

Stuttering: A Life Bound Up In Words

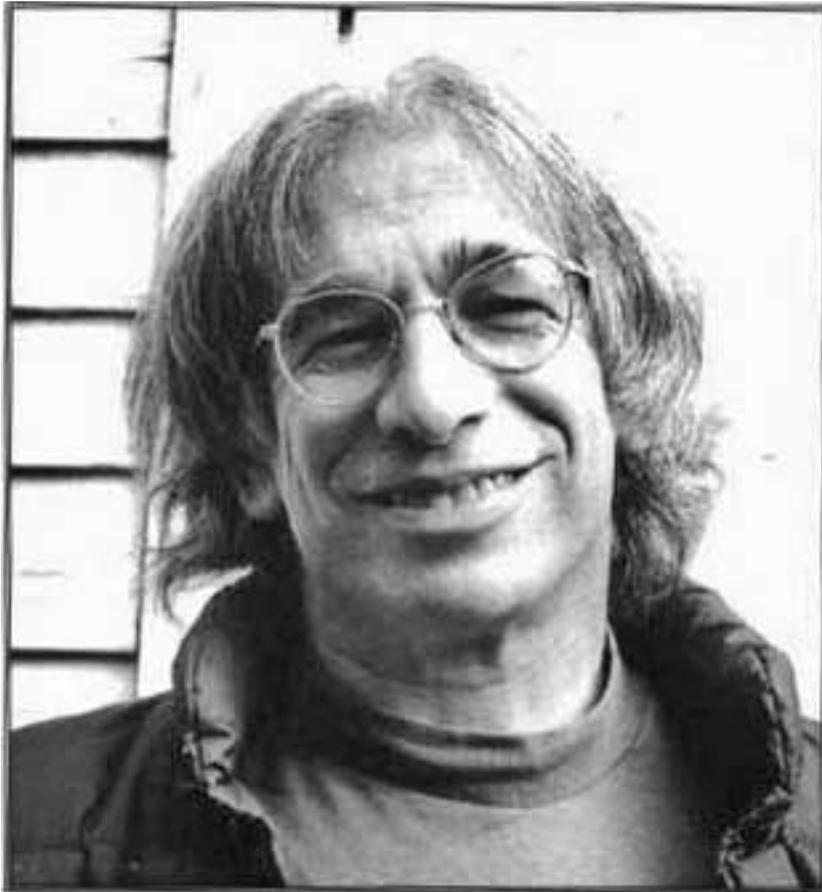
(BY PERMISSION)

by Marty Jezer

(Tribute to Marty Jezer by Alan Badmington is featured at the end of this ebook.)

MARTY JEZER

Marty Jezer (1940-2005) was a progressive activist, author, and stutterer. He was active in movements against the Vietnam War and for a nuclear freeze, campaign finance reform, organic farming, and universal healthcare. He was active in the National Stuttering Association and Speak Easy. His books include biographies of Rachel Carson, Abbie Hoffman, a history of 1950s, and his autobiography *Stuttering: A Life Bound Up in Words* (below).



Marty Jezer

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Book Jacket Blurb

“As a stutterer who is always afraid of speaking but is rarely able to keep his mouth shut, I have a story to tell.” So writes Marty Jezer in this insightful and invaluable book about stuttering that, by necessity, is also a work about speaking, silence, and the pleasures and pitfalls of everyday communication.

With eloquence and passion, Jezer delves into his lifelong struggle with fluent speech. “I live on both sides of the disability dilemma,” he says. “As long as I keep silent, I look like a normal fluent person. But every time I talk, I put this identity on the line. The need to speak and the probability of stuttering are the dominant facts of my life.”

This is a book about persistence and pluck, denial and fear. With humorous and poignant personal anecdotes, Jezer recalls being a student, too embarrassed to speak in class yet humiliated by his own chosen silence. Afraid to phone girls, he found ingenious ways to ask them out on dates. Apprehensive of raising children, he delighted in reading to his daughter. Told at a job interview that he was unemployable, he created his own career.

In an endless effort to “cure” his stuttering, Jezer has tried many kinds of speech therapy and psychotherapy, and even volunteered as a guinea pig to test an experimental drug. Supportive, though critical, of existing therapies, he’s insistent that issues of identity, self-acceptance, and self-esteem are as vital as fluency techniques. Through the examples of new-found friends in the self-help movement for people who stutter, he learned to take responsibility for his speech. Although Jezer still stutters, he’s no longer afraid to speak.

However unique stuttering is as a disability, the daily embarrassments and deeper psychic indignities that stutterers face, if not universal, are commonplace. The defeats of giving in to them and the triumphs of overcoming them are, as Jezer writes, the drama of life.

Aristotle described the stutterer's tongue as "too sluggish to keep pace with the imagination." Quite the contrary; Marty Jezer may stutter, but he is seldom at a loss for words.

Introduction

I grew up during the 1950s, a period that was the golden age of television comedy—The Great Gleason, Lucille Ball, Ernie Kovacs, Steve Allen and his men in the street, Martin and Lewis, Phil Silvers, Red Skelton, Groucho Marx, and Sid Caesar. I loved comedy. All I wanted was to be around people—in the movies, on television, in the school yard, on the street corner, and at the dinner table—who could make me laugh. The joke is on me, as I see it. Here I was, a kid who couldn't tell a joke without stuttering on the punch line. Prudence should have led me to admire and want to emulate strong, silent-types like Gary Cooper, John Wayne, Marlon Brando, or James Dean—and, as I said, I tried. But I dug funny men instead, guys who talked, guys with “shticks.”

Of course, like most boys, I at first wanted to be a ballplayer. But in some things, at least, I was a realist. Although I was a good athlete, I knew that I could not appear on pre-game warm-up shows or the postgame wrap-up. I also knew that I couldn't be a standup comedian or a comic actor. But I could think funny things and, so I thought, write funny lines. And since writers, I figured, do not have to talk, I thought I could be one.

In addition to reading *Mad* (then a ten cent comic book), I would peruse the magazine rack at my corner candy store. On one of the shelves, next to the crossword puzzle books, were large softcover joke compendiums with titles like *1000 Jokes!* or *One Thousand More Jokes!* Inside were mother-in-law jokes, ethnic jokes, fat people jokes, kid and parent jokes, armed service jokes, employee-boss jokes, take-my-wife jokes, and in one collection, this stuttering joke:

A stutterer met a friend at a tavern and said, “Y-y-

ya g-g-got t-ten m-m-minutes? I w-w-wannna h-h-have a f-five m-m-m-minute c-c-c-conversation.”

I closed that book as if a rattlesnake lay coiled in its pages. My stomach tightened and for a moment I thought that I would throw up. I put the book back on the shelf and never opened it or any other book like it again.

