



March 26, 2019

*Comments in School Meeting: Remembering the Muslim Victims in New Zealand*

I want to start by wishing all of you a warm welcome back from Spring break – I know for many of you it was busy with various commitments – but I do hope you found some time to rest and restore and recharge your batteries.

As we emerge from winter and find ourselves on the brink of a new term, I am sure you share my anticipation of sunny days, spring athletics, and seeing this beautiful campus in bloom again. I know you are eager to reconnect with friends, to dive back into your course work, and to launch the new term, which, for me, is always my favorite time of year.

But I am sure you will understand me when I say, “We need to pause.”

Before moving ahead, before the relentless pull of obligations and responsibilities propels us forward, we need to take some time to reflect on recent events in New Zealand.

Normally, this would be a moment to send you on your way with a few light-hearted words of encouragement for spring -- but we did not create the timing of what occurred; we are not disconnected here from world events, we don't close our eyes to tragedy.

And because we are a community that cares, **we pause**.

I am sure you are all fully aware that on March 15, at least 50 people were killed as they gathered to pray in the city of Christchurch in what can only be described as a hate crime against Muslims. The attacks began at the Al Noor Mosque and continued at the Linwood Islamic Centre. Following the example of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, I won't name the suspected killer -- “He may have sought notoriety,” she said, “but we in New Zealand will give him nothing,” she said. “Not even his name.”

In the aftermath of the tragedy at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, I spoke of “struggling to avoid the numbness that comes with too much violence and absolutely senseless loss.”

This past Sunday, Student Council Representative Shaezmina Kahn echoed that sentiment in an email she sent to a number of us: "...given the frequency of terrorist attacks, I do believe that people in the global community are becoming desensitized to this display of inhumanity."

Part of our duty as a caring community is to avoid at all costs this numbness we might start to feel, or the air of banality that these all-too-frequent tragedies can take on if we don't stop to reflect, to empathize, and for those who pray, to pray.

**With that in mind, I have just three very brief reflections to share this afternoon, and I know there will be additional voices later this week, especially student voices, who will offer further thoughts and perspectives.**

- I want to start by remembering the victims and by expressing our deepest, heartfelt sympathy and condolences. I can scarcely comprehend the magnitude of suffering and loss that those families are only beginning to process. In doing so, I also want to express our solidarity with the outpouring of international outrage at this tragedy.

There have been a number very moving displays of support and solidarity, many of them symbolic. My uncle, a Catholic priest who spent most of his life teaching among local populations in developing countries, used to say that **symbols and rituals take over when words fail us**. One such symbolic gesture came from members of the Maori community, the primary indigenous people of New Zealand, who performed the traditional haka dance in front of the Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch, a dance that is an emphatic celebration of life. Another gesture involved female newscasters, police officers, nurses, and other professionals in New Zealand who donned the hijab in solidarity with the Muslim community.

- I also want to mention the principled, decisive leadership in this moment of crisis that we have seen in Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. Her personal grief, the clarity of her messages, and her willingness to take action quickly have been moving and inspiring to me. Days after the tragedy, referring to this "extraordinary and unprecedented act of violence," she said, "It has no place in New Zealand. Many of those affected will be members of our migrant communities. New Zealand is their home—**they are us.**"
- And finally, I want to take a moment to remind ourselves that this is not the first time we've been faced with deeply troubling circumstances, and it is precisely at these moments that we need to recommit to our core values as a community and to our founding principles as a country; these serve as guideposts in a world that may not share those principles: **in this case, the fundamental right of religious freedom, to worship and practice one's religion in a safe and respectful environment.**

We live in complicated times. The FBI has documented a clear increase in hate crimes in recent years in our own country, especially hate crimes directed against an individual's race or religion. As I look to make sense of this recent tragic episode, where there is no sense or logic, I am reminded of the wisdom and foresight that guided our founders who sought to impose rational values on a frequently irrational world. The basic freedom of worship is a settled question enshrined in our Constitution, and while it may not be open to debate, such freedoms are open to attack. Which is why our unwavering commitment, as a free people, is so important.

**We need to trust the guideposts, stay true to our ideals, and for all of our imperfections, strive ceaselessly to measure up to those ideals and be worthy of them.**

I'll end with brief historical allusion. I recently heard historian Jon Meacham speak, and was somewhat comforted to hear him make the point that while we **do** live in deeply complicated, unsettling times, there have been in the past, frequent, serious tests of our constitutional ideals and aspirations.

Meacham referred to a speech that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave in 1933 in the depths of the Great Depression. In his speech, he asserted that in order to lift the country out of such catastrophic economic straits, he might well need wartime presidential powers. **The crowd roared it's approval.** That night, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her diary of feeling deeply chilled by how receptive the populace was to authoritarian power, especially at a time when, for those who were watching, dictatorships under Stalin and Hitler were rapidly on the rise. This was 1933, there was no end in sight for the Depression, and we had yet to face the test of World War II and the Holocaust.

We emerged from World War II with Hitler vanquished, an integrated military, and not long after, the Supreme Court produced the Brown vs. Board of Education decision ending segregation.

So we have endured difficult trials in the past, assaults on our faith in our values, and by staying resolute, we have emerged stronger. For me, this is a moment

- to mourn deeply those victims in New Zealand;
- to condemn and reject the hatred that leads to such tragedy;
- and to recommit, resolutely, to the values that uphold our basic freedoms.

Thank you very much.

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