



“KEEP ON WALKING”

Speech by Malachi Talabi

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When life throws its worst at you, you only have two choices: to stay trapped in a tunnel or to keep on walking.

Mr Contest Chair, ladies and gentlemen, and anyone who's ever been hit where it hurts, life threw its worst at me when I stood face to face with Terry in the tunnel.

(Pick up school bag)

Scene 1

It wasn't strange for me to walk home on my own from school; my dad was in Nigeria and had been for 10 years, and my mum was a black statistic – a benefit beggar, single parent, three children, working hard to put cream crackers on the table or pay the electricity. It was never both *(pause a little)*.

I came out of Bermondsey station, walked pass the bus stop and peered into the tunnel. I saw Terry and his mate inside. Terry was freckled-faced and filled with fury. He had bruised, battered knuckles. He was 18 years old and he *hated* ten year olds – especially.... black Africans *(pause)*.

(Quicker) My heart started to beat as I entered the tunnel *(beat hand on chest)*. The next thing I remember is Terry grabbing me *(drop bag)*.



Terry (angry husky voice, throw punches violently but slowly): "I hate you, I hate you!" (*spit sound*)

Terry's friend (cockney – East London – accent): "Terry, someone's coming, let's go!"

I laid there in a pool of blood. Terry had made a mess of my face; I felt like my face was in a frying pan (*pause*).

Has life ever thrown a punch at *you*, that you weren't prepared for?

(*Pause*)

I got up wiped away the blood and his spit and I kept on walking.

Scene 2

A few years later I was in secondary school. The first day was good, the second day was ok, but by the third day...the bullying began.

I went to Saint Thomas the Apostle school - we called it "bully central". Mum was putting cream crackers on the table or paying the electricity – it was never both! No electricity meant no washing machine and no washing machine meant that I stank!

And on the third day it was time for P.E and I had to take my blazer off (*take off blazer and drop bag*).

School class mates (*voice change*): "Arrrgh you stink! Talabi you reek! You smell worse than rats vomit! In fact, you smell soooo bad, you make Right Guard want to go left!"

It was just like being back in the tunnel again with Terry.

(*Emotional voice*): "You stink, you smell, I hate you!"



I couldn't deny it – you could see the dirt around my collar (hold the collar) and the damp circles underneath my arm pits (*raise arms*). I was no longer the black boy from Bermondsey, I was now the black boy from Bermondsey with B.O. (*pause*)

(*Very softly*) It's okay, I can laugh about it now too...has anyone ever said anything to you that shattered your self-esteem?

(*pause*)

I got up, wiped away the shame, and I kept on walking.

Scene 3

College was amazing! The sun shone and I smiled (*big smile*); the bus came and I caught it; mum was putting cream crackers on the table and paying the electricity – it was both!

Everything was ok...until results day (*pause*).

I walked up to the deadly desk to discover (*bring folded paper out of pocket*) my results were miles away from an A – what was I going to tell my mum?

(*Speaks to mum hesitantly, scratching head*) “Err mum, here are my results”.

Mum (*in dramatic African accent*): “Oh my God! I cooked for you, I cleaned for you...go and tell your dad!”

(*Looking puzzled*) “Dad's back?” I hadn't seen him in 18 years. I wondered what he looked like.

(*Turn to dad*) “Dad, here are my results...”

Dad (*snatches paper; responds in strong African accent*): “My son, you are silly, you are stupid and you are slothful; get out of my sight!”



MALACHI TALABI

Inspirational speaker | 2011 UK & Ireland Public Speaking Champion

(Throws paper)

I was back in the tunnel again.

Has a family member ever turned their back on you?

Ladies and gentlemen, this time when I was in the tunnel I didn't see a wimp, I saw a winner. You see I could have stayed there with my jaw against the floor, with shame in my veins, the smell of blood in my nostrils, and fear doing a disco in my mind.

But I refused to stay down, I refused to stay defeated, I refused to remain in pain.

You see, I didn't let racism ruin me, I kept on walking; I didn't let bullying beat me, I kept on walking; I didn't let neglect knock me out, I kept on walking.

Walking through my tunnels I have become an author; walking through my tunnels I have become a football coach; walking through my tunnels I have become a speaker because now I have things to say.

There is nothing you can't become or overcome if you keep on walking.

You see our tunnels make us, our tunnels mould us, our tunnels help us realise our potential for greatness.

Maybe you're here today because you're trapped in a tunnel; maybe you've lost your confidence; maybe you've lost your job or a loved one and it's dark and it's cold, and you're hurting. I encourage you to keep on walking because I have discovered that every cloud has a silver lining and there is light at the end of every tunnel.



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When life throws its worst at you, you only have two choices. What will you decide? To stay trapped in a tunnel or to **keep on walking**?