September 23, 2004: Public Hearing: Imagining Freedom and Straining to Hear Voices for Tolerance in a Post-9/11

Imagining Freedom and Straining to Hear Voices For Tolerance in a Post-9/11 Age
In conjunction with the Folger Shakespeare Library

Keynote Speaker: Dr. Azar Nafisi
Author of Reading Lolita in Tehran:
A Memoir in Books

Gail Kern Paster, Director, Folger Shakespeare Library
Preeta D. Bansal, USCIRF Chair
Felice D. Gaer and Nina Shea, USCIRF Vice Chairs

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Dr. Azar Nafisi (standing at podium) addresses a full-capacity crowd

at the Folger Elizabethan Theatre at the Folger Shakespeare Library. Seated on stage are (left to right): Joseph R. Crapa, USCIRF Executive Director; Gail Paster, Director, Folger Shakespeare Library; Preeta D. Bansal, USCIRF Chair; Nina Shea, USCIRF Vice Chair; and Felice D. Gaer, USCIRF Vice Chair.

GAIL PASTER: I'd like to welcome you here to what I know is going to be a truly memorable evening.

The planning for our exhibit, "Voices for Toleration in an Age of Persecution" began two years ago. We knew then that our subject was crucially important and that it would remain so. This was not a question of prophetic inspiration. It was simply an acknowledgement of the persistence of issues of religious freedom, religious intolerance over centuries. What our exhibit proves in remarkable detail is that current crises of religious intolerance and persecution that stretch globally from Ireland to Iran to India
and beyond have their roots in the early modern past and that we forget this historical perspective at our peril.

Americans may take for granted their own freedom of religion. Consider the right that comes to us with the constitutional guarantee, yet we know that constitutional guarantees mean little without vigilance, and we know even more urgently that our own religious freedom ought to offer a promise to others in the world persecuted for practicing their own faiths.

I want here to acknowledge and honor the work of our curators for the exhibition: our guest curator, Vincent Carey, associate professor of history at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, and our own two Folger curators, Betsy Walsh and Ron Bogdan who gather the materials for this Folger - from the Folger collection and from elsewhere to tell this important and complicated story.

In each of the exhibit cases, as you'll see, there is not only evidence of religious, political, and ethnic persecution, but each case also contains evidence of the struggle against intolerance. The picture we tell - the picture we show is a dark one, but it is not a picture without hope. It is a picture that allows for a limited belief in the possibility of moral progress, a belief we must cling to if we wish to achieve religious freedom in the world.

I am very grateful to the United States Commission on International

Religious Freedom for their great interest in our exhibit, their understanding that our exhibition is empowered by a vision similar to theirs, and this is why we are so delighted to welcome the Commission and Ms. Nafisi here tonight.

It is a great pleasure, then, to introduce to you the chair of the Commission, Preeta Bansal, who is currently Of Counsel with the firm Skadden Arps, but has been the Solicitor General of the State of New York, Special Counsel in the White House's Counsel Office in the Clinton Administration, and is the author of many scholarly legal issues - sorry, legal essays published in the Harvard Law Review, in the Yale Law Journal, and other prestigious law journals on issues of constitutional law, First Amendment, and intellectual property issues.

Ms. Bansal will speak to you a little bit about the Commission and then introduce our other speakers. Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

PREETA BANSAL: Thank you so much, Gail. It's my great pleasure to welcome you here tonight. I'm Preeta Bansal, Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and we're delighted to have this capacity crowd tonight to hear Dr. Nafisi speak in conjunction with this fabulous exhibit at the Folger, which you will see as - during the reception in the great hall. The exhibit is called "Voices for Toleration in an Age of Persecution. We're especially honored to co-host this evening with the Folger Library, so thank you, Gail.

The exhibit could not be more timely or relevant. The struggle between tolerance and intolerance, between freedom and repression is an enduring reality of the human experience. As the curators of the exhibit have noted, therefusal to accept as fully human individuals or groups on the basis of religion, race, or ethnicity has caused immense human misery throughout the world and throughout history.

Sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe provides examples of those tendencies, and yet it also offers ample evidence of the opposite impulse; that of the struggle for freedom of expression and of voices for tolerance and peace. Similarly, another period of history: After the ravages of World War II, the world came together under the auspices of the United Nations and came up with another voice for tolerance, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948. The Universal Declaration recognizes, in its first sentence, the inherent dignity and the equal and unalienable rights of all members of the human family. Article 18 of the Declaration forbids distinctions of any kind, including religion with regard to the enjoyment of those rights and freedoms. It states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

As an illustration of the aspired universality of that document, it's perhaps important to note that the delegate from Egypt, Dr. Mahmoud Azmi, was crucial in the drafting and passage of the Universal Declaration. Dr. Azmi was an active defender of human rights, including the rights of women and minorities. He fervently advocated the passage of the Declaration and pointed to the long, multi-civilizational and multi-religious history of his own country.

To demonstrate the commitment to human rights was not a Western concept but a universal concept. Indeed, from the early, early years after the formation of the United Nations, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and other religious people have formed both intra-and inter-religious groups to work for the advancement of human rights. At a time when critics have asked searching questions about the particular religious roots embodied in the Universal Declaration and have questioned claims of universality of human rights, these intra-religious human rights organizations have emphasized the religious roots for human rights within their own traditions.

In the end, out of 58 states in existence in 1948, no country voted against the Universal Declaration. The Declaration thus represented a consensus at that particular moment in history on the subject of fundamental human rights and especially the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.

Now fast forward exactly 50 years to 1998. In that year, with a similar consensus, the United States Congress passed a law entitled the International Religious Freedom Act or IRFA. By a nearly unanimous bipartisan vote of both houses of Congress, passage of IRFA made the issue of freedom of thought, conscience and religion -- as defined in the Universal Declaration and related international instruments - an integral part of the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Act created our commission - the Commission on International Religious Freedom. We're a bi-partisan, independent federal governmental entity. We're not part of the State Department, the executive branch or the Congress, but we regularly consult with and advise each of these entities.

The Commission consists of nine private citizens who are appointed by the president and by the majority as well as minority leadership of both houses of Congress. Members of the Commission have backgrounds in law, U.S. foreign policy, human rights and religious affairs. We're assisted by a very able professional full-time staff of nearly 20 based in Washington.

