

Of Snakes, Butterflies, and Small Acts of Kindness

When I was a child, my mother told me that I should always sleep with the covers over my head. At the time, my family was living in a Sudanese refugee camp, in Africa and we owned nothing that we did not carry with us. On many a night, we slept out in the open, and my mother warned that if we let the covers down, snakes could slip in and slither into our mouths. We had no trouble following her advice.

Years later, in the comfort of the United States, my mother gave me another piece of advice, this one less obvious. "Always remember where you came from," she told me just before I left for Harvard. I was puzzled. The first piece of advice had been easy. Who wants a mouth full of snake! But why was it important to remember where I came from?

When I moved on to Harvard and saw new worlds open before me, I quickly forgot about trying to understand my mother. Before I knew it, I was signed up for the Tae Kwon Doe Club, the Harvard African Students' Association, a Phillips Brooks House Program, the Freshman Crew Team (where I totaled a 15,000 dollar boat against the dock), and a Freshman Bible Study (I figured I needed all the prayer that I could get). And of course, I was taking four classes and trying to meet as many of my 1600 classmates as wanted to meet me. As I focused my energies on myself and my immediate surroundings, remembering where I had come from seemed far less important than knowing where I was supposed to be every half hour.

During my sophomore year, however, something happened to remind me of my mother's advice. I was working as a delivery man for the Harvard Student Agency. One day as I was waiting for my packages in the office, an elderly black woman tottered in and

warily leaned on her cane. She hoped to find someone who would type a short letter for her. Such a simple, easy thing to do. But HSA has no typing service, and the receptionist had to tell her that she had come to the wrong place. As the old woman turned to leave, frustrated and confused, one of my co-workers called her over, gently sat her down, and typed the letter. It was such a simple act. Yet never has a Harvard student seemed so great to me as in that moment of reaching out.

I began to reflect on what my mother might have meant. In the Sudan, we had carried with us all that we owned, but that included our devotion to one another. In that sense we carried a home, a community, a sense of mutual responsibility wherever we went. On that day in the Harvard Student Agency, my co-worker carried a community with her as well: the simple community of human connection and duty.

So what have I learned from my four years at Harvard? Many facts and formulas, many new ways of thinking, a fresh understanding of the world. But what's most important to me is that after four years at Harvard I'm finally beginning to understand my mother's advice. Remembering where you come from means holding on to the vision that you are a part of a human community that you can carry with you every day. That community has given us much. Are we not obligated to give it something back?

My mother's advice in childhood was to pull the covers over my head—that had been the easy part. But her later advice meant, I now realize, that I should know when to pull the covers down, and stick my neck out. That's the hard part. Too many of us go through life with the covers over our heads. We want to reach out, but we fear to make ourselves vulnerable. And we are also busy. We have appointments to keep; we have things to do. We race through a world of demands.

And then we ask ourselves almost helplessly, “What can we do as individuals?” Some people say that a butterfly flapping its wings in Japan can cause a hurricane in Louisiana. Any one of us, however small and helpless we may feel, can spark unimagined changes. Today’s small act of kindness can become tomorrow’s whirlwind of human progress.

But as you all know, progress is not easy, and it will not come unsolicited. I hope that many of us will inspire positive change. There is still so much to be done both in distant lands such as the Sudan, and closer to home in our own communities. The big, sweeping, revolutionary actions are always most noticeable. But quite often, it will be the small things that all of us can do that will have the most impact. Yes, we will be busy in our lives. But we can all take a little time, to do a little deed of kindness. We can help write a letter; we can inscribe a little goodness on the hard surface of this world.

In a few minutes we shall be welcomed to the ranks of educated men and women. As we start the journey to wherever our dreams may lead, we must remember where we have come from. We must recall our membership in the human community that has nourished us; we must accept the responsibility to keep that community alive. Improving the quality of life for the entire human community is the single greatest task that faces our generation and generations to come. Of course, no worthy endeavor is without risks and pitfalls—without snakes, if you will—but I know that you, my classmates, are ready to peek out, to see beyond yourselves, and cast off the covers. You are ready to face the snakes and drive them away. You are ready to change the world.

Congratulations, Good Luck, and Thank You!