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TO:

SUBJECT: Threshold Graduation Speech
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"You're Not As Unique As You Think You Are"

Hi All! I wanted to share a speech I gave at the graduation ceremony for the Threshold Program yesterday. To put it in context, the program was a 9 month interfaith program designed to help inmates advance on their spiritual path. There was a small group of 22 of us that participated in this last session and I learned a lot from the stories the women shared -- about compassion and struggles and more. I hope something in here resonates with you. If nothing else, this provides a little window into my time here and how I'm spending it. Love to all of you.

Good afternoon, everyone. It's an honor to say a few words to celebrate the completion of the Threshold Program. Thank you to the staff here today, especially Ms. Chasse, and to everyone who participated in some way to make this happen.

I think it's fair to say that all of us began this program not sure of what to expect. Some of us may have figured that even if we got nothing else out of it, an afternoon out of work would be enough. But the fact that no one quit is telling. Whatever our differences, we are united in that each of us wants to be better. Each of us wants to grow. Each of us loves God and wants to live with greater peace, purpose, and love.

Today I want to talk about the power of human connections and our ability to come together and encourage one another as part of our spiritual journey. We have been given an incredible opportunity to support one another during a time of adversity and deepen our faith in the process. No matter our background, we share the need to know that someone has our back. We need to feel heard and seen. And the power of simply bearing witness to each other's journey -- its joys and its pain -- brings us closer to God. The deep-seeded desire to know we are not alone is why every faith tradition comes together to pray, praise, celebrate, and mark important milestones.

I want to share two pieces of advice given to me during a very difficult time in my own life. In preparation for trial I had two attorneys -- an older Jewish man in his 70s and a younger attorney who had never before had a criminal trial. Each gave me a piece of advice that has stuck with me.

One day I was expressing frustration at my situation -- ranting about "why me, this is so unfair, and no one could possibly understand." We've all had a time when we've felt like our problems are bigger than other people's, our pain more pronounced, and our circumstances incomprehensible.

My older attorney interrupted me saying, "you're not as unique as you think you are." I bristled at his comment. I was insulted and defensive. But he was right. Not everyone knows what it feels like to be on the losing end of "you versus the United States of America," but although the circumstances of life are many, the range of human emotions we all experience at one time or another is few. Life challenges us in different ways, but none of us is immune from trials. Some of us battle illness, or addiction, or the loss of a child. Some struggle through divorce or financial difficulties. But loss is loss, and pain is pain. At some point we need to stop comparing and start practicing compassion. Part of our spiritual journey involves getting over ourselves.

Let us never forget our shared humanity and the reality that at some point we all experience hard times. We all come into the world full of love and light -- with no ego or animosity. Somewhere along the way we learn fear and face pain and as a result we begin to construct walls between "us" and "them." We create divisions through labels, or identities that mean nothing to God and serve only to unnecessarily divide us. We lose the inherent sense of interconnectedness and interdependence that is part of our creation.

Over time, we distinguish ourselves by all sorts of unimportant things like the color of our skin -- even here we experience division over the color of a uniform, ignoring the shared humanity of our nakedness beneath it. We are not as unique as we think we are. We define ourselves by titles, material wealth, religion or political affiliations. We compare and compete in self-defeating ways that move us further away from God and the ability to see God in another. We place distance between our true

nature as loving, creative, and holy beings and our actions and interactions with others.

We all make mistakes. It is in our brokenness that God finds us and teaches us. When we fall and when we fail, we should all be able to look up and see God in the face of the one reaching out their hand to lift us up. We should practice being the one there with an outstretched hand and kind words. We can't always fix each other's problems, but we can be there to help bear one another's pain. There is a saying, "Grace sat with me until I could walk in her again." By lovingly sitting with one another at times of isolation, despair and suffering, just as Jesus did, and just as we did during our time in Threshold, we become grace. We let go of what makes us different and acknowledge our sameness.

The second piece of advice is something my younger attorney said just after my conviction. As we walked from the courthouse, cameras and a small crowd of people surrounded us. I put my head down to make my way through an unfriendly sea of strangers looking for a photo or comment -- seeking entertainment from my misery. My attorney leaned close and whispered in my ear, "keep your head up."

Because of the time and conversations we've shared through this program, I know that each of us has had a similar moment -- one in which we want to look down and hide from the reality of our circumstances, to cover our face and retreat from the world, to become invisible. But God is there, whispering in our ear, "keep your head up."

We are not the sum of our mistakes. Fear and shame and guilt have no place in our lives and it's time to hold our heads high. It's time to move courageously through the world with the unshakable faith that the Holy Spirit dwells in us and works through us.

My prayer for every one of us is that we can continue to set aside our differences and treat ourselves and one another with the extraordinary love and respect that our faith seeks. If we can learn to see one another as God sees us -- our beauty, our gifts, to see the Holy Spirit within -- imagine the love that would radiate from us and permeate the atmosphere of this camp and beyond. Love is contagious. So is kindness. Imagine the miracle it would be if God could look upon us and smile as he watches all of us -- in green, in blue, in suits, and in sweats -- practice the patience, kindness, and love that he built into our nature.

Ladies, we are not as unique as we think we are. We all bleed the same. We all seek love, acceptance, and understanding. We are equally beloved daughters of the most high God. We are beautifully and wonderfully made. Whatever unique gifts, talents, and challenges we are given, we are united by the same Divine spark responsible for our creation.

I'd like to end my words with the instruction to all of us here today -- keep your head up. Keep hope. Be not afraid. Courageously face your fears, trust in your worth, never be afraid to show your face, and let your light shine.

For everyone that shared a piece of their story during this program, thank you. Thank you for allowing us all to be your witness. We see you. We hear you. So does God. And you are never alone.

Thank you.