

## **Title: Building Bridges to a More Perfect Union and a Stronger Community**

Tonight, I want to talk about some big, bold things like community, and collaboration and country ... I'm going to try to share some lessons learned from more than 11 years in Congress... But first, I'm going to do what a lot of elected officials do. I'm going to talk about myself.

I say that because I think it's useful for you to have a bit of background on how I got into this role and why I've taken the approach that I have.

As some of you may know, I grew up in the district I now have the honor of representing - in Port Angeles.

When I was in high school, it was right around the time that the timber industry took it on the chin. A lot of my friends' parents lost their jobs, and a lot of my neighbors lost their jobs. And it had a big impact on me.

So, when I went off to college at Princeton, my senior thesis was focused on how to help timber towns in Washington State. When I went to Oxford, my doctoral dissertation focused on challenges facing single-industry communities - I looked at mining towns in the UK and timber towns in Washington, basically trying to figure out what you do when the main industry that is the reason for a community's existence declines.

I came home, worked in business for a few years trying to get out of student debt - unsuccessfully - and then took a 70% pay cut to work for the Economic Development Board here in Tacoma.

I didn't know I'd run for office. Honestly, I just got grumpy. I found myself saying "Gosh - our ability to grow jobs in this region is sure impacted by what government does and doesn't do." And finally, some of my friends said, "Well you seem like you have a lot of good ideas. And you sure complain a lot. So why don't you do something about it?"

And the next thing I knew, I was serving in the State Legislature.

Then, nearly 12 years ago - almost to the day - my predecessor Norm Dicks called me and said "In an hour I'm going to announce that I'm not going to run again. And you should figure out whether this is something you want to do."

I admit - the opportunity to work on growing economic opportunities and engaging in economic development policy - held real allure to me. In fact - as a fun aside - I turned some of the conclusions of my doctoral dissertation into legislation, got it passed as a pilot program in the CHIPS and Science Act that was signed into law, and just a month or so ago, the Economic Development Administration announced 22 economically distressed communities around the country that will benefit from this pilot program - and one of them is the place where I grew up. How cool is that? So that was a real attraction to me.

But at the same time, running for Congress was not a no-brainer for me.

My kids were three and six years-old at the time. I was conscious of the fact that, if I was successful in this undertaking, I'd be signing up for a 3,000-mile commute where I'd be away from them a lot. Or, according to Alaska Airlines, a 2,394-mile commute (which totally hoses me out of 606 miles each trip).

But beyond that, I was conscious of the fact that Congress was a fixer-upper. It is strange to want to join an organization that – according to recent polling – is less popular than headlice, colonoscopies, and the rock band Nickelback.

In the end, though, those were two of the big reasons that led me to run. It was *because* Congress was a mess and because I had kids... and I didn't want their future dictated by toxic politics.

I share that background with you because my rationale – those reasons for running -- absolutely influenced my approach to this job. My desire to make sure our economy and our politics work better for people.

To the students in the audience, I encourage you to **know your “why.”** I will occasionally meet with classes – in fact, I did earlier today. Inevitably, I will ask the students “Who here thinks they may run for office some day?” And when a student raises their hand, my response is nearly always the same. I ask them “What do you care about?”

Because the people I've observed in these roles who have been most effective – and indeed, the people I've seen in every walk of life who are most effective – know their why. They have a clear mission.

So ... In the time we have together, I want to share some more stories about my mission... and share some lessons learned.

**Perhaps my most important lesson learned is that finding common ground takes work. You can disagree with someone on 99 things. But if there's one thing you can agree on ... it's a start. But it can be tricky to find it.**

Quick story: In my first week in this job, they invited all the freshmen members on the Armed Services Committee and on the Foreign Affairs Committee to the Pentagon to meet with the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

After the meeting, they had us all pile on to a bus back to the Capitol. And it was my first week on the job and I didn't really know anybody. And I figured perhaps I could make some friends. So, as we pulled into the Capitol, I stood up on the bus and said, “Hey – I'm going to go and grab a burger about 5 minutes away if anyone wants to join me.”

And we had like three Republicans and three Democrats head up to Good Stuff Burgers on Pennsylvania Avenue. Really good burgers. Phenomenal milkshakes. Highly recommend.

