"Why I Keep Speaking Up Even When People Mock My Accent"

by Safwat Saleem

TED2016 Talk:

I used to have this recurring dream where I'd walk into a roomful of people, and I'd try not to make eye contact with anyone. Until someone notices me, and I just panic. And the person walks up to me, and says, "Hi, my name is So-and-so. And what is your name?" And I'm just quiet, unable to respond. After some awkward silence, he goes, "Have you forgotten your name?" And I'm still quiet. And then, slowly, all the other people in the room begin to turn toward me and ask, almost in unison,

(Voice-over, several voices) "Have you forgotten your name?" As the chant gets louder, I want to respond, but I don't.

I'm a visual artist. Some of my work is humorous, and some is a bit funny but in a sad way. And one thing that I really enjoy doing is making these little animations where I get to do the voice-over for all kinds of characters. I've been a bear.

 (Video) Bear (Safwat Saleem's voice): Hi.

(Laughter)

Safwat Saleem: I've been a whale.

 (Video) Whale (SS's voice): Hi.

(Laughter)

SS: I've been a greeting card.

 (Video) Greeting card (SS's voice): Hi.

(Laughter)

SS: And my personal favorite is Frankenstein's monster.

(Video) Frankenstein's monster (SS's voice): (Grunts)

(Laughter)

SS: I just had to grunt a lot for that one.

A few years ago, I made this educational video about the history of video games. And for that one, I got to do the voice of Space Invader.

(Video) Space Invader (SS's voice): Hi.

SS: A dream come true, really,

(Laughter) And when that video was posted online, I just sat there on the computer, hitting "refresh," excited to see the response. The first comment comes in.

(Video) Comment: Great job. SS: Yes! I hit "refresh."

(Video) Comment: Excellent video. I look forward to the next one.

SS: This was just the first of a two-part video. I was going to work on the second one next. I hit "refresh."

(Video) Comment: Where is part TWO? WHEREEEEE? I need it NOWWWWWW!: P

(Laughter)

SS: People other than my mom were saying nice things about me, on the Internet! It felt like I had finally arrived. I hit "refresh."

(Video) Comment: His voice is annoying. No offense.

SS: OK, no offense taken. Refresh.

(Video) Comment: Could you remake this without peanut butter in your mouth?

SS: OK, at least the feedback is somewhat constructive. Hit "refresh."

(Video) Comment: Please don't use this narrator again u can barely understand him.

SS: Refresh.

(Video) Comment: Couldn't follow because of the Indian accent.

SS: OK, OK, OK, two things. Number one, I don't have an Indian accent, I have a Pakistani accent, OK? And number two, I clearly have a Pakistani accent.

(Laughter)

But comments like that kept coming in, so I figured I should just ignore them and start working on the second part of the video. I recorded my audio, but every time I sat down to edit, I just could not do it. Every single time, it would take me back to my childhood, when I had a much harder time speaking.

I've stuttered for as long as I can remember. I was the kid in class who would never raise his hand when he had a question -- or knew the answer. Every time the phone rang, I would run to the bathroom so I would not have to answer it. If it was for me, my parents would say I'm not around. I spent a lot of time in the bathroom. And I hated introducing myself, especially in groups. I'd always stutter on my name, and there was usually someone who'd go, "Have you forgotten your name?" And then everybody would laugh. That joke never got old.

(Laughter)

I spent my childhood feeling that if I spoke, it would become obvious that there was something wrong with me, that I was not normal. So I mostly stayed quiet. And so you see, eventually for me to even be able to use my voice in my work was a huge step for me. Every time I record audio, I fumble my way through saying each sentence many, many times, and then I go back in and pick the ones where I think I suck the least.

(Voice-over) SS: Audio editing is like Photoshop for your voice. I can slow it down, speed it up, make it deeper, add an echo. And if I stutter along the way, and if I stutter along the way, I just go back in and fix it. It's magic.

SS: Using my highly edited voice in my work was a way for me to finally sound normal to myself. But after the comments on the video, it no longer made me feel normal. And so I stopped using my voice in my work. Since then, I've thought a lot about what it means to be normal. And I've come to understand that "normal" has a lot to do with expectations.

Let me give you an example. I came across this story about the Ancient Greek writer, Homer. Now, Homer mentions very few colors in his writing. And even when he does, he seems to get them quite a bit wrong. For example, the sea is described as wine red, people's faces are sometimes green and sheep are purple. But it's not just Homer. If you look at all of the ancient literature -- Ancient Chinese, Icelandic, Greek, Indian and even the original Hebrew Bible -- they all mention very few colors. And the most popular theory for why that might be the case is that cultures begin to recognize a color only once they have the ability to make that color. So basically, if you can make a color, only then can you see it. A color like red, which was fairly easy for many cultures to make -- they began to see that color fairly early on. But a color like blue, which was much harder to make -- many cultures didn't begin to learn how to

make that color until much later. They didn't begin to see it until much later as well. So until then, even though a color might be all around them, they simply did not have the ability to see it. It was invisIble. It was not a part of their normal.

And that story has helped put my own experience into context. So when I first read the comments on the video, my initial reaction was to take it all very personally. But the people commenting did not know how self-conscious I am about my voice. They were mostly reacting to my accent, that it is not normal for a narrator to have an accent.

But what is normal, anyway? We know that reviewers will find more spelling errors in your writing if they think you're black. We know that professors are less likely to help female or minority students. And we know that resumes with white-sounding names get more callbacks than resumes with black-sounding names. Why is that? Because of our expectations of what is normal. We think it is normal when a black student has spelling errors. We think it is normal when a female or minority student does not succeed. And we think it is normal that a white employee is a better hire than a black employee. But studies also show that discrimination of this kind, in most cases, is simply favoritism, and it results more from wanting to help people that you can relate to than the desire to harm people that you can't relate to.

And not relating to people starts at a very early age. Let me give you an example. One library that keeps track of characters in the children's book collection every year, found that in 2014, only about 11 percent of the books had a character of color. And just the year before, that number was about eight percent, even though half of American children today come from a minority background. Half.

So there are two big issues here. Number one, children are told that they can be anything, they can do anything, and yet, most stories that children of color consume are about people who are not like them. Number two is that majority groups don't get to realize the great extent to which they are similar to minorities -- our everyday experiences, our hopes, our dreams, our fears and our mutual love for hummus. It's delicious!

(Laughter)

Just like the color blue for Ancient Greeks, minorities are not a part of what we consider normal, because normal is simply a construction of what we've been exposed to, and how visible it is around us.

And this is where things get a bit difficult. I can accept the preexisting notion of normal -- that normal is good, and anything outside of that very narrow definition of normal is bad. Or I can challenge that preexisting notion of normal with my work and with my voice and with my accent and by standing here onstage, even though I'm scared shitless and would rather be in the bathroom.

(Laughter)

(Applause)

(Video) Sheep (SS's voice): I'm now slowly starting to use my voice in my work again. And it feels good. It does not mean I won't have a breakdown the next time a couple dozen people say that I talk (Mumbling) like I have peanut butter in my mouth.

(Laughter)

SS: It just means I now have a much better understanding of what's at stake, and how giving up is not an option.

The Ancient Greeks didn't just wake up one day and realize that the sky was blue. It took centuries, even, for humans to realize what we had been ignoring for so long. And so we must continuously challenge our notion of normal, because doing so is going to allow us as a society to finally see the sky for what it is.

(Video) Characters: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Frankenstein's monster: (Grunts)

(Laughter)

SS: Thank you.

(Applause)