



**FREEDOM  
OF  
SPEECH,  
HOW I OVERCAME  
STUTTERING**

**Tim Mackensey**

# Freedom of Speech: How I Overcame Stuttering

Tim Mackesey, SLP

## **FREEDOM OF SPEECH; HOW I OVERCAME STUTTERING**

### **Boca**

It's the second week of my sophomore year in a college accounting class in Boca Raton, Florida, and I'm about to relive my worst nightmare. My professor has just announced that we will go down the rows of seats one after another taking turns reading the homework questions and giving our answer. I was in total panic. All my past memories of and embarrassment for reading aloud in class, from childhood to now, were all a cumulative horror.

The worst fear of my life was in front of me right now. I had to read. I could not leave the room. For many years I used to leave the room saying I had to go to the bathroom. As a result of fear, I would stutter while asking to flee. Here I was feeling like a naked, armorless knight cornered by a fire-breathing dragon.

I began to stutter on nearly every word. I was suffocating as my larynx tightened, and I created massive speech blocks. I noticed some of my classmates turned with an astonished look, as they had never heard me speak. They were probably very surprised. I had stayed silent in the class before that moment.

I left the class that day feeling defeated. I went to the admissions office and dropped the class. I lost a percentage of my tuition, but I gained leverage on myself to finally begin changing. That was it. I could not go on like this anymore.

Later that day I was in my room alone. I was reading aloud the very same text I had read earlier in class. I read totally fluently and totally at ease. I thought I sounded like a news correspondent, or actor. My voice was rich, my chest was relaxed, my tongue moved from sound to sound and syllable to syllable with ease and fluency. Was I hallucinating or was I really capable of speaking this way? I was in a different identity at the moment. This "alone identity" did not expect or know how to stutter. Then I got the idea to record myself. I went to push the record button, started reading it,

and immediately started stuttering. I turned off the machine in disgust. I can reflect back and make an association to telephone answering machines at the time. You see, for about a decade I had hung up instead of leaving messages on answering machines. Caller ID was not born yet. At the time, all I knew was that I was doing something to sabotage my speech. I believed that because I could speak with total ease in fluency when alone, that I was created perfectly by God. At that moment the pain was so great that I finally had leverage. I would reach my goal of effortless, block-free speech if it killed me.

**“The journey begins within and it ends within.” – Sufi**

At that time in my life, age 19, I lived with what Joseph Sheehan called the “giant in chains complex.” Like the giant in Gulliver’s Travels pinned to the ground by the tiny Lilliputians, I felt shackled by my stuttering. I blamed everything on my stuttering. For instance, the manager at the exclusive restaurant I was working had offered me a promotion from busboy to waiter on several occasions. I made up illogical excuses and deferred promotions each time. I would’ve gone from \$50 a night in tips to about \$200. Again, pain was applied to my stutter. I wasn’t dating much because I wouldn’t call any of the women I met. Not calling women was self-induced torture.

I have learned that when people finally take action they are either motivated by pain or pleasure; the pain of continuing to struggle as they are or the perceived pleasure of overcoming their obstacle. Like the proverbial mule that starves between two haystacks, I had been immobilized by indecision.

I had refused speech therapy for many years. I was caught in the middle, suffering but not taking action. Ironically, it was in Boca, meaning “mouth” in Spanish, where I finally developed enough pain that I took action. Raton means “rat” in Spanish. Up until then, I felt I had a rodent living in my brain and in my mouth. **“Timmy, you stutter!”**

Until second grade I had no idea there was anything different about my speech. I was a little blond hair, blue-eyed boy running through life. One day in elementary school we were planting seeds into little cups with dirt in them. Apparently I stuttered. My teacher took me by the wrist, led me into the hallway, closed the door, and in the privacy of the hallway looked down at me and said: “Timmy you stutter!” She had a look of concern and urgency on her face. I had never heard the word stutter before, but I knew

it had to be bad based on her facial expressions and the inherent need to take me into the hallway to deliver the news.

I became her project. She began pushing me to talk more than the other children did. She assigned me the lead in a play called *The Lincoln Pennies*. I recall standing on the stage one day in our small auditorium and stuttering in front of all the parents of the children—including my mother. My teacher had good intentions. She wanted to help me.

She, and anyone else I used to blame for my feelings about stuttering, have been completely forgiven — a crucial step towards healing. It was not her fault that I stuttered. There is a family history of stuttering on my paternal side. Even though my family does not recall any stuttering prior to that, maybe I had some age appropriate disfluency.

Either way, it is of no benefit to look back. Whatever this problem was that I had with my speech, it was apparently significant to others. I recall a very brief enrollment in speech therapy that was held in a utility closet at my elementary school. There was Tim, a mop, a bucket, some toys, and my speech teacher. I was discharged from speech therapy after a short while. Earlier, in first grade, I loved being singled out for my accomplishments. Apparently my handwriting was good for my age.

I was often asked to come to the front of the room and write on the chalkboard. Expressing myself brought me great pride. In third, fourth, and fifth grade I gradually began “acting out” more in classes. I chose to be a prankster and instigator as a form of expression. My stuttering remained about the same for the duration of elementary school.

I had several situations of blatant teasing and taunting in elementary school. One girl in particular was a frequent pain to me. After seeing how much she could anger me, she recruited some friends and choreographed a skit in which they put their hands on their hips, move from side to side and called me “stutter butt” in unison.

