

On Mute

By Logan Clark

By the time I was a senior in high school, I had been told to be quiet more times than I could possibly count. It wasn't particularly surprising. I was and am still a bit of a chatter box. Talk talk talk talk talk, a never-ending stream really. Half the time I sounded like a movie at 2x the speed. I don't do it to be malicious, mostly. Largely it just sort of happens. I'm very enthusiastic about a lot of things, and when I get going, I'm hard to stop. Newton's first law of motion hard at work. Objects in motion tend to stay in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. In my case, the outside force was the disapproval of the people around me when I got too fast for them to understand.

Being judged for something that you aren't trying to do is a hard thing to bear, but over the years I'd gotten used to it. I'd been told to shut up by my friends, my family, and my enemies. Over time, you get inured to such things; even so, you're still aware of it, and you still know that it's a problem.

The idea came to me out of the blue one day: if everyone wanted me to shut up, then I would. It was so simple, so very *very* simple. So I decided to conduct an experiment. I'd be quiet; in fact, I wouldn't speak at all. I decided on a week as my arbitrary time limit. Long enough to be noticed but not so long that I wouldn't be able to manage it. I wouldn't speak a word the entire time, and I'd try to keep my laughter and other such noises as quiet as possible. If I spoke, my timer would be reset. I didn't know it, but my little challenge would be one of the best things to ever happen to me.

I started out on a Monday, so that my friends would really get the full effect. The beginning was hard I'll admit. I messed up so many times the first day that my deadline got

pushed back to the next Tuesday. Being willfully silent is hard enough as it is, but it seemed like the universe itself was conspiring against me that week. Topics that I was interested in and had ideas and theories about were frequent targets of conversation. It made me want to scream.

There's a three-day hump that comes with quitting any kind of addictive substance or habit. I didn't realize it at the time but I was addicted to talking. Those first three days I had to fight against my every instinct. The temptation was so intense. The first day I broke repeatedly out of sheer habit. Responding to questions was the bane of my existence. My teachers were, thankfully, strangely understanding. All I did was gesture towards my throat and make a side-to-side motion or shake my head. Granted that might've been because they thought that I literally *couldn't* speak, an illusion I had no intention of dispelling.

My friends were very understanding of my little experiment. I was already the oddball, so it really wasn't that out of character. Most of them I had to write to get my point across because they were all abysmal lip readers. In reality, they probably weren't all that bad, but I had one friend who could flawlessly parse through what I was saying, so the rest of them seemed rather awful in comparison. For the sake of classiness, I'll not reveal his name, so instead I'll refer to him as Q, my favored letter.

I have no clue how he did it, but Q understood me completely. Perhaps it was my nigh preternatural ability to mouth words, but considering the lack of success the others had, I assume it was on his part. Not *all* of my friends could be so bad at it, right? He was my mouthpiece when we shared classes during that week. No matter what I said, he understood.

My family wasn't nearly so accepting. Despite the fact that we spent roughly the same amount of time together as I did with the people I saw at school, they were far more irked. Oh sure, the first day or two it was fine, but after that there was a growing level of discontentment

and irritation. I personally found it all *very* amusing. They wanted me to be quiet, but when I was, they weren't happy at all. I tried to mouth words with them, or write them down, but after day two they gave up on that entirely. Eventually they refused to interact with me unless I spoke.

I come from a family of quitters.

I discovered something, a few somethings actually, during that week of silence. The most bizarre part of it all was that I *liked* not speaking. After the first few days I felt so at *peace*. I was more focused, and my mood felt better than it had in a long time. I was content and happy and *nicer*. I felt, for lack of a better word, chill. I no longer felt that unrelenting pressure that most high schoolers feel. My friends liked me better like that.

I liked myself more like that.

I was a better person, more willing to compromise and listen. All my life, as the youngest of the bunch, I'd had to shout to be heard, and I'd had to make my case quickly if I wanted to say what I needed to say. That kind of driving force can be a good thing, and enthusiasm isn't *bad*, but I liked who I was so much more when I didn't speak. It's hard realizing that you like a version of yourself that the ones closest to you don't. Without having to speak, my endless streams of sarcasm turned into a trickle as my metaphorical venom glands dried up.

Like all good things though, it had to come to an end. On the final day of my little silent strike, I actually had to force myself to break my vow of silence. I enjoyed the silence and the company of my own thoughts and the peace I felt. In all honesty, I probably would've *stayed* silent if it wasn't for my family's growing anger. My own mother refused to communicate with me unless I spoke.

That's the most important thing I learned, really. My family wanted a version of me, and when they got that version of me they didn't like it, but *I* did. I was becoming someone new, and

better, and I had to give it up because it inconvenienced them. That was the hardest lesson I learned. Sometimes what your family wants isn't what's best for you. Sometimes you have to make hard choices, even if it means making your loved ones angry, because if you don't you'll only hurt yourself.

I could generally be relied upon to bow to my mother's will on most matters. I love her a lot, and I hardly want her to be angry with me. How ironic it is then that being silent gave me the drive and the will to deny her demands and carry through with my little challenge to the final day. Even if I didn't go mute for another week, the way I felt during that week had a lasting impact. I was much more open about my feelings with my family after that, and everyone else. It turned out that being silent was what gave me the courage to say what mattered.