

“NO ORDINARY JOURNEY”

Dr. Suja Lowenthal, Vice Mayor of Long Beach

First, let me welcome you to Long Beach!

I want to thank the U.S. National Committee for selecting our beautiful city to host your inspiring conference. This is an amazing city made better by your presence. And, the fact that anytime a group of women gather to improve just our corner of the world or the entire world, we are only the better for it.

It's an honor to be with you today.

This conference is a reminder of our shared story... No matter what corner of the world we come from, we have a shared story.

Our challenges, struggles and ultimately successes have a common thread that stitches together our journey to this very conference today.

And so, I want to share with you my own unlikely journey from India to the United States. Mine is not a unique story at all. I don't tell it because it is or because it is special. I tell it because the narrative is quite a common one where gender, race, poverty could have converged to ensure that I would have never stood before you today; one that we know threads through the stories of the nearly 70% of the world's impoverished today – they happen to be women.

COMING TO AMERICA

I was born in a little port city called Madras, now Chennai, and spent much of my childhood playing on my aunt's rooftop and gazing at the port cranes and the ocean beyond, imagining all the distant places that ships were going. Here, we call rooftop dwellings penthouses. Not so much in India. It was an illegal shack and the hottest place to be when it is scorching hot.

My mother was a nurse and my father worked at the Port of Madras. Our family is originally from another state, Kerala. Being in Madras was tough for my mother – new language and discrimination against those like her who had come from another state for better work. That sounds familiar today with the anti-immigration rhetoric in the States.

I would be remiss if I did not share one point that changed the entire trajectory of my parents' lives, my life, my son's life and the lives of those that will follow us.

My mother was born to an impoverished family, not uncommon in her village in Kerala. Her father died when she was two and her mother remarried leaving her to bounce from relative to relative. At age 16, she decided that education would be her only way out. She wanted to attend nursing school. Her family said no. She defied her family, boarded a train and headed north to Bombay.

She shows up, finds out she has to 17 to register for school and stood in the lobby...

The elements that could have swallowed her up – poverty, homelessness, red light district – in one swift motion did not.

As she stood in the lobby – I don't know if she realized then what I realized by the time I came to understand her story – in a matter of moments, the fate of which way her life and the lives of all whom she forebears will be changed forever.

The comfort of strangers can be a powerful thing...the receptionist took her in... A strong-willed young girl, ignorant to the world outside her own village, driven by the desire for self-determination, a “song and a prayer” as they say and a tremendous amount of luck. Not an uncommon story.

My family wasn't wealthy, but my parents emphasized the importance of education and community service.

Education being the key to opportunities...as with my mother's life.

And public service reinforcing our bond to one another as human beings.

Public service comes in many forms

For my mother, it was a lifetime spent helping others in their time of sickness

For my father, it was countless hours in the community, making sure everyone was cared for

Some of my fondest memories are of me riding on the front of my father's bicycle from one place to another...

That wonderful bicycle – in Asian countries, a great symbol of mobility for the masses

It's almost as though if we can move, we have hope and there is hope...just as books can transport us, so can the immutable bike.

And when we talk of bikes and symbols, I realize that to the average tourist, South Asian thoroughfares can look like one giant accident waiting to happen – you've got cars, buses, motorcycles and bikes, lots and lots of bikes, on the same road.

To us, it was a symphony of different users coming together to share the space – and it's these experiences I would tuck away for another day.

Now, as I mentioned before, my family stressed education as the key to opportunities...

And in fact, it was an opportunity for my mother, which led my family to United States.

The U.S. had a shortage of nurses in the 70's and was recruiting nurses worldwide with grant programs...

So my parents decided that it was an opportunity we couldn't pass up

Just one thing though – it meant we'd be separated from my mother for two years.

For a 5-year old little girl – it was traumatic.

Not understanding time and space, I laid awake that first night and heard a plane overhead thinking that must be her in the sky. There were many tear-filled nights and days being the motherless child in the neighborhood.

But as I grew older and became a mother of my own beautiful little boy, I realized the true value of her sacrifice – something that we as mothers know all too well...

Mothers are the foundation of every culture.....

At times, they are the tablets upon which history is etched....war, disease, genocide - such pain is felt many times over by mothers because they are hubs to a family and community wheel.

