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INTERNATIONAL ADVOCATE FOR  
PEACE AWARD

Thank you very much. Thank you. Whoa! What a speech, I'm totally knocked out, and by a guy no less! I don't think that's ever happened. There is something about a man talking about caring about women that moves me to my core, so thank you very much. I'm completely honored and overwhelmed and really happy to be here. It's funny, I've been doing the new show and I haven't been accepting anything like this, but I live like three blocks from here, and I felt like you are my community. So I wanted to show up and be here today, and I feel really honored to be honored by you.

I've been thinking a lot about what I want to say. These have been very disturbing weeks and months since the war on Iraq began. At night, I watch news shows and listen to pundits and politicians and policy-makers, and sometimes I feel unbearable sorrow. Sometimes this complete helplessness in minutes becomes rage. What I feel the most is that the words and the dialogue and the discussion that I'm hearing is flat and disassociated and far away. That the paradigm, the essential argument, the box inside which all the ideas are agreeing or disagreeing is an empty, old, unusable, and very dangerous and deadly box. I want to reach in, when I'm watching these people talking and pull the minds, the words, the men, the thoughts out of the contained, limited world they live in so that they can be helped to transform this terrible idea or myth they have created about war on Iraq, or on terror, or on difference, war on fear, war on anything. I want them to hear the words that they are using. Words like "occupy," "invade," "conquer," "greatest nation," "evil doers," "enemy," "freedom."

Freedom. How can they speak of freedom when they are locked in this box, in this power struggle that is so unfree, its only end can really be the death of our species? Freedom. Freedom. There is no freedom without imagination. Bombs do not make people free, bombs do not engage people's trust, bombs do not invite people to connect. There is no freedom without imagination. And imagination requires a leap. It involves metaphor and living on other levels and trusting the invisible, as much if not more than we trust the visible. Imagination asks us to suspend taking sides, being right or wrong, left or right, on top or on the bottom. It asks

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that we live in all of it. Turning and returning, seeing it one way and another. Imagination actually demands time, patience, daydreaming, lingering. It means getting lost, not having answers when you don't have answers. It means not being afraid of being lost, but surrendering to the unsureness and vulnerability and fear, because that's when imagination really gets clear. Imagination is actually a practice, exercising the soulful expression of what is possible. It is much more difficult in the end than knowing things or making fast decisions, or manipulating or lying or being right, or dropping bombs. I'm not naïve or some kind of blind hippie peace activist. I grew up with enormous violence. I'm a product of violence. My muscles were actually created reacting to violence. I became violent. I know the excitement of violence. I have found my aliveness and meaning through it. It no longer interests me. It is ultimately a deadly empty box. What I long for is freedom. What interests me is freedom. The great leap that we take as individuals, and then as a species, into this new waiting paradigm. I was thinking the other day that we have all the fire power we need to end meaning forever, we have it. We've done it. We won. We could actually use these weapons now to make peace the way we use imagined weapons to start a war.

There is a new story, a new myth, a new paradigm emerging all over this planet. I have been incredibly privileged over the last six years to witness it. I've probably been to over fifty countries. Women have been exiled from the box. Patriarchy does that, ironically. It has been both our undoing and our salvation. And in the end I think it will be what saved the species. Outside, underground, in between, we have been all along creating another way of being, another world. Imagination is the mechanism for this world because in many ways the lives of women and children exist most in the future. I want to tell a few stories today that represent this kind of imagination and how it has functioned in women I've met around the world, who through their imagining have not only been peacemakers but what we call now on V-day, "vagina warriors." I'm using the word "warrior" in a whole new way because I think that the energy required to bring about peace requires a fierceness and devotion and commitment and intensity; but when you put warrior with vagina, it becomes "life warrior," person dedicated to making sure life exists on this planet and peace exists on the planet.