One day I walked out of a class into the hallway and was greeted by them with their new dance routine. A number of people asked why I stuttered or imitated it. In hindsight, it is clear to me that my reaction to these experiences are the reasons why I started programming myself to prevent stuttering. Many years later I would learn Charles Van Riper’s famous

quote: "Stuttering is everything we do trying not to stutter."

### **Middle School**

The first day of homeroom in sixth grade we sat in a circle and introduced ourselves. Across from me sat what I thought was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. After spying her at orientation that summer, I thought I hit the lottery to have her in my homeroom. We were told to say our name and what we did the previous summer. I had been trying to flirt with her using my eyes. As my turn approached, I became very anxious and anticipated stuttering.

When I started to stutter, she looked down, and when she looked back up at me, she had an uncomfortable smile. She now knew my secret. I tried to pretend like it didn't happen. The number of events that involved stuttering—events that helped build my phobia around speaking—developed quickly in middle school. Reading out loud was my biggest nightmare until eighth grade. Oral presentations would soon be torturous, as well. The telephone became as painful as picking up a piece of hot charcoal.

Taking a principle or belief such as "I will protect myself from feeling embarrassment by avoiding speaking and using tricks"...and translating that into physical behaviors...is called mind-to-muscle, by cognitive psychologist [L. Michael Hall](#). This physicalizing of my speaking fear manifested itself in such behaviors as eye contact aversion, word changing, avoiding, sitting low in my seat in class, hanging up instead of leaving phone messages, inserting "uh um" as filler words before stuttering, using character voices, speaking on expiratory reserve and raising the pitch of my voice, jerking my head down during blocks, and so on. Over time, these avoidance strategies evolved into automatic and unconscious habits. Every behavior had a positive intention at first but ultimately, did not serve me well at all!

By middle school I had begun associating fear with specific words. For instance, the name of our street was Yellowstone Drive. If people asked me what street I lived on, I could remember past experiences of stuttering on the word and would go into a panic. I remember calling for pizza delivery to our home and when they would ask the name of the street go into choking speech blocks. I would later name this mechanism inside the brain that can scan into the past and/or forward for feared words a Linguistic Search Engine (LSE).

I was back in speech therapy now. I was being helped by a lovely woman with good intentions. I was being told that if I said five words, took a new breath, and said five more words, I would stay smooth and fluent. One day before a planned oral presentation in class, I came to her with great concern. I shared my fear of stuttering.

She said: “Don’t worry. Go in there, say your five words, take a breath, and five more words each breath and you’ll stay totally smooth.” I went to class that day, stood in front of the class, stuttered, and I was snickered at by several children. Speech therapy had lost credibility for me, and I convinced my parents to let me quit. They offered to take me to the local university clinic, but I refused. Little did I know that I would end up at that very clinic many years later to start exterminating the rats in my mouth and brain.

### **High School**

Speech-wise, high school was a nightmare. I taught myself a myriad of strategies to avoid stuttering. In the classroom, I sat low in my seat, attempting to hide from teachers. I faked sick on days when I was to give an oral presentation. I negotiated a “D” grade for not doing an oral report in one class. Would you believe the teacher let me and did not call my parents? I take full responsibility for my cowardly choice, and at the same time, wonder what would have happened if he had convinced me to face my dragon?

I asked some teachers to excuse me from reading aloud. I substituted words, and avoided words so frequently that when I got done saying something, I would often be asked “What did you say?” Then I would end up stuttering through what I had originally intended to say. A very inefficient and frustrating way to communicate.

I did my best to avoid making any phone calls for nearly a decade. I sabotaged dating. I would ask a girl to “go with me” but then never call her. Sending these mixed signals, such as being nice at school but never calling, made the relationships short-lived. Confiding that I stuttered and was uncomfortable calling may have taken care of the whole problem. But I assigned great shame to my stuttering. I began mind reading my listeners, creating toxic thoughts such as “What would her mother think if she heard me stutter?” Some of the names of these girls continued to be feared words later in life.

We belonged to a country club at the time. Golf was my escape. Being a member of the club, I was entitled to make a tee-time by simply picking up the phone. Instead, I would ride my bike about 10 miles, put my name on a waiting list in the pro shop, and wait up to two hours before playing with people I often did not know. I would see other kids my age organizing foursomes and playing together on a routine basis. This self-induced outcast role was very painful.

### **The University of Wisconsin**

Before going to Boca Raton I spent my freshman year at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. That year in the dormitory was a blur of drinking, stuttering, and learning that I did not know how to study. When drunk, I forgot about my stuttering and was more fluent—liquid fluency. My moving to Boca was intended to give me an opportunity to step away and reevaluate my life.

One of the first things I did upon returning to Madison in my third year of college was to go down to the speech and hearing clinic to inquire about speech therapy. The waiting list was more than a year. At the clinic I met Florence “Flo” Filley, the clinic supervisor. I felt that she could see into my soul— my stuttering soul, that is. I arranged a few private sessions with her before getting a phone call from the clinic.

Half way through my evaluation at the clinic, the graduate student said “Tim, we are not really hearing a lot of stuttering.” I knew this was a nice way of saying that I was changing words and avoiding too much. I replied, “Give me something to read.” When I started reading, the mask was off, and the monster came out of my mouth.

I had two semesters of speech therapy with graduate students at the clinic under the supervision of Flo. I started learning that I had some choices: I did not have to stutter the way I was stuttering, and I did not have to avoid the way I was avoiding. I made every appointment and was thirsty for knowledge. My covert avoidance was far from over though.