I still liked comedy and loved to laugh, but I never ever considered writing gags again. Until that moment, I had found ways to compensate, if not for the fact of my stutter, then for the pain that it caused me. I was popular, had lots of friends, and was smart in school. I didn't then know how humor can cut to the bone, and I especially didn't know how vulnerable I was to seeing my problem as the butt of somebody else's laughter.

I've spent a good part of my life learning to cope as a stutterer and overcoming my embarrassment at stuttered speech. And I'm still overcoming. But one lesson I have learned is that it's better to talk and to stutter than to feign fluency by being silent—even if there are going to be occasional listeners who laugh at my disfluency. Yes, a five minute conversation with me might take a few minutes more than it would were I perfectly fluent—and that's no joke.

But what's the hurry? I've learned by hard knocks that if I've got something to say, most people will listen. And if they don't, what of it? Stuttering is a fact and a facet of my life that I have had to learn to live with. No matter how fluently I happen to speak at any given time, I know there is going to be another time when fluency deserts me.

Abraham Maslow, one of the seminal thinkers in the field of humanist psychology, theorized that people are motivated by instinctive needs and inner drives to become self-actualized. These needs are structured as a pyramid. At the base are the physiological needs of hunger, thirst, shelter, the instinct to survive. Higher on the pyramid are the associated needs for personal safety and security.

When one is comfortably and safely sheltered and has enough to eat,

more individualistic needs come to the fore: the need for love and belongingness, the drive to feel self-confident and develop self-esteem. At the top of the pyramid, and sometimes buried by the psychological baggage and physiological weight of life's hard-knocks, comes the need for self-actualization, the drive for self-fulfillment, the need to be true to oneself and everything that one is able to be.

Somewhere within Maslow's hierarchy, connected to and as deep as the need for love and belongingness is, I believe, another need. The need to communicate, to interact and express oneself with one's family, friends, neighbors, and community. Everyone has this need. The grammar of language, we are told, is an entitlement of being human; it's encoded into every person's brain. Deaf people, Oliver Sacks tells us, instinctively develop a language of sign even when they are isolated from other deaf people. Speech, whether it be spoken or signed, is not the only medium for communication, of course. We know that the earliest communicative interactions between infant and caregiver—touching, holding, rocking, gazing, “cooing,” “gooing,” smiling, etc., are critical to the survival and development of infants. For example, infants “placed” in overcrowded orphanages all over the world, where they may be fed, clothed, and changed, but who have very little human interaction and opportunity for communication, are more likely to have health and emotional problems, are more likely even to die than children who grow with the opportunity of human communication.

Speech may not be the be and end-all of communication but once a child develops speech, it becomes the medium of choice. What happens, then, to a young child physiologically predisposed to stutter (the best evidence, as I shall show, now indicates a genetically-based organic predisposition), and instinctively determined to say his piece. He's got an idea in his head and the words to go with it. But when he opens his mouth to speak, the words (that he is so sure of) are blocked by the dis-coordination of his speech. We call this stuttering but the actual violation cuts much deeper than the temporary interruption of the ability to communicate. Stuttering is not only a blockage of speech: it is a blow to the psyche, an impediment to a basic and inherent inner need.

And then people react to stuttered speech differently than they

react to fluent speech. They fidget, they cover their eyes, they interrupt, they say the word they think you are trying to say, they give advice, they make faces, they mimic, they laugh, they look away, they walk away—and the wound cuts deeper. Speech, for the child who stutters and for the adult for whom stuttering is chronic, becomes not a medium for communication, but a recording of humiliation, a confirmation of ineptitude, an indication of abnormality, a violation of what everyone else in the world considers fundamentally human.

This then is a book about stuttering that, by necessity, will also be a book about speaking, silence, and the pleasures and pitfalls of everyday communication. As a person who can never take fluent speech for granted, I want to address the complex dynamics of verbal communication and describe the barriers that are erected when the mechanics of speech break down. I see stuttering not only as a disability that is challenging to live with and difficult to overcome, but as a metaphor for other impediments—physical and psychological, real and imagined—that inhibit so many peoples' lives and block their path towards self-actualization.

How I Stutter

Everyone who stutters stutters differently. Some stutter by repeating the first sound of their words but are generally able to move forward in their speech without huge blocks of tension-filled silences and gasps for air. Others who stutter have tension-filled silences. “My vocal chords are so tight,” one woman says, “that I feel like I’m being strangled when I speak.”

Still others will block after they begin their voicing. They get stuck on one sound and no matter how hard they try, they cannot move past it. Still others stutter with a soft stutter. When they are having difficulty speaking, they sound like an engine idling –an engine with fouled sparkplugs, defective timing, or, more likely, a burned-out clutch. Their motor is running but there is no forward progress, they can’t seem to get their speech into gear and move from the stuttered sound to the intended word.

Some people who stutter look like kids who have been in cold water too long—they are unable to effectively control the movement of their mouth, and their teeth are uncontrollably chattering. When I was young, I often had this pattern. Kids at summer camp who heard me stuttering would ask me if I was cold. I’d press my arms across my shoulders, start shivering, and acknowledge, through chattering teeth, that “I g-g-get c-c-cold easily.”

For others the problem seems to be located in their jaw; their lower jaw seems to have come unhinged from their mouth. If they could only stabilize that wayward part and keep it in the position that it is supposed to be in, they would not stutter. But that’s easy to say and, for a stutterer, difficult to do. For people who stutter,

when they are stuttering, have no control over the mechanics of speech.

They may know what to do and, even as they are in the midst of a stuttering block, be thinking about what they ought to be doing to get through it. But thinking isn't doing. It is as if there is a decisive split, a cut cord, so to speak, between mind and body, between brain and lips, mouth, tongue, larynx, and jaw.

In my life as a stutterer, I have done all of the above. In addition, I often hold my breath even as I am trying to speak. I know that it is physiologically impossible to speak while holding one's breath—just try it. No matter how much I strain to make a sound, all that comes out is the forced spasm of my futile effort.

In the middle of a speaking block, we stutterers sometimes look as weird as we sound. And it bothers us. Indeed a good part of the stuttering problem is caused by our physical effort not to stutter. Some speech pathologists refer to this as the “secondary characteristics” or “symptoms” of stuttering.

They describe “primary characteristics” as the normal disfluencies of childhood speech. Young children, even those who end up perfectly fluent, often stumble on words.

These early instances of stuttering are not necessarily associated with tension or stress, and the children don't consider themselves to be having a speaking problem. “Secondary symptoms” or “characteristics” begin to occur when children become self-conscious of their speaking difficulties.

