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THE END OF AN ERA - CAN WE EMBARK ON A NEW ONE?

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For three Cleveland women, today marks the end of an era.

Ariel Castro, who kept the women captive and brutalized them for a decade died in prison Tuesday night, apparently of suicide.

At the sentencing of her tormentor, the most brutalized of the three women, Michelle Knight, said: "You took 11 years of my life away, and I have got it back. ... I spent 11 years in hell. Now your hell is just beginning."

The man who had held three women in a hellish prison for years could not live in his far more comfortable prison for days.

The death of Ariel Castro will evoke various emotions and reactions. Many questions that have nagged us for months will surface again. How could all this go on in broad daylight for over a decade? What could we have done to prevent such a horrific crime from occurring in the first place? And many other questions: the crime, the punishment, the mindset of such criminals, the plight of the victims, the role of law enforcement agencies.

While we ponder such questions and engage in introspection over them, let us also remember that there are thousands of other women who are still missing. Many have been missing for years, and many of them might still be living in hells around the country.

Let us also contemplate what can be done about the hell in which millions of women are still living all around the world. A recent report from the World Health Organization points to "a global health problem of epidemic proportions": more than one third of women in the world are victims of sexual and physical violence.

We owe it to ourselves to ask why this epidemic exists. Unless we understand the root-cause of an epidemic, we cannot start to address it, much less effectively eradicate it.

Among other factors, we must realize that denigration and brutalization of women has become woven into the very fabric of the human race. For centuries, women have been looked down upon in almost all cultures, societies and countries. We forget, or ignore, that women are children of the same God as men.

We forget that it is not only men but also women who have been created in the image of God -- the same God for both. In describing the play enacted on the world stage by the Creator, Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS), the Sikh Scripture, says:

'The dancers are women and men, but it is none other than the Creator who manifests in them all; doubt it not; shed all skepticism; it is the same Creator that speaks through women as through men' (translated from SGGS).

SGGS also admonishes treating women as inferior to men: *'we are born of a woman... how can we call her inferior who nurtures the emperors...none, except the Everlasting One, can even be created without a woman'*.

Although these words were pronounced five centuries ago, they are as relevant today as they were then. Recently, I was part of a panel on 'Religion, Women and Political Change' at the 2013 Kyiv Interfaith Forum in Ukraine, and one of the panelists pointedly asked the audience: how could we forget that it is women who had given birth to everyone sitting there.

Whether it was centuries ago or it is today, while all the segments of society have a critical role to play in eradicating the epidemic of violence against women, the leaders of faith have a special role to play. A vast majority of men and women in the world care deeply about what their houses of worship and prayer say.

While we preach in our services to accept the Will of God, we must also realize that violence against women is not in the Will of God. That God is not so heartless. That God does not condone brutality on its children, whether they are men or women.

Our faiths teach us about a loving, compassionate and benevolent God. Our religious institutions must spread the message of the love of God among their followers. It is incumbent upon our religious leaders to emphasize in their services that God loves its children equally; independent of whether they are men or women. That men and women are equal in God's eyes. That God does not look kindly upon the abuse of its daughters.

It is the responsibility of the leaders of faith to play their much needed role in ending the hell that millions of women live in, from which only very few are lucky enough to escape as the three Cleveland women did.

Our hearts go out to Michelle Knight, Amanda Berry and Gina DeJesus who suffered an unimaginable ordeal for years. Our thoughts and prayers are with them as they recover from such horrific trauma. For them, today marks the end of an era, albeit in a limited sense.

As we hold them in our thoughts and prayers, let us all work towards bringing a new era in the life of all the women in the world.