

Jacob Silberg

### The Red Phone

In every Harvard dorm, there is a little piece of history: a small, red landline phone. Most of us probably disconnected it on our first day and stashed it in the back of a closet or under a futon. But imagine for a moment that we'd left the Red Phone connected, and then imagine that it rang. We'd have no idea who was calling or what they needed, or even if the call was meant for us. The only way to find out would be to pick up. Now, we all have cell phones to be more connected. But we are usually so busy that when we get a call, we silence it and wonder why on Earth they didn't just send a text.

About a year ago, I received a call from a 16-year-old friend of mine named Avery. Avery had leukemia and I had had lymphoma several years earlier, so naturally he and I talked about . . . sports. On this particular call, he told me about his Make-a-Wish trip to the Super Bowl with Jamie Foxx and Leonardo DiCaprio. "Leo was the man," he told me, "He was rocking a giant beard. And I met Kate Upton...and I was making her laugh...and she even gave me a kiss." I teased Avery not to be *too* disappointed that he didn't get Kate Upton's number, but I was so glad to hear he was doing well. Tragically, about a week later, Avery passed away. It wasn't fair, what happened to Avery. But I am always so grateful that he and I shared that phone call. The warmth and the joy in his voice always give me strength.

A lot of things aren't fair in the world today. At the beginning of the year, Dean Khurana asked, "Do we want to prepare students for the world as it *is*? Or the world as we *want* it to be." It is easy to disengage in the world as it is, when we hear of the suffering of people from Iraq to Newtown, when we know the globe is warming and the middle class is shrinking. It is easy to think that no one can solve these big problems, and to conclude that no one should try.

But, it is also easy to disengage in smaller moments. It is easy to answer, “how are you,” with “busy” to end a conversation rather than feel vulnerable by opening up. It is easy to sweetly lie to those people in Harvard Square holding clipboards, “I’ll be back soon,” and avoid them for the rest of the day. It’s easy to be unavailable because we’re all working on something important. Engaging requires us to choose empathy, to set aside time for what is important to others.

But at Harvard, in ways big and small, we engaged. Here, we chose optimism over cynicism when we planned an educational trip to Israel and Palestine, or gave a voice to refugees the world had left in the dust of Western Tanzania. We watched fifth-graders beam on a field trip as their state senator told them that they were all actually her boss. It reminded us that our political system, so often a punchline, can still inspire. We chose to appreciate each others’ gifts rather than view them as threats to our own. We brought a latte to a friend up all night in a lab across campus. We cheered together all over the world when we sank the shot to beat Yale as time expired. We chose empathy when we respectfully disagreed in class and said “I’d just like to push back on that.” In these moments, we glimpsed a world as we want it to be.

Now, as we are about to leave this place, we are excited, even restless. But we worry. Will we like our new jobs? Will we get into the right grad school? Will our parents keep paying our cell phone bill? Most of all, I think we worry about losing our ability to choose. Next year, it will be easy to stress about big meetings and important presentations because our bosses say they matter. It will be easy to spend more time being busy because we’re told that’s how to get ahead. It will be easy to disengage, to forget those special moments we shared.

In this reality, then, before we worry about changing the world, let’s choose not to let the world change us. Let’s invite someone who looks lost to sit with us at lunch, like we might have in Annenberg. Let’s give our neighbors directions, like we would to tourists looking for the John

Harvard statue. And most of all, let's make time for our friends even when we have a million things we should be busy doing instead, like we did when we went out for drinks after our roommates turned in their theses, and perhaps like we did a second time, for even more drinks, when our roommates got their theses back.

Harvard graduate Robert Kennedy told South Africa under apartheid, "Each time we act to improve the lot of others, we send forth a tiny ripple of hope. Crossing each other from a million different centers, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression." Today, I see in front of me 6000 ripples toward a world as we want it to be. I see in our collective imaginations and our combined actions the beginnings of a mighty current.

Robert Kennedy's brother, President Kennedy, installed in the Oval Office a direct line to the head of the Soviet Union, popularly depicted as a small, red landline phone. They used it in times of crisis to build a momentary connection. Today, it would be easy to pretend there is nothing we can do, to disconnect, to stash other peoples' problems in the back of a closet or under a futon. But instead let's connect our Red Phones, and be available for those small serendipitous moments when someone needs our time. Let's engage, even when it makes us feel vulnerable, because how we treat each other, bit-by-bit, affects how leaders treat leaders, and how nations treat nations. As we celebrate our commencement, let's remember that our diploma is not a piece of paper. Rather it is a call to see the world as it is and choose to imagine a world as we want it to be. Right now, the phone is ringing off the hook. Answering that call requires us to make time. But when we answer, I believe we will always be so grateful that we did.