The secondaries are the tricks we stutterers use in order to avoid a block or break out of one that we are already into. These tricks have nothing to do with proper (that is to say “normal”) speaking techniques. They are the very opposite—desperate acts of forced speech that, in their aggregate, intensify the primary characteristics of childhood stuttering into severe, chronic stuttering...

The visible symptoms of chronic stuttering are a mishmash of secondary stuttering characteristics. Adult stuttering is marked by the bad habits these adults picked up when they were young in

order not to stutter. For example, when stuck in a block with lips pressed closed or jaws clamped shut, the proper, common-sense thing to do is to draw back, relax the jaw and gently open the lips so air can come out and carry the words forward.

But if we were able to control our speech in the middle of stuttering block, we wouldn't be stuttering. What we do instead is try to blast through our blocks by brute force. And if we tense our muscles, contort our faces, and push hard enough on our articulators, we believe that we'll break through the block—and we probably will.

Some blocks are so severe that body language has to be called in to play. For example, many of us learn to jerk our face up and down or back and forth in order to muster the physical force to get through a block. Or we approach speech as if we are throwing a bowling ball, using facial tics, shoulder shakes, and other kinds of body language to achieve the strike of fluent speech.

One stutterer, I am told, would swing his arm around like a windmill in order to build momentum to get him through expected blocks. “You had to stand back so you wouldn't get clobbered,” a friend recalls. Another “would spill out a huge string of words” in preparation for getting through the word he was intending to say. Asked to give his name, he would say a half dozen sentences about his name before he would actually say his name.

When speaking on the phone, I can usually break a block by stomping my feet, pounding the desk, or moving my body back and forth like an Orthodox Jew does when he is dovening (praying). Concerned with how I look to others, I would never use such spastic body movements in public. But on the phone where no one can see me, I will do whatever it takes to blast through my blocks in the hope that I will at least sound as if I'm fluent.

People who stutter will do anything not to stutter. I know people who claim to stutter but who never do. Covert or secret stutterers stutter internally, or so they say. They live in constant emotional turmoil, fearful always that they might utter a disfluent word. I never understood why covert stutterers called themselves stutterers until, at a self-help meeting,

I met a man who I will call Murray. As far as I could tell, Murray was completely fluent. He never stuttered or showed any sign of stuttering in the dozens of self-help meetings we attended together. The only evidence that he was a person who stuttered was his faithful attendance at these meetings. His presence sometimes made me angry. Why was he there? Everyone else at the meeting was trying, sometimes with much difficulty, to overcome obvious chronic disfluency. Murray's fluency came easy, too easy. What was he overcoming? What was his problem?

One evening he showed up at the meeting at the edge of tears. He had to talk to us and share his anguish. On the way to the meeting he had stopped at a MacDonalds. There was a line at the counter, and he felt pressure to hurry with his order.

Ordering a Big Mac, he stuttered on the Mac. He felt humiliated, marked. He felt exposed, as if everyone on the line behind him, as well as the smiling teenager who took his order, knew his secret, that he had defective speech, that he was a stutterer. Who has it easier, I wondered, as I heard his story: a severe stutterer like myself who knows that he is probably going to stutter not only on the Mac, but on the french, the fries, and the c-c-cup of c-c-coffee? Or a person who is so afraid of stuttering that each instance of disfluency brings about a personal crisis?

Many stutterers do what covert stutterers do and attempt to disguise their stuttering by anticipating words that they feel might give them trouble. They then substitute words they feel confident they can say without stuttering.

That's why many stutterers develop large vocabularies—and often speak with muddled syntax. Proper grammar is often thrown by the wayside when perfect fluency is what the stutterer is after. There are times, however, when there are no synonyms to describe a basic need.

There isn't a person who stutters that hasn't gone into a restaurant and ordered something that he didn't like because it was preferable to ordering something that he liked but couldn't say—a hamburger and a coke, for example, when what was really wanted was a cheeseburger, medium rare with lettuce, tomatoes, onions, french

fried potatoes, and a chocolate malt.

I lived as a teenager in White Plains, N.Y., but often bought train tickets to Hartsdale, N.Y. because the “wh” sound in White always gave me trouble. There were no buses or taxis from the Hartsdale train station as there were from the larger White Plains station, but walking four miles home was preferable to me than stuttering in front of the ticket seller in Grand Central Station. The God of Stuttering is a wicked jokester.

Had I lived in Hartsdale, I would likely have had trouble saying the “H” sound and would have chosen to buy a ticket for White Plains. I eventually gave up using word substitutions (especially when I stuttered on the word substitutions) and stuttered my way to White Plains or wherever else I had to go. Try as I might, there was no way for me to fake or hide my stuttering.

Dr. Kerr, who promised to cure me in a fortnight, had one good idea. He stressed, and made me repeat it over and over again, “I must have complete control of my mind. I must have complete control of my mind.”

And in everything but speaking I do seem to have control of my mind. I’m coordinated and intelligent. I can pat my head and rub my belly which, I’m told, is more than one recent President of the United States was able to do. One thing that attracted me to the NIH neurological research was my belief that something happens inside my brain that makes it difficult for me to exercise control over my speaking mechanism.

Whenever I try to visualize what’s in my head, I get a picture of scrambled eggs. That’s not so startling. Have you ever seen a picture of the brain? OK, if not scrambled eggs, how about tightly packed links of breakfast sausages? When I picture the brain in terms of my speech, I always think that I’m a short-order cook making breakfast in a diner.

Whenever I am having difficulty speaking, it feels as if my brain is heating up and my thought processes, especially those concerning speech, are becoming scrambled. The orderly passage of time gets jumbled. If I were a computer, an error message would flash on the screen saying either “System Overload” or “System Breakdown.” As

a breakfast rather than a cybnaut, however, the feeling I have is of a griddle over-heating. The toast is burning, the egg yolks are breaking, and the bacon is spewing hot grease into the fire. The cook, that's me, is in a panic, trying to deal with every thing that is going wrong and, in a frenzy of frantic motion, dealing with nothing.

Another indication of an over-agitated mind is my difficulty with time. I do not understand—or perhaps I cannot accept—the lateral movement of time. A clock ticks in an orderly and regimented fashion. One second passes and then another and another, and each is defined by an exact measure. But my urge is to always telescope that time into itself (as in the submariner's term, "down scope") and speed it up.

People with a normal sense of time can count "one, two, three, four, five" in an orderly systematic fashion. I, on the other hand, would count out five as "one, two, threefourfive." In this, I am typical of a lot of stutterers who want to finish what they have to say as soon as they start to say it. I may start off in control of my speaking technique, but the middle gets muddled as I rush to achieve the relief that can only come from finishing whatever it is that I have to say.

