

## Learning How to Speak

For much of elementary school, I hardly spoke in class. I knew the answers, but when it came time to raise my hand, something clamped down in my body. My face felt hot. My hands shook. I did not have anything to say; I just could not say it out loud.

My teachers called it shyness. My parents said I would grow out of it. To me, it felt like being chained to my skull and watching words appear in my mind and exit without ever being properly vocalized.

Then in sixth grade, my English teacher asked us to present a short poem to the class. Not read it from our seats, but stand up and say the words out loud. That night, I spent memorizing every line, practicing in front of the mirror. I was hoping those would lessen the level of panic.

It did not. I stood up for my poem and I am not sure if my voice was barely a voice, let alone audible for the audience. My hands would not stop shaking. My eyes stayed on the floor, and I felt embarrassed. My whole body wanted to collapse and disappear.

But then, something peculiar happened. No one laughed, no one rolled their eyes. When I finished, my teacher nodded. She said Thank you. A few classmates even said they liked the poem. I was waiting for something to go wrong, but that was it; it just happened, like it would, and then it was over.

That small moment did not change everything overnight, but it gave me something to hold onto. A little evidence that I could speak, and survive it. I began saying one sentence per class. Then two. Some days felt easier than others. Some days, I stayed silent. But I continued to try.

By eighth grade, I signed up to be the leader of a group presentation. I did not speak the most, and I didn't speak perfectly, but I stood up, and I spoke.

What I have learned is that courage does not always look like confidence; sometimes it looks like showing up anyway, even when you shake.

That challenge has shaped how I treat people. I identify the quiet students, the intentionally unsure students who are uncertain if their voice is welcome. I make space. I wait. Because I know how valuable it feels when someone does not rush you, but listen.