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Free to Speak

I was a senior in high school with a big dream. It was January and I was taking a play production class that was in charge of putting on our high school's spring show. I had always been interested in acting, but when our director announced we would be performing *Alice in Wonderland* on stage, a fire ignited in me. I desperately wanted the part of Alice.

Alice in Wonderland is one of my very favorite stories. It is a tale wrought with adventure and full-fledged fantasy that details the antics of the courageous main character, Alice. I love the movie adaptations of Alice—especially the 2010 Disney adaptation where Alice learns from her adventures down the rabbit hole that she is in charge of her own life path. When she returns from the world of nonsense, having saved its people from a vicious monster, she is stronger. In this screen adaptation, Alice actually falls down the rabbit hole while fleeing from a marriage proposal. Not knowing what to say, she simply runs. When she returns, she refuses the marriage proposal, declaring that she wants to travel the world as a trading apprentice—and she follows through with this goal (Zanuck). In a sense, Alice freed herself from many of her inhibitors. She became who she wanted to be because she let go of many of the restrictions that society and her own personal fears had placed on her. I wanted to feel a taste of that freedom. I wanted to be Alice.

There was only one problem. Her name was Emma Crumbley. She was beautiful. An experienced actress. A former theater intern. A friend of the director. A debate champion. To top

it off, she had a lovely speaking voice—her words were smooth and articulate. When she spoke, her lips pursed together and circled around sounds to create perfect speech. Her voice was one of confidence and clarity. I was envious of Emma’s voice. When I speak in front of people, I get flustered. I stumble over my words. My mind goes blank and I repeat what I said only moments before. Everything I want to express crowds up in my mind like a traffic jam. I feel like a traffic officer in the middle of it all, holding a whistle in my mouth and watching helplessly as words smash into each other, waiting to come out of my mouth.

Words often have to wait until I can figure out the right way to say them. I have a thrusting tongue that makes any word with the dreaded letter “s” sound like a leaky tire attached to my teeth. Many people in my life have identified this as a lisp. Despite my slight lisp, I desperately wanted the part of Alice—more than anything. Some part of me wanted to prove that though I didn’t have the perfect voice of an actress, I could still be Alice. I could still be heard. I felt like if I could just be Alice, I could maybe liberate myself from this impediment to some degree, just as Alice had freed herself from her inhibitors.

When the day of the audition came, I was sick to my stomach with anxiety. By sixth period, just before my audition, I couldn’t sit still and my mouth was as dry as a desert. I was holding my script book so tightly I was bending the pages. I wasn’t sure I could make it through (or even to) the audition. I skipped government class and retreated to my car to practice my lines. I felt trapped—trapped by my own tongue.

Though freedom for my tongue and my words was what I longed for the most, I felt in that moment it was something I didn’t have. I knew *what* I was supposed to say—I knew my lines backward and forward. I had worked on memorizing them for weeks. However, I knew that *how* I was going to say it wasn’t ideal. The world had taught me up to that point in my life—as it still

does—that the freedom of speech isn't what we think it is. How you express yourself—not just what you say—matters to society's listening ear. As I sat encapsulated in my car that day, wondering how a girl like me could ever conceivably audition for a play, I started thinking about the freedom of speech.

The freedom of speech, as we know it in America, is outlined (along with four other core freedoms) in the Constitution's first amendment: "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech..." ("Bill of..."). James Madison's wording here leaves a lot of room for interpretation and debate. The first amendment isn't specific about what kind of speech is allowed in our country. It doesn't say who has this freedom. It isn't clear how you measure or quantify free speech or what to do if the government tries to "abridge" this freedom. It doesn't even tell you what speech is. And while the freedom of speech outlined here leaves us with a lot of questions to be answered, it appears to be a beloved freedom for Americans.

A Rasmussen Reports survey conducted in August 2017 found that 85% of American adults believe that giving people the freedom of speech is more important than trying to avoid offending people ("73% Say..."). The survey also reports that 73% of Americans agree with this famous saying often attributed to Voltaire: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" ("73% Say..."). Another survey conducted in October 2017 by the Cato Institute found that 67% of Americans believe that the freedom of speech ensures that the truth will prevail in the end (Ekins). Yet, according to the Rasmussen Reports survey, only 28% of Americans actually believe that they have the true freedom of speech ("Just 28%..."). This is alarming—after all, we're obviously a people that love our 200-and-something-year-old freedoms. This amendment, crafted by James Madison as part of the Bill of Rights, would eventually become, according to one author, "the foundation of individual liberty, without which

most other rights in the Constitution would be virtually meaningless” (Labunski 224). So why would an American feel that he or she did not have a freedom that our country claims to so ardently love?