I recall praying in a church on campus. Between classes I would go in alone and cry in the front pew. I had initiated an inner turmoil by finally confronting my dragon—stuttering. It was breathing flames and daring me to raise my sword.

On speech “field trips” to a local shopping mall, my assignment was to stutter on purpose with store employees. When I did it, I would walk away from those sessions with a euphoric tingling in my stomach, knowing I just did what I feared the most. In retrospect, that very area around my abdomen I would later learn was ground zero for my anticipatory anxiety that precedes stuttering.

I took a job as a taxi driver. This proved to be one of the most powerful experiences of my life. Here I had the challenge of speaking to strangers in my cab and talking into the radio. I had established a hierarchy of fearful scenarios in my cab. Some of the worst speech blocks I have ever had were heard in the dispatch office of the taxi company as well as other drivers and employees. I started to fear saying certain street names and common pick up points. After several severe blocks on “hound,” I changed the word Greyhound into Graydog. Thinking it was cute, other drivers and dispatch adopted this new term for Greyhound. If people were in the car to hear me, I stuttered even worse into the radio.

I learned that changing street names was a problem. Henry Street is a major artery through the campus. One day I was called to give my location. I gave the name of an adjoining street to avoid saying the dreaded Henry; a wicked block-inducing word. Another driver passed me on Henry and when he heard me give a different street name he reported me for attempting to steal fares. In hindsight, I did not know where the fare was going to, hence I had no advantage in lying and reporting that I was about a block away from my actual location. Nevertheless, I was being dishonest with myself.

One day I was faced with the moment of truth. I had picked up three attractive sorority girls on Henry Street. In their presence I was to call in and report that I was picking up a fare on Henry Street and where I was going as a final destination. In speech therapy I had been practicing the traditional strategies of easy onsets. Easy onsets are done when initiating a word beginning with a vowel using soft, prolonged voicing.

It was show time! I decided that I was going to say it. I did my best to calm my racing mind and my panicked chest enough to use an easy onset into Henry. Little did these girls know that I equated the upcoming feat with making a 4 ft. putt to win the U.S. Open golf tournament in front of several million television viewers.

I started the word by emitting air through my larynx and stretching the /h/ sound for a couple seconds. When Henry Street came out of my mouth without a stutter, I wanted to park the car and begin a Mardi Gras-sized street party. That moment changed my life.

I could not wait to tell the folks at my next speech therapy session. That moment saying Henry Street without a stutter put me on the road to change. It showed me that I could control the monster in my mouth. If I was the giant in chains, then I had just started to break some of the shackles. Flo gave me a copy of an article called “And the Stuttering Just Dies” that was written by a man named Jack Menear who had overcome stuttering. A belief was born: the belief that others have overcome stuttering. Stories like this are metaphors that drove my determination.

All the time I was in speech therapy on campus I was concealing it from all but a few people. When friends saw me coming out of the building, they might inquire what class I was taking in that building, a building they were unfamiliar with. I would lie and say that I was using the restroom in that building. At one point, I had asked my clinician if she would use a plain envelope when sending me progress reports instead of stationery with a clinic address. Fortunately, they refused.

Nearing graduation in the spring of 1987, the student clinicians asked me when I thought I would be done working to improve my speech. I replied: “This May.” God is that funny now! Knowing of my plans for moving to Atlanta, they recommended I pursue speech therapy when I got there. I wonder if the graduate students who helped me will ever read this. I hope they do. People with communication disorders worldwide can thank the professors and graduate clinicians who make speech therapy affordable to so many at university-based clinics.

### **Checking In**

I moved to Atlanta in spring of 1987 with \$150. By day I was working as a laborer for Manpower— the temporary agency. I was earning about \$9 per hour carrying sheet rock. I was also accepted into a training program for insurance salesman that met in the evenings. The insurance training program required us to cold-call prospects and develop a list of 500 contacts. I was hung up on chronically word substituting or silently blocking during those calls. It felt like too big a challenge, and I dropped out of the program.

But I kept pushing. I took a job at the front desk of a major convention hotel in downtown Atlanta. I had to check in customers, answer the phone, and call guests in their room. I had to speak to supervisors, go to training meetings and speak, and take on other challenges. I was definitely facing the dragon; in fact, I'd call it total immersion.

Once again I developed my personal list of feared situations. Answering the assistant manager's private line was one of them. We were ordered to answer it within the first two rings and say: "Assistant manager's line, this is Tim speaking. May I help you?" After a few massive blocks on the words "assistant" and "manager" I began avoiding. I would act busy and let others answer the phone, but there were some situations, for example when the assistant manager was standing right there, when I would have to answer. I would turn away so he or she would not hear me and create a block. Several times, guests who were already irate about something and calling to complain would remark by saying: "Easy for you to say," or scoff at me in their moment of no patience.

When I interviewed for a management training position at the hotel, my supervisor asked if I could handle it with my stuttering. After blushing, I said yes. You see, I only spoken of my stuttering problem with a select few people, yet everyone knew. I moved on to manage 120 people before resigning to attend graduate school. Overall, it was another pivotal and rewarding sparring match with my dragon. I actually chose to do what I feared the most: phone use, conversations, introductions, oral presentations, and so on. I was desensitizing myself to stuttering and earning new confidence.

Later I would learn the process by which I would "grow a word fear." It helped me understand how I acquired feared words as a child; many still provoked anxiety as an adult at this stage of my recovery. In college and early careers, words such Henry Street, manager, and others entered my daily vocabulary.

