

REACHING A FLUENCY OF LIFE

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At the age of 60, after enduring numerous challenges over the years and decades, I think I can state with confidence that I have reached a Fluency of Life, even if my one-time dream of a Fluency of Speech has been elusive.

My early childhood (in Massachusetts, later 1950's) was certainly not a typical one, and was filled with unusual aspects, both positive and negative.

I began to speak in single words at the age of two, but after a number of months, simply stopped talking altogether. I went totally silent, for some mysterious reason.

Since I don't remember this period of silence, I have no explanation for my decision to become quiet and stop talking with the world. My parents, very concerned, brought me for medical examinations. It was suspected that I might be deaf, but testing showed my hearing to be entirely normal. I could hear all right, but talking apparently seemed like it was just too much effort for my then-little mouth.

At the age of three I decided to rejoin the world of oral communication, resumed speaking, and started putting sentences together for the first time. But almost immediately there was a problem – I started to stutter. I was now willing to converse with words, but the words weren't always willing to converse with me.

At about the same time, there was another unusual development in my life. Shortly after my third birthday my mother started reading to me nightly from an alphabet book. One night I read the book back to her. My mother naturally assumed I had memorized the book after so many readings.

But then I took some children's books that she had never read to me, and I read those to her also!

My mother was absolutely shocked to discover that I indeed knew how to read. How this developed will always remain a mystery; no one, to anyone's knowledge, had taught me this skill. I myself have no recollection of learning how to read, and no memory of ever not knowing how to read. Apparently I used the information from the alphabet book to demystify the printed letters and words around me. (That alphabet book I've always kept – it seemed to have magical qualities!)

My shocked mother brought me around to different people's homes, including to those of schoolteachers, to show them what I could do. This period I do remember. One teacher wrote this on a piece of paper and asked me to read it:

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ. I did it like: “Ab-k'def-ghij-k'l'm'nop-querstiv-wiksiz.”

(I remember saying it fluently too!)

And so I started speaking in sentences, stuttering, and reading all at the same time. Since all of this seemed tied together, I started pronouncing words the way they appeared in print. (I pronounced the word “island”, for example, as “iss-land”.)

Over the next year or so, my stuttering gradually worsened; and my reading ability further developed, as I began to read stories for older children.

Though the printed world was demystified for me, the oral world was not. I remember at the age of four playing by myself, running around

the cellar of our home, talking to myself, and stuttering to myself. (Decades later I read in numerous articles and texts that people who stutter never do while talking alone; I proved that particular assertion wrong at the age of four, not yet being aware that it wasn't supposed to be possible.) I also remember learning my first speech «trick» during this play experience – I discovered that if I slammed my little hands against the wall, my speech blocks immediately released themselves.

And so I was running around, having an interesting conversation with myself; and every time a block hit, I raced to the nearest wall to slam my hands so my speech could continue.

The next unusual event occurred at the age of five. My mother, who had studied for a year at Boston University School of Music, had piano playing abilities on the intermediate level, and I often enjoyed listening to her play classical sonatas. It was my wish that someday I could play just like her! My mother sensed this interest, and I had some introductory piano lessons from a cousin over a period of six months or so.

After this short series of lessons, I began to develop piano abilities on my own, reading through and practicing pieces of increasing difficulty. There was plenty of music to choose from inside the piano bench.

But my mother apparently wasn't listening closely to how I was progressing. (The piano was in the cellar, and the door leading to the kitchen upstairs was often closed.)

One day when I was six, I shocked my mother again, by performing C.P.E. Bach's Solfiegetto for her accurately, and at speed. She then discovered that I was no longer playing elementary tunes for little children.

Within a few years I surpassed her in piano playing abilities, and then started lessons with a professional piano teacher and concert pianist. Somewhat sadly, my mother played very little after that, but she always enjoyed listening to me play. The piano teacher had never before taken on a child as young as me, and I continued studying with her for many years (she kept me on after she retired and dumped all her other students).

