

I used to edit texts at least five times before sending them. I was the girl who expressed remorse before voicing an opinion. Yes, I knew what I thought, but I only ever expressed it in my notes app. To me, being misunderstood was worse than invisibility. So, unless I could fill it up perfectly, I didn't want to take up space. Perhaps I also didn't believe that I could speak up without losing my temper. However, being silent won't keep you safe forever. After a while, someone interrupts you. Even worse, they might speak for you.

Group projects were the first. While someone else took center stage, I would handle the majority of the work behind the scenes. At one point, someone actually claimed credit for my idea using the exact same wording. The class applauded with a boom, and I sat there empty. Not only did I feel small, I was upset. While I remained silent at the time, I gave it days of thought. If I didn't say anything, people would keep filling in the blanks, oftentimes in a negative way. Maybe I was allowing that to happen at school, in clubs, and even with friends.

I therefore made the decision to speak whatever was on my mind. Not flawlessly, not even with assurance. My voice trembled when I challenged someone in class for the first time. However, I succeeded. When I disagreed with a comment, I gave an explanation without expressing regret. Nobody rolled their eyes. Nobody even chuckled. Though it was brief, the feeling stuck with me immensely. I began writing about anger, identity, and outside pressures. All of this was for me, not just for grades! I began sending my work to places I believed were beyond my capabilities. And little did I know at the time, people really did appreciate my voice!

I realized then that self expression is more than just volume. Making a strong statement doesn't require being the loudest person in the room. All you need to do is state the truth. I also began to take leadership more seriously. In presentations where nobody had prepared, I had to improvise everything on the spot. Despite my trembling hands, I managed to scrape through and make it out alive. Later, my group mates thanked me. It worked, not because it was perfect, but because it showed effort.

I used to believe that before I spoke, I had to be sure. That I needed to be the most knowledgeable, the least exposed, and the smartest person in the room. But I learned this year that sometimes clarity comes later. Sometimes you talk before you're ready, and then you'll understand. Sure, there have been occasions when I should have intervened, or I cowardly allowed others to speak over me. Now, though, I accept full accountability and try my best every day. For me, the year was defined by a private moment. No prize, no attention. On a late spring evening, I went back over a draft of something I had written and refrained from the customary urge to remove everything. I didn't wince. I didn't mentally apologize to myself. This is really good, I just thought. More significantly, this sounds like me. "You don't need to be exceptional to deserve to

speak," a friend said blithely during a burnout discussion this year, and it really stood out to me. Sometimes, I believe, we forget that. We behave as though having a voice is something you have to earn by being sufficiently impressive. Voice, however, comes naturally. You've got one already.

I didn't become fearless this year. I continue to overthink things. I'm still hesitant. However, I no longer remove myself from every room. I don't automatically keep quiet to avoid criticism. Speaking up used to seem risky to me. I now consider silence to be one as well. In a big dramatic moment, I didn't just find my voice— I stopped keeping it a secret.