The Commission reviews the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom worldwide as religious freedom is defined in the Universal Declaration, and we recommend policies to the U.S. government, both in response to violations abroad and to progress in this area. Our Annual Report addresses nearly two dozen countries where violations of religious freedom exists and where the Commission has made recommendations for U.S. policy.

Our special focus during the past year has been on the emerging constitutions in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the situation in Saudi Arabia.
In August 2003, during a critical period when the constitution of Afghanistan was being drafted, Commissioners visited Afghanistan.
Our concern there was not just in protecting the freedom - the religious freedom rights of religious minorities - which is 99 percent Muslim in Afghanistan - but more significantly, with protecting the right of conscience for all individuals, for Muslims and non-Muslims alike so as to allow for debate and dissent within prevailing orthodoxies. This we believe is critical in order to provide the breathing for voices of toleration to emerge within the various traditions in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, in January 2004, Afghanistan adopted a Constitution that did not contain explicit protections for freedom of thought, conscience and religion. More significantly, all of the individual rights provisions, including the right to life, in the constitution can be trumped by ordinary legislation. Such legislation, in turn, is valid only if it conforms to the sacred religion of Islam. And the Afghan supreme court has been empowered to evaluate the validity of legislation according to Islam.

And so the Commission has expressed ongoing concern that the reconstructed Afghanistan faces a real threat of a constitutionalized judicial theocracy in which individual rights are easily trumped.

Let me give you an anecdote from our visit to Afghanistan which demonstrates that our concern about this is not simply theoretical. The head of Afghanistan's supreme court is a man who has shown little regard for individual rights for those who disagree with his hard-line view of Islam. He told us when we were visiting with him that, yes, he supports international human rights standards, with the exception of three: freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and gender equality. (Laughter.)

Although we're at the Folger and not at the Lincoln - not at the Ford Theater, I think it's probably fair to say "Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?" (Laughter.) It's the Afghan supreme court, headed by this person, that has been given the authority to interpret the suitability of all legislation.

In its work on Iraq, the
Commission has been very concerned to make sure that what happened in Afghanistan is not repeated. The Commission developed and vigorously pressed U.S. officials with a series of specific recommendations to ensure that the right to freedom of conscience was constitutionalized and contained in the interim constitution in Iraq.

Unlike in Afghanistan,
an important breakthrough occurred there. The CPA and the Iraqi governing council embraced in what's called a Transitional Administrative Law - broad human rights guarantees including the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This was a historic step. The transitional law, if enshrined in Iraq's permanent constitution, could become a model for the region.

Finally, I want to touch just very briefly upon the Commission's work in Saudi Arabia. Since its inception in 1999, the Commission has vocally and consistently sought to increase public attention on Saudi Arabia, on the lack of religious and other freedoms there and on the role of the Saudi government in propagating globally an ideology of religious hate and intolerance.

Saudi Arabia is a country where religious freedom, according to the State Department's own annual report, religious freedom does not exist. Yet it was a country that, year after year, escaped criticism from the U.S. government, even after 9/11, and even after an increasing number of reports came out indicating the Saudi government's direct involvement in exporting globally a religious ideology of hate. So we proposed recently - and then welcomed the announcement just a few months ago - of a General Accounting Office study that's looking into Saudi Arabia's funding of an ideology promoting violence.

Last week for the first time the State Department formally named Saudi Arabia a country of particular concern, which is a designation under the International Religious Freedom Act. The State Department acknowledge in so doing the severe violations of religious freedom that occur within Saudi Arabia. Since we've been recommending this publicly for five years, the Commission very much welcomed the designation.

I've described the work of the commission in only three countries. Our focus, though, is global in scope, we work regularly on countries in Asia, Africa and Europe as well. We make every attempt to approach our work and the principle of religious freedom evenhandedly and do not elevate the concerns of one religious community above another.

So as we glimpse this evening at the Folger, the voices for toleration that have emerged from within our own Western tradition, let me close by suggesting that we cannot understand the global conflicts of the world without taking the role of religion seriously. The past 50 years alone show that most of the

conflicts of the world - the Middle East, the southern Sahara, the Caucuses, central Asia and south Asia - have occurred in places where the world's great religions intersect. These conflicts were not and are not explicitly religious wars, but religion matters in these conflicts precisely because it shapes world views and perceptions of people. It makes them live compassionately at best, and it focuses anger at its worst.

So promoting religious freedom and related human rights is a vital component of U.S. foreign policy and to our strategic as well as our humanitarian interests. When observed freedom of religion or belief is one of the lynchpins of stable, democratic, productive societies in which the rule of law is observed. When denied, generations of hatred and societal instability have ensued.

So while we must encourage governments to provide space and breathing room to all voices of conscience, including voices for toleration, the real work of promoting freedom and peace comes from the particularized struggles of courageous individuals in a variety of times, places, and contexts.

As Mahatma Gandhi wrote, we must each individually become the change we wish to see in the world, and as the exhibit here reveals, horrific events of religious conflict and terror have been accompanied by voices for toleration along the way; from within every religious tradition, voices who decried the name of violence in the name of religion and who called for the compassion that is at the heart of so many traditions.

And one of those courageous voices - the voice of Dr. Azar Nafisi, from whom we have the honor of hearing today.

Nina Shea is going to introduce Dr. Nafisi, but before we do that, I've been asked to ask that you refrain from photographing or videotaping the photos of her students that will be displayed on her screen during her presentation in order to protect the young women's identities.

Nina is the co-vice-chair of the Commission. She's the Director of the Center for Religious Freedom at Freedom House, and is one of the original members of the Commission who has devoted her tireless energy to the work of the Commission since its inception in 1999.

(Laughter.)

NINA SHEA: Perhaps you've seen the mysterious Audi car ads of Azar Nafisi levitating in a library with a Mona Lisa smile on her face. They give a tantalizing hint of who she is and what she is about.

Allow me to say now a few more words of introduction, but these, too, will be inadequate to fully reveal the critical role Azar Nafisi plays on the world stage in today's great human drama.

First, she is a scholar. Dr. Azar Nafisi is a professor of aesthetics, culture and literature now teaching at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.

Before leaving her native Iran in 1997, she had taught at the University of Tehran, the Free Islamic University and other universities, as well as having held a fellowship at Oxford University.

She is also an author. She has written extensively in both English and Persian on the political implications of literature and culture. Her most recent book, of course, is the critically acclaimed, "Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books," which was published by Random House last year.

