



Of Many, One

Ruth Bader Ginsburg

August 26, 2019

Just days after Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg completed treatment for pancreatic cancer, she paid a trip to Western New York and was awarded an honorary doctoral law degree at the University at Buffalo. There, the associate justice spoke of our country's most important aspiration. Here is an excerpt of her comments to those assembled there.

If I am notorious, it is because I had the good fortune to be alive and a lawyer in the late 1960s. Then, and continuing through the 1970s, for the first time in history, it became possible to urge before courts, successfully, that equal justice under law required all arms of government to regard women as persons equal in stature to men.

In my college years, 1950-1954, it was widely thought that women were not suited for many of life's occupations — lawyering and bartending, military service, foreign service, driving trucks, piloting planes, policing, serving on juries, to take just a few of many examples that now seem senseless. It was exhilarating to help bring down the barriers that, in Justice Brennan's words, put women less "on a pedestal," than "in a cage." So much has changed for the better since then.

True, we have not reached Nirvana, but the progress I have seen in my lifetime makes me optimistic for the future. Our communities, nation, and world will be increasingly improved as women achieve their rightful place in all fields of human endeavor.

At a reception some years ago, a college student asked if I could help her with an assignment. She had one question and hoped to compose a paper by asking diverse people to respond. What, she asked, did I think was the largest problem for the 21st century. My mind raced passed privacy concerns in the electronic age, terrorist threats, deadly weapons, fierce partisan divisions in our legislatures and polity.

I thought of Thurgood Marshall's praise of the evolution of our Constitution's opening words, "We, the people," to embrace once excluded, ignored, or undervalued people – people held in human bondage, Native Americans, women, even men who owned no real property.

I thought next of our nation's motto: *E Pluribus Unum* – of many, one. The challenge is to make or keep our communities places where we can tolerate, even celebrate, our differences, while pulling together for the common good.

"Of many, one" is the main aspiration, I believe. It is my hope for our country and world.