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Introduction of Jenny Nordberg

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Incoming students were invited to submit entries for an essay contest about Jenny Nordberg's *The Underground Girls of Kabul*. The winners were announced at the New Student Convocation and, as part of their prize, attended a dinner with Ms. Nordberg last night. Information about the winning essays is on the back of your programs. The first prize was awarded to Amanda Breeden. Amanda, please stand to be recognized. Honorable mention prizes were awarded to Alexa Letourneau and Naing Lin Tun. Alexa and Naing, please stand to be recognized.

As you know, this year's theme is "Women's Power: Women's Justice." At the convocation welcoming new students just three weeks ago, I shared an outline of nine leading issues affecting women around the world today, as identified by Global Citizen. These represent societal failures so great that I am compelled to repeat them.

1. Inadequate access to education: According to UNESCO 31 million girls of primary school age are not in school.
2. Inequality in the workforce: In the United States, a nation that regularly declares itself a leader in equity and human rights, women are paid less than men across nearly all employment sectors. In 2015, the differential was 21% even though women began outnumbering men on college campuses in the 1980s, and in 2014 women in the U.S. surpassed men in overall academic achievement.
3. Reproductive health and rights: Worldwide, 225 million women lack family planning resources.
4. Maternal Health: The World Health Organization estimates that nearly 300,000 lives are lost each year from preventable pregnancy-related causes.
5. Gender-based violence: The World Health Organization reports that 1 in 3 women will experience physical or sexual violence.
6. Child Marriage: According to the United Nations Population Fund, during this decade over 140 million girls will become child brides.
7. Female Genital Mutilation: The World Health Organization estimates that over 200 million women and girls have been victims of these practices across 30 nations.
8. Female infanticide: Globally, when left to nature, human beings have an even distribution of men and women through what is known as Fisher's Principle. Women generally live longer, but this is balanced by a slightly higher male birthrate: 107 male births for every 100 female. When the World Bank first collected global population data by gender in 1961, the world population was within 0.09% of gender equilibrium. A gap has continued to grow since that time, so that there are now over 60,000,000 more men than women in the world. Much of this can be attributed to female infanticide in male dominated cultures.
9. Political inequality: 95% of the world's nations have a male head of state. The 19th amendment was passed 96 years ago, finally granting U.S. women the

right to vote, and yet, until this year, no major party had nominated a woman to be their candidate for president.

These issues are so elemental and deprivations so severe, that it is beyond my comprehension that they can persist in a world contemporary with the extraordinary privilege I enjoy as an educated, heterosexual, white, middle-aged man in a first-world nation. How is it possible that the wealth and opportunity of my world has yet to be globally disseminated? How, in this information age, can fundamental truths about the values of being human not be universally understood? Women's justice is justice. How can our nation persist in institutionalizing inequalities along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and most of all at the intersections of these facets of our diversity? How can we as an intellectual community provide a voice to those who have been marginalized, and how can we best celebrate the actions of our campus companions who advocate for their rights and those of others who have been disenfranchised?

I was a small child at the height of the civil-rights movement, and I remember being told and believing that we were on the brink of a new and just global society. In the words of the great jurist, William Gladstone, "Justice delayed is justice denied." I was a naïve child, and those whose optimistic voices inspired me failed to understand or chose not to acknowledge how truly complex social inequality is.

This summer, as a community, we read Jenny Nordberg's *The Underground Girls of Kabul*, which through its exploration of the bacha posh elucidates one of the countless threads in the complex web of "Women's Power: Women's Justice." Ms. Nordberg's narratives provide poignant confirmations about how truly non-bimodal issues of gender and identity are, and yet society's assignment of privilege and power remains governed by anachronistic rhetoric and traditions that are yoked to rigid concepts of dualism. Man Woman, Black White, Gay Straight, Conservative Liberal, Religious Secular, Rich Poor. We are all far more sophisticated and nuanced than an amalgamation of binary characteristics, and these individual complexities compound when we form communities.

Ms. Nordberg's portrayals introduce us to characters with whom we are sympathetic and for whom we care — who make decisions counterintuitive to our experience. This is why universal justice is so hard. Concepts of ethical relativism fail as soon as we acknowledge that we believe in certain inviolable truths, and each of us possesses foundational beliefs that for us cannot and must not be broken. This is indeed why universal justice is so hard, but Ms. Nordberg persuasively shows us that those aspects of our shared humanity can help us as a society to traverse our seemingly irreconcilable differences. This was the hope of the optimistic voices of my childhood, and it is my hope that Ms. Nordberg's example of giving voice to a silenced people will inspire us all to give voice to all who need to be heard. Please join me in welcoming Jenny Nordberg.