

“The work goes on”
Mary Dahdouh '18

To the Arab Girl from Suburban Texas...

I know you do not realize this yet, but your place in the world is going to change significantly one day. One day, the entire world will open itself up to you and immerse you in its wonder. One day, you will no longer be the Arab girl from suburban Texas, a misfit in her own skin, but rather a global citizen whose place is nowhere and everywhere. Just you wait.

To the Teenage Girl Waiting on Tables to Help Pay for College...

I know this may sound crazy to you now, but one day you will be on the path to becoming a human rights attorney. One day, you will gain an understanding of international law deep enough to consume real world problems and digest them into tangible solutions. One day, what another may construe as a limitation to our legal system, you will see as an invitation for innovation. One day, you will look at a stranger and hunger for their perspective and thirst for their knowledge to satiate your voracious desire to make sense of the world around you. Just you wait.

To the Rookie Journalist Crying in the Newsroom Bathroom...

I know how difficult it is to talk to the mother of a dead teenage boy, a boy who was killed with impunity because the color of his skin was a liability, because the color of his skin carried an inherent suspicion of culpability. I know you are frustrated by the nonchalance of those alleged veteran reporters who spoke to her before you, firing their questions at her as if the bullet through her son's skull was not enough. I know that right now, in this moment, you yearn to do more than write a brief byline about the police officer who received only probation for killing her *hijo*. Just you wait.

One day, you will be the person you wished you were in that moment—the grassroots lawyer who recognizes the oppression built into our legal system and understands the methods of dismantling institutional inequality¹—so that you could tell that grieving mother that, one day, she will have her justice.

To My Arab Homeland...

أنت كنت حبي الأول. | You were my first love.

You taught me to care deeply and fight from the heart. You taught me about sorrow and sacrifice and homesickness, about loss and love and revolution. You taught me to reject the dichotomies antiquity eternally attempts to thrust upon us and to forge a history that future generations will be proud to recount. You taught me that the greatest expression of peace is to break bread with another, because, when you open your home to a stranger, you can never look at the destruction of their people the same way again.

But for many years, I thought you could be my only love. I thought that fighting for another cause, for another part of my identity, would be a great infidelity. Now that my clinical project has enlisted me as a soldier in the battle for women’s rights, I hope you understand that the war I fight for my womanhood is simply a manifestation of my love and pride for being one in a long line of strong, resilient, Arab women. You will always be my first love.

I must admit that this love is not without conflict. At times, I find it hard to love from afar, and I am still learning how to care for you despite this vast ocean between us. I do not know how

¹ Thomas M. Hilbink, *You Know the Type...: Categories of Cause Lawyering*, 29 LAW & SOC. INQUIRY 662, 664 (2004) (Hilbink explains that grassroots lawyers view the legal system as being “corrupt, unjust, or unfair” and an “oppressive force.” Grassroots lawyers further possess a “[s]tructural understanding of social ills” and emphasize substantive social justice as central to their cause.).

to surmount the guilt of advocating for you from atop an Ivory Tower—how does one lead grassroots efforts without stepping foot on the soil one fights for? I am terrified of misunderstanding your struggles and wants and needs.² I acknowledge that empathy is powerful, but I fear it does not close the chasm between our shores.

For now, I hope the armament I have been given in this new battle—the power of research and writing and the strength of analysis and advocacy—will better prepare me to continue fighting for you. You are the reason I am here, today, and I will forever be grateful.

To My Womanhood...

I'm sorry I neglected you for so long. I'm sorry I was deceived by the rosy illusion of egalitarianism until I was at last disenchanted by the injustice that has provoked our clinical work. I'm sorry I did not fight for you until I was shaken by the stark realization that you are still thought of as being less than the powerful force you are. I'm sorry you are still under attack, day in and day out, regardless of the place and profession you fight to occupy. I'm sorry you must still outwardly prove your inherent worthiness to sit side by side with men.

Most of all, I'm sorry that, even after I vowed to fight for you, I had doubts. I felt disconnected from you, from this battle. I felt there were more important causes to fight for, felt that my efforts and expended energy were futile.