I believe the answer lies in the exploration of the following question: What is the freedom of speech? And, perhaps more importantly, who actually has the freedom of speech? I have started to explore, knowing that once I can define the freedom of speech, I can determine if I actually have it or not (and if I had it at the time of my audition). Knowing there is a disconnect between Americans and that freedom, or in my own case, individuals and their own personal freedom of speech, led me to start examining the history of free speech.

I started first with my personal history. For me, my personal longing for the freedom of speech (that culminated the day of my audition) came from a history of being told that I had a lisp and feeling like I wasn't able to be heard because of it. This was terribly frustrating because I couldn't express myself in a way that others would take seriously and I knew it. My physical restriction became a barrier to expression.

I remember one of the first times someone identified that I had a lisp and pointed out that how I spoke wasn't necessarily “normal.” It was the summer before my freshman year of high school. A group of friends and I were walking home from a church activity in the sinking sunset. The sound of our flip flops on the sidewalk mixed with the hum of cars whizzing by on the street. We were laughing and joking, taking our time on the way home. It was a pleasant, carefree moment. I finished saying something when one of the girls turned to me. She was a younger girl—and a little outspoken.

“Madalyn, I just love your lisp. I think it's so gosh darn cute!” she said, grinning at me with silver braces on her teeth.

There was a lag in the conversation—as if no one knew what to say. Her words both stunned and shocked me. I immediately felt like her act of pointing this out had stamped an automatic label onto my forehead, branding me as someone who had something wrong with her. I didn't know what to say—though I knew I wanted to rise to my own defense. I did not have a lisp! I didn't know what she was talking about. This was one of the first times someone had ever said that to me and I desperately wanted it not to be true. Instead, I didn't say anything, letting the comment fade into awkward, choppy silence until time healed the broken conversation and we continued laughing and joking as we rounded the corner to our street. I walked in my front door that night feeling broken and dejected.

Mankind has its own history with the freedom of speech. After learning about this history and comparing it to my own, I would argue that mankind has a particular way of restricting and liberating speech—we care quite a lot about *what* people say and *how* they say it. The freedom itself—and these complexities—have their roots in societies as old as Athens. The Greeks adopted a general love for freedom that was “not yet the idea of individual freedom as it is understood today, but freedom nonetheless for people to choose their own rulers and determine their own destiny” (Hargreaves 5). This love of freedom led the Greeks to grant the freedom of speech. Yet one of the most famous citizens of Athens, Socrates, was executed for utilizing this freedom. After one too many strikes for speaking out against democracy, Socrates was forced to drink hemlock and die for what he had said and taught that didn't sit well with Athens' leaders. Robert Hargreaves, a British journalist, called this paradoxical: “The city which loved to talk and was always eager to hear and receive new ideas is remembered by history as the city that stopped the mouth of its greatest talker and idealist” (Hargreaves 21).

Both my own story and Socrates' story got me thinking about who has the freedom of speech. It seems to be a discontinuous freedom, given when your speech isn't alarming to society—and identifying speech as alarming is a twofold ordeal, as discussed above. In Socrates' case, it was *what* he was saying that was cause for his execution. The government leaders of Athens weren't going to stand by and watch Socrates bash on the government and the people in charge. In my case, it was *how* I was saying it—how I would sound to the director in my audition. We seem to be granted the freedom to express ourselves (which I have learned is often synonymous with freedom of speech) by society when we speak the way it wants us to—whether it's the sound of our voice that matters or the content of our words. But is that really freedom?

If freedom in this sense is actually on the chopping block, then perhaps we haven't progressed from the days of the Greeks as much as we think we have. The Greeks and Socrates' death make my modern American mind wonder: Do American citizens ever feel like Socrates must have felt in Athens? Take the recent NFL controversy as an example. Players on various teams have been making headlines in the past few months for kneeling during the national anthem to protest the government and advocate for social change. This has resulted in a number of viral videos showing staunch football fans burning team merchandise they had accumulated over the years, saying they were done with the unpatriotic NFL and their favorite players for kneeling during the national anthem and, by so doing, disrespecting God and country. These football players didn't speak out against democracy in Athens, but they did kneel during our country's anthem to show solidarity against the current political climate in our country. As a result of this, they weren't forced to drink hemlock, but they have certainly been called out for it—online, in the media, and by politicians. If we live in a country that so values the freedom of speech and expression, why did these football players become like Socrates? Or were they better off than Socrates? Their

case presents both aspects of speech that tend to not be okay in society: people didn't like what these players were trying to say and express and they certainly didn't like how they did it—by kneeling during a treasured national anthem on public television. But does the fact that they can participate in this action and that we can discuss and debate it in the public sphere show that we've come much further (hemlock aside) from Athens? Or does this rejection and refusal to listen by society of these football players' actions and messages take the freedom of speech away?

