

QUIETLY STRUGGLING

I've always struggled with putting myself out in the world. When I was little, my mom would go to parent-teacher conferences and every year she would come home with the same comment from my teachers: "Kelly is very quiet." My mom would ask me if I could make a goal to speak up once a day in class and I would try but I didn't always succeed. Even today, there are times that I am not outgoing. It is hard for me to be outgoing for many reasons. It can be hard for me to be outgoing because observing helps me to feel more comfortable, I need time to organize my ideas before speaking up or acting, and I don't want to look foolish.

The first reason why it can be hard for me to be outgoing is because observing helps me to feel more comfortable. In middle school, when I went to dances, I stood back before going out on the dance floor. Other kids just dove right onto the middle of the floor and starting moving to the music but I couldn't do that. Even if I am on vacation, I like to take some time to watch before I jump in and start doing things. Like the time I went on a cruise. The minute I got onboard, I was surrounded by people. There were people asking questions and carrying suitcases and blocking hallways and crowding into the elevators. I stood back and found a seat by a window and gave myself time to watch. It was hard for me to be outgoing and just jump into the middle of the action. Observing makes me feel more comfortable.

Another reason why it can be hard for me to be outgoing is because I like to have time to organize my ideas before speaking up or acting. When someone asks me, "What do you think?" it can be hard for me to answer right away. How should I start? What should I say first? Sometimes there are so many ideas buzzing in my head that I am not sure which one to follow. Like the time I was in fifth grade and my class went on a trip to Washington D.C. My friends were arguing about what to do first. "We have to go to the Smithsonian!" my friend Jenny said.

"No, I want to see the White House," Kim insisted.

"Or we could go to the Lincoln Memorial, that would be cool," Amy said.

"The White House first!" Kim put her hands on her hips.

They turned to me. What to do? We were only there for one day. We wouldn't be able to do everything. What was best to do first? "Whatever you guys think," I said. I couldn't give my own opinion because I needed time

to think and figure it out. I need to organize what I'm going to say. I realize now that when I didn't say my own opinion or speak up, that meant I had to follow what Jenny and Kim and Amy wanted to do. If I don't speak up, I'll have to follow what others say. But speaking up is not always easy.

Another reason it can be hard to be outgoing is because I don't want to do or say the wrong thing and look silly in front of others. I hate to make mistakes in front of people. Like, the time I was in class and our teacher asked, "So what did everyone think of the book you read?" Even though I had read the book and taken lots of notes, I never raised my hand. What if I said an answer that everyone thought was silly? I kept my hand down. My worst nightmare is having no choice but to risk making mistakes in front of others. I remember being in fifth grade and having to do "math races." My teacher, Mr. Birch, would call out a problem and one kid from each team would race to the board. Whoever solved the problem correctly first would win a point for his/her team. I remember watching some kids run to the board grinning. How do they do that, I wondered. How do they not care that everyone might see them make a mistake? I would sit doing all the problems at my seat, trying to convince myself that I could get the answer right when it was my turn. Each time I ran to the board, I felt tears at the back of my eyes and all I could think in my head was: "Please don't let me be wrong." Sometimes I took too long to solve the problem on purpose so the other kid would shout the answer out first and I wouldn't have to be wrong. Being forced to put myself out in the world made me so nervous because I was constantly worried about what others would think.

When I think about being shy, I am reminded of Naomi from *Becoming Naomi León* by Pam Muñoz Ryan. She didn't have an easy time of speaking up either. When boys at school make fun of her brother, she can't speak up to them. "Why couldn't I speak up and defend Owen or myself?" she wonders (p. 68). Yet, as the story goes on she starts to develop more confidence in herself. At the end of the story, she is able to speak up and take control of her own life. We know she has changed because her teacher, Mr. Marble tells her, "Before you were a mouse, but now you have the countenance of a lioness" (p. 243). In fact, the author uses Naomi's name "León" which means "Lion" as a symbol for how strong Naomi becomes. When I think about Naomi's story and how developing greater confidence in herself allowed her to speak up, I see that what matters most is having inner strength that is lion-strong. Having strong inner strength can help you to push away what other people say. This is easier said than done, but I'm starting to see that

being quiet is a choice. I can decide when I want to be quiet and when I need to speak up, just like Naomi did. I don't think I'll ever be a loud voice in the world, but maybe that's okay. The world has a lot of voices that are loud and don't say much. I think what matters most is that I am proud of what I say and do. I have to be okay with my choice of when to be quiet and when to speak. I have to put myself out in the world when it matters. My mom used to ask me to make a goal of speaking up at least once. I think my new goal will be to not worry about how many times I speak up but to know when doing so matters most and to be proud of what I say once I speak.