

One Step at a Time

by Anant Vinjamoori
age: 19

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“Th-Th-The man...”

“Stop, Anant. Relax, take a deep breath, and try again.”

I mouthed the sentence I was to read silently and I prepared myself for another try. I was going to rattle off this sentence flawlessly. I was going to knock the socks off my speech therapist, and this would be the very last session I would have to attend. In fact, from this day forth, I was going to speak so effortlessly, so perfectly, that my amazing eloquence would almost surely set me on the path towards becoming the President. Yes, I was going to be the President.

“Um, Anant? You can go ahead now.”

Abruptly awakened from my reverie, I prepared to speak.

“Th-Th-Th...”

It was as if I had suddenly struck a wall. It was not as if I did not know what to say — I knew so well the texture, the composition of the verbal barrier that confronted me. Yet scaling that barrier was another matter altogether. I knew especially well the potential and possibilities that lay beyond this wall. If only I could cross to the other side.

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A few months into kindergarten, I was placed in a speech therapy class at my elementary school. I was told that I had a speech impediment, namely a stuttering problem, which interfered with my ability to communicate with clarity. Every week, the speech therapist, Ms. Polly, would pull me out of class for our hour-long sessions.

Past the familiar library, past my beloved computer lab, I was taken to a cozy room, neatly tucked away in one of the forgotten corners of the elementary school. The walls, laden with inspirational posters and depictions of far away places, lulled me into soothing daydreams of a hopeful future.

Ms. Polly was a kindhearted individual who genuinely cared for my progress. Unfortunately, I didn't take to her lessons with nearly the same enthusiasm as I did to the decorations on the wall. I felt embarrassed to be attending these sessions, singled out as the kid with “the problem.” To cope with the embarrassment, I convinced myself that I was never “really trying” even as I floundered through speech in daily life.

When my teacher used to ask questions of the class, I would mull long and hard over the perfect reply, anticipating any and all potential counter questions. The teacher would be impressed, and my classmates would be in awe. With a confident smirk, I would put my hand up, only to be reduced to the class laughingstock as I stuttered and stumbled before I could even start my elaborately planned response. I was the architect of the most magnificent ladders, but I could not climb past the first rung.

I was inspired to write this essay as I was brainstorming topics for my college application. As any high school senior will tell you, this was no easy task. My search had ultimately taken me back to Kindergarten, a time when I was an inattentive, trouble-making child, who was seeing a speech pathologist to remedy a stuttering problem. As a former debate captain and a successful debater, I was able to frame overcoming my speech impediment as a testimonial to the power of perseverance.

Editor's Comments:

Anant takes a hard look back at his experiences as a kindergartner struggling to communicate through a persistent stutter. He writes to take stock of how far he's come and to imagine where he's headed.

Despite my difficulties, my dreams persisted. There was no stuttering, no hesitation, when I was delivering the State of the Union Address or when I was giving my post-Superbowl interview.

As high school approached, I saw the opportunity to join the speech and debate team as the first step toward making my dreams come to fruition. My first few rounds, however, were very trying experiences. As I perused the judges' comments on my ballots, the words of one judge — whose name I cannot remember — caught my attention. "It looks as if you have a lot of meaningful things to say. Take things more slowly — one step at a time." Sure, it may seem simple, obvious even. But for me it made all the difference. For the first time in a long while, someone had seen me not as the hopeless kid with the speech problem, but instead as a capable kid with a special problem, a problem that I realized I could fix.

Now when I spoke, I didn't think about what I was going to say five minutes later, the applause I was going to receive at the end, or the presidential address I was going to deliver in 40 years. My vast ocean of thoughts was channeled into a steadily flowing stream of consciousness. I would focus only on what I was to say at that moment and nothing more.

Of course, my mental adjustments were not met with immediate results. But as I continued to commit myself to this new perspective, I grew to love the communication arts and developed a special appreciation for the spoken word.

I haven't discovered the cure for speech impediments, nor have I formulated some magical mindset for success. At heart, I am still a developing teenager, endlessly distracted by my own demons of ambition. What I have discovered, though, is a personal affirmation, my own meaningful reminder of one of life's simple, yet Zen-filled truisms. Whether I'm making a speech, beginning a clarinet concerto, starting a research presentation, or even writing an essay, I can be sure of one thing:

It's hard to climb a ladder if you're only looking up.