I want to begin telling a little story of a woman named Agnes Paria, who I met four years ago in Kenya. Here is an example of how the imagination works and creates another kind of being, and

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maps out a path in the world that isn't mapped out when one isn't using the imagination. Agnes was mutilated when she was a little girl. She was mutilated against her will. No one asked her and, when she was finally asked, she said that she didn't want to be mutilated, but no one cared. They came, they took her, and they cut her, and it obviously had an enormous impact on Agnes. But rather than going out and getting an AK-47, or a piece of glass, or a razor, she went inside herself and actually experienced the death, mourning, grieving, and loss she felt having had her clitoris removed, and she made a commitment to go and to devote her life to stopping it from happening to other girls. This to me is a "vagina warrior." Over the years that Agnes worked, she imagined that she would create this presentation, this beautiful box. But it was a box of complexity, not a box of endings and dead ends, and inside the box was a torso, half a woman's anatomy, a woman's vagina, and she would walk through the valley, which is wide and vast, and she had a little box that she took with her and every place she went she would take it out and she would show people what a beautiful, healthy vagina looked like and what a mutilated vagina looked like. And she taught mothers and fathers and daughters, and brothers and sisters and girls. Over the course of her walking she saved fifteen hundred girls from being cut in eight years. For those of you who haven't been to Kenya, the Rift Valley is vast and wide, and the nomads, it's hard to even find them. In the eight years of her walking, she'd saved fifteen hundred girls from being cut; and when we met her, I said to Agnes, "What could V-day do for you?" And she said "Eve, if you could get me a Jeep, I could get around a lot faster." So we bought her a Jeep, and in the year that she had the jeep, she saved forty five hundred girls from being cut. And then we said, "What else could we get?" and she said, "Well, if you gave me money, we could build a house." And two years ago we went, and Agnes opened the first safe house in Narak, Kenya. And now girls, fifty girls at a time, can run away from their homes when they want to save their clitoris, and save their freedom, and save their futures, and they stay with Agnes. And what's happening is that they stay long enough so that their families actually understand that it's a terrible practice and then they get invited back into their families and it has become the centerpiece of the community and a safe place in the community. And Agnes, who was initially exiled, and slandered, and put down, and a pariah in her community, has now become the Mayor essentially of Narak and is one of the greatest women and, as a result, not only is the practice stopping, but all these other issues have bubbled up. Women are now

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talking about being abused in their marriages, they're talking about the fact that they want to be educated. They are building a school this year, next to the house, so that girls can continue their education. Because Agnes made a decision to have imagination, to get a little box that was personal and specific and to walk through the valley and, rather than judging people or hurting people or violating people, she just showed them what a healthy vagina looked like and what a mutilated vagina looked like. It was very simple.

In Warez, this is another example of imagination, but a different form of imagination. For those of you who don't know what's going on in Warez, over the last ten years over three hundred women have been mutilated, murdered, raped, and disappeared. Ninety-four of them have been found. There has been absolutely not one conviction on any of those murders, and it goes on. A lot of action has happened. I'm very proud to say that this V-day, February 14, V-day brought, with Amnesty International, seven thousand people into the streets of Warez, a magnificent protest, and things are gradually, incrementally beginning to change.

I want to tell you a story of a mother, and this to me is an example of imagination. Although it isn't about saving someone, to me, it's what the imagination has the capacity to do. I was there a few months ago, and I met this woman named Estir, and her daughter had been taken from her. It was an incredibly tragic story. They were very poor, and she was beaten by her husband, and she moved her children out, and she was trying to find a way to keep feeding her children. She had this domestic job, and it wasn't enough money to feed the family, so her fifteen year old daughter, Brenda, said "I'll go and I'll take your job and you'll get another job making [INAUDIBLE] and we'll be able to support the family." On the first day, her daughter went to her job; she didn't come home. Estir was very concerned and she went to meet the domestic family where the daughter had gone to work, and she had never turned up. Through a long, involved, complex series of five years it took Estir to track down her daughter, they finally found the body of her daughter, and it was clear that she was killed by a knifing in her stomach. She literally stood by her daughter's body, and she knew it was her daughter and felt her clothes, the authorities said that there wasn't enough DNA for her mother to be right and her mother didn't know that it was her daughter. So for five years they took her on this wild goose chase where they had DNA, then they didn't have DNA, then they lost DNA, then they found DNA. And at the end of the five years it turned out that, of