Anyhow, so, we're sitting at this burger joint and just talking about our districts and how we got to Congress and the stuff we cared about and about 45 minutes in, I said something along the lines of, "You know, it feels like we ought to be able to find some stuff we can work on together."

The guy sitting across the table from me was a Republican from the Midwest. And he said, "Derek, I like you. In fact, my parents live in your district. After freshman orientation, I called them and said, 'mom and dad, you seem to be represented by a pretty good guy.'"

And I said, "Thanks!"

Then he said, "Now, here's what you don't understand."

He said, "I won my seat by defeating a Republican incumbent. And I ran against him as not being conservative enough. I attacked him for being too willing to work with Democrats. I won my seat with that argument."

He said, "And the first vote I cast when I got to Congress was a vote against John Boehner for Speaker of the House. And I sent out a press release after that vote saying, 'I voted against Boehner because he's too compromising ... too willing to work with Democrats.' And I was celebrated by my constituents for that vote."

Then he leaned forward in his chair and said, "Derek what you don't understand is this: I like you. But my constituents didn't send me here to work with you. They sent me here to stop you."

I walked out of that burger joint and called home and said "I have two reactions to this experience. First – how incredibly honest and forthcoming. And second – OH MY GOD!"

Because if success is defined as NOT working with people who have a different perspective, we're in trouble.

So, in the year that followed, I made it a mission to find something that I could work with this guy on. As it turned out, we both were on the Science committee together and I realized he had an interest in space policy. And we ended up working on a space policy bill together.

There was intentionality behind that.

That same year – my first year in Congress – I had a similar thing happen.

I had a friend from college who worked for a nonprofit focused on helping low-income individuals build assets. He shared with me that his nonprofit had been working with an economist at Harvard and had discovered some challenging truths.

First, he found that asset poor people often didn't have savings accounts. And they found that even if they had savings accounts, they often weren't making deposits.

Second, their research found that asset poor people disproportionately gambled and played the lottery.

And third, they found that if you could somehow take the excitement of gambling and playing the lottery and apply it to saving money, you could influence savings behavior. They came up with this idea called prize-linked savings accounts.

The concept was simple: every time you made a deposit into a savings account, you would earn a “chance.” And the “chance” would be for cash prizes. Your money would never be at risk. Rather, the financial institution would use some of its marketing budget and, rather than running ads on radio or TV, they could use it for cash prizes.

They made two other interesting conclusions when they did this research.

First, they found that this was an amazingly effective tool for helping asset poor people build assets. People were far more likely to open an account and they were far more likely to make deposits into the account.

And the second thing they found in their research was this – it was illegal.

But it wasn’t illegal for any particular reason. It was just that this was uncharted territory that existing regulations hadn’t anticipated.

And I said to this buddy of mine from college, “Well that sounds super interesting. And, as it so happens, I’m now in a job where I can change laws!” So, we worked with that nonprofit and the economist from Harvard and the asset building coalition, and we wrote a bill that was focused on allowing these prized linked savings accounts.

But I was a freshman in the minority who wasn’t on the Financial Services Committee. So, I had to find a cosponsor for my bill – ideally a Republican on the Financial Services Committee. So, I looked at the roster of Republican members on the committee, and it was mostly a bunch of people I didn’t know. But there was a guy on the committee named Tom Cotton who had worked for the same management consulting firm that I worked for after grad school. Tom is an incredibly conservative guy – something he has demonstrated now in his service on behalf of Arkansas in the U.S. Senate. But I figured I’d give it a shot.

And I remember approaching him on the House floor. And I said, “Tom – we both used to work at the same firm.” And then I gave him the whole pitch. “Harvard economist. Amazing research. Really impactful. Helps people save money!”

And when I was done with my pitch, there was this awkward silence. Like ten seconds of silence. I’m not sure if you can feel just how awkward it is when someone stares at you in silence for ten seconds. But it was ... awkward.

And after this ten second silence he looked at me and said, “So what you’re saying is ... you’d like to introduce legislation to eliminate unnecessarily onerous financial regulations that prohibit

financial institutions from offering innovative products that would enable people to be more self-sufficient and less reliant on the government.”