At age seven I began to compose music, and also began to improvise pieces, no longer bound to music on the printed page. Also around that time I became fascinated by numbers, and developed a mental calculating ability.

I began developing a reputation around the neighborhood as kids gave me mental math problems to solve.

My memorization ability also seemed to zoom in unusual ways. My grandfather bought me a World Book Encyclopedia for my seventh birthday, which I spent many enjoyable hours reading, and I loved to memorize lists of information, for example, about U.S. Presidents. Though it was often difficult for me to talk, people were impressed by my abilities in these other areas – and this built up my self-confidence.

Speech was a weakness of mine, but there were quite a few strengths.

(Many years later, an uncle of mine told me: “G-d gave you a disability. But he compensated for it in many other ways.”)

My first speech therapy (the first of dozens of therapies I've tried) was around the age of three or four, with a young speech therapy student known to one of my mother's friends. I don't recall the sessions at all, or even the therapy student, but I do remember a pointless exercise she prescribed for me to practice at home – blowing bubbles in a

glass of water with a straw. This was the first ridiculous therapy I was exposed to.

Also at around the age of four I began therapy sessions at a local youth guidance center, and these lasted periodically for about six years. The sessions were not useful in the least, and were largely unmemorable. I remember talking about the activities I enjoyed, such as composing music. One day I noticed my therapist desperately writing down everything I was saying, including all my stutterings. Apparently she needed this for some type of evaluation. I corrected her frequent errors in notating my stuttering, but I found this experience quite humiliating.

I have many very negative memories of kindergarten. My teacher knew I could read, but absolutely forbade my doing so, telling me firmly, "WE do NOT read until WE are in the FIRST GRADE!"

This apparent Law of Nature seemed quite irrational to me even at the tender age of five, so I used to sneak books from the back of the room, and tried to read parts of them when the teacher wasn't looking.

At times I was caught reading a book and was yelled at.

During singing time, I at times asked the teacher if I could play the piano part instead of her, and was yelled at, since that was not something a child was allowed to ask.

I also was rather unskilled in many requirements of the kindergarten curriculum: I had very little drawing ability; I had difficulty cutting paper along a straight line; doing fingerpainting always resulted in a colorful mess on my clothes (despite wearing a smock); when trying to open little milk cartons, milk invariably spilled on my pants and the floor (eventually the teacher assigned another kid to always open my milk cartons for me); and I had absolutely no idea how to build things

with blocks. I was yelled at constantly for not meeting satisfactory standards in all these areas. But such activities were just not in line with my interests of reading and learning from books, and piano playing.

My stuttering was also a sore negative point for the teacher. She told my parents during Parents' Night that my stuttering plus all my other weaknesses were a clear sign of mental retardation. My father, a courtroom lawyer who loved to proudly brag about me – with exaggeration – asked the teacher (I presume in his assertive cross-examining voice): “Do you realize that he can read the New York Times? I'll tell you quite frankly, the other day I found him reading my law books. I bet you didn't know that, now did you? Now DID you?”

My first-grade teacher had been warned beforehand by my kindergarten teacher that I was “stupid and retarded” (an insensitive but sadly common phrase of that era, c. 1960).

Three weeks into the school year my first-grade teacher was shocked when she discovered that I already knew how to read. Her first reaction was to ask the class, “And how many of you are just LEARNING how to read?” Everyone else's hand shot up.

At first she wasn't entirely pleased with the discovery. I still had to read the same boring lines from the same primers as everyone else (“This is Tom. This is Betty. This is Flip. See Tom run. See Betty run. See Flip run. Run, run, run”), and I had to explain afterwards in my own words what this well-illustrated but utterly meaningless story was all about. “I don't know. The story wasn't about ANYTHING!” - an answer that was quite correct but which highly displeased the teacher.

Eventually though, she came to accept that I was just a little bit different from the other kids. Sensing my frequent sheer boredom with the class, she sometimes sent me up to the fifth-grade

classroom to busy myself with the Encyclopedia Britannica.

I later learned that she proudly talked about me for decades afterwards as her star pupil of all time.

