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Emilio F. Iodice
efiodice@yahoo.com

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Education Meant Risking Her Life

A Young Girl's Deadly Struggle to Learn

EMILIO IODICE, ROME, ITALY



Malala Yousafzai, Courtesy Pinterest

Let us remember: One book, one pen, one child, and one teacher can change the world.

I speak not for myself but for those without voice... those who have fought for their rights... their right to live in peace, their right to be treated with dignity, their right to equality of opportunity, their right to be educated.

I don't want to be remembered as the girl who was shot. I want to be remembered as the girl who stood up.

I think of it often and imagine the scene clearly. Even if they come to kill me, I will tell them what they are trying to do is wrong, that education is our basic right.

It is very important to know who you are. To make decisions. To show who you are.

— Malala Yousafzai

All she wanted was to go to school. She desired the chance to learn, to open her mind to the world, to discover her interests and talents and to realize her dreams of freedom. That is what education is for Malala, freedom. It meant the chance to be a person, a woman with the control to plan her own future. She fought tirelessly so that other girls could have the chance to study, learn, and emerge from discrimination. Malala faced great obstacles. Assassins tried to silence her.

They failed.

Growing Up in the Swat Valley

She was raised in northwest Pakistan where her hometown of Mingora was in the Swat Valley, a three-hour drive from Islamabad. It was a beautiful place. The Valley was a popular tourist destination with its lush forests and fields and summer festivals. The people of Mingora were friendly and hospitable. It was the center of economic, cultural,



Swat Valley, Pakistan, Courtesy Pakistan Tourist Bureau

and social life of the region. The town of nearly 200,000 was the home of rare Buddhist ruins that were world renowned. The local Yousafzai tribe, predominantly Muslim, was the main clan of the city which also welcomed Hindu and Sikh families. The metropolis was diverse and interesting with a rich cultural heritage. This is where Malala lived.¹

She was born on July 12, 1997. Her father named her after a Pashtun heroine. Pashtuns were among the oldest traditional Islamic cultures dating back to Alexander the Great known for its rich history, music, poetry, colorful language, and beautiful clothing. The Pashtun traditions were respected in Malala's family; she would wear a head scarf but did not cover her face. This was something that made her unique. This uniqueness of Malala's character was reflected in her everyday life including her love of learning. Malala's mother was different because as she was illiterate, she could not understand the fervor Malala and her father had toward education.



Malala as a baby, *Courtesy malala.org*

Malala was a splendid student. She loved to learn and came from a family of educators. Her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, founded and administered the Khushal Girls' High School and College where Malala attended school. Ziauddin was an outspoken social critic who advocated for universal education and women's rights. He wanted his daughter to learn the value of learning and to fight for justice as he did. As a result, he was determined to give her the best possible education thereby providing her the tools to think for herself. For Malala, her studies opened the world to her. They became the most important aspect of her life. Living in her village and going to school was exciting, satisfying, and normal. It would not remain so for long.

The Taliban

In 2007, Malala's life suddenly changed. The Swat Valley was invaded by a group who would bring terror, suffering, and endless fear: the *Taliban*.² They destroyed Western symbols, killed innocent people, and made examples of those who opposed them. At first, they attacked the



Taliban Fighters, *Courtesy Fox News*

perimeter of the region, taking control of one town after another. They closed one school today, then another tomorrow, and then another. Day by day, week by week, the invaders moved closer to Mingora. Malala feared what it meant and what would become of her and her dreams. She was terrified.

Who were these ferocious fighters who were approaching her homeland?

The Taliban set out to create the world's most pure Islamic regime by introducing a disturbing and deeply revolutionary form of Muslim culture that came at a tremendous cost to human freedom. Men were ordered to keep their beards to a specific length, and subjected to punishment for defiance. Members of minority groups wore labels to distinguish them as non-Muslims, a measure the Taliban argued was to protect them from religious police enforcing Islamic law. Frivolities such as television, the Internet, music, and photography were outlawed.

¹ *The Pulitzer Center* (5 August 2011). Life in the Swat Valley. Retrieved from <http://pulitzercenter.org/slideshows/pakistan-swat-valley>

² *Encyclopedia.com*. The Taliban. Retrieved from <http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/asia-and-africa/central-asian-history/taliban>

Punishment, including amputation of the hands of thieves and the stoning to death of women convicted of adultery, considered severe, was common under the Taliban.