I can't deny that I have felt this way as someone with a thrusting tongue. When someone points out my lisp, even to call it "cute," I feel like I have been labelled as less because I don't sound "normal." Like the players in the NFL or Socrates, I have a different way of expressing myself that isn't necessarily popular. Because that is foreign to others, they notice it and sometimes dislike it. In the case of *Alice in Wonderland*, I was worried that the play director wouldn't like or accept my voice because of its different quality. I was afraid that others would think less of me when they heard me speak. I was scared that everyone would see Emma Crumbley as more worthy for the part than me because she sounded so much better. In a way, this audition was my paradox. So many odds were stacked against me and yet I still wanted to speak. I think this was the source of my immense anxiety before my audition (besides a bit of standard stage fright, of course). I wonder if Socrates struggled with the paradox of his own death like I struggled with the paradox of the audition. As he was handed the hemlock, was he wondering why a free society was silencing him because he had different views than the majority of the people (or the people that were in power)?

This makes me think of an episode in the history of our colonial ancestor, England. The Charter of the Stationer's Company was granted by British rulers Philip and Mary in 1556.

Something it allowed stationers to do was seize or burn illegal books or presses (Patterson 9). This allowed people to control what other people said (or at least dispersed through presses and books). So is that what the freedom of speech revolves around? Are we just trying to control other people and their views to our advantage? This makes me wonder if we silence others or restrict the freedom of speech out of fear for what people will say or what will happen as a result of their words.

Looking forward in British colonial (and early American) history, I discovered that sometimes this isn't far from the truth. Sometimes we are driven by fear of other people's words. The 1735 John Peter Zenger trial (which is often cited as a victory for the freedom of the press but is still applicable in the freedom of speech conversation) is a chief example of this. Zenger was a printer who published the *New-York Weekly Journal*, an independent publication started by New York's former Chief Judge Lewis Morris and some of his associates. Morris was kicked out of office by New York Governor William Cosby for giving a dissenting opinion in a case involving him, so Morris began writing articles in the *New-York Weekly Journal* accusing the governor of being an oppressive tyrant. Zenger was accused of printing seditious libel and was tried, but was found not guilty by the jury ("Crown v..."). The Zenger Trial is a landmark case that illustrated a yearning for a true freedom that allowed unpopular opinions to be heard. This illustrates perfectly that element of fear. It makes complete sense that Cosby would go to grand efforts to silence the *New-York Weekly Journal*. Every politician has to be concerned with their public image to retain influence and power. In Cosby's mind, what Zenger was printing and what Morris was writing were probably terrifying. It jeopardized the life he knew—his reputation, his office, and probably the reputation and happiness of his family. So he struck out to silence those speaking against him.

In my field, journalism, keeping people around like Socrates and Lewis Morris is actually healthy for democracy. Having more ideas in the marketplace or a “laissez faire approach to the regulation of speech and expression” allows for people in a free society to sift the truth out from a variety of ideas (Tokarev). The marketplace idea spawns from minds like John Milton and John Stuart Mill. Mill argued that a large marketplace of ideas “facilitated the search for truth” (Tokarev). Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes solidified the marketplace’s role in America when he wrote a dissent following the Supreme Court case *Abrams v. United States* in 1919. The defendants in *Abrams v. United States*, who were convicted of dispersing anti-war materials and creating resistance to the war, were found to be lawfully convicted. The justices decided that their convictions did not violate their freedom of speech (“Abram v. United...”). In his dissent, Justice Holmes wrote that the “ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas—that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market” (qtd. in Collins).

So, for the best ideas to find their place in society and for truth to rise to the top, we need a diversity of ideas. This means that we can’t shy away from an idea—from speech and expression—just because we don’t like it or agree with it (or, in my experience, because it doesn’t sound normal or appealing). This concept of diversity in ideas (and I would argue from my exploration that ideas are made more diverse by variety in what their content is and how they are presented) led me to think about the realm of speech disorders and the fact that not everyone creates speech in the same way. To explore this, I turned first to the realm of speech anatomy and physiology.

