

Finding My Voice (draft)
10/2/2017
Steven Tran

TLDR; #1

Practice using your heart and you will have a strong voice. I basically talk about beating depression, why I go the gym, and why I do what I do.

TLDR; #2

Without investing your heart into something, the physical acts of repetitions, sets, and eating boring food have little meaning. And because you struggle to see the point of doing the mundane, you subconsciously fail to see the point of achieving the greater goal, and your routine will inevitably crack.

Here goes:

My goal with this essay is to draw an important connection between building your physical self and building your mental self, and how that contributes to the idea of having a strong “voice”. I point to two integral parts of my life that have helped me tremendously: *weight training* and *calculated risk-taking*.

One of my greatest weaknesses used to be my voice, and I turned it into one of my strengths. By “voice”, I mean not only the physical volume and tone, but also being able to effectively express the content of your thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. I am not talking about being introverted vs. extroverted because that really has to do with where you draw your energy from. I am talking about simply being able to put your thoughts into words no matter what type of person you are, where you come from, or whatever.

Backing it up a couple steps, when I first started college, I weighed 120 lb. at a height of 5-foot 5-inches. The height was never going to change, but I could change how *strong* I was. While I was considered physically healthy and was a decent cross-country runner, my mental health was desperately in need of self-esteem and self-confidence. I would be afraid to talk to professors or ask people questions or ask for help when I needed it, and I lacked an internalized value system, meaning someone could easily convince me that they were right about something.

Unfortunately, it was not until the beginning of junior year that I decided to fix these problems. A close friend decided to constantly compare me to her friends, who she told me repeatedly were “better” than me in many ways – from uncontrollable aspects such as my *height* (unreasonable) and *body type* (body shaming goes both ways), to more controllable things such as *self-confidence* (reasonable), *the ability to talk* (not sure how that ever entered the conversation), *humor* (reasonable), and *personality* (then why are you hanging out with me?). This sent me into approximately three months of depression, during which I eventually cut off my relationship with this person.

But here was the underlying cause of the depression that I was afraid to admit. *I was insecure*. I did not *own* who I was. *I lacked a strong heart*. In fact, I was so insecure that I did not even have the courage to admit what was causing the depression, and this made me even more depressed because I felt powerless. It is this spiral of negative thinking that makes depression so

toxic. Yet, the more I thought about my spiraling, the more I realized that the way out would be counterintuitive to my discouraged, depressive mindset. And if I wanted to outlast my suicidal thoughts and live a lifetime worth remembering, *I had to own who I was and whatever I was going to be*. It was not going to be easy. Life is always going to throw lemons at me and that is going to change who I am a person. So, I posed myself some challenges. What if I decided to throw lemons at myself? What if I decided to make myself stronger so that I could handle life's endless throwing of lemons? What if I learned to love and embrace the taste of at least some of these lemons, skin and all?

At the end of junior year, I decided to make a huge change in my life by deciding to *weight train* and engage in *calculated risk-taking*. I stress the “calculated” part. Risks such as drunk driving or substance abuse are uncontrolled, dangerous, and will not grow me as a person (I would say overcoming these problems does grow one as a person, but not during the fact of the abuse), while skydiving, spontaneous road trips, and making genuine conversation with strangers, will.

Over the course of six months from summer to the middle of my senior year, I adhered to a 5-day strength training program and rested on the weekends. As someone who struggled (and still struggles) to gain weight, I increased my caloric intake from an unknown low number to 3000 calories a day, including religiously consuming half a gallon of milk every day. It was not easy. There were days where I felt like quitting because I felt the work was not worth it. But I put a printed journal entry on my desk that constantly reminded of the dark place I used to be in, and I knew I risked being there again if I decided to quit.

