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I want to tell you today about something I call the “Power of Yalla” and how it came to change my life.

Allow me to say first how deeply honored to be with you today, particularly because ...well ... I was not what you call the perfect student. In fact, I was quite the troublemaker at school. Let’s just say that my teachers preferred to have me outside of the class more than inside it. Even when I was inside the class, they made sure there was

always an island of empty seats around me. I made it up with good grades though. But today I realize this trouble making was just the seed of my entrepreneurial journey.

The Power of Yalla is about challenging the system, which sometimes means going outside of the rules, but you should always and above all remain ethical.

The Power of Yalla is also about being scrappy and fast. You can have the best technology in the world but if no one uses it... what's the point? So move fast, iterate fast and do not over plan.

And one of strongest traits of Power of Yalla is to take action. If something you care about is broken, don't just say something. Act. Don't ask for permission. Just take action.

During the 2006 war, my whole family was in Lebanon. I was so anxious. I needed to continuously check on them. Phones were not reliable so I had to follow the news on the web. The best sources were breaking news in Arabic. The main issue however, is that I didn't have an Arabic keyboard so I couldn't search for news around my parents' city to make sure they're safe. Meanwhile, I was chatting with my friends back home in Arabic, but using English letters and numbers... so it hit me, why not allow people to type real Arabic words using phonetic English. This is how the idea of Yamli, the Arabic search and typing technology, was born.

To develop such a technology I needed a strong co-founder. So I tracked down Imad Jureidini, one of the smartest people I knew and the only other Arab partner from my first computer graphics startup. By that time, Imad had his own startup so he needed convincing. I tracked him down at his Boston gym for a month, I took the elliptical machine next to him - and I hate the elliptical - until I convinced him.

We started working on the technology and I had to go back to the same Arabic books I used to avoid as a kid, and discovered back the language's beauty and complexity. In a few months, we launched Yamli and it took off very quickly, we got amazing press coverage, lots of awards and a lot of users. At some point, even Google and Microsoft copied our product, but their products were far less accurate than ours. Everything was going great, ... Well almost everything... there was one big problem...

We couldn't monetize it. We had raised some money from investors but we weren't making enough money to keep going.

I decided this can't be it. There must be a way. There has to be a way.

In a couple of weeks we had a deal signed, our bank accounts replenished, and a new business model to focus on. A year later, we signed a major partnership with Yahoo! Today Yamli is still going strong and it has allowed millions of users to type more than 10B Arabic words, that's the equivalent of 120,000 books...

This rollercoaster of a ride taught me a lot. And so here is the 4th Power of Yalla lesson: Do not get fooled by awards and press coverage. Stay focused on the goal, but be ready to adapt. Maintain persistent flexibility.

As I was building Yamli, I was splitting my time between Boston and the Arab world. I built strong friendships with Arab entrepreneurs. And I was so impressed with their amazing energy and resilience. I noticed however that they were getting minimal support from their ecosystem compared to what I had in Boston.

So in 2011, and after we did our deal with Yahoo, I decided it was time to move back to the Middle East. With my mentor, Fadi Ghandour, we started Wamda to build one of the largest platforms to support and invest in MENA entrepreneurship. Over the past 5 years we supported thousands of entrepreneurs, covering their stories, mentoring them and investing in their startups.

In a region where youth unemployment is one of the highest, Entrepreneurship is presenting itself not only as a job creator, but also as a tool for optimism and positive change. I'm talking about entrepreneurs like Hind Hobeika, inventor of Instabeat the wearable for swimmers and winner of StarsOfScience - an awesome initiative by Qatar Foundations. Or entrepreneurs like Moe Ghashim, who fled the war in Aleppo to establish one of the largest e-commerce platforms in the region.

Those entrepreneurs are the true embodiment of the power of Yalla. And the final lesson is the following: We all

have an amazing energy within us, we are not born with entrepreneurship skillsets, we nurture them, we all have this power of Yalla and if we harness it well we can do wonders.

As you embark on your new journey, you are faced with a tough and highly unpredictable environment. The future is not fixed, it is there to be imagined and created. You don't need to be an entrepreneur, to be part of this future, but you do need entrepreneurial skillsets. As graduates from HBKU, you are publicly accepting a huge responsibility... a responsibility towards Qatar's and the region's futures.

Hang your degrees on your walls if you want, but do not cherish them. Cherish the moments, the connections. Truth is, degrees do not define you. What you do with them does. Never stop learning and never get comfortable.... Ever... comfort zones are the black holes of evolution.

The moment you realize that you can rearrange all what is around you, that you can challenge the conventional wisdom and improve things, you can never be an observer of life anymore. So, do not wait for change to happen, do not ask for change to happen. Create change. Imagine a better future and create it. This is the power of Yalla. Go out there and create change.