what their personal circumstances. Circumstances like having a mother and nine siblings in a Kenyan refugee camp waiting on our student’s success to make their lives better, circumstances like having a Kurdish father and uncles fighting on the frontlines against the menace that is ISIS,

circumstances like facing the possibility that they can't come back to school next year because their visas may not be renewed.

What we do, what we teach our children, how we interact with our neighbors, what we expect from our leaders and what we do in response to the politics and policies of our time will determine what "firsts" are possible, for the citizens of this great country and for the citizens of the world. As the first native New Mexican to serve as president of UWC-USA, I am proud to represent both this wonderful state and this exceptional educational institution right here in Northern New Mexico. And I look forward to figuring out together, as members of this community, what "firsts" we might achieve together.

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak this evening, and for indulging my efforts to honor Doyle's request while talking about some things far more important and interesting than myself!