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course, it was her daughter and that it had been her daughter all along. When I met Estir, I said to Estir “Have you ever been to your daughter’s grave?” And she said “No, because it’s far away and there are no busses that go there and they had no car.” So we decided that we would take Estir to her daughter’s grave because it’s really important to go to your daughter’s grave, as we know; that’s how mourning and the process of mourning occurs. We drove out to the graveyard, and it was vast in the middle of the desert, and there were hundreds of graves and of course the markings on the graves were primitive and rudimentary. Little white crosses in the sun. She had a little paper that said “Brendita” with an “X” on it, and it was impossible to locate because there were no numbers but through a miracle of miracles we found her daughter’s grave. I witnessed something that day that was so powerful and so intense. Her mother, who had been a very unperformative and very quiet woman, when she saw the grave, literally ran to the grave and threw herself on the grave, threw herself on it, and she started digging the grave, just digging dirt as if she were covering her daughter up and protecting her. And in the process of being there for half an hour, she ended up getting stones, and she decorated her daughter’s grave, and she put flowers on it as if she were dressing her daughter for her coming out party, and she got water, and she watered her grave; and I realized the active imagination that was going on for this woman. That she was, in fact, clothing her daughter, and healing her daughter, and protecting her daughter, and dressing her daughter, and honoring her daughter, and I thought to myself that that act of active imagination, we were all there witnessing it, and it was so powerful that this incredible healing was going on in the entire graveyard, because this woman had the capacity to love her daughter so much, to feel the presence of her daughter so deeply, that she was actually there for her as she lay on the ground. She wasn’t on a corpse, she wasn’t on a grave, she was with her daughter.

I want to talk about Afghanistan, where for years an active imagination has been the only thing that has kept the women of Afghanistan alive. When I first went to Afghanistan in 1999, I went in with a group called RAWA, some of you may know who they are, they are the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, and they are unbelievably brave, courageous, and visionary women. And because their leader was assassinated by the Soviet KGB, they were forced to go underground in doing the work they do. When I first went there, I was blown away by this

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community of women because they all lived in burkas, they all lived underground, they were spread out throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan, and they were doing the most amazing work. They were running apprentices and schools. They were running orphanages and shelters. They had a complete network without telephones, where they could literally pass signals all the way through from Pakistan to Afghanistan, and one of the things that struck me was, I know that after 9/11 you all probably saw those video tapes of that execution in the stadium where the woman was executed; I'll tell you a really interesting story. When I first went to Afghanistan in 1999, under the Taliban, women literally were going into stadiums where the Taliban were executing women publicly, and they were taking video cameras underneath their burkas and they were documenting those executions, obviously risking their lives. If they had been caught they would have been killed instantly. When I first went to Afghanistan we went in and when we came back we were in this refugee camp in Pakistan, and they took out that same film that was shown at 9/11 and put it on the television, and all these women gathered to watch this woman's documentation of the executions. It was an incredibly emotional scene, and one of the women who had been doing the documentation had an epileptic fit in the middle of it, and her daughter came running in, but what was incredible was that she said to me after her epileptic fit that she had not had epilepsy before she started documenting the trauma; and she said if she had to do it all over again, she would still have documented the trauma, because by documenting it, they knew there was a possibility that one day the women of Afghanistan would be saved. And in fact, when I came back to the United States in 1999, I had that footage and I brought it to every news outlet in America, and not one news outlet would put it on television, because they weren't interested in the women of Afghanistan. It wasn't until 9/11 occurred that people suddenly had an interest, and briefly I will say, in the women of Afghanistan, and then they put it on television. But what I will say is that the RAWA women had the vision and the imagination. They didn't go around, again, with AK-47s, they didn't burn people, they didn't kill people, they documented them, and, to me, these forms that women have developed throughout the world, of making a way through violence, carving a way through violence that isn't about violence, to me, is the genius of imagination.