Mingora Square, Courtesy the Pulitzer Center

It was the Taliban's anti-woman agenda, however, that caused mounting concern around the world. Under the Taliban, women were forbidden to work outside the home, were compelled to wear a head-to-toe covering, and could not leave the home without a male guardian. Such issues, along with restrictions on women's access to health and education, caused resentment among ordinary Afghans and drew the ire of the international community. To the Taliban, however, the restrictions served to preserve the honor and dignity of women who had previously been preyed upon.

Death and Suffering in Mingora

The day came when the Taliban attacked Mingora. A former forklift operator, Maulana Fazlullah, led the fight against the town and its people. The famous "Green Square" of the village became the "bloody square" since it is where the Taliban hung from electricity poles the bodies of opponents, government workers, the police, and anyone they felt could oppose the regime. They murdered a female dancer and threw her body in the square as an example to others. In 2008, Fazlullah imposed restrictions on the administration of anti-polio vaccines, the ability to speak and protest, and denied girls the right to an education.³ Schools were shut down and women were banned from having an active role in society. They could not go shopping, music was outlawed, and anyone who dared confront or disagree with the Taliban risked certain death. Malala and her family fled. They returned later when the violence had diminished.



Malala, Courtesy Girl Up and Pinterest

Speaking Out

Malala's father wanted to fight the Taliban, not with the sword but with the word. On September 1, 2008, when (Malala) Yousafzai was 11 years old, her father took her to a local press club in Peshawar to protest the school closings, where she gave her first speech, *How Dare the Taliban Take Away My Basic Right to Education?* Malala knew the consequences of what she had done and that the Taliban would seek revenge.

Blogging to Reach the World

Her speech was publicized throughout Pakistan. Shortly after the speech, the BBC contacted Malala's father. They wanted to create a blog and needed someone to describe life under the Taliban. Malala began to write. Toward the end of 2008, the Taliban announced that all girls' schools in Swat would be shut down on January 15, 2009.⁴ To protect herself and her family, Malala used the nickname, Gul Makai. From January

³ *Ibid.* The Pulitzer Center.

⁴ Blumberg, N. (1 January 2017). Malala-Yousafzai. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/>

to March, she submitted thirty-five entries about her daily life and those of others who were persecuted by the Taliban, for example:⁵



Malala, Courtesy malala.org

Saturday 3 January. *I had a terrible dream yesterday with military helicopters and the Taliban. I have had such dreams since the launch of the military operation in Swat. My mother made me breakfast and I went off to school. I was afraid going to school because the Taliban had issued an edict banning all girls from attending schools... On my way from school to home I heard a man saying 'I will kill you'. I hastened my pace and after a while I looked back if the man was still coming behind me. But to my utter relief he was talking on his mobile and must have been threatening someone else over the phone.*

It was only a matter of time before the Taliban would destroy all she cherished. As the year progressed, the Taliban closed schools throughout the region destroying over one hundred of them with explosives.⁶ The next year would be momentous for Malala and her family.

Pakistani Television

It was February, 2009, she was invited to be interviewed by a Pakistani journalist on television where many would hear her voice and see her face. They would know her message and know who she was, but so would the Taliban. The people of Pakistan began to oppose the Taliban and fight their brutality. The insurgents agreed to a ceasefire and lifted some restrictions in the areas they controlled. The Taliban allowed girls to go back to school as long as they wore burqas but it was short-lived. Within a few months, the violence and bloodshed returned. Malala and her family fled from the valley. The Pakistani army fought and drove the Taliban from the area. For a short time, the valley seemed to be in peace.

The Video that Reached Around the World

The New York Times decided to make a documentary about Malala. In October, 2009, Times reporter, Adam Ellick, worked with Malala and her father Ziauddin, to make a movie about her ordeal and that of other girls under the rule of the Taliban, entitled *Class Dismissed*. The video depicted the torture and murders committed by the radical Muslims. It talked about the 200 educational institutions shut down. Boys' schools remained opened while, overnight, 50,000 girls lost their right to learn. One spoke out about the horror of a lack of education. She wore a black head dress to protect her identity and said, "Why our future is targeted? Schools are not places of learning but of fear and violence. Who will solve our problems? Who will return our valley to peace? I think nobody. No one. Our dreams are shattered."⁷



Malala, Courtesy malala.org

Ellick described how Malala's family was under siege: Her father was on the list of those to be killed by the Taliban. Ziauddin had to sleep in a different place every night. "Sometime I think I will hide in the bathroom and call the police and they will come and save my father," said Malala. "And sometimes, I think I will tell my father to hide in the cupboard and I will tell no

⁵ BBC [online] (10 October 2014). Moving moments from Malala's BBC diary. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29565738>

⁶ *Ibid.* Blumberg.

