

By Tensing Lama

Overcoming Religious Intolerance and Violence

Good morning everyone, I want to sincerely thank you all for coming. I am here today to speak in response to the growing prejudice and discrimination against peoples of faiths, simply because they hold certain beliefs, or were raised in certain cultures. I invite you all to take a stand for tolerance, and invite those who are different from you with open arms. I will begin with the story of my childhood friend, Roshan, who lived down the street and played marbles with me. For some of us here, Nepal may be a place to escape to, but for Roshan, it is a place to escape from. He wears nothing, but an old white cloth wrapped around his genital area. The color of his skin resembles that of the soil, on which he works and plays with his friends till the sun sets. Nepal is his only home, yet people do not see him as one of their own. People call him Dalit, not Roshan. He is not allowed to enter any temple, drink any water from the public source, attend the same school as everyone, or speak to a girl of a different caste. Yes, his only crime was being born in a family of Dalits, the lowest of all castes in Nepal.

He is supposed to serve people of the higher castes, especially the Brahmins. The children are told by their parents and high priests that the Brahmins are created by the Almighty himself from “his mouth”, while the Dalits are made from the Almighty’s “feet”. They are considered to be dirty and untouchable by others of higher castes. Roshan tells me, “I don’t get it. What is this untouchability? I really wish that I could go to the same schools as the other kids. It is unfair.” But little does he know, and little can he do to challenge the long, old tradition that has been set up to favor those from the higher castes, and prevent his dreams from becoming true. For him, getting a job other than collecting wastes and recycled products is a dream far out of reach. He says, “They will never change. It has always been this way.”

“It has always been this way.” The last time I heard that statement, it was from my high school friend, here in the United States. It was my first week in high school. When I entered each classroom, one session after another, I, who had just recently arrived to this country, quickly noticed something obviously unusual, yet seemed normal to everyone else. On one side, there were white students, and on the other, there were black students. And there I was, each time confused, as to where I should sit. There was such striking separation of students based on their skin color that I did not know where I belonged. For once, I too started to think about my skin color, and asked myself, “where did I belong more?” At that time, I was not aware of over a century of the racial tension that was deeply rooted between the two groups. Later, I had become very close with a friend, who was African American. While feeling slightly awkward, but sincerely curious, I asked him, “why do I never see white and black students hanging out with each other?” He hesitated for a moment, and released a heavy sigh, seeming as if he had just lifted off something. He said, “It has always been this way man~”

It is true that our differences cannot be denied. It is everywhere around us. Yes, it may be difficult at times to associate with someone who is different than you, but this is not a valid justification for causing any senseless harm to that person. Instead, let us acknowledge and unite in our differences. This should be our strength, not our weakness.

Freedom of speech was fought for by the founders of this nation, and later by civil rights leaders, not so that we can freely insult others, but so that we can debate our convictions, and speak against any injustices. There are some, who practice coercion to force people into their beliefs. As a person of faith, if I am given by God the freedom to choose what I would like to believe, then everyone else should also be allowed to choose for themselves. And there are some, who stay hidden in their little boxes. Many prefer to sit and lay back on their soft cushion of indifference. To these friends, I say, let us not wait for someone else to lead us. Let us not wait

for a change to appear. Instead, let us shake people out of their apathy with dramatic examples, let us inspire our younger siblings and our children who look up to us for guidance, and yes, we can do this as individuals!

We can do this by understanding that we must not blame the actions of a few on an entire civilization. The last time we did so, we were in the Holocaust. And above all things, let us remember that we are first and foremost human beings. We are similar in almost 99.5% of our genes. We all yearn for love and joy, and not simply for hatred and violence. If you ever look from a distant viewpoint of our large cosmos, we see that we live in a tiny blue planet called Earth. This is our only home, at least for now and for many coming generations. How can we even think of venturing out into space in search for another home, when we have wars, religious hatred, and acts of intolerance under our own roof. Yes, there are these acts of violence, but let us not point our fingers on a certain group. Let us not be so quick to judge, and put the term “Islamic” in front of terrorists. Let us remove the “I” from ISIS. Let us pursue brotherhood, not retribution.

Today, if I was a woman of muslim faith, then I would like to proudly walk outside wearing my hijab. I would want to feel welcomed by everyone, and yet many muslim women feel vulnerable in their own neighborhood. As an activist and a role model for women, Malala Yousafzai advocated for a muslim woman’s right to equal education. Mr. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi led India to its independence through the means of nonviolence. Dr. Martin Luther King long stood for liberty and justice for the black citizens, singing to their last breath, “We shall overcome.” Let us not only cherish those moments as things of past, but also relive those moments, by saying, we too will persevere, we too will reach the other side of the mountain by standing up for tolerance, by giving hands to someone who is need of help, regardless of their faiths, their color, their nationality, and in my friend Roshan’s case, his caste.

