

9) "Down the Rabbit Hole"

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I had been at Harvard for a year when I decided to emulate my peers by adding a respectable quote to the end of my e-mails. I eventually settled on one from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, from the scene in which Alice finds the Red Queen running around in circles. When Alice asks her why she is running in circles, the Red Queen responds:

"Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

At the very least, I thought this quote would show my recipients I had read an acclaimed book. But I also chose it because it had personal significance.

When I read about Alice as a child, I knew we were very different. She's English; I'm Rwandan-Kenyan-Ugandan-Tanzanian. She's a European with long, blonde hair; I'm an African with a short black Afro. She spends her afternoons reading books along a river bank or playing games of croquet by herself (never mind that she plays by herself, I thought, what on earth is croquet?). I spent my afternoons doing back-breaking housework and feeding the chickens. You almost believed that, didn't you? I was actually quite the irresponsible African daughter, spending most afternoons reading books, and pretending to be a boy. So what do Alice's Wonderland experiences have to do with my time at Harvard?

For starters, I think you'll agree that freshman year felt a bit like falling down a rabbit hole. I tumbled through those first months, trying to reconcile my expectations of a Harvard student with my false starts. Although things did not slow down in later years, I did develop a strategy: I would run twice as fast as my fastest speed, which is slower than that of most Harvard students.

The questions raised during my Harvard career were even more important than the pace of life. Everywhere, there seemed to be a hookah-smoking caterpillar asking "Who-oooo aaare yooouuuu?" I often had no good answers to this question. Along with my changing accent, my views on personal and societal issues were in a constant state of flux. In the US census, should I call myself "Black/African American" or should I check the "Other" box? Should I share the Kony 2012 video or point out the many other tragedies unfolding in Africa and the rest of the world? Should I watch the Red Sox game with my friends, or finally confess my disinterest in any American sport not associated with Harvard-Yale weekend or Jeremy Lin? My

identity hinged on these questions and since I couldn't always answer them decisively, it seemed I couldn't identify myself.

I needed to strike a balance between extreme confidence in my abilities and being intimidated by impressive peers. When I heard of other people's great accomplishments, my ego shrank so fast it felt like I had drunk from a small Wonderland bottle suspiciously marked "Drink me".

I also had to keep my ego from swelling beyond recognition. If you think dropping the H-bomb here is challenging, try East Africa, where Yale truly is an afterthought. Thankfully, it often sufficed to say I go to school in America. "You go to school in America? Wow. How's Obama? I want to come, can you help me?" It seemed like my head could never find its ideal size, if ever there was one.

As my adventures in Harvardland draw to a close, I have to confront Pauline from 2008. She is echoing the Caterpillar's incessant question - who am I? How has Harvard shaped me?

Despite the uncertainty, I look back on my Harvard career with a Cheshire smile. Unlike Alice, I did not journey alone. From the frantic rush of freshman year to the slothfulness of senior year, my family, friends and advisers always walked with me. My friends convinced me that I was not completely batty and when that did not work, that being batty wasn't really that bad. My advisers, tutors, bosses and TF's gave me reality checks, and after hearing about my Wonderland obsession, they will realize they acted just in time. And of course, there is always family. To be fair, I did have two families. If you can get past the identity crisis that comes with being an international student, you will discover the joys of having a truly loving American host family in addition to the Rwandan one that took all your nonsense growing up.

As I travelled, I learned that Harvard is not the Wonderland where things always work like magic. It is the Wonderland where we tirelessly question our beliefs and assumptions. A place where we try to make sense of a world that often seems quite absurd, knowing that hard work, not magic, will solve this world's problems. In the process, we all learned one or two things about ourselves. These are the most valuable lessons we will apply to our lives and to the people we hope to touch.

Finally, if all the good-natured orations today do not inspire you to greater heights, I urge you to follow the White Queen's advice - start believing at least six impossible

things before breakfast. If you're anything like me, at least six of those things will be events that allowed you to be here today, a Harvard graduate against all odds.

Dream on, Harvard Class of 2012!