I met this woman recently in Palestine who told me this great story, and she was talking about how Palestinians negotiate the

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checkpoints. And she told me what they do is they tell jokes, and I said “What do you mean?” And she said, “When we get to the checkpoints and the soldiers are searching us, we tell them jokes and they laugh, and then they put their guns down.” And I started thinking about how women do that all the time. We have a way of disarming violence, conflicting situations, difficulty with life, finding humor by finding another way that isn’t about going into the violence itself and perpetuating and escalating the violence.

I was just in Pakistan last year, and another example is a woman name Shanaze Bakarie, who in Pakistan, five thousand women have been acid-burned by their husbands or family members, and basically again not one person has been convicted of any of these crimes; and Shanaze Bakarie, another way of imagination, has gone and has sat by the beds of every single woman who has been acid-burned, five thousand women, and she holds their hands and she tells them stories as they are dying, most of them. In that act, in that moment, she has actually created a passageway where they can begin to see something other than the terrible, terrible terror that has been done to them.

I want to tell the story of a woman named Yurnama Mahomod, who, to me, has incredible imagination. I find it very, very disturbing what’s going on in Afghanistan right now and in Iraq. Obviously we know what’s going on to the general population in Iraq. But the word on women, unfortunately, is not getting out anywhere and, as is true in Afghanistan, all along we had this illusion, this supposition, that this war was being fought to liberate the women of Afghanistan. I think many women in this country got behind this war because we thought women would be liberated. We actually encouraged them to have imaginations. We said we are going to come and liberate you so please begin to picture a future. I’ve been to Afghanistan quite a few times; and the last time I was there was less than a year ago, and we had a summit where we brought women from all over Afghanistan to picture and envision and imagine what their futures could be, and then to create actions and plans and programs that we could then fund. What I want to tell you is that it is not a safe place, it is not a secure place; and that, in fact, in a way, it is potentially more devastating than it was before, because, now that we have activated people’s imaginations and encourage them to have a vision and a future, to be locked in such an insecure environment, where so many women are being raped, and so many women are at high risk now because the northern alliance and the Taliban are still at large, women are

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actually at higher risk in many ways than they were before. I don't know if you're aware of this, but there is an enormous amount of women who are self-emulating. Reports are coming out, and I'm getting them every day on e-mail, that hundreds of women are killing themselves because of this very factor that I'm talking about. The promise of the liberation, the promise of a future, and the desolations when this future has not arrived; and it just beholds all of us to really examine how it is that we are living in a country that has promised freedom to certain women, and we have based a war, not only, I believe, on our own desire to end terrorism but, in theory, to free women, and this freedom has not occurred and, yet, none of us know this or seem to be speaking out about it.

In Iraq, where we, in theory, went to liberate the people of Iraq. In Baghdad, for example, over the last four months, seventy women a month have been abducted, raped, and sold into sex slavery. And this, by the way, was not going on under the incredible tyranny of Saddam Hussein. In fact, under Saddam Hussein, women were doctors and lawyers, and were freely walking in the street, and in the months since the US bombings, women are literally staying in their homes. The lawlessness, the combination of high fundamentalism and surreal law and the lawlessness has now made it an absolutely reckless place for women all through Iraq, but particularly in Baghdad; and Yanmar Muhammad, who we just bought here, is doing extraordinary work. Another woman with a vision who went out and started working with these women who were being abducted, and started created marches, and has now created this thing called "power zones," which we are helping her support, where she is opening safe places for women all through Iraq; her life is completely under threat. She has two assassination attempts on her life right now, and the U.S. authorities have absolutely no interest in helping her whatsoever. She has been to them repeatedly.