She is also a long-time dissident against Iran's theocracy and a human rights advocate. In 1981, she was expelled from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear Iran's mandatory Islamic veil. She has lectured and written on the political implications of literature and culture as well as on the human rights of Iranian women and girls, and the important role they play in promoting pluralism and an open society in Iran and other Muslim societies.

She earned international recognition for advocating on behalf of Iran's intellectuals and students, especially young women, while she was in Iran. One of her acts of dissent was to form a literary salon or tutorial in her home with seven of her top female students to discuss the forbidden works of Austen, James, Fitzgerald and Nabokov. These sessions debated the social, cultural and political realities of living under hard-line Islamic rule and later became the inspiration for her memoir.

At Johns Hopkins, she directs the Dialogue Project on Culture and Democracy in the Muslim World and the West, which is an initiative designed to promote, in a primarily cultural context, the development of democracy and human rights in the Muslim world, as well as to educate non-Muslims about the complexities of Western relations with Muslim societies.

She is - I'm personally delighted to note - also a valued Freedom House board member. But first and foremost, Dr. Nafisi is a dissident literary artist, one who - with her memoir of being a woman scholar in Iran - follows in the tradition of Solzhenitsyn, Kundera and Havel. She is one of the few so far to emerge from the Muslim world to speak compellingly of the daily struggles, fears, and humiliations of life in a religious totalitarian state.

Here is one example of her imaginative words to describe her very personal experience there. In Washington we call Iran - using the technical and bland legalese term - a country of particular concern for its egregious religious persecution. Now listen to how Dr. Nafisi's lyrical pen captures the problem, and I quote from her memoir, "Reading Lolita in Tehran."

"A stern Ayatollah, a blind and improbable philosopher king, had decided to impose his dream on a country and a people and to recreate us in his own myopic vision."

What a perfect insight. Her words reach far beyond the literary world. Just in today's Washington Post, George Will started his column quoting from Azar Nafisi. She is able to transcend partisan politics, cultures, and epochs. To those who would argue that religious freedom is not universal but a Western value, Nafisi answers with a convincing, emphatic "no." She echoes Shakespeare's Shylock when he exclaimed, "If you prick us, do we not bleed?"

So Nafisi is a creative voice of toleration in another age of persecution. And this exhibit in this beautiful Shakepearean theater tonight is the most appropriate setting for hearing her, I think.

So please join the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in welcoming Azar Nafisi.

(Applause.)

AZAR NAFISI: Thank you so much. Thank you so much - it is such a privilege and a pleasure to be here. You'll have to forgive me if I become a little emotional. I would like to thank the Commission on International Religious Freedom and Folger's Library, my friend, Nina Shea, and Freedom House for providing me this opportunity for this conversation with you - not just being in this place, where I would be sitting there usually, enjoying myself.

There is also another reason for me to celebrate. Two of my students in the book were supposed to be here tonight, and if you see me constantly looking around it's because I want to know if they are here. I had heard that they had left home about two hours ago. Are you here? (Pause.) Where are you?

(Applause.)

I can't see them. These lights are sort of blinding me and, you know, not making me communicate with them, which is just as well because I feel so nervous. I mean, they are the ultimate judges as far as I'm concerned.

Anyway, you know, today I told myself as I was preparing for this talk, Azar, remember, this is on intolerance, not Lolita. (Laughter.) Let us not talk about "Lolita" and "Pride and Prejudice," and you know, how you love Jane Austen. That - and you know, there are moments in history when certain issues, certain tendencies come to the foreground. They are tendencies that had always existed there, but they come to the surface, and this is one of those moments, actually. You look at the television, you know - it is so amazing. I mean, you talk about tolerance. We have people now who behead others from the issue of the veil to issue of the war. I mean, the whole sort of bridges towards communication, it feels as if it's being broken internationally by people who kill themselves in order to eliminate others. This is the first thing that comes to mind.

Then you think about democracies. You think, for example, about U.S. and Europe. In both continents we have reached such a point of absurdity where we change the name of french fries to "freedom fries," you know. (Laughter.) I mean, the word "freedom" - this country of Jefferson and Lincoln, you know, so that is the relationship between, you know, centers of democracy, which is Europe and America.

Then in this place which I call home - I left one home where my existence, the way I looked, the way I felt, the way I thought as a women, as a writer, as a teacher and a human being was completely questioned and intolerated by those who ruled over us. And I came to this other home, and now in the streets of my D.C. - today I was a little late because a taxi driver sort of - in the middle of the - you know, just went a few blocks and then told me "I can't go there." They check the cars, you know, it's impossible to park there, there are barriers, there are barricades. "I drop you by the Metro." You know - and you know, now these familiar places in this beautiful city is being designated as "soft targets" and "hard targets." Colors even - when we think of orange and yellow and red, alerts and dangers come to our mind.

Now this is the heart, the cradle of democracy, and we are so polarized - we are so polarized both internationally and in terms of what goes on in our country that, you know, the question is why would you want to talk about "Lolita"? Where is the room for talking about "Lolita," for talking about literature. Of course, I haven't talked about the debate in this country. I think that's one thing that frightens me more than anything else, is the polarization and politicization, and I think politicization and polarization in fact does away with any form of political debate when our intellectual debates around politics has been reduced to Michael Moore and the Swift Boat veterans, you know, and you know, the only voice of reason in this age of unreason seems to be Jon Stewart - (laughter) - who only today - no, I mean, he is right now the only news I watch. (Laughter.) And I'm going to be protesting - I'm going to go to New York in front of his building and say, what has he got against women from Muslim countries who write about "Lolita"? Why doesn't he ask me to his show? He is the only show I would like to go to. (Laughter.)

Now on Larry King, Jon Stewart actually brought up this. He said the extreme right and the extreme left have confiscated the debate. What about us?

And around the controversy around Dan Rather, he was talking about we won - everybody is now doing fake news. (Laughter.) And this is serious, but you know, the only place where we can go to is in fact someone who is of course through humor reminding us where we are at.

So the question that I wanted to put to you today - and I put to myself before coming here - was is there room for "Lolita"? In a more extreme case, the question that Theodor Adorno asked during World War II: Can there be art after Auschwitz? I wanted to sort of bring this question to you, and today sort of concentrate my talk on the relationship between imagination - I mean, in this place where we celebrate imagination daily and nightly, I wanted to bring a - sort of the questions in relation - the relationship between imagination and human rights, and what you so elegantly were talking about, and where does the question of tolerance come.

