

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016
Massachusetts Center for the Book
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Level II Top Honors Award

Dear Malala Yousafzai,

I must confess that I was quite skeptical when I heard that you won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 at the age of seventeen – just five years older than me. The image of a Nobel Prize laureate in my head was of a white-haired old man who has spent his entire life in a lab inventing something, not a teenage girl who spoke up about education rights for girls. After I read your book, I changed my mind. You definitely deserve the Nobel Peace Prize. Your book sheds new light on how I view many things.

While I was reading your book, I suddenly understood why my great-grandma always told me to study hard. I also realized I should not take for granted that every girl has the right to receive an education. In fact, my great-grandma had similar experiences as the girls in Pakistan. My great-grandma grew up in Taiwan, a society that highly preferred boys to girls. One week after she was born, her parents gave her to a relative without children because they were poor and, more importantly, because she was a girl. When my great-grandma was around seven-years-old, she wanted to go to school. Sadly, because she was a girl, her foster parents did not want to invest in her. They kept her home to do house chores. As a religious Buddhist, my great-grandma went to a temple to learn how to read Buddhist texts, which were the only things she could read. Before I read your book, I could not imagine what kind of life my great-grandma had when she was a kid. Now I know why my great-grandma looks so joyful when she is reading her Buddhist texts and when she is able to recognize some Chinese characters in a newspaper. Actually, after I finished your memoir, I began to imagine what my life would be like if I were living in Pakistan without rights to go to school. I think my life would be boring and less meaningful.

Your book also reminds me that rights are not given but asserted and earned. Nowadays, girls have the right to receive an education in Taiwan. Of course, such equal rights to education in Taiwan were made possible by many courageous people who fought for gender equality. Similarly, in the early years of American history, women were discouraged from going to college. It was only after activists initiated the women's movement that more women were able to receive higher education. Your book helped me to remember that not all girls on this planet have the basic right to receive education. More importantly, we have to speak up and take action in order to make things happen. Your effort and action has convinced me that even kids can use their voices to talk about problems in society and take action to change the world.

While I was reading your book, I also thought more about Islam, a totally unfamiliar religion to me. The year I moved from Ann Arbor, Michigan to Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is across a river from Boston, there was a bombing at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. As you can probably guess, people in the United States felt sorrowful, fearful, and just mad. After the bombing, a lot of media reported that the bombers were Islamic extremists and they also connected this to 9/11. I remembered that after the bombing, there were a lot of police cars swirling around mosques. Before I moved to Cambridge, I had never had any Muslim classmates. In my school in Ann Arbor, I was one of the few people who was not Christian. In Cambridge, almost half of my class were Muslims. I had never seen anyone with religious headscarves in the past. Even though I knew that I needed to be kind and respectful to people with different religions, sometimes I still did not know how to judge media reports that connected Islam to terrorism. But your book has shown me a very different version of Islam that does not treat others with cruelty. This strand of Islam aims to improve people's lives through peace, dialogue, and education.

Your attitude towards the Taliban who shot you also surprised me and changed the way I thought about fear, hatred, and love. When you were interviewed by Ellen DeGeneres, you said that if you hit a Talib, then there would be no difference between you and the Talib. You also said that you had no fear and hatred towards the Taliban because of the love you got from your family, doctors, friends, and even people you have never met before. You completely convinced me that love is so powerful and able to defeat fear and hatred. I think that the purpose of terrorist attacks around the world is to provoke violence and arouse hatred and fear. A large number of people who participate in such attacks are people who feel marginalized in their societies. If everyone could just give more love to the people around him or her, then probably fewer people would join extremist groups.

The moment I closed your book, the image of the old, male Nobel Prize laureate vanished from my head. Instead, your brave, compassionate face and my great-grandma's beaming smile appeared in my mind. Cheers to love, inclusion, and mutual understanding.

Sincerely,

Ning-Er

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Grade 7