

Lucila Takjerad

“The Least You Can Do”

May 20th, 2019

The Least You Can Do

As Harvard graduates, you will be asked to go into the world and do the most you can do. I am here to ask you to do the least.

I was born in Algeria. Every Friday, my sister and I had our weekly shower at the public baths. We didn't have running water at home. On winter nights, we cuddled against the cold because our heat was cut off. And, on some days, we hid our hunger in order not to worry our parents.

When I was seven years old, my country plunged into a bloody civil war. Every night, I prayed to God that tomorrow, there would not be an empty seat at our dinner table.

On one hot summer day in 1994, my life was changed forever by a man whom I never met, do not know, and can never thank.

My mother was at the local market when she noticed a chaotic gathering. Wading into the crowd, she learned that the French government was allowing some Algerians to find refuge from war. All you had to do was write your name on a list. My mother desperately wanted to sign that list. That list might promise her daughters a better future.

But there was one problem: my mother was illiterate; she did not know how to write her name: Fadila Takjerad. Dejected, she walked away.

A man noticed her and ran after her. He got my mother's name and wrote it down on the list. A few months later, my family was fortunate to emigrate to France. I was sad

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to leave my beloved homeland, my caring neighbors, childhood friends and extended family. But I knew that bright opportunities awaited me. Had I stayed in my village - assuming I was spared from bullets or bombs – my life would have been very different. I would not have become the first woman in my family to graduate from college to work and live abroad. I would not have had the chance to call Harvard my home this past year.

As we are graduating today, I still find myself asking – Why did this wonderful man run after my mother? A simple gesture of writing a stranger’s name on a page offered an entire family hope for a better life. He will probably never know the difference he made, but from the small seeds of his goodness have grown fruits of prosperity for my family, myself, and everyone whom we touch.

I now have the ability to shape my world, but this ability was sparked by one little encounter which lit up the course of my life. So, that is the real power, the power of little things, the least you can do can bring true change.

Perhaps you have been blessed in your life with small gifts that made big changes. Maybe it was a teacher who instilled in you her love of a certain subject. Or a kind stranger who helped you with directions when you were lost. At Harvard, I see it every day, in the smiles of the cafeteria staff who keep me so well caffeinated, and in ad hoc baby-sitting circles. Small things... such small things... but from these small things grow inspired people, lasting friendships, and stronger communities.

When one person thanks another, that second person often replies, “Oh, it’s the least I can do” ... because, often, the least you can do can be more than enough. You don’t need to move mountains. Maybe it’s a matter of translating documents for a family

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at the immigration office or offering a car ride to a pregnant lady. You never know how these small gestures can affect people's lives. But I can tell you: they do.

Fellow graduates, of course, do the most you can do: your education and legacy demand it. But also do the least you can do. Because, the least you can do might turn out to be the most significant.

To that gentleman in Algeria, I now say *شكرا والله يعافيك* – thank you and God bless you. And to each of you today, I ask of you: what is the least you can do – now – to make the world around you a little better?