

JUST ONE STEP

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I came all the way from India to BYU in 1988, to get a ticket to the business world. From outside, BYU stood out and I felt a degree from the premier institution, will launch the next phase of my career. Little did I know, that one class will change my life.

It was a public speaking class that I walked in with a lot of personal reservations. The video recordings, the professional critiquing, all were new to me. I left with the learning that speaking with a purpose is key as just speaking does not cut it.

Fast forward to thirty-two years later. I was lost in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. My world stood still. In the blur of lockdowns and uncertainty, my work as a motivational speaker vanished overnight. Emails stopped coming in, events disappeared, and my calendar went totally blank.

Then, unexpectedly, one of my doctors reached out. "Would you be willing," he asked after a hesitant pause, "to speak to my medical alumni group about your cancer journey?"

I froze.

Cancer. The word echoed in my mind like a distant siren. For over three decades, I have fought and been fortunate to win multiple battles against cancer. I have gone through over more than twenty surgeries, rounds of chemotherapy, and radiation. Yet, I had never spoken about it publicly. I had packed that part of my life into a sealed vault, hidden under layers

of silence and denial. Only a handful of people in my inner circle truly knew what I had endured. I had no intention of revisiting that chapter.

Then he added one more word. A single word that shifted something deep inside me.

“Paid.” It was strange how that one word made the impossible seem manageable. I also remembered my learning from BYU, “Every speaking must have a purpose”; and if I felt if my speaking helped even one person, I should do it. So, I said yes.

Then came the tough part. As I began to sift through the archives of memory, I found myself overwhelmed. The pain, the fear, the loneliness, all of it came flooding back. I stared at the screen, often my fingers froze over the keyboard, and at times tears were drizzling down my cheeks. But amidst all the darkness, I remembered the light. I remembered the people—friends and family, nurses and doctors, sometimes even strangers—who smiled, who held my hand, and who walked with me when I had no strength to take a step. I was never truly alone. They made sure I took one step forward in life.

The day of the Zoom presentation arrived. I spoke, from my heart, walking a path I have never traversed before. I laid bare my story—raw, unfiltered, imperfect. I felt vulnerable. The screen in front of me was full of thumbnails of unknown faces, but still it felt cold and distant. There were no eyes to connect to, no gasps to hear, no applause to hold onto. Just silence and more silence.

And then, a voice: “Wow. That was incredible,” my doctor whispered, unmuting himself. “I’ve never witnessed such a detailed account of a patient’s journey. I never realized how much our words impact our patients.”

One by one, other voices followed: ; words of gratitude, reflections full of emotions, some even shared with tears. Something shifted. My pain had found its meaning. My story found a purpose. I felt fulfilled as the steps I took to get here touched at least one heart, and then maybe more.

Two weeks later, a check arrived in the mail. It was a simple envelope, but it symbolized something remarkable. For the first time money was finding a path from my doctors to me. But more than the money, the memories from that day were etched in my mind. In the darkness and lost days of COVID-19, life had given me an unexpected gift. But life was not done surprising me.

A message pinged on WhatsApp. It was from Shoojit Sircar, the acclaimed Bollywood director. He had heard my story and wanted to connect. “Would you be open,” he asked, “to exploring your story as a film?”

I could not believe what I was hearing. “My life? A movie?” Surely it was a prank. But it wasn’t. Our conversations began and soon became hours-long Zoom sessions. He asked questions no one had asked before. There was a simple innocence in his words. He never judged and was always present from the heart. He listened genuinely and deeply. And slowly, we began to revisit the past together. I started feeling goosebumps as I reflected on the people who had stood by me, lifted me up when I was ready to fall, and most importantly, believed in me when I had nothing left to believe in.

Shoojit and I became close friends. Over the next four years, I had the surreal honor of watching my life unfold into Shoojit's film, from script to screen. Today, the movie, I Want to Talk is streaming on Amazon Prime and has reached millions across the world. Messages have poured in from day one of the theatrical release. Audiences are finding hope, courage, and a reason to keep going.

One message struck me deeply. A 76-year-old woman from Kolkata, India, wrote to say she left the theater feeling ten years younger. Inspired, she started a running group with residents in her apartment complex. They are now training for their first 5K.

Tears rolled down when I read that. That one hesitant "yes" had led to this.

That one step I took to reopen my past started all this. Looking back, I'm grateful—for the pain that became purpose, the silence that became strength, and the single step that became a journey. I never imagined my story would matter to anyone beyond my family. But I've learned something powerful: when we share our truth from the depth of our heart, we plant seeds in the heart of others. Some grow silently. Others spark revolutions. We never know who's listening or how far our words might travel. But every word matters. The simple words from my BYU class, got me in this journey.

So, when opportunity knocks, take a breath. Smile. And say yes. Then take one step—and then another. Take your time but never give up, because every unquit journey of a million steps begins with just one and then one more. Just taking that one step makes you an unquitter.

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