

Personal Essay & Memoir, “A Spoken Word”

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Silver Key

“Nithe to meet you, Mith-uz. Aron-th-on.” When I first met Mrs. Aronson, the speech pathologist, I was confused. *Why am I here? Is there something wrong with me?* After performing some tests, Mrs. Aronson cleared the confusion, “You have a lisp.” I knew what a lisp was; and I even knew people with lisps, but it wasn't until that day, that I even stopped to consider that I had one. I suddenly felt so *different*. Every time I opened my mouth, I couldn't bring myself to speak. *What will other people think? Do people notice?*

Fixing a lisp would be difficult because I'd never actively thought about the way I spoke; I merely spoke. Weekly speech therapy drove me to consciously monitor my speech until the corrections became second nature. Each time I slipped up, I'd acknowledge it to train my unconscious mind, creating logs of mistakes. Soon, “Nithe to meet you, Mthuz. Aron-th-on” became “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Aronson.” Though correcting my lisp improved my speech, it wasn't the end of the journey. The legacy of the lisp spurred a continued interest in finding my voice, leading me to start attending Toastmasters — despite shriveling into a raisin every time I got onto a stage. As I stood up in the front of the class, my heart was thumping. I managed to only squeak out a few words, “Hello, I-I a-a-am Aniketh and I'm f-r-r-om N-n-new-t-town.” Once again, the pressure of speaking in front of others got to me, but I wanted to make sure that wouldn't happen again.

Each week, I gave speeches in Toastmasters, receiving suggestions and constructive criticism. I also observed others, giving feedback of my own. To improve my performance, I started practicing my lines, memorizing in front of the mirror, and studying famous speakers. I found my muses in my theater friends, studying their soliloquies. Soon, I'd gone from experiencing petrifying stage fright to easily delivering speeches.

Years passed before the legacy of the lisp would haunt me again. It started when a few friends and I decided to host a podcast for our high school. I was nervous because I had little experience in content creation, but I still thought my public speaking experience would make podcasting a breeze. Except it doesn't seem like my mic-speaking voice got the memo:

“Alright, Aniketh. Tell me, what's going on in sports?” asked my co-host.

“W-well, What thports exactly are we talking about?”

Because I think you're being unclear whether we should look at fast-paced stuff or something a bit more slow-tempo like golf," I snapped back with some uneasiness. I was blindsided by that moment and I left the studio disheartened. *What was the point of all that therapy and public speaking when it had failed me at a critical moment?* Once again I had to search for my voice.

I knew I needed a paradigm shift, so I made a plan. Now, before each recording, I do a variety of exercises, like reading the *New York Times* aloud and practicing tongue twisters — you know the ones, like "Sally sells seashells at the seashore!" Let's face it: there's a reason I do this in the privacy of the bathroom. These exercises ensure my voice sounds crisp whenever I speak.

Improving my speech and finding my voice has proved to be a lifelong journey. It has become part of my identity; not because it's flawed, but because improving it has given me the mindset to face challenges head on.

Now, finding my voice shouldn't just serve my own interests. Public speaking has given me the confidence and ability to speak out against injustices such as discussing racism in my town in a podcast episode following the death of George Floyd. This experience has helped me empathize with others who do not feel understood. I hope to lift their voices up along with my own because, to me, everyone's voice must be heard.