

## The Worst Disability

In the summer of 2017, while most students were traveling the world or enjoying their time off away from school, I was at home. Sitting in my room with the curtains closed, anxiously refreshing my phone every five seconds in hopes of seeing my schedule for the upcoming school year. I had been like this for the past hour and the butterflies in my stomach continued fluttering away. I sighed and picked up a cool glass of orange juice to try and settle my nerves, praying that I wouldn't have the misfortune of getting the toughest, strictest teacher in my school: Mr. Smith.

Throughout the previous school year, my older sister would come home every day and attempt to frighten me with anecdotes about Mr. Smith's seemingly impossible history tests or endless amounts of homework.

"So what," I responded cockily, "I get far better grades than you, why should I worry?" She stared at me for a second before an evil grin replaced the look of hurt caused by my previous insult.

"You might," she said leaning towards me menacingly, "But he requires every student to participate in class, or else he'll get super mad. And we all know how much you *love* using your voice." I grimaced. She was right. I hated speaking up. From asking questions in class to even calling my grandma on the phone, I never had the courage to speak my mind because of the fear that I would say something wrong. And whenever I *did* try to raise my hand to answer a question, the butterflies in my stomach would take over, and the overwhelming feeling of nausea would force me to put my hand back down. And I despised myself because of it. The fact that I

couldn't start conversations with people, or order food by myself, or tell people what I *really* thought about their new haircut.

So when I refreshed my phone for the millionth time and saw that my period three history teacher was Mr. Smith, I dropped my glass of orange juice and screamed.

The first day of school started off like any other. Hallways were filled with hundreds of sleep deprived teenagers trudging down cheap blue carpets during passing period. Freshman wandered around lost, confused, and despised by most upperclassmen for simply existing. And teachers already began assigning homework and projects and essays that were due within the next few days. I grudgingly accepted the piles of homework my teachers bestowed upon me and trudged over to my third period class with Mr. Smith.

*What if he asks me a question?* I thought while walking closer and closer to his classroom, *Or what if he makes everyone stand up and share something interesting about themselves?* But before I could answer myself, I turned a corner and arrived at his classroom.

I peered inside through the open doorway and saw twenty or so kids sitting straight up like statues, their visages completely void of any emotion except for fear. Their brightly colored outfits contradicted the concoction of angst and misery in their eyes, along with the dismal atmosphere of the room. Large, colorful flags drooped down the achromatic walls as if they were trying to cover up the bleakness of the room. I sneaked in, careful not to make any noise, and gently set my bag down next to a seat in the back of the class.

Suddenly, the bell rang and Mr. Smith slowly prowled into class, his tall figure looming over all of us while he glared into each and every one of our faces, until he took a seat on a stool in the front of the class. He stayed quiet for a minute (probably the longest minute of my life) before talking about his class expectations.

“This class will not be easy,” he said, still scrutinizing our frightened faces, “besides having difficult tests and homework assignments, I require every student to participate.” I sighed and waited for him to say more.

“I understand that most of you are scared of speaking up, but I’d like of you to think of it this way. Your voice is the most powerful thing you will ever have the good fortune of owning, and if you don’t use it, you’re simply letting yourself down. Who care if you’re right or wrong? What matters is that you tried.”

I paused. And in that moment I had an epiphany that changed my life for the better. He was right: what’s wrong with being wrong? I was born with the most powerful weapon in the known universe and for the past fifteen years of my life I failed to take advantage of it. Whether it was expressing my political opinions or asking questions about biology or astronomy or literature, I never once used my voice without the fear of saying something wrong. I never once considered that my voice was a unique gift that should be heard. I never once stood up for the ideas that I believed in. I never once *truly* used my voice.

“You there, in the back,” I heard Mr. Smith say, stirring me back to reality, “What rumors have you heard about me and my class?” I smiled and eagerly began sharing with the class the stories my sister told me about Mr. Smith’s rigorous history class.

I recall during the course of that year, I debated whether his class was fitting for me or not. After all, staying up late studying history is not the most ideal way for me to spend my weekends. However, after receiving one of the highest grades in his class from actively participating, I can say that his class is the most enlightening I will ever participate in. He taught me that a person’s voice is more powerful than any weapon or army on the planet, and to not utilize it is the greatest harm one can do to oneself. I was recently assigned a school project

asking what -- in my opinion -- the worst disability is. Blindness? Paralysis? Deafness? It took me a while, but speaking from experience, I can say with certainty that the worst disability would be to have a voice, but not the courage to use it.