

REMARKS TO HOUSING RESOURCES BAINBRIDGE

Steven Falk

Thank you for that warm greeting!

Just now, as I was listening to Penny's kind introduction, it occurred to me that this was not the plan! Though I am plenty glad to be with you this morning, I did not set out to have a career that would land me here, speaking before you, today on Bainbridge Island.

Indeed, mine was supposed to be the story of a pale old public servant who kept his balding head down, balancing budgets, worrying about parks and potholes, and listening patiently to people about parking meters – basically being the guy who keeps the trains running on time. That's what city managers do, and that's what I did for almost three decades, and that's what I thought I would be doing this morning. Not standing here before you.

But instead, I wound up with my picture in the *New York Times*, with my face on the *PBS NewsHour*, and with my voice on NPR, and now, with your invitation, here before you today.

I date myself when I quote David Byrne: "And you may ask yourself well: how did I get here?"

It's complicated and its long, and we don't have time to go into it, but my basic story is that I served for twenty two years as the city manager of an affluent community of about 23,000 people. It's a community that's notable for its great schools and its located about forty minutes across the water from one of the world's most spectacular big cities – a city famous for its technology startups and

stars. The town that I managed is a commutable suburb that sits among and is embraced by the natural world. It houses doctors and lawyers and tech executives and writers and inventors and a bunch of really lovely people who care deeply about their community. Does any of this sound familiar to you?

Mine was also a town where housing prices have risen so fast that restaurant workers and teachers and police officers can no longer afford to live where they work. And the children of long time residents: they can't afford to move back to the city where they grew up. I repeat: does any of this sound familiar to you?

Meanwhile, over the last half century scientists have learned more about the earth's atmosphere and concluded that human activity and carbon emissions are responsible for climate change. Seas are rising, the atmosphere is warming, the land is warming, ice is melting, heat emergencies and wildfires and hurricanes are increasing, rainfall patterns are changing, and the ocean is becoming more acidic. The risks and consequences for humanity cannot be overstated.

And so it was that, a few years ago, I began promoting and working on measures and methods that would increase the supply of housing in my town and housing density around the transit station. Doing so, I thought, would lower prices and reduce our carbon footprint. I did this despite the fact that certain powerful groups in town were fearful of the changes that might arrive when more people and new people and different-looking people arrived.

And I did this because I didn't want to be the Adolph Eichmann character in my own story – the pale and balding bureaucrat that

writer Hannah Arendt described as ‘terrifyingly normal;’ a man who acted without any motive other than to advance his career; a man who failed to consider the larger consequences of his day-to-day duties; a man who was disengaged from the impacts of his work.

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According to Arendt, Eichmann never realised what he was doing because he couldn’t think from the standpoint of somebody else. Eichmann wasn’t inherently evil, just shallow and unthinking.

And so it was that, after local voters referendized and then rejected a proposal I had brokered for missing-middle housing, I wound up leaving that lovely job in that livable suburb, and on my way out, I let the people know why with a letter of resignation that later went viral.

I did what I did because I thought it was the right thing to do.

All of us hear a voice in our head; all of us tell stories to ourselves about ourselves. And I decided I didn’t want to be the Eichmann in that story. I wanted to be the hero in my own story.

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Folks, the problems before us are unprecedented. According to last year’s Affordable Housing Task Force Report, housing prices in Bainbridge Island are at an all-time high. At the same time, inventory is at an all-time low. New construction in your city is way below demand, and the result is a housing affordability crisis right here in your hometown.

Meanwhile, the consensus of the world's scientists is clear: if we don't reduce our carbon output by half in the next dozen years, and don't fully decarbonize by 2050, the earth as we know it becomes far less livable, and perhaps even uninhabitable.

Already the glaciers on Mt. Rainier are melting. Already the orcas that were once plentiful in Puget Sound are endangered. Already, the Pacific Ocean is seven degrees warmer than normal, and the native American fishing community is devastated.

Earlier this year at my house of worship, a thirteen year old named Stella stood before the congregation with tears in her eyes and she said, "I don't know when our world will end, but I think it will end soon."

This happened on our watch; this happened during our lifetimes, and this is our responsibility to fix and, simply put, if we don't live differently, we won't live at all.

Now, many ask why should people in Bainbridge Island, why should people in the State of Washington, why should people in the United States make sacrifices for this problem when the Chinas and the Indias and the Indonesias of this world are still so far behind? To that, I say this: If not here, where? If not now, when? If not us, who?

Never before have we expected the poorest places to solve the biggest problems. That responsibility has always fallen on us, the people with the resources.

It's up to us to do this. Us. The people in this room. The people who have the means and have supported housing and the environment for days and for weeks and for years and for decades.

If **we** have the will and we have the vision and we have the fortitude, then we can lead the world!

Look: If Greta Thunberg can do this, so can we!

We can do this. We can do this because we are the people that overcame earthquakes and tsunamis and volcanic eruptions, and we are the people that built a navy that won a world war, but it won't be easy and there will be challenging times ahead. And some of you who make bold recommendations and take bold positions and make big donations to support affordable, efficient housing projects that go against your neighbors' wishes may be criticized. But, trust me on this, you *will* be able to sleep at night, knowing that you walked **every** mile; knowing that you used **every** tool; knowing that you spoke with **everybody**, knowing that you gave all that you could give, knowing that you did **everything** in your power. Knowing that you did **all** that you could do!

And if you do that – if you do just that -- then you will certainly be the hero. You will be the hero. You will be the hero. The hero in your own story.

Thank you for having me here this morning. It was a privilege to be with you.