Malala Yousafzai: An Inspiring and Problematic Symbol, and What She Can Teach Us

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Malala Yousafzai was born on July 12, 1997, only two days after my birth, in the Swat district of northwestern Pakistan, a place she would later describe to John Stewart as a “paradise on earth,” with lush green hills, mountains, and crystal clear water. In 2004, the Taliban first came to Swat Valley. As she tells it, the real brutality began in 2007; since then, over 400 schools have been attacked. At the peak of violence, two or three people were slaughtered every night.

With the encouragement of her father, a strong advocate for girls’ education, Malala began to speak out, recognizing it as her mission to inform the world of the horrors occurring in her paradise. She spoke out using every media outlet she could find, asking why the Taliban could take away her right to education. In her earliest anonymous blog posts, her resolve and determination to fight for what she believes in already shine through.

The New York Times reporter Adam B. Ellick met Malala in 2009, when she was set on becoming a doctor. (She has since changed her mind, opting to be a politician instead.) As Ellick later wrote, “I spent six

What’s the Student Union Up To?

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We all know what the Student Union (SU) is, but what does it mean to the students who run it? To Madison Fernandez, a 9th grade SU representative, the SU is “a way for students to communicate their ideas in a way where they are comfortable sharing with their peers.” For Liana Van Nostrand, a 10th grade rep, the SU “should be a place where students of all grades can voice concerns. The most important part is that the rest of the Student Union, in conjunction with the administration, can actually think of and put in place a solution.” As for Allie Gumas, a Y2 rep, the SU is “a way for students to bring up issues that affect the student body as a whole. It’s a productive way of venting.” All in all, the SU is a valuable BHSEC resource that all students and even teachers need to take complete and utter advantage of!

The SU reps have met only twice so far, but students want to know what has been happening in the meetings so far. The SU meetings take place once a month (usually at the end of each month). The last meeting was on Monday, October 28th and some bylaws were discussed. Bylaws are laws established to help regulate and settle a specific group or organization. According to Liana, one of the bylaws that needed to be settled was the act of voting. “The SU voted not to have anonymous elections,” she said. In that meeting, the SU reps also tried to figure out major issues with last year’s meetings, with the hope of increasing productivity this year, “since there wasn’t much structure last year”, according to Allie.

After discussing the bylaws, Madison said that the SU “also touched upon [the] yearbook, but due to time, [they] didn’t have much discussion on how to better the yearbook committee this year.” The yearbook committee is a pressing issue this year and the SU is on its path to find a way to strengthen it. The meetings to discuss these issues haven’t happened yet, since the SU

To Sleep or Not to Sleep

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she says. “The goal is basically to isolate myself from the world and focus on my work.”

Meanwhile, other students have given up on sleep altogether. Alea Alexis has a friend who pulled two all-nighters in a row. Alea has done the same, but would not recommend that strategy because “it’s not conducive to being successful at anything in life.” Indeed, parents constantly tell students that they must go to bed early to succeed. But if sleep is more important than completing assignments, how should BHSEC students manage their workload? Angelique Fenton has a possible solution. When she’s having a particularly demanding week, especially during final exams, she’ll “cut off completely” for a few days at a time, using every free period and spending no extra time seeing her friends. BHSEC students should handle their workload by maximizing their ability to work during the daylight hours, sacrificing a few days every once in a while to work alone, and taking a break for sleep when their brains can no longer function.

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reps are still settling in and trying to formulate their bylaws, but according to Liana, “a few subcommittees were formed. One [subcommittee] to make sure the yearbook happens, and another [subcommittee] to see if anything could remedy the loss the school suffered by losing the Math Center. I believe their goal was to see if there were alternatives, like a peer tutoring system that could be put in place”. The loss of the Math Center and Dr. Rosenbaum is definitely a pressing issue for all grades that has affected students dramatically. Hopefully the Math Center and Dr. Rosenbaum will be up and running by next semester, but before that would be nice as well!