So in order to think about this relationship, I sort of flashback to actually yesterday - I was at the Holocaust Museum. There was a panel on Sudan and what is going on in Darfur right now, and a women whom I very much admire, Samantha Powers, was there. She had just come from Darfur, and it reminded me of the first time I saw Samantha talk, which was at Sun Valley Literary Festival, and she was talking about the experiences of Rwanda. And she made two points which sort of remained with me. One point was that during the Rwanda crisis, when everybody was being slaughtered and the Americans had to leave the country, she noticed that many of the citizens were calling the American embassy and the Americans asking them to take them with them - including actually, I think, the ambassador's translators, whom the ambassador could not take with him, and apparently they were slaughtered later on.

And Samantha asks a woman, one of the officials - she says, "Can't we do anything for them?" And she said, well, no, and then she said, I hear they do these things to one another every once in awhile.

Now I'm not - I'm just paraphrasing her talk, but you know, when I heard that, I thought human rights, of course, the Declaration of Human Rights is all about tolerance, but also it is intolerant of intolerance. I mean, that is what we are fighting for. We are fighting intolerance. And because it is intolerant of intolerance, it should be also intolerant of those who tolerate brutalities and violence in the name of "they do this to one another every once in awhile," or in case of the Muslim societies nowadays - perfectly well-intentioned, intelligent experts, academics, policymakers tell you, it's their culture, this is what they do. The Islamic people do not follow the same rules as we do.

There should be Islamic human rights - as you mentioned so well in the case of Afghanistan - Islamic democracy, Islamic feminism. These are the people who try to justify this brutality and violence by tolerating it. So there are certain things, ironically, that I think we should not tolerate.

The second point that Samantha said was - she said, you know, it was so difficult for me, sitting, you know, where I was sitting, in New York or Boston or Washington, to be able to imagine what was happening to these people in Rwanda. She said, it was beyond my power of imagination, and of course, none of us want to imagine what happens. I mean, you know, constantly I think - and it is ironic that reality sometimes does follow fiction. The case of that woman during the Russian attack - I mean, the school - the attack on the Russian school, the woman who had to choose between her two children.

I constantly think what that does, what sort of violence has been imposed upon her and her two children for the rest of her life, and of course, what sort of violence has been imposed upon us, as a human community, and how can we absolve ourselves of that violence. But the point that Samantha was making was reminding me of a crucial point - meeting point between imagination and defense of human rights. You need to imagine, you need to have empathy for people who are not like you, for people who are not in your place. You need to particularize them, to make them human beings, and you need to create empathy by believing that they, also - like you - will bleed if they are pricked.

In fact, there is a certain sort of comfort in knowing that everyone will bleed if they are pricked. So you need to have these universal points of reference to make you understand that, yes, I empathize with these human beings because of the fact that he or she - like me - loves her children, will bleed if anything happens to them, and he or she - like me - wants the right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. I mean, I think that this is where imagination and human rights come together because they constantly question reality as it is, and they are constantly imagining the possibilities and the potentials for what should or could be. So at least I've found a point of

- sort of common point where I could link "Lolita" to the swift boat veterans, you know - (laughter) - to talk about it.

Now the other point - of course I also wanted to mention because one of the points that rather shocked me when I came back to U.S. was this sort of political correctness that sort of dominates, especially our elite, and I kept thinking, no amount of political correctness can make us empathize with others if we - as that narrator in a book I read when I was very, very young and with which you are all familiar: "To Kill a Mockingbird" - if we do not put on their shoes and walk around in them for awhile.

So you want political correctness? You want to genuinely empathize with others? Walk around in their shoes, know their stories, empathize with them through the ability to imagine. And when you imagine a women - an Afghani woman taken into a football stadium with a gun put to her head just because, you know, she does not - she has sort of disobeyed certain rules about her covering - when you imagine yourself as that woman at that moment of execution in that stadium, you will not be able to tolerate what used to happen in Afghanistan and what might still happen in Afghanistan. So that was one point.

The other point that I wanted to make was of course the Folger Library and what they have been doing. I mean, the whole documentations on intolerance and tolerance. It is amazing, you know, and the names that sometimes are so familiar to us that we don't even think about, of course. Unfortunately, these names are becoming more and more unfamiliar. I mean, how many people are thinking about Erasmus?

I remember that in one of my classes at SAIS, I was talking about de Tocqueville, and one blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl put her hand up and said, "Who is de Tocqueville?" You know, so John Locke and Erasmus and de Tocqueville are not as familiar to us today as they should be, but at any rate, I so much appreciate this exhibition because it reminds us, first of all, that intolerance as well as tolerance is universal. It can happen everywhere; that democracy and human rights, as well as terror and fundamentalism are not geographically, culturally, nationally, racially, sexually determined; that each and every one of us are capable of it.

And the second thing is what you mentioned in your talk - and you also mentioned - is that in order to resist intolerance, you need its antidote, which is thought and which is, again, imagination. You cannot - you know, you cannot defeat that sort of polarized mentality, which constantly excludes the other in a self-righteous manner without this ability to have a democratic imagination.

So when I sort of put all of this together, I told myself, hah! Not only should I be talking about "Lolita," it is my bound and duty - (scattered laughter)

- to come here and to talk to you about "Lolita."

So finally I'm going to come - go back to, you know, my - the essence of what - I keep thinking, you know, that's the only thing that I can do in life, you know - read literature and like literature and sort of celebrate it. So I want to focus my talk on this relationship between imagination and tolerance, and ways through which imagination resists tolerance. And why is it that at times of political polarizations, at times of chaos, at times where the danger of totalitarianism in all its shapes and forms is very imminent, we need more than ever our poets and our artists, and our thinkers, and our philosophers, and our fiction writers. I mean, this is sort of going to be the gist of my talk, unfortunately. (Laughter.)

Now I do need - I do need somebody who would sort of - I know that Locke said all authority is error, and I completely agree with him, but I - for the convenience of the audience, somebody should remind me of the time - how much time I have. I mean, this captive audience is so wonderful, intelligent, loving - (laughter) - of course, I know you have your ways of letting me know that my time is up, but if you want to let me know my time is up, do it ten minutes before. Start looking at your watches ten minutes before you want me to end -- (laughter) - so that I can wrap it up.

