



LIVE
YOUR DREAMS:

by Paul Goldstein

Live Your Dreams:

A Letter from Paul Goldstein, September 22, 2004 to Paul Goldstein, April 10, 1970

by Paul Goldstein - from Norway

Dear Paul,

I send you greetings today from the future on the occasion of your 16th birthday. Don't ask me to explain, but you might call this a type of "Twilight Zone" letter. I am in fact you, writing to you from 34 years in the future. You're a teenager and high school sophomore; I am your future self, now 50 years old.

Paul, being you, I vividly remember exactly the way you feel these days. Facing the daily challenges of very severe stuttering can be often frustrating and agonizing. I remember that you often feel very discouraged about your prospects for a happy and successful life, since it is more difficult for you than others to express yourself in conversations. Adding to your burden is the hard cold awareness of having tried a number of different therapies for stuttering, none of which have seemed to help.

But Paul, I am writing to you today to tell you that you

have a bright future ahead, and you can look forwards with confidence and high spirits to the adventures of the coming years. There will of course be some rocky periods to endure and obstacles that will seem difficult to overcome. But as the years go by, you will be able to live your dreams, and a happy and successful life is yours for the taking.

I know what you're now thinking, having heard these words from your future self. You're excitedly asking, "Does this mean that my stuttering is going to be cured?"

In your world, man first reached the moon nine months ago, and many people of your time are expressing boundless enthusiasm for the idea that if man can do something like that, then surely anything is possible.

Well, Paul, I'm writing these words far in your future, in the year 2004. There is (as of yet) no "cure" for stuttering, and none seems to be on the near horizon.

But our understanding of stuttering has come a long way since your time, and neuroscientists researching the problem have made many significant discoveries. New therapy techniques will be developed in your future, some of which will prove to be of great help to you. In fact one particular therapy technique will enable you to enjoy many fluent conversations (something that you have not yet experienced).

There will also be new inventions in the coming decades specifically to help stuttering, and some of these will be very useful to you. These future techniques and inventions,

though not "cures" by any means, will be contributing in a small but important way to the happiness and success that you seek.

I say "small", Paul, because the larger share of the solution you seek already lies within you - and this has nothing to do with new techniques or inventions.

It has taken me years to realize this fact, but after a half-century of life, I have come to see that the degree of speech fluency exhibited to others when we converse bears little importance in the grand scheme of things. For as human beings, we all have our strengths, skills, and talents. We also all have our "weaknesses" - those areas in which we may not excel to the extent that others do.

I put the word "weaknesses" here in quotation marks, since from what we commonly regard as "weaknesses", we also derive our courage to face and accept our personal challenges head on.

This courage can provide us with the motivation to strengthen our "weaker" areas, if that is what we desire; but it can also mean a courage of acceptance. A courage of acceptance also strengthens us for it gives us a sense of balanced perspective.

If we are not as skilled as others in fluent speech, it need not hold us back - neither in communicating our ideas to others, nor in our life's activities, nor in achieving our personal goals of happiness and success. To always have fluent speech is not what life is all about. The way we live

our lives, and what we do as people and for people is what life is all about - and this has very little to do with the degree of fluency that we happen to have in our speech.

Paul, now at the age of 50 (which I know to you seems quite old!), I still stutter - though not as severely as before. It's true that I still don't have the same degree of fluent speech as many others do, but I want you to know that I feel happy and successful as a person.

I can easily communicate all the ideas I want to express. And I also feel a profound sense of satisfaction in life, which you will of course also come to have. These are some of the living dreams that you can look forwards to in your future years.

I know you have lots of questions for me, your future self. I will partly answer some of them for you now (but will leave many others for your own self-discovery as the years go by).

For example: You often wonder, because you happen to stutter, if you will ever find someone who will marry you. Well, Paul, you will find someone to marry you - or to be more accurate, someone will find you to marry you.

And in this case, she will find you not in spite of the fact that you stutter, but because you happen to stutter! I won't tell you the details now, but believe it or not, the very fact that you stutter will play a role in achieving the happiness that you seek. And a new technology that you cannot now imagine will enable her to find you.

I also know you feel lonely these days as a high school student; you feel a lack of a social life because, with your stuttering, you find it difficult to meet people.

Paul, you'll be happy to know that this particular problem will be history before too long. You will soon be meeting many people as soon as you realize that stuttering is no reason to hold back. Indeed someone who would reject you because you stutter (and believe me, very few people would) is not someone worthy of your friendship.

Today, Paul, there are many many people who I would count as my friends - so many, in fact, that I have the opposite problem - I don't have the time to keep up with everyone as much as I would like!

I know that you (and many others) often like to speculate on what the world will be like in the year 2000, which is now 30 years into your future.

I can tell you, Paul, that the year 2000 will be for you a great personal milestone.

Among other positive life-changing events, you will in that year be moving to a distant country, a move which will be related to your marriage. If you try to guess which country (and I know you may have a few possibilities in mind right now), you will undoubtedly be wrong - since this is a country that you have hardly ever thought about or read about.

