

Pretty Pink Flamingos  
Grant Brashears

A sensation grasps my lower left calf; a sensation caused by my leather bound right foot as it slides gently across the opposite calf while walking along the smooth concrete path that leads diagonally across my school's campus. This sensation enacts an unbalanced feeling. I question my doctor's words in my head, "Tics, why are they called tics?" It is almost as if my left leg feels lighter than my right. In response, I rake my left foot across my right calf, hoping to even out the feeling. The feeling, however, is different from the first. Now I'm left with the decision to either continue the balancing act, or to just try to ignore my legs and feet entirely. My jeans don't help the commotion going on with both my legs. The rubbing only dares me to continue to try for a medium that will relax the feeling of heavy leg verses light leg. "Is anybody watching me try to do this," I ask as I look around, scanning the eyes of the other, soft stepping students who traveling the same path as myself. I know I look like a pretty pink flamingo as I constantly hamper up my legs, one at a time for no apparent reason. With no evidence of other eyes fixed on me, I continue the battle of creating the exact same sensation that I caused thirty seconds before. Then comes the realization that I looked further to the left than I did to the right. How can one find balance in a sensation that drives so spitefully to one's attention? Where is the balance, and, even more important, why can I not find a way to ignore this urge to continue a balancing act between random physical feelings and random physical actions?

This is normal to me, as it is for many who walk their entire lives with the smooth concrete existence of Tourette Syndrome (TS). TS is a funny, laugh out loud kind of brain phenomenon. It can, at its extreme, cause excessive grunts, squints, facial twitches, and even the most recognized affiliated issue: hilarious outbursts of random swearing and derogatory word pairings, which is an extension of TS known as Coprolalia. Coprolalia is the kind of TS used to make us laugh at movies with characters who curse uncontrollably, often at the most abrupt time. The prominent sidekick of TS is the obsession. Obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD, often rebounds many of the motor and verbal tics into cycles, like a child bouncing a basketball for the first time trying their best to bounce it just right, with all of their focus dialed into their movement and connection with the leather bound ball. I was bound for about three months with an obsession to touch my chin to one of my knees. This type of tic is not easily overlooked when it happens mid-stream of me walking up a set of stairs. A tic is a subconscious motor movements and/or verbal sounds. TS causes phenomenal damage to self-esteem and can create many walls which must be broken down in order for a person's quality of life to move forward.

In the *Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection*, Cutler, Murphy, Gilmour and Heyman observes that TS takes its obvious form in a child by ten or eleven years of age. This is an abrupt age to develop a condition that thoroughly alters the quality of life with those who observe the condition from the outside. There is no definition for the feelings that take place in the body and mind that could describe what is happening when tics set in. They are disruptive to others, yet mostly nonexistent to the affected person. Though the reason for this disorder is still unknown, a few hints linger in the information we do have. A DNA survey revealed TS is most common in white males, and is a dominant gene that commonly passes through generations, as shown by the research produced by Möller, Tackenberg, Heinzl-Gutenbrunner, Burmester, Oertel, Bandmann and Müller-Vahl.

I remember the first movie I watched with my wife. It was the movie *Once*, with Glenn Hansard singing his heart out, which to my favor, drowned out the small grunts and scratches my

voice box pushed out while my arm was around Chelsi, my girlfriend at the time. She eventually noticed my tiny, whisper-like noises, and had no obvious shyness in asking me, “Why do you make those noises?” My immediate answer seemed perfectly logical at the time, “What noises?” As mentioned in *Making Sense of Tourette’s*, by Steve Olson, tics caused by TS are triggered by stress factors such as anxiety, pressure, and lack of sleep. My first movie with a beautiful girl would fall into the “pressure” category. This is most likely why the syndrome kicks into high gear during the early adolescent. The higher end estimate shows that about one out of every one hundred children will begin to show signs of TS between ages seven and ten; however, very few are diagnosed properly because “Some researchers see Tourette syndrome as a single discrete disorder that may be accompanied by other syndromes such as OCD or ADHD.” Olson continues “Others see Tourette’s as part of a spectrum of disorders with common causes and varying manifestations.”

When I was nineteen, my high school sweetheart slammed my heart to the ground. I should have expected it as much as I suspected it, but it’s in the past. Caught her cheating on me red-handed with a man from Memphis. It took its toll on my life. It changed the way I view love, life, religion, and my time on Earth. The ability to accept that I was on my own from there was a hard battle to fight. My tics spiraled into a sharp point that pointed directly back at me. Medication after medication failed to show any improvement in my anxiety. It took about six months to leave my empathetic attitude. I had to accept my past. I couldn’t change it. That acceptance is what made me take the step forward. I wasn’t balancing what I could be with what I should be. There were no night and day decisions that stood in the way. This is the only way for me to truly illustrate the hurt of TS. It takes understanding that your past exists. TS is not going anywhere. Just like love, Tourette’s consumes its victim whole, intensifies beyond control, and at some point, it hits a rock bottom point, which allows acceptance to take the forefront. Just like heartache, TS reaches a point in the lives of the pretty pink where they will make the decision to move away from broken balancing acts, forward to a new understanding and acceptance of what their life entails. Acceptance is the major reason that age seventeen, for the majority of children with TS, means nearing the end of the major tics.

There are currently no cures for this condition, but many methods of medication and therapy exist to treat those who are affected by the tics, OCD, and ADHD. It seems abrupt to watch a syndrome die out in a matter of a few months, but that is just the way Tourette’s works. Tics will linger for the majority of my life in minute ways. I will still tap my toes, pointed forward, into the top of each stair as I climb to the third floor of a building (usually twenty-three stairs per floor), hoping the whole time my feet will clash into the stair with the exact impact they created with the first tap. I still slide my feet across my calves with the same expectation. My eyes still wander from left to right with the occasional, heavily scorned look on my face. —It creates that warm sensation inside of my nose, like I just hit the back of my head on a car door entrance, leaving the smell of metal to loiter within my nose while it also generates splashes of color in a cluster of dots on the back of my squinted eyelids.

I realize having TS is not all that different from any other acceptance issue others may have to face in middle or high school. We all must ignore our legs sometimes. Balancing can’t solve everything. One leg may not always be like the other, and in that, we can’t always balance what feels unbalanced in our lives, but we can accept it, and move forward as a more knowledgeable person. Understanding “acceptance” is a prominent part of all lives. It is the only true way to get past the urge to continue a balancing act of random physical feelings. TS promotes a more physical example of what it feels like to not fit in. Sometimes it takes a pretty

pink flamingo, one who is constantly hampering-up their feet to their calves one after another, to remind us of the simple facts of life.

#### Works Cited List

- Cutler, D, et al. "The Quality Of Life of Young People With Tourette Syndrome." *Child: Care, Health & Development* 35.4 (2009): 496-504. Web. 31 Jan. 2012.
- Möller, J. C. et al. "Immunophenotyping in Tourette Syndrome – A Pilot Study." *European Journal of Neurology* 15.7 (2008): 749-753. Web. 31 Jan. 2012.
- Olson, Steve. "Making Sense of Tourette's." *Science* 305.5689 (2004): 1390-1392. Web. 31 Jan. 2012.