

Deep Breath... Again

By: Hong Nguyen

The teacher called on Hong to read the word on the board. He knew how to pronounce the word, he can say it in his mind a thousand times, but nothing came out. The harder he tried, the tighter his lips locked; the tighter his lips locked, the lower his face sank into his chest. As the class began to chuckle the teacher went on to another student. Instant relief for Hong but on the inside, he knew this was just one of a million more similar situations to come. This isn't a story about sorrow or pity, however. This a story about perseverance and holding your head up high.

My name is Hong, and I grew up with a stutter. Born in the Philippines to Vietnamese parents who settled in a refugee camp, we immigrated to the United States when I was a few months old. Upon settling in Dallas, Texas; a church organization assisted with the bare minimum like housing and employment. Unable to speak a lick of English, my parents took odd end jobs to start becoming a contributing member of society. This meant working three to four part time jobs throughout the day. This also meant that I spent my toddler years in a makeshift daycare in one of the apartments at our government sponsored housing complex. Without many interactions growing up, my mother thought I was a mute. She recalled the joy she felt when I spoke my first word a week before I was to start kindergarten at the age of 5.

For as long as I can remember, my inability to effectively communicate with others has always been a detriment on my life. It's an ability that most take for granted as it should come naturally. It shouldn't be difficult to read the word "apple" when you're eight years old but for me, it was. Some of my least favorite memories were from my youth as kids are ruthless. Looking back at it as an adult, I don't blame the kids at all because they don't know any better. Kids just want to have fun and laugh, and a kid who stutters is an easy target. To defend myself or rather, hideaway, I recall going most days

without saying a single word. I would avoid everyone and sit by myself during lunch or find a corner to hide out during recess. When your parents are away at work for most of the day and your daycare consisted of an old lady who was glued to her television, it wasn't too difficult to get by without saying anything.

I recalled one of the lows I hit that resulted in me walking home from school and crying to myself. It was 5th grade and I was asked to read a passage from our textbook. Most teachers were aware of my stutter and normally left me alone when it comes to public speaking however, this day, we had a substitute. I stumbled my way through the three sentences – probably took two minutes from start to end. Between every word, I heard the class giggling and signaling at each other like “look at this retard.” The teacher was patient with me as she allowed me to continue reading which is the best thing anyone can do for someone with a stutter. One of my biggest pet-peeve was having others complete my sentence for me. However, I understand that most are just trying to help and, in our world, where time is money, many lack the patience to wait around for someone to finish what they're trying to say.

Rock bottom came during junior high school when something similar happened but this time, I decided to defend myself a bit. My lips quivered, my chest was tight, and I began to clench my toes in frustration. I couldn't get the words out. So simple yet so difficult – I gave up. I stopped reading mid-sentence and directed my attention at the kid who I thought was the antagonist behind the laughter. I stood up, looked him dead in his eyes, but like many times before... nothing came out. My lips locked and my face sunk into my chest. What followed was an eruption of laughter; louder than ever before. Although everyone was still seated, I couldn't help but picture the laughing faces within inches of my face with fingers affixed on my position. I grabbed my backpack and walked out of class. Again, I walked home crying to myself.

Moments like these were really defeating for a young child who only wanted to do better for his family. I often asked myself if I was going to be able to make anything of myself. I knew I wasn't going to be able to make good grades and get accepted into college if I couldn't even read a paragraph out loud. How am I going to meet and maintain friends not to mention find a girlfriend and develop a lifelong relationship? Am I even capable of finding a job where I can support myself? Am I supposed to go through life in complete mental exile? Questions like these were what ran through my mind half of the day. The other half was occupied with scenarios of how my day would have gone if I didn't have a stutter. Dreams, I would call it. The dreams of being able to carry on a conversation without hesitation. Conversations of deep intellectual exchange, small talk, or just conversations on how the Dallas Cowboys are going to win the Super Bowl this year. Being able to commingle in any type of environment and not be asked why I am so quiet. Truthfully, the answer to that question is because I don't want to embarrass myself in front of these people. The worries that followed, the doubts, the feeling of being trapped behind my quivering lips led to a deep depression where on several occasions, I thought suicide was the only answer.