Paul, just like today in your time is a special day for you

(your 16th birthday), today in my time is a special day also. I chose to write to you today, September 22, because it is my wedding anniversary (as it will eventually be yours).

A wedding, many friends, a move to a new country, new technologies that will have a great positive impact on your life, and improved fluency.

Paul, there are so many wonderful surprises in store for you in the coming years and decades. So get out there, my friend and former self, even if you do stutter - meet those people, begin to live your dreams, and - most of all - **ENJOY YOUR LIFE!**

Love, Paul

At Peace With My Stuttering

by Paul Goldstein

My perspectives on my stuttering have evolved dramatically in new directions in the last three years since I moved from Massachusetts to Norway, and I'd like to share these with you. My stuttering itself hasn't changed, but the way I view it certainly has - what I write below is completely different from the ideas that I used to express several years ago.

Here are my current thoughts and perspectives regarding my stuttering, and my observations concerning its role in my current life.

Here in Norway, I am not only living in a very beautiful and peaceful country, but I am also at peace with my stuttering. I feel at peace, and I am at peace. In saying that, let me also point out (so that there's no misunderstanding) that my stuttering is neither "cured" nor "controlled". In fact my typical disfluency levels are more or less the same as they were before I came to Norway. What has changed is not my stuttering, but myself.

When I lived in the U.S. I felt it was very important to constantly strive for the greatest fluency possible at all times. I practiced fluency exercises diligently and often, always pursuing a fluent pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

I worked hard to try to conform my speech to the norms of fluent speakers around me whenever I could. To help achieve these goals I not only attended fluency shaping "refreshers", but also organized many of my own. I enjoyed many extended periods of complete fluency as a result of these efforts. But it was frustratingly hard

work, and just frustrating, period. My fluency gains always had a way of unravelling after a while, and relapses after speech achievements were quite commonplace.

I poured hours and hours of work into fluency improvement, and sometimes remained fluent for weeks (and occasionally, for months) on end before the inevitable relapse would occur. And those relapses did indeed always occur sooner or later - for the most part, sooner.

Was all this hard work really worth it? Did the benefits of speaking fluently justify the enormous time-consuming daily efforts that (for me at least) were necessary to achieve and maintain fluent speech? Three years ago I would have answered these questions with a resounding and unqualified yes.

Of course! Isn't it obvious? I had experienced periods of wonderful enjoyable fluency lasting for months, and also long periods of agonizing severe disfluency. To be fluent was so much more pleasant than to be disfluent - fluency brought ease of communication and self-expression, self-confidence and inner satisfaction, peace of mind, and the comforting feeling that I didn't have to speak differently than over 99% of the population and be penalized for this difference. To me these were self-evident concepts: fluency maximized happiness in life and self- fulfillment. And stuttering was just a big pain in the you-know- what, something that was necessary to defeat at all costs.

In my stuttering support groups in the U.S. the question was sometimes asked whether people would be willing to start life all over again without having a stuttering disorder to contend with - whether one would discard all one's previous life experiences, both positive and negative, and try again, reliving life as a normally fluent person. For most of the people responding to this question, the answer was no. They felt that what they perceived as the

"positive" aspects of stuttering (such as increased sensitivity to the feelings of others and empathy for their problems) were adequate compensation for the difficulties that stuttering had caused in their lives.

But my answer to this question was always a strong definitive yes. I would have welcomed the opportunity to discard everything I had experienced and start life anew as a normally fluent speaker. I could think of nothing bright and positive that had happened in my life because I stuttered (except of course for meeting many nice people at stuttering groups, conventions, symposia, etc. - yet as nice as these people were, and as much as I valued their friendships, I would have gladly sacrificed knowing them if it could mean not having ever had to endure the struggles of a severe stuttering problem).

But today I feel differently. My stuttering (or perhaps more accurately, the fact that I stutter) has brought me wonderful developments in life - indeed the fact that I stutter has brought happiness and joy to me in unexpected ways that I could not have foreseen before 3 1/2 years ago.

It was in January 2000 that I first "met" my wife Liv through the "Friendship Center" website, designed to enable people who stutter to correspond with others sharing in (or in Liv's case, interested in) the problem. Liv has never stuttered (and is in fact a fluent speaker of many languages), but has had a mysterious fascination with the problem of stuttering since childhood. She and I met each other in person for the first time the following April, after three months of almost daily E-mails, supplemented by Instant Messaging, phone conversations (beginning in February), and overseas exchanges of photos and biographical materials. By that time we felt we knew almost everything there was to know about each other. It was actually a Speak Easy Symposium that determined the city in which Liv and I met in person for the first time. On April 28, 2000

I saw my then-future wife for the first time in real life at the airport in Newark, N.J. We chose this city in order to attend the Symposium in New Jersey during the weekend of May 5-7, with Liv being able to catch a flight back to Norway as soon as the Symposium ended.

On the morning of May 5, exactly one week after first laying eyes on each other, Liv and I became engaged. That evening we drove from Massachusetts down to New Jersey to attend the 2000 Speak Easy Symposium.