I had the nice fortune of being in an elementary school class where the kids respected me, and were very patient and understanding when I had a hard time getting words out.

I can honestly say I don't remember a single incident of a negative reaction to my stuttering from my elementary school classmates. Maybe part of the reason was that I wasn't the only one in the class who stuttered, and so wasn't unique in that way.

A girl in the class also stuttered (though not as severely as me), and we often were sent to speech therapy together. Also helping the situation was my reputation for smartness. I had to wait many years for the other kids to more-or-less catch up to me in reading skills; meanwhile other kids came to me for help in their reading, writing, and math.

The school speech therapy to which I was sent weekly for six years was totally useless to me. The therapists had absolutely no idea what to do for stuttering, or what to do with me. Whatever speech sound the articulation kids happened to be working on, I was assigned to work on it too. If a group of kids was having trouble with /r/, I practiced making /r/ sounds with them; if a group was having trouble with /s/ or /l/, I practiced those sounds with them.

Of course, I already knew how to make those sounds, and all sounds. My problem wasn't articulation; it was stuttering. But the speech therapists didn't seem to understand that.

In fourth grade, I received a mediocre C+ on my report card for Language, despite excelling with "A" level work in all the spelling,

grammar, and vocabulary tests. I puzzled over this for a while, and then to my dismay suddenly realized why. I asked the teacher, «Does the Language grade include speech?» «Yes, it does!», he answered smilingly, looking directly at me.

Deep inside I was hurt. I was penalized two entire grading levels for simply having a disorder. Of all the grades I received during my long schooling career, that one was surely the most unfair.

My elementary school teachers usually avoided mentioning my stuttering. But there were occasional exceptions:

During a rehearsal of a class singing presentation for an Xmas assembly, my fourth-grade teacher (the same one mentioned above) noticed that I wasn't stuttering when singing along with everyone else. As people who stutter know, nearly everyone can be fluent in this situation.

But my teacher, not being knowledgeable about the nature of stuttering, found this to be an incredible accomplishment. He told me after class that if I didn't stutter in that situation, then I could do the same everywhere! I found this encouraging, even though – at the age of 9 – I already recognized that it was a rather naïve (but well-meaning) statement.

Very early during the school year of fifth grade, we were assigned oral reports on some topic. When I started my presentation, I blocked through the first few sentences. “I notice you stutter a little,” observed the teacher, tactfully not mentioning the severity of the problem. “So sit down! You'll do a written report instead. Go ahead – sit down!”

I had mixed feelings about this teacher's reaction. On the one hand, I was relieved not to have to struggle through the presentation. But I also didn't like being singled out that way, and being barred from an

activity that all the other kids were doing.

I was happy when she left our class a few weeks later, and another teacher took over.

In sixth grade, in a similar situation, I was asked by the teacher if I would prefer to do a written report rather than the oral one required of the other kids. That's what I liked – being given an option. I told him I would do it orally like everyone else. That remained my standard operating procedure when similar questions were asked all through public school.

When I was 12 I attended a summer music camp in Maine, and was tormented constantly by the other kids with names such as “Stutterbum!” and “Diarrhea-of-the-mouth!”, along with some physical abuse. On the last day of camp a strong-looking junior counsellor finally caught one of the ringleaders in the act. He dragged the kid away with force. A half-hour later the once-cocky bully of a kid was returned to us, now bawling like a baby. I have no idea what happened during the preceding half-hour (no one asked; no one told), but I sure felt plenty of satisfaction!

The seventh grade marked the beginning of junior high school with new classes, teachers, and classmates. In our first class of our first day of school that September, my classmates heard my stuttering for the first time. I was sitting near the back of the class. Immediately every kid turned around in their seat to stare at me, curiously wondering who was having this strange difficulty.

And a few seconds later, every kid turned their seat around again to face the front. It was a humiliating moment. And these were junior high kids – that never happened to me in my elementary school classroom.

After that first class, a girl asked me: “Paul, I don't want to sound

mean or anything, but have you ever had speech therapy?”

