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One morning, 18 years ago, I stepped out of a New York City subway on a beautiful day in September. The sun was warm and bright, the sky was a clear, perfect blue. I had my six-month-old son in one of those front-facing baby carriers, you know, so he could see everything. And when I turned right on Sixth Avenue, what he saw was the World Trade Center on fire.

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As soon as I realized that this was an attack, the first thing I did, without even really thinking about it, was to take my baby and turn him around in that carrier. I didn't want him to see what was going on. And I just remember feeling so grateful that he was still young enough that I didn't have to tell him that someone had done this on purpose.

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9/11 was like crossing a border, a hostile border into dangerous, uncharted territory. The world was suddenly in this terrifying new place, and I was in this place as a new mother. I remember my thoughts kind of ping-ponging around from, "How am I ever going to protect this baby?" to, "How am I ever going to get some sleep?"

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Well, my son turned 18 this year, along with millions of other people who were babies on 9/11. And in that time, we have all crossed into this hostile, uncharted territory of climate breakdown, of endless wars, of economic meltdowns, of deep political divisions, of the many crises around the world that I don't need to list off, because they are blaring at you every single day from your news feed.

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But there is something I've learned in these 18 years of parenting and in my years leading a global women's rights organization. There is a way to face these big crises in the world without feeling overwhelmed and despairing. It's simple, and it's powerful. It's to think like a mother.

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Now, to be clear, you don't have to be a woman or a parent to do this. Thinking like a mother is a lens that's available to everybody. The poet Alexis De Veaux writes, "Motherhood is not simply the organic process of giving birth. It's an understanding of the needs of the world."

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Now, it's easy to focus on all of the obstacles to making this the world we want: greed, inequality, violence. Yes, there is all of that. But there's also the option to plant a seed, a different seed, and cultivate what you want to see grow, even in the midst of crisis.

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Majid from Iraq understands this. He is a housepainter by trade and someone who believes deeply in equal rights for women. When ISIS invaded northern Iraq where he lives, he worked with a local women's organization to help build an underground railroad, an escape network for women's rights activists and LGBTIQ folks who were targeted with assassination. And when I asked Majid why he risked his own life to bring people to safety, he said to me, "If we want a brighter future, we have to build it now in the dark times so that one day we can live in the light." That's what social justice work is, and that's what mothers do. We act in the present with an idea of the future that we want to bring about.

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All of the best ideas seem impossible at first. But just in my lifetime, we've seen the end of apartheid, the affirmation that women's rights are human rights, marriage equality, the fall of dictators who ruled for decades and so much more. All of these things seemed impossible until people took action to make them happen, and then, like, almost right away, they seemed inevitable.

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When I was growing up, whether we were stuck in traffic or dealing with a family tragedy, my mother would say, "Something good is going to happen, we just don't know what it is yet." Now, I will admit that my brothers and I make fun of her for this, but people ask me all the time how I deal with the suffering that I see in my work in refugee camps and disaster zones, and I think of my mom and that seed of possibility that she planted in me. Because, when you believe that something good is coming and you're part of making it happen, you start to be able to see beyond the suffering to how things could be.

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Today, there is a new set of necessary ideas that seem impossible but one day will feel inevitable: that we could end violence against women, make war a thing of the past, learn to live in balance with nature before it's too late and make sure that everybody has what they need to thrive.

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Of course, being able to picture a future like this is not the same thing as knowing what to do to make it come about, but thinking like a mother can help with that, too. A few years ago, East Africa was gripped by a famine, and women I know from Somalia walked for days carrying their hungry children in search of food and water. A quarter of a million people died, and half of them were babies and toddlers. And while this catastrophe unfolded, too much of the world looked away. But a group of women farmers in Sudan, including Fatima Ahmed -- that's her holding the corn -- heard about what was happening. And they pooled together the extra money that they had from their harvest and asked me to send it to those Somali mothers. Now, these farmers could have decided that they didn't have the power to act. They were barely getting by themselves, some of them. They lived without electricity, without furniture. But they overrode that. They did what mothers do: they saw themselves as the solution and they took action.

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You do it all the time if you have kids. You make major decisions about their health care, their education, their emotional well-being, even if you're not a doctor or a teacher or a therapist. You recognize what your child needs and you step up to provide it the best you can. Thinking like a mother means seeing the whole world through the eyes of those who are responsible for its most vulnerable people. And we're not used to thinking of subsistence farmers as philanthropists, but those women were practicing the root meaning of philanthropy: love for humanity.

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What's at the core of thinking like a mother shouldn't be a surprise: it's love. Because, love is more than just an emotion. It's a capacity, a verb, an endlessly renewable resource -- and not just in our private lives. We recognize hate in the public sphere. Right? Hate speech, hate crimes. But not love. What is love in the public sphere? Well, Cornel West, who is not a mother but thinks like one, says it best: "Justice is what love looks like in public." And when we remember that every policy is an expression of social values, love stands out as that superstar value, the one best able to account for the most vulnerable among us. And when we position love as a kind of leading edge in policy making, we get new answers to fundamental social questions, like, "What's the economy for?" "What is our commitment to those in the path of the hurricane?" "How do we greet those arriving to our borders?"

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When you think like a mother, you prioritize the needs of the many, not the whims of the few. When you think like a mother, you don't build a seawall around beachfront property, because that would divert floodwaters to communities that are still exposed. When you think like a

mother, you don't try to prosecute someone for leaving water for people crossing the desert.
Because, you know --

09:05

(Applause)

09:12

Because you know that migration, just like mothering, is an act of hope.

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Now, not every mother thinks like a mother. When presented with a choice, some of us have made the wrong one, hiding behind weapons or barbed wire or privilege to deny the rest of the world, thinking they can see their way to safety in some kind of armed lifeboat fueled by racism and xenophobia. Not every mother is a role model, but all of us have a choice. Are we going to jump on that armed lifeboat or work together to build a mother ship that can carry everyone?

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You know how to build that mother ship, how to repair the world and ease the suffering. Think like a mother. Thinking like a mother is a tool we can all use to build the world we want.

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Thank you.

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(Applause)