When I started stuttering on those words I would remember them using a phenomenon known as somatic memory. My brain filed them away as feared words. By attaching meaning and emotion to a stuttering event, I would remember it vividly. I would replay the moments in the cinema of my mind: hearing, feeling, and seeing the moments of stuttering. When encountering those words in the future I would feel anticipation in my stomach—a sort of panic sensation like the fight or flight response—and

then avoid or speed up and stutter.

### **Self-Help**

At this stage of my recovery, I was devouring materials from stuttering textbooks and from the Stuttering Foundation of America. I also organized the Atlanta chapter of the National Stuttering Association and served as its president for several years. Seeing successful business people who stutter helped to minimize my fear of gainful employment in the future. Opening up, talking about stuttering, and removing avoidance was essential to my recovery.

### **Toastmasters**

Shortly after arriving in Atlanta, I decided to confront my biggest fear—public speaking. From eighth grade through undergraduate school, I had escaped, avoided, dropped classes, switched professors, and done everything else within my power to avoid speaking in front of a group. And I had been 100% successful.

Then one day in a local paper I found an advertisement for Toastmasters. The nearest chapter was in the president's boardroom of a local university. I knew nothing of the format for a meeting. I arrived wearing jeans and a hockey jersey. Walking in late, I entered a room with wooden paneled walls and oil paintings. Everyone else was a professional and dressed in their work attire. I later learned most of them were realtors, attorneys, and sales people.

At the end of the meeting, I was asked to stand, introduce myself, and share why I was there that evening. The hounds had me in the tree, but this time I was going to bark out the words. The room started spinning, and I thought I was going to vomit. As I stood, I kept my vow and told everyone that I stuttered and that I wanted to improve my speech. I stuttered wildly through my introduction. After the meeting, several people came up, shook my hand, and told me they would support me.

I continued in Toastmasters for five years. There were breaks as I moved around in Atlanta and joined new club's closer to my dwellings. At the first meeting of each new club I joined, I would introduce myself and tell them I stuttered. I knew by disclosing that fact I was less prone to anxiety and avoidance behaviors. I earned two CTM degrees (Competent Toastmaster), an ATM (Able Toastmaster), and an ATM bronze. I competed in some local speech competitions and won many ribbons at the nightly meetings. I have

a first-place trophy from a humorous speech contest.

When I first started Toastmasters, I was guilty of black and white thinking. After giving a speech I would judge my performance solely on how much I stuttered. If I had three or four significant stutters in a five-minute talk, I would beat myself up. It was a roller coaster the first year. Well-meaning people would give me feedback on my stuttering. They might say something like: “Tim, it’s not that bad. Just relax.”

They had good intentions and wanted to help me, but because I was not open enough about the stuttering, I did not give them direction and guidance. It’s critical that the person who stutters “sets the frames (i.e.: framework)” for his stuttering. This means letting people know how to talk about it, when to talk about it, and anything else important to the person who stutters.

Communication is like dancing a waltz. Sometimes you have to ask your partner not to step on your toes. If you try to conceal your stuttering and act self-conscious about it, your dance partner may step on your toes without realizing it. Averting eye contact, substituting words, saying “um,” and other avoidances can discourage you from continuing the waltz.

I eventually got to where I transformed anticipation and fear into adrenaline. I would sit through the meeting eagerly waiting my turn to give a prepared speech. I volunteered at every meeting to do table topics or evaluate a speech. My black and white thinking started developing shades of gray. I was enjoying personal growth. Failure was replaced with feedback. If I slipped, I got right back up.

Speed skater Dan Jansen is a role model for me. In his late teens, after training since a child for the Olympics, he fell in Albertville, France. Four years later at the next Olympics, he learned his sister died moments before his race and fell again. Four more years of training, and his final Olympics, he fell during the race he was all but guaranteed of winning the gold. He had one more chance—the 1,000 meter race.

Dan was a distant third in the rankings for the 1,000. His sports psychologist told him to walk around saying “I love the 1,000.” His teammates and family were asked to listen and confirm he was saying it. In his third Olympics and his final race, in an event where he was not favored, he won the gold medal. You may remember someone passing his

baby to him to carry during a victory lap.

What was more important to him than falling? How could Dan keep getting up? How could he silence thoughts like “Others judge you...you’re a choker...you’ll never win.” His goal—the gold medal and personal redemption—must have motivated him to endure all the heartbreaks. In 1983, in Boca Raton, Florida, I saw my own freedom of speech as the gold medal I simply had to have.

### **Graduate School**

“When the objective is clear enough, there are no obstacles” -Napoleon Hill  
I think I originally entered graduate school with the intention of learning to slay my stuttering dragon. I made an unreasonable goal of curing my stutter during graduate school. I was open about it, and all my classmates knew I stuttered.

Going into speech-language pathology (SLP) as a person who stutters has the potential to introduce a number of unique frames of thinking. Some of my “frames” were: “What will people think about a stuttering SLP?” “I must overcome it by the end of graduate school!” “How will my supervisors evaluate me in the clinic if I stutter with a client?” As a graduate student in the speech and hearing clinic we performed therapy while supervisors and parents observed through a two-way mirror. I quickly learned what it might be like to be a goldfish in a fishbowl. I was very self-conscious of the possibility of stuttering in front of the parents of the children I treated. It was the meaning and significance that I gave stuttering that was at the core of the problem.

I thought stuttering took away from my credibility. It was always a challenge for me to say “speech pathology” and “speech therapy” as I feared stuttering on those very words. That was because I was “mind reading.”