Though there were no further in-class negative reactions to my stuttering, there were incidents outside of class. Three boys (who were maturing sexually but not in other ways) took pleasure in laughing at my blocks, and tried unconvincingly to cover their stupidities with other stupidities. “Hey, Paul, did you see that fat lady who just walked by? She was so funny!”

Finally one of them wised up after a number of weeks, and duly informed the others of his newly acquired wisdom: “Hey, cut it out, guys! Paul KNOWS we're laughing at him!”

In French class in seventh grade, my teacher noticed that when reciting in unison in the language lab, I didn't stutter at all. She was absolutely astonished, and didn't understand how that could be possible. That phenomenon of stuttering astonishes Fluent People all the time.

In junior high school I was involved for a while as pianist in rehearsals of an unbelievably stupid musical play, featuring a character who stutters. The playwright (presumably of adult age) gave the stuttering character inane rhymes such as: “Whatever your ch-ch-children may utter / May they n-n-never ever stutter.”

One kid suggested to the teacher directing the production that I should act in the stuttering role. The teacher smiled at the suggestion. She answered him, “Oh you – you're always so funny!” After that day, I abruptly left my role as pianist for that production. I've always wondered if the teacher understood why.

While in training for my Bar Mitzvah in 1967, a cantor told me of a breathing method he had learned in Europe for “curing” stuttering. This involved breathing in until an inhalation was absolutely full, and then holding one's breath as long as possible before exhaling,

practicing this distinctly uncomfortable procedure for 20 minutes a day.

Anyone familiar with speech pathology would realize right away that such an exercise can only make stuttering worse, as this adds much tension to the speech mechanism. Nevertheless, not knowing any better, I religiously followed the cantor's suggestion for a number of weeks. My speech was soon in a worse mess than before, now punctuated by gasping sounds.

I was perceptive enough to stop this ridiculous exercise before it caused further speech deterioration.

I led the congregation for the entire service during my Bar Mitzvah, in Hebrew chanting. (Most kids lead for only a small portion of the service.) It is traditional in the U.S. to give a Bar Mitzvah speech in English to the congregation, but this was waived for me.

Chanting was one thing, but I could not possibly speak to a crowd numbering in the hundreds. That morning I had a huge block on the very first sound of the very first word, the /b/ sound of “baruch”, meaning “blessed”. I sure felt blessed when I finally emerged from that block, and I proceeded through the rest of the service without difficulty.

[My fellow friend of the Tribe of the Tangled Tongue, the late Marty Jezer, described a very similar Bar Mitzvah experience in a chapter of his autobiography. He began with a huge block on that very same sound; and after a synagogue official bopped him on the shoulder, the sound came out and the rest of the ceremony went smoothly. No one bopped me, but the sound did eventually come out on its own.]

In ninth grade we were assigned in English class to write an autobiography. Mine included quite a bit about my stuttering. The teacher, extremely impressed with my writing, read my autobiography

to the class. It was the first time that any of my classmates had heard anything about my stuttering from my own lips (or actually in this case, from my own typewriter – this was 1969).

I think I left a profound impression on many of them; by that time my junior high classmates had known me for three years, and were long past the point when they had turned around in their seats to stare at me that first day.

I have learned that during the succeeding years until her retirement, this teacher proudly read my autobiography to all her classes. Interestingly, for a month or so, an apprentice teacher who stuttered taught our English class that year. Once again, I wasn't the only one in class who stuttered. When he left, I wrote one of my first pop-styled tunes in his honor.

I tried various other useless therapies during the coming years. One, advocated by a doctor, involved writing down the first letter simultaneous with speaking, which supposedly gives support to a deficient nervous system. The method might “work” occasionally, but is certainly of no practical use. I also tried the services of a neurologist/psychiatrist – a complete waste of time.

He prescribed for me a powerful drug generally used to treat schizophrenia, one that had been reported to relieve symptoms of stuttering. It did nothing for my speech, and the side effects were devastating.

