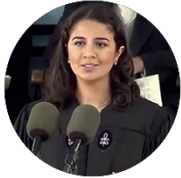




ENGLISH SPEECHES

WITH BIG SUBTITLES



SARAH ABUSHAAR

THE HARVARD SPRING

<https://youtu.be/kaypQCpYuNk>

When I was around seven, my toothless brother and I, on long, boring taxi rides in Syria, would indulge in imperialistic fantasies of how we wanted to take over the country outside our windows.

My parents would quickly crush these imperial conquests by warning: “Shh! You’ll get taken by secret service if they hear you.” The walls everywhere, we were told, could hear our revolutionary ideas and would send us to prison. Whereas children here had ghosts and the boogeyman, our equivalents were our governments. Fast forward to 2010.

When I first got here, someone told me, “If Harvard shut its gates, it could be its own country, just like the Vatican.” As I’ve walked through this place every day for the past four years, I was struck by how true this idea was. I saw it everywhere: The Harvard Nation. I saw it in the big and obvious things: We had our own version of the Statue of Liberty, the John Harvard statue, our own embassies, the Harvard Clubs of Boston and London, a tax collection agency, the Harvard Alumni Association, and an endowment larger than more than half the world’s countries’ GDPs.

We also had our own diplomatic passports. Nowhere did I see this more clearly than at US immigration at Boston Logan airport. Whenever they saw I was coming from the Middle East: “What were you doing there? Why are you here? Why did God make you from the Middle East?” But I made sure I dressed like our overly proud Harvard dads, with Harvard hat, Harvard shirt, Harvard shorts, and Harvard underwear and as soon as they saw I was a citizen of Harvard: “Ohhhh! You go to Harvard?! Surely you must not be a national security threat! Welcome to America!” And suddenly all the gates to the American Dream opened wide. I saw it everywhere, this “Harvard Nation”.

But I saw it not just in the hard structures but, more importantly, in its invisible institutions ... the invisible scaffolds around and undergirding the hard institutions.... I saw it in the quarrelling columns of The Crimson newspaper... its Kung-Fu fights of ideas and lively student debates with the potency to propel policy changes by the next morning’s print. I saw it in our cluttered bulletin boards, bustling with life... with announcements of student-led conferences, Broadwayworthy shows and dorm-room projects turned world’s next Facebook smothering each other for our cursory glimpse... a trivial detail these cluttered boards that often slipped notice, but where some saw papers, I saw passions, purpose, creativity - I saw a heartbeat of civic community’s vivacity.

My parents’ countries were places where institutional dysfunction killed off this social dynamism and vibrant productivity and so I felt acutely here the value of civil society and living, breathing institutions. My time here would give me a working model of a better world - not only that, but that sense of empowerment



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to initiate change. You see, with those spying walls still lurking in my memory that constrained the little Napoleons in my brother and me, you might imagine my shock when, in one of my first classes here, I suddenly found myself debating a president.

“So it’s the 1990s,” our negotiations class professor set the stage. “A war’s about to break out between Ecuador and Peru. How will you stop it?” I raised my hand to respond. “Wait.” Professor Shapiro stopped me, “Tell the president what to do” and in walked the Ecuadorian president. In bringing the president to me, in having me speak to and question a shaper of history and experience the value he saw in my view, Harvard would make me feel I too could be him.

I, too, had the power to shape history and not just be passively shaped by it. That sense of infinite possibility we have as children - to think big and conquer great things - was returned to me here, a less despotic version of it. What seemed intractable problems of the world became opportunities for me, for us, to change things. You know, when I first got here my name was Sarah; after Harvard, it would become “Hey Harvard!” with people stuffing 378 years, 5,000 acres of real estate, the entirety of Widener library and 32 heads of state all into my 5 foot 6 inch self! Ridiculous as it is, there’s a strange reality to it. Arab-American author Randa Jarrar pictures inhabiting a new place as “[...] running barefoot, the skin of our feet collecting sand and seeds and rocks and grass until we had shoes, shoes made of everything we’d picked up as we ran.”

And running through Harvard Yard over the past four years, the skin of our feet collecting a world of experiences, we each become this place in a strange way, each of us picking up bits of people and history and ideas that changed the way we saw the world... accumulations I hope we will continue to wear on our “soles” and leave a footprint of all the best we took from Harvard Yard on our new destinations. And that’s why I am hopeful for the future. I am hopeful because of my dining hall dinners spent marveling at friends who, while their countries wage bloody war against each other, are able to carry out civil conversation and build generative projects together.

I am hopeful because of the Founding Mothers and Founding Fathers of revolutionary ideas like these being launched into the world who will make of its institutions, its constitutions, its hospitals, its art houses something better. We’ve heard a lot in the news about an Arab Spring - this graduation is sending 6,000 revolutions into the world in the 6,000 revolutions graduating as part of the class of 2014 ... if we take those waiting revolutions, those great ideas sparked behind Chipotle burritos and Starbucks coffee cups in our version of Tahrir Square, Harvard Square, out with us into the real world, into the real Tahrir Squares, and make something of them! Revolutions not in arms but in minds ... more powerful and permanent and pervasive.

For, this isn’t a Ukrainian revolution or an Arab Spring, but a global revolution. This is the Harvard Spring of 2014. This is the Harvard Spring!