

Mount Vernon Unity Rally Remarks
Westchester County Executive Robert P. Astorino
Hartley Park, July 12, 2016

What to say at a time like this?

It's definitely not time for any big pronouncements.

The truth is that there is no magic to put an end to the pain tearing at all of us.

Our country is going through hard times. There's a lot of fear, misunderstanding, and miscommunication out there. Passions are running high, spilling over. Too many innocent people have died.

People want answers, and we all deserve them.

Some also want revenge. Revenge is not the answer. It was Mahatma Gandhi who said, "an eye for an eye makes two blind men." He was right.

What we need today is not revenge, but renewal: The renewal of our faith in family, community and country.

That renewal starts with honesty.

Every police force is made up men and women who will not hesitate to rush into harm's way to protect the most vulnerable among us. But when rare cases of harm to the innocent occur, they cannot be dismissed.

Likewise, every community is made up of heroes and everyday people who do great things. But here again, when the innocent are harmed, justice must prevail

It should be easy to tell good from bad. We are all taught the difference as children. But life can get confusing as we grow older. Especially in these times when we are bombarded 24 hours a day by so much information; and so little truth.

As adults, it's our job to stay honest to the facts – wherever they take us, especially when they pull us out of our comfort zones.

Here in Westchester, we are blessed with some of the nation's finest police officers, in our cities, towns and villages, and on our County Police force. None of these departments is perfect. But our goal is to make them better every day.

More and more, these departments reflect the makeup of our communities. These men and women are receiving the best training available anywhere. For officers across Westchester, the county has made cultural competency programs available, as well as crisis intervention training, which is aimed at safely diffusing situations when individuals become a threat to themselves and others. This knowledge saves lives.

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Outside the County courthouse in White Plains, there is a monument honoring fallen Westchester police officers. It stands near a statue of Dr. Martin Luther King. They both represent justice, albeit in slightly different ways. Day after day; night after night; year after year, through hurricanes and blizzards, those memorials weather every storm together.

I like that. It speaks volumes.

Justice -- equal treatment under the law -- is what we must always be pursuing; on the streets and in our courts.

And when tragedy or injustices do occur, here or elsewhere, we must fight to right these wrongs. We must also acknowledge the perception, and sometimes the reality, that our justice system is not without its failures. When it fails one of us, it fails all of us. There is no justice, if it is not justice for all.

We must also guard against the rush to judgment. Due process is there to protect all of us. Innocent until proven guilty is one of the cornerstones of our legal system and must remain so.

So how do we get better?

As our nation is ripping apart, some serious soul searching is in order. It starts with looking in the mirror each day and asking: Are we doing a good enough job of putting ourselves in the shoes of others? The honest answer is: No.

But there is hope if we focus on what unites rather than divides us.

Nothing ties us together more as human beings than family.

If you were to open me up and look at my heart, at my hopes and at my worries, what you'd see is a father who wants nothing more than for his wife and three kids to come home each day – happy, healthy and safe.

This desire is the same in all of us. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor. Black or white. Hispanic or Asian. We're all the same inside.

And we are all better, stronger, smarter and safer when we work together.

So we pause today to remember and reaffirm the things that bind together as Americans. We come together to pray for peace, for healing, for justice, for understanding, and most of all we pray that each day we can all be better people than the day before.

I leave you with the timeless words of Dr. King.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that.

Thank you.

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