The sequence of words collapse upon themselves. My urge is to blast through my words as fast as I can, to make a sandwich of them, to compress them together. It would seem, in this state of mind, that I have no respect for what I want to say. My words are like garbage, ready for the landfill, waiting to be compacted.

Here, too, I usually know what is happening and I know what I need to do to liberate my speech and allow my words to soar. Indeed, when I get into this rushed sequence, I can be telling myself, even as I am racing through my words, to slow down. But thoughts don't stop me. My stuttered speech is like a runaway bulldozer, rolling over all signs of caution.

My compulsion to compress time is replicated in other things that I do. The best example is when I'm standing before a urinal; then I feel compelled to flush the toilet even before I'm finished with what I am standing there to do. Even when I want to wait until I'm finished, I can't. Somehow I believe that the sooner I flush, the

sooner I can leave and get on with my life. But no matter how fast I am in turning the knob or jiggling the handle, I cannot leave until I'm finished. And so it is with speech. I am determined to finish what I'm saying even before I give myself a chance to say it.

But I'm probably being too harsh on myself. If a neurological dysfunction creates the predisposition to stutter, what seems to ignite the dysfunction—what throws the normal working of the brain out of whack—is the excitation that results from psychological or physical stress. This is true not only for stuttered speech but for virtually every kind of human endeavor that requires motor coordination and is done interactively; that is, before an attentive audience. For example, a basketball player sinks jump shot after jump shot in practice when no one is watching. She's got her moves down, her soft touch, everything coordinated, perfect concentration. In a game situation with the pressure on, with the crowd screaming and opposing players bumping and jostling her and waving their hands in her face, she will do well to make 40% of her shots.

The same dynamic applies to golfers who putt perfectly in practice but often choke when the game is on the line, and when they are conscious that people are watching. Musicians who are beginning to master their instrument will hit clinkers in a concert on notes that they'll hit perfectly during rehearsal. It's the same dynamic for people who stutter, only that all the stress that's engendered by public performance seems to fasten on their speaking mechanism.

For example, sitting alone in a room reading aloud to myself, I am usually fluent. Alone, I can be speaking gobbledygook—no one has to know. But when people enter the room and I become aware of their presence, my stress shoots up. With listeners, I'm transformed into a performer with something to communicate, my words take on weight.

My listeners, the way I perceive them, also becomes my critics, listening to how well I'm speaking in addition to responding to the substance of what I have to say. I try and concentrate on my reading and ignore their presence. I tell myself that they are not listening; and perhaps, they aren't.

They may be distracted, lost in their own thoughts - - it's only my perception (and my egocentricity) that leads me to believe they are listening to me. Nevertheless, the environment in which I am speaking is totally changed by their presence and, in reacting to that change, the neurological biochemistry controlling my speaking mechanism changes also. All of a sudden I lose the confidence and the concentration that comes so easily when I know no one is listening.

A neat bit of transference is taking place here. It's easy and all too common to project my own negative attitude towards my stuttering on to my listeners who may be more interested in the content of my speech than in my fluency. Listeners, studies have shown, are often more tolerant of stuttering than we stutterers' are wont to believe. A clock within us is always ticking: Is what we have to say taking too long? Are we discomforting our listeners.

My listener may not care about the fluency of my speech. I'm the one who is the critic. Even as I'm speaking, I'm monitoring how I'm speaking, how the listener is reacting to my speaking, and, additionally, how I'm reacting to my perception of the listener's reaction. Is the pursing of his lips a reaction to the tension in my voice? Why did he blink? Why is he averting his eyes? Why is he covering his face with his hand? Does my stuttering shock him or make me look grotesque? Is his shifting his weight away from me negative body language, a sign of boredom? Sometimes I see inside, or imagine that I see inside, the minds of my listeners.

My fluent friends tell me that they, too, pay attention to how listeners react to their speech, and that their self-consciousness about their speech restricts their own self-expression. In a sense, then, even fluent people suffer from a form of internal stuttering. But the speech mechanisms of fluent people can successfully process this stress-induced sensory overload and they do not stutter when they speak. The complexity of speech-inspired mental activity is unique to people who stutter. Speech for stutterers can be as mentally strenuous as an Olympic competition and as complicated as playing three chess games all at once.

Yet, as with everything, it's not neat and simple. We're all different and some people perform better under stress. There are

athletes like Larry Bird and Michael Jordan who come through when a game or the season is on the line. The excitement of the game makes them more focused on what they have to do and, as their concentration increases, they are able to shut out all distraction. In a similar way, there are people who stutter in informal conversation but get focused and become fluent when they are up in front of a room talking to a crowd. But troublesome feelings like anxiety and fear are not the only causes of stress. I'm often calm and focused in a tense situation. When I panic, it can be as a result of fear and anxiety, but also as a result of over-stimulation and excitement. But my speech operates in a world of its own. And the slightest outside stimulus ("excitation feedback," as Richard Harkness calls it)—all it has to be is another person entering a room—causes my speaking mechanism to go awry.

Speech stress falls and rises with every subtle change in the social environment. For example, I want to ask a stranger for directions. I approach someone who seems to have a friendly and sympathetic vibe. I feel confident and start off fluently.

"Hello," I begin, "can you give me directions to..." and then I feel something change in her. Perhaps it has nothing to do with me; she was lost in thought before I approached her, and she perceives my question as an interruption, and is irritated by that interruption. Or perhaps she's late for an appointment and doesn't want to stop to answer my question, and what I'm sensing is his own feeling of indecisiveness—should she stop to give me directions or ignore me and seem, by his standards of conduct, rude?

Whatever the reason, I immediately sense the distraction of my listener and interpret it as disinterest in me. In an instant, my confidence drops, my anxiety spikes, and my fluency turns to stuttering. My listener may react to my stuttering with compassion. She pays attention to me and shows, by his attentiveness, a willingness to hear me out. My confidence rises again, my anxiety drops, and some fluent words come out. On the other hand, my listener might react to my stuttering with confusion (thinking to herself, what's wrong with him? Is this some whacko or a masher about to proposition me on the street?) I sense this negativity in an instant; my emotions reverse themselves and I begin to stutter.

Measuring stress, if we were to do it, would create a printout much like a heart cardiogram. Our level of stress would be changing every millisecond as we are stimulated by and react to our surrounding environment. But the stimuli and their effect on us would be rooted in past experiences as well as in present reality. How stress affects us is genetic, learned, and existential. That is, each of us is programmed by our genetic code to react to different kinds of stress in differing ways. As we grow up and experience stress, we learn to cope, adapt, and otherwise respond to it in new, inventive, self-destructive or self-protective ways. These learned behaviors mesh with our genetic code and alter the way we respond to what's happening around us. Each moment of experience encompasses more stressful situations—and this, too, gets added to (and changes) our response mechanism. And I'm sure this is just the half of it...