Mind reading is presuming to know the reaction of the listener. Later, I realized the humor of introducing myself as a speech pathologist specializing in stuttering while I stuttered during it. Again, it came down to whether I personalized stuttering, whether it permeated my identity, whether I thought it took away from me as a person, and whether I would have less credibility if I kept stuttering.

During graduate school in 1991, I served as a clinician at the Successful

Stuttering Management Program (SSMP) in Washington State. My eyes were opened to the power of directly confronting the stuttering. Under the supervision of Dorvan Breitenfeldt, Ph.D., the clinicians and the people who stuttered went out on the campus, telling people they stuttered (advertising), and interviewed these individuals, asking them what they thought about stuttering. Phone calls, speaking into a mirror, and trips to a shopping mall to interview people were all part of the program. One of the most important things I learned was that listeners did not react to my stuttering as I presumed they did. I learned to stutter on purpose. I learned to push myself further into speaking situations. The semantic meaning that I gave stuttering was further changing. By the time I left SSMP, I had taken several more swipes at my dragon.

### **Lunch with Dean Williams**

In 1991 in Knoxville, Tennessee I had the rare pleasure of having lunch with the late Dean Williams, a pioneer in stuttering therapy and a person who stuttered. With several other influential people sitting around, I built up my courage to ask him point blank, “What do you believe is the secret to overcoming stuttering?” He replied: “I’d want to know what I did when I stuttered.” At the time I felt almost cheated by the brief answer. However, as I drove back to Atlanta the next day, it dawned on me how profound his reply was. I still smile when I think how accurate he was. I am sure he was referring to whether I knew what I did before, during, and after the stutter. What thoughts and feelings preceded the stutter, what did I do during the stutter, and how did I reflect back on the blocks I experienced.

### **The hospitals**

My first position as a licensed speech pathologist began in 1992. I functioned as an acute care SLP, going up into patients’ rooms. I was also on a stroke team with other therapists, nurses, dietitians, and doctors. Reflecting back, this was also a critical period on my time-line.

The meaning I gave to being an SLP who stutters manifested in situational stuttering. My percentage of fluency and how I presented myself was much improved from when I began graduate school. Toastmasters and the SSMP were a big part of it. However, I still had specific speaking situations in which I consistently felt anxiety and stuttered.

One situation that speaks volumes about my status at that time was my level of comfort and fluency when at the bedside talking to a patient and the patient’s family. When a nurse walked in the room I was more self-

conscious of my stuttering and, in turn, was more likely to block. Giving formal tests where I would have to read to the patient would trigger my stuttering, especially if the nurse were working in the room. This anxiety went right back to my experience of reading in middle school. The memory of those situations, especially the way I felt at the time (my somatic memory), still had enormous power to run my life.

Speaking to doctors brought out some of my worst stuttering. When they entered room, it was as though I were two people. If I had stuttered in front of that doctor before, I would remember that and get anxious. If I did not know the doctor, I would become anxious because I wanted to conceal the stuttering. Typically, I would have my worst stuttering when calling a doctor's office for orders to see a patient.

This, of course, was a combination of my timeline of phone avoidance combined with the meaning that I gave stuttering as a speech pathologist. (A "stuttering timeline" is similar to the type of timeline you see in a textbook that records historical events along a horizontal line.) I believed that if a physician heard me stutter, he or she would think less of me and would give me less credibility. Typically, my stuttering would be triggered by the memory of a specific phone call 20 years previously in which I stuttered. The embarrassment and shame I had attached to these early calls explained my ability to recall them so vividly.

It was those early remembered feelings—the somatic memories—that explained why I had so much anxiety in my stomach and chest before calling. It was as if I were experiencing those early crises all over again. I believed that leaving a voice mail was worse than talking to a live person. If I stuttered, they would have permanent history of it. So I would mind read and presume that what I thought they thought was the actual truth. I later learned that these were only my projections.

One time when calling a doctor's office and introducing myself to the receptionist I had a massive block on my name and the title "speech therapist." In response to my stuttering, the nurse started laughing. I said, "May I presume you laughed because I stuttered while announcing myself as a speech therapist? I happen to be a speech therapist who stutters." When she began to apologize, I assured her that I might laugh, too, in the same situation. Perhaps she had thought it was a prank call at first. Considering she was a member of the general public with little or no knowledge about stuttering, I can now see the potential humor of the

situation.

We started talking, and she told me her grandchild was starting to stutter. Using the internal mail in the hospital, I sent her materials from the Stuttering Foundation of America. We maintained a dialogue for a couple months as I continued to advise her and her daughter.

Her granddaughter benefited from my willingness to take a second perceptual position. What I mean by “second perceptual position” is that I considered what her experience might have been when I first called and stuttered. By considering the position of the listener, finding humor in it, and immediately forgiving her for laughing, I was able to turn the interchange into a win-win situation. Had I responded the way I traditionally did and ended the call with my tail between my legs, it would have been a loss, not just for the both of us, but for her grandchild as well.

One day I was talking to a neurologist with whom I had frequent interactions. As we sat at a nursing station he asked me why I had gotten into the field of speech pathology. He said I was the first male he had ever met who was an SLP. I told him that I stuttered and that I had gotten into the field to help myself and help others. He said, “You know, it seems to me I have heard you stutter a few times. And come to think of it, you are ideal for your job.

When you go to see my patients who have had a stroke and cannot speak, you bring a compassion that others might not have.” I remember that as being a very emotional moment. In fact, tears just welled in my eyes as I dictated that quote into my IBM voice recognition software.