I learned that it’s a wonder that anyone speaks at all. It is a marvelously complicated feat. The physical act of creating speech requires the human body to do a lot that we don’t even think

about. It all begins with the larynx (sometimes called the “voice box”) and the lungs. One of the most important parts of the larynx is the thyroid cartilage. This structure safeguards the vocal folds (sometimes called the “vocal cords”) and creates the protrusion we know as the “Adam’s Apple.” This thyroid cartilage sits atop another cartilage structure which contains two arytenoid cartilages. These arytenoid cartilages move back and forth to “adduct” (close the vocal folds) for swallowing and vocalization and “abduct” (open the vocal folds) for breathing. There is another structure called the epiglottis that plays the important role of covering the airway when you swallow. Muscles called intrinsic muscles connect all these little larynx pieces together.

Prior to speaking you have to have air in your lungs. The diaphragm lowers and the abdomen pushes outward. The volume of the lungs also increases vertically. The ribcage expands. As this all takes place, the pressure inside the lungs becomes less than the pressure outside the lungs and air rushes inside your body and into your lungs. And when we exhale to speak, air flows through the space between the vocal folds called the glottis. The vocal folds adduct and air molecules build up underneath them. The pressure increases, finally opening the vocal folds. The air from the lungs passes through and exits the body through the mouth or nose as you speak. Then the vocal folds adduct again until the cycle repeats (Feindel 212-221).

Once air is moving through your vocal folds, other parts of the body take over. According to the Voice Foundation, voice as we know it is produced by the combination of three things: voiced sound, resonance, and articulation. Voiced sound is the sort of “buzzy” sound that comes from the throat as air is modified by the vibrating vocal folds. Resonance occurs when the voiced sound is “amplified and modified by the vocal tract resonators (the throat, mouth cavity, and nasal passages)” (“Voice Anatomy...”). Articulators—the lips, soft palate, and tongue—then help to modify the amplified voiced sound into words that we recognize (“Voice Anatomy...”).

After discovering the physical act of speaking to be so complicated (and I only discussed the anatomy of speech—think of how complicated it must be for our brains to learn and work with our body to communicate language), it doesn't surprise me that sometimes people aren't able to speak as normally as we're used to. These complexities of how you speak, combined with the issue that we've already explored of what you say, seem to pose even more of a paradox in our free society than the one that Socrates faced. It is simply hard to be free in a society that doesn't deem your delivery normal.

Take stuttering as an example. According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), three million Americans struggle with stuttering (“Stuttering”). Stuttering is caused by abnormalities in development. Scientists have found that there are differences in the brains of stutterers versus non-stutterers. It is also thought that stuttering could be genetic and perhaps caused by mutation on certain genes. One particular type of stuttering is neurogenic stuttering, which is caused by some sort of brain injury like head trauma or stroke (“Stuttering”). The fact that this many Americans have problems with stuttering (and that's only one type of speech impediment) should indicate that perhaps the “normal” way to talk defined by society needs to change. But for now, society tries to change how people talk to meet its expectations.

One of the most famous stutterers in history is King George VI of England, who had to go through the process of “normalizing” his speech. In the movie *The King's Speech*, Collin Firth plays the soon-to-be king of England. Due to abuse as a child, he has a stutter. The invention of the radio begins to bridge the gap between leaders and their people as the world shifts toward World War II, and because he has a stutter, this presents a challenge for George VI. The movie

portrays the story of George working with unorthodox speech pathologist Lionel Lowell prior to his first major speech as king.

In one scene of the movie, King George V gives a Christmas address over the radio. After the broadcast, George VI sits down at the table where his father has just given the address and George V tells him to try to read the address. As the younger George struggles to get the word “this” out of his mouth, his father shouts, “Just try it!” George VI manages, “This Christmas day, I speak to all my...” But he isn’t moving fast or smoothly enough for his father, who shouts again: “Do it!” (Hooper).

The disconnect between father and son (two grown men) in this scene is heartbreaking. The two are not on the same communication wavelength—all because one’s speech delivery differs significantly from the other’s. For the record, George VI isn’t just gargling unintelligible sounds when he stutters. He eventually says coherent, understandable words—and in the case of this particular scene, he would have eventually said the exact same words his father had. The sad truth is that he couldn’t be perceived by society as a strong, intelligent leader until he could speak smoothly. This makes me think again about football players, Socrates, and the marketplace of ideas. When it comes to the freedom of speech, it seems like society is often just as divided as George V and George VI—one side trying desperately to speak and to be heard and the other dictating what is and what isn’t proper speech or a proper idea.