Our shared sacrifice as mothers, daughters, sisters and women in our communities – no matter where you go in this world, you'll find that the condition of society can be measured by the treatment of its women.

By the opportunities and rights afforded them by law and culture

You coming together in the purposeful way you do, know this all too well.

I've lived and gone to school in Southern California for most of my life now, but in many ways I'm still that Indian girl with a bag full of memories, experiences and values to inform me, on the front seat of my dad's bike, wind on my face, the sights, sounds, and smells striking all my senses, seeing things not always as they are, but closing my eyes and seeing them as they should be.

This is my earliest memory of hearing in my mind and feeling in my heart a fundamental question that will shape who I am the rest of my life – Why Not?

APPLYING MY LIFE EXPERIENCE

As an elected school board member and now as Vice Mayor and council member, I've called upon those experiences to inform my policy making – I have focused on things that urban planners do – but I have tried to apply a spirituality to work and policy-making in a way that is intuitive to women. Mobility, the Environment, Health, Education and the plight of those less visible – whether they be hotel housekeepers, the underserved, women, children, and sometimes our four-legged friends.

Some things I have had the privilege to work on impact -

- Coming from one port city to another – as my cousin said during my swearing in to office many years ago – “like a message in a bottle, sent from the port of Madras to the port of Long Beach.
 - Seeing ports as economic engines with environmental burdens for port-adjacent communities – the less visible amongst us live the externalities of what global transport and technology afford the rest of us.
 - Knowing this compels me, as the elected representative of the area that houses the Port, to focus on improving air and water quality so that the less visible amongst us don’t pay the price for our comfort.
 - It inspires us to grow green collar jobs for the future, a future which includes those whose voices have been small for far too long.

- From issues related to global goods movement to right here on the ground. Seeing localized movement - Transportation – as life altering - offering choices to the user.

There is something magical about mobility. It is the great equalizer. I come from the poorest parts of this universe. And, even there, someone in the remotest village has a right to dream her dreams and have opportunities to realize these dreams. That is what mobility does. It makes a poor village girl’s chances of fulfilling her hopes and aspirations possible. Whether it be the 16-year old who got on a train to study nursing half way across her native country, or the 7-year old girl on her dad’s bike imagining a world she cannot quite see, it is a hope like nothing else can provide.

Only with mobility, whether by train, bike or bus, when we dream the impossible it can be possible.

A few years ago at the TED conference right here in Long Beach I was inspired by so many thought leaders and world changers. One particular speaker said the following - The miracle of your mind is that you can see the world as it isn't. We can imagine the future. We can remember the past. We can imagine what it is like to be some other person in some other place. We can change the world if we defy the impossible.

I have never believed this more than I do today...

In my own work whether mobility or the environment...

By being committed to moving people – moving them to their work, their schools, their hopes and dreams, their destiny, we are committed to people themselves. This is huge. Those of you who may be working in mobility, you are the new force behind what I believe is the transformative nature mobility – it is life altering. It is justice. Economic justice. Social justice.

I consider this daily in my own work here in Long Beach and my transportation work in Santa Monica. Making Long Beach a bike-friendly city for women and children with complete streets that encourage multi-modal sharing of the road is incredibly important – a street grid that allows everyone to access it equally can be the conduit and pathway to economic and social justice.

When you ask yourself a fundamental question – Whose streets are these? – when you believe the earth knows your name, you must also believe that she knows your name equally to mine.

While mobility may not appear on first blush as a way out of poverty, social injustice, and hopelessness, I see it differently. I see it like the girl on my dad's bike.

I'm an urban planner by trade and a policy maker by the grace of good fortune and the faith of an electorate that understands when we say "why not", we can dream and build the impossible.

My reasons for pushing a bicycle agenda have centered on predictable elements such as mobility, place-making and traffic.... but I'm also a MOM with a 12 year-old son.

I believe the true test of whether we are succeeding is in the number and diversity of riders taking advantage of our streets and programs.

And not just any riders, but women, children and communities where culturally or historically, bicycling has not been a realistic option.

I am fortunate in that I came from a country where bicycling was the main form of transportation.

As I have mentioned, one of my most cherished memories comes from a picture of my childhood on my dad's bike.

