

**ARE YOU
OR
ARE YOU NOT
A
STUTTERER?**

By John C. Harrison

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ARE YOU A STUTTERER?

I'm going to confess to you a secret that I've never shared before. Something that even my best friends have never known about me.

I'm a thief.

You heard right. A thief. An honest-to-god, we-gotcha-red-handed- you're-gonna-have-to-make-full-restitution thief. I was caught dead to rights.

Now that I've confessed to being a thief, how does that affect you? Would you hide the good silver if I came to dinner?

You would?

I'm not surprised. Hanging a label on someone sets up expectations and causes a person to be seen in a particular way.

For example, imagine walking into the local bar of a small rural town in the Deep South and announcing to all the hard drinkers that you're a Yankee.

"Hey, lookit what we got here. We got us a Yankee!" somebody shouts as everyone turns around to stare at you.

Might make you a mite uncomfortable, having those less-than-friendly eyes directed your way.

You might be as saintly as Mother Teresa or as popular as Michael Jordan. But "Yankee" conjures up feelings for anybody still reliving the Civil War. Those individuals know who you really are. "Yankee" says it all.

Labels shape how people see.

Labels are potent shapers of perception. Not only do they cause you not to see what's there, they also lead you to see what's not there. For example, if someone told you that I am a stutterer, and I made an hour speech and over the course of the presentation never once stumbled, blocked or repeated, where would your attention be?

Where, indeed!

You'd be waiting for the other shoe to fall. You'd be waiting for me to stutter. Your awareness would be on something that was *supposed* to be there but wasn't.

You might also unconsciously assign to me thoughts and feelings that I didn't have - fears, perfectionism, obsessive focus on performance, etc.- because that's what a "stutterer" is supposed to think and feel. You'd turn me into something that I wasn't.

Labels also establish a frame of reference. I was reading the *San Francisco Chronicle* a couple of years ago when I saw an article about two defensive linemen on the local Forty-niner football team who also happened to be medical doctors.

I remember how confused I felt. Based on years of watching instant replays, my conception of a defensive lineman is that of a large, raging hulk who wishes to do bodily harm to members of the opposing team.

On the other hand, a medical doctor is a healer, someone who supports the health and well-being of others.

I couldn't fit those two concepts together. It just didn't play.

So I started paying attention to the label "defensive linemen" and

how it was affecting me. "Suppose I had read about two doctors who were also defensive linemen," I asked myself. "Would that cause me to perceive these players differently?" It would.

Somehow, a medical doctor who likes to vent his aggression is more palatable than a defensive lineman who wants to heal people.

Same guys. Different labels.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

When you label someone, when you say that someone "is" some particular thing, you end up placing that person into a category. Categories are important, especially in the sciences where it is necessary to organize and analyze a vast amount of natural phenomena.

For example, as any biologist can tell you, being able to categorize an animal within a particular phylum or classification allows you to make certain assumptions about the salient characteristics of the animal and how it will behave. The problem is that when you apply that same methodology to dealing with humans, you can easily make assumptions about them that aren't true.

For example, would you consider Jimmy Connors a tennis player? Of course. From the time he was a kid, Connors lived and breathed tennis. As a player on the pro tour he made millions. Even now, it's hard to hear his name without conjuring up the gritty determination and the exuberant play that have been his trademark. Jimmy Connors *is* a tennis player, right down to the very soles of his Adidas. He sees the world through tennis-tinted glasses.

Now let's say someone named Jimmy *Camden* decides to take up tennis. He goes down to the local sport shop, buys new sneakers

and a complete tennis outfit, a brand new Prince racquet and enough tennis balls to last a lifetime. Then he signs up for tennis lessons, and over a year of three-set weekends, he becomes pretty good.

Is Jimmy Camden a tennis player?

You could call him that. But he's not a tennis player in the same sense that Jimmy Connors is. Tennis is not his life. He doesn't think and breathe tennis. He's simply a guy who plays tennis. So if you assume that the two Jimmys share the same perspective on life because they're both tennis players, you might be getting yourself in trouble. Same category. Two different people.

When you assign someone a label - thief, Yankee, defensive lineman, doctor, tennis player, stutterer - you're making a statement about who that person *is* and what you can expect from him.

Former NSA Executive Director John Ahlback tells a story that vividly illustrates how labeling can lead to observations that occasionally border on the absurd. It seems that during a recital by an accomplished violinist, a member of the audience nudged his neighbor and said, "He plays beautifully, doesn't he,"

"Indeed," said his friend. "Especially for a stutterer."

