

Remarks Delivered at the 2023 Cultural and Diversity Festival of Madison and the Chathams

Greetings everyone, and welcome to this (now annual) celebration of the wonderful diversity that defines our Chatham and Madison communities, and, more generally, this nation of ours.

Today's public embrace of the complex racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, philosophical, class, gender, and sexual-orientation matrices that constitute our communities and modern American society is a wonderful thing.

For one, it helps build bridges of understanding between, and among, each and every one of us.

Through this embrace, we affirm our recognition of, and respect for, our different "ways of being," and our different "ways of seeing." This facilitates greater bonds of trust, respect, and partnership across our diverse frames of personal, and categorical, reference.

Now, each of the matrices by which we have come to measure our diversity – race, ethnicity, culture, religion, philosophy, class, gender, and sexual-orientation – is, of course, important.

But one, in particular, it seems to me, very often receives less attention than it should. And yet it is so frequently *conjoined* with the others.

I speak here of the category of *class* (or socioeconomic status). And yes, the issue of class still matters in the present era.

In a recent New York Times opinion piece, the former columnist Nicholas Kristoff describes how working-class Americans have been essentially "screwed over" for more than fifty years now.

He cites Bureau of Labor Statistics figures which show that blue-collar earnings are measurably less today than they were in 1969 (when adjusted for inflation). And yet the bosses of these workers now earn so much more.

To illustrate, Kristoff highlights the well-known chain Dollar Tree, where struggling Americans shop and work, and where, since 2020, prices have increased, wages have dipped, but the stock holdings of its CEO have gone up in value by more than 2000 percent. That's right, a 2000 percent increase for the chief executive in just the last three *difficult* years!

The social ramifications of this persistent widening of the income gap in America are disturbing. The philosopher Michael Sandel has pointed out that in a highly individualistic, meritocratic society such as ours, those who land on top tend to believe their success to be morally justified, by dint of perceived talent and hard work *alone*. No outside help from society, of course. And as for everyone else, it is their fault for not having *earned* it.

This attitude, widely embraced on both sides of the socioeconomic divide, breeds resentment and despair on the part of those drawing the shorter straw. It is why so many working-class Americans have today lost all hope, a fact that has given rise to what Kristoff calls our “social great depression.”

My friends, this is a challenging time for our society. We live in an age of perceived winners and losers, where the odds tend to be stacked in favor of the already fortunate. For far too many, stalled social mobility and widening inequality give the lie to the American credo that “you can make it if you try.” The consequence is a toxic brew of anger, suffering, and resentment that has manifested itself in increased social alienation, political polarization, and numerous other societal ills.

This is a complex problem, the solution of which requires a great deal of serious thought and a profound commitment to social action and change. But my plea before you today is an altogether simple one:

- When we reflect upon the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, let us not forget those for whom the American dream, in economic terms, remains so woefully unfulfilled and out of reach.
- Let us be more attentive to the role of communal support, and, indeed, “moral luck,” in human affairs.
- Let us be more open to an ethic of humility and solidarity with regard to the less fortunate among us.
- Let us affirm the dignity of all human beings, regardless of station or of status.
- And let us strive towards a more hopeful vision that includes a *new* politics of the common good.

We can do this. Indeed, we must do this.

Thank you all.

Thaddeus J. Kobylarz
Mayor, Chatham Borough