The Double-Edged Sword of Denial

The same child psychologists who told my parents not to fuss over my stuttering because I would probably outgrow it also advised them to encourage me in whatever I was good at and liked to do. It was good advice and my parents took it seriously: foster my self-confidence, nurture my self-esteem. Consequently, they never held me back from doing what I wanted to do, even when what I wanted to do most, which was to hang out with my pals on the corner of Creston Avenue and 178th Street in the Bronx, was something of which they didn't altogether approve.

Wendell Johnson spoke of cultural inheritance, an attitude towards speech (and other things) passed down from generation to generation. My inheritance, as I have written earlier, was that of a congenital optimism, a sense of belonging to my culture, a belief that I was everyone's equal, and a delight in being part of a conversation, whether it be on a street corner or at a kitchen table. My reality, however, was that most of the world was closed to me, inaccessible.

My desire to enter into the verbal fray was neutralized by my sense of verbal inadequacy. Not being willing to stutter in front of anyone who didn't already know of my stutter, and reluctant to stutter even in front of those who knew I stuttered, I didn't feel like a kid who had access to anything. Deep in the silence of my heart, however, I knew that I did. My fear of speaking was a veneer. At my core I had absorbed my parent's sense of belongingness and their sense of place. The speech that was in me was never dormant.

It was always wanting to get out. To cope with my fear of speech and my need to speak, I learned to live cautiously, focus on what I could confidently pull off, protect myself from the humiliation I risked every time I opened my mouth, and pick my spots whenever I

wanted to talk.

Children are resilient. They know how to protect themselves, they know how to cope. My strategy of coping was to learn my limitations, excel within them, and avoid everything else. Because I was smart and athletic, I seemed always to be doing well: good in academics, good in sports, cheerful, upbeat, never without playmates, surrounded by friends. But I did not take risks. I made my friends and I stuck to them. I was loyal, but only to a past in which I had become comfortable, that I wished would never change.

Many people who stutter recall being laughed at and harassed by other kids. Males, especially, tell tales of using their fists because they could not defend themselves with words....

As one of the youngest kids on my block (and as a kind of mascot to the older kids), I always felt secure. I don't remember ever having to defend my self because of my speech. I do, however, remember my older friends egging me on to fight other kids. With my friends in my corner (and because of my need to please them), I never backed down from those fights. One time they instigated a fight between me and an overweight boy named Bobby.

While my friends never made fun of my stuttering (at least to my face), they always taunted Bobby about his fatness. The older kids on the block liked to watch us duke it out because of the contrast in our fighting styles. I was skinny but fast with my hands, a real boxer. Bobby moved slowly, but if he was able to get me down and sit on top of me, there was nothing for me to do but cry "uncle." In one of our many fights I really belted him, right in the kisser.

He fell to his knees with blood pouring from his face. My friends held my arm up in triumph and called me the champ of Creston Ave. Bobby slunk home alone crying. Later, thinking about what happened, I too started crying. Instead of savoring my victory, I identified with my victim. I probably did not make the connection then, but I suspect I realized that as a kid with a stutter, I was as vulnerable to attack as was my fat friend Bobby.

Nevertheless, I seemed to have lived a charmed life—even when I didn't have my older friends around as protectors. To get to my junior high school, I had to walk past a Catholic parochial school. In

the early 1950's, religious prejudice was much more prevalent than it is now, and the Catholic kids used to extort money out of the Jewish kids walking to school. One of the leaders of the Catholic gang was Tommy O'Connor, a strapping Irish youth with a fearsome reputation. Perhaps it was because of my stutter, or the fact that when stopped by his gang I wouldn't run, cry or back down, but Tommy O'Connor became my protector who would greet me heartily as I walked past his gang to school, "Hey, Marty, you're OK," he would declaim, a 1950's version of giving me a "high five." Experiences such as this gave me a rather benign view of my stuttering. As long as I kept within my own safe and defined bounds, I didn't feel that it caused me insurmountable problems.

There are many different ways that people use speech beyond the necessity of communicating information. For some, speech is an extension of their ego: they use it to show off, to dominate a scene, to control the content of a conversation. For many talkative people, speech is a defense mechanism: they use it not to communicate or engage others, but to prevent others from asking them personal, intimate, truth-challenging questions.

Afraid of contact, they construct a wall of verbiage that keep people at bay. I've a friend whose entertaining but non-stop commentary about the lives of other people serves to prevent others from asking personal questions about him. I have other friends who are non-stop funny. I love to listen to their shticks, but I can't get close to them. Their comedic gift is a barrier that keeps me and others away.

For me, speech has always been a way of connecting, a way of making contact with another person. Some people, taking their speech for granted, can connect by touch, demeanor, a friendly smile, a look in their eye. More so in the past, but still some today, I feel the need to connect through speaking. Speech, even stuttered speech, affirms my existence. In a funny way, my silence bothers me as much as my stuttering. My stuttering is a fact of my life; silence, however, is an admission that it affects my life. The silent one in a noisy conversation, I often feared that I would disappear into nothingness unless I asserted myself by speech. So I am compelled to speak, even if only to grunt an affirmation or to make some other "look I'm here" kind of noise.

As an adult I am sometimes complimented for being concise in my speech, direct and to the point. To the degree that this is true, it's a result of coping tactics I developed in my youth. As much as I wanted, nay, needed, to speak, I wanted to finish what I had to say as quickly as possible. Trying to say more than one sentence at a time was asking for trouble. I wasn't going to utter any extraneous words that I might stutter on. I was not going to give any long-winded speeches that would call attention to my disfluent speech.

My challenge in speaking was to pick my speaking-spot. I needed to gain recognition from others in a conversation without calling attention to the intrusion of my stuttering. For example, I knew that I would not stutter if I reserved my thoughts for the tail end of other people's statements. I didn't know it, but I was using the "masking principle" to get my two cents into the conversation. People who stutter usually don't stutter when they don't hear the sound of themselves speaking. By entering the conversation while someone else was speaking, I could use the sound of their voice to mask the sound of my own. This allowed me a few fluent words to get my confidence up and, perhaps, get me fluently through an entire sentence. But I never wanted to push my luck.

Picking my spot so as to come into the tail end of someone else's speech meant that I risked interrupting the person who was speaking. Growing up with the knowledge of good manners (and given my speech-induced insecurity, always trying to please), I didn't want anyone to be mad at me because of my butting in on them. So I tried to be precise in when I entered into a conversation.