And I thought about it for a second and said, “Sure!” I mean, for me it was about helping poor people save money. But, if it meant he’d be willing to work with me on it, I had no problem with Tom working on it. because it would “eliminate unnecessarily onerous financial regulations that prohibit financial institutions from offering innovative products that would enable people to be more self-sufficient and less reliant on the government.”

It was a Kilmer-Cotton bill in the House and an Elizabeth Warren-Jerry Moran bill in the Senate. Passed the House, passed the Senate, signed by Barack Obama and now financial institutions across the country are offering prize linked savings accounts that help asset poor people build assets. How cool is that?

This experience with Tom Cotton underscored a valuable insight: despite the 99 issues we might strongly disagree on, finding even a single point of agreement can lead to meaningful progress. It’s a reminder that the threads of common purpose – despite the complexity of politics – can weave meaningful change.

What does this mean for each of us?

For me, it means when we find ourselves in a room with folks with whom we disagree, maybe a starting point is to find the one thing we can agree on – rather than hashing out the 99 things we disagree on.

So, the first lesson learned is know your why. The second is to do the work of finding common ground, even when it’s hard.

**And my third lesson learned is that if you want things to work differently, you have to do things differently.**

Let me give you an example.

When I first thought about running for Congress, one of my main hesitations was ... Congress.

Congress is a hard problem to solve. The boat moves best when all oars are in the water rowing in the same direction. That’s hard to do when 45% of oars are rowing in one direction, 45% in the opposite, and 10% with oars out of the water, beating everyone over the heads.

A little over five years ago, Speaker Nancy Pelosi called me to lead a committee called the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, which – based on the name - sounded like it was the IT help desk. But it was a committee that became known as the Fix Congress Committee. It had a simple mission – make Congress work better for the American people.

The history of Congressional Reform committees in particular and of Select Committees in general was pretty abysmal. In fact, in modern history, most of these committees get nothing done.

So, when the Speaker asked me to lead this committee, my first reaction was “What have I done to offend you?”

But I made an immediate decision that if we were going to try to have a different outcome, we had to do things differently. I remember sitting in my car when Speaker Pelosi called me and asked me to run the committee. I agreed and then I said a few things that shocked her. First – I said, “I think there should be an equal number of Democrats and Republicans.”

The speaker reminded me that Democrats were in the majority and that the majority brings the advantage of a partisan advantage on committees. I told her I didn’t want it. In fact, I told her, I wanted to require a super majority vote – 2/3 of the committee – to pass any recommendations.

I remember the silence on the phone before she said, “O.K.,” in a tone that made clear to me that she was skeptical. Select Committees generally don’t pass *anything*. And I was making a higher bar for myself – and for our committee.

But doing things differently didn’t stop there. As we kicked off this new committee, we got our funding for operations. And I was hiking on a trail not far from here when I called my Republican counterpart – a guy named Tom Graves. Tom was a genial Georgian who came to Congress as a self-described bomb-throwing tea-partier. In fact, he departed Congress a few years ago, and his congressional seat is now filled by Marjorie Taylor Greene.

Anyhow, I called Tom and said “Usually when a committee gets its funding, there’s some simple math. Democrats take their part of the money, and they hire people with a Democratic background who put on blue jerseys. And then the Republicans hire people with a Republican background who put on red jerseys. And then they spend the rest of the time fighting with each other. I’ve got a crazy idea for you. What if we don’t do that? What if we commit to each other that we will hire a joint staff – some folks with democratic backgrounds and some with Republican backgrounds. We will hire them together. And rather than putting on blue and red jerseys, we will have everyone put on jerseys that say, ‘Let’s fix Congress.’”

And Tom sort of chuckled as he responded in a syrupy southern accent, “Well, my leadership is going to hate that idea, but let’s give it a shot.

As the committee kicked off, we did something else that was unheard of in Congress. We had a bipartisan conversation about what we wanted to accomplish.

This does not sound like rocket science. Indeed, I’ve never been part of a functional organization that didn’t define what success looks like before kicking off a project. But in Congress, that never happens. And most assuredly it doesn’t happen in a bipartisan matter.

So, we got a room at the Library of Congress, and I brought in some sandwiches. And we started with an exercise fresh out of social psychology.

There is detailed organizational psychology about breaking down barriers between people who view themselves as part of warring factions. One of the most memorable examples for me was a study that looked at Red Sox fans and Yankees fans.

