

Day of Remembrance Speech

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37th San Jose Day of Remembrance at Buddhist Church Betsuin in San Jose

Feb 19th 2017

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to speak to such a renowned audience on this historic day.

It was exactly 75 years ago today on Feb 19th 1942 that President Roosevelt's executive order 9066 was issued in the name of keeping America safe.

The government used euphemisms such as "internment," "evacuation," and "non-alien" to describe what was actually illegal incarceration and a violation of the American Constitution.

The irrational fear that spread through this time was that there were spies for the Japanese government living amongst the U.S. citizens, and that they were dangerous. This was found by historians to be just an excuse to justify racial crimes.

Today's White House is on a similar slippery slope with the same dangerous attitude toward the Constitution. The legacy of the Japanese camps may become a precedent for a Muslim registry. We must take preventive action.

Today many Muslim families are being cast away under the rhetoric of terrorism. It is ironic that no ban has been imposed on the one country where most of the 9/11 terrorists came from, Saudi Arabia.

Our government's hypocrisy is clear, they pander to the interests of the rich and dare not offend oil rich Saudi Arabia, where ironically some of the worst women's rights abuses are tolerated daily.

Today's world continues to be fettered by war zones, poverty, refugees fleeing for their lives, children dying, and terrorism on the rise.

Today's topic is standing up against hate. I know a little about hate and isolation myself.

I was born in Pakistan to parents who had come from war torn India after the British colonials left a very divided subcontinent. My mother was a practicing Muslim but was decreed non – muslim during one of many military coos, because of being born an Ahmedi.

My father was born to a staunch muslim who abhorred education and anything western. He grew up to become a rebellious teacher, writer and progressive.

He was constantly threatened for his liberal views by a retrogressive government, just as many of us are being today, in 2017 by the current set up.

It seems we forget the lesson history teaches us again and again, that bombs and walls cannot make the world a safer place nor safeguard the future of our children.

I grew up exposed to extremes of intellectual richness, libraries, an elite University of Cambridge sister Convent.

At the end of the day I came home to my street pals, children of the janitorial staff on a huge college campus, where my father served as the Principal.

The children I played with had no shoes, torn clothes, rarely ate, and were always ravaging local dumpsters for food. It is those children who taught me about the real world growing up, and who taught me to be a real person rather than a formulated phantom.

The danger of simple poverty is that it becomes a weapon of mass destruction in the wrong hands.

What do we expect a small child who is born in a small village in Afghanistan or Pakistan in a tribal zone with no schools or electricity, and who is put in a madrassa where they train him to be a warrior of their god, to become?

If we cannot level the playing field for all the children of the world we cannot expect more Taliban not be trained and born.

No amount of bombs can kill the Taliban if children continue to be born and raised in war zones without access to education, literacy and basic human rights.

Instead of spending trillions of new arsenal to kill, if we invested an iota of those resources to make food, water, electricity and education available to the children of developing countries, we could theoretically, have a world based on social equity and justice.

Could it be that keeping the poor, poor serves a political purpose?

Otherwise, how can it be that in today's world of technological advancement and instant communication, we cannot figure out how to make an even playing ground for the children of the globe who are tomorrow's stakeholders of the planet we call home?

I don't have the answers to systemic and blind hate, and blind love is not enough.

At age five my father bought me a black board and said if I wanted to do something

for my friends, I should teach them what I had learned at school that day, from the alphabet to counting, to singing nursery rhymes.

The irony of singing London Bridge is falling down to Punjabi kids in Lahore was lost on me then. It rings even truer now, with Brexit rejecting the very peoples they colonized and enslaved and now don't want to accept as part of the globalization process.

During my own education in later years in England, I never forgot the kids I played with on the sidewalks of Lahore. They taught me more in my first five years of life than the lessons I have learned in the rest of my life.

They taught me the importance of love, generosity and authenticity.

There is a lot of love that breeds when you are very poor.

The wretched of the Earth have gifts to offer which westernized colonials are deprived of. I worked via World Health Organization Projects in rural villages outside city limits in Pakistan where there was no electricity or water.

