

Dear Malala Yousafzai,

When I opened your autobiography, I Am Malala, I was certain I knew what to expect. I had heard a great deal about you, how you are an activist who was shot by a member of the Taliban. I was sure the book would be sad and inspiring, and with a happy ending that makes you tear up. But I never expected it to change me.

There are always small things that people say, over and over again, that you simply listen to – but do not hear. *You are lucky*, I would hear. *You are lucky*. I think every child has heard it before. You are lucky to have a full stomach, to go to school, to grow up to do and be anything in the world that your heart desires. And I would listen, but I didn't really understand. Especially about school. It was just something so normal and everyday that I couldn't imagine life without it. And there have been days when I was impatient with it, tired of the homework, sick of the demands, wishing to be somewhere else. It never sunk in that these tiny things that I take for granted mean everything to those who don't have the same opportunities.

In reading your book I was shocked to realize that for many kids in this world, especially girls, the simple right to wake up every morning and sit at a desk for 6 hours – learning and growing – is something worth fighting for, perhaps even something worth *dying* for. School gives you a chance in life – the chance to be what you want to be, to be strong, to be happy. At the least it gives you the ability to take care of yourself and your family, and at best it gives you a chance to soar, to live your dreams, to be your best and maybe to make a difference in the world. Every single person should have that chance – and no one should have the right to take that away.

The headlines about girls who speak out, who want change, being killed just weren't real to me until I read your memoir, which is written from the truthful, haunting perspective of someone who has been through it all. And not only did you live through it, Ms. Yousafzai, you did the most amazing thing – you became stronger. After you were shot, you weren't scared away, you are now even more determined to have education for every boy – and every girl. I don't think I will ever understand how the Taliban think you are doing something wrong, fighting for books and pens and teachers. But as you point out, the Talib is often speaking from ignorance, from someone who hasn't had the gift of school, which is why they are afraid of women and education. Otherwise why would they be afraid of something that is good for a village, for a family – for their own sisters, others, wives, and daughters?

Your book has inspired me to learn more about the Middle East and the religion of Islam. I have never studied it before – I've never even been interested until now – and was glad to learn that it's an interesting, beautiful religion with a rich history instead of a violent one that is demeaning to women, which so many people think it is.

But I plan to do more than that. It occurred to me that a little bit of – conversation, help, money – from a lot of people can make a difference. Maybe my friends and I can be part of the chain reaction of change that you have started. So I started talking about the issue with other people and I got my friends together to see the documentary film, *Girl Rising*, which is about the struggle for girls' education around the globe. Next I've started two projects that I hope will raise awareness and money; the first one is in support of an orphanage in Angola, Africa, where my aunt worked for seven years. I am collecting clothes, books, school supplies and badly needed money for school tuition – school is their way to a better life and they are hungry for it. For the second project, my friends and I are creating a big community Bike-A-Thon that will promote fitness for local teens and will raise funds for two organizations that support girls'

education globally: one supplies heavy terrain bikes to girls in rural Cambodia so they can get to school without being assaulted or trafficked, and the other provides personal hygiene kits to girls in Africa so they can attend school even when they have their periods. I hope I can accompany these supplies to the places they're going and have a chance to meet these kids – these girls the same age as I am – who are fighting to be in school.

Before reading your book, I never would have imagined that I could be doing this. How could I be the one to organize a huge community project, to ask all these people I don't even know to help, to support? How could I fly halfway around the world to deliver these items to people I've never met before? Before reading your book I NEVER would have done anything like this. It would have seemed too big and I would have been too scared. But in the face of how important it is – in the face of all you have been through and done – this is nothing. No big deal. I can do it.

I want to thank you for putting your memories, thought, and – your fight – into words. After reading about the struggle that other kids are going through for something as basic and important as school, you made me realize – really *hear* – that I have the chance to be anything I want to be and nothing is holding me back. And you also made me want to help others who are being robbed of that same chance.

Good luck, and stay safe. Remember that this world will move on, eventually it will open its mind and follow in your footsteps. Even if it happens long after we are both gone, someday there will be change. And you will have been a big part of that for many people, including me. Thank you for your words of wisdom.

Grace Payne