During my high school years I began working professionally as pianist. I wasn't yet quite old enough to legally play in nightclubs, but I grew a mustache (and later a beard), so that club managers would think I was older than I really was.

(Today, in sharp contrast, I like to look younger than I am – not older!) I discovered that for a person who stutters, the worst aspect of being

a nightclub pianist is calling the managers of clubs to keep the flow of work coming.

As a high school junior, at the age of 17, I finally found a therapy that had some value (in a limited way). Under a speech pathologist, using techniques based on Charles Van Riper's writings, I was able to substantially reduce the length of my blocks – which had been recorded and measured up to 45 seconds long. I was still blocking on most words, but now I was practicing to release blocks with reduced tension rather than force them out with more pushing.

In 1972 I began my elongated university student career at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, my hometown. After a while, I decided to double major in music (with an emphasis in composition) and mathematics (with an emphasis in mathematical logic).

Meanwhile my nightclub piano career really took off, and I was often playing out five or six nights a week, in addition to being a full-time student with two majors. I was incredibly busy – and most of the time sleep-deprived!

I also began to compose pieces in a serious avant-garde style, and once in a while found a way to present them publicly. One of my undergraduate works, a Quartet for Flute, Reader, Piano, and Deck of Cards, was the first chamber piece of a Clark student to receive a university-funded professional performance.

But speech remained difficult, and it wasn't easy to meet new people and make friends on campus. I continued with speech therapy at another local college (Worcester State College). A speech pathologist, who also stuttered himself, was able to elicit from me – at around age 20 - the reluctant admission that I really had no close friends to speak of. (I used to have a number of friends while in public school, but at college now I knew few people.)

My speech pathologist advised me to get myself out there, throw myself into social situations, introduce myself to people, and meet as many new people as I possibly could. Most importantly, this was to be done REGARDLESS of how I felt about it, regardless of how severe my stuttering happened to be, and regardless of how difficult it was for me to speak.

I followed his suggestion while on the Clark campus. Soon I was making close friends, and was astonished to discover that most people really didn't care if I wasn't a fluent person. Before long I even had a girlfriend (and there would be quite a few more over the next quarter-century before I finally married). A number of the people I met during that social breaking-out period are still close friends of mine today, some 40 years later.

My speech remained lousy, but my social life was now blossoming, dis-fluent speech and all. I was talking and stuttering, but I was having a good time.

As a college senior at age 21, I had my first experiences with a fluency therapy program, the first of four fluency shaping programs I would become involved with over the years. A speech pathologist and one of her students at Worcester State College tried an experimental program with me. (Many years later I discovered that this was based on GILCU [Gradual Increase in Length and Complexity of Utterance] as devised by Dr. Bruce Ryan of California.)

I worked through a series of commands to be fluent, first on individual words, then phrases, then sentences, then gradually to extended conversations. I'll always remember the ecstatic feeling of my first-ever fluent conversation outside of a therapy room, with a friend over the telephone in November 1975.

I developed mysterious “fluency feelings”, perhaps a form of self-hypnosis, during which I knew I would not stutter at all. Within a few

months, about a third of my conversations were totally fluent, and another third had sharply reduced disfluency. I believed that improvements would continue to occur at the same dizzying pace, and that soon my stuttering problem would be gone forever.

But alas – this did not happen. Some months later all my fluent situations started collapsing, and before long I was back where I started. This pattern – tremendously increased fluency for an extended period, and then collapse back into severe disfluency – would repeat itself an endless number of times over the next 25 years.

In 1976 I graduated from Clark University, and moved on to the University of Chicago for graduate studies – eventually doctoral studies – in music composition. I became immersed thoroughly in the world of music, composing works and performing in contemporary concerts. I lived at the International House of Chicago, a fantastic place that I loved, which housed 500 graduate and professional school students from 70 different countries around the world.

A year after I arrived in Chicago the I-House hired me as Concert Director, and for the next five years I organized a concert series, bringing hundreds of campus and community musicians to the I-House to perform in a variety of concerts. Of course I often booked myself too as pianist and composer.