As a result, I became super-sensitive to other people's speaking patterns and learned to detect when their verbal energy was trailing off and it was safe for me to come in. (At the same time, I am very impatient—and can still become infuriated—when a speaker comes to what I consider the proper ending of his speech and yet continues to go on). I also came to realize that people liked to hear what they said acknowledged. So I always began my brief burst of speech with an enthusiastic affirmation of what the person I was interrupting had just finished saying. Because of this acknowledgement, my interruptions did not make me unpopular. But they greatly limited the substance of my conversation. To get my words in edgewise, I had to make a positive statement. I

couldn't argue, disagree or say anything that was counter to the general drift. To state my own view would mean that I would have to then defend it and use more words. I could not trust myself to be fluent in my own defense and, in addition, I believed that my stuttering would undermine my argument. Who would believe or take seriously someone who couldn't speak fluently?—That is what I thought.

This made me seem to be very agreeable. If someone had said “Do you know, the earth is flat,” I would have chimed in at the precise moment that the speaker, having articulated the “fl,” was completing the “at” with something like, “Yes, that’s a very good point...” Whether I was affirming a statement that I believed to be right or wrong, perceptive or obtuse, was of no consideration. What mattered to me was that I was saying something and thereby connecting with another human being. “I think therefore I am,” said the French philosopher Diderot. “I speak therefore I am,” I reply in response. I affirm my existence by being a participant in a conversation.

There is a principle of compensation working here. Because I feared speech, speech took on excessive importance. Unable to speak articulately, I looked for ways to speak symbolically: I was less interested in what I had to say than I was in the fact that I was able to say something—anything—just for the sake of feeling that I was heard.

This desperate belief that if I didn't assert myself through speech I would somehow disappear, had one positive affect. Where many stutterers find safety in silence and go through childhood saying as little as they can get away with, I, being horrified at the sound of my own silence, have the gumption to talk. My participation in a conversation, no matter how meager and unimportant, gives me a giddy sensation, and I go away from it feeling like Gene Kelly singing in the rain.

What some might seem as a proclivity for avoidance, I saw as a determination to excel. By focusing on my strong points; that is, by figuring what I knew I could do and then limiting myself to doing just that, I was able to ignore the constrictions I was placing on my life. There were so many things that I would not do. I would not talk

to strangers. I would clam up in front of adults, authority figures, and people who didn't know that I stuttered. My parents, as I have noted, had an active social life and were always dragging me on week-end visits to their friends. I never went without a fight.

They couldn't pry me away from my friends on the street-corner, my verbal comfort zone. So safe did I feel within my limited area of success, that I saw no need to branch out and extend myself. I saw no need to deal with or improve my disfluent speech. Within the safe area that I had constructed, I could convince myself that I was doing all right.

The speech pathologist Woody Starkweather describes my coping strategy exactly: "Most of the stutterers I have known," he wrote in an internet discussion, "have been so hurt and shamed and frightened by their stuttering that they have adopted a number of defensive mechanisms to minimize their hurt. One of the most common ones is denial.

Sometimes the only way a person can get relief from pain is to act as though it isn't there, to find distracting thoughts or competing emotions, or some way to just not be present during those tough moments when nothing will come out or when what does come out is embarrassing or frightening. The only problem with denial, is that although it protects you from pain, it also puts you out of touch with the problem."

Denial, as I experienced it, was both an act of courage and a self-destructive act. By concentrating on what I did well, I was able to diminish the impact that stuttering had on my life. This boosted my self-confidence and encouraged a positive and upbeat attitude. There are many stutterers who, as kids, surrendered to their difficulties and now, as adults, recollect only the difficulties they faced growing up. I remember only good things. Just as I did as a youth, I find it easy to deny that my stuttering caused me hardship, that I suffered and experienced woe.

There was a "man in the street" character on the old Steve Allen television show played by the comedian Don Knotts. Knotts would appear on camera with his eyes bulging, his head shaking, and his body trembling as if his spine was a jackhammer or as if he was in

the frenzied throes of mega-voltage electro-shock. Steve Allen, playing a newspaper reporter, would ask Knotts if he was nervous. For the briefest moment, as if the jackhammer or the electromagnetic switch was suddenly turned off, a calm would come over Knotts and he'd purse his lips in mock surprise that anyone would be asking so immaterial a question and answer "nope." I always identified with Don Knott's very funny shtick.

Does stuttering bother me?

For most of my life, I would answer this question with phony composure and practiced calm. I would flash my most ingratiating smile and swallow my lie.

"Does stuttering bother you?"

"N-n-n-n-Nope!"

People would then tell me how brave I was and how wonderful it is that I could have such a severe disability and not let it bother me. Did I bask in their compliment?

Yup!

Did I believe them?

Nope.

And once the glow of my deceit faded, the truth would kick in. I would then feel shamed, embarrassed, stupid, scared. Not only for my stutter, but also because of how easy it was for me to lie. The truthful answer was that my stuttering was the defining fact of my life. It was my shadow, a ghost, the darkness within. In one sense, I was lucky. I stuttered so often that I could not let everyday incidents of stuttered speech get me down. But if I couldn't hide the fact of my stuttering, I could at least try to make a secret of the suffering that it caused. To do that, one has to become tough. Like a delicate plant being readied to survive a cold winter, I had to learn to harden off. And so I learned to sit on my grief, suppress emotion. I learned to move past embarrassing moments as quickly as I could. Like the great Ali, I learned to "dance like a butterfly" in order to dodge life's knockout blows. Like Mad Magazine's Alfred E. Neuman, I adopted a "What Me Worry" attitude every time I got hit.

If my denial discouraged me from retreating into myself and totally surrendering to my stuttering-induced fears, it also encouraged me to pass up opportunities to learn better speech. For example, my speech therapists wanted me to practice speaking slowly and fluently for a half-an-hour every day, but I would not do it. I could not get past the first exercise, slowly shaping and speaking the five vowel sounds—a, e, i, o, and u—without starting to cry. For to practice my speech was to admit to myself that I had a problem, that I was someone who was not normal, that I was weird. Practicing undercut the positive self-image I was determined to create. Practicing introduced a measure of reality I was determined to avoid.

In my mind, I drew a distinction between embarrassment and humiliation. An embarrassing incident, for me, was something that I could quickly shrug off and forget. Like stuttering in front of a stranger, and having someone hang up on me on the phone or walk away from me when I stuttered in the middle of a conversation. I felt bad, yes; but it was easy to bounce back with my confidence intact. Humiliation however, cut deep. It was often triggered not by an incident of my stuttering but by my feeling of being recognized as a stutterer, a person with a problem, a handicap, a flawed human being. The shame of being so identified—of having that “S” letter draped around my neck—was so powerful that it became etched into my consciousness. Recalling a humiliating incident forty years after the fact, I can still feel the blow in my gut, my stomach tightening up.

