



Like Abby, I am happily astonished to receive this award and profoundly grateful to the Bradley Foundation for the honor. Abby has told you something about how she came to be the person she is today, and I will add a few words about my own very different background and upbringing.

Abby hails from Greenwich Village; I'm from the heartland, specifically two small Midwestern industrial cities, Port Huron and Battle Creek, Michigan. My father, the son of a Swedish immigrant laborer, had to leave school after the eighth grade to earn his keep. My mother's formal education ended with high school, but she was a devoted life-long reader who encouraged me to read voraciously from an early age.

Outside of school, I was always reading. At school, I was colossally bored, and devoted my energies to dipping the pigtails of the girl seated in front of me in my inkwell, releasing garter snakes in class, and putting thumb tacks on the teacher's chair.

It was no surprise, then, that when I began ninth grade, I was assigned to the vocational

track, placed in metal shop rather than Latin. Plainly not college material. It was a great surprise to my mother, though, and she marched down to the school to insist they reconsider. It was a crucial turning point in my education, because Latin was the first school subject I found intellectually challenging.

A year later, I found a new love: the debate team, coached by one of the greatest teachers I ever had. I loved debate, and when the Northwestern School of Speech offered me a full-tuition debate scholarship, I took it. My undemanding coursework in public speaking left ample time to study history and the social sciences -- my springboard to a graduate-school fellowship.

I met Abby at Harvard in 1958. By then, I had read deeply in Marx, and considered myself a democratic socialist. Over time, though -- a long time -- I gradually lost my faith that the government could run the economy more fairly than a free market, and began to move back towards Battle Creek, as it were. The year spent in England as a visiting professor at Cambridge University in 1978-79 was particularly eye-opening, as we lived through the final months of the Callaghan Labor government and found ourselves cheering Margaret Thatcher's election. The tragic degeneration of the civil-rights movement, in which I had been active in college and graduate school, also sapped my faith in left liberalism.

Like Abby, I have no regrets about the first left-leaning phase of my intellectual journey. Without it, I probably would never have pursued the subject of my first two books, social class and social mobility in American history. I derived worthwhile research questions from the Marxist literature, although the evidence that I assembled led me to distinctly un-Marxist conclusions. America is, and always has been, a country of great opportunity, unconstrained by the rigid class structures of Europe.

This is a topic I plan to return to after I finish my current book. Suffice it to say here, the evidence I've seen of America's social mobility makes me highly skeptical of the conventional liberal wisdom that today we face a crisis of rising inequality. Dire warnings that "the rich are getting richer" ignore the crucial fact that those who are wealthy today are very often not the same people who were rich two or three decades ago. In America, fortunes are made -- and lost -- every day. People with great ideas are able to amass wealth by creating something that enriches all of us.

Such mobility is evident not only at the rarified level of the super-rich; it is pervasive throughout the economy -- one of the reasons that millions of immigrants have arrived in recent years. This is a land of unparalleled opportunity -- as it has been for me and my family.

Again, my thanks for this great honor. My only regret tonight is that my parents did not live long enough to see my gravitation back towards their values. They would have been thrilled to see me receive this award.