You are the force that gives life. You are the might that turns lust into love and flesh, the architect of future generations. You are the stratum of my identity that cannot be hidden, covered, or rejected—the facet of myself that I wear over my bones in irrefutable nakedness.

² See MAKAU MUTUA, HUMAN RIGHTS: A POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CRITIQUE 10-14 (2002) (Mutua criticizes the human rights systems as being a mechanism for imposing Western and Eurocentric norms and values on other countries.).

Fighting for you means fighting for equality, for fairness, for impartiality, and in this instance, not just for those who have been privileged and empowered by an education in the law. When I finally dug myself out of the trenches of futility after many weeks of research and sobering discussions, I realized that fighting for you in the manner I have and will continue to do means forging justice for every victim and survivor who walks into the courtroom unable to conceal the womanhood that hangs over her heart.

You should not be a heavy burden on our shoulders, and yet the world distorts and desecrates you as such. I see now that fighting for the equality of women in international fora means stripping away yet another level of repression, and I believe we will one day disrobe injustice until we lay bare the formidable magnificence of womanhood. No longer will you be an inhibition but a form of liberation.

“What’s the greatest lesson a woman should learn? That since day one, she’s already had everything she needs within herself. It’s the world that convinced her she did not.” – Rupi Kaur³

To Makau Matua...

Thank you for giving me yet another glass ceiling to shatter.

I refuse to fit neatly into your eloquently painted epochal metaphor.⁴ I am not a one-dimensional actor in your grand narrative. Do not forget that the whole world cannot be separated by a fine line between Us and Them. Do not forget that the world is so much more complex than

³ Rupi Kaur (@rupikaur_), INSTAGRAM (Mar. 7, 2016), <https://www.instagram.com/p/BCq7pCjnA6C/?hl=en>.

⁴ MUTUA, *supra* note 2, at 11 (Mutua explains that “the human rights movements is marked by a damning metaphor” that pits “savages, on the one hand, against victims and saviors, on the other.” He then goes on to describe the State as “the operational instrument of savagery,” an individual whose “‘dignity and worth’ have been violated by the savage” as the victim, and Western entities and INGOs as the saviors. Concisely put, Mutua expounds a metaphor that personifies human rights work as a conduit for Western and European dominance.).

your triptych of Saviors, Victims, and Savages. Do not forget that the new generations born of coerced diaspora are both East and West, Global North and Global South, too foreign for home yet too foreign for here, with a consuming love for both. I am the epitome of what you call “the cross-contamination of cultures,” the offspring of colliding countries, the embodiment of two worlds.

At first, your words coerced me into contorting my identity to conform to your deceptively enthralling framework, but alas I did not fit. I am a woman advocating for women’s rights. Can you reconcile my incarnation of the victim figure in the same body as the savior and redeemer? I’ve tried. I’ve tried to convince myself that perhaps the lingering absence of equality for women is not an affront to my rights, but that cannot be denied. I’ve tried to convince myself that perhaps I am not the vindicating type, but I refuse to diminish my strength and potency as a human rights advocate. Rather, I simply defy your delineations.

Though I have yet to resolve this dissonance you have struck or to comprehend how my identity fits within the fabric of international human rights advocacy, I am assured that your framework fails. To distill the intricacies of our work and world into a trinary system dismisses individuals—like both you and me—who do not further the Eurocentric narrative but rather actively work to rescind and abolish its imposition on our own homelands.

Do not forget us.

To My Western Privilege...

I have tried for so long to disown you, to tell myself and others that you are simply the product of a decision I did not and could not make—to be born here, in the United States of Freedom and Opportunity and Supremacy. I have tried to deny that you were a part of me because

the other parts of my identity were so vast and beautiful and complex that there was no room for you.

But I cannot deny you. I cannot bury you in an abandoned field and hope you are never found. I cannot throw you in a chest with a thousand locks and heave you into the ocean. Like my womanhood, you are an incontestable part of who I am.

And now I see that you are more a means to an end than an end in yourself. Now I see that you may be a crucial ally, because Western privilege metamorphosed into an American legal education is a powerful hegemon on the battlefield for human rights. Now I see that Western privilege married to my Arabness and Womanhood makes for, as they say, the best of both worlds—the ability to empathize, to understand the underlying historical, political, and social contexts that shape the many issues I wrestle with, but without the censorship of fear and violence—a great and powerful immunity not to be taken for granted.