The event that changed the trajectory of my mindset was oddly enough a TV show that my daycare nanny was watching. At this point, it wasn't much of a daycare anymore but rather a place that I would go to after school and do homework until my parents came home. Long ago, MTV had a documentary series called "True Life" and this particular episode featured individuals who stuttered. All of them were adults and had unique stutters. The documentary followed each one on their journey of achieving their goals. At this moment, I have not met or seen anyone else who stuttered so immediately, I was hooked. Not only did they stutter, but they were on the TV! That alone was courageous as I was deathly afraid of just reading aloud in class, let alone be on TV. The one that caught my attention was a woman in her early 20s who aspired to become a pageant model. Her stutter was the worst of the three individuals featured but she also had the biggest aspirations in my opinion. The documentary followed

her through the many pageants show that she participated in and the many interviews she did. Stuttering through every word, she kept her bearing and was in complete control of her emotions, something I was amazed at. She spoke on perseverance and not allowing her stutter to define her. Rather simple words that have been spoken many times before, but somehow it carried a different meaning coming from someone else who also stuttered. Being able to witness three individuals with severe stutters be able to accomplish their goals in life opened another section of my mind. This was the motivation that pushed away the doubts and added fuel to the engine. Sometimes, you just need to know that something is possible in order to achieve it.

With a new outlook on life, I took my breathing techniques seriously for the first time. Previously, I thought they were a waste of time and practicing them were more demeaning than stuttering itself. Like the unconscious ability to speak that others possess, I was frustrated with having to conduct breathing exercises throughout the day as I felt this was another handicap I was dealt in life. Not being able to connect the dots until this point, I realized my breathing habits were vital to my speech fluency. My mindset was changed as I motivated myself to try and maintain new habits as my old ways were obviously not the best. I started every morning by taking ten deep breaths and reciting the ABCs out loud in the mirror. I also recited common phrases like “hello, my name is Hong”, “I am doing well, how are you?”, and “I would like the #3 combo with bacon, please”. The first few days, I laughed at myself as I practiced. After several days, I decided that I would speak up in class; perhaps I would raise my hand and answer one of the teacher’s questions. That moment came and sadly, it was a disaster. Nothing came out and my lips got tight but the words “never mind” came out smoothly. I was back at square one and I was defeated once again. Trying to maintain some sort of positivity, I focused on the confidence that I had before I attempted to speak up in class. Something that I did not have for as long as I could remember.

I continued the breathing exercises and told me myself that when the time is right, I will try again. Funny thing was, it still didn't go as planned but this time, I knew I was getting closer as I was able to speak a few words before stuttering! People still laughed but the positivity in me blocked it out. Back to the drawing board as I continued my morning rituals as well as adding in a few of my favorite songs. Eventually, the confidence grew, the stutter remained, but I was little more outspoken. My shell was cracking, and I was inching my way out of the cover that kept me down for most of my life. In big situations like class presentations, the fears still find its way out, but I found a way to get through it. I resorted to the basics of taking a deep breath and remaining calm.

Flash forward two decades and the stutter remains although not as bad. I still have days where I want to hide in a corner but the long grueling journey that has brought me here tells me that I am better than that. My stutter does not define me anymore. My career requires that I interact with individuals from all walks of life and act in a mentorship position to some. That means, having one on one discussions or mass briefings in front of a hundred. There is not a day that goes by where I do not think about my stutter, it is engrained in me. The best thoughts, however, are when I am unwinding and preparing to close out the night with my wife and I tell her "guess what love? I don't think I stuttered at all today." Little corny, huh? Well, it absolutely is, but that's the journey that I call life. Sometimes, you just have to take those small victories and even when those small battles don't go your way – remember, deep breath.