The women I worked with there, though poor and living in mud houses, and barely able to have a meal a day, nevertheless had something many westernized, developed countries lacked.

They would share their last piece of bread with you. They did not need to be taught how to breastfeed their child. They were poor but they were giving of themselves.

The west could learn a thing or two from third world clans about the ability to bond regardless how hard and war torn life is.

There is a lot of beauty in poor, undeveloped countries. In order to survive, they learn the art of sharing and comradeship.

If we could develop that basic instinct further via education and learning, the world could truly become a place of peace for all.

I worked for the foreign services of the US State Department for seven years before migrating to the USA in 1998 and soon after 9/11 happened. We were living in Florida. I had a valid work visa and was in process of applying for green card.

Soon after 9/11, one night, at about four in the morning, there was a huge knock on my door as I slept with my two small children and our dog. It sounded like someone was trying to break our door. When I opened the door the front lawn was swarmed with FBI, ICE, and local PD. I was in my nightie and couldn't quite gather my wits about me.

They said I was here illegally and that this was a raid. I said I had papers. They asked me to show them. They barged in and ransacked my house. They would not let me cover myself nor go to the bathroom.

My children clung to me in fear and tears. I was afraid they would harm my puppy.

Disheveled, I ransacked my own passport drawer to show them our papers. They grabbed all our paperwork and said they would be in touch and if it didn't check out we would be deported. I was told that if I dare go to a grocery store without my papers I can and will be arrested because that is the law.

That set the pace for my life as an immigrant. It took us eleven years to gain a green card because our name was put in a name check. I thought the nightmare was behind us until 2017.

Even though we, maybe, insulated from complete persecution as naturalized Americans, I do live in angst. Things around us are not well. We are not well. There is an illness in the air in America. It doesn't feel right. I feel I do not belong. I feel like people like me are the focus of distaste and I cannot understand why.

Some of us choose to wear a hijab as a practice of their faith. Don't nuns cover their heads? Why the intolerance?

The irony for me individually is I come from a very liberal, westernized family and was always called too Americanized back home. I felt I wasn't accepted back home for being an emancipated modern woman.

Today my sense of belonging in America is being questioned by those who would ban me simply because I happen to have been born in Pakistan, regardless of the fact that I am now a fully assimilated American woman.

Will I and my children ever be allowed to wash away the geophysical origins of where my parents from?

The irony is all of us are from somewhere else originally, all of us are immigrants, but the difference seems to be in the color of our skins.

I always say that for people like me, who come from one world to another, we always find ourselves emotionally homeless in a sense, always hankering for a feeling of belonging, always challenged to prove that we are as American as anyone else, our skin tone and accent notwithstanding

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I am proud of my origins and what I overcame.

The third world kids I grew up with taught me, that poverty and illiteracy are not

choices any kid makes, they are bestowed upon the children of the world by a systemic failure of society.

Poverty breeds ignorance even when you have schooling, if schooling is limited to academic curriculum.

To truly break the mold of emotional ignorance we must introduce social emotional learning curriculums in school systems.

Education is incomplete if it is limited to technological advancement, for us to become truly civilized we must nourish the body, the brain and the soul.

I have taught my kids to not let the past haunt them as it does me. They are fully integrated with their peers as regular American kids.

My daughter just graduated from Long Beach and wants to teach English in Japan. She loves Japan and went on her own for a trip as a teenager and promised to return to work there. She learned the language and got teaching credentials and wants to move there. She also thinks Japanese boys are cute.

My son is studying philosophy in Berkeley. I fear I will have to feed him until I retire.

While my personal success story allows me to sleep better at night, I cannot help but feel ill at ease with what is going on around me these days.

Let us focus our attention on President Trump's recent executive order banning Muslim families from seven countries from entering the US temporarily and banning refugee services to Syrian families fleeing for their lives.

Apparently this was done for the sake of making America safer and fighting terrorism. That is not the America that will go down in history as a great America.