That moment was like the proverbial hand slap to the forehead. In an instant, he reframed several years’ worth of illogical thinking about being an SLP who stutters. Once in awhile people will say something seemingly simple that will suddenly change your mind. It was something I knew but was refusing to believe because of my habit of mind reading. That moment has continued to have a profound impact on my life.

Another profoundly important moment on my recovery time line was when I was going through orientation at a hospital and was told I would have to page people on the intercom. That meant several hundred people would hear me speak at once. As toxic thoughts entered my mind, the dragon belched his nasty breath. I took a quick inventory of the mental “frames”

that controlled my thinking at that moment. They could be summarized as this: “If I stutter, people will ask who was that? Oh, it is the new speech pathologist stuttering. Who hired him? They’ll hire anyone!”

I knew I had to find a reason to page someone that very day. If not, I would develop a phobia. Even though I had no reference for an intercom in my life, I projected the fear based on past references of stuttering on telephones and at drive-through windows. I got ready to page respiratory therapy to a room I was working. My Linguistic Search Engine predicted I would stutter on “respiratory.” I felt panic. I decided to face the dragon head-on. I walked to the nursing station with a speaker directly above me, and several people sure to connect my voice and face to the intercom.

I looked right at a nurse and elongated the /r/ sound; getting the page out free of a stutter. It took great restraint to not do an end zone dance and spike the phone. A huge moment! My mental radar had picked up the toxic frames of thought, I faced the dragon, and slew it.

Over my first eight years as an SLP, I gradually improved my fluency and freedom of speech. In serving several hundred patients, only two times did a parent of the prospective client mention my residual stuttering on the phone during an initial contact as a reason why they would seek services elsewhere. I have lost track of the number of times parents of children who stutter and/or adults who stutter have cited my history as a reason why they chose to work with me. It was important to keep track of that ratio in my mind.

The phone was my last link in the chain. Sometimes I would go months at a time with relative ease introducing myself on the phone. Other times, the somatic memories of earlier catastrophes would fire up my anxiety, and I would really have to focus on my stuttering modification tools: easy onsets, light contexts, and pull-outs. They worked most of the time, but not always. During the recovery process, there are always times when the person’s anxiety is so overwhelming that his or her speech tools don’t work. This is why it’s necessary to develop strategies for running your mind as well as your speech.

### **Neuro-Linguistic Programming**

I first tumbled on an NLP book in 1995. As I read it, I found descriptions of therapeutic processes that looked applicable to stuttering therapy. They talked about concepts such as re-imprinting painful memories, visualizing

to prepare for future events, conversational reframing, learning how to relax in a matter of seconds, how to get into rapport with people, and how to manage your physical and mental state. I knew my stuttering was much more than simply a motor speech problem. There were too many inconsistencies in that theory. How could I be spontaneously fluent in so many contexts using no modification strategies at all? How did I “turn on my stuttering” consistently with certain people or in certain situations? How is it that specific words from childhood would still provoke a panic attack? NLP seemed to offer some of the answers.

NLP is an umbrella term that encompasses a myriad of therapeutic processes originating from the cognitive-behavioral sciences. The pioneers of speech pathology have utilized gestalt therapy, Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT), transactional analysis, Carl Rogers’ Rogerian-style counseling, reframing, and many other approaches. Drawing ideas from psychotherapy is not new to speech pathology, and desensitization to stuttering is absolutely critical to complete recovery.

After confirming the relevance of NLP processes to traditional speech pathology, I decided to earn my NLP practitioner certification. This was a 150 hour experiential, classroom process. The final weekend included an outdoor ropes course. Each activity on the ropes course was set up as a metaphor for change. We would identify an obstacle in our life—a thought or feeling. There was then a physical manifestation of that obstacle in the form of a challenge that we had to overcome. I started to change inside out. I began learning strategies to run my brain. All of this was applicable, not just to my own recovery process, but to my practice as well.

### **2001 to Now**

“It is by changing our inner thoughts that we change our outer behaviors.”-  
William James

By 2001, I had been using stuttering modification, desensitization, voluntary stuttering, and pushing myself into more speaking as my framework for recovery for 15 years. My stuttering had become so situational and context specific that I felt like it was just a matter of time before it was defeated. If I stayed focused on those last few targets, and figure them out, I would finally have spontaneity. I knew that closing the final loops would be difficult. Nevertheless, I knew there was no quitting now. As former Green Bay Packer football coach Vince Lombardi once said: “The harder you work, the harder it is to surrender.”

I started corresponding professionally with [Bob Bodenhamer](#), a trainer in NLP and [Neuro-Semantics®](#). Finally, I had found an authority on NLP who had a specific interest in helping people who stutter. He helped me identify specific therapeutic processes in NLP to eliminate the thought patterns that led to stuttering. He put me through these processes and then taught me how to do them.

As I continued to resolve my remaining stuttering I noticed that my stuttering seemed to follow a 1-2-3 sequence:

**1. Negative thoughts.** The circumstances leading up to a block usually began with a negative thought. After 15 years of hard work, my stuttering had become very context specific. I could pretty much name the people, places, and words I still stuttered on. The blocks were usually preceded by negative thoughts such as “I anticipate stuttering.” “I do not want to stutter with this person.” “This word is hard for me.”

**2. Anticipatory Anxiety.** This is also known as the General Arousal Syndrome or the fight-or-flight-response. My negative thoughts would instantly lead to anticipatory anxiety. When I anticipated stuttering, I always had a nervous sensation in my stomach that felt very much like panic. The level of panic was usually dependent on the situation.

