

**Parliament Hill Panelist:
for the Era 21 Networking Breakfast for Young Canadians**

The Audacity of Hope:

Reflections on Citizenship

and Belonging in the 21st Century

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Good morning students, Senator Poy, Minister Chan, teachers, principals and other friends. When June asked me if I could do this presentation, I immediately said yes (although my schedule was already more than full) for a number of reasons: first, I could never say no to June: she inspires me everyday and I have a tremendous respect and admiration for the amazing work she does for our community so we could reconcile our differences and live, work, serve, and play together peacefully. She is fondly referred to as “community mama” and true to this role when she asks we deliver! I also said yes because I am quite passionate about sharing learning and experiences with young men and women. I hope you will draw lessons (hopefully wise ones) that help you live up to your full potential in your journey to become full and contributing citizens in our country. When I came to Canada as a refugee 20 years ago, one of the most important losses I have experienced was the loss of immediate access to great wisdoms and teachings that helped me in my own personal path to adulthood and growth. Therefore, I cherish this moment I am spending with you today.

This morning, I would like to share with you some of my own personal journey to being Canadian and my own reflections on citizenship and belonging in the 21st century Canada that includes people from practically every part of the globe. I will touch on these points in my personal story to speak on what I think the role of the young Canadian men and women today is in building a socially inclusive, open, democratic, and pluralistic society that plays an important and critical economic and political role in the world stage.

I am from a well known, much respected, highly educated, and politically and socially active extended family in Somalia. My father was an internationally

known judge and my mother a well respected business woman. Education, excellence, leadership, social justice, and service to the community were themes that were constant within our family as I was growing up. This family context and experiences set the stage for a life that was (and continues to be) active and full of wonderful learning that allowed me to live up to my potential and provided me with immense opportunities to contest social limitations, to question and challenge cultural prescriptions and conventional wisdoms and explore ideas and really reach for the stars in many ways!

At the very early age of 4, I became very much aware of unjust privileges when I noticed that boys had the privilege of running around and be free while girls were put in pretty dresses and expected to sit around on the sidelines. I refused to wear the dress as I realized that doing so will force me to sit somewhere quietly restrict my ability to be free; this societal arrangement did not really fit my personality and my energy. Luckily I had a family that was ok with what I wanted and accepted my desire to be active (run, climb trees, jump from trees etc) in the neighbourhood. I later realized, I was challenging and contesting a social and cultural norm that gave freedom to boys to be who they are and restricted girls ability to be all they could be!

At 12, I was one of few students selected to welcome African presidents and other dignitaries coming to participate in the OAU Conference in Mogadishu. We were trained in cultural etiquettes of countries represented by the delegates and were taught to say “welcome to our country; we hope you have a wonderful stay” in more than 40 languages. The most exciting about this was meeting the former Emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie. In Rastafari, a movement that emerged in Jamaica in the 20th century, Haile Selassie is believed to be a direct descendant of the Israelite Tribe of Judah through the lineage of King David and Solomon, and that he is also the Lion of Judah mentioned in the Book of Revelation. This may have shaped my love for Ethiopian history during my undergraduate years and later.

When I graduated from High School I was asked to teach Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at a high school as part of the national service every graduate had to do. I was fluent in Arabic at the time. However, it was still a daunting task as I was only couple of years older than students I was supposed to teach and these subjects were generally taught by old religious men and were not all time student favorites. I managed to negotiate with the principle to allow me to make some changes to the curriculum to make the subjects more appealing to the students. I was successful in teaching and engaging the students and was very proud of myself. I came to the conclusion that I could do anything to which I put my mind.

During my 2nd year undergraduate studies, I had a unique opportunity to work with the Doctors without Border in a program that developed and implemented an extensive outreach program whereby local midwives and traditional healers were recruited from various villages in the Somalia's Bari region. I was able to convince my thesis advisor at the University to let me start doing my research early as this was a region where there was much knowledge on traditional medicine. I conducted an in-depth study on traditional healing practices in Somalia while there and learned a lot from the traditional healers I worked with and interviewed for my research. This was my most conscious raising experience as I understood the notion of the have and have not very clearly. This also influenced me deeply and shaped my later work on social justice issues.