A humiliating incident could be as trivial as a momentary glance in my direction. As a teenager, I went with a friend to see the British comedy, “I’m [It’s] All Right, Jack.” In one scene a wizened old trade unionist severely stutters as he tries, incomprehensibly, to articulate his support for a strike. The scene is a cheap shot at rank-and-file trade unionists: they can’t effectively articulate a reason for going out on strike. But the movie’s retrograde politics was not what upset me. What burned was that my friend turned towards me to gauge my reaction to the stuttering character in the movie. Correctly, she understood that I would identify with his stuttering and, having a lively curiosity, she wanted to see how I’d react to it. Had I been able, then, to confront my feelings about my

stuttering, I might have engaged her after the movie in a fascinating friendship-bonding conversation. The thought of that possibility, of saying “I disliked the way they used that stuttering character,” went through my mind, but I quickly shut the door to that opening. Instead, I interpreted her glance as her wanting to see if I was as embarrassed by the portrayal as she (as I projected my feelings on to her) thought I ought to be. As for myself, I was admitting to nothing.

My response, typical for me, was to steel myself against any show of emotion. “I’m All Right, Lynn,” was the message I wanted to convey by my frozen body language. But I felt naked and exposed just the same, as if all my efforts to cover up my stuttering problem were stripped from me.

Although I often stuttered in talking to her and had no illusion that my stuttering was a secret, I could not tolerate her recognizing me for what I was. And what I was or, more accurately, what I thought myself to be was a stutterer and nothing else. Although we lived in the same apartment building and her family and my family were friends, I literally never risked a conversation with her again. She knew my darkest secret. Not that I stuttered, but that I was ashamed to admit that my stuttering hurt.

Why did I become so dogged in my optimism, so persistent in denying the trouble I was in? I don’t know where I got my positive outlook except, perhaps, from my father.

My magnanimous father was a great conductor, he viewed the world from up on a podium and, with his billfold as his baton, attempted to orchestrate everyone’s life. My father would not countenance any negativity (which he defined as a disagreement with what he had planned). He found it difficult to accept or acknowledge setbacks—whether it was in his life or with my speech. My father, I believe, willed his death at the age of 65 because he couldn’t deal with the pain of shattered illusions and a broken heart. First it was his protege, his young partner whom he had hired fresh out of law school, who was caught cooking the books and stealing money from the firm. And then it was the death from cancer at the age of 35 of his daughter, my sister Ruth. With those two setbacks, especially the death of my sister, he lost his faith in God and his interest in

life. To live with his kind of optimism is to dance at the edge of despair. It's like riding a bicycle on a high wire. You can't afford to stop and look down. To maintain balance, you have to look straight ahead and keep pedaling. My father stopped pedaling and fell down. I keep pedaling on.

I had my father's spirit, but it was contradicted by a quiet despair. I always liked what Jack Kennedy said, "life is unfair." I'm of a different generation. I've had help from good psychotherapists (and the insights and self-awareness that come from psychotherapy are something that men of my father's generation resisted) and good friends.

But more, because of my stutter I've become hardened to pain; somewhere inside of me is the expectation that every time I block in my speech, my listener will laugh, turn away, or otherwise do something that is embarrassing or, worse, humiliating to me. One can't go on living obsessed by defeat. So I've had to learn to shrug defeatism off - - and I am good at shrugging it off.

Once, playing basketball, I missed three game-winning foul shots. When the third one bounced off the rim, I started to laugh. My coach blew up at me, but I knew what I was doing. If I didn't laugh, I would have been drowning in guilt. And I had perspective. What's a few missed foul shots compared with the consistent failure at fluency every day of my life? What's a few disfluencies compared with the joy and wonder of life?

My father, who never saw me struggling inside the speech clinic, always wanted to believe that I was on the verge of outgrowing my stutter. In a sense, I got my desperate optimism and proclivity for denial from him. Every time I got out a fluent sentence in his presence, he took it as evidence that my speech was improving. And every time I stuttered in his presence, which was most of the time, I felt further defeated for not living up to his hope and expectation. Worse, he seemed to collect stories of children who, as many did, overcame their stuttering. I suppose that from his perspective, he was trying to assure me that it could be done. From my perspective, however, it only confirmed the hopelessness of my situation.

Was it my negativity, my oedipal requirement that I disagree with

everything he said, or was I being realistic about my speech? I knew what I was up against and was not going to fall for any pollyannaish lie. Although I went head to head with my father on any number of issues, I don't think I was being negative here. I knew that getting off a few fluent words didn't mean my speech was improving. I knew what my limitations were. I knew in what situations I had a chance to be fluent and in what situations I would probably stutter. I knew in what situations to risk speaking and in what situations to play it safe and not speak at all. It bugged me that my father would not deal with my difficulties in speech as they were, but would find any excuse to declare that I was getting better.

My father's optimism created in me a wariness about fluency, and, when it came to speech, a reluctance to change. As long as my stuttering was constant, I felt safe. To be fluent, to even speak a few words fluently was to set up an expectation in my father that I could be fluent, and create, in that expectation, a situation in which I felt bound to fail—and also that the fault was mine. The more I recreated this dynamic, the stronger the idea of myself as a stutterer became.

Yet what a burden my speech must have been in my father's eyes. He was a believer in possibilities, but in me all he saw was limitations. So he tried to deny them. I could do anything, or so he thought, even stop stuttering. Wasn't I fluent on the last word I said? On the one hand, his attitude pushed me to try stuff that, self-protective as I was, I never would have tried. On the other hand, he set me up, over and over again, for an inevitable fall.

In order to create a strong and positive self-image, I had to bury the ache that stuttering (and missed foul shots) caused me, squash it down in its box every time it threatened to appear. But I'm not all right, Jack (recalling that movie again). As I get older the box keeps opening and the repressed pain of half-a-lifetime keeps popping up. More and more, I lack the energy—and the desire—to force it shut. By repressing memories of stuttering in my youth, I have been able to create a private mythology that has sustained me through difficult (and usually disfluent) periods of my adult life. But there's also been a price to pay: a dulling of sensation, a desensitivity towards personal pain, an intellectuality that overwhelms my emotions. The coping mechanisms that I mastered as a kid are still

very much with me even though I no longer need them. The fears of speaking and the shame of being identified as someone with a flaw no longer exist—but it's a struggle to come unbound from them.

Sex, Lies, and The Telephone

Charles Van Riper, who lived a happy and productive life and therefore should have known better, once called stuttering “an impediment in social living.” And there is a stereotypical image of people who stutter (fostered by the psychoanalytic profession, about which more later) as socially inept losers. What makes that image so hurtful is that most of us who stutter have, at one time or another, bought into it. Just as striking out in an important baseball game made me feel like a lout, staying home on a Saturday night, when every other teenager in the world (or so I thought) seemed to be having fun on a date, made me feel like a social pariah—friendless, unloved, forlorn, and unwanted.