It was our very meaningful first event as an engaged couple, and for me the beginning of a new chapter in life (I had been a bachelor for 46 years). It was such an exhilarating experience to introduce Liv to everyone at the Symposium as my brand new fiancé.

Liv and I spent most of that summer together in the United States. On September 12, I moved to Bergen, Norway (it was the first time I had ever stepped foot in Europe) - and ten days later, September 22, 2000, Liv and I tied the knot at Bergen City Hall. [Luckily in Norwegian civil wedding ceremonies there is nothing that a groom or bride has to say, except "ja" (pronounced "ya") when asked if they accept marriage with the other. And "ya" is pretty easy to say.]

Norway is a spectacularly beautiful country - and even more importantly in these troubled times, a very peaceful land as well. In just our immediate neighborhood alone we have a magnificent mountain (Mt. Lyderhorn) which dominates the view from our bedroom window, lush green forests teeming with hikers year-round (even during the winter rains), a beautiful shimmering fjord, crystal clear blue lakes of different sizes (all inhabited by local colonies of ducks who know me personally), and a number of small pretty islands. The environment is peaceful, and the people are peaceful.

There is great tolerance throughout the land with respect to individual differences. As a part of this, people in Norway are very accepting of the unique differences in the ways that people speak.

In fact there is no problem in not speaking in the "correct" "standard" way, because there is no "correct" "standard" way of speaking in Norway.

Because of the unique geography of Norway, with communities historically isolated from each other by towering mountain ranges, long meandering fjords, and vast expanses of wilderness, oral Norwegian language has 200 different dialects. There are in fact two different written Norwegian languages ("bokml" and "nynorsk") in order to accommodate them all.

Not only vocabulary, but also grammar, shifts from region to region and town to town, and even from generation to generation (as an example, older folks use different words for numbers than younger folks do).

The large majority of Norwegians also speak English well, and this language is also heard very often in the daily life of the country. In addition there are many here who speak Swedish or Danish, two other Scandinavian languages that are close enough to Norwegian that they are mutually comprehensible to anyone who knows Norwegian well. In the context of this linguistic mix, no one really cares if you stutter - it's just one more speaking difference to stir into the pot. No one bats an eyelash.

During some weekends I work as a "helgeforelder" ("weekend parent"), taking care of a mildly-to-moderately retarded 9-year-old girl, work which is paid well under the State's extensive social services system. Since my "weekend daughter" Kristin doesn't know English, I have to converse with her in my limited Norwegian. When I have difficulties in expressing myself in

Norwegian, she responds by kissing me. And when I have on a block on a Norwegian word, she also responds by kissing me. It's all the same to her. Kristin is very fluent in both speech and oral language, but like other Norwegians, is very accepting of a different way of speaking.

There is also no pressure to speak in Norway if one doesn't feel like it. Unlike in the U.S., there is no "small talk" tradition here. Neither is there any tradition in "big talk" (grandiose rhetoric or public speechmaking with memorable phrases).

As a matter of fact, one chapter of a famous satirical book about Norwegians is entitled "Norwegian Conversations - Do They Exist?" (At least between strangers, the answer is not at all.) As a general rule, people in Norway speak when they have something important to say, and there is no awkwardness in silence. Shortly before I left for Norway, John Ahlback (former director of the National Stuttering Project) told me, "You're so lucky - you're moving to the quietest nation on earth."

I'm an active member of the Bergen chapter of the Norwegian Stuttering Association (in Norwegian the association is known by the clever acronym NIFS ["Norsk Interesseforening for Stamme"]); "nifs" in Norwegian also means "scary"), which meets twice a month in people's homes.

The Norwegian social services network takes good care of people who stutter. Through State funds channeled to the local group from the national association, our entire Bergen group enjoyed an entire weekend a year ago at a vacation cabin on a beautiful island, on the banks of a fjord - at full government expense.

All travel expenses were also paid last summer for people who stutter in Norway to attend a partially subsidized weekend stuttering workshop at a vacation retreat in one of the country's

spectacular mountainous regions. In fact no one who stutters in Norway is left out of stuttering conventions or conferences for financial reasons - the State picks up the tab for travel expenses for these purposes. Money is also provided to our local group for occasional restaurant meals and for meeting refreshments. Stuttering therapy in Norway is also free of charge. If one has to stutter, Norway is an ideal place in which to do it.

I no longer regularly practice fluency exercises as I used to do in the U.S. I have come to realize that fluency is not a prerequisite to happiness or to the enjoyment of life. The very fact that I stutter has given to me a lovely wife, and has brought me into this beautiful peaceful land.

As I write these words, I look out the window towards Mt. Lyderhorn, rising magnificently before me. There is something in the mountain that speaks to me. And I realize that it is not necessary to have fluent words, or even words at all, to communicate ideas. Some people speak fluently almost all the time. Others don't speak fluently as often. I happen to fall in the latter group. Norwegians have always been in the forefront of the world's peacemaking, and in true Norwegian style I have done my part in making peace with the fact that I'm not always fluent. I feel at peace, and I am at peace.

- Paul Goldstein, Bergen, Norway 2003