The backlash this order received is probably unprecedented in terms of the number of citizen, legislators and State officials and Judges, who stood up and issued decrees against it. That is the America that will go down in history as a great nation. I am proud to be that American. We must all take a side and choose wisely because our collective actions will be pronounced in the archives of history.

What stands us apart today from 75 years ago, is our ability to use our civic awareness and employ legal argument to take a stand against injustice, hate, and discrimination based on race in the name of political gamesmanship.

We have more tools today to bring issues of political and social injustice to light, than we had seventy five years ago, But the fight is still far from over.

It is unfortunate that in today's America, despite our tremendous advancement in technology and science, we seem still to indulge in Neanderthal practice of hate and violence against each other, sometimes in the form of naked bigotry and other times garbed in the misrepresentation of national safety.

A nation that needs to keep humble hard working minorities away from its shores is not a nation that needs more security, it is a nation that needs more education in diversity and inclusion.

History has taught us many times over that breeding hate and separating each other based on race is not beneficial for anyone. When you bring different cultures together, you create a beautiful community with an open mind.

At the root of every emotional conflict, or war, is the question of the other, of who we are vs who they are.

This us and them is a phenomenon that has divided what could otherwise be a peaceful world. We are afraid of those who do not think, act or feel like us. Who have a different God. Who we think mean us harm.

Make no mistake. There are evil forces in this world that must be destroyed. Armies and terrorists that must be taken to task for spreading violence and hatred. But it is not a question of Islam vs Christianity, or Muslims vs Jews, or whites against blacks.

The problem is much more complex and cannot be resolved by simple answers such as deport them all.

Our own double standards have been exposed and it is time we looked in the mirror. It is time we admitted our part in inciting political wars and confusion that have led to our own and other's destruction.

War and separation will only keep this hatred ignited. We must resolve to spread education.

We must learn to use weapons of mass construction, books, not bombs.

Only when we stop building walls and start building bridges will we overcome the divides that have split our great nation into red versus blue.

It all begins with a dialogue, with a chance to meet each other in a safe space and explore the humanity that must prevail in each of us over the differences that make us feel threatened and alienated.

Unfortunately, history is both a gift and a curse that keeps on giving.

Events change, and the process of failed political leadership, continued prejudice and war hysteria keeps on rearing its ugly head in the current political climate in America and other parts of the world.

We cannot let racism and bigotry overrun Americans' conscience and good faith. The tragedy of Japanese-American internment cannot, must not, be repeated.

Many Muslim Americans, Sikh Americans and others are living in fear of harassment and violence simply because they happen to resemble and practice the same faith as those who committed the atrocities in Paris and San Bernardino.

There are millions of peace loving hard working Muslims around the world and in the US.

To lump an entire body of practicing Muslims into the category of terrorist based on the evil acts of a few is discrimination at best, bigoted in the least, and unconstitutional in the eyes of the law.

When our own head of state begins to break laws, who will the citizens turn to? It is a dangerous social precedent.

In like vein, why don't we declare the KKK a terrorist organization?

To think that a Bay Area American female student can have her scarf pulled off her face so tight it almost choked her points to an underbelly of hate that exists in the hearts and minds of some of us.

These are very turbulent and eye opening times. All is not well with us as a nation.

There is hidden hate in our hearts which is spilling out into public life and which is being condoned and enabled by the powers that be.

We as a civilized nation cannot afford this regression. It is up to us as citizens to arrest this tidal wave of hatred and discrimination.

We like to believe we as a nation are a role model to other countries, yet we have so much to learn.

We like to believe we are the United States of America, yet we are divided in more ways than we thought.

We like to believe we have freedom of speech, yet we tread on eggshells biting our tongues to make sure we make politically correct statements, incase the bitter truth has an unpleasant ring to it.

We like to believe we are the champions of the fight for world freedom and

democracy, yet our foreign policy sometimes is the actual cause of many ill begotten wars, wars which leave carnage on both sides.

There are wars being fought outside of us, but there are wars that we fight inside of ourselves. Wars of distrust, hatred, competition, greed, and the need for domination and supremacy.

Our sense of well being comes from feeling safe for ourselves and our immediate family, regardless of what is happening to other around us.
Make no mistake.