⁷ Ellick, A. (9 October 2009). *Class Dismissed*. *The New York Times* [online]. Video. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/asia/100000001835296/class-dismissed-malala-yousafzais-story.html>

one. I am afraid,” she said. She put her head in her hands and cried. “This hiding goes on all the time and all night,” said her father. “This is our life.” Malala went to school in fear of the Taliban. “He will kill us. He throws acid in our faces. And we can do nothing about it,” she explained.

The film described the evacuation of Malala’s town as the Taliban advanced. It showed Malala appealing to U.S. Special Envoy, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, to Afghanistan and Pakistan to help restore education in their valley. The family had to leave for fear of being killed by the Taliban.

Sorrowful Return to Mingora

Six months later, Malala and her family returned to their village. They saw the victims of the Taliban rotting in the streets. At times, they feared the Pakistani army as much as the Taliban, since they were also involved in random killing.

“You are now going into a city where you are a wanted man,” Adam Ellick tells Malala’s father. “I have a strong belief that death has a certain time. When it comes it comes. Death cannot be a hindrance in my struggle,” he responded. Malala and her father cry as they enter the town and see the destruction and desolation. They finally reached their home. They found it is still standing. It had not been looted. Their chickens were dead. Malala cried. She searched to find her most precious possessions, her school books. They were still there. She was delighted. They visited the school that was their family’s livelihood for 14 years. It was closed. It had been plundered. Someone moved in to live there. Malala looked for clues as to who stayed in the school in their absence. She discovered that they had been government soldiers fighting the Taliban. “When I see my school in this way, I am very shameful of my army,” she says. “The Taliban destroyed us,” she stated.⁸



Malala on her way to the hospital, October 9, 2012.
Courtesy, Reuters

Target of the Taliban

Malala was now well known around the world. She spent the next two years completing her education as best she could and giving speeches and interviews to support education of girls. In 2011, she was awarded the International Children's Peace Prize as well as the National Youth Peace Prize. As her fame grew, so did the peril facing her. She received death threats in many forms: from papers slipped under her door to warnings via social media. The Taliban were determined to silence her.⁹

The assassins launched their plan in the fall of 2012 knowing where they could find this little girl they feared so much. She was in her school bus on her way home. Malala had just finished taking an exam. The bus, which was filled with twenty girls and three teachers, was suddenly stopped:

A masked man went up to the bus. “Who is Malala?” he demanded. No one responded, yet several girls looked at Malala. They all had face veils. She was the only girl with her face uncovered. Now he knew. He lifted a black pistol and pointed it. Malala’s friend held her hand. He fired three shots. One pierced her left eye socket and came out her shoulder. The

⁸ *Ibid.* Ellick.

⁹ *The Express Tribune.* (12 October 2012). “Radio Mullah” sent hit squad after Malala Yousafzai.

bullet narrowly missed her brain. Two other bullets hit the girls next to her. Witnesses said the gunman's hand was trembling as he fired.¹⁰

Malala slumped forward, unconscious. They thought she was dead, her wounds were life threatening. She was taken by a military helicopter to an intensive care ward in Peshawar.



26 October 2012: Malala's father Ziauddin and two younger brothers Atal and Khushal visit Malala at Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham, *Courtesy Reuters*

Swelling developed in the left portion of Malala's brain and doctors were forced to operate. Five hours later, the surgeons removed the bullet from her shoulder which was lodged near her spinal cord. She was then taken to Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, England.

Malala spent three months in the hospital and underwent numerous surgeries. After a week of recovery, she emerged from a coma.¹¹

A Taliban spokesman, Ehsanullah Ehsan, claimed responsibility on behalf of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Pakistani offshoot of the Taliban movement notorious for its restrictions of women's freedom and female education during

the five years before late 2001 when they were in power in Afghanistan.

"She was pro-west, she was speaking against Taliban and she was calling President Obama her ideal leader," Ehsan told *Reuters*. "She was young but she was promoting western culture in Pashtun areas," he said, referring to the main ethnic group in northwestern Pakistan and Afghanistan from which the Taliban finds most of its followers.