Now I - what I wanted to do, for brevity's sake partly, was to talk a little bit about my own experiences in Iran; partly because I think Iran is very important to what is happening today when we're talking about tolerance and intolerance. After all, the Islamic Revolution was like the Soviet Union of the Islamic world, and they formulated these theories that today, we see in their extreme forms - what we call Islamism or Islamic fundamentalism. And I think finding a way to understand this phenomena and finding ways of confronting it is very important to us.

So - and the other thing is that, as I mention in almost every talk, if I talk about my story, it is not because I'm so important that everybody needs to know my story but because the novel form, which I think is the best representative of what a democratic imagination is about, is in fact about the extraordinary-ness of the ordinary.

According to the novel, no individual is not unimportant, that every life, every story has, at its core, something that is extraordinary, something that needs to be celebrated, and as you know, the novel form is basically about ordinary people in relationships with their own conscience and their own selves, and in relationship with the world. So if I talk about myself, you know, I'm not worried about that. It's not because I'm so extraordinary.

Now what I wanted to mention was that when I went back to Iran in 1979 - and I tell people, my friends in America not to ever go - my timing is terrible;

never do what I do. I went in 1979 to Iran to revolution, war with Iraq, and religious fundamentalism, and when I came back to this other home in 1997, I came back to war with Iraq, fundamentalism, you know, and terror. So you guys could go to Paris right now if you want to - (scattered laughter). It is rather safe; I don't know.

But at any rate, when I went back home, I discovered that this home was not home any more; that the home that I had imagined in my mind was an illusion. It called me - the way I looked, the way I felt, everything that I had believed in - now a group of people had come to this home that had confiscated this reality that I had lived and called it alien. And in order to confiscate the present, totalitarian mindsets always confiscate the past, they rewrite the past. They have to say, this is why we are like this - because this is the way we always were.

The truth of Iran, and especially of Iran's women is of course that for 150 years this country has been in the throes and crisis of change, and at the forefront of change. The idea of democracy came to my country not just through political thought, but simultaneously through an acute awareness of cultural forms that came from the West: the novel form, the music, film, minority rights, and rights of women. And the precursor of Ayatollah Khomeini, Sheikh Fazlullah Nuri, at the end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century said that novel minority rights and women's public right to education were all poisonous vapors that had come from the West to poison the minds and eyes of their youth.

For 150 years we had fought, and by the end of 1979, this country was a country with modern institutions, advanced enough where its women - we had two women ministers, one minister for women's affairs. We had women active in all walks of life. We had a very lively and vibrant culture. What we did not have was the right to political participation. It was a society that in some ways was in advance of its system, and it burst, and it exploded - and I won't go into all the reasons for it - and it was confiscated by a group of people who confiscated not just our rights, but confiscated our religion. Everywhere where you see religious fundamentalism, they do not just confiscate the right of other religions; they confiscate the right of those who also believe in the religion they claim to believe in. So they not only confiscated the right of the Jews and the Christians, and the atheists, and the Zoroastrians, and the Baha'is, they confiscated the rights of Muslims to worship their god the way they saw fit.

So first of all, fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon. It has much more affinity to fascism and communism than it does to what we call traditional religion, although it takes the worst aspects of that religion. They imposed the laws, and like Soviet Union and like Hitler's Germany, the first thing that they did was confiscate individual rights. They targeted individual rights, human rights, minority rights and the rights of women, and alongside of it, cultural freedoms because these are the voices that create

multiplicity, color, multivocality. So that was - that was the first thing that happened in my country.

I'll just mention some of the laws related to women and then go to culture and sort of wrap up the talk.

They lowered the age of marriage from 18 to 9. Now for those who say "it's their culture," I would like you to say how many nine-year-old girls say, it's our culture; we love to be married to a man three or four times our age. Meanwhile, they legitimized polygamy and temporary marriage where a man can marry as many women - he contracts, he rents women from five minutes to 99 years.

They said that women could not become judges, or two women counted as one witness on the witness stand because women are weak minded. We all know - there's a testament to that, that women are all weak minded and they cannot judge the way the men can.

Shirin Ebadi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize, she was one of the first women judges in Tehran's circuit court, but when they disrobed women like her, they did not go home of course; they came back into the streets and into public as advocates of the human rights of women and children.

And then of course where do you go and under veil. The question of the veil in my country is not the question of whether veil is good or bad. It is a question of uniformity. If you remember communist China, with all the Mao jackets; if you remember Soviet Union, when everything that was individual, particular, was banned as Western decadence; when you remember that Hemingway and Faulkner, and Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus were all called decadent Western writers, and they were not allowed to be read in public; when you remember the number of the best and the brightest of the poets and thinkers and writers who were in the Soviet jails and Nazi concentration camps, from Primo Levi to Mandelstaum to Solzhenitsyn, or people like Achma Turva (ph), who for all practical purposes were in jail - when you remember all this you remember the similarities between those who banned Othello's Desdemona - you know, who cut Desdemona out of most scenes of Othello, and cut Othello's suicide scene out of Desdemona - out of Othello because the masses would be depressed if they watched the suicide scene. Masses would not be depressed when they are being stoned to death for adultery and prostitution, but apparently they cannot bear Sir Lawrence Olivier - (audio break, tape change) - mad at me; keep bringing me these children's books. In children's book, they not only put the veil on Pocahontas -- (laughter) - and you know, on the "Beauty and the Beast," they also put the veil on female chickens -- (laughter) - for the fear that the male chickens would go absolutely -- (laughter) - nuts looking at these female chickens without the veil and won't know what to do with themselves. (Laughter.) Now, there are two points: Don't ask me how they discovered how the chickens were female or male. (Laughter.) That is something that I have not yet - it's a puzzle, something I think about from -- (laughter) -- time to time.

But the second point - the second point about it is that the kind of man who becomes so provoked sexually by a strand of my hair that he cannot control my - himself, should not be on the streets -- (laughter, applause). He should - I mean, this is, this is an insult against men and against Muslim men.

Now the point that I'm trying to make to you is that the question of the veil was the question of uniformity. It was not the question - and my grandmother, who never took the veil off in her life, who was a practicing, devout Muslim, would, you know, would not accept this. We used to go into our home, you know, with our bikinis and swim, you know, in the - in my uncle's home, or in my grandma - you know - where they all, you know, were very traditional and religious. But there was this understanding, there was this respect, there was this tolerance. She had chosen the veil because of her faith. And now the veil it has become an object of politics.
So all Muslim women have also been deprived of their rights to worship the way they want to and not become tools of the states.