They despise each other. In fact, research tells us that a Yankees fan would rather see the Red Sox lose than to see their own team win (and the same is true of Red Sox fans).

But there's research on how people overcome those divisions. For one, there's an attempt to share common ground and build bridges. The warring fans are asked, "Why did you fall in love with baseball?"

But the psychologist Adam Grant found that the most effective tool was showing people the "arbitrariness of their animosity" – that if perhaps they had simply been born into a family of Red Sox fans for example, they might be Red Sox fans now instead of Yankee fans.

So, when we got into that room at the Library of Congress, the first question was "Why did you come to Congress – and how has it met or failed to meet your expectations?"

What was stunning was to hear story after story of good people – Democrats and Republicans – who were inspired by a virtuous mission. But beyond that, what was stunning was to hear member after member – Democrat and Republican – explain their frustration with being part of an organization that was punching below its weight.

Those conclusions led to a willingness of members of the committee to try some new things.

If you want people to be there for the landing, you need to invite them for the take-off. Our committee did two bipartisan planning retreats. Only in Congress is the notion of "defining success" at the beginning of a project considered to be revolutionary. But, for us, it really helped.

What else....

If you watch one of our committee hearings on CSPAN ... you have too much time on your hands.

But if you watch one of our hearings on CSPAN, you'll notice a few things.

First, when we held official meetings, we didn't sit with Democrats on one side of the dais and Republicans on the other. We staggered our seating – Democrat, Republican, Democrat, Republican. Why?

Well, when a witness says something interesting, my genetic predisposition is to lean over to the person next to me and say “That was kind of interesting. What do you think of that?” And on our committee, you were saying that to someone from a different party.

In fact, we didn’t even sit on a dais. We sat around a round table. Why?

I’ve never had a good conversation speaking to the back of someone’s head. On our committee you could look each other in the eye. You had discussion rather than debate. We didn’t seat ourselves above our witnesses, grilling them from on-high. We sat eye-to-eye and tried to dig into problems together.

I share these things with you because these changes were NOT cosmetic. They were intentional.

I shared with you that most of these select committees pass zero recommendations.

Our committee – in the midst of presidential elections, pandemics, insurrections, and other chaos managed to pass 202 recommendations to make Congress function better. And at this point, nearly a third of them have been implemented and another third are on their way to implementation. And we are trying to get that other third out of the parking garage.

Now, someone could look at our record and say, “Hey, bang-up job, Kilmer. Congress is clearly fixed!” Obviously, that’s not the case, although I’m reminded of a conversation I had with the House Chaplain during the 15<sup>th</sup>-or-so round of votes for Speaker of the House.

I saw her on the House Floor, and I said, “Pray harder!” And she put her hand on my elbow and said, “Just imagine how bad things would be if I wasn’t praying this hard.” So, that’s sort of how I look at the work of the Modernization Committee.

I think that over time, you’re going to see some positive change within the institution because of that work.

But there are also recommendations we’ve made that have already made a difference – let me give you an example.

During our work, I was connected to a football coach who had taken over a team that had a notoriously corrosive culture, and he turned it into a healthier, winning culture. So, I set up time with this football coach, and I said, “Coach, what do you do when you have players on the team that are trying to sabotage the team?” And he said, “Well, I cut ‘em.” And I said, “We don’t really have that option.” And then he said, “Well then, I bench, ‘em.” And I said, “We don’t really have that option either.” And then he asked me a question.

He said, “How do you do new player orientation?” I said, “We don’t really have new player orientation ... but we do have new congressman orientation.” He said, “How does it work?” And I said, “You know, it’s funny you ask that.”

In many respects, it works entirely the wrong way. You have members of Congress who talk about they’re showing up at member orientation and literally being told, “O.K., Democrats, you



get on this bus. Republicans, you get on that bus.” Much of the orientation process is an exercise in keeping the two parties from talking to each other. And this coach told me, “Derek, I don’t know a lot about Congress, but I think you ought to stop doing that.”

So, one of our 202 recommendations was to stop doing that.

This last year, the orientation process involved Democrats and Republicans going through orientation together for the first time in three decades. That is not going to fix Congress overnight. However, I do believe that some of the relationships that get formed through that process, some of the tone that that sets, over time, should make a difference in the institution.

