

Searching for the Better Angels of Our Nature
University of Virginia – Joseph Smith Lecture
September 13, 2019

I appreciate this invitation to speak to you today. It's an honor to deliver the Joseph Smith Lecture. I'm doubly honored to have been introduced by my good friend, Tom Griffith, whom I have long admired and continue to look up to. I'm especially grateful to have been invited here by my cousin, Kathleen Flake, who continues to shine and polish the Flake name when some of us tarnish it.

As Judge Griffith noted, I was raised on the F-Bar cattle ranch in Snowflake, Arizona, the fifth of eleven children. I didn't appreciate until much later in life the gift that such an upbringing gave me. In fact, when I heard that Ronald Reagan had paraphrased Winston Churchill by saying "There is nothing so good for the inside of a man than the outside of a horse, I concluded that neither of them had been raised on the F-Bar.

In addition to my ten siblings, I grew up with 69 first cousins on my father's side alone. In case you're wondering – yes, that *IS* how I got elected.

I've chosen as my topic today "Searching for the Better Angels of Our Nature." The reference to better angels, of course, comes from Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address. Lincoln's earnest supplication came when our nation was at war with itself.

We have no such calamitous conflict today, gratefully, but perhaps at no time since the war between the states has our nation seemed so divided. In Washington at least, where we talk endlessly of red states and blue states as if they were competing teams, it seems that the better angels of our nature have been sidelined for good.

So how can we summon these better angels. How can we bridge the growing divide? In my own experience, three pillars - community, family and faith – have influenced my approach to politics.

Which brings me back to Snowflake, or as we Flakes like to call it, the center of the universe.

In the late 1800s, the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wanted to ensure that its members were participating in the mainstream political parties. Bishops in many wards or congregations reportedly instructed those seated in the pews on the right to register as Republicans and those on the left register as Democrats, or vice versa. In Snowflake, the demarcation was main street. Those living west of main street were to register as Republicans and those living east of main street were to register as Democrats.

Well, the Flakes lived east of main street, and the family dutifully registered as Democrats. That designation largely held until my father's generation. In fact, our family story is that my mother, after dating and marrying my Democrat father one day said to him, "Dean, your positions and attitudes seem more aligned with the Republican Party." My mother must have been persuasive. My father changed his registration to Republican.

I don't remember much about political parties growing up. Issues were important, but the issues didn't seem to fall neatly along party lines. I do remember Snowflake's lone barber displaying John Birch

Society stickers on his truck and on his barbershop mirror. He talked endlessly about getting us out of the United Nations, but he gave the same bad haircut whether you agreed or disagreed with his politics.

I learned a lot about civility from my community. I learned even more from my family. I watched my father serve as the mayor of Snowflake. I worked with my Uncle Jake Flake when he was Arizona's Speaker of the House. I observed my cousin Stan Turley's tenure as President of the State Senate. Each of these public servants were loved and respected by colleagues from both parties.

Uncle Jake passed away more than a decade ago after being thrown from his horse, the last of Arizona's true cowboy legislators. My dad, my mentor, has now been gone for more than two years. He passed on a lot to me, but if there is a partisan gene somewhere in my line, he neither possessed it nor passed it on. Incivility was not in his nature. For that I am grateful.

As for attempting to nurture the better angels of our nature, my mother, Nerita was kind and determined.

As early as I can remember being able to read, there was a 3x5 card on our refrigerator, permanently stained with vegetable oil, brownie mix and cookie dough. It read: *"Assume the Best, Look for the Good."* There were a lot of things stuck to that refrigerator over the years - wedding invitations, ribbons from the country fair, respectable report cards (as infrequent as they might be) and countless sticky notes, reminders of ball games, rodeos and irrigation turns.

All of these items came and went. But that card remained: *Assume the Best, Look for the Good*. It was a gentle reminder from a patient mother, who was forever trying to coax the better angels out of eleven unruly kids.

That phrase *Assume the Best, Look for the Good*, now adorns the homes of all of my parents' children, and I hope that some of it has worn off on all of us.

In addition to community and family, my faith has loomed large in my civic engagement.

Over the years I have been frequently asked what it was like in the United States Senate as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I got an early taste of it. Let me explain.

I served twelve years in the House before being elected to the Senate, and every two years, each member of the House of Representatives stands together to be sworn in, pledging in unison to uphold and defend the constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic.

In the United States Senate, only one-third of the body is elected every two years, which allows for a more personal swearing in ceremony. Four senators at a time are escorted to the well of the Senate chamber, where the Vice President of the United States reads the oath of office and "swears us in." We were invited to bring our own family bibles to hold in our left hand as our right arm was raised and the rite was performed.