**3. Choice Point.** Someone once said that “between a stimulus and a response is a choice.” In the past, once a thought about stuttering (#1) had created anticipatory anxiety (#2), I would do one of two things:

**a) Avoid:** use tricks like saying “um,” switch words, not raise my hand, and employ other strategies to try to not stutter. In this situation my intention was to protect myself from the pain of stuttering and more important, to shield myself from all the bad things that stuttering meant to me.

**b) Push and block:** this is the impulsivity that I had translated from mind into muscle. In a state of panic, to rid myself of my anxious feelings about stuttering, I would jump into a word and create some or all of my familiar stuttering symptoms (repetitions, blocks, facial contortions, eye contact aversion, etc.)

It is essential that a person who stutters slow down his mind and body so he or she can make different choices and practice new behaviors. This is called “interrupting the pattern” or “breaking state.” Thus, once I was in a moment of anxiety about stuttering, or actually stuttering, I had to find ways to interrupt this process.

Through traditional speech therapy I had learned to get myself out of a block by executing a “slide.” A slide is done by prolonging the first sound of the word with light contacts in the articulators and larynx. If I started to stutter, I would use a “pull-out.” A pull-out involves realizing the block,

stopping your speech completely, and then saying the word again with a slide. But when my anxiety was raging, my mind went numb, and these strategies would become difficult and sometimes impossible to use. The classic strategies did help me reduce the severity of my stuttering over a 15 year period, but I found that even when using slides and pull-outs, there was still a level of tension in my larynx, mouth, and abdomen. The amount of anxiousness about stuttering dictated this level of residual tension. And ironically, the more I would try to prevent stuttering, the more tension I created.

Previously, I had never paid much attention to the sensations in my abdomen. I didn't think they were significant. I always focused on managing my stuttering in the area between my larynx and mouth using slides and pull-outs. But now, I was also doing my best to desensitize myself as well. I was seeing the importance of digging deeper and understanding my anticipatory anxiety.

Since the feeling of anxiety in my abdomen was a messenger telling me to use the slides and pull-outs, I wondered what would happen if I could remove that very anxiety. It made sense that the thoughts and feelings I had about stuttering that caused the anxiety was the core of my problem. Could I learn to say the words without any anxiety, residual tension, and without having to resort to slides and pull-outs? That's when I started changing my objective, moving away from focusing on motor speech strategies to removing the process that created anxiety.

My new choice was to use a neuro-semantic technique to resolve the anticipatory anxiety. It is called "Drop-Down Through," and it helped me reframe my thoughts to eliminate the panic sensation in my stomach before initiating speech. Now, instead of focusing on a fluency technique such as the easy onset, I focused all my energy and attention on the release of the anxiety. When the Drop Down Through technique was done effectively, the word was uttered with no residual tension in the articulators. In the summer of 2002, I earned my master practitioner certification in NLP. This was a 14-day intensive course with Bob and L. Michael Hall.

### **What I learned**

Considering my family history of stuttering, perhaps I was predisposed to be at risk. However, I have learned what I believe to be the key contributing factors to my stuttering, and the necessary components needed to recovery. Here are some of the concepts, tools, and techniques

that I've found useful.

- **Somatic memory.** As mentioned earlier, this refers to the physical sensations associated with a past event—a kind of mental movie in which we can re-experience what a previous event actually felt like. Try it out. See if you can vividly recall a wonderful vacation or holiday. Notice the positive sensations. If it was a holiday at the beach, notice the warmth of the sun on your skin. Smell the salt air. Feel the sand under your feet. Thinking back on such pleasant moments will help you recall the good feelings associated with this earlier experience.

However, the reverse is also true. Recalling negative memories will trigger uncomfortable feelings. I started a list of specific situations, people, and words in which I anticipated stuttering. I clearly defined what these moments meant to me and identified the specific feeling patterns. For example, when I went to use the intercom at that hospital, even though I had never used one before, it brought back my phone phobia, which in turn, led me to feel like I would stutter. It also recalled my tendency to mind read what my listeners might think if I did stutter. My list of other feared situations included the telephone, reading aloud, oral presentations, specific girls names, my street name, my own name, and saying the word “stuttering.”

I began to see that if I sat in class “knowing” I was going to have to read aloud, my somatic memory would trigger the panic sensations associated with similar unpleasant experiences from the past. This is what inevitably led to my stuttering and blocking. My big question became—“What could I do about it?”

The good news is that negative memories can be edited and the emotion removed from them. There are a number of strategies that allow me to observe a past stuttering event, change and “reframe” the meaning I had assigned to it (i.e., embarrassment over teasing), and then alter the visual picture of the event. Once the meaning has changed and it is difficult to visualize the event anymore, the unconscious mind will not reflect back on these time-line moments. The only way I knew to anticipate stuttering on certain words, in specific situations, or people was to reflect backward with somatic memory.

Once my somatic memories of stuttering were edited and stopped showing in my “mental cinema” I experienced less of the panic sensations in the

specific situations I would consistently stutter. That allowed me to initiate speaking with ease and confidence.

- **Anchors.** An anchor is a specific memory that allows you to tap into the feelings and meanings of a previous experience. For example, think of a favorite song. You can go back and fully experience where, when, and with whom you heard it, how you felt, and so on. You can choose to replay the song to re-experience what you felt like back then. The song becomes an anchor to that earlier, positive mindset. Going back to re-experience a past feel-good event explains why we like to repeatedly play particular songs, albums and movies.