The Taliban had previously announced the girl was on their "hit list" because of her backing for "the imposition of secular government" in Swat.¹² They were frustrated that their plan to kill this fifteen-year-old girl had failed.

Recovery and Global Reaction

In January, 2013, Malala was discharged from the hospital and needed rehabilitation. The family stayed in a temporary home in the West Midlands and the following month, Malala underwent another operation. Her skull was reconstructed and her hearing restored with an implant.

The attempted murder of Malala received global media coverage resulting in an outpour of sympathy, anger and protests in Pakistan. Over two million people signed a Right to Education Petition which led to a law being passed by the Pakistani Parliament. A reward was offered for the arrest of Malala's attacker as concerns grew for the safety of the girl's entire family. "We wouldn't leave our country if my daughter survives or not. We have an ideology that advocates peace. The Taliban cannot stop all independent voices through the force of bullets."¹³

The President of Pakistan called the shooting an attack on "civilized people." President Barack Obama said it was "reprehensible, disgusting and tragic." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton applauded Malala because of her bravery and standing up for the rights of girls.¹⁴ Celebrities

¹⁰ Ng, C. (5 October 2013). Malala Yousafzai Describes Moment She Was Shot Point-Blank by Taliban. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/International/malala-yousafzai-describes-moment-shot-point-blank-taliban/story?id=20459542>

¹¹ *Ibid.* Ng.

¹² *The Guardian* [online]. (10 October 2012). Malala Yousafzai: Pakistan Taliban causes revulsion by shooting girl who spoke out. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/09/taliban-pakistan-shoot-girl-malala-yousafzai>

¹³ Ghosh, P.R. (10 October 2012). Malala Yousafzai: Family Refuses to Cower in Fear as Girl Remains in Critical Condition. *International Business Times*.

¹⁴ *Indo Asian News Service*. (11 October 2012). Pakistani teen still critical, Obama calls attack tragic. *Yahoo News*.

devoted songs to Malala's courage and a fund was started in her name to help the education of girls. The Taliban were not repentant despite the worldwide condemnation of their action. "We warned him (Malala's father) several times to stop his daughter from using dirty language against us, but he didn't listen and forced us to take this extreme step." The Taliban also justified its attack as part of religious scripture, stating that the Quran says that "people propagating against Islam and Islamic forces would be killed. Sharia says that even a child can be killed if he is propagating against Islam."¹⁵ While some suspected the Taliban were brought to justice, doubts remained as to whether or not Malala's attacker was ever found.¹⁶



12 July 2013: Malala Yousafzai is introduced before her speech at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, Courtesy International Business Times and Reuters.

Speaking at the United Nations in New York

Nine months after the attempt on her life, Malala was invited to speak before the United Nations in New York. It was her 16th birthday. Here is what she said:¹⁷

There are hundreds of human rights activists and social workers who are not only speaking for their rights, but who are struggling to achieve their goal of peace, education, and equality. Thousands of people have been killed by the terrorists and millions have been injured. I am just

one of them. So here I stand. So here I stand, one girl, among many. I speak not for myself, but so those without a voice can be heard. Those who have fought for their rights. Their right to live in peace. Their right to be treated with dignity. Their right to equality of opportunity. Their right to be educated.

Dear friends, on 9 October 2012, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. They shot my friends, too. They thought that the bullets would silence us, but they failed. And out of that silence came thousands of voices. The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my ambitions. But nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear, and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage was born...

'The pen is mightier than the sword.' It is true. The extremists are afraid of books and pens. The power of education frightens them. They are afraid of women. The power of the voice of women frightens them.



Malala and Kaliash Satyarthi, who also won the Peace Prize at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo Dec. 19 2014, Courtesy Nobel.org

Malala carried her message far and wide through her speeches at universities and institutions everywhere. Her willingness to

¹⁵ Walsh, D. (12 October 2012). Taliban Reiterate Vow to Kill Pakistani Girl. *The New York Times*. *The Guardian* (16 October 2012). Malala Yousafzai deserved to die, say Taliban.

¹⁶ Hughes, C. (5 June 2015). Brave Malala's hitmen secretly FREED just weeks after their 25-year prison sentences. *Daily Mirror*. MGN Ltd.

¹⁷ Yousafzai, M. (12 July 2013). Our books and our pens are the most powerful weapons. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/12/malala-yousafzai-united-nations-education-speech-text>

sacrifice herself to fighting evil and securing the rights of women gained her solidarity and support in the four corners of the earth.

