Senior Speech: Tasnima Zaman ’19

From “Song Unsung” by Rabindranath Tagore

The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day,
I have spent my days in stringing and unstringing my instrument.
The time has not come true, the words have not been rightly set;
Only there is agony of wishing in my heart.
The blossom has not opened and the wind is sighing by.

And From “A Litany for Survival” by Audre Lorde

And when the sun rises we are afraid it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive
I live in a predominantly Muslim-Bangladeshi immigrant community in the Bronx. Every day, I wake to the pounding rhythm of the elevated six train. When I walk home, I pass by a wall decorated in graffiti with a bear opening its mouth to speak. Right before I pass through the tunnel that leads to my home, I overhear the whispers of a group of aunties dressed in traditional salwar kameezes...something about a girl whose nika just got finalized. As I step into my home I am welcomed by the warm smells of spicy chicken curry and oil dripping off of fried pakoras. In my neighborhood, everyone’s mother and father sells fruits on the street, makes breakfast sandwiches in the back kitchen of the nearest Dunkin Donuts, or works as a security guard at the local public school. They do all of this to earn money that will help them send their children to college. The kids in my community work tirelessly too in school, and at home where they try their best to study in a one-bedroom apartment where five other people live. But there is something about these shared spaces, this open communication and this unspoken shared commitment to each other that makes this place an inviting community. It’s the idea that all of us have something to offer up and share with each other.

It’s my first day at Trinity. Walking into school, before I see anything, my quiet nervous self is engulfed by loud voices. I turn my head toward the noise-- the old swamp in the lobby. I see these people in t-shirts and pastel colored shorts gathered in tight clusters. I smell the sweat dripping off of these bodies cramped together in this one area. And even in this limited space, somehow they are sprawled out on the couches, their legs spread out on the seats, their clothes and bags strewn across the floor. I’m intimidated by how comfortable they feel occupying this space...their depth of ease. I, on the other hand, find this sense of ownership both foreign and alienating. I will not be returning to this place.

So off I go into my first class hoping to find a space I can be a part of. It’s a class where we are discussing our favorite books. I’m the first one to speak and I gush about my love for Lois Lowry’s The Giver. When my new classmate speaks after me and describes his favorite book, I don’t really absorb anything he says. I am too awestruck by how different we sound. His speech is much more “proper” than mine. He doesn’t use the ‘cuz’s’ or ‘gottas’ that are normal to me. His use of language seems more “elevated” and “analytical” while mine now seems more “colloquial” and “emotional”; he speaks about characters from a critical distance, relying heavily on the text and interpretive logic, whereas I use my own experiences to understand and connect to characters. And there’s something else I notice as I attend more classes. There is a power in the way he and my other peers speak; they are never afraid to blurt out the first idea that pops into their heads. I think over and over again before even raising my hand. They are never unsure when they speak--no I thinks, no I’m sorry..., no hesitations-- and they always
have an opinion on anything and everything. This confident “intellectualism” gives their voices volume and authority whereas I become quieter and quieter the more I listen to them.

This is the Trinity I encountered when I got here in ninth grade. This Trinity is a place where a certain kind of student can feel not only comfortable but entitled and empowered to claim physical and intellectual space here. This Trinity is a place where another kind of student—like me for example and surely like some of you—can feel disconnected, voiceless and powerless. I didn’t want to feel so powerless and voiceless.

So from then on I began to consciously change myself to become like these comfortably powerful people. First, I began speaking more slowly. So each time I was about to say ‘cuz’ I would turn it into a ‘because.’ I changed “I gotta do this” into “I have to.” Even when I texted my friends, I always replaced the word “gonna” with “going to.” Next, I shaped my interpretations and arguments to be more abstract and theoretical—looking at the facts and discounting emotion and personal connection. I never brought my own experience to what I was talking about. Studying The Great Gatsby or Of Mice and Men, I’d hear classmates bring up the American Dream. Their definition of what it took to succeed in this country was an assumed given that had nothing to do with what it meant to me personally. But I wouldn't counter them because I didn't want them to know that as a child of immigrants, I understand how hard this dream is to achieve and I know the hardship it brings to the lives of people like me who watch their parents unsuccessfully struggle every day to get to a place of economic prosperity. I didn’t want them to know that I came from a different world where mothers work more than one job a day, where fathers are victims of hate crimes, and where kids dedicate their lives to their academic success because that’s their only hope of not living the same lives as their parents.

Therefore, in any conversation on topics that had any connection to how my identity could be read in the world, whether those topics were comparisons between “third-world” and the “first world” or discussions about Islam and terrorism, I'd either be silent or speak as if I had no connection to these people and experiences my peers were analyzing. I spoke as an objective observer on these topics. I didn't want to be made to be the sole representative and advocate for part of my identity. I didn't want to always have go out of my way to teach people why and how my experiences shaped my thinking. I didn't want to let them know that I wasn't like them. And in distancing myself from the words I spoke, I became less hesitant to speak because I wasn’t putting myself or my experience on the line; I had nothing to lose. And I thought maybe by doing this, I would be able to have my voice take up space too.

