Thoughts Upon the Occasion of Receiving the Citizen Laureate Award*

I am honored to be invited to this great University tonight to receive its Citizen Laureate award. It is one that a number of distinguished individuals have been given before me. To be considered among the select group of those recipients is an honor. And, to be so honored is exhilarating and humbling. I thank my wife, Rose, whose constant love and support has made my work possible; and I thank my daughter, Anne, son-in-law, Mike, and my grandchildren, all of whom center my life.

A gentleman who received the Citizen Laureate award in the 1980s, when learning that I was to be this year’s recipient, told me to wear the honor well; it is one, he said, “that will stay with you for the rest of your life.”

Upon considering this advice, I know that he is quite right. I have been honored to receive many awards from the business community. Those have been appreciated very much. However, their message is different from this evening’s. Tonight’s recognition is not one based upon my contributions as a CEO. It is more personal. This recognition says that I have been a good citizen.

Two thousand years ago – two thousand years ago – the proudest statement that a man could make was “civis romanus sum.” I am a citizen of Rome. That declaration was both a boast, and a perceptive acknowledgement of belonging to a thing that was larger than oneself. More important than any individual. More substantial, more sustaining.

Throughout the ages since, the notion of citizenship has involved a profound realization that we are individuals certainly, yet that we belong to a greater community. And citizenship is the emblem of that belonging.

Most of us came to our American citizenship as a birthright. But not all. Exactly one century ago, my grandfather, Guiseppe Barba, at age 17, left all of his family and his native Italy and came to our country, alone. He brought little with him save a strong back, a willingness to work hard, and a burning desire to belong to America. To be part of a dream that had been described to him by his father. To become a citizen. That ambition was not easily achieved. He could read and write only the Italian language. There were no schools here to teach him English, and even had there been, he had
to work to support himself, and later to support a widow whom he married, who had three young daughters.

But he never surrendered the dream. And, in 1930 at the Federal Courthouse in downtown Albany, having passed all of the necessary tests, he forswore allegiance to the King and government of Italy and became an American citizen. As an old man, when my grandfather spoke of his American citizenship, he did so with a certain smile in his eyes.

The notion of citizenship has been much debated in our nation of late, and that debate is not one that has always made me proud. Throughout our history, it appears that at least once in each generation we must take up the discussion about who we are, what we value and what we wish to become. These questions are as old as the Scriptures and as new tomorrow’s sunrise. Our nation was created by men and women of many nations and many backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all are equal, and that the rights of every person are diminished when the rights of any person are threatened.

One might have thought that these unassailable principles would have applied in this year’s discussion about immigration and citizenship, but that has not been the case. Instead, difficult politics inserted themselves into this debate and, ultimately, have derailed it. Consider the sad message that this experience has sent to the rest of the world.

The time has come, once again, for us to remind ourselves that this is one country. We are not a collection of political ideologues; we are a collection of immigrants.

In the final analysis, America and its freedoms are merely an elegant idea, a dream that men and women can live in peace and liberty, and raise their children safe from commotion and turbulence.

Are we now to tell foreign nationals that they may no longer share in this dream? Is it our message that because of the color of their skin, or their ethnicity, or their nation of birth they may no longer come to the shores of the Lady who holds the Lamp? Do we mean that there is no longer a place in America for them if they are Mexican or Muslim, Bosnian or Buddhist? Do we wish to have a national policy that would have, had it been
implemented a century ago, foreclosed the possibility of many of us being in this room tonight?

I refuse to believe that this is who we are or what we wish to be.

Giuseppe Barba lived a life of honesty, hard work, integrity and decency. A simple man who adored his family, particularly his grandchildren, of whom I am the oldest. He died peacefully when I was 24 years old. During his life, no groups honored him for his contributions; there were no fine dinners to celebrate his achievements; no monuments have been raised in his name. Yet because of him, and because of the tens of millions of immigrants like him, our nation was built strong and just and free. We ought never forget the richness that their lives have given to all of our lives.

As an old man, when my grandfather spoke of his American citizenship, he did so with a certain smile in his eyes. Were you to look closely tonight, you would see that same smile in my own. As you honor me with this Citizen Laureate award, you honor him, who was also a good citizen. And I humbly accept that honor for both of us.

Thank you. God bless us all, and God bless this wonderful land that we call America.

James J. Barba
October 24, 2013

*I acknowledge with gratitude the thoughts of John F. Kennedy, the thirty-fifth President of the United States, expressed in his address on civil rights delivered on June 11, 1963, and his address in Berlin delivered on June 26, 1963.