

I was asked to offer a few words tonight to acknowledge the great work you have done, and it's my honor to do so. I have been thinking about this for some time. Actually I have been thinking about this since this event last year. Over that time I kept coming back to the same ideas, but they were hard to distill.

One of the purposes of history, religion and poetry is that they give us metaphors to help us express complex ideas. Those of us who are awkward, windy, and less creative can use someone else's ideas to more concisely explain a complex thought.

With your permission I need to borrow a few metaphors tonight. They offer a less windy way to share my deep admiration for you all.

The religion in which my parents raised me had a tradition of prayer called The Stations Of the cross, a series of prayers or contemplations that recalled the events surrounding the crucifixion of Christ. They were based on the gospels, and included a story that as he carried his cross out of the city, Christ fell to the ground. A man named Simon of Cyrene was on

his way home from his work in the fields, and the Roman guard pressed him in to service, so he picked up Christ's cross and carried it for him.

Whether this actually happened is of course uncertain—one of the gospels expressly disputes the event — but it doesn't matter. The story was included in three of them, and it became a tradition of contemplation for many Christians. That tells us that the authors thought the story said something important about what we may be called on to do with our lives, and what other people can do when they know they are not alone.

Revered texts across the world reference similar themes. Secular ones do, too, and they are present from high art to pop culture. Atticus Finch. Henry at Agincourt. Karl Malden's character from "On the Waterfront", who compels the beaten Marlon Brando to stand up and lead his neighbors back to work. Look at the lyrics to the Aretha Franklin/George Michael song "I Knew You Were Waiting".

At some time all of us will need someone to reach down, pick up our burden, and help us finish a job.

The story taught to me when I was a kid was that, to finish his own work, even God needed a field worker to put a hand under the shoulder of his son to help him carry on.

Whenever you have helped a hungry neighbor, a single mother struggling to raise children, a student struggling with homework, or a community group cleaning up a park, you have done this very thing.

The metaphor from all those stories is about you.

A German Poet, Reiner Maria Rilke, tried to explain the potential of the individual to fill a larger role - and be a larger presence to the rest of us- in a prayer using his own religious imagery. He wrote:

YOU SHOW YOURSELF TO OTHERS
ALWAYS OTHERWISE.
TO THE SHIP YOU ARE THE SHORE.
TO THE SHORE YOU ARE THE SHIP

That imagery is also about you.

To the volunteers here and throughout our community, please accept our thanks for picking up the burdens you carried. Your work reflects an intricate part of our potential. Everything you have done-- to help the community, to make a better or more beautiful future possible, to put your hand under the shoulder of a scared hungry lonely neighbor, or to help someone stand up and go to work – every bit of it has served us all.

You also have inspired the officers, professionals and employees who do the regular hard work for your agencies or service organizations. Those professionals see you as A SHIP--bringing skill, or time, or effort to a shore in great need. You have made yourselves better, and I believe you have shown all of us how to be better. Interestingly, the name of Rilke's poem is "You Are the Future".

Rilke would say: "He has shown himself to others--through you."

Aretha and George would say "we knew you would be there".

If I may speak for the volunteers here, I also want to offer our deepest gratitude to the organizations, officers, and professionals who lead the hard work we celebrate tonight. When a volunteer comes to help you, that volunteer sees in YOU the possibility of a better community—they see in you a BETTER SHORE.

Volunteers are willing to lift a bit of your work NOT because we think WE will save the world, or even save our small community, but we think that YOU JUST MIGHT. Really, it is we volunteers who wish to thank you.

I'm humbled to be here. Present here tonight is a great community, and it's a privilege for all of us to be part of it. For me, I see in you all both the ship AND the shore, and I see a really beautiful life that we have made together. Congratulations to you all and thank you.