Not just any bike – my father and this bike transported me to school and back every day until I was 7 years old.

On the front of my father's bike I experienced the sites, sounds and smells of my city.

I experienced the sense of freedom and travel that awaited me

And perhaps most importantly – being on the front of that bike meant I was experiencing life's wonders with my dad – just two explorers venturing out on a daily basis.

Fast forward to today, I am keenly aware that Women on bikes are a measure of success. Women are often the bellwether of the health of our societies, ourselves and humankind.

Ironically – India's middle class sheds bikes for cars while we try to convince our middle class to shed cars for bikes.

Perhaps instead of swapping narratives – developing communities yearning for what wealth can afford and well to do communities yearning for what simpler times

provided – perhaps we can meet in the middle – Seeing the value in the basics – such as mobility and the environment.

I tried to take this back to basics approach when I introduced banning single use **Plastic bags** – in favor of reusable bags. This was an incredible fight and a lesson in what the simplest of things can mean to individuals. Somehow the right to waste and denigrate the environment has come to be a symbol our human progress for some.

If I look at Lessons from India's past – it's cautionary note for its future and ours

I am always thankful for being born in a developing nation where poverty and oppression are not solely tales of darkness, but tremendous light, knowledge and hope.

Before plastic bags were invented, we all used reusable bags – our imprint on mother earth far less menacing. Taking up the fight to ban single use plastic bags takes lessons from simpler times where our care for the environment means care for ourselves.

It is the same when I considered our failing local **Beach water quality** – united by gyres and plastic polluted beaches around the world, I saw our coastline as indication of our teetering toward collapse and demise.

I have been given the opportunity to work on policies hoping that at least locally we can make a difference:

- helping create an education program at the Aquarium called “It all flows back to me” teaching that something as simple as dropping a candy wrapper on the streets comes back to impair our water quality down the way.
 - ensuring that we invested in our storm drain infrastructure
 - We went from Ds and Fs along our coast just 8 years ago in Long Beach to now receiving A and B grades from Heal the Bay
-
- Water conservation – childhood memories of walking for water serve as lessons for conservation today.
 - Rights of housekeepers – mothers break their back every day before heading home to their own families.

So these are my own personal threads carrying memories of an Indian girl on the front of her father’s bike...

A patchwork of experiences that contributed to my very own tapestry and even more so, a lifetime of public service and policy

I offer it to you today in hopes that you’ll see that it is not too different you’re your own narratives and that you will stitch it and weave it together with your own unlikely journey.

We are at the precipice of an amazing place in our history as women but also as a people.

Yesterday the Supreme Court of the United States ruled favorably on marriage equality and while this is celebrated as a victory for the human race, there are so many frontiers of injustice that remain – many of these at the forefront of the work you do.

Each of you in your own way is transforming lives and communities. You all ask in your own way “why not”.

What is the new frontier?

Is it equal pay for equal work?

Is it the still common story of the Ugandan LGBT youth I met yesterday who fled their country for fear of being killed?

Is it the Anti-immigration rhetoric and hate I heard from some members of the public Tuesday night as our city council discussed a resolution asking our president to pass immigration reform?

Is it Public Health?

Is it Hate speech – cowardly speech via anonymous online attacks?

Is it the fact that our young girls and even boys continue to struggle with the body image messages they see and learn?

Is it domestic violence tears at the fabric of communities by weakening family structures and passing down from generation to generation, dysfunctional and abusive approaches to relationships?

Is it a commitment to communication and information exchange?

- On a daily basis, we see the value of communication and cooperation between seemingly disparate people.
- All around the world, human rights and the human condition are being impacted by man-made and natural disasters, crossing physical borders, ethnic and religious lines.
- Terrorism nips at the heels of our human spirit, at women's rights and at education.
- However, the power of information, communication and cooperation is unrivaled and cannot be denied.
- Respect for human rights starts with each of us in the way we treat our neighbor and if we approach those of a different ethnicity or faith with distrust or with an openness that fosters dialogue and trust.
- In other words are we fostering a culture of prejudice or one of tolerance?

I believe your work at this conference, at home and with your peers worldwide provides the foundation of understanding and compassion necessary to effect change. It has always been women. Always women.

To that end, I wish you all the best in your efforts to be the change you wish to see in the world.