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A Formative Memory

Ashlynd Norvask
Parkland College

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A Formative Memory

I was sitting at my toddler-sized desk, scribbling on my homework when my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Reeder, called my name, “Jade Cavins.” I was purposely keeping my eyes away from her gaze and pretending to be busy so she would possibly skip my name. Alas, it was a futile effort. We always went by alphabetical order, and since my last name started with a C, I was normally around the third or fourth kid to line up. I tried to ignore her call. She had another go at it: “Jade Cavins, come up to the front please.” Again, I ignored her and kept on scribbling. I made sure I continued not to make eye contact. She understood what I was doing. So, she took it upon herself to walk over to my desk and crouch down to my level: “Jade, it’s your turn. I know you can hear me. Go to the front and present your paper.” I gave up and looked at her. “Now,” Mrs. Reeder persisted and walked back to her seat next to the podium.

With a groan, I stood up and collected my two-page paper on a topic that has left my memory and walked to the front of the classroom. On my way up to the podium, I paused. Something felt wrong. I glanced around the room with its colorful bulletin boards and posters of educational motivators. I looked at all the children talking amongst themselves and those looking right back at me. I started to feel sick. “What seems to be the problem?” Mrs. Reeder seemed annoyed with me at this point. I said nothing and quickly made my way to stand behind the child-sized podium.

As I set my paper down and started reading the paper over again silently to myself, the words started to blend. I blinked a few times in an attempt to see more clearly. When my vision had finally cleared and I had taken a few deep breaths, I opened my mouth to speak. “I...Imm...” I stuttered. Some children started to giggle, while others looked at me impatiently. Everyone had seen this coming, as I was notorious for being a slow reader in class. But this time was different,

I was expected not only to read aloud, but to read something I had written myself. I tried again. “Ima....gine,” I croaked. I started to feel overwhelmed. My palms began to sweat. My throat felt like there was a rock in it. I began to hyperventilate. My lungs felt like they were about to explode. My eyes darted from my paper to the students who were sitting in front of me. Their faces were coated in a mixture of annoyance and concern. When I looked back at my paper, there was a little yellow sticky note. Written in black ink, it read, “You’re wasting my time.” My stomach dropped.

Mrs. Reeder had written the note and put it on my paper when I was distracted. This made me feel even more embarrassed. My own teacher dreaded it when it was my turn to read, and she decided to make it truly clear. I read the note repeatedly to myself. I no longer cared about my paper. All I could focus on was her note. I must have been doing this for some time because Mrs. Reeder attached another note to the podium. This one read, “Go sit down.” I did just that. I ran to my seat and let the tears fall. I began wailing and did not stop until my counselor came into the classroom and took me to her office. I was devastated. I was aware that my classmates were not very fond of me reading aloud, but to get the disapproval from an adult really rattled me.

This experience had an enormous influence on how I approached reading and writing. At first, I decided that I would simply never read aloud in front of anyone ever again. After further discussion with my counselor, I realized that reading and writing were essential life skills that I simply could not avoid. She told me that I had to produce some way to practice reading aloud and that eventually, it would get better. I was not hopeful. I was convinced that anything I wrote would be garbage and that I would never be able to get through reading it anyway.

I tried to get better at reading aloud. I used to practice reading to my stuffed animals because I knew they would not judge me when I messed up. When I finally had enough courage to read in front of another person, I chose my grandpa to be my audience.

My grandpa was my hero. Matt de la Peña, the author of six young adult novels, writes, “Books and words are my world” (688). When I read this line, I immediately thought of my grandpa because he always had a book in his hands. Because of this, I believed he was the smartest man in the world. My grandpa was the one who helped me learn to read and write in the first place. I had, and still have, a learning disability. My mother did not have the patience to work with a child with a learning disability, so she entrusted most of my care to my grandpa. Grandpa understood that it would take extra patience and persistence to teach me anything. He took his time with me and made sure I understood what all the words meant and helped me practice sounding things out. He knew what a struggle learning had been early on. So naturally, it made sense for me to choose him as my audience. I trusted him to be the one to understand and help me.

He would sit down on the couch beside me with a phonics book and have me read aloud. Whenever I messed up on a word or stuttered, he would highlight it and we would make a list of words I missed for me to practice later. Another way he helped me was by purchasing a word-practicing game for the computer called WordSmart. I detested WordSmart. I remember having an exceedingly tough time using the software and rage-quitting on multiple occasions. Little did I know that this would be the most helpful thing I would ever use. It allowed me to get angry and walk away, something I could not do at school. It allowed me to take things as slow or as fast as I wanted and there was no penalty for messing up. Every week, my grandpa would check my progress and we would base our phonics lessons around that. Grandpa never rushed me or made

me feel stupid. He was always encouraging me to do better and reassuring me that there was nothing wrong with me. He told me that when I get stuck on something, I could always ask for help.

After Grandpa passed, I continued to practice reading and writing. I even joined my high school's Future Farmers of America and competed in their public speaking competitions. I also went on to write a speech and present it at my hometown's city hall about mental health and learning disabilities during mental health month in 2014. Here I am now, in my first semester of college, taking a course entirely dedicated to writing. It is because my grandpa believed in me that I am able to cope with the lingering effects of my first speech.

Before presenting a speech or report I always get a tinge of nervousness. I always worry about losing my place while I am reading aloud and whether I will stutter or not. I also fear that I will write something boring and that I will lose my audience members' attention and respect. Just like when I was in fourth grade. Then, I take a deep breath and remember that there is no shame in getting stuck and that I can always ask for help. I also remind myself that just because I have a challenging time learning and understanding things, that does not mean I cannot succeed. It just means that I must put in a little more effort than other people, and that is okay. I still stutter from time to time, but I am not embarrassed by it anymore. I understand that I must be patient with myself and others because we all have things we are still learning.