After all, we tend to treat people differently if they aren’t like us—for a variety of reasons. Speech is just one of them. In 1991 a study was conducted based on a previously known trend—children (and older people) tend to perceive their peers negatively if there is something abnormal in the way they speak. These researchers conducted a study in second grade students. The students watched a video of a 7-year-old girl reading a short story—once without a lisp and once

with a simulated lisp. They were then asked to rate the videos on multiple different scales, like beautiful to ugly, smart to stupid, and like to hate. Both the male and female students rated the lisping video more negatively on 12 out of 15 scales. On the other three scales, the lisping girl was rated positively, but the characteristics from which the rating originated (like friendly or sensitive) indicated that the children may have perceived her as different or even handicapped, according to the researchers (Madison).

This study reminded me of my own experience feeling different and looked down upon because of how I speak. My first two boyfriends both pointed out my lisp. Both followed their identification of my thrusting tongue with the ambiguous and admittedly offensive opinion that it was “cute.” Why did I find a seemingly flirtatious or friendly compliment offensive? Well, like anyone else, I want to be taken seriously when I speak. I can understand why George VI was so desperate to do something about his stuttering. People really do perceive you differently when you don’t sound “normal” when you talk. So being told that my lisp was cute felt to me like that scene with King George V and George VI. It made me feel like I was less of a person because the way I sounded was not accepted. It wasn’t normal. Speaking wasn’t just a vehicle for me to express ideas and connect with people. It was a noticeable element of my person that, because it was different, stuck out like a sore thumb, drawing attention away from my mind to a physical imperfection. It limited my freedom to speak and really be heard. When both of those boyfriends said that to me I couldn’t help but think, “Cute? What does that mean, anyway?” A lisp isn’t something that you perform for compliments. It’s something that happens when your tongue doesn’t move correctly to form a certain sound. But the fact of the matter is that, in terms of speaking, it does make you less—less “normal” and less likely to be heard.

In the 1991 research article mentioned above, one of the sentences that the researchers wrote in their introduction went as follows: “There were no stars among the children with speech disorders” (Madison). Those reality-ridden words took me back to that lonely hour in my car with my script, just before my audition for the part of Alice. I had worked for weeks memorizing and blocking out my movements for the first scene of the show, when Alice is trying desperately, by eating magic cake and drinking enchanted elixir, to fit through a small door that leads from the bottom of the rabbit hole into Wonderland. I had kept my brother and my mom up late at night since getting my script, forcing them to listen to me repeat lines and dream about actually getting the part of Alice. I watched scenes from *Alice in Wonderland* nearly every day. In some ways, I think I practiced so hard and invested myself so much because I was worried that I didn’t have a way to reach my goal and become Alice. I didn’t think I could be (quite literally) the star of the show because I had no magic elixir or cake labelled “eat me” to get me through the door to my goal and my freedom. What I had was a thrusting tongue and a tangle of nerves attached to my speaking skills. I was boxing myself in, restricting myself and keeping myself out of the “marketplace of ideas” that was my audition for the play. The director needed to hear my voice. She also needed to hear that darn Emma Crumbley’s voice, because it was the only way she was going to pick the best person to play Alice. This is why I forced myself to get out of my car five minutes before play production class and begin the long ascent toward the drama classroom on the third floor of my high school. I had to face my paradox. I was at least going to attempt to be the “star.”

The feeling I can recall from that moment of getting out of the car, paralyzed with fear to the point where I didn’t feel like I could even open my mouth. caused me to wonder about those who were once able to speak but suddenly lose the ability to do so, just as I seemed to (in a small

way) in that moment of anxiety. Stroke victims provide a particularly interesting case study. When someone has a stroke, parts of the brain and nervous system, like the spinal cord or cerebellum, can be damaged. This can cause speech problems because the nervous system plays a large role in the speech process. According to the article, speech “requires nerve signals to be sent from the highest centers of the brain (cortex) to the nerves that stimulate the muscles, with various connections along the way” (Wambaugh 14-15). All the muscles that control the vocal folds, jaw, tongue, and other parts of the body important to speech are controlled by these signals sent from the brain. This connection can be very easily tampered with when an individual suffers a stroke (Wambaugh 14-15).