**So my third lesson learned is if you want things to work differently, do things differently.**

**My fourth lesson learned is that, when looking to find common ground, there’s real value in walking in someone else’s shoes.**

I’ve got a few stories to share that exemplify the point.

A few years ago, I found myself working on some budget proposals with another conservative Arkansas Republican – a guy named Steve Womack. Womack is a military veteran, a quick wit, and – despite the fact that our politics are really different – a guy I’ve found to be a good dude.

Spurred by a desire to become better partners with Steve, I pitched him on a novel idea. “What if I spend a couple of days in your district and I invite you to spend a couple of days in mine? I wonder if – perhaps something positive might come of that.”

Amazingly, he agreed, and the next thing I knew, I was on a plane to Arkansas. Steve and I did a joint town hall meeting with students at the University of Arkansas, we toured WalMart’s massive distribution center, we went to the radio station where his dad has a radio talk show. I joined Steve and his wife for one of the largest plates of meat I have ever eaten. Not only did we bond ... I realized that part of getting a better understanding of where people are coming from is to actually understand *where* people come from.

A few months later, I brought him here. We ate salmon instead of meat. We visited the Port of Tacoma together and the Port did a bang-up job of sharing “these are how many containers come from Arkansas to Tacoma and then go all over the world. And here’s how many containers come in through the port of Tacoma and end up in Arkansas.” And as we drove away from the Port, he said, “Man, Kilmer, I don’t know how you did it, but suddenly I give a damn about Freight mobility issues in the Puget Sound region.”

We went to Hurricane Ridge and – in addition to seeing some amazing views and taking a breezy hike - the Superintendent of Olympic National Park did an outstanding job of talking about the park’s maintenance backlog. And as we drove down the mountain, Steve looked at me and said, “Heck, Kilmer, now you’ve got me wanting to do something about the Park Service’s maintenance backlog.”

**Again, part of the way we get a better understanding of where people are coming from is to understand *where* people are coming from. To actively do the hard work of trying to bridge divides.**

And when I say walk in someone else's shoes, I mean it. Take a walk.

There's research that tells us that when people participate in a physical activity together, they are more likely to develop common understanding.

They even teach our diplomats when they reach a stalemate in negotiations to have the negotiators take a walk together. No joke.

I've seen this work. Let me share another story.

One of the things that bummed me out when I ran for this job back in 2012 was that the dialogue on the Olympic Peninsula between the timber industry and the environmental community hadn't really advanced in the 20 years since I'd graduated from high school in Port Angeles. It was still the Hatfields and McCoys on opposite sides of the gymnasium.

And consequently, nobody was winning. The timber industry faced real challenges in having enough timber sales to make a go of it. We saw multiple mill closures. And the community's economy was bearing the brunt of that. But on the environmental side, there were challenges too because the Forest Service wasn't even doing ecological thinnings and stewardship contracts that contributed to forest health.

That's why I helped to organize the Olympic Forest Collaborative which brought together folks from the timber industry and the conservation community to figure out how to manage the Olympic National Forest in a way that works better for our economy and our environment.

And I'll be honest ... the first six months were an exercise in just keeping people in the room. Prior to this effort, a lot of these folks had only managed to meet in courtrooms in the midst of lawsuits.

And six months in we decided to do something novel. We took a field trip together. We went for a walk in the woods. And the folks from industry showed some of the treatments they used to conduct timber sales in a way that could increase harvest levels but do it in a responsible way. And the folks from the environmental industry showed some things that happened on prior timber sales that they were uncomfortable with – and showed some things that could protect streams and critters.

After the field trip, we got in a conference room and one of the leaders of one of the environmental groups preempted my agenda and said, "Before we start, I want to say something. We learned a lot from last month's field trip. And we've decided that we want to help you guys harvest some more timber – we just want it done in an environmentally responsible way. In fact, my organization voted, and they've empowered me to put tens of thousands of dollars on the table to help us hire a forester that can help us lay out timber sales together. It's money we're

hoping to save on lawsuits. All we'd ask is that we're all at the table together and it's done in an environmentally responsible way."

I almost fell out of my chair.

