Eli R. Speech - Discovering my Voice

In the first grade—which was also my first year at BC—while my buddies were at play dates or galloping about at soccer practice, I was spending my after-school time at my speech therapist's office. There, Dr. Rosen and I would compete in fantastical board games like Candy Land or Chutes & Ladders while I smacked on a new piece of Hubba Bubba Bubble gum after every round. However, I was not sent there to just mess around. I was sent there to cure and revive my non-existent pronunciation of R's and S's. I was sent there to rebuild my voice.

At school, my mispronunciation of just two letters had taken over my life. I promised myself—swore myself in, even—that I would never utter another word with an R or S in it. "Homework" became an "at-home job," a "snack" became a "yummy bite," and a "birthday" became a "day of cake and fun." What I would soon realize, though, is that quite a few words in my first-grade-vocabulary had R's and S's in them. When a teacher would ask a question to the class, by the time I came up with the perfect R-and-S-celibate sentence, another classmate had already answered and taken the credit. However, I believed that staying almost completely silent was better than the embarrassment that would follow my wonky speech. In turn, I became shy for the rest of first grade. I would only speak when directly asked to, and spent most of my time in class observing and listening to other people, rather than collaborating or bonding with them. Because this approach didn't require much effort, I remained shy for the entirety of lower school, and then middle school, and then about half of upper school.

Now, though, in the second quarter of my senior year, I'm here, making this speech, sharing my thoughts, expressing myself in a room full of people. I've changed, I think. And I believe that Berkeley Carroll has helped me do so. BC has supported me in developing my voice both as an artist and as a person.

Now, there's not one moment or project I can pinpoint that "changed the trajectory of my life." Instead, this evolution of my expression happened gradually over time, with a series—a collection,

really—of impactful experiences. But, if I had to describe stories that encapsulated my Berkeley Carroll experience, these are the two I would choose.

In the spring of my junior year, I applied for a semester-long independent study—a special program at BC for students to study a personal interest and structure their own class with a faculty advisor. My proposal was to explore the work of the American filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson—the director of two of my favorite movies, Magnolia and Boogie Nights. I had asked Ms. Clapps to be my faculty advisor; she would assist me in organizing my research and creating my final project. She said yes, but expressed that she was "not remotely a film expert," had seen just one Anderson film, and suggested that I find another teacher if I wanted to really focus on the filmmaking side, and not the analytical side. We agreed that I would bring a cinematic approach to the partnership, incorporating my own background knowledge, and she would apply a literary framework, treating the movies more like texts. Our teamwork grew apparent during our meetings. She would coordinate and manage our sessions like a regular teacher would, but I would assign the homework. Every session I would task her with watching and taking notes on a different Anderson movie. Most of our time spent together was built around discussions, and over time our collaboration blossomed to the point where it felt like we were expressing ourselves on even ground, like a person and another person would, and less like a teacher and a student. My independent study gave me the space to truly, and maturely, express my artistic voice, one that had been difficult to incorporate into my regular life. I now found myself bringing a cinematic lens to my other classes and personal experiences, and I have grown less afraid to publicly articulate and demonstrate my passion for the arts. I love to share short films I have directed with friends and family, I co-lead the film club with the most members we've ever had (12), and am definitely known as the "film-guy" at school.

This year, as a senior, what I'm also known as, is a peer mentor.

At the start of September, just nine days before the first day of school, 20 seniors who had been selected to mentor the incoming ninth graders were sent up to Northern Connecticut for the annual peer retreat. There, we would participate in meaningful activities to establish trust and cohesion between us,

and undergo the process of selecting our co-leaders. We would also be sleeping in tents and spending around 15 hours a day together.

On the third day of the trip, Mr. Sanchez—the leader of the peer program and chaperone on the expedition—dropped a bomb on us. “Create groups of five and, one-by-one, tell each person in your bunch two things you value about them, and two things they need to work on.” The circle let out a collective gasp. “This is called straight talk,” Mr. Sanchez interrupted, “we do it every year, and it’s the most important exercise, so please take it seriously, even if it’s awkward.”

After pondering and writing down what were essentially a pros and cons list for each person, my group and I set out for a deserted, outdoors archery range in the nearby woods. Sensing the immense discomfort and timidness of my peers, I volunteered to speak my truth first and hopefully set an example of vulnerability. But I was terrified. How could I look these people in the eyes and be so utterly direct and honest with them? It was like narrating my entire perception and judgment of them right to their faces.

The previous 40 hours at the retreat had prepared us, though. In such a short time, we had all become so close and vulnerable with one another, and had each come out of our shells. By the third day, there was a tenacious culture of openness and transparency, where each person's voice was tender, but safe.

So, as I started to verbalize what I admired and disfavored about one of my group members, I realized that it wasn’t that difficult. In fact, it was actually therapeutic. It was perhaps the most honest I had ever allowed myself to be with another person, let alone a collective of people, and it helped me recognize the extent to which I had been internalizing and repressing my own emotions.

This state of mind did not end at the archery range, though. I now carry this attitude throughout my daily life, remaining eager to express my internal monologue and to understand other people’s, especially when the discussions are sincere and profound. In turn, I feel as though I have discovered so much more about myself. I’m more in touch with my emotions, aware of other people’s sentiments, and carry a newfound confidence and open-mindedness when sharing my voice.

While writing this, I wondered what seven-year-old-Eli would think of me now. He would probably be confused why I wasn't avoiding my R's or S's, or why I was voluntarily talking to a room full of people. But, hopefully, he would be proud that the voice he once spent so much time trying to hide has become something he now loves to share.

Thank you.