At the age of 24 with a Bachelor degree in teaching, a 1 year diploma in general management, a six month diploma in business administration, 1 year diploma in international relations, professional teaching experience, and a well defined career plan that included teaching high school, working in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and becoming an Ambassador (there was only one Ambassador in Somalia at the time), I had a lot going for me. I was also a well loved family member, a respected friend, a responsible member of a neighborhood and community. Then at the blink of an eye, I lost everything!

While being a refugee has not defined who I am, it profoundly shaped and influenced the decisions I made afterwards. For example, I chose to be conscious of the privileges I have at all times and not take the gifts that I was given for granted. Early on as a refugee, I became conscious of the fact that my privileges included speaking both of the Canadian official languages fluently (in addition to Arabic, functioning Italian, and Somali) and being highly educated. I also had a good understanding of western cultural and social norms through my family networks, extensive readings, and travels to Europe. Through marriage, my family includes nationalities such as American, Italian, Irish, Polish, German, French, Jamaican, Aboriginal, and Swedish. In Somali, family relations through marriage are called *xidid* (the same word is used for the root of a tree to indicate that these connections are deep). Therefore, my family history and my growing up experiences were very much *rooted* in cultural and linguistic diversity.

Being stripped of all that I had worked very hard for and held dear, forced me to look deep inside myself and find something that would not only sustain me but also gave new meaning to my life. Without going into the details of the challenges associated with these huge losses and the self awareness process that I engaged in, I found that I needed to transcend the obvious national, cultural, race, gender, and social/professional identities and find the human in me. This is

when I decided that I do have a choice in what I could and will do in my new personal situation.

Within a year of my arrival to Canada, I made friendships with many students, who were also refugees at the time and registered in universities. We have collectively realized being young (i.e no family responsibilities) and being able to speak the official languages, we were in many ways privileged. So we decided to take these privileges and use them to serve others; we took leadership in helping our community make sense of the traumatic experiences of displacements, dislocation, fragmentation of families, and loss of home. We saw leadership not as a position (as newcomers, young, racialized we were certainly not seen by the larger society as leaders) but as a choice. You could say we chose a life of sacrifice (subordination of what you want now for what you want later) and service. While still working and going to school, we managed to be really active in the community.

As refugees, Muslims, and Blacks, we often worked within social, economic, and political contexts that were quite oppressive and left little room for individual and collective growth. However, with much hard work, persistence, patience, perseverance, and support from many Canadians, we managed to reach success in some of the areas on which we were work. On immigration issues (which was one of the most important challenges we were facing at the time), we were able to launch a Court Challenge that challenged the federal government when it introduced Bill C-86 that essentially placed systemic and legal barriers to integration and placed thousands on limbo that continues to negatively impact the community. What we had was the drive, lots of hope (you could actually say we had the audacity of hope) and knowledge that what the government was doing was neither right nor just. We succeeded in making the federal government accountable by winning the court challenge!

During this early community organizing activities we learned how to behave in a democracy and appreciated what it could mean for our new lives in Canada! Being from dictatorship and a politically active family that had paid heavy price (through jail, persecution, torture, execution etc.) for their convictions, it was personally frightening to do what I was doing but it was also rewarding as I was standing up for what I believed to be just. Something interesting was simultaneously happening at the time: we were learning about Canada and Canadians. It was an amazing experience to realize that here we were refugees challenging state immigration policies and we were not ending up in jail! This, I think, is when I started to love Canada and began considering it a wonderful home.

My social and political activism made my early life in exile bearable and in fact enriching and exciting in many ways. I learned about Canada and its people by being active in the community and made lasting relationships that are so nurturing to my spirit every day. For example, June Girvin (forgive me for putting you on the spot but I must mention this). In our early days when we felt that we were not liked very much, June represented Canada and its generosity for many of us. She will come to all of our events (we used to hold international conferences, workshops, social and cultural events and seminars to help Canadians know us better) wearing beautiful Somali outfits and jewelry and scarves. I must say she carried these outfits off much better than many of us who were more comfortable wearing T-shirts and pants. She always had warmth and beautiful smile that quietly (without a word) said to us we were doing good work for our communities.

We felt validated and appreciated by her simple but powerful presence. We may have not shared this with her (we do not express feeling very well, it is a Somali thing!) but seeing her wearing these warm smiles gave us a sense of courage and sustenance we so needed after we lost most of those who have provided support throughout our life at that time. Today, as many of you know, June continues her work in the community with this sense of generosity and giving to everything she does. Those of us who are fortunate enough to call her a friend consider ourselves blessed for the gifts that she brings to us every day by being a source of inspirations and motivations.

