

1/9/13

Dear Randa Abdel-Fattah,

Your writing is truly inspiring and has helped me to live differently. Thank you.

We've all heard it before: "be yourself". Teachers, parents, and counselors constantly bring up these two simple words. But oh, they're the cause of torment and teasing, the cause of judgment and harsh actions. I used to ask myself, "Is it worth the consequences, letting my true self shine through?" *Ten Things I Hate About Me* gave me an answer: YES! I realize it's easiest to just try and blend in, lay low, but when Jamilah decided to play the darbuka at her formal instead of hiding as Jamie, it became clear to me that even though being myself is hard, the people who will admire me for doing so outnumber those who will make fun of me for it. Being myself feels gratifying and rewarding, like I'm finally free of some heavy burden.

Being in middle school, I'm constantly witnessing people suppressing who they really are. It's disconcerting, always being looked up and down by fellow students. Am I wearing the "right" jeans? Is my hair in the most popular style? This all creates so much peer pressure which, I'll admit, I've let get to me. Jamilah (or should I say Jamie) also let this lack of tolerance or understanding get to her. By hiding her identity, she dodges bullying and judgment, yet she also keeps a sort of barrier between herself and her friends. Jamie opted for the choice that many would choose: try not to be different.

I have friends who don't seem to care what others think and who are comfortable being themselves. I really admire that quality in them. I wish that everyone would stop being nervous

about what others will say and that we wouldn't all judge everyone else. People would stop buying clothes just because they're "in" and they wouldn't have to act a certain way to be "cool". Who decides what's "in" and "cool" anyway?

When Jamilah finally revealed her true self to Amy, she realized that she had found a real friend, someone who loves her for who she is. I have been lucky enough to find friends like this. We're all very different, but this draws us closer together. When Amy and Bilal supported Jamilah and her decision about playing in her band at her school formal, they proved that they truly loved her. Liz ditched Amy and Jamie for the popular crowd, giving them the message that popularity mattered more to her than their friendship. I'm definitely not one of the popular kids at my school; I never have been and probably never will be. I'm not extremely fashionable and I don't wear makeup or "go out" with boys, eliminating my chances. But as I watch the popular people, some of their friendships seem forced, based off of gossip and the desire to be on top. Your book showed me how this desire can rip friendships apart. I used to want popularity and I sought after the approval of the popular kids, but I can now say that that is no longer the way that I feel. I wanted them to like my outfits, and I stared longingly at their lunch table. But now, though I know some very nice popular people, I'm perfectly content with my current social status. Jamilah showed me that if my friends look at the real me and don't love and stand by what they see, they're not true friends.

I've hardly ever seen or experienced racism before. I'm Caucasian, making me part of the majority in my community. I have fair skin, green eyes, light brown hair and freckles. But by looking at these physical features of mine, you can't tell what I like to do, what kind of music I

like or what I want to be when I grow up. If I'm not teased because people don't make assumptions about me, then why should people of other ethnicities have assumptions made of them? The island that I live on, Bainbridge, is a quiet, calm community. There's not a lot of racism here, so your book opened my eyes to just how racist people can be. You showed me that some people stop paying attention once they see your surface; they don't wait to see what's on the inside. Jamilah only covers up her identity because all she thinks people will see is her dark skin, hair and eyes. Yes, some people do only see that, but there are many people (such as Timothy and Amy) who are able to look beyond her surface and love Jamilah, not Jamie.

So I guess that those two simple words are actually extremely complicated, but even more extremely important. I believe that being myself means standing up for what I believe in and following my passions no matter what other people say. You have showed me that in some ways, my life is much easier than some others', that true friendship conquers all and that my heritage and passions are a part of me; I should let them shine.

All the best,

Julia Batson

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julia Batson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline that extends across the name.