Nobel Peace Prize

On Friday, October 10, 2014, two years and a day following her attack by the Taliban, Malala Yousafzai was awarded the Nobel Prize. She was the youngest recipient ever to be given the prestigious symbol of world peace.

“The terrorists tried to stop us,” she said. “Neither their ideas nor their bullets could win. We survived. And since that day, our voices have grown louder and louder. I tell my story not because it is unique but because it is not,” she said. “It is the story of many girls. Today, I tell their stories too. I have brought with me some of my sisters from Pakistan, from Nigeria, and from Syria who share this story. This award is not just for me. It is for those forgotten children who want education,” Malala said. “It is for those frightened children who want peace. It is for those voiceless children who want change. I am here to stand up for their rights, to raise their voice. It is not time to pity them.”¹⁸

Malala Fund

Shortly after leaving her hospital bed in England, Malala, her father, and many supporters created the Malala Fund. Its goal was to help girls everywhere have twelve years of quality education and to support national and international changes in policy to do so. On her 18th birthday, Malala opened a school in the Bekas Valley in Lebanon, close to the Syrian border. The institution provided education of Syrian refugees and, in particular, training and learning for girls ages 14 to 18. Malala called on world leaders to invest in “books, not bullets.”¹⁹

Her 2013 memoir *I Am Malala: The Story of the Girl Who Stood Up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban* received excellent reviews. *The Washington Post* said, “It is difficult to imagine a chronicle of a war more moving, apart from perhaps the diary of Anne Frank.”²⁰ In the last three years, Malala has devoted herself to giving speeches and interviews everywhere to promote the cause of education for girls. She has received scores of “honors and awards and in each case accepts in the name of girls who want to learn and want to be themselves in an atmosphere of freedom and peace.



A woman reads a copy of Malala's book "I am Malala" in Islamabad, Pakistan Courtesy, Reuters

Conclusion

The measure of someone's courage requires the consideration of the world they live in. An eleven-year-old in an American or European town that protests injustice can usually expect not to be punished, attacked, or killed for their initiative. It is a brave act to take a stand, but to do so in a place that threatens your livelihood, your traditions, your possessions, and your life is geometrically greater than anything we can imagine in the comfort and safety of the developed world. Malala lived in a world foreign to our own, fighting in a place that was diametrically

¹⁸ Engel, P. (10 December 2014). Malala Gives A Jaw-Dropping Speech to Accept Her Nobel Peace Prize. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/malala-nobel-peace-prize-acceptance-speech-2014-12?IR=T>

¹⁹ Westall, S. (13 July 2015). Nobel winner Malala opens school for Syrian refugees. Reuters.

²⁰ Arana, M. (11 October 2013). Book Review: "I Am Malala" by Malala Yousafzai. *The Washington Post*.

opposed to her beliefs. She could have stayed silent, given in, slipped into the crowd, and waited out the storm. She could have accepted the tyranny of the Taliban but instead, she lifted her voice to those who would listen. She lifted her voice to us. The world heard her call for equality and justice. She was ready to lose her life for the chance to speak out. She was afraid because she was wanting to live a normal life. That makes her example of courage larger than life and makes her more powerful and more memorable.



Malala, Courtesy Malala Fund

I want education for the sons and the daughters of all the extremists, especially the Taliban.

There are many problems, but I think there is a solution to all these problems; it's just one, and it's education.

Let us make our future now, and let us make our dreams tomorrow's reality.

I don't know why people have divided the whole world into two groups, west and east. Education is neither eastern nor western. Education is education and it's the right of every human being. When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.

When I was born, some of our relatives came to our house and told my mother, 'Don't worry, next time you will have a son.'

Once I had asked God for one or two extra inches in height, but instead, he made me as tall as the sky, so high that I could not measure myself... By giving me this height to reach people, he has also given me great responsibilities.

I say I am stronger than fear.

— Malala Yousafzai

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About the Author

Emilio Iodice is a former American diplomat, business executive, university administrator, professor of leadership, and best-selling writer and public speaker. The story of Malala is from his latest book, "*When Courage Was the Essence of Leadership, Lessons from History*" which is an Amazon best seller and can be found at https://www.amazon.com/When-Courage-was-Essence-Leadership/dp/1981767479/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=

Emilio Iodice can be reached at efiodice@yahoo.com.