Through many uncomfortable speaking experiences, I began to see how I had developed a stuttering timeline with anchors to many fearful words and situations. Whenever I experienced one of these stuttering anchors, I would slip into my familiar panic state. For example, when the assistant manager's line rang at the hotel, I was instantly anchored to an earlier feared event, and I'd quickly slip into a state of panic.

On the other hand, if at the first sign of fear I could anchor myself to a positive experience from the past, I could short circuit that panic state and stop it from developing.

- **Time line.** Each situation in which I'd stuttered and endowed with embarrassment, shame, and frustration became another point on my stuttering time line. Eventually, this time line stretched over 20 years. Points on this time line were somatic memories and anchors for specific moments of stuttering, and they heavily influenced my present behaviors and choices.

For instance, how would I know to anticipate and avoid specific words or situations if not for previous references? Sometimes I would find myself drifting back and replaying past moments of stuttering or imagine that my stuttering was to blame for events that did not turn out as planned.

One thing that neuro-linguistic programming offered was an approach to time line re-imprinting. By going back and changing the meaning I gave to the stuttering that came up with I read aloud, and doing this all along the timeline, I eliminated the anticipatory anxiety that always preceded reading aloud. Today, it is very rewarding to read verbatim during an oral presentation or sit on the sofa with my children and read them stories without ever thinking about stuttering.

- **Linguistic Search Engine (LSE).** This refers to the mechanism in our brain that allows us to instantly identify a feared word. The LSE is like a forward-looking radar on a jet fighter that's flying low to the ground. It scans ahead for potential dangers so it can take evasive action. With stuttering, it allows us to reach ahead and instantly identify the feared word. For instance, when I moved to Atlanta from Wisconsin, if I was suddenly asked where I was from, my LSE will alert me to a feared word (Wisconsin). I would panic and say "up north" or go into a block. Many people have told me how they look ahead of the passage they have to read and identify specific words they fear stuttering on.

By re-imprinting our somatic memories of feared speaking situations and removing negative meaning from them, we find it less and less necessary to fire up our linguistic search engine. The only reason we remember the stuttered words in the first place was because we applied meaning to that past moment of stuttering. Thus, when the search engine is not running any more, we remain more grounded and fully in the present.

- **Reframing.** If stuttering events were emotionally neutral to us, would we recall stuttering and make choices to change words, look away, avoid, and the like? I think not. Anticipating stuttering, feeling panic, remembering specific words, sounds, speaking situations, and all other cognitive memories of past stuttering events are made possible only when we apply meaning (negative) to stuttering.

Alfred Korzybski, the developer of general semantics, said: "Human beings are a semantic class of life." What he means is that humans are programmed to endow their experiences with meaning. We do that by setting up frames-of-reference. Hence, it is essential to reframe the very meaning we have created for our stuttering. Remember how I thought that my stuttering meant having no credibility around doctors. That frame was what triggered the panic sensation and led to stuttering. Marcus Aurelius once said: "Men are not disturbed by things, but by their estimate of things." He meant the meaning we give things.

One part of the recovery process, then, is to reframe the meanings we give to the speech-related moments of our life — turning negatives to positives.

- **Breaking state.** I had to learn to identify when I was going into a stuttering state and break, or interrupt, that state. When I realized that I felt anticipation in my stomach prior to stuttering, it made sense to me to look into that and see what I could change. By using time-line therapy

techniques, reframing, the [Drop-Down Through](#) process, and other neuro-semantic and NLP processes, I was able to gradually dissolve the panic feeling that preceded stuttering. My speech flowed more and more spontaneously without ever having to resort to my old fluency modification techniques. I just talked without interruption.

### **Peeling back the layers of the onion**

In summary, it was essential that I re-imprint my time line—that is, reframe and revise the negative speech-related experiences covering many years—so that the memory of past stuttering disasters did not continue to cause anticipatory anxiety in my present life. Re-imprinting memories of stuttering erased many of the frames-of-reference they created for situations such as oral reading, telephone, and oral presentations.

Could Dean Williams have been planting this very seed in my brain in 1991 when he asked me if I wanted to know what I did when I stuttered? I like to think so. The evidence of my recovery is that I no longer think about stuttering nor do I rely on behavioral fluency strategies to produce modified fluency. I no longer even feel the sensation of anxiety in my stomach. I just talk.

At the time this article was written, March 2003, I have anticipated a stutter five times in the last six months. They were old references, old feared words that popped up in my linguistic search engine. One of them arose when I asked to speak the manager at a hotel. As I did with the other four occurrences, I used a neuro-semantic process like reframing or the Drop Down Through process to remove the anxiety, and I was able to speak fluently.

Today, before a public speaking engagement, my focus is on pushing myself to achieve excellent platform skills. I still have the normal, typical disfluencies that all speakers have (i.e., loose whole-word repetitions), but my blocking and struggle behavior are history.

This is further evidence of the power of clearing my head of stuttering thoughts. I am 100% confident that I am now cognitively Teflon-coated and relapse proof.

Having come this far, do I regret that I had to endure more than two decades of stuttering and self-punishment? No. Next to Christopher Reeve's ability to stay positive with quadriplegia my story seems trivial,

although I know it's not. I believe I am a more compassionate person, a better parent and spouse, and I love my work as a speech pathologist. The journey through stuttering has been a personal metaphor that will make all things possible for me. The dragon's fire is out.

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