There are two common problems that can occur with speech when someone has a stroke. These are dysarthria and apraxia of speech. The kind of problems that result from dysarthria depend on where the stroke takes place in the brain. For example, if a stroke damages both hemispheres of the brain, the speech muscles can become too toned and hard to move and use. But a stroke in the spinal cord or brain stem can weaken the strength of the speech muscles. Apraxia, on the other hand, often results when the left side of the brain (which deals with language) is damaged during a stroke. Though the severity of apraxia varies, it generally involves slow speech, having difficulty saying particular sounds on multi-syllabled words, or struggling with blended sounds (like the “str” sound in the word “street”). I found it interesting that those with apraxia are generally “well aware of their errors and may become frustrated with their inability to correctly articulate what they wish to say” (Wambaugh 15). Though the muscles aren’t affected like those who suffer from dysarthria, stroke survivors who experience apraxia often have to relearn and rehearse movements that create speech. (Wambaugh 14).

I can only imagine what it would be like to have my ability to speak completely taken away. It makes me grateful that all I struggle with is a thrusting tongue, because I can't imagine having so much in my head that I would be wanting to share with the people around me and not be able to say it. I think of my Great Grandpa Claude, who had a stroke shortly before his death in 2004. At one point he lost the ability to control some of the muscles in his mouth, causing it to droop down on one side. As a result, he couldn't talk very well. But did he want to? As his grandchildren gathered around his silent bed in a rest home, did he want to say something to us? Did he have some last piece of advice or wisdom for our lives? I suppose we'll never know because a stroke took my grandfather's freedom away completely—he couldn't control what he could say or how he could say it. Imagine for a moment the eternal frustration and entrapment he must have felt when he looked into the eyes of all the people he wanted to communicate with and was unable to do so.

This was a night and day change for my great grandfather. One moment he was able to speak and the next moment he wasn't. This is similar to what I experienced the first time that someone told me I had a lisp—my freedom to express myself was suddenly different and changed. This is also the way the Supreme Court works. The freedom of speech continues to be defined by the Court on a case by case basis, with the justices going off of precedents set by previous justices. There have been plenty of landmark cases that have furthered the definition of speech and determined its bounds. But for a court that has a long resume of experience defining this freedom, they sure haven't reached a very solid conclusion yet. On the U.S. Courts website, the Courts give a seemingly clear-cut list of what is and what isn't included in the freedom of speech. According to the list, the freedom of speech does include things like the right to not speak, the right of students to wear black armbands to school in protest of war, the right to use

certain offensive words to convey political messages, and the right to contribute money (under certain circumstances) to political campaigns (“What Does...”).

I see a pattern here. The freedom of speech is either applicable in very specific instances (I wonder what would happen if I wore a bright orange arm band to school to protest war instead of a black one) or very vague ones—for instance, what qualifies as a “certain offensive word”? There obviously isn’t a black and white list of words that I can and cannot say. Here’s where the freedom of speech seems to branch out like a river with a thousand different tributaries. It seems that if you define one aspect of the freedom, you just have to define another. There is no comprehensive list of what is allowed and what is not allowed to be said or who is allowed to say it or how. Just like stroke patients who can lose their speech seemingly overnight, the Supreme Court makes decisions that become the standard for the freedom of speech and cause it to evolve and change.

I think a striking example of this evolution is found in the case of *Texas v. Johnson*. In 1984 Gregory Lee Johnson was arrested after he broke a Texas law that said desecration of a venerated object was not permitted. Johnson’s crime? He burned the American flag in front of the convention center where the 1984 Republican National Convention was taking place. He was trying to protest President Ronald Reagan’s policies. A Texas court convicted him under the state law and he appealed to the Supreme Court, arguing that burning a flag constituted symbolic speech and was therefore under the protection of the first amendment.

The Court ruled that Johnson’s actions indeed fell under the protected umbrella of symbolic speech. The court noted that the Texas law in question “discriminated upon viewpoint, i.e., although the law punished actions, such as flag burning, that might arouse anger in others, it specifically exempted from prosecution actions that were respectful of venerated objects, e.g.,

burning and burying a worn-out flag” (“Facts and...”). Though the court process is not a fast one, this is a great example of how the freedom of speech is continually evolving. It is also yet another example of people speaking out against how another person expressed himself. Though the NFL players discussed previously will not likely be involved in a Supreme Court case, I can’t help but notice how their situation was different from Johnson’s. Those football players were not arrested for what they did to protest our government. Their method of speech and the ideas they expressed, though, were condemned by many. Does this mean that the football players have an enlarged freedom of speech that Johnson didn’t have at the time? Have we really changed? I think that in some ways, we have come further. But in other ways, I think that we’re still right where we started.