The lessons learned in this life journey are many and I continue to learn everyday in my life. For example, after experiencing dislocation and uprootedness from my home, family, and community as a refugee, I learned that rootedness need not really only be about the physical space we live in. That our essence as human beings really transcends racial, gender national, cultural identities and must be rooted in teachings and wisdoms that allow us to fully grow as individuals and as part of communities regardless of the geographical location. Also, while we all have multiple identities, it is important to remember that we, as humans, are much more than the sum of these parts. Today, I have recreated a wonderful community of friends and kinships (often with no blood relations) that are composed of cross-section of men and women of different racial, cultural, national backgrounds and social locations that make me proud to be of the Canadian I am.

I also learned that you are never a victim unless you accept victimization. You always have the power to choose the path for your life. While I have experienced the legacies of colonialism and have been victimized by sexism, racism etc throughout my life, I never thought of myself as a victim. I learned that contesting and challenging social injustices and inequities at the individual

as well as at the community level is actually quite doable if you commit to them. Finally, I learned that disrupting the multiple levels of oppressions and domination in our society and critically thinking about social justice involves transcending “us vs them” mentality and building coalitions with others. This, I must admit, is not an easy process but a worthwhile exercise if we are going to learn to respect the diversity of our cultures and who we really are (as opposed to who we are told we are!). In fact, it is imperative that we invest time, energy, and resources to get to know each other: as the African proverb says “if you want to go quickly go alone, but if you want to go far go together. I strongly believe that we will start to respect each other truly only after we know each other deeply.

As Canadians, we all have a social responsibility to convey the message that a pluralistic society encompasses multiple cultures and we all have much to gain through contact with people of diverse backgrounds. We also have a stake in interrupting patterns of social isolation and promoting a culture of respect. In a pluralistic society, accommodation and acculturation are mutual processes of cultural change and adaptation. This means that the immigrants are not the only ones who are being asked to adapt. As young people in the 21st century, you could play an important role in helping us not only negotiate our differences but benefit from them. Understanding that notions of equality, justice, hope and freedom are universal will help us deal with increasing local and global poverty and ecological decay. We will also understand that collective action and new thinking levels are needed to deal with high and irresponsible consumption of energy and other resources that continue to damage the environment we share.

Before you engage in social action and community development, however, know who you are, your history, ancestors, family and social memories. In your case, this includes knowing about our Canadian history (that is *all* of our histories and includes the experiences of the multiplicity of communities including aboriginal, African, Chinese, and Japanese etc. that make up our great nation). This will mean you have to engage in education beyond consumerism and do your own studies as, unfortunately, our public school curriculum does not really reflect all of our cultures and experiences, continues to erase important aspects of our past, and tends to be biased in how it covers our history. I strongly believe, and there are empirical data to support this, that lack of appropriate knowledge on our past leads to a process that normalizes biases, stereotypes, and prejudices about some communities. Getting to know our full history will illustrate that our past is full of ancestral history and rich culture with a spirit of community support and respect, courage, generosity, a sense of justice, and self-determination.

In my opinion, with this knowledge of our cultural and historical past under our belt, we are all really standing on a solid foundation. As the Yoruba proverb says “If we stand tall it is because we stand on the back of those who came before us”. As young men and women, you must use these as tools to develop an authentic personal identity rooted in a sense of being Canadian that contains elements of spiritual, intellectual and social liberation. In my opinion, negotiating healthy and authentic identities that work for you and allow you to continuously grow and learn is a prerequisite to the development of active and engaged citizenry. This kind of identity negotiation provides you with the space necessary for individual growth and choices. It also gives you the courage necessary to not internalize oppressions based on gender race, class, nationalities etc. being self confident in who you are (not who you are told to be) will, finally, give you the audacity to always stand for something: social justice because as Malcolm X said, “a man who stands for nothing will fall for anything”.

I am going to leave you with a quote by Nelson Mandela, “there is no passion to be found in playing small – in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living”. Find your places, and your voices. Focus, courage, and strong determination will help you stay the course. Follow your passion, I assure you, Canada will be better for it. Peace.