*Shunning Podiums*

My arms were glued to the sides of my stomach and my forearms were outstretched, dangling like the arms of a praying mantis as I made my way to the front of the class. I hid my face behind the pages of my research project without saying a word. The words from my paper danced across my tongue, but never wanted to progress past my lips. “Well, are you going to begin?” my teacher said as she impatiently tapped her heels on the gray tile floor. “You know presenting this project *is* part of your grade.”

After taking a shaky deep breath, I began reading my paper in a nearly inaudible voice, my words hardly louder than a whisper. “Stop, stop, stop,” my teacher said. “We can’t *hear* you. Please, *speak louder*. Look us in the eyes; stop hiding behind your paper. Begin again.” She said it like it was simple, like I could simply turn up the amplifier of my voice box and present my project with charm and charisma. I began reading my paper again, fighting with the massive lump of tears in my throat that blocked every word I tried to utter. Needless to say, I never finished presenting my paper that day.

There was something about public speaking that paralyzed me. The vulnerability that came with speaking in front of others unnerved me. I couldn’t get past the scrutinizing eyes of other people. So I avoided almost every opportunity to speak up in class or initiate conversations outside of class. I hid. I hid until I was sick of hiding. After a lack of success with flipping through self-help books with cheesy motivational quotes and basic advice, my ventures to relinquish my fear of public speaking led me to sign up for an oratorical contest hosted by my church association. Every Saturday and Sunday morning for three months, I walked to the chestnut podium, and recited a speech for a crowd of about fifty people. I eased through the first recitations, simply reading off the paper, avoiding eye contact with my audience. As the weeks progressed, papers were no longer allowed on the podium; I had to walk up to that podium, look out into the sea of faces in the audience and recite my speech from memory for four minutes; four excruciatingly long minutes. The longest four minutes of my life.

I walked away from each practice session slightly more confident and every time I stood behind that podium, the timid praying mantis posture that I had walked with before became more relaxed and my arms slowly began to hang by my sides with ease.

I have addressed audiences with over two hundred people, spoken about the importance of public speaking at local youth conventions, and presented countless class presentations without being overcome by nerves. Every time I step in front of a crowd and look into a new sea of faces, it becomes harder to believe that the timid person that I had once been ever existed. I didn’t know it at the time, but those four minutes proved to be some of the most empowering and life changing minutes of my life.