

Miriam Nelson, MA – 2021

I felt like an imposter all throughout Washington Week. In fact, I had been feeling like an imposter for months, ever since I'd gotten into Harvard and started the destructive cycle of self-comparison. Getting into the Senate Youth only heightened this. I saw all of the impressive delegates, who had started nonprofits or led political campaigns or were national debate champions, and I felt like I hadn't done enough—that I wasn't even in their league. As we got to be friends in our many zooms leading up to Washington Week, I told the other delegates as much, and they were always supportive and said they related to what I was feeling, but the feeling persisted nonetheless.

I tried telling myself that I shouldn't frame it as "I don't belong here," rather, I should frame it as "I have infiltrated the ranks" (thanks to a tweet Kenny Gu from Michigan sent me). I decided that I should just make the most of the opportunity. And I did. I treasured every moment. I am so grateful for the experiences I was given through this program. Speaking with the nation's leaders, during such a pivotal time in history, is something I will never forget.

Still, the imposter syndrome persisted. It was more than just that, too. It was a deep fear that this destructive mindset would follow me throughout my next four years at Harvard and into my future career. I was terrified of the rat race and of burnout. I felt like all of my political ambitions since childhood were somehow being fulfilled and getting a reality check simultaneously. I'll spare you from a declaration of my love of public service—you can assume that well enough based on the fact that I'm a delegate—but I was starting to think the lofty political ambitions I'd had since childhood may have been naive.

The reason I'm comfortable sharing this now is because I no longer feel like an imposter. After we logged off the Zoom on our second-to-last day, my Military Mentor, Major Amanda Martin, graciously met with me one-on-one. I asked her how she'd handled self-comparison and burnout. She was full of wisdom and reminded me of why I'd started: to give back to others. I'll carry the advice she gave me for the rest of my life. I went into the last day of the program feeling more comfortable taking up the space that—I was finally beginning to realize—I had earned.

On Thursday, we heard from two speakers who had the greatest impact on me. The first was White House National Climate Advisor, Gina McCarthy, who I was giving the introductory remarks for. Just a few weeks before, if you had told me I would be introducing Gina McCarthy, once I overcame my absolute disbelief, I would've been terrified out of my mind. But, going into my speech, I felt prepared. I felt like I belonged. It showed how much I'd grown in just a few days—in just a few hours, even.

Ms. McCarthy reminded me of why I fell in love with public service in the first place, before I'd gotten wrapped up in the competition. She didn't worry about competing with others and she was always moving onto the next opportunity to do good. It was like she had escaped the rat race, had stepped out of it entirely, but still carried on racing. She looked ahead without slowing down to look to the side. She was ambitious but not at the cost of her happiness. She was exactly the role model I needed at that time.

Our last speaker was Harvard Student Body President Noah Harris. My feelings of inadequacy surrounding my selection as a delegate were inseparably intertwined with my recent acceptance into Harvard and I'd subconsciously held my breath throughout the week in anticipation of Mr. Harris's speech. I knew I'd be seeing him on campus in the fall and I wanted to see how he managed imposter syndrome, if he felt it at all. When he spoke, I saw that he, like Ms. McCarthy, had grown bigger than the race. The words he said, too, were just what I needed to hear: "Dare to believe in yourself. You are who we've been waiting for."

I learned so much during Washington Week—more than I can express—but this was my biggest takeaway. I had to get wrapped up in the destructive self-comparison and the imposter syndrome before I could grow out of it. I realized that my childhood ambitions may have been a bit naive, that my future is going to be challenging, but I also gained the courage to rise to that challenge. I'm infinitely grateful I learned all this before I went to college. I'm not afraid of the future anymore. I just can't wait to get started.