I spent some seven years in Chicago during the late 1970's and early 1980's. While there I developed my own jazz style, and became a performing jazz pianist. I also branched off into the world of experimental music, and developed a number of original notational systems to express my musical thoughts.

I collaborated with other musicians to produce works such as «Music for Keyboard & Strings (& Things)» for two pianists on one grand piano (one playing keyboard, the other playing piano strings).

But again, there were the usual problems with speech – and also *unusual* problems with speech. When I first arrived in Chicago, I experienced one of the most devastating speech collapses of my life. Every sentence was extremely tough. I was now a thousand miles away from everyone who I had known in my life, and it was virtually impossible to meet people, since it was virtually impossible to speak. (I should mention that this was long before the Internet, and when long-distance calls to another part of the country were incredibly expensive.)

But slowly I began to adjust, and before long my blocking eased enough for me to start making new friends – a process which accelerated rapidly once it began.

Not long after I began my graduate studies, a faculty composer called me into his office. His name was Ralph, and anyone familiar with the Chicago music scene of that era knows exactly who I'm talking about. He told me that the Department chairman asked him to have a talk with me. Lacing his speaking with numerous obscenities (which was his custom), he asked me what in the hell I was doing there, with my speech being the way it was.

Didn't I realize there was nothing one could do to make a living from composition except to teach?

Didn't I realize that it was impossible for me to teach anyone anything since I could hardly speak at all, and that I couldn't even say my own damn name, for cryin' out loud?

What in the hell was I there for? (I've sanitized this rant extensively.)

I was so shocked that I didn't know what to say in response. In fact I have no recollection of what I responded, or even if I could say anything at all.

But despite – or perhaps stubbornly because of – Ralph's rantings, I stayed the course.

Interestingly, five years later, I indeed proved Ralph wrong. The U. Of Chicago Music Department hired me to teach an advanced music theory course that involved a branch of higher mathematics, a course that none of its faculty members had the math background to teach. I stuttered, but I still taught.

In 1977 I tried two different fluency shaping programs, neither one of which resulted in long-term benefits.

At the University of Chicago I tried an expensive program run by the Psychology Department, devised by Dr. Israel Goldiamond. (The payments were deceptively called “voluntary donations”, which effectively ruled out any health insurance coverage.) I learned a simple fluent pattern of speech, based on breathing and phrasing.

The clinicians were of the even more simplistic opinion that once someone learned their fluency pattern inside the clinic, it could then be applied in all other situations. And if it wasn't so applied, the reason must be that the client CHOSE to stutter rather than using the pattern, due to some benefit the person was receiving from stuttering.

Utter nonsense! I had immense trouble applying their speech pattern in the outside world, and I certainly knew I was NOT choosing to stutter, nor was I receiving any benefit from stuttering. The clinic spent hours with me trying to figure out what was the alleged deep-seated reason for my “wanting” to stutter in so many situations. This one was a complete waste of time and money.

Later in the year I spent an expensive week of therapy with Dr. Martin Schwartz in Manhattan, who famously claimed to have found the

long-elusive cause of stuttering (locking of the vocal cords), and devised an airflow method meant to eliminate stuttering entirely for a lifetime. [In reality, locking of the vocal cords is only one of many aspects of stuttering, and various airflow methods have been around for centuries.]

He told me and two other clients that we were “pieces of cake” - it would be very easy to end our stuttering forever. Indeed within three minutes we were all speaking fluently inside the clinic, using his rather simple airflow technique. But when it came time to apply the technique in the outside world, I just couldn't do it.

After that week in August I headed back to Massachusetts not very fluent. We were told to follow a series of practice exercises, and send tapes of these weekly to Schwartz's office for evaluation. I followed the exercises diligently for a number of months, sending in the tapes as requested. I started having some success with the flow, and soon I could speak with airflow fluency in about a third of my situations. But with other situations I was having much difficulty.

Meanwhile the clinician working under Schwartz evaluating my tapes was praising me effusively for my «excellent» technique, based on my recorded practice exercises. But those exercises didn't reflect the problems I was encountering with the technique in real life. Eventually my successes just fell apart, and one more technique was gone from my life.

