



On Common Ground

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January 3, 2020

The beginning of a new year and the beginning of a new term allows us an opportunity for reflection, preparation, and hope.

It would be easy, today, to simply look back with satisfaction at all we have accomplished together – to reflect on what we have overcome, secure in the knowledge that our time over these last eight years has been defined by anticipation, resiliency, and hope.

While I am filled with immense gratitude to my family and friends, to those I serve with, and to those for whom we work – you, the residents and taxpayers of Dutchess – today is not for ruminating about the past. Today is for us to propel into the next four years – to seek common ground, engage in the critical work of our day, solve the problems that confound us, and overcome the challenges before us.

And one of the greatest challenges felt by every family, neighborhood, and community across America, the public health crisis of our lifetime. Far too many are lost to the opioid epidemic; too many suffer in silence with mental health issues; too many sleep in shelters or on the streets; and too few have access to the opportunities needed to prosper and grow.

We see far too much recklessness, fecklessness, and division in Washington and Albany; in communities and homes, too many harbor anxiety, anger, or fear. And while our economy has grown stronger with record-low unemployment, for those out of work, struggling to pay their bills, put food on their table, the unemployment rate may as well be 100 percent.

Addressing today's challenges and preparing for tomorrow's opportunities requires we confront the traditional limits and expectations of local government; challenge conventional wisdom; acknowledge that we cannot achieve lasting success if we "cancel-out" those with whom we may disagree; and we must strengthen the ties that bind us.

Our next four years will build on the last eight, but our time together will ultimately be defined by our ambition. Our willingness to take on big issues and to offer big solutions; to see each other as one interconnected family, to dream, to inspire hope; to lead and encourage others to do great things; to try, try; and try again.

Just as President Franklin Roosevelt affirmed over 80 years ago, the challenges we face today "demand bold, persistent experimentation." They require we search beyond our fears and test the limits of our imagination for lasting solutions. We cannot — and must not — be dragged down by pettiness, partisanship or squabbling.

Our future and fate rest upon our ability to solve problems, hold firm on our common ground, think big, to build – together. Groundbreaking ideas may be born from an individual mind, but great achievements

are the providence of the many. To correct great injustices, create new paths to prosperity, to protect our most precious resource – our human potential – we must work as one. We will not always agree on the solutions to our problems, and there will be times we may not even agree on what those problems are. But if we can agree that our overarching goal is to make Dutchess County a better place to live, work, and raise a family, we can continue to find compromise, mold consensus, and reconcile our differences.

The next leg of our journey will take the spirit, brilliance, and hard work of every resident. For, as Hellen Keller once noted, “Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much.” And we have much left to do.

County government serves many functions: We pave roads, build bridges – metaphorically and literally, we provide services to our seniors and veterans, uphold the rule of law, and care for those in need. We touch so many lives every day. Our officials, partners, and employees fulfill our duty with care, professionalism, and efficiency.

Yet I believe our role does, and has surpassed, the things you think of when you envision local government. We help define our sense of place and shape the character of our community, just as you, our community, helps shape the purpose and vision of our government.

With this in mind, we have one big audacious goal for the next four years: to do as Lincoln said and “elevate the condition of men — to lift artificial weights from all shoulders — to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all — to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life.”

To use my words: to provide an opportunity for all – regardless of who you or where you come from, to whom you pray, who you love, your station of birth or your ability – to build a meaningful life as you define it.

This goal is big and broad, and we will not achieve it by creating one program or offering one solution. It is only possible if we ingrain it in our minds and within our duties as our highest purpose, something to aspire to and be inspired by. We hold no arrogant thoughts of being able to create a more equal world on our own. We do not believe that alone we can change the lives of every individual, but we can start with one: a neighbor, a coworker, a friend, a stranger. We can start with one and then another and another.

Together, we will strive to shape a future where when the starting bell rings in the race of life, every person of every ability and background is standing shoulder to shoulder on the starting line. There will be times when ensuring equal access to opportunity for some will require us to address long-standing inequalities or historical barriers to change. When these moments arise – or are thrust upon us – trust that we will act deliberately, thoughtfully, but unabashedly.

These last eight years have been the honor of my lifetime. I am so proud of what we have achieved, but I am even more excited about the future and the challenges we will overcome together. Dutchess County is a special place: how we live and act, how we come together, and how we go about our daily lives is a testament to our unique character and the people who call this county home.

It is because of all of you and countless others throughout our community that we continue to shine as an example of what can be accomplished when people are willing to act as one to solve problems – where, despite all the noise, we are capable of finding common ground. And, as Poet Gold implored, we will not yield an inch or “abandon the idea of Common Ground, the place where hope speaks and holds our better

selves where we are both vulnerable and brave, and indifference has left the room.” Hope, ambition, aspiration, and empathy – the things required to make great change – are found on that common ground.

So, let us begin this decade together with a shared goal so audacious, so lofty, so high, we can only reach it together. Let us contribute to building a fairer, more equal state and nation. And let Dutchess County be the first brick in the foundation of lasting change, built upon that elusive yet attainable common ground.

May God bless America, New York, Dutchess County, and each of us.