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Always Playing Ketchup

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“Always Playing Ketchup,” by Jonathan Gummel

Instructor’s Note

Stories are powerful because we empathize with the characters we meet in them. These characters reveal something to us about ourselves and encourage us to persevere. In Jonathan Gummel’s Literacy Memoir, “Always Playing Ketchup,” Jonathan depicts himself as a child who struggled with pronunciation. His narrative reveals the emotional pain that he endured as he tried to learn standard pronunciation. The essay analyzes how a children’s story gave Jonathan the courage to persevere. Notice how Jonathan uses what author and writing teacher Tom Romano calls *repetend* in this essay. A *repetend* is a repeated word or phrase that represents multiple levels of meaning at the same time that it suggests a significant theme in the essay. What is significant about the repetition of “ketchup” and “catch up” throughout the essay? Why do you suppose the author uses the word “Ketchup” in the essay’s title?

Writer’s Biography

Jonathan Gummel is a Business major from Springfield, Ohio. He writes about what he loves: family, friends, sports, and Jesus Christ.

Always Playing Ketchup

“Could you please pass the catchup?” I have asked this question hundreds of times in my life.

A person at the table would frequently chime in, “I’m sorry, but do you mean ketchup?”

I always wanted to tell that person, No. I have been saying it this way all my life, and I am not about to change because you are a snobby know-it-all. What came out, however, was slightly more polite: “I did mean ketchup. Thank you very much.”

As a kid, I was a master in the art of perpetually mispronouncing words. My brothers loved to tease me because of this. I often stood on my tiptoes, peered over the kitchen counter, and said, “Mom, could I have ceweal for breakfast?”

“Sure, honey.” She gently replied while removing the milk from the fridge. “What could I get you?”

“I’d wike to have cinnamon wife.”

“Jonathan,” my brothers teased from the other room as they mashed the buttons of Nintendo controllers, “are you going to marry a cinnamon wife also?”

In the same way, cheering for sports teams was difficult. My dad followed Michigan. Because I wanted to be just like my dad, I did too. My brothers, however, liked Ohio State. Before the game, we plopped on the couch with a bowl of snacks. My brothers would ask, “Jonathan, who are you rooting for?”

“I am wooting for Michigan, the bwue team, just wike Dad.”

“Why don’t you root for Ohio State, with us?” They asked while munching on pretzels.

Sensing the animosity in their voice, I retorted, “No. I don’t wike the wed team.”

I gradually grew out of these elocutionary errors with practice and steady encouragement from my parents. But my most deep-rooted blunder was the pronunciation of the word “ketchup.” To this day, I do not say the word correctly, and I blame my favorite children’s book: *Ketchup, Catch Up!*

Ketchup, Catch Up! is a book written by Fran Manushkin. The story is set in a jungle full of red monkeys. It follows a young monkey named Ketchup who is slower than all the other monkeys. Because of his sluggishness, he was consistently last in every monkey activity. He could not scamper up the trees to get to the bananas before any of the others. He could not catch any other monkey in games of tag. During these games, the other monkeys teased him.

“Ketchup, Catch Up!” they would jeer. Soon after, Ketchup became deserted in the dense jungle because he could not maintain the pace.

Ketchup was not in trouble, however, because he discovered a pair of roller skates. After donning these strange shoes, he realized that they made him fast. He practiced skating, then quickly caught up with the other monkeys and whizzed past. After enjoying the look of astonishment on their faces, he became afraid. He was approaching a cliff, and he did not know how to stop! Ketchup flew off the rock and landed on the deck of a ship.

After introducing himself, Ketchup impressed the crew with how fast he could clean their ship. Afterward, the crew returned him safely to his family. Upon returning home, he realized that he no longer needed the skates to go fast. They taught him how to be quick and gave him the edge he needed when competing against the other monkeys.

“Ketchup, Catch Up!” was my favorite line in the book. I repeated it to myself again and again. To a six year old boy who had struggled with pronunciation his whole life, “ketchup” sounded just like “catch up.” Soon, “Ketchup, Catch Up!” became “Catchup, catch up” — a phrase I solidified in my vocabulary through frequent repetition. At the time, I did not realize how deeply this simple mispronunciation would impact my life.

