I’d like start by sharing this quote from his holiness, the Dalai Lama which I have used as my guiding thread for this speech and depicts with such accuracy the world we live in. I invite you to deeply reflect on it:
“**There can be no peace as long as there is grinding poverty, social injustice, inequality, oppression, environmental degradation and as long as the weak and small continue to be trodden by the mighty and powerful”.**

I am from Senegal, West Africa, a small country, about the size of Washington with a population of 14 million people. When I was sixteen years old I was driving one day, by one the poorest neighborhoods of Dakar, situated right next to the Mbeubeuss landfill, which has been called by some environmentalists as a “ticking time bomb.”

Before my own eyes, was a scene worthy of a horror movie: an open dump with towers of electronic appliances, furniture, and organic waste. Even with the windows rolled up, I could breathe the pestilential smell from the carcasses of goat and sheep in advanced stages of putrefaction. Wild dogs were chasing each other and children ages 5 to 8, played Hide and Seek bare-foot, completely oblivious to the dangers they were facing. My environmental spark was ignited that day. After what I had seen, it was no longer acceptable or convenient for me to leave my blindfolds on.

Waste management for almost every country from the Global South is a challenge that the governments are still grappling with and I’ve learned that by implementing a sustainable and operational framework grounded in strong and effective policies that take into account both the people and the environment, we could address by ricochet two other challenges that a lot of developing nations are currently facing: energy issues – as the methane generated from the landfills can be converted to produce electricity which also mitigates methane emissions and addresses climate change; and the creation of jobs through a circular economy.

I moved to the US in 2009 to pursue my education in environmental studies and I chose Evergreen for its uniqueness and beautiful approach to encourage students to be at the steering wheel of their education by designing a curriculum that fits and best serves their needs. This untraditional way of educating has not only challenged but improved and sharpened my critical and analytical skills. Seminars, which I used to dread have been the ideal setting to foster healthy conversations and exchanges, allowing me to reflect on a variety of environmental issues. Evergreen has not only helped me grow on an academic level but also on a personal one as well

How can we learn to reconnect and engage with one another?
It starts with recognizing our diversity and differences, acknowledging our individual and collective struggles and last but not least it involves understanding (or at least trying to) the complex mechanisms and dynamics between some communities’ power or privilege. We cannot possibly write a narrative of equity or inclusion without placing empathy at the core but also without truly reflecting on the differences between hearing and listening.

I have been living in the US for 8 years now and as an immigrant, Muslim, person of color and woman I can say that the very fabric of the American society (and its strength) is made of diversity. Hate easily trumps values like tolerance, respect, inclusion and tolerance. Let us not allow that.

So what’s next? Our future and that of generation to come is in jeopardy but we are also capable of changing the course of things. We are lucky to be calling WA, a progressive and environmentally conscious place home. But there is still a lot more work to be done everywhere. Now more than ever, is the time to roll our sleeves up and dig deep, like the good little geoducks we are.

I have mentioned at the beginning that peace cannot be reached without preserving the environment. We will be called upon to be peacemakers, so let’s wear that badge with honor and pride. Let us be ready to be the voice of the voiceless. We owe it to ourselves and to the rest of the generations to come as the environment is a common patrimony.