As you might have guessed, for my swearing in I brought a leather-bound set of the Standard Works, which for members of our Church includes the King James Version of the bible as well as the Book of

Mormon. I wondered what someone in the Senate chamber or somebody watching C-SPAN might think if they saw this rather unconventional “family bible,” but it passed without notice.

I returned to my seat in the Senate chamber, and as the next group of four newly elected Senators passed toward the well, one stopped and said “Senator Flake, I forgot my bible, can I borrow yours?” “Sure,” I said. As he walked toward the Vice President, I wondered how long it would take before he looked down and realized he was holding something a little bulkier than just a family bible.

I breathed a sigh of relief when he returned to my desk without incident, thanking me as he handed back the Standard Works. I then looked across the well of the Senate and saw the Majority Leader, Harry Reid, a member of my faith, wearing a big smile. He slowly walked over and asked: “Brother Flake, are you going to inform that good Senator that he just swore his oath on the Book of Mormon?” I said, “I think I’ll see how he votes for a while.”

When the Senate is in session a weekly prayer breakfast is held, attended by roughly one-third of the body as schedules permit. Each week a different Senator is asked to talk about his or her faith – to give a sort of faith journey, if you will. The Senator who is asked to speak also chooses the hymn that is sung at the beginning of the meeting. A few months into my term, it was my turn to talk about my faith, so I chose the hymn.

Let me just tell you, to join thirty of my Senate colleagues in singing a very amateur rendition of the Mormon Anthem, “I am a Child of God,” was an experience I will never forget. A few months later, another member of my faith chose the hymn “Have I Done Any Good in the World Today?” Now, I know what you’re thinking - for a bunch of politicians in Washington, that’s not an easy question to answer truthfully.

Over my eighteen years in Congress I witnessed a steady decline in civility. While there are many reasons for this deterioration, the absence of friendship and trust has to be at the top of the list. Let me explain.

In decades past, when members of congress were elected they would typically move their families to the suburbs of Washington. The children of Republican and Democratic Congressmen and Senators would attend the same schools and play on the same sports teams. Their families would socialize, entertain and sometimes worship together. The pull of partisanship during the weekdays was no match for the friendships fostered on the weekends.

There’s an old saying in Washington that you won’t question the motives of your colleague if you know the names of his or her children. Such familiarity is now all too rare, but it hasn’t always been this way.

Soon after I arrived in Congress in 2001, I proposed an amendment to lift the American ban on travel to Cuba. I had this strange notion if we really wanted to punish the Castro brothers, we would just make them deal with spring break once in a while. I was convinced that before long they would just waive the white flag.

In any event, my amendment was opposed most strongly by Republicans, particularly Florida-based Republicans who at that time still wanted to stick to our policy of isolating Cuba. One Republican opposing my amendment stood during the debate on the House floor to say that my motivation to lift the travel ban rose from my desire to drink mojitos on the beach in Cuba.

As soon as my Republican colleague said this, a Democrat, David Obey of Wisconsin, who had served more than 30 years in Congress, jumped to the microphone and demanded that those words about me drinking mojitos be “taken down,” or removed from the congressional record.

When this happens, debate stops while the clerk reads from the transcript and the parliamentarian decides whether the spoken words rise to level of being defamatory.

After the words were removed, I walked over to David Obey and thanked him for his kind gesture. I asked him why he, a very senior Democrat who rarely shared my views on appropriation bills, had sought to protect me, a very junior Republican. He responded: “Ah, Flake, I know you’re Mormon. I know you don’t drink. I was just defending your honor!”

Sadly, in today’s polarized, shirts vs skins environment, such interparty magnanimity is rarely found. If there’s a good political fight going on, the inclination is not to break it up, but to pile on.

In his introduction, Judge Griffith mentioned the incident at the State of the Union address with Gabby Giffords. What he didn’t mention was that during the President’s address, whenever I would help Gabby to her feet, which left me standing during the President’s applause lines, I would get furious texts and emails from angry Republicans, demanding to know if I agreed with President Obama. They didn’t see what was intended as a kind gesture. They saw someone consorting with the enemy.

Much the same happened during the 2016 presidential campaign when Tim Kaine was added to the Democratic ticket as the vice-presidential nominee. Tim and I had entered the Senate together. We disagreed on many things, but I knew him to be smart, hardworking, and patriotic.

