

Tree of Dreams

Senior English Address

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In 1951, in a poem titled "Harlem" Langston Hughes asked a question that I continue to ask today:

"What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

When my mom was a little girl growing up in the Nigerian Village of Ososo, she and her four siblings would get excited whenever one of them accomplished something noteworthy. Why? Well, it meant her dad would do the tree thing. That's when a smile would stretch across his face as he would climb a tall tree, branch by branch, all the way to the very top. His children down below would look up at him, eyes wide, sparkling and full of joy, as he yelled out "Higher, Higher, and Higher." Though he was proud, he was also never satisfied. He had a dream that his children, and his children's children would strive for even greater things.

A big part of that dream was the pursuit of an education. You see, while some families tell bedtime stories consisting of dragons, princesses, and castles, in Nigerian families our stories consist of law school, med school and Harvard. And I'm only kind of joking. After all, educational opportunity is what drove my parents to trek across the Atlantic from Nigeria to Toronto before I was born. And so, throughout my education, I, like many of you, strived for excellence, with hours of study, meetings, and practices. All to fulfill the dream of one day attending Harvard. And on December 13, 2013 that dream came true. I, along with 2,000 other high school seniors, was fortunate enough to receive an acceptance letter from Harvard. And my first thought reading the letter was of my grandfather in that tree. And I knew it was time to aim higher. But I wasn't sure yet where to aim.

Eight months later, I was preparing for freshman year at Harvard. However, little did I know, events happening over 700 miles southwest of my home in Toronto would transform my dream, and my life, forever. These events would shatter the sheltered comfort of the life my parents had created for me. Because on August 9, 2014 just over a week before I would arrive at Harvard, Michael Brown was shot and killed by the police in his hometown of Ferguson, Missouri. Through his death, I saw what happens to those whose dreams are deferred, and ultimately denied. They are left to dry up, abandoned like his dead, murdered body, which laid under the hot Missouri sun in the streets of Ferguson for eight hours. Eight hours. Just like me, Michael was black. Just like me, Michael was 18. Just like me, Michael was preparing to go to college.

Unlike me, however, Michael would never have a chance to see his dream realized. And it was at that moment it hit me. After spending my life believing that my grandfather's dream meant educational attainment, the accumulation of accolades, or even acceptance to Harvard College, Michael Brown's death woke me up. It made me realize that the dream was about much more than how high in that tree we could go as individuals. It was also about how we could encourage and enable those like Michael Brown, whose dreams are deferred and denied, to climb with us. And while education might be essential to achieving that dream, we often forget it is an incomplete answer.

We forget that textbooks don't do much to teach us about compassion and problem sets don't necessarily teach us about the unconditional love of others. We forget that whether you are a banker, a teacher, or an activist, the dream should be about creating the conditions for Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for everyone on this planet. So, while we strive for our

dreams, using the privileges that our Harvard education affords us, we can't forget just how many other dreams have been deferred, denied, and left to dry like a raisin in the sun.

I never met my grandfather, save through his tree of dreams. But today, I stand before you as a proud grandson of a Nigerian carpenter, the child of two Nigerian immigrants, and a graduate of one of the greatest institutions in the world—proof that while we all have dreams, some of us must travel farther to achieve them, both figuratively and literally. My wish is that with our help more dreams can be converted into realities. This task is the calling that the class of 2018 must answer. A dual mandate to do well and to do good. To wake up, look around and see those whose climb is threatened by the burdens of oppression. Your future, my future, and the future of our society depends on us creating, supporting, and investing in the dreams that the next generation can live up to and build upon. It depends on us looking one another in the eye and helping one another to continue to strive for more. To keep growing. And to never, ever stop climbing. Because the next generation is watching, looking up at us, eyes wide, sparkling and full of joy, as we yell out “Higher, Higher, and Higher”.