Emi Mahmoud (YC ’16), Sudanese poet activist and UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, packed a one-hour lunch event with more inspiration and wisdom than I could have possible anticipated. Warmly articulate, she alternated between moving poetry recitations and pithy observations on conflict resolution, family, disruption, and playing the patriarchy.

Poetry offers people “truth where they least expect it,” Emi explained. In an age where it seems like politicians and comedians have switched roles, and trust in the media is at an all-time low, spoken word creates a platform for people to both listen and share. Finding truth where you least expect it is my current motto of sorts, as I prepare to interview student climate activists at COP 24 in Poland next week. When I go, I hope to find truth in unexpected places, from the young, first-time observers instead of the heads of state. Following Emi’s advice to ask questions, and to listen to the questions of others, I will record these interviews and try to be the person filling the space between words and action.

Poetry, as I learned, also provides safe passage. On her One Girl Walk across Sudan, Emi was able to gather large groups together in a dangerous zone of long-term conflict under an authoritarian regime with the pretense of poetry town halls. Emi also spoke about the general lack of trust in Sudan, how difficult it is to convince people that she isn’t on one side, either pro-government or pro-rebel. Who is responsible for peace? With governments, rebels, and citizens all pointing fingers, Emi said, the key is to bring people together across sides. One of Emi’s tactics to do so was to use the “stupidity” of male government officials who hold unthreatening stereotypes of young, unmarried girls to her advantage to gain sympathy. As a young female audience member, hearing the ways that I could manipulate oppressive gendered stereotypes to my advantage was genuinely empowering. It had never before occurred to me that being perceived as a “girl” might actually make certain forms of activism and community work easier.

Early in her talk, Emi emphasized how bursts of visible violence often attract short-term attention to a long-term conflict, but that “we never see these crises through to the end.” As an environmentalist deeply interested in climate change communication, this idea rang true. Interests peaks when a terrible water shortage or wildfire hits, but few people seem to feel a sustained sense of urgency around climate change. In that light, the work can sometimes feel like a necessary obligation, but a hopeless one. This brings me to a few final bits of wisdom from Emi Mahmoud. First, in tough times, we rely on our family. I feel incalculably grateful to have, in Emi’s words, a mother who is in love with words, whose own mother was also in love with words. Their combined support is everything. Second, sorrow can either “paralyze, propel, or compel” you. In the last two years, the federal government has undone the life’s work of countless environmentalists, eviscerating the EPA and pulling out of the Paris Agreement. Also considering the administration’s relentless attacks on women, immigrants, trans people, Muslims, etc. sorrow comes knocking more often that I care to admit. Emi reminded me that I have a choice about how to cope with that sorrow, and I intend to propel fiercely forward.