I’m reminded of the marketplace of ideas. The idea sparks images in my head of a lot of diverse, different people with all sorts of different kinds of goods moving about a space. In my mental image, I see a lot of people and a lot of activity in this metaphorical “marketplace.” It’s noisy and there’s a lot going on, but it is civil. After all, isn’t the marketplace of ideas supposed to allow the truth to be sifted to the top? There’s nothing in this concept to indicate that other ideas must be silenced or condemned or screamed at or angrily tweeted about in order for that truth to rise to the top. Yet isn’t that what we’re doing in America? Trampling some people in the marketplace and not allowing their ideas to be heard or expressed? I know that I feel trampled sometimes—like I’ve been stomped on because I sound differently.

If this is the case, there has to be a solution. There must be a way to become free to express yourself. There must have been a way for me to find a way to be heard in that audition for the part of Alice. After all, we know from the courts and from stroke victims that our ability to speak and what sort of speech is tolerated by society can change. But what about individuals who find

an alternative way to express themselves? The primary example of this that I thought of is the extraordinary story of the renowned physicist, Stephen Hawking. He was diagnosed with ALS in his early twenties. Though this took away his ability to use his muscles to speak, he now uses a computerized voice system to communicate. There is a keyboard on his computer screen that uses a cursor to scan the keyboard. Hawking can stop the cursor on the letter of his choice by moving his cheek. When his cheek moves, this triggers an infrared switch on his spectacles. The software he uses is trained on his writings and lectures, so he usually only has to type a few letters before the software takes the prompt and types an entire word. Hawking writes on his website that he has experimented with eye and brain controlled software that work to help communication, but that he prefers the less tiring cheek method (Hawking). Hawking's is an interesting case. Because of physical limitations, his freedom to speak was abridged. But he did something to reclaim it. He found another way to express himself.

Because of my lisp, I have done something similar (on a much smaller scale). I often look for words that don't have difficult "s" sounds at the end of them to avoid getting stuck on the sound. For example, I will say the word "exams" instead of "tests." Sometimes in conversation my responses are delayed as I rack my brain for words like these. Hawking's computer and (perhaps in an extrapolated sense) my search to find alternative and easier words are examples of augmented and alternative communication (AAC) ("Augmentative and..."). The term itself implies that speech is the primary form of communication. So does this mean it is the preferred form of communication? We use AAC every day—writing and facial expressions qualify as AAC ("Augmentative and..."). This makes me wonder if the body is the complete package. Is hearing a normal, unhindered voice speak words the best form of communication and expression? Is every other form of communication only secondary to that?

The story of Helen Keller seems to indicate that normal physical speech is indeed ideal. Helen lost her vision and hearing at 19 months old, most likely from scarlet fever or rubella. She struggled in a silent world to communicate, often bursting out in temper tantrums (“Helen Keller Biography...”). Frankly, I don’t blame Helen. It would be terrifying and frustrating to be alone in a silent, dark world, not knowing how to connect with people around you. It’s hard enough to deal with occasional embarrassment from a slight lisp. I would have screamed and thrown fits, too. But for Helen, there was hope. A teacher, Anne Sullivan came to Helen’s home with a compassionate heart and taught Helen to communicate with sign language and to read braille. This is the well-known part of the story. But what some people don’t know is that Helen wanted more—by age 10, she wanted to learn to speak. She did learn, but she was never satisfied with her voice, which was hard for others to understand (“Hellen Keller Biography...”). In fact, in a short film showing Helen speaking, she remarks, in an admittedly muffled and odd-sounding voice, “It is not blindness or deafness that bring me my darkest hours. It is acute disappointment in not being able to speak normally.” In the film, she goes on to say that she believes she would have been able to do more good in the world if she had normal speech, but she learned a great deal about the power of hope from her experience (“Helen Keller Speaks...”).

This makes me think about ways that we see people in our society reclaiming their voice and fighting to be heard despite what society might dictate as “normal” speech. I think that the poetry slam is a prime example of this phenomenon. The poetry slam was pioneered by Marc Smith in the working-class bars of Chicago in the late 1980s (Somers-Willett 4). Since then, “slam” has become its own phenomenon. It is a genre of art focused on unconventional dissemination and counterculture (Somers-Willett 5). One of the things that makes slam a phenomenon is that it focuses on poetry for all, not just those who occupy the tall towers of academia. Susan Somers-

Willett writes, “Slam’s commitment to plurality and diversity has led slam poets to linger on personal and political themes, the most common of them being the expression of the marginalized identity” (Somers-Willett 7). Somers-Willett goes on to say that most champions of the National Poetry Slam have been blacks (Somers-Willett 8). Blacks certainly have a history (and in some cases, a present) of marginalization in the United States. I find it very interesting that slam poetry functions as an outlet for people who haven’t always had a voice to be heard.

