

I wish everyone could see we're better together

Editor's Note: South Dakota journalist and First Amendment champion Brian Hunhoff gave the keynote speech last week at a Sioux Falls naturalization ceremony for new citizens.

By Brian Hunhoff

We are better together than we are alone.

It was one of many thoughts that crossed my mind last Friday at a ceremony welcoming new citizens from 40 different countries to these United States.

It was my first time at a naturalization ceremony. I wish everyone in America could experience it.

I wish everyone could see the joy and pride shining in the faces of those 237 new Americans.

I wish everyone could see how eager and excited they are to be here, and how much energy they bring to our country.

I wish everyone could see the powerful level of gratitude they expressed to officials in attendance.

If everyone had witnessed that ceremony, I think we would have less discord about immigration in this "great land of liberty."

I invited a xenophobic friend of mine from Sioux Falls to attend, but he declined. "I don't know any of those people personally" and "I'm not really in favor of them coming here," he said.

After an exasperated sigh, I remembered his words were not an unusual thing to hear in South Dakota these days. In recent years, our country's acceptance of people different from us has steadily declined.

Mesfin Yilma from Ethiopia wrote me the day after the ceremony, saying, "Dear sir, I was very impressed and enjoyed your speech. Our country needs a person like you – honest, kind and faithful. God bless you."

My favorite part of his note was when Mr. Yilma used the words, "our country." I could easily turn the tables on my new friend and say, "No, our country needs more people like you, Mesfin."

I am one of the lucky ones. I was born here. My citizenship came easy. It was a birthright. The same is true of most U.S. citizens. Just six percent are naturalized. Just six percent took the path less traveled and became Americans the hard way.

It's not an easy or fast process. Most worked and waited years to join us. They became Americans through sacrifice, determination and vision of a better life. After their long journey to achieve it, they are unlikely to take the blessing of citizenship lightly.

And it is a blessing. America means equal opportunity and pursuit of happiness. America means rich and poor have the same rights. We support truth, justice and the rule of law. And no one in America – not even the President – is above that law.

Following is part of my speech to our new citizens, titled, "Journey to America the Great."

America's greatest achievements are not skyscrapers or jets. Our strength lies in our compassion, in our communities, where our people care for one another; where neighbors help neighbors – and strangers – in times of need.

America is big cities and small towns; cornfields and main streets; veterans and nurses; teachers and truck drivers; factory workers, farmers and firefighters.

America is working one place 40 years or changing jobs every year if you want to.

America is open government and voting and running for office if you want to.

America is a nation of immigrants, multi-cultural by design. We should be a celebration of diversity. America should mean respect and dignity for all people. America is red, white and blue. We're also black, white and brown.

America is Democrats and Republicans and Independents. America is any religion or no religion – the right to pray freely or not pray at all.

America means liberty to be who we want to be and fighting for that freedom if need be. It means standing up to bullies who disguise bigotry and cruelty as patriotism.

America is a place we rise above that which separates us to build a stronger nation on that which unites us.

America is also hard to please. We like to complain. Polls show many think our country is on the wrong track. We sometimes have to stop and look around to remember we would not want to live anywhere else.

Our leaders in America disappoint us at times. I speak out when that happens, but I never lose hope and pride in our country. We're not defined by a single leader. We're bigger and better than one person or moment in time.

We can bring our polarized country closer together by rediscovering shared values like freedom and equality. Those principles are more important than partisan beliefs that divide us.

I told a co-worker I was writing a speech called 'Journey to America the Great.' He laughed and said, "I'd call it 'America the Corrupt' or 'America the Greedy.'"

Well, America is not perfect. But America is great. And we're better than we were. Slavery was one of this country's original sins. Horrible treatment of American Indians was another. We moved forward and became better by admitting our mistakes and not forgetting those shameful chapters in American history.

As William Faulkner wrote, "The past is not dead. It isn't even past."

My cynical friend's father was a WWII veteran, so he knows America is capable of greatness. Next year, we celebrate the 100th anniversary of women getting the right to vote in this country – Aug. 18, 1920. That was another time we became better than we were. Just imagine how much the combined intelligence of our nation's voters increased that day! ☺

Neil Armstrong's 1969 walk on the moon was another great moment ... Rosa Parks refusing to give a white man her seat on an Alabama bus in 1955. Her isolated moment of courage has been making a difference ever since.

America has a great big heart and a strong heartbeat. We still inspire democracy and human rights in other countries. We still enjoy the liberty to make our own American dreams come true.

Congratulations on becoming United States citizens. Thank you for taking the journey to this day. It's a supreme achievement. We're proud of you.

I hope all 237 of you will be active citizens. We need people with your perseverance and fresh perspectives to help solve America's problems. We need your courage and commitment to help us keep our flame of freedom burning bright.

God bless you and God bless America the beautiful, which has been great since 1776.

Our country became even greater and more beautiful today, because of you.