

try to win back the respect of my father. Notices had gone up at school for a public speaking competition and Moniba and I both decided to enter. I remembered the story of my father surprising my grandfather and longed to do the same.

When we got the topic, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was 'Honesty is the best policy'.

The only practice we'd had was reading out poems at morning assembly, but there was an older girl at school called Fatima who was a very good speaker. She was beautiful and spoke in an animated way. She could speak confidently in front of hundreds of people and they would hang on her every word. Moniba and I longed to be like her and studied her carefully.

In our culture speeches are usually written by our fathers, uncles or teachers. They tend to be in English or Urdu, not in our native Pashto. We thought speaking in English meant you were more intelligent. We were wrong, of course. It does not matter what language you choose, the important thing is the words you use to express yourself. Moniba's speech was written by one of her older brothers. She quoted beautiful poems by Allama Iqbal, our national poet. My father wrote my speech. In it he argued that if you want to do good, but do it in a bad way, that's still bad. In the same way, if you choose a good method to do something bad it's still bad. He ended it with Lincoln's words: 'it is far more honourable to fail than to cheat'.

On the day only eight or nine boys and girls turned up. Moniba spoke well – she was very composed and her speech was more emotional and poetic than mine, though mine might have had the better message. I was so nervous before the speech, I was trembling with fear. My grandfather had come to watch and I knew he really wanted me to win the competition, which made me even more nervous. I remembered what my father had said about taking a deep breath before starting, but then I saw that all eyes were on me and I rushed through. I kept losing my place as the pages danced in my shaking hands, but as I ended with Lincoln's words, I looked up at my father. He was smiling.

When the judges announced the results at the end, Moniba had won. I came second.

It didn't matter. Lincoln also wrote in the letter to his son's teacher, 'Teach him how to gracefully lose.' I was used to coming top of my class. But I realised that, even if you win three or four times, the next victory will not necessarily be yours without trying – and also that sometimes it's better to tell your own story. I started writing my own speeches and changing the way I delivered them, from my heart rather than from a sheet of paper.