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Let's Go Together

We have to be willing to sit by, listen to, and share with those who seem different from us.

While attending a conference in Tennessee, USA, I was invited to a formal dinner. As my husband, David, and I walked into the banquet hall, I noticed name cards at each setting that indicated where everyone should sit. When I found my name card, my heart sank.

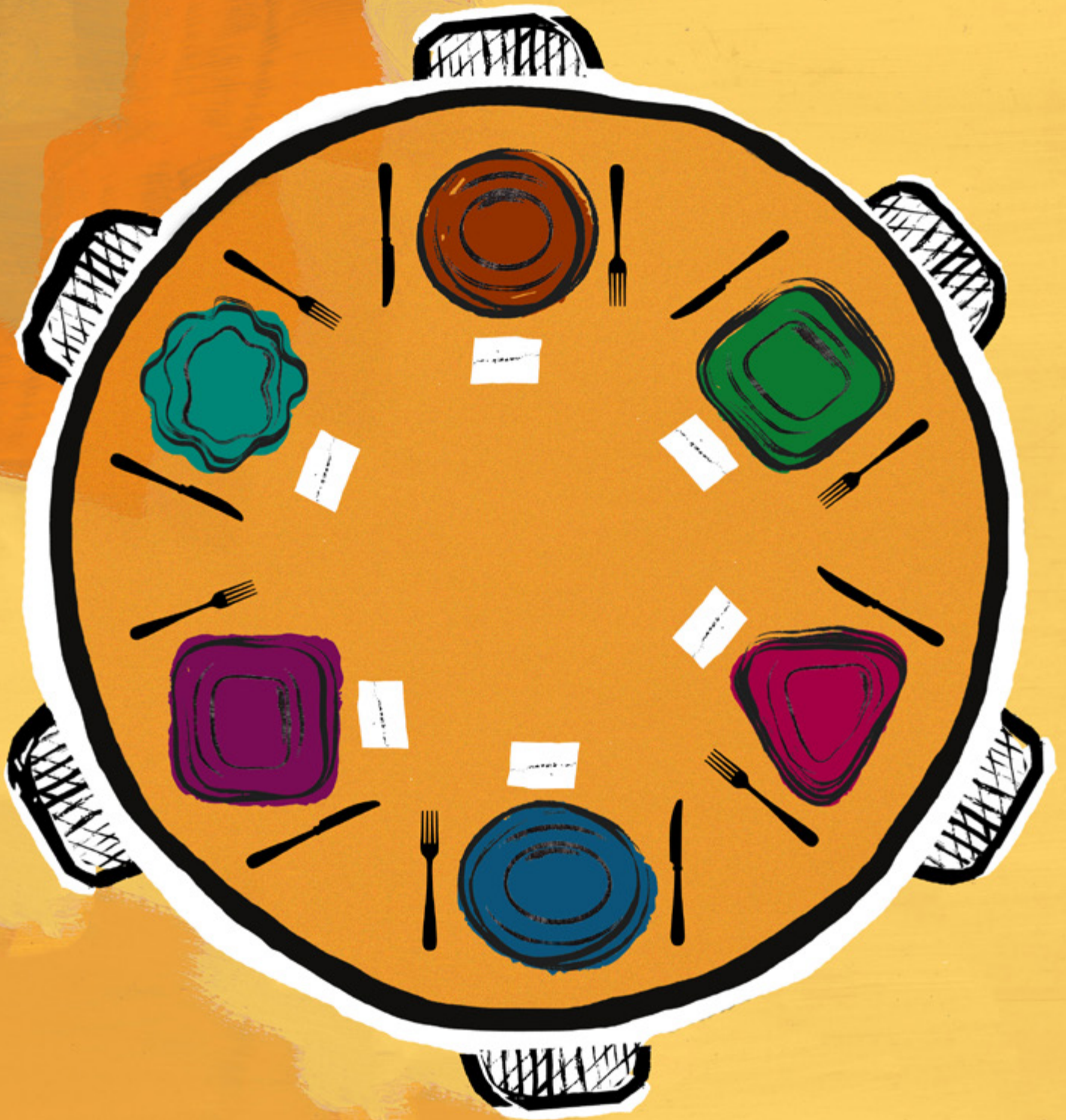
Sitting next to my assigned chair was a man with a white beard, a turban, and a rather unexpressive face. He looked so different from me. I considered asking David to switch seats with me, but that wouldn't have been polite. So, I sat down and introduced myself.

The man's face came alive. His eyes sparkled as he introduced himself as Baldev Singh. We started off with normal chitchat, and soon I felt like I was talking to an old friend. I asked if he would tell me about his turban. "Sure!" he said. And he told me about his beliefs as a Sikh.

It turned out that we were very much alike. Baldev believes in family with all his heart. He values his religious community. He believes in feeding the poor. Just like me.

He talked about Sikhism's hundreds of years of tradition. I talked about my beliefs and why I joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We had some wildly different beliefs about what happens after death, but that was OK. As we talked and shared, I came to love him.

When we got up to leave after the dinner, Baldev took David and me by the hand. "I'd like to pray with you," he said, and he asked David to pray. So, the three of us stood in the banquet hall, held hands, and bowed our heads while David prayed. He prayed for unity, love, and understanding. When he finished, we hugged. As we said good night, I knew I would support Baldev Singh's right to live his religion just as fervently as I'd support my right to live mine.