If you’ve ever been to a poetry slam, you know how raw and real the poems are that are performed. The poets aren’t afraid to bare their souls and to speak up about the flaws of society, be political activists, curse, relate traumatic experiences, tread the controversial waters of sexuality, or discuss mental health issues. And often these poems do genuinely feel like a cry from a place that is silent—or silenced. (I would like to note here that I can hardly explain the atmosphere of a poetry slam with ink and paper. Experience one for yourself!)

Slam poetry seems to give the poets who participate in it a voice of their very own to contribute to a marketplace of ideas where they simply refuse to be silenced, no matter what they’re saying or how they’re saying it. They find and seize their very own voice. Isn’t it funny that our society seems so keen on everyone “finding your voice” when we also live in a society that seems to dictate who gets to speak and how they get to speak? How many songs and inspirational speeches have been written about “finding a voice?” Perhaps we’re not trying to find our voice but to free our voices. Like Alice, perhaps we have to shake off our inhibitors to exercise the freedom of speech. Perhaps the freedom of speech doesn’t come from the Supreme Court’s rulings but from within an individual who grants it for herself or himself.

This self-granting of freedom is illustrated in the slam poem “Shake the Dust” by Anis Mojgani:

For the ones amendments do not stand up for / For the ones who are forgotten / For the ones who are told to speak only when you are spoken to / And they are never spoken to / Speak / Every time you stand so you do not forget yourself / Do not let one moment go by that doesn't remind you / That your heart beats a hundred thousand times a day / And that there are enough gallons of blood to make every one of you oceans ("Anis Mojgani...").

The most interesting part of this poem to me is "Speak / Every time you stand so you do not forget yourself." It makes me think that perhaps we shouldn't be waiting for someone to tell us if we're eligible to speak or if our ideas are worth listening to (Though, I would like to note, I think it's important to recognize that some speech, like hate speech, is destructive to society and not applicable here).

As I think back to the day the day that parts were posted for *Alice in Wonderland*, I remember my mouth being dry just as it had been the day of my audition. Everyone rushed outside to see their part, but I stayed behind in the classroom, too nervous to deal with the reality and finality of the casting list. The classroom was empty and in a few minutes three or four people would rush back in to tell me the news, but for a moment, I just stared at the small stage in the front of the classroom.

It was there that I spoke and granted myself the freedom of speech. I created Wonderland for my audience. No matter how many leaky tires were attached to my teeth, I spoke loud and clear. My lines were memorized. My blocking executed nicely. For a moment, with my words, I was Alice. I drank when the bottle said "drink me" and I ate when the cake said "eat me" and I fit myself through a door into a world that I didn't belong to. I had forced myself to get out of my car and walk, knees knocking, to the drama room. When I opened my mouth, I was heard. I was

heard, I hoped, just as Emma Crumbley was heard—and it didn't matter to me how it sounded. For me, simply getting up there and speaking was enough. If nothing came of it, I could hold onto that liberated moment. It made me feel proud.

In case you're wondering, I did get the part of Alice. I successfully performed four shows and didn't leave the stage for one scene. I also had the most dialogue out of the entire cast. And though I had proved that someone with a speech impediment could indeed be a star, performing on stage and being able to become Alice for a few short nights didn't hold any real triumph for me. For me, my dream came true when I opened my mouth and spoke for that audition. My dream came true when I let myself become free.

I recently met a speech pathologist and was told he could probably help me get rid of my thrusting tongue. For the present, I haven't acted on that information. Instead I remember that free speech isn't always what we imagine it to be. The freedom hails from a long, complicated history and faces an even more complex future. It is shaped by the expectations and definitions of "normal" that society demands. It is determined by those who dictate what is acceptable to say and how it is acceptable to say it. It is interpreted by courts and challenged by those brave enough to speak up (or to kneel down) to have their views considered in a marketplace of ideas that often feels more like a bloodbath than a marketplace. After studying these issues surrounding the freedom of speech, I've reached a conclusion that satisfies me for now. While most of America feels like it doesn't have the true freedom of speech, I believe that it's a freedom available to all who are willing to grant it to themselves. The law dictates what can and cannot be said in our country—and I believe we need the law to tell us what kind of speech makes society safe. But in most, if not all, cases we are our own masters and liberators. We have to shake off the restrictions that society and fear place on us and speak—loud and proud.

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