I think what I feel right now, in terms of the world, is that there are so many; this box that I keep feeling information is being reported through, and in and out of, is not a box I'm living in. I feel like I'm living in this other world of Vagina Warriors. I see them everywhere in this world, and they are men as well as women. They are people who have made a conscious decision that violence is not the path that all of us knew. I certainly was around enough people marching who knew that at the beginning of the Iraq war, that there was a good chance that war in Iraq would create more violence. That without a plan or strategy or a relationship with the

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people on the ground, the chances are good that chaos would be resulting. I want to say that one of the things I've learned from V-day is V-day works, very simply for one reason: women in individual communities around the world bring it there and, actually they know what they need to do, it turns out, they don't need Americans to tell them. If you go and you interview women in any part of the world and you say, "What do you need for your community?" They actually know it turns out. And part of the work of making peace is not imposing your agenda or saying that this is what I believe you should be doing, but it's asking people what they need and how they would like to do it. So for example, in Cairo, where V-day is now thriving because of Haback Asmin, our wonderful special representative, women were making vagina cookies three weeks ago in Cairo because women in Cairo knew they wanted to open a safe house for the number of women who are being beaten, and V-day is helping them get the money to do that. But what it means is that you serve other people. You don't control other people. You don't dictate other people. You provide them the resources you have luckily been able to get, because you are in a country that has an enormous amount of resources and luxury. And I think, if I can say it, what the U.S. government has not done in the Iraq war is ever ask the Iraqi people what they want! This was all done in their name, and this was all done for them without any relationship with the people we were, in theory, doing it for or with. So now we are in this position where we suddenly don't understand why things have gone wrong. If someone comes in your house, and makes a decision where they know better what should be going on in your house, and they move all your furniture and they get rid of all the things you love and they redecorate, and you come home and you're upset, there is probably a good reason. Now their intentions might have been whatever they were, but it's actually your house it turns out. One of the things I've learned over the years with V-day is, if we really are serious about peace, and if we are really serious about stopping violence, we need to shut up and serve. We need to really go and listen and serve, and I mean that in the deepest, spiritualist, humblest sense. When you go with an idea about how people should be or behave, you are not serving them; you are manipulating and controlling them; and that is a completely different impulse, and the end result will not be peace and will not be non-violence.

I want to close by saying that we were just in India, and we were with amazing women there who are doing fantastic work to

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stop violence towards women and, at one point, we went to a place called Hamagan Pradesh, which is up in the mountains near the Dalai Lama, near Dharamsala, and we are opening, in conjunction with a group there called Jakorie, a sanctuary for abused women from all over South Asia to come, and we were there breaking ground and creating this incredibly beautiful place. There are streams that run from the Himalayas through it. What they had done was they created a garden of the imagination and, in the garden, there were these stones, and everyone had been asked to write a word. A word or what they wanted to grow in this garden. Then this beautiful artist had carved these stones that represented the words and all through there was truth, and there was compassion and there was vagina, which I was very happy about; and I looked at this place, and I thought this is how women do it. We create gardens of imagination and it's not naïve, it's another way. It's underneath it all. It's between it all, it's around it all. It's in the levels of it all. Imagination is equal to compassion. When you imagine someone else's life and struggle and feelings, you enter them. When you are inside someone it makes it almost impossible to kill them. This war, this invasion, this occupation has brought a loudness, more terror, the death of nineteen-year-olds who died for someone else's box. It has burned children, it has raped women, it has dragged bodies into the streets, it has created unspeakable cruelty and humiliation and division and corruption and distrust and many more enemies, who now are stuck in the box.

There is another way. It involves thinking, patience, planning, and the wisdom of many. In the case of Iraq, it would have meant that we would have begun the whole situation saying that war was not an option. Then we as a world would have been compelled to work in our collective imagination. It would have meant that through the process of evolving a vision we would have come to actually know each other. Know our partners in the Arab world, know our partners in the European world and, through that, we would have learned about each other and this, more ideas would have come, and eventually the right idea would have come. Through this process a world would have found itself which would be in the imagining of itself. This writing, all of this is an active imagination. You can try to fit it into the box, you can contain it, but that can't be done. I just say we all begin by saying we don't understand. We begin here, and that's where the real freedom starts. Thank you all very much.

[APPLAUSE]