Many of the SU reps feel that their fellow students are not taking advantage of the SU and the fact that the SU is there for students to voice their concerns. Madison says, “Some of my peers actually come up to me and ask me to bring points up for them, and other times I mention what I see is going on in my grade.” Maybe these 9th graders are a bit shy to speak up! But, Liana says, “I haven’t had many students approach me about issues. I usually have to go around and ask. Once I do, people have a lot to say.” This is a serious issue. The SU reps are in their positions because they want to help students voice their concerns and find ways to resolve such conflicts. They can’t just base their meetings on issues they witness rather than issues addressed, because the reps can be very oblivious to some serious issues floating around the school. It seems, though, that Y2’s have realized the benefits of the SU and approach the reps more than the 9th and 10th graders. According to Allie, “my peers are very comfortable with bringing me their issues”.

Liana, like many other SU reps, says, “I always try to steer clear of basing the comments I make on my opinion. The job of the rep is to hear what everyone in the grade has to say. I just try to ask as many people as I can in the days leading up to the meeting.” There are a ton of issues facing the BHSEC community and it is the responsibility of the student body to report such issues and to follow through until they are resolved. The SU reps love their jobs – and they don’t bite! Their role is to address conflicts, to speak on behalf of the entire BHSEC community, and to try their best to resolve such conflicts. Allie, for example, “love[s] having a voice in the meetings, and being a part in getting [her] grade what they want.” Madison “definitely feel[s] honored to be in the Student Union.” “It feels good to be able to cultivate a place to share ideas, especially for ninth graders,” she says, “considering [they’re] new to the school.” The moral of the story is, “Take advantage of the resources you have,” as Liana says, and don’t be shy to approach the SU reps about any matter that needs to be addressed.

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Malala Yousafzai

m o n t h s m a k i n g t w o documentaries about her life that helped bring her brave campaign to the world, transforming her into a public figure.”

As Malala’s audience—and power—grew, and she continued to speak out, the Taliban took more and more notice. Malala first found out that she had been targeted directly when an acquaintance informed her and her father that upon searching her name on Google, news of the threat came up as a result. At first, Malala felt disbelief; she was more worried about her father than herself, thinking that the Taliban were not cruel enough to kill a child. (She was 14 at the time.)

As she would later explain on the Daily Show, now a bubbling 16-year-old girl that no one would ever know had been shot in the head, at the time of the death threats, she asked herself what she would do if the Taliban came. Her first thought was to hit her assassin with a shoe. But then, she stopped herself, thinking, “If you hit a Taliban with your shoe, then there would be no difference between you and the Taliban. You must not treat others with that much cruelty... you must fight others, but through peace, and through dialogue, and through education.” She would explain, she decided, that she wanted education even for her killer’s children, and then let him do what he wanted.

On October 9th of last year, members of the Taliban boarded Malala’s school bus and shot her in the head. Malala was airlifted to a military hospital and operated on immediately. Offers to treat her came from all around the world. After months of surgeries, drugs, and painful rehabilitation, she was able to make a full recovery without brain damage.

And what a recovery it has been. Since the assassination attempt, Malala has, once again, stepped into the public spotlight. Angelina Jolie and Laura Bush have written about her. She has met the Queen of England, been interviewed on countless media outlets, and sat in the Oval Office with President Obama, the First Lady, and their daughter, Malia. Malala was awarded the top European Union human rights award, and was nominated (and denied) the Nobel Peace Prize. She has also released a memoir, I am Malala.

It is undeniably difficult to not be rendered speechless, even tearful, by Malala’s story, by seeing this incredible strength coming from a 16-year-old girl who has defied all odds. Summarizing concisely the emotions being felt by his audience, John Stewart responded to her story by saying, “Let me ask you, I know your father is back stage, and he is very proud of you...but would he be mad if I adopted you?”

Finding fault with Malala and her story is a task that proves to be quite difficult. What makes some people uneasy, though, is her reception in the West. In the Washington Post, Max Fisher denounced the American fuss over Malala as feel-good “slacktivism,” and claimed that the Nobel committee did her a favor in giving the Peace prize to someone else. “The hard truth we don't want to acknowledge,” he explains, “is that the world's most difficult and intractable problems, from gender violence in India to civil war in Syria to discrimination against girls in Pakistan, are not camera-ready. They do not cry out to be adopted by Jon Stewart or given a hug by Queen Elizabeth II. The solutions, if they even exist, are not slogans and they don't make you feel warm and fuzzy.”