How grateful I am that I overcame my initial hesitation that night. Had I let my fear and misunderstanding stop me from talking to Baldev, I would have missed out on connecting with a wonderful person. Instead of building a foundation of understanding, I could have built a wall between us. We can't do that. We've got to break down those walls. We have to be willing to sit by, listen to, and share with those who seem different from us. That is one way we can defend religious freedom.

I'm not a politician or a theologian, but I don't have to be to defend religious freedom. To me, it is all about being personal. You can take a powerful stand for religious freedom just by reaching out on a one-on-one, personal level.

Three things come to mind as I think about this personal, one-on-one level. First, we need to be aware of what's really happening and what's really needful. Second, we need to be articulate about who we are at our core and why. And third, we need to be active.

Be Aware

In 1962, when I was about 12 years old, my father was a member of the board at a church in Louisiana, USA. At breakfast one morning, he sat deep in thought until he finally turned to me and asked if I thought we should let black

people come to our church. "The board spent a long time talking about it last night," he said.

My father was an attorney and a judge. He had helped start a home for battered women and another home for runaway youth. He worked with black people all the time. He cared about them; he served them. And yet there he was wondering if we should let them in.

A hurt feeling bloomed in me, and I said, "Daddy, could you stand at the door and turn them away?"

Being aware means being aware of whatever ruts we may be in and being willing to climb out of those unthinking, cultural habits to get a broader view. I was stuck in a rut when I first looked at Baldev, and my father was following a cultural attitude back in 1962 as he thought about who should be allowed in church. But we climbed out of those ruts. Every time we do this, even on an individual level, we start to shift our culture.

We need to be aware of what is happening in the world around us. We need to read up on what is going on, about attacks on religious freedom.

We need to be aware of the gaps that may be dividing us and of how to bridge them. We need to be aware of the goodness of others and to identify the strength even in those with differences. Just saying, "I see your earnest desire to do

what you feel is right and good; let's talk," can be that start. Being aware can lead to a groundswell of unity, understanding, and coming together as a community, but it takes one-on-one experiences.

Be Articulate

What is your core identity? Can you state it clearly to people?

My core identity is that I'm a daughter of God. I know of my dependence on Jesus Christ and His Atonement for my sins. I know that my path is part of the plan of salvation given by Heavenly Father to return me to Him. Were it not for Jesus Christ, I could not return, nor could I have great joy, hope, or direction. He is the source to which I must go. And from that source, I feel a need and a desire to reach out and build bridges and cross gaps of misunderstanding. That's who I am.

What would you say to someone who asked you what makes you tick? That's where we start—we can be articulate about who we are.

Being articulate means having the courage to speak up and offer your opinion. Sister Joy D. Jones, Primary General President, told me about a time she and her husband, Rob, attended a parent-teacher meeting for one of their children. As the teacher reviewed the curriculum for the class, she mentioned a scheduled movie that Rob and Joy knew wasn't up to their family's standards.

Rob raised his hand and in a calm and respectful way said, "I would prefer that my son not see this movie. It is not something we feel would be good for him to view, and its content is against our principles."

The teacher was a little taken aback, but then another hand went up and then another. Before long, about a third of the parents had their hands up, saying, "We feel the same."

The teacher said: "It seems that there are enough people here who do not feel right about this movie; I'll remove it from the curriculum."

One couple with courage to state their opinion made a difference for the class.

Being articulate does not mean trying to squash differing opinions. We want to allow differences to live. They are what give us the grit to grow and the impetus to learn and to stretch. We're not trying to all be the same, but one voice of courage can make a big difference in many people's lives. So, be articulate.

Be Active

I think there are times when we need to be willing to fight for our beliefs, but that doesn't mean we need to fight one another. Wars of words and ill feelings in our families and neighborhoods won't get us anywhere. They just pull us further apart. Instead, we can defend religious freedom by

taking a first step in reaching out to others and starting a conversation.

You might be surprised by who wants to join you. I asked the Relief Society president of my ward if she and her counselors would come chat about religious freedom. She suggested that we meet at the church and invite anyone who wanted to come.

That night I set up ten chairs. Forty people showed up! Our discussion was robust and rich with shared feelings, questions, and answers. We talked about what religious freedom is and why we have to defend it. A sense of awareness grew as people started to ask themselves questions and reach out to others.

"By small and simple things are great things brought to pass" (Alma 37:6). We might be that small and simple thing that reaches out and starts a circle of influence. And that circle of influence will grow, whether you're a politician, a theologian, or a nonpolitical person like me.

About a year ago, David and I participated in a prayer service at a mosque in our area. We joined in the rituals and got a feel for the Muslim faith. Afterward, the imam, or prayer leader, rushed over and threw his arms around David. There is a hunger in many people to connect, to understand, and to be understood. We can act and be that bridge of understanding.

Let's Go Together

I once saw a huge mural in Johannesburg, South Africa, that read, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

When you are aware, articulate, and active, you can have a personal influence. If everyone would do that, culture would change, understanding would deepen, and freedom would grow. ■

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