In the years that have followed, we've been able to move forward with multiple timber sales designed to increase harvest levels in the Olympic National Forest. Additionally, through this collaboration, we've been able to avoid persistent litigation.

Standing up the Olympic Forest Collaborative – getting environmentalists and leaders from our state's timber industry in the room together – has yielded results. It's also provided a takeaway that I think is key when thinking about polarization. We've got to work harder to walk in each other's shoes.

That can be hard. The world doesn't give us as many of those opportunities as it used to. We are now more likely to sort geographically, to live next to people who share our world view. Social media means we can get information that's solely designed to affirm – rather than to challenge – our perspectives. Even the cable news channel you watch is likely to tie directly to your ideology.

But interactions matter. They can lead to interesting breakthroughs.

Years ago, I took a trip to the Middle East – and there I met with nonprofit leaders – some of whom were Israeli and some of whom were Palestinian.

And we started talking about how their organizations were funded.

First, the Israeli nonprofit leader spoke. He said that in the Jewish faith they have a notion of Sedakah – giving up 10% of your income to charity. The literal meaning of the word is 'righteousness' – the notion that the righteous individual must strive for social justice through giving.

As the Israeli nonprofit leader spoke, one of the Palestinian nonprofit leaders smiled. Then he weighed in. In their faith, the Muslim faith, he said, they believe all human beings should be one another's well-wishers – that Muslims are expected to remove stumbling blocks that keep others from living a full life. In their faith that act of voluntary giving is known by a single word – Sadaqah – spelled differently, a different faith, but again meaning righteousness.

I found that resonant. And it made me reflect on my own faith. Matthew 25 states:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink

I was a stranger and you took me in

I was naked and you clothed me.

I was sick and you took care of me.

I was in prison and you visited me.

And then, whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine you did for me.

That, too, is a vision of removing barriers, of righteousness.

Former President Bill Clinton once said, “Believer or non-believer, we all live in an interdependent world in which our survival depends upon an understanding that our common humanity is more important than our interesting and inevitable differences and that everyone matters.”

**Finally, let me end with perhaps the most important lesson. And that is that each of us has a role to play.**

President Kennedy said “In a democracy, every citizen, regardless of his interest in politics, ‘holds office’; every one of us is in a position of responsibility; and, in the final analysis, the kind of government we get depends upon how we fulfill those responsibilities. We, the people, are the boss, and we will get the kind of political leadership, be it good or bad, that we demand and deserve.”

To me, that’s a reminder that we are not observers in this democracy. We are participants in it.

So, how’s that going?

Well, let’s look at some polling from the last couple of years.

An NBC News poll found that 70% of Americans agreed with the statement, “America is so divided it is now incapable of solving big problems and the problem is getting worse.”

There was a battleground poll last year that found that on a scale of 0 to 100, with 0 being no conflict and 100 being civil war, Americans put us at a 70. The median was a 70. The highest on record. That means, on average, Americans believe we are more than 2/3 of the way to a civil war.

That should be concerning for all our communities.

Now, having said that, there are people in our community doing some amazing things in the face of conflict and polarization.

First—you all may remember a few years ago—there were a number of attacks against religious institutions, and the people affiliated with these institutions, in our region. Over the span of two months, the Islamic Center of Tacoma was set on fire by an arsonist, there was vandalism against a Church, and two Buddhist faith leaders were assaulted near their temple.

And people in the community stood up and said, “That’s not what we’re about.” In fact, they organized an interfaith solidarity event at Tacoma Community College, and it was just awesome. People from a variety of faiths all coming together and embracing the notion that part of living in a religiously and otherwise diverse pluralistic democracy means that you’re going to live and

work next people who look, and think, and pray differently than you do, and it cannot come to violence and conflict.

After the event, one of the faith leaders approached me and said, “You know, this was a pretty good 90 minutes, but if we are going to do this right, we should really do this on an ongoing basis. And then they asked, “As an aside, is there any support for something like that?” And I said, “You know, not really – at least not currently.”

A couple months later, I visited a local YMCA – and I thought they were going to talk to me about gymnasiums losing money during the pandemic. That is NOT what they wanted to talk to me about.

Instead, they wanted to talk to me about how fights were breaking out at the Y over politics – over the t-shirt someone wore or the news channel they watched on the elliptical.