It seems clear that Malala’s story, in addition to being absolutely inspiring, incites a lot of difficult questions. Did the journalists who Cont’d Page 8 brought her to
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prominence play a part in her attempted assassination? In fawning over her, are we simply reducing the problems of Pakistan, and the Middle East, into an issue of good guys versus bad guys—in which we support the good ones? In pouring money into Malala’s cause, are we ignoring, and simplifying, the more fundamental problems that plague her nation?

Adam B. Ellick, the Times journalist, did express remorse and frustration with the role he may have played in Malala’s pain. “While giving people a platform to the world,” he wrote of his profession, “We do everything we can to avoid situations in which our reporting turns people into targets. But most of the time, we just don’t know what will happen. My reporting certainly heightened the family’s status, and sparked their appetite for recognition.”

Malala does bring some much-needed complexity and attention to the discussion of the role of the United States in Pakistan. While talking with President Obama, she raised the issue of drone strikes, which he supports, saying that they fuel terrorism. Often, if we really pay attention, she can teach us much more than the often simplified narrative that is presented to us. And her renown may help break down stereotypes of her region.

Despite the drawbacks of her newfound fame, the broad appeal of Malala’s story has undeniable benefits. Watching this girl, born two days after me, overcome great odds to travel the world spreading a message of dialogue and peace, I can’t help but feel inspired to do bigger and better things. Hearing her story makes me feel grateful for the public education I have, and, perhaps more importantly, the political and social stability that I enjoy as a resident of the United States. This tale of Malala’s paradise, and the horrors that have unfolded there, both give us healthy perspective on our own lives and motivate us to solve the problems that plague our world—cheesy as it may sound.

Life Changing Y1 Seminar Lectures?

Ifeoluwa Aiyelabowo, ’15

The Y1 Seminar lectures are monthly talks in the auditorium given by Seminar teachers and guest speakers, on topics branching off from what we learn in class. Topics that are introduced during Seminar lectures are normally philosophical, but sometimes seem useless because they are so diluted in metaphysical and historical points that the evidence that we could use to prove these points is scarce. During the Seminar lectures, many of us ask ourselves, “Why in the name of God am I here in a crowded auditorium listening to someone talking about something that is of almost no importance to me?” To answer this question, I analyzed Dr. Bruce Matthews’ seminar lecture on Plato.

According to an anonymous BHSEC student, “[Seminar lectures are] not really that interesting. I’ve been in this class for two years now so that lecture this week was really repetitive for me. And in general I think that they’re informative, but nothing that couldn’t be said in actual Seminar.” Most of us agree with this person, but we go to the lectures anyway because it is expected of us.

Even though they are not necessarily interesting, Seminar lectures can greatly impact our academic lives. After much analysis of the last Seminar lecture, I came to the conclusion that the purpose of these lectures is to teach teenagers about their lives, who they are, and how they can improve themselves. The majority of students, however, do not interpret these talks as life changing.

Dr. Matthews’ most recent lecture was titled “Plato’s Retreat: The Allegory of the Cave, Digitalized.” In this lecture, Dr. Matthews spoke about Socrates and Plato, whom he somewhat jokingly referred to as “Platocrates.” Towards the beginning of the lecture, Dr. Matthews discussed the fact that Socrates did not like writing his ideas down. The Greek philosopher was quoted as saying, “Writing is a techne that weakens knowledge.” For these philosophers, knowledge was not something that one should write down, but something one should learn and apply. This idea can help all students, as it teaches us that we are not learning unless we can apply our knowledge to the assignments and tests we are given. Is this a thought that all students think while listening to Dean’s Hour lectures? No! But is this not a belief that we should all hold, and something that students should think about during Dean’s Hours lectures? Yes! We students need to understand that if we really know something, we should be able to apply it. If we don’t, then we will not be able to apply the teachings that we are given to better our lives and the world.

Students should use this lesson from Dr. Matthews’ lecture to understand that one only has knowledge if one can apply a given concept, not just write it down. Many BHSEC students are faced with a lot of pressure to do well academically, so they study a lot, but they do not do as well as they want. Platocrates’ belief of knowing by applying can help all of us in this situation. As Ms. Caldarro once said, “You cannot learn to run without running, and you cannot learn to swim without swimming.”

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