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I want to share some thoughts on the cover of the program of the International Law and Religion Symposium, why I picked the photo, and what it means to me. The picture is of a woman in a refugee camp and was taken by Their Story Is Our Story, an organization formed by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who identify with migrants because of our religious tradition's experience with forced migration. They have a book in which they document the stories of those who face persecution, giving a voice to the voiceless.¹

I love a statement made by one of my own religious leaders that I believe applies with equal

Seeing Religious Persecution

Concluding remarks offered at the 26th Annual International Law and Religion Symposium on October 9, 2019, at BYU Law.

force to those suffering religious persecution. He was speaking of refugees, but you can take a little liberty and translate the word *refugee* into “victim of persecution.” He said:

Being a refugee may be a defining moment in the lives of those who are refugees, but being a refugee does not define them. Like countless thousands before them, this will be a period—we

*hope a short period—in their lives. Some of them will go on to be Nobel laureates, public servants, physicians, scientists, musicians, artists, religious leaders, and contributors in other fields. Indeed, many of them were these things before they lost everything. This moment does not define them, but our response will help define us.*²

I love that phrase: “our response will help define us.”

I think that sums up what we have tried to address here this year. Our response to the persecution we see throughout the world—how will we let that define us? We have heard so much about the challenges, the courage, and the need for articulate defenders for those facing persecution. I have been particularly moved by so many of you who have clearly been defined by your response to

persecution. And I appreciate the example of courage and humility many of you give to me in being willing to admit failings in your own communities, because certainly this is a challenge for us all.

Academics who study empathy identify concern for others as one of its aspects. Harvard psychiatry professor Dr. Helen Riess defined this empathetic concern as an “inner motivation that moves people to respond and express the urge to care about another person’s welfare”³ and has noted that this is deeply influenced by our environment. We have more concern for those in need who resemble us. We have more concern for the suffering of one person than for the suffering of many. We feel less concern if we think that others deserve to suffer. We feel less concern if we think we have a higher social status.⁴ I think probably those cover all of us; we are all guilty of this.

Two of my heroes are Václav Havel and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Havel wrote of the power of the powerless. He noted how “the world[s] of the powerful and . . . the powerless . . . are never divided by a sharp line: everyone has a small part of himself in both.”⁵ Solzhenitsyn similarly wrote, “[T]he line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.”⁶

I started these comments by saying I would explain why I picked this picture, but I have not quite gotten there yet, so I am going to conclude by explaining what this photo means to me. When I saw this picture, it immediately spoke to me. You

have heard from my colleague Professor Brett Scharffs about the Punta del Este Declaration,⁷ and you have seen the corresponding brochure on human dignity, with those amazingly powerful, moving photos of faces, especially eyes, that reach out and engage you. You see these people and instantly feel a connection to them.

Well, after thinking about the contrast with these captivating photos, I realized why the photo on the program spoke to me. We do not see the woman’s face. She’s depersonalized; she’s abstracted; she’s not valued. She is not seen as a human being. If anything, we see her headscarf and perhaps assume she is Muslim. That is all we know about her. To me, this failure to see a person beyond her religion is a powerful image of persecution, particularly religious persecution.

The award-winning American writer Toni Morrison once spoke about children, and I love this quote from her interview. To me, it speaks to how we can and should respond to everyone, not just children. She said, “When a kid walks in the room—your child or anybody else’s child—does your face light up? That’s what they’re looking for. . . . Let your face speak what’s in your heart. . . . It’s just as small as that.”⁸

By seeing people, by having our faces light up when we see them, we speak what is in our hearts. We see them. We see their challenges. Especially when they are not from our own religious tradition, when they are not from our own class or social status, when they are not from our own culture. When we see them and have our faces light up, we speak what is in our hearts.

Harvard psychologist Dr. Susan David commented about the Zulu greeting *sawubona*, which means “I see you.”⁹ Isn’t that a wonderful greeting? I want to see others. To me, this is the essence of human dignity: to see every individual around us and each person’s value.

I have a practice in my family of praying with my children every night, and I often mention in my prayers individual family members, neighbors, or friends who are struggling with one issue or another, or myself when I feel I am particularly struggling. But one night my son asked me, “Mom, why are we just praying for people we know? Aren’t the people we don’t know suffering too?”

We all have difficulties in our lives. For some these are enormous, overwhelming, and life-threatening challenges—

persecution based on freedom of religion or belief or other issues. But the people who matter are not just the people who are my religion, my neighbors, or my friends.

I am an American, I am an Anglo-Saxon, I am a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I am a Christian. And I know at times in the past that I have not always seen people who are not Americans or who are not white or who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or who are not Christian. And for that I apologize and ask forgiveness. But my hope is that each of us can do better, that I can do better, that we can relate to everyone we meet, and that we can see them and greet them with *sawubona*—I see you.

Thank you.

NOTES

- 1 See *Their Story Is Our Story*, comp., *Let Me Tell You My Story: Refugee Stories of Hope, Courage, and Humanity* (Sanger, California: Familius, 2018).
- 2 Patrick Kearon, “Refuge from the Storm,” *Ensign*, May 2016; emphasis in original.
- 3 Helen Riess with Liz Neporent, *The Empathy Effect: Seven Neuroscience-Based Keys for Transforming the Way We Live, Love, Work, and Connect Across Differences* (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2018), 24.
- 4 See *id.*, 32.
- 5 Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvížďala*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1990), 182; originally published in 1986. Also Havel, “An Orientation of the Heart,” in Paul Rogat Loeb, ed., *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen’s Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 83.
- 6 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), vol. 2, 615.
- 7 See Punta del Este Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere: Seventy Years After the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Dec. 2018, dignityforeveryone.org/punta-del-este-declaration-2.
- 8 Toni Morrison, on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, May 26, 2000; see also “Does Your Face Light Up?” *Oprah’s Lifeclass*, Nov. 2, 2011, oprah.com/oprahs-lifeclass/does-your-face-light-up-video. I am indebted to Deborah Farmer Kris’s writing, which introduced me to this quote: see Kris, “‘Does Your Face Light Up’: Five Words That Changed My Teaching and Parenting,” *Lifecompass Blog*, Montrose School, Sept. 10, 2019, info.montroseschool.org/blog/does-your-face-light-up-five-words-that-changed-my-teaching-and-parenting.
- 9 Deborah Farmer Kris’s writing also introduced me to Dr. Susan David’s use of the Zulu term *sawubona*: see Kris, “Does Your Face Light Up?”