I knew Tim’s son, Nat, was serving our country as a Marine. By way of congratulating Tim on being named to the Democratic ticket, I tweeted a playful jab: “Trying to count the ways I hate Tim Kaine. Drawing a blank. Congrats to a good man and a good friend.”

Once again, unhinged, irrational fury from some on my side of the aisle. At a political gathering not long afterward, I received a scolding from a die-hard Republican who said that I was aiding and abetting the enemy: “If you can’t say anything bad, don’t say anything at...” He caught himself before fully reversing the advice I’m sure his mother once gave him. Such is the conditioned response of a shattered politics.

On a beautiful June morning just over two years ago. I was standing between home plate and first base on a baseball field in Alexandria, Virginia. I had already fielded balls in centerfield and had taken batting practice a few minutes earlier.

I was now waiting for the last of my Republican colleagues to take their swings from home plate before heading back to Capitol Hill for the more mundane job of legislating. That’s when the first shot rang out.

Confused, not knowing exactly what the sound was or where it came from, we looked at each other for a few seconds until a volley of new gunfire rang out, accompanied by our third baseman yelling: “Shooter! Shooter!”

The next 10 minutes was an intense blur as the gunman fired nearly 100 rounds at members of Congress and staff on the field.

I remember running and diving into the dugout, cinching another congressman's belt as a tourniquet on the leg of a staff member who had been shot. All the while more gunfire raged above and around us.

When the shooting finally stopped, I ran out on the field and used my batting glove to plug the bullet's entry wound in Steve Scalise's hip while waiting for first responders. I then used Steve's phone to call his wife, Jennifer, so that she wouldn't find out on television that her husband had been shot. It was an awful call to make.

The most enduring memory I have of that morning came as I turned during the first volley of gunfire and ran toward the dugout, watching bullets dislodge bits of gravel in front of me. I remember thinking to myself: "Why?" "Why us?" How could anyone look out at a bunch of middle-age men playing baseball and see the enemy.

The gunman, who died during the incident, had surely been stirred to anger by the polemics of social media and cable news. Among his belongings was found a piece of paper with a list of Republican targets.

The level of hate and vitriol many Democrats feel for Republicans and many Republicans feel for Democrats is unhealthy not only for Democrats and Republicans who harbor such feelings, but for the country as a whole.

Just weeks ago, two individuals who made substantive threats against me and my family were convicted and sentenced. My wife, Cheryl, sometimes marks the time we have been out of office but counting the weeks, now months, without death threats.

A few years ago, the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued a statement titled "The Mormon Ethic of Civility, which reads in part:

"The fabric of civil society tears when stretched thin by its extremities. Civility, then, becomes the measure of our collective and individual character as citizens of a democracy."

I have to admit, I am sometimes concerned that not just the influence, but also the verbiage and jargon I hear in church settings might inadvertently seep into my political dialogue. After delivering a speech on the Senate floor in October of 2017 when I announced that I would not run for reelection to the Senate – a speech in which I decried the lack of civility in politics, the New York Times ran a lengthy article under the headline: "*Flake's Speech Bore Marks of Mormon Faith, Not Just Politics.*" In it, a Professor of Religion was quoted saying that the speech reminded him:

"Of the cadence, tone and themes that Mormon leaders often use when addressing the church's vast general conference meetings in Salt Lake City, calling on members to refuse to accommodate the immorality of the larger world."

I took that mostly as a compliment.

To continue with the theme of the influence of faith, some of my favorite chapters in the Book of Mormon chronicle the exchange of letters between a mighty military man named Captain Moroni and Pahoran, the Governor of the Land.

In his letter, Moroni excoriates Pahoran for failing to provide for his army, saying:

“We desire to know the cause of this exceeding great neglect; yea, we desire to know the cause of your thoughtless state. Can you think to sit in your thrones in a state of thoughtless stupor.”

As an aside, let me just say that on some days in my Senate office, this type of correspondence would have been considered “fan mail.”

We find out later, of course, that Captain Moroni, a good and righteous man, was nevertheless acting on bad information. Pahoran had been besieged by his enemies and was in no position to help.

Now, Pahoran could have responded in anger. He certainly would have felt justified to return a vitriolic volley to Moroni. But instead, he listened to his better angels. He answered Moroni:

“And now, in your epistle you have censured me, but it mattereth not; I am not angry, but do rejoice in the greatness of your heart.”

How different would Washington be if we were to respond in similar fashion. Can you imagine Mitch McConnell saying to Chuck Schumer: “Chuck, I know you called me a knucklehead, but you meant well. I rejoice in the greatness of your heart.” Now let’s sit down together and pass immigration reform. Okay, probably not going to happen, but we can all dream, can’t we?

