

My head was spinning, my hands were bleeding, and my lungs desperately needed more air. The air was filled with the shouts of men dying and steel clashing with steel. To my left were two young men, no more than 18 years old, at each other's throats. To my right an old man lay dead, missing an arm. My men were pouring out of the breach in full retreat. Death surrounded me as I summoned every ounce of my courage and shouted out that desperate ultimatum to my dying brethren, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more, or close the wall up with our English dead!"

Then reality came crashing down. "No, no you're doing it all wrong." I blinked, and instead of a bloody battlefield in front of me there was nothing more than a nearly empty auditorium. The sole occupant of the auditorium was a tall, bald, British man with a terrifyingly condescending demeanor. He was my Shakespeare coach. The most minuscule mistake never escaped his notice. "There's no chance in hell I would ever fight for you," he said. "Do it again." I went offstage and tried to repaint the picture.

I emerged inflamed with the drive for victory. Every word I uttered was a strike against the French. Every heartfelt delivery of that carefully choreographed routine was ground gained at Harfluer. I fought passionately with that ancient text, but my coach cut me off again. "OK, better, maybe I would fight for you, but I wouldn't die for you. C'mon pump me up, show me you care. Do it again." I tried again. I put forth all my effort, but again he stopped me. I performed it countless times over, but with each rendition the quality exponentially worsened. Finally, he told me to stop. We had done all we could for today.

I stepped off stage and collapsed into a chair, angry and defeated. Reaching into my pocket, I found the small rectangular magnet that had been given to me by the head of the theatre department for "motivational purposes." On the right side of the memento there was an ornate picture of The Bard in all his glory, and on the left there were six simple words: "To thine own self be true." I knew why I was here. I was here to prove to myself that I could accomplish something momentous.

I was born with two speech impediments. I was a shy kid, with a crooked smile, who couldn't pronounce any words correctly. Participating in theatre was the last thing anyone expected of me. Yet I wanted to sway crowds with my voice, make them cry, laugh and shout for joy. I was a terrified 10-year-old the first time I stepped on stage, and equally frightened moments before I finally performed at Lincoln Center. I walked slowly to my position full of fear,

but when the spotlight hit my face, there was no trepidation, only a calmness and quiet determination. In that moment all the long hours of struggle fell into place. I had already accomplished what I had set out to do before my final performance. Just being there, having worked as hard as I had, made all the worry dissipate. It was just me and the light.

In that earlier moment of failure, I couldn't see that light, or even imagine it. My brain was in a fog; I couldn't think. As I sat there and the lights in the theatre clicked off one by one, the setting sun cast a beam of orange sunlight directly center stage. I pretended to watch myself perform in that light, pacing to and fro, shouting heroically to my men and charging headlong into battle, into victory. I looked back down at the memento. Then something clicked. Henry V never lost hope and neither would I. So I went once more to the stage.