During that time period, I increased my deadlift from a measly 100 lb. to 215 lb., squat from 95 lb. to 185 lb., and my bench from just the 55 lb. bar to 120 lb. I also gained 10 pounds and a giant boost of self-confidence, while leaving my past self in the dirt somewhere. The most beneficial aspect of weight training is that progress is easily measured, in that you notice immediately when you can lift more weight than you did last week. This continual positive reinforcement helped me learn to believe in myself, and believe that I can achieve a set goal if I put time, dedication, and *heart* into it.

So, the last part of the goal equation, “heart”, is what really drives the time and the dedication, and what links the physical and mental selves (quite literally too). Weight-lifting was where I first recognized the *heart* as an essential component to doing anything. Without investing your heart into something, the physical acts of repetitions, sets, and eating boring food have little meaning. And because you struggle to see the point in doing the mundane, you subconsciously fail to see the point of achieving the greater goal, and your routine will inevitably crack. This is where *calculated risk-taking* comes in.

Calculated risk-taking builds the heart. My first risk was to go on a spontaneous backpacking trip with random strangers. We were not allowed to bring our cellphones, and we carried 50 lb. backpacks for five miles a day (this is not that bad in retrospect. I was just physically weaker at the time.). Also, they were all random strangers. Furthermore, we slept outside in below freezing temperatures, with only the warmth of nearby fellow backpackers to save us from the cold.

For five days, I was relatively cold and hungry, and had only these *strangers* to depend on for my physical and emotional well-being. Remember, no phones allowed. They also

depended on *me* for those same things. I was in a situation where I was forced to be vulnerable and I was forced to be strong for myself and others. It was either be somewhat miserable, or be more miserable. By the end of the trip, I was close to all of them, and I had learned to be vulnerable and I had learned to be strong. And this was all because I decided to take a risk and willingly engage in all these things. The *calculated* part means that I know what I am getting into, and not necessarily how I was going to react to the situation. But the idea is that, when I am faced with uncertainty or discouragement, I will have experienced a similar situation where I experienced similar negative feelings, and it is a matter of applying that attitude to the problem (which still is not easy, just easier).

So, what does all this have to do with having a voice? I say that the voice is the direct manifestation of the heart, and all the experiences that one has put into it. I also have been intentional about what I value from my experiences. The obviously reward of weight training is a more aesthetic body and greater physical strength. But it is so much more – I learned dedication, pain tolerance, commitment. When I take a risk, and talk to a stranger, I can just see them as whatever internalized assumptions or biases I might have and not gain or give anything from that conversation, or I can choose to look beyond the superficial and learn to give understanding, empathy, and tolerance. When I decided to go backpacking, I could have chosen to only see pain, cold, and exhaustion, but I looked beyond that to find friendship, emotional vulnerability, and perseverance.

And all these things – dedication, pain tolerance, commitment, understanding, empathy, and tolerance, friendship, emotional vulnerability, and perseverance – build the heart. And it is reflected in the way one expresses their thoughts, beliefs, and opinions. A great example is that if one truly holds their own, independent opinion (so not because they live in an echo-chamber or watch only certain TV channels) about a social justice or political issue, then that will plainly show in the writing or the way one speaks– whether on something as simple as social media comments or in a leadership role. It does not matter which side you are on. It is respectable on its own to make an argument from the genuine product of your own experiences. There is a huge difference between owning what you believe, and just following the beliefs of others around you.

Today, I am proud to say that I weigh 145 lb. still at a height of 5-foot 5-inches, and my best lifts are 320 lb. on the deadlift, 225 lb. on the squat, and 145 lb. on the bench. I still have much more to go, but life is also about progress and appreciating the journey. I think the most exciting part of writing this essay is that, this is *me* finally using my *voice* to contribute a small perspective to others about gaining confidence and beating depression (still in progress sometimes). Talk about feeling empowered! There is a way out. It feels like there isn't, feeling as if you were at the bottom of a bottomless well. The solution is not obvious, nor does it become obvious after it becomes obvious. But it all starts with *training the heart*, whatever that means for you.

Find your voice.