

In 1849, an early explorer--Parley P. Pratt--wrote that as they first arrived in what would become Washington County, they “passed... over a rugged, stony, sandy almost indescribable country, thrown together in dreadful confusion...” The area “show[ed] no signs of water or fertility... a wide expanse of chaotic matter presented itself...” with “huge hills, sandy deserts, cheerless, grassless plains, perpendicular rocks, loose barren clay, dissolving beds of sandstone... lying in inconceivable confusion; in short,” he continued, “a country in ruins dissolved by the pelting of storms... and turned inside out, upside down, by terrible convulsions of some former age.”

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Washington County.

Governor and Mrs. Lady Herbert, legislators and other constitutional officials, members of the Supreme Court, distinguished guests, family, friends, Lt. Governor and Gabe Henderson, First Lady Abby Cox, Gavin, Kaleb, Adam and Emma Kate... my fellow Utahns—Thank you for joining us today at this special place on this special day. Abby and I are forever grateful for your kindness and support, and we are humbled by the responsibilities that lie ahead.

The same words Parley Pratt used to describe Washington County could also be used to describe the year 2020. “Indescribable... dreadful confusion... a wide expanse of chaotic matter... Cheerless... Inconceivable... Turned inside out, upside down.”

And if I’m being honest, we all probably feel a little tired. Lady Liberty has been holding that torch for so long. And sometimes it feels like her hands--and ours--hang down.

Over the course of this past year, we have learned valuable lessons.

With a global pandemic raging, we have learned that our people are smarter than we could have ever imagined... as scientists, chemists and medical professionals developed and mastered new technologies to create multiple life-saving vaccines in record time.

And yet, at a time when we have more knowledge at our fingertips than any generation in history, we have somehow become more susceptible to disinformation, conspiracy theories and lies as too often we all struggle to find accurate sources of truth and unbiased information.

We have learned that we are stronger and more resilient than we ever imagined, as individuals, communities, industries and countries have found ways to adapt and innovate through impossible circumstances to restore critical supply chains and keep businesses open and friends and family safe and employed.

And yet, we have also seen real weaknesses as too many people have lost their lives and livelihoods and too many of our most vulnerable communities--including our Native American,

Black, Latino and Pacific Islander friends--who have been disproportionately impacted by this virus and continued racial inequities.

This year we have learned that we are kinder and more giving than we ever thought possible, as Utahns do what we always do... donating millions in food and relief, including 800,000 meals for our #OneUtah food drive, supporting Farmers Feeding Utah, sewing 6 millions masks and gowns, and neighbors helping neighbors fix uprooted trees and damaged homes after unprecedented earthquakes and hurricane-force winds.

And yet, we have sadly realized that we are more divided than at any time in our lifetimes as the news is filled with civil unrest and protests, including one right outside this venue here today. Hateful rhetoric dominates our political discourse. We are facing a crisis of empathy; a scourge of contempt. Very little feels "United" about the United States today.

Indeed it appears that mens' and womens' hearts are failing them.

Let me be clear. Conflict and passionate debate around ideas can be healthy, but contempt and contention will rot the souls of our nation and her people. And this division isn't just ugly or unfortunate. It's dangerous. As one expert recently warned, "[T]here is a very good chance that in the next 30 years we will have a catastrophic failure of our democracy." The reason? "We just don't know," he observed, "what a democracy looks like when you drain all the trust out of the system."

But there is good news. It's not too late to fix this and Utah is the perfect place to make it happen. Judge Thomas Griffith has given us the formula:

"If the Constitution of the United States as we know it is to survive," he wrote, "then we must inculcate the virtue of civic charity. We must seek to understand one another, to treat each other not as enemies, but as friends, and to secure justice for all without demonizing and ostracizing those with whom we disagree."

Indeed this is the only way it has ever been done. And it is distinctly American. As another expert has noted, "The heroes of America are heroes of unity. Our political system is designed for vigorous disagreement. It is not designed for irreconcilable contempt. Such contempt loosens the ties of citizenship and undermines the idea of patriotism."

This is a theme that echoes through time, taught by America's greatest leaders. Listen to the words of Thomas Jefferson: "Let us then, fellow citizens, unite with one heart and one mind, let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty, and even life itself, are but dreary things."

Listen to 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.”

Listen to the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The words of th[e] text [to love our enemies] glitter in our eyes with a new urgency. Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies.”

Now let us return to where we began and where we find ourselves today: right here in Washington County. A few generations after Parley P. Pratt’s initial scouting report, a young man named Orval Hafen was born in this same valley. After moving away to get his education, he came back here to what was then a small community of less than 8,000 residents without a single paved road in the entire county and he recorded many of the same frustrations as his predecessors.

“St. George doesn't figure much in the world's progress,” he wrote. “It is insignificant, and in so many ways so is all that we do here. The town seems so sleepy, there seem to be so few opportunities for people to make the money they need to keep up with the times. There is a temptation to feel like one should chuck it all and move to Salt Lake or some section where there are more opportunities.

But not willing to give up, he continued, “[I knew] a man could make a better contribution [in] his own....town than he could anywhere else.”

With hands hanging down, he turned his gaze upward and he let himself dream -- with very little money in his hometown and even less water, in the middle of the Great Depression no less.

He wrote, “I can't get away from the feeling that the destiny of [this place] lies in her climate and scenery and that my mission is to help bring this about.”

“[We] seem destined to undergo quite a change,” he said. “Instead of the isolated little farms and cattle ranches, we may be in the midst of a recreational center, which will entirely change our attitudes, our outlook, our associations, our opportunities.”

His dreams were so big, that at times even he struggled to believe them. “I don't dare to confess to Mom what wild ideas are going through my mind,” he wrote. “In fact, I hardly dare face them myself...”

Well, it is entirely appropriate that today, in the first inauguration ceremony ever held outside of Salt Lake City, we find our feet firmly planted on ground purchased by Orval and his wife, Ruth Hafen.

In another one of Orval's outrageously audacious dreams, they bought a small ranch on the exact same piece of land we stand on today with a breathtaking view, second to none, and yet without a single drop of water.

The first time he saw this canyon he wrote "I was awe-struck. There before me lay a scene of indescribable beauty: wild, primitive, unspoiled, largely unknown, waiting to be enjoyed, waiting to inspire folks and bring them near to their God...."

Years later, Orval Hafen would pass away from a heart attack while digging a trench to the same site where we gather today... which I can proudly report now definitely has running water.

Great achievements that seem inevitable in retrospect, rarely feel that way when the work begins.

Never forget that one person can describe a piece of land as "... a country in ruins, cheerless... turned inside out, upside down" while another sees that exact same place as "a scene of indescribable beauty...waiting to be enjoyed."

More importantly, the very thing that has made this land so beautiful over the millions of years of its history has largely come from those harsh, often unexpected, moments in time when ferocious rains beat down or hurricane-force winds blow, and the earth shakes.

I promise that our children and our children's children will learn about this moment in our history...when the earth has both literally and figuratively shaken beneath our feet.. My fellow Utahns, our moment, our rendezvous with destiny, has arrived. It is time we rise to that challenge.

At times our hands may hang down and our hearts may fail us, but even when we feel tired, we must never give up. Just like pioneers that came before made an arid landscape blossom as the rose, so too must we make Utah a wellspring of hope in times that can feel bleak. It's our turn to write the next chapter of Utah's history and prove that yes indeed our greatest days still lie ahead.

I love this state. I come to you from the smallest of small towns and the humblest of circumstances. In taking a sacred oath today, my family and I pledge our hearts and our hands to you these next 4 years. We will succeed together, as One Utah. Let's Go.