But last year I realized that the power these people claimed wasn't theirs just because of their polished language and theoretical approach to the world. There was something else that made them so sure that their voices had weight. It’s the first day of junior year. I walk into one of my classes, eager to show this school this transformed me, to show everyone that I had
learned to speak like them. But a few days pass and just like on my first day at Trinity, I notice something. I’m in class and I don’t understand anything my teacher is explaining. But it’s almost like I’m the only one who doesn’t understand. Every time a question is asked, I am silent, but the same kids whose bodies take over space in the school and whose voices take over space in my other classes always have answers. But when they answer, they’re just filling the room with words, offering one answer after another, not stopping or letting anyone else answer until the teacher declares something they said to be correct. They perform a confidence that convinces me that what they say is right. It’s amazing actually, how they carry this power with them to make me believe every word they say. Before we even get to the point of the lesson, they act like they already know it, leaving me to feel like I am somehow deficient because I don’t. It’s the same ownership that they have in physical common spaces and they have over language that they pretend to have over knowledge. The more they say and the more confidence they say it with, ‘the smarter, the more capable---the better they are than the rest of us.

But in this class I can’t help but think to myself, why can’t I feel this ownership? I have done everything to sound like them, to think like them. Why can I never speak in this class? Why can’t I ask the question that I have? Why do I stay quiet even if I know the answer? It occurred to me then that this claim on ownership had something to do with their whiteness and their wealth. Now, I’m not saying that everyone with white skin and a rich family feels and acts entitled. The “wealthy whiteness” I speak of is an individual choice to move through the world cloaked in an incontestably worthy identity that feeds itself on ownership of space, language and knowledge.

Most Trinity students come from wealthy families and expect to have wealthy families of their own. In this way, this legacy of financial security can easily guarantee, if individuals choose to let it, that they grow up and live the rest of their lives with little exposure to people outside of their world or lives unlike their own.

Most of my classmates have not grown up or spent time in neighborhoods like mine. They haven’t experienced the hardship that comes with experiencing a failed American dream. They haven’t faced the hatred that people who look like me have had to.

In my mind, this “whiteness” is a kind of cloak that can allow people to insulate themselves from the experiences of people they don’t have to know or understand. And this makes real communication and compassion very difficult. And this hurts everyone.

So I walk into this class every day dreading being surrounded by this particular whiteness; I become paralyzed, not saying anything and not ever understanding and never learning. I hate
it. It’s suffocating. I definitely thought I would never find my voice and that I would be powerless in this place until I graduated.

And I would have been stuck feeling this way if it hadn’t been for AP Spanish class last year. Our class focused a lot on understanding Latin American cultures and to do that, my teacher encouraged all of us to dig deeper into our respective cultures. For our presentations, we shared stories about the food we ate at home or the traditions our family celebrated. This was the first and only class where I could speak about my background and my experience—no theories, no logical facts, no constructed evidence, no distanced intellect. This was also one of the only classes where I did not have to use the polished Trinity language I had developed because everything we said was in Spanish; there was a freedom in using a language other than English, because in that class no one owned the power of the words. In fact, I felt a certain level of authority because I could use my voice and new words to bring my experiences into this school. I could share the pounding of the six train and the warm smell of cumin. I could share the whispers passed between the aunties or the stories of our parents working at Dunkin Donuts. I had tried to fit in by suppressing my experiences. But in this class, by talking about my culture, I was powerful. And this wasn’t the same power that was granted by ownership. It was a power that acknowledged and honored my life and all life. It was a power that allowed me to speak and I liked the sound of my voice.

My Spanish class made us think about the world outside of that room; it made us think about the different people that live in different ways. But in that class we also listened to each other’s stories, without having to comment, without using language to intellectualize experiences. We just listened.

I think there is something we can all take away from my Spanish class. We have to work to make the spaces within this school be spaces not owned by certain people but shared by all of us. We are all under this pressure to succeed and act a certain way, to perform and conform. We need to stop wanting to prove ourselves to be better than each other by trying to speak the most or by distancing ourselves from the words we speak. We need to listen for all voices within a classroom. We have to change the way we value people’s experiences and that starts with inviting ourselves and each other to share our personal stories. But it’s not only the responsibility of people like me to explain ourselves. Those of you who carry this whiteness also have the responsibility to take off this cloak and reach out to other people to ask to hear their stories. And to those of you who like me have felt voiceless, who have felt like you need to keep these stories to yourself because it makes you lesser, be proud of where you come from. Own your experience. Find your language. What I have learned is that it is better to speak than stay silent.