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For liberty, and love of learning

Even when I was much younger, before I knew what college was, there were some things that didn't feel quite right. When my mom told me that she had authority just because she was the parent, when I learnt that teachers could cut ahead of students in the cafeteria line and enforce rules they didn't have to follow, or that you could be executed for bringing weed into the country, and jailed for criticizing the government or even just sleeping with someone of the same gender, something didn't feel right. But at fourteen years old, in a conservative country where you're always told that "you owe your elders respect" and "society comes first" and "it's for the greater good", I couldn't fully articulate what was wrong with these things, even though I knew every one of them was bothering me for the same reason. I knew it had something to do with *authority*, something to do with *rights*, and the fact that everyone is inherently equal and you can't tell someone else what to do, but it was frustrating that nobody else seemed to truly understand what was wrong. And every so often, I would try and explain how I felt to my parents or friends, why it wasn't okay for people to do things like that, but the only reaction I ever got was a shrug and a "that's just the way things are".

By the time I was halfway through two years of military conscription, arguably the most disagreeable of all the peculiarities mentioned thus far, I had already developed some understanding of rights and obligations, of freedom and duty, and a friend, aware of my philosophical dispositions, lent me her copy of Mill's *On Liberty*. Whether she was hoping it would reinforce my argument or change my mind, I still do not know, and it did neither of those things, but it also did so much

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more. I discovered that there was a whole world I knew nothing about, a world of ideas and arguments and philosophies that were remarkably similar to the rudimentary principles I had developed on my own, but far richer, deeper, and more complex than anything I'd come across before. College was when I finally entered that world, and here I found everything I was looking for, and more. I found the pieces to fill the gaps in my explanations, of what I had so long felt was wrong with so many things. I learnt how to counter the "this is part of being a member of society" argument, the social contract, which I had always found to be rather unsatisfying (when did I ever sign on the dotted line?). I discovered that my worldview of "to each his own" had a name, *classical liberalism* or *libertarianism*, and it felt like I had finally found my philosophical home. After a semester I knew I would major in political science; after a year, I knew I wanted to go into academia. For me, making the most of college isn't necessarily about going on as many road trips, or joining as many clubs as you can. It's about taking a long, slow walk to Franklin Street and back, chewing on an interesting idea in your head, before turning it into an essay. Here, every politics or philosophy class, every engaging discussion with incredible faculty and friends, confirms that this is what I love, what brings me to life; reading, thinking, learning, and standing up for what I believe in.

Coming to America has been an amazing experience, especially this past year. It was nothing short of a privilege to hear President Obama declare that "... *we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal...*" and later, to see the American Civil Liberties Union and thousands of people across the country rise in defense of freedom of speech and religion, of justice, of immigration, of gender and

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LGBT equality. People at home love picking at the flaws in American democracy, and pointing out the dangers of a free press and free speech and multiple political parties. In the wake of the election, that criticism has only grown stronger. But this year at UNC has only reinforced my belief in its underlying principles, in equality, justice, and true freedom. It has shown me that the values we hold dear are not guaranteed, and that their legitimacy is under threat now more than ever. Yet, because of all I have learnt and continue to learn, because of the ideas and arguments and skills I have acquired in college across politics and philosophy and economics and history, I rest assured knowing that, whether here or at home, I know what I'm fighting for, and that I have what it takes to fight for it.