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Speech for UN Event

We live in a nation where the harrowing events of 9/11 still ring fresh in our minds and our hearts; a nation where we suddenly set aside our differences and came together when our values and our home were threatened. And yet, this is the same nation where suspicion began to rule our lives, where hostility against Muslim-Americans turned into vandalism, hatred, and ultimately more violence.

A very good friend of mine from college once opened up to me about the constant confrontations and even death threats she and her family members faced. As a Guyanese-American, I was simply appalled and baffled at how people belonging to a wealthy, democratic nation could be victimized in this manner.

Why is it that *my* father can walk down the street in Hindu garb and prayer beads and be greeted respectfully by those outside our culture, whereas another Guyanese girl's father was beaten to near death outside his masjid in the same area simply because he dons the traditional clothes of a Muslim? Suddenly every Guyanese son and daughter is thinking, that could easily have been my own father, uncle or friend. Suddenly the entire community feels threatened. We are fearful and we don't understand why we have to be.

We remember the days in Guyana when we would walk hand-in-hand with our Muslim neighbors, never thinking twice about letting our children play together. My parents remember the days when Hindus and Muslims observed each other's religious holidays and donated to each other's temples and mosques. I remember the time I worked alongside Muslims to repaint a Masjid in Guyana, and the evening I visited a mosque and broke fast during Ramadan with Muslims who treated me like family. As Guyanese-Americans, *we* remember those days and we don't understand why many people around the world hate Muslims indiscriminately.

For us, "Muslim" means something different than what it seems to mean for them. For us, a Muslim is someone quite ordinary, who can be good or bad, just like every other person in the world. For others, however, "Muslim" signifies someone violent or dangerous.

Unfortunately, we have politicians today who would stoke this fear and suspicion. They encourage our government, which is meant to *protect* the civil liberties given to us in our Constitution, to deport Muslims or keep them out of the country until their innocence can be proven. What people fail to realize is that Muslim Americans fear the same threat that any other American does. The terrorist attacks were not carried out by all Muslims, but rather by a small group of militant extremists who simply call themselves Islamic. Terrorists have no law or religion. Their religion is violence. Their tenets are intimidation, subjugation, and disregard for human dignity.

Now some people might be thinking, "Who is this rather small girl and what right has she to speak about this issue? If she were personally victimized by Muslims, she would say otherwise." But one cannot pass judgment on a whole race of people based on the actions of one or few. As it turns out, Hindus and Muslims have a rivalry that dates back centuries ago, resulting in the death of roughly 260 million people by today's equivalent and the largest exodus in history, displacing and killing millions of people. Even Gandhi could not stop it.

But to me, this history of violence doesn't mean that Muslims or Hindus are bad people. To me, this is an historic lesson about what happens when fear and hatred go unchecked. For the record, I *have* been personally victimized by Muslim extremists who

claimed the Quran gave them the right to harm and intimidate me. But I understood then as I understand now that anyone who makes such a claim clearly misunderstands their religious texts and chooses an interpretation that allows them to justify their actions.

As a young person, the most important message I can share with my peers is one they've heard countless times, but is worth repeating nonetheless. Do not stand idly by as hatred, intolerance, or racism is perpetrated in front of you. Standing up for peace, equal regard for all people, and freedom of expression is not only the American thing to do; it is the right thing to do.

There is no good reason why we cannot have compassion and sympathy for members of a different group. As a feminist, I believe in equal rights for women but I also understand and feel empathy for men and those of other gender identities experiencing plights unique to their own groups. As a Hindu I believe in the significance of my own religion's teachings but I also have great reverence for those of Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and all other major religions. As a citizen of the world, I worry about the issues facing people in the United States but I also think about what I can do to help those suffering around the world. It is important that we stop seeing ourselves as "us" versus "them." I believe that recognizing our interconnectedness and our interdependence will go a long way in resolving the tensions between different racial and religious groups.

It will not be easy to change the minds of those determined to believe that Islam is a violent religion and that the majority of Muslims are extremists, but if anything I have said today has changed the mind of even one person, then it was worth it. There are so many Muslim reformers who are fighting and dying on the front lines against jihadis, but as CNN reporter Fareed Zakaria pointed out, "their task is made much harder when Western politicians condemn Islam entirely, demean their faith and speak of all Muslims as backward and suspect." It will not be a simple task to fill their hearts with understanding and tolerance, but universal love is something that every religion and tradition teaches. It is something worth fighting for. And when we hear the sounds of our children speaking passionately about religious tolerance, acceptance, love and altruism, we will have known that we've succeeded.