After that experience, I waited seven years to try again with another fluency program. It was now 1984, and I was 30 years old. I became a client of the Precision Fluency Shaping Program of the Hollins Communications Research Institute, Roanoke, Virginia. This was an intensive three-week program of reconstructing speech, based on learning specific «targets» (muscle movement patterns).

The main targets were diaphragmatic breathing, gentle onsets, a

contouring of loudness, and stabilized stretched sounds, and these were learned first by slowing speech to a drawl of two-second syllables, and then gradually building speed to a slow-normal rate. I mastered the targets quite well inside the clinic, but at first had great difficulties applying them in the outside world.

However, I practiced diligently for about an hour a day upon my return to Massachusetts, beginning each session with the breathing target alone, then adding sounds and words with other targets. After practicing alone, I then entered speaking situations, either in person or on the phone, to carefully monitor the targets in conversation.

All this diligence paid off. Three months after I returned from the program, in March 1985, for the first time in my life I was FLUENT EVERYWHERE! What an incredible feeling that was! This was it! My stuttering was gone – totally!!

Completely!

FINALLY!!

I continued to practice intensively for a while, but not quite as diligently as before. I was already fluent – everywhere! This was the new me! I made it! I was positive I would never stutter again. An hour of practice a day just didn't seem necessary any more. I still practiced at times, but no longer daily, and wasn't quite as sharp in focusing on targets as I had been.

Four months later I attended a reunion at Hollins, very confident in my new fluent speaking skills. I was still fluent. But my clinician warned me there was trouble ahead – my targets had become “sloppy”. She was right. A month later my speech fell apart. My severe disfluency returned. It was back to the drawing board once again.

I returned to Hollins for a one-week refresher. Again my great fluency

returned, everywhere. I returned to practicing an hour a day, and maintained my fluency well. But it wasn't always possible to spend an hour a day, and whenever my practice slacked off, my fluency did as well. I had to keep very intensively focused to keep my targets sharp. It was all very hard to maintain. A few months after the refresher, my speech collapsed again.

Meanwhile, by a stroke of luck, my clinician moved to the Boston area, only an hour's drive from my hometown of Worcester. I saw her weekly for a period, and my fluency returned with practice. But when I slacked off in intensive practice, my fluency did too. It was all very exasperating.

In 1988 I tried a one-week refresher at a different fluency shaping clinic (but still essentially the same program), run by Ross Barrett at the Eastern Virginia Medical Center in Norfolk. Ross is a person who stutters, and a master at using Precision Fluency targets. His therapy incorporates his personal advice for target use based on his own experiences, and is therefore a bit different from Hollins.

I continued to have similar experiences, enjoying fluency for substantial periods of time as long as I intensively practiced. But I just couldn't maintain consistent target fluency for more than several months at a time – I just wasn't able to maintain the long-term intensity needed to make the fluency last.

I returned again and again to Ross's clinic over the next three years for periodic refreshers, always with the same results. I always maintained great fluency for a period of time, but I just couldn't make the thing last. It was very frustrating. Daily intensive practice and intensive focusing and monitoring all the time was required to maintain the target fluency. Nothing came automatic. Hollins had always told us that eventually the targets would become automatic. But that never really happened with me.

Enormous efforts were required to sustain fluent speech. And it was exasperating to speak with total fluency with someone one day, and severe disfluency with the same person another day. I didn't like to have to explain these odd occurrences.

During the 1990's I organized many Precision Fluency refreshers on my own with friends in New England who also needed them. Each time produced similar results – great fluency for a while, and always a collapse sooner or later.

I also tried various fluency devices in the 1990's.

I purchased a Fluency Master in 1991, a wearable ear-level device invented at Hollins that amplifies internal vocal tone. For the first six weeks I was very fluent. Then disfluencies started creeping back into my speech little by little. Finally as disfluencies increased in frequency and severity, I realized the Master was no longer helping me in any way, and took it off for good.