Labeling is especially pernicious when it's applied to yourself. By taking on the label "stutterer," you can easily end up isolating yourself from others because you're "different". Rather than looking for points of identification with other people, you end up focusing only on what separates you. You can also find yourself limiting your career choices, the people you choose to share your life with and/or the level of success you dare hope to achieve. "Oh, a stutterer couldn't do THAT!" you think.

On the other hand, if you're gradually able to drop the label and see yourself as a *person* who stutters, you won't be as likely to blind yourself to other possibilities. You can more easily avoid falling into the "allness" trap that labels engender and remain more receptive to the full range of opportunities that life presents.

Yet, giving up the term "stutterer" is tough for most people. Some of the more familiar arguments sound like this:

Well, you're just afraid to admit what you are.

-- "Person who stutters" is just too cumbersome.

-- I've always used the word "stutterer".

-- You're just running from yourself.

There's no question that "person who stutters" is a more cumbersome term. It's always easier to label someone a thief, failure, cripple, hippie, commie, Yankee, Republican, jock, chauvinist, women's libber, stutterer, or whatever convenient term comes to mind. Putting people in boxes is attractive, because you don't have to think very hard. But in doing so, you often end up seeing reality through tinted glasses.

Be what you are.

There is, however, a time when it is important to be a stutterer. This is when a person secretly believes himself to be a stutterer but is living in denial of it. The thought process might go something like this:

"Who me? A stutterer? I'm not a stutterer. Okay, so I may hesitate from time to time, and maybe I do repeat or substitute words. But I'm not different from other people. No way! I'm just like everybody else. Me? A stutterer? NEVER!"

The more he denies it, the more he reinforces the idea that his

secret fear is true. This is what happened to me. When my father suggested that I stuttered, I emphatically insisted it wasn't so. I absolutely hated the "s" word. "I don't stutter," I whined, "I hesitate." - even though the blocks regularly interfered with my flow of speech. In those days I was very much in denial, which is why I was so stuck.

To understand why being in denial locks you in place, try a simple experiment. Stand facing the wall about an inch or so away, close your eyes, and while you're standing there, tell yourself that you're actually standing in front of an open door.

I'm not standing on front of a blank wall. That would make me really stupid if I were doing that. No, no. I'm really standing in front of an open door. Except for some reason, every time I go to walk through the doorway, I can't do it. Something mysterious is blocking me. I don't know why I can't move forward. (Must be a genetic flaw that's holding me back!) I KNOW that I'm standing in front of an open door. But WHY can't I move through it?

Obviously, to move forward, you must first accept where you are. If you want to walk through the doorway, you have to first accept that you're not standing in front of the door. If you're reluctant to own up to where you are, you can't take that next step and your forward motion comes grindingly to a halt.

I'm not suggesting that you need to label yourself as a stutterer, or that it's even appropriate to do so. But I do suggest that in this instance you're reluctant to recognize that you've *already* cast yourself as a stutterer. And until you recognize and accept this fact, you'll be unable to give up the emotions, perceptions, beliefs or hidden games that are attached to it. You'll be subject to the universal law that "I am what I resist"

Does this imply that the word "stutterer" should never be used?

Realistically, I know that old habits die hard and that the word is going to be around. "Stutterer" does trip off the tongue a lot easier than "person who stutters," and I'll even cop to using "stutterer" from time to time in writing to the professional community and in other presentation situations. But in talking to or about an individual, I make an effort to never inadvertently trigger a person's self-imposed limitations by putting them in a box that has a label attached to it. In these instances, I always use "person who stutters."

So my advice is this: use "stutterer", if you have to, but remain aware that "stutterer" is a label that can shape your perception if you let it. If you can keep this mind, then the word will have less opportunity to bias the way you see.

Harrison confesses all

Before I conclude, you're probably curious about the confession that started this essay. Am I a thief?

Okay, here's the story.

When I was eight years old I unabashedly robbed my cousin Pat's piggy bank of 24 pennies. On the way home in our old black Ford coupe, I felt so guilty about what I had done that I ended up confessing the heinous deed to my mom. Fortunately, my mom was understanding, and although she gave me a stern lecture on the virtues of honesty (as well as making me give the money back), the episode never colored my self-image...because there was one thing my mom never did.

She never called me a thief.