So this was something that I wanted to mention to you, and then go towards why, then, imagination. I mean, under such conditions, when all your individual spaces are taken away from you; when you are not tolerated for what you are, what do you do? Where do you go?

One of the most heinous things that regimes like this do is that they turn the citizens into guilty parties. In Nabokov's "Invitation to a Beheading," he mentions that. In "Lolita" we have that - where the victim becomes implicated in the crime of the perpetrator; where Lolita has no where to go, no where to cry, but the shoulders of her rapist.

Now, people like me, every morning, when we woke up and we had to meet the faces - you know, to change our face, to change the way we looked in order to become, you know, the figment of their imagination, we felt dirty, we felt guilty, we felt that we were negating, not just certain principles, but our very being.

So for my students and myself, this fight was not political. People keep talking about it and when they talk about me, a lot of times, they say that she's political, or she likes this - I mean, sometimes I'm leftist, sometimes I'm rightist. From Zionists to an agent of Islamic Republic, I've been called names. You know, but the point is, that I don't give a damn about any of it. What I do give about damn about is this existential right to be, and to - to fulfill my potential to the fullest. So for us the struggle was existential. And the question that we had to ask ourselves was, how do we not become like our enemy.

So, this is the question that I want to put to you because this is the most important question. And that is why we need imagination. That is why we need to become humane. It is so easy to become like them. It is so easy to hate.

Now the question that we faced in most extreme force were faced by someone like Primo Levi, when he was in the concentration camps. And in one of his writings, after he comes out of the concentration camps, he says, "I write in order to become a man again and in order to join the community of humanity." And he wrote about his enemies. He said, "I write in order to understand my enemies." And this is where imagination becomes more tolerant than reality.

For me, in reality it was so difficult to forgive those who had killed so many of the people that I knew or did not know, who had put one of my brightest students, Brazie (ph), of whom I talked about in my book, who loved James, in a room. And one morning, they had taken her outside in the courtyard, and had killed her like an animal. It was very difficult not to desire that they should die.

It was only through writing that I could become generous. It was only through writing because, you see, writing, writing fiction - if you want to write good fiction, or if you want to write well, you have to give a voice to every character. You have to be able to go under their skin and become like them. Through writing I understood how vulnerable these people who had been hurting us and persecuting us are, how without a language they are, how weak they in fact are because they cannot communicate except through violence. So this was one reason why we need literature, we need fiction -- in order not to become like our enemy, in order to take your enemy into your own domain. That was the main point that I think that experience of Iran makes it so important.

The Iranian people, for 25 years, resisted this regime - not by violence. They had had enough of violence. What they advocated was being themselves. My students, one of them who's up there, I remember her - the robe she wore, which was always sort of mustard color as opposed to this black. They would wear colorful clothes, they would show a little bit of hair. They would wear their weapons of mass destruction, which would be my lipstick, you know -- (laughter) - a strand of hair, holding hands in the streets, listening to music. And opening their minds, not just to our own works of literature - and, by the way, works of classical literature in Iran were censored much more than works of Western literature, in fact - Rumi and Hafez and Khayyam. Of course, Khayyam was called the materialist and completely taken away. Faroukcaud (ph), Hedoyad (ph), so many of our writers were censored, and mutilated. But by going back to these works, we reminded ourselves that we are human again be cause what literature does to you, when you're individual integrity is taken away from you, when you have nothing that would identify you from the person right next to you - because that is the whole purpose, to make you faceless - then you retrieve that sense of integrity, that sense of uniqueness, that sense of individuality by going back to the highest achievements of humanity.

You go where individuality, originality, integrity, is most celebrated. And where do you go? I mean, you're in the Shakespeare Theatre. I remember that I made my peace with being away from my home through Shakespeare,actually. And I tell the story of how, decades later, my daughter came home one day, when we were in U.S., and she had read just "Romeo and Juliet," she was just barely 14, and she said to me, mom, listen to these words. (Laughter.) And as she was reading an obscure word about Rosaline, she's too fair, she's too wise, she's too wisely fair. And I thought, well, someone who's too wisely fair cannot become a Shakespearean heroine. You need the madness of a Juliet to become enduring. And the second thought that I had was that, she's okay, she has found her home. So the whole point that I'm trying to make then is restoring humanity and becoming one with others, is passed down through the work of imagination.

Now, the last - I have three more points to make and I'm done. I know that I have a lot. Ten minutes? My god, you're so generous. (Laughter.) You shouldn't do that. You give them an inch -

MS.
: Five.

MS. NAFISI: Six. (Laughter.)

So the question then that we had was, through these works of imagination, you would take yourself and then you would force them to come into your own domain. I remember the discussion we had of "Huckleberry Finn." There's one scene in "Huckleberry Finn," - you all remember - when Huck is debating whether he should turn Jim in, because, you know, he'll go to hell. And he believes that if he doesn't turn Jim in, he will go to hell. And so he's debating with himself: shall I turn him in? Shall I not? And then he remembers how kind Jim has been to him, how much a friend Jim has been to him. And he goes through all his experiences with Jim, and he says, oh, well then, I'll go to hell -- (laughter) - but I won't turn him in.

That is a fantastic lesson in tolerance. Not like Michael Moore and the Swift Boat veterans. You think, you reflect, you have an internal conversation with yourself, and you accept going to hell. But doing the right thing: this is what novel after novel teaches us. Henry James, Jane Austen -- that wonderful, amazing Jane Austen, who is wrongly called a spinster who had, you know, who had nothing to do with the revolution - one of the most revolutionary writers ever. I teach her now with Zora Neal Herston, another one of the most revolutionary writers I have discovered.

Jane Austen is the embodiment of what you call the democratic imagination. Remember that in Jane Austen voice is the most important thing. Every character, even the villain, has a voice. Wickham, and Mr. Collins, and Lady Catherine Du Bourgh, they all have their voices.