Islamophobia is rearing its ugly head in our nation like never before.

The process of eliminating hate does not begin and end in the White House. It begins in each and everyone of our houses.

It begins by having a dialogue with our neighbors, our children, and our local community.

The great thing about America as a country is that even during our worst hour, we find the resilience to come together. They ban us and instead we band together.

The real power of a nation lies not with the elected but with the people of the land.

The people of America who display ignorance and hate, are people who can be brought around from hateful or ignorant behavior and beliefs, to mutual dialogue and dispersion of racial tensions.

I refuse to believe that in this day and age, hate cannot be overcome by positive intervention.

As a social worker who works with kids via social emotional learning models, it is my first hand experience that hate is just form of fear.

We want to build a wall to keep the enemy out yet the enemy is actually within our hearts.

It is not until we find the courage to soul search and cleanse our psyche that the real enemy will be overcome.

If we can address our fears, redress our misgivings about each other, we can turn fear, fight and flight into a coming together of people who simply need to learn to talk to each other in a safe place.

America is still that safe space and we the people of America must reclaim that space.

We must allow our homes and our minds to become a place of welcome, dialogue and transformation.

My fellow Americans I beseech you, do not let the politics of hate disunite us.

If they start a Muslim registry, I request my white American friends to stand up and register with me. If we all register together, they will not be able to tear us apart.

But if we don't come together, we will remain forever strangers and enemies, rather than brothers and sisters, friends and partners.

We must show the courage of our conviction as a united America to overcome instruments of political and legal oppression. We still have the power and we need to use it, daily.

I am a Muslim American, and I am proud to be American.

I would do anything to protect my homeland and my children, not just the two I gave birth to, but all American children, whether they are white, black or brown, Christian, Jew or Muslim.

We the people need to show our solidarity to our government, our community and to the rest of the world.

Liberty is not to be found on the streets, it begins with inner liberation. We have sat back quietly too long witnessing a mockery of the constitutional philosophy of our nation.

Please raise your voice against injustice and tyranny and become partners with minorities under siege to show your support as fellow Americans.

This is a call for action for us to devise and form a circle of comradeship which grows so strong that no political power or arsenal of war can quiet or defray us from marching forward and speaking up for what is right and just.

We must seek justice not just for ourselves and our immediate clan but for all humanity, all the minorities of the world who don't count in the imperialist count of colonial politics.

We must endure their flogging of both the retrogressive ISIS and the short sighted imperialistic colonial powers to create a better world for ourselves and our children.

That one day, there will be days of remembrance when our children will not have to quote a painful past but live in a perpetual peaceful present. That may not be this

year or the year, but let us continue to sow the seeds of love and unity, and at the same time be willing to fight for what is right and take a stand on issues of human justice.

Our journey as humans is a never ending attempt to transform, from children who do not understand to beings of understanding, from fear to strength, dark to light, inertia to action, and hate to love.

I dare to dream and work for a world where one day, our children will be completely color blind, and will not be stereotyped based on the color of their skin. Such a day is not far, but we must work for it every day.

I would like to quote from a few favorite philosophers: Friedrich Nietzsche, said,

“All great things must first wear terrifying and monstrous masks, in order to inscribe themselves on the hearts of humanity.”

G.K. Chesterson said that “Fairy tales do not tell children dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children that dragons can be killed.”

I believe that we do have the power to eliminate the dragons of hate and injustice, if we all come together for a future free of dragons for our next generations.

I would like to Thank you to the Nihomachi Outreach Center for keeping the tradition alive on the day of remembrance each year to remind us that our work as a people to foster peace and harmony continues.

I leave you tonight with a call to action.

It starts with shaking the hand of the person sitting next to you and making a commitment that we have each other's backs.

Please join me in the first step in our collective fight against intolerance, injustice and hatred.

Stand up and embrace each other and keep talking to each other after this evening ends.

Let this evening be the beginning of a new tradition of solidarity as a nation.

And repeat as often as you can. Repeat after me. We are one. We are one. We are one.

Thank you.

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