They said, “It’s become so bad, we can’t ignore it anymore. So, we’re training our staff and training our board in conflict resolution. We’re hosting events to have people actually engage one another constructively about their differences rather than having the Y turn into the Jerry Springer show.”

And then they asked, “Just out of curiosity – any federal support for something like that?”

And I looked into it. As it happens, the United States does, in fact, spend tens of millions of dollars each year focused on trying to reduce polarization and encourage social cohesion as a means of strengthening democracy ... in other countries... through the National Endowment for Democracy. But we don’t do any of that work here.

And so I introduced a bill called The Building Civic Bridges Act. The bill would do a few things. First, it would provide some grant support for these hyper-local efforts to bridge divides – the local Y, the interfaith group. Second, it would train AmeriCorps members in the skills related to bridge building. Because they have a presence in our communities, they could be depolarization force multipliers. And finally, it would support colleges and universities that are doing work in this space.

I’m excited to share that the Building Civic Bridges Act had 12 Democrats and 12 Republicans on board from a wide spectrum of political beliefs and backgrounds.

We are even trying to do some of this bridge building in Congress. I’m a co-chair of a group called the Bipartisan Working Group – which is a group of about a dozen Democrats and a dozen Republicans that meet every week over breakfast.

I don’t want to mislead you into thinking that we’re all sitting around the table, holding hands, and singing “Kumbaya.” We’re not doing trust falls into each other’s arms (we stopped doing that after we dropped a guy).

But I do find myself thinking that the work we're doing in the Bipartisan Working Group – the challenging work of trying to solve problems, together – is something we need to see more of (not just in Congress – but in our country too).

And I guess that's the final message I'll leave you with in the form of a question.

**What do you want from your country and from your community? And what are you willing to do to help see it happen?**

According to the organization Starts With Us, 87% of Americans agree with the statement that they are exhausted by how politically divided we are. I encourage you to visit their website – StartsWith.US. They actually lay out a challenge – one exercise a day for four weeks, with the goal of building skills to develop greater compassion, to be more comfortable with discomfort, to repair strained relationships, and to be part of helping your community overcome toxic polarization.

Whether you do those exercises or others, we've got work to do. Each of us. It means exercising respect and empathy for others and going beyond mere politeness—it means ultimately seeing and respecting humanity in one another.

I've encouraged the folks I represent to find avenues to engage with people who might have a different political ideology and to do the challenging work of trying to build understanding and (hopefully even) common ground.

Whether you are in a heated dinner conversation with a family member with whom you disagree, or debating on a more public-facing platform, each of us has a decision to make about how we engage. Do we stay rooted in a problem-solving ethic? Do we work toward understanding?

And I think institutions of higher education – in particular university communities like this – have an important role to play in civic bridgebuilding, too.

Places like the University of Puget Sound have a unique capability to foster understanding, dialogue, and collaboration across a diverse university community. Our colleges and universities are the places where students from varied backgrounds, holding different perspectives, come together, challenging each other's views constructively, and learning to appreciate the value of how other people think.

A university community can organize forums, workshops, and projects that not only enrich the academic experience but also prepare students to actively participate in democracy in a positive, unifying way. Students can learn the skill of disagreeing without being uncivil, the importance of listening, and the value of empathy—skills that are fundamental to bridging divides in our broader society.

We have agency and each of us can do something to contribute to civic bridgebuilding—when we sit down with someone we disagree with, when we walk into a conversation with the

understanding that we may be wrong and the other person may be right, or when we listen and try to understand where someone else is coming from.

As I wrap up two decades in public service, I come away with hope. Not a blind belief, like Kevin Bacon yelling at rioters in Animal House, that “All is well.” Not a Pollyannish view that, despite evidence to the contrary, there are no reasons to be concerned. But hope. Indeed, I remain hopeful.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once wrote, “Optimism and hope are not the same. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, if we work hard enough, together we can make things better.” He wrote, “It needs no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to hope.”

There is good work being done by people to make things better. The task ahead – for each of us – myself included – is to be a part of that. To have hope. To make things better. Whether you are a student, a community member, or a soon-to-be-former member of Congress, we’ve all got plenty of work to do. Let’s get to it.