And no one is exempt from criticism. In fact, Elizabeth Bennet, who is our heroine, is the one who should be most chastised for her blindness. And, of course, as I say in almost every talk, you know, we woman have been given the gift of Mr. Darcy -- (laughter) - and we should dream of him -- (laughter) -- no matter how feminist we are, at least - at least once a month. (Laughter.) I think we should close our eyes and imagine Mr. Darcy. So this is my - okay, so the point then that I wanted to finish with was, come back here to you. This is how cultures are exchanged. Iranian students, now, are reading Austen and Flaubert. Former Iranian revolutionaries and hostage takers are quoting Khanar (ph), and Karl Popper, and Spinoza. And this is how it should be.

We bring back to you the gift of these people. We remind you of the fragility of these values. We remind you that the right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness - and, my god, who ever thinks of pursuit of happiness, you know, deserves - I don't know what they deserve, deserves to make it universal for everyone. So life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, we remind you of that.

And we remind you - I want to end my talk with Saul Bellow. In three novel - three stories, "Bella Rosa Connection," more die of heartbreak - where he says, more die of heartbreak than of radiation. And in "Dean's December," he talks about the ordeals and sufferings of freedom. And he says, his characters could escape the ordeal of the holocaust; will they be able to survive the ordeal of freedom? And he talks about the problem that the West has. He said, Stalin pulled on the old death. In the West, we have the ordeal of the consciousness, our sleeping consciousness. And he talks about the atrophy of feeling.

Now this is what I think we should be worried about in the West - about the atrophy of feeling. Intolerance, totalitarianism takes away your sense of feeling, your senses, the sense to see, to hear, to touch, to become one with others. In order for us to restore that essential sense of feeling, we need to go back to what Bellow calls poetry and the soul. And he says that country that has lost its appetite for its poetry and soul is a country that faces death.

So this is how I would like to finish. This is what, also, Henry James said during the worst kind of wars. He experiences World War I, where he talked to, wrote a letter, and he said, "I'm incapable of telling you not to repine and rebel because I have the imagination of all things and because I'm incapable of telling you not to feel. Feel, feel, I say. Feel for all you're worth. And even if it half kills you, for that is the only way

to live, especially to live at this terrible pressure, and the only way to honor and celebrate these admirable beings who are our pride and our inspiration." So this is what I would like to leave you with: with a plea to feel, and feel. Thank you so much.

(Applause.)

Thank you so much. I very much appreciate it. I've been asked to show the photos. I think that if you see the photos, the main thing, apart from celebrating them, is the fact that you see what I mean about confiscation of individualities. So if you would show them - oh, they're there. This is the two photos. And, okay, so if there are any points or comments, or discussion -

FELICE GAER: Ladies and gentlemen, I'm Felice Gaer. I'm the other co-chair of the Commission, and I've been asked to moderate the question-and-answer session. Is there any way we can turn down that spotlight up there so I can see the audience - (laughter)?

MS. NAFISI: There's been a conspiracy.

MS. GAER: We have an opportunity to ask Professor Nafisi to comment on her lecture, her book, other questions you might want to ask. I know we have some special guests here who might have some questions. We have about 10 minutes -- 10, 15 minutes in which we can do that, and then there will be a reception following here. And you're all welcome and invited to it. So the floor is open, and if I don't see any hands, I'll have to ask the first question to get it started.

MS. NAFISI: If you don't seen any hands, that means I've put everybody to sleep -- (laughter) -

MS. GAER: And when you ask a question, would you just identify yourself?

Q: Sure. My name is Adelle (ph) Stan. And my question is one about curiosity. I mean, one of the things, that has troubled me as an American, living in the time that I live, is that I see a lessening of curiosity. I don't know if that's my perception, or - but I certainly feel it. And I'm wondering, how does one nurture curiosity? Are we a society in denial? Is it that sleeping consciousness you're talking about? How does one make people want to know about what its government is doing in the world? What's going on in the world?

MS. NAFISI: Well, you know I'm so glad you mentioned it. Actually, that is how I usually begin my talks with - with curiosity. And I usually begin with "Alice in Wonderland" because of all the little thousands of little girls, there's one little girl who sees a white rabbit that is running and talking, and has a watch, and has the courage to jump into the hole. And this is what a great reader should be: to have the courage to jump into the hole. And then you will be rewarded with all the rewards of the wonderland. And I think that curiosity is at the center of this debate.

It might sound strange and irrelevant. Nabokov describes aesthetic beliefs as tenderness, kindness, and curiosity, you know. And he says that curiosity is insubordination in its purist form -- (laughter) - you know. And I believe it because the urge to want to know, the urge to be questioning, not just about the world, but about yourself, is what has kept us going, what has created this country, I think - the desire to constantly want to know, and the desire to constantly want to shape that edge, you know, and to share that edge.

And unfortunately, I have to use all the clichés, you know - that is why I worry about culture sometimes more than about politics because politics comes out of the culture; a culture that is used, now, to watching hostages being beheaded on television. And a culture of - god, Donald Trump was everywhere. Did you see? On all these news shows, he was talking about his show, "The Apprentice," where our millionaires are not creating the Whitney Museum, but are going on "Apprentice" and, you know, the other one, those Hilton girls, you know -- (laughter).

And a country, where if you've read Dianne Ravitch's superb book on the language police, on how we cut debate by banning books, you know, from "Harry Potter" to "Great Gatsby," you know. We are in trouble. We don't want to think, you know. And that is why my plea, my slogan is, "readers of the world unite" -- (laughter) - you know, activism is not just voting. It is much more difficult than that, you know. And I hope that by this plea, we will do something about it.

Q: (Off mike.) My name is John Sharfield (ph). Something

to add to what she just brought up is that I find a lot of Christians, especially conservative Christians, don't know anything about Islam, and they presume it to be a religion that is not of a true god, but of idols. And subsequently, through that misunderstanding, there's a prejudice there.

MS. NAFISI: Yes, sir. That's completely true. It's exactly what the fundamentalists do when they talk about the West - a country like this, which is a very religious country, actually, in many ways - when they talk aboutits decadence and portray it as, you know, just loose women and AIDS, you know. That is rather unfortunate. I always, when they talk about Islamic culture that way, I always refer them, actually, to the great poets and philosophers of Islam.

You want to know how sensual this culture is? Go to Hafez and Rumi where the way of communion with God is a glass of wine; where, actually, one of the places where you do commune - the mysticism, the place of communion, is a place where you drink wine, and where the image of God is, the method for it, is the image of a woman, of a beloved. So we don't even know these things about it.

