

Level III

Honorable Finalist

Cassidy (“Cassie”) Cox

(Grade 9: Ursuline Academy, Cincinnati. Sponsor: Dr. Anne Hinkle)

Letter to Pakistani activist and Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai concerning her autobiography, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*

Dear Malala,

As a young lady living in the year 2016, the words I read from your hands were the words that I hope throb in the heartbeats of every single girl alive on this Earth. Your constant fight for the right of all children, especially girls, to have an education still sparks up a fire in my soul, even though it has been months since I read your story. As girls, we are told to know our place, where exactly *is* “our” place. Some have said a kitchen, some have said sitting at home and raising children, and others have said being submissive to and dependent upon a man. I’d say that mine is nowhere near any of those. Being a girl in society, even today, brings up challenges and hardships that we have been told cannot be changed and are quite simply “the way things are.” Reading your book has ignited in me the thought that nothing is set in stone. Things are never “just the way they are”—they are only that way if we *let* them become that way. Whether we, as women, are fighting for the right to vote or the right to an education, we must never stop fighting.

When I was born, there was a silent acknowledgement that I was in fact not a boy. Immediately, there was the expectation that my beloved family name was destined to die as I would one day take my future husband’s last name. When I was two, I was told that blue was a boy’s color: therefore, it was simply preposterous for it to be my favorite. Later, when I was five, I wanted short hair: I was told no, that wasn’t for me because short hair was a fashion strictly reserved for the opposite sex. When I was seven, I was told to shut up and sit down; I was after all a young lady and must behave like one. When I was nine, my cousin struck me with the palm of his hand and I hit him back in return. I was punished and forced to apologize while he was rewarded with a new racecar toy. When I was eleven, I was whistled at from someone passing in a black pick-up truck. When I was thirteen, I was expected to want a flawless family in the future. I was told to be a perfect housewife. While there is nothing wrong with that, it simply isn’t what I aspire to. It was when I turned fourteen that I found my voice.

Malala, even when your world changed, your views did not. While the Taliban took away your day-to-day life, you kept true to who you were as a person, and your beliefs. You knew very well what you were, but even more important you know *who* you were, and that was far more than a scared little girl. In the harshest of times, when you found yourself a victim of authority, you stood up and used the voice that many tried to suppress. You used the voice that at first only resonated with your loved ones, but soon, your loved ones became every student and teacher in your school, then everyone in your town, then your fellow countrymen, and ultimately your country turned into the world. It was that very voice that resonated within me. Every girl, whether she is five-years-old or a hundred-and-five, has that voice within her. But it is whether or not we choose to use it that makes a difference. You have taught me that by ignoring that voice, we are actively doing nothing to achieve our goals of equality; we are actively rolling over in submission.

Malala, you have told me that whether I'm fighting for basic human rights or standing up for something I believe in, my voice is my strongest weapon. You have taught me that words are swords, sentences are cannons, and paragraphs are bombs. Staying silent does nothing, but raising our voices can start a revolution, and all it takes is one word. When we are oppressed, and starving for social, economic, and educational equality, one word can ignite a fire not unlike the depths of hell. You have taught me that that word is "NO."

No, I will not be judged. No, I will not be oppressed. No, I will not be denied an education, nor will I be denied respect. No, I am not less worthy simply because I am a girl. NO!

Malala, I know now that I am worth every opportunity that crosses my path. I am worth every word that runs through my head. I am a girl, yes, but I am a hurricane. We call warships "she" for a reason. We are strong, but the only way to exercise that strength is if we speak. Even a whisper can be heard if the night is silent enough. A dormant voice is simply a dormant volcano. All you need to do is erupt.

I know now that equality should see no gender, class, or race, for we are all part of one race—the human race—no matter if we are female, male, or anything in-between or outside of that. We are all people, and as people we each deserve the right to learn, grow, love, and be respected in very possible way. Malala, I am a girl, and for the first time in my life, I'm proud to be so. You have proven that a strong girl can grow into an unstoppable woman. You have taught me that no matter what I wish to pursue, I should respect and be respected. We are girls, and if we want to be a writer, chef, stay-at-home mom, teacher, doctor, scientist, or even a president, we should be able to do so. Because of you, I know that I can change the world with just a few words.

Somebody once told me that someday I'll fit into a glass slipper, but I know now that someday I'll demolish a glass ceiling. Women are weapons. We are guns, bombs, and grenades, but we have to use our ammunition to hit the target.

Malala, it's been quite the journey, reading your book and walking through your life in your shoes. You have been persistent in telling us girls that we are important, that we are strong, that we are pure power, and that we are worth every opportunity of an education, a career, and an equal life. If you are strong enough to take a bullet to the head and still use your voice, then we are strong enough to join you and fight together. We are united, not divided. We are one race, the human race. We are one voice in a million, and no one can take that away from us. Thank you, Malala.

Sincerely,

Cassidy Cox, age 14