As I see it, the only real alternative we have to getting along with each other is to be alone, completely alone. Let me tell you, I’ve tested that alternative, and it’s no picnic. Ten years ago, I clicked on google earth and located a bunch of small uninhabited islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Determined to live out a strange dream I’ve had since my childhood growing up on a dry dusty ranch, and after reading countless books about sailing adventures gone bad, I decided to maroon myself on one these remote islands for a week with no food or water and with minimal tools, just to see if I could survive.

Just to give you an idea how alone I was, and how lonely I was, after a few days on the island I picked up one of the hermit crabs that wandered through my camp and, with a sharpie pen that inexplicably made it into my meager survival kit, I wrote “number one” on his shell. I wanted to know if this crab was just doing laps around my camp. I wondered if I would see him again.

A while later, I picked up another hermit crab and wrote “number two” on his shell. By the end of the week, I had 126 numbered friends.

I grew quite fond of number 72, with whom I often shared scraps of coconut. I was not so fond of 47, who pinched my big toe.

It has been said that no man is an Island. That I can confirm. When I find it difficult to be civil or decent to those with whom I disagree, when I am inclined to ignore the better angels of my nature, I think back on the lonely alternative.

As an aside, I've returned a few times to those lonely islands. In a bipartisan gesture a few years ago, New Mexico's Democratic Senator, Martin Heinrich, and I went back to the Marshall Islands, where we survived for a week with virtually only one tool of survival, a machete, between us. Dangerous, I know, given the political climate.

Upon our return to civilization, Late night comic Steven Colbert quipped, "Flake and Heinrich proved once and for all that Republicans and Democrats can get along – when death is the only option!"

The temptation to return verbal fire after having been publicly insulted is sometimes overwhelming. Just a few months ago, a newly elected Democrat to the House of Representatives publicly used vulgar language in calling for the President to be removed from office. Since I had been critical of the President's use of similar language over the past two years, I tweeted the following:

"There should be no place in politics for language like this. Pointing out that the President also speaks crudely is no excuse. We should be better."

Over the next few days more than 30,000 people commented on my post. The overwhelming sentiment: "If the President speaks this way, then so must we."

We should ask ourselves, where does this escalation lead? What kind of example is set for our kids? As elected officials, how do we govern at all if we treat each other this way?

Every so often we see a glimmer of hope. During a contentious party-line vote during the confirmation process for the Secretary of State nominee last year, one Republican member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Johnny Isakson, was in Georgia delivering the eulogy at his best friend's funeral. Senator Isakson himself was in failing health. Given the narrow margin, Senator Isakson's absence would have doomed the confirmation, until a Democrat, Chris Coons, stepped forward and agreed to "pair" his vote with his absent Republican colleague, thus allowing the nomination to proceed.

Once commonplace, the practice of "pairing" or voting the opposite way out of deference to an absent colleague, has all but disappeared in our hyper-partisan environment. After the vote was called and the confirmation proceeded, the Republican Committee Chairman, Bob Corker, choked up when talking to the media about Senator Coons' magnanimous gesture.

Oh. And Senator Martin Heinrich, the Democratic Senator from New Mexico with whom I survived for a week on an island? In January of this year, Martin asked me, a Republican, to escort him to the well of the senate chamber where he was sworn in for a second term. We left the machete behind.

This fever of rancor and discord will eventually break. That is my hope, and my belief. We will return to ourselves once more, and the sooner the better. Because to have a healthy government in this country we must have healthy and functioning political parties – two parties that understand that compromise is essential. Two parties that respect each other again in an atmosphere of shared facts and shared values, in comity and good faith.

And who better to help break this fever than those whose faith affirms that we are all children of God, that there is inherent worth in every soul.

In an address to BYU's graduating class of 1996, titled "Our Fading Civility," the late President of the Church, Gordon B. Hinckley, offered this counsel:

"It is an interesting world that lies ahead of you. In some respects, it is a jungle. It is the absence of civility which creates the jungle. No matter the extent of your education. No matter the degrees which you may add to those you receive today...If that other dimension of which I have spoken is missing you will have lost that which is most precious. That is the Godly quality of reaching out with respect and kindness, with courtesy and appreciation to helping others."

I am grateful for the positive influence of community, family and faith in my life, all of which serve as a constant reminder that I can and should be better tomorrow than I am today.

Let me end where I began, with the words of Abraham Lincoln:

"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Thank you for inviting me to this historic campus. It is an honor to be here.