You are an accomplice to my empowering education. Ergo, you are a coconspirator to my acquisition of this abundant toolbox full of laws and facts and theories I now carry, an abettor to my being trained to diagnose the underlying human rights symptoms promulgating the hatred, discrimination, misogyny, and xenophobia that infect our world. You are an accessory to my being programmed to recognize, for instance, that a lack of gender parity on international adjudicatory bodies really means a critical deficiency in a complex system of entangled rights.

But now that you have been arraigned and your culpability proven, you must be confined so that I may discover if the guilt you bear on my shoulders can—and should—be abandoned.

To My Team of Fearless Women...

Thank you for being the vibrant flowers growing by my side, with roots so strong that you entwined yourself with mine to keep me grounded. You are the epitome of community and support and patience.

I must admit when we first began working together, my biggest fear was that I would be the Achilles' heel of our team. I was so afraid of being the one who would hold our team back and even more frightened of letting you down. I could not have abandoned those fears had it not been for your constant confidence and reassurance in my abilities as an advocate. You are the personification of the communal strength upon which I've come to realize cause lawyering depends.

You refined my understanding of the many facets that compose the artistry of human rights advocacy. You dissipated my anxieties with poise and tempered my stress with grace, demonstrating that composure can be a woman's greatest ally. You presented your critiques of my work with such tender finesse, demonstrating that how you communicate an idea is just as important as the idea itself. You welcomed all suggestions and solutions with a sincere openness and eagerness to listen, learn, and understand, demonstrating that collaboration is more constructive than struggling in isolation. Most of all, your steadfast attentiveness to those around you demonstrated a profound empathy I hope to emulate.

My dear fearless women, now that we have finished the work we set out to do thus far and may now indulge in the sweetness of reflection, I cannot help but feel immense pride and gratitude—pride for the splendid creation we produced after months of researching, writing, and refining, and gratitude for the opportunity to work and learn from you both.

Now when I gaze upon the blossoming flowers we have cultivated in ourselves and one another, I truly see abundance.

To the Fearless Women Who Steer This Ship...

Thank you for being the rich soil in which our roots dug deep. Thank you for being the sunshine when we needed the warmth, and the rain when we needed to drown our fears and frustrations.

Thank you for helping me find my voice and the confidence to be resounding. Thank you for teaching me how to be assertive without being argumentative. Thank you for encouraging me to trust my own intelligence and to stand firm in my own convictions. Thank you for demonstrating how to be an unapologetically tough and tenacious woman.

Thank you for showing me how to care for my own well-being, and for convincing me that it is not always selfish to put my mental and emotional health first.

Thank you for assuring me that there is no paved road that leads to this vocation. But more than this, thank you for reassuring me that I do not have to discover my path alone.

Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

To My Future Self...

As I sit here writing this, I am too exhausted by recent events—in particular the ascension of Donald Trump to the presidency—to fathom what the future may look like. I feel like I am choking on all the words I wish to say right now—about racism, about war, about justice, about peace, about human rights and the human wrongs that mutilate and desecrate the world we live in,

about the mind-numbing cynicism leaking into my bones, a pessimism that is wrestling with the optimism I just can't bring myself to surrender because, well, the work goes on.

I'm not sure if and when you will read this again, but always remember that—that the work goes on. Show up. Show up and fight your damn hardest for yourself, for your Arab homelands, for your womanhood, for those who came before you and the generations not yet imagined, and most of all, for those who seek your aid in their own battles. But always, always, always make certain that your help is invoked.

After all this time, I hope that you still take care for your own well-being. Lean on your community, lean on your family, lean on your sisters fighting alongside you. You are not meant to do this alone. Seclusion is not sustainable, and sustainability is decisive in this line of work.

I hope you continue to find solidarity in a community as full of fire and soul as the one that welcomed you into its midst this year at Boalt. I hope you bear the many stories you have and have yet to be entrusted to carry with continued earnestness and solemnity, and that you always find open arms to help you when the burden becomes too heavy, because the work always goes on.