“Mom, could you please pass the catchup?” I once called from across the dinner table, hoping to drench my fries with my favorite condiment.

When the bottle reached my dad, he did not hand it to me. Instead, he said, “Jonathan, saying ‘catchup’ instead of ‘ketchup’ is nothing more than a bad habit.”

“Dad,” I answered. “I know it is just a bad habit. What’s more, I am confident that I could successfully break the habit if I tried. I just don’t want to. I love saying ‘catchup.’ The pronunciation makes me unique. I don’t want to be a cookie cutter for standard english! But most of all, ‘catchup’ is a cord that connects me to my childhood. Mom, do you remember practicing the correct

pronunciation of words with me when I was a little boy?” I asked as I grabbed the ketchup from my dad, popped the lid, and poured the sauce onto my plate.

“Yes,” She said with a grin. “You would say, ‘my favorite ceveal is cinnamon wife!’ And I would reply, ‘No, Jonathan. Your favorite cereal is cinnamon life. Now, say that back to me, cinnamon life.’”

“Exactly!” I blurted through a mouth full of soggy, ketchup-stained fries. “Saying ‘catchup’ reminds me of all the ‘L’s’ and ‘R’s’ I replaced with ‘W’s’ as a child.” I took a second to swallow. “‘Catchup’ reminds me of the practice, encouragement, and maturation I needed to overcome my difficulties. Dad, saying ‘ketchup’ would allow me overlook the work I have done to become the speaker I am today.”

“What do you mean, ‘the speaker you are today?’” My dad laughed. “Right now, You are breaking the first rule of speaking — never talk with food in your mouth!”

Although my dad was joking with me, he learned that “catchup” connects me to my past speaking difficulties. These difficulties have made me empathetic towards people with long-term speech impediments. While my speaking setback was not drastic, having an impediment gave me valuable experiences. Through these experiences I identify with those who are frightened and discouraged by how they speak. And because of these experiences I desire to aid and encourage others in any way.

As a result of my mispronunciations, I have learned the importance of speaking well. A good leader must be a good speaker. He or she must effectively communicate both interpersonally and in public. No future president says, “vote for the wepubwican pawty.” No business executive refers to his staff as “empwoees.” No pastor declares, “Jesus woves you.” Instead, leaders speak flawlessly. And because they speak flawlessly, they speak powerfully.

My favorite children’s book has become much deeper to me. Ketchup’s story, ironically, applies to and parallels my life in many ways. Like Ketchup, I am a slow.

I work slow, write slow, read slow, talk slow, think slow, and move slow. But I believe this slowness is a blessing and a curse. On one hand, I am able to take the time to enjoy each moment, each sunset, and each conversation. On the other hand, I am frequently late, last in line, and barely make deadlines. I have the capability to be fast. In fact, I love to race, and I'm good at winning. I just prefer to take things slow. I like to think that Ketchup did too. By becoming fast, he earned the right to be slow. If the others teased him for going at his own pace, he would win a race — reminding them of his new abilities.

Before finding the skates, Ketchup struggled with his ability to run and keep up with the other monkeys. He endured torment, teasing, and humiliation because he was slow. When I read this, I identify with the embarrassment Ketchup suffered. Like him, I also suffered from a set back that I was not responsible for. I couldn't speak properly. The impediment wasn't my fault! Yet, I suffered teasing, ridicule, and shame. Humiliation unites us.

I think Ketchup risked his well-being on the dangerous skates because he was tired of not being taken seriously. As the slowest monkey in the jungle, no other monkey paid attention to Ketchup. He could not rush through the trees to pick bananas. He was consistently last in every competition. No one took him seriously. "Ketchup, Catch Up!" they would jeer.

Similarly, I felt as if no one took me seriously when I struggled to pronounce my favorite cereal, my favorite sports team, and any other words that contained a "L" or an "R." Most of all, I hated that my brothers teased me, even though it was playful. "Cinnamon wife, Jonathan? Is that your favorite cereal?" Their teasing fueled my desire to fix the problem. Their teasing inspired me to work hard and improve. I wanted to be taken seriously. I did not want to play catch up.