

"Don't say such things about anyone!" My father was screaming at my sister in Urdu about her high school relationship. "Alright, she's had enough. Please stop!" My mother in a trembling voice. Tears flooded on her cheeks from being slapped in the face after trying to stop my Father. A shock ran through my nerves and my body was paralyzed from what I had just witnessed. Even as a 12-year-old, I knew I could no longer open myself to anyone, even if I trusted and loved them.

The idea of sharing blood with someone yet never being able to express how they feel is sickening. This however was the norm growing up in my traditional Islamic household. My parents' traditional arranged marriage led them to carry on another tradition of not opening up. To talk about any difficulties, especially mental health issues, was considered impermissible and an act of weakness. This notion had long been ingrained in my parents' upbringing as well, resulting in a lack of true conversations. But because of this distorted "normality", I couldn't speak up and instead developed anger issues. This was when I discovered an outlet: football.

Football allowed me to express myself. I could vent out all my rage by tackling someone without getting in trouble for it. It was the temporary, end of my difficulties. Football was my way of exerting rage, yet I still struggled to express my grief, fear, or even joy. After a strong, anger-filled game, I'd return home only to find I'd stored up sadness and would cry myself to sleep, replaying the past in my head. I soon realized while football helped release my anger, it failed to control the memories that haunted and forced me into my self-imposed emotional exile.

Going into high school as a freshman, I had mindlessly chosen theater as one of my electives. I had never enjoyed reading books, but when I read a script for the first time I gained a whole new perspective on reading. The exhilaration of expressing yourself through someone else's story was unparalleled. By sophomore year, I was cast as Romeo in "Romeo and Juliet". Taking on this choice required me to give up everything, including football. From then on I dedicated myself to taking on this role. I was adamant on showcasing all of Romeo, especially his affection and sensitivity. With my script constantly on hand and my exhaustion wearing through, my family noticed my efforts. On opening night, I poured myself into this one character. I felt secure expressing myself without being told I couldn't.

After the show ended, I looked over the crowd and spotted my parents. I hoped for a look of approval or even acknowledgment of my efforts. Though what I witnessed was more than I could have expected. I saw them in their seats beaming at me, with the residue of teardrops falling down their cheeks. I knew they finally understood what I had spent months trying to convey and seeing my desire to express my true sentiments. I ran off stage, embracing them tightly as tears streamed from their eyes. Within that moment, I felt my walls falter. I knew I had finally shattered a wall and was being awarded the chance to challenge my family's traditional beliefs while being heard.

Theater gave me the ability to speak up for things I cared about. This also gave me an opportunity to help other people struggling in the same position using this form of art/communication. While it is still hard to open up in my family, I try to push for open conversation in my household without trying to undermine their generationally held traditions. I

learned the value of keeping traditions, but also letting go of those traditions in order to bring more peace and comfort into your life rather than clinging on to those beliefs which bring pain and suffering.