I mean, we take the word of those who have not only confiscated the discourse in their own countries - not only have the Islamists confiscated the discourse and frightened the people in their own countries, they have confiscated the discourse in this country and in the West as well. That is why we need to become curious, and read, and investigate.

MS. GAER: I wonder if - I wonder if I can ask you a question. In your book, you use Lolita as a - sort of as a metaphor for control, Gatsby is a metaphor for lost dreams, James was how to find self respect in a more ambiguous setting, and then you come to the personal as political, and that was the Austen section. Clearly, each of these are relevant to the repression in Iran. And I wonder if you could comment today on your view of the situation in Iran and how - and perhaps you could do it in the same terms that Kofi Annan did the other day at the General Assembly. He spoke of the rule of law, and he spoke of it as something everyone should follow. I know in your book -

MS. NAFISI: Yes.

Q: -- you raise it in a different context. Could you speak of some of these concepts in terms of how do they affect human rights and freedoms in Iran today?

MS. NAFISI: Actually, you and I know how much work Nina has done on

the question of rule of law in these countries. And I'm glad you brought it up because - especially when President Khatami, when people had still dreams about President Khatami. He was treated like a rock star, at one point, you know. He talked about rule of law. Everybody here, not everybody - but many people here said that, "Look, they're like us," and they want the rule of law, and he has come to restore the rule of law.

And I was trying to say that their rule of law is not Magna Carta. I mean, their rule of law is what the people in Iran today are trying to defy, and you know, create a real rule of law. The rule of law is what I was talking about. It is basically the Sharia laws. And you know more than I do about this - that Sharia laws in all these countries are the same. I mean the same laws that rule the Taliban are in the Iranian Book of Laws. It's only that the Iranian people never agreed to it.

Talking about law, something that bothers me so much because no one talked about it - recently, about three weeks ago, a 16-year-old girl in a northern city of Iran was hanged on the charge of prostitution. The judge was very mad at her. Her mother was dead, her father was a drug addict, and the man she had slept with got a hundred lashes, but she got the death sentence. And they said she was a little retarded, that's what they said about her. And in court, she said that people think that I go into fits. And she was talking to the judge in an impertinent manner. The judge put the noose around her neck himself. So he became the prosecutor and the executioner at the same time. And the governor of the province wrote him a letter thanking him for what he did. And he left the girl hanging there for 45 minutes. The citizens were absolutely disgusted and flabbergasted, you know, and it created a little scandal, but this is the kind of law you're talking about. And I think that peopl e - that is why you need to be curious. Just do not take the words of everybody who says to you, this is what these people are all about.

MS. GAER: Yes, sir.

Q: I'm sure I'm not the only one who found it enormously moving to listen to the passion with which you called for the need for imagination and empathy to try to internalize and imagine the plight of victims in various places in the world. I wanted to ask you about what I think you heard you said in the other direction. Now, for a playwright, it may be a real challenge of imagination to try to understand the mentality of a young person who could blind six horses in a stable and produces the play, "Equus."

Are you saying that also, this is a challenge for us to try to imagine what produces the person who can cut the head off a prisoner kneeling blindfolded in front of him, or take control of a plane and fly it into the tower to destroy so many lives? Does it work in both directions, the need for imagination and empathy?

MS. NAFISI: (Off mike) - imagining not just these things, but also the perpetrators. I'm afraid so. I'm afraid so. Yes, and, you know, understanding. I think understanding is always the basis of knowledge, and without that knowledge you cannot fight them. You have to understand what is happening with them in order to be able to fight them. And this fight goes far beyond just mere - not mere, physical violence. And that is where we have to meet. I think if we had understood what was going in Afghanistan 15 years ago, maybe, what was going on with Iraq when we were supporting Iraq, what was going on with all these countries if we had been aware, things that have happened would not have happened. But for a writer, you imagine everyone, including the executioner. And it stains you forever, I think.

The fact that the things you have seen, and you have to continue with life, will never - you'll never be the same. But if they're part of reality, they are also part of your imagination, you can't escape it. It's a horrible place to be.

Q: (Off mike) - recall whether it was whether it was Ms. Paster (ph) or Ms. Bansal in the opening talked about vigilance in protecting constitutional rights and, you know, I think of the gentleman's question, or observance, down in front, about how ignorant religions are of each other.

I'm Steve Elliot (ph), I'm with the First Freedom Center in Richmond. We did a national poll last month. I was appalled that 20 percent of Americans didn't feel that there was a need for separation of church and state in America today. Thirteen percent favored establishing official religion. More than half could not point to where their rights for religious freedom are protected in America: the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, or the First Amendment. If you had your five minutes on the Jon Stewart program -- (laughter) - and everybody -

MS. NAFISI: (Inaudible.)

(Laughter.)

Q: -- and everybody in this country was watching you - I mean, given, given that we're not hanging 16-year-olds, and we don't have a Supreme Court judge like the chief judge in Afghanistan - but given some of our state of mind, some of the polarization, what would you say to America if you had five minutes

on the Jon Stewart Show?

MS. NAFISI: (Inaudible) - that was one thing that I was actually telling some of my American friends: that they are evil but that doesn't make us all good. That - that is the whole point; that we feel smug sometimes by other people's evil. And that is the most dangerous thing that we can do. And I would - with America, that is what worries me: that we become too smug on one hand, and then we become too panicked on the other hand.

I mean, I'm so amazed at people saying, oh, what can we do? There's nothing we can do. Well, there's plenty you can do. If young girls in Iran
could resist the flogging and going to jail, you darn well can do a lot. And not just by protests, you know. I mean protests have very - I mean, that sort of polarization, that sort of self-righteousness, that sort of smugness, I think, is the most dangerous thing that can happen to this country. We should create these public debates. I want to create my own subversive book groups -- (laughter) -- in every school and university. Maybe we should start doing it in churches, too. I hope somebody would not -- (laughter) -- you know. I'm getting worried now.

MS. GAER: Thank you very much.

MS. NAFISI: Thank you.

MS. GAER: We now invite all of you to join us in the reception that follows. It's at the same place as the exhibit, the exhibit on tolerance, and it's here at the library. And you'll have an opportunity to discuss these issues more, I hope, at the reception, and I hope among yourselves and in those churches, and synagogues, and mosques, where those book clubs are going to be formed. (Laughter.) Thank you.

(Applause.)

(END)