I had much greater success with Delayed Auditory Feedback telephone attachment devices produced by Casa Futura Technologies. I used these for about five years, and they greatly enhanced the fluency of my speech on a landline phone.

Meanwhile I had become deeply involved in the stuttering self-help movement, beginning with my first attendance of a National Stuttering Project meeting in Marlboro, Massachusetts, in October 1985. I soon became active in multiple stuttering self-help groups in Massachusetts, attended regional self-help gatherings, along with 15 straight annual conventions of what is now the (U.S.) National Stuttering Association – traveling to San Francisco, Houston, Philadelphia, Anaheim, Dallas, Washington, Cleveland, Denver, San Diego, Buffalo, Atlanta, Seattle, and Chicago. I was also active in retreats and symposia of the U.S. Speak Easy association.

In addition I became very active in Toastmasters, a public speaking organization, first joining Central Toastmasters of Worcester in 1992.

Through this organization I discovered a side of myself that I never knew existed before. Nearly each week for a period of eight years, I presented a speech to audiences usually ranging from 20 to 40 people, sometimes prepared speeches, and sometimes short impromptu talks on a topic assigned seconds before the presentation.

I held most of the club offices, including President; won numerous awards, and competed in local speech contests. At times I was fluent (especially in prepared speeches that I had practiced extensively), and at times disfluent, but the experience was invaluable.

After leaving Chicago in 1984, I worked for a while as a computer programmer for a law firm, and then in 1988 returned to graduate school – this time in a master's program at Emerson College, Boston, to study speech-language pathology (with a special research emphasis in fluency disorders). I completed my graduate coursework and clinical work by 1993, but had great difficulties in finding the required Clinical Fellowship position – due, I suspect, to my severe stuttering during interviews.

In the later 1990's I was active in various aspects of the speech pathology field, including special needs tutoring, disability advocacy, and fluency group therapy. I held office for several years as a member of a local disabilities advisory commission.

At the end of the 1990's my life took a new unexpected turn, one that was absolutely amazing and wonderful. It was something I could never have dreamed up.

In December 1999 I placed a small ad about myself on a new stuttering-related website set up by a friend.

A fluent Norwegian woman with mysterious long-time interests in the problem of stuttering noticed it and wrote to me on January 15, 2000. (By the miracle of cyberspace and time zones I read the letter the day before she wrote it.)

I waited a week before answering (I didn't immediately recognize my future wife), but once I did, we started writing each other daily E-mails. These grew in length and intensity, and very soon a cyber-romance was developing.

On April 28 Liv flew to the U.S. to meet me. Exactly one week later we were engaged.

Four months later I moved to Norway, stepping foot in Europe for the first time. Ten days later – on September 22, 2000 - we married in a civil ceremony in Bergen, and my 46-year bachelorhood came to an end.

I am deeply in love with my new life, my wife, and this beautiful magnificent country of Norway. I have three adult stepchildren, three step-grandchildren, and a foster “weekend daughter” with special needs.

I've worked in social services for special needs since 2001. Also I've occasionally presented musical works of mine at community events. Seventeen (17) of my music pieces can now be heard on YouTube.

Not long after moving to Norway I decided to finally pull the plug on Precision Fluency.

Enough is enough.

I'm tired of all those enormous efforts, and all those years of exasperation, all those ups and downs of fluent periods and relapses, all that intensive practicing and focusing, trying desperately to

become a Fluent Person year after year after year. It's time now to enjoy life and settle back. If I happen not to be the most fluent person in the world, well so what? Having reached the age of 60, I am content to accept myself just as I am.

We continue to be very active in the stuttering self-help movement, both nationally and internationally. We attended Nordic regional conventions in Iceland in 2004 and 2014, the World Congress for People Who Stutter in the Netherlands in 2013, and national gatherings of the Norwegian association (NIFS) nearly every year.

In the current millennium, I'm no longer pursuing a dream of Fluency of Speech. Instead it's a dream of Fluency of Life. And guess what? Dreams do indeed come true!