There are no studies comparing the lives of people who stutter with those who don't. If one looks at the membership of stuttering self-help groups, people who stutter seem to have boy or girlfriends, marry, have children, get divorced, marry again, and muck through life just like everyone else. But self-help groups probably represent a biased sample. These are the people who are actively dealing with their stuttering and have, to a degree, overcome the social difficulties that most every person who stutters suffers. Just as there are stutterers who are not bothered by their stuttering or who have so successfully overcome their disability that they feel no need for self-help, so there are stutterers who live isolated lives and wallow hopelessly in their stuttering problem. But there are also fluent people who lead sad and lonely lives in fear of the risk inherent in any human interaction. Everyone has flaws, after all. Most people see themselves as being either too fat, too thin, too small, too tall, too ugly, too awkward, too oafish, too this or too that—suffering always in comparison to the perfection they perceive in others. Those of us who stutter know how easy it is to give into the anxiety of social fears. That many of us seem to live social lives within the general norm is a triumph of pluck, persistence, and the insatiable (and evolutionarily necessary) human coupling desire.

Consider the verbal obstacles to a successful relationship, especially in an era when so much communication is dependent on using the

telephone. First, there is the challenge of introducing oneself (or of being introduced by a friend) to a stranger who doesn't know your darkest secret, a secret which is likely to be a secret no longer the first time you open your mouth. And, then, asking for the date: many people, in this situation, fear rejection; stutterers, however, fear the asking. So worried are we about not stuttering when asking for the date that we don't have any worrying-energy left to fret about the answer.

And suppose then that these initial obstacles are surmounted. A friendship begins, the relationship grows, you fall in love. Then comes the communication demands of a loving relationship. Intimate conversations, the sharing of precious secrets and the narrative of one's life. Small talk, love talk, kitchen talk, pillow talk. Imagine trying to whisper sweet nothings into your lover's ear and ending up blocking? One could, I imagine, fake it by blowing softly into a lover's ear. But when one is blocking, one is usually inhaling, holding oneself in, resisting the urge to communicate, to flow into and with the other. To love, on the other hand means, among others things, allowing oneself the risk of letting go, of breathing, exhaling, reaching out, and expressing oneself to the other.

My own stuttering has often served as a dependable love detector. Much to my wonderment, I could always—even as a teenager in the self-conscious throes of shyness—flirt fluently with girls. Of course, my style of flirting was based on my style of talking. I did best in groups where I did not have to initiate or further a conversation. As always, I kept to the background, coming in at the end of other people's sentences, commenting upon what they said rather than making bold statements of my own. It was only when I liked a girl that I began to stutter. And the more I liked her the more I was likely to stutter.

Being a flirt was the only role-identity that I could adopt for myself in which I didn't feel as if I was being dragged down by my stuttering. To flirt was to reinvent myself as an actor and become someone who I ordinarily wasn't. Flirting involved, first, something chemical—the physiological reaction to my natural attraction towards the opposite sex: flushed skin, a tingling sensation, an alertness and an electricity in the way I carried myself, in my body

movements and in my posture. Feet apart, my body swaying with the rhythm of my excitement and bobbing with the beat of my enthusiasm. “Doing my dance, my old soft shoe,” is how I would describe it when viewing myself from outside my body. I always thought that I moved in the way I did because bobbing and weaving was somehow sexy. But as I write this, in the context of this book about speech, I realize that my body movements were an aid to fluent speech. Rhythmic motions will often carry a stutterer through a block. I had created my particular style of flirting, not to fit some preconceived notion of what would seem sexy, but as a means of getting myself through stuttering blocks.

One flirts or, perhaps I should say, I flirted, not primarily to score. The pleasure for me is private, the joy I feel in being gregarious, getting out from under my social fears and stuttering shyness, the exuberance I feel in expressing a part of me that so often lays dormant, the pride, a lion-like pride, that comes from unabashedly proclaiming my own sexual power. It’s more difficult for me to flirt once I connect with the other person. Then we’re communicating. Back in my own body, I’m reunited with that part of me that stutters. It’s what I say that counts, not what style I’m affecting or how I’m moving.

In the first draft of this book, I wrote, “of course, in assuming this flirtatious role, I was being a total phony.” Upon reflection, I’m not so sure about that. Who’s to say that this role-identity or that role-identity is not as real as the role-identity we usually inhabit? What’s phony about getting out-of-oneself and playing the Lothario, or playing, as I did, the role of a John Wayne/Marlon Brando/James Dean mumbling hero.

The same goes for women, too, who, with the help of fashion, can change their image or identity every time they dress. My problem was that I could not imagine myself, for long, as anyone other than who I normally was. Safe, stolid, stuttering, everyday me. . . . Except when I’m flirting, I cannot play-act or assume a new identity. I believe that this has something to do with my stutter. So insistent am I on accepting myself with my stutter that I view with suspicion any desire to change. I interpret any effort to get out of myself, even if only to be playful, as a rejection of what I am: which I further interpret as a rejection of my stutter. Tempted to be

smooth and stylish, I hear an inner voice (it must be my own voice for I can't identify it as belonging to either of my parents) making a sardonic comment:

“Whatsamatter, you're not satisfied with who you are?”

To which I instantaneously and defensively respond, “I am satisfied! I am satisfied. I don't want to be anyone but me!”

Self-Help Heroes

Speak Easy has been running annual symposiums for more than fifteen years. I attended my first one in 1983 while I was still in the Schwartz program and before I got the Masker. I felt compelled to “check it out” lest I miss a magical opportunity for self-improvement, but I went with great wariness. Instead of seeing it as an opportunity to speak (and to try out my airflow technique in a sympathetic setting), I worried about how my own very fragile fluency would rate against the fluency of everyone else, and I feared that Speak Easy would be one of those touchy-feely organizations where people who barely know one another tell everyone how much they love them. I like to get to know someone before I hug them. I don’t love everyone—don’t even like everyone—and hate being manipulated into expressing emotions that I do not feel. I was further concerned that the participants would be people (like myself) who weren’t successful at therapy. I knew that I would be repelled by a mood of self-pity and victimization. This apprehension, which turned out unwarranted, reflected the isolation I still felt (despite my friends in the Boston and Montreal groups) as a stutterer, and the lingering feelings of disgust that I still felt about my own stuttering.

My first experience at a Speak Easy symposium didn’t all together quash my skepticism, but it fascinated me. I did pit my own stuttering against that of everyone else I listened to and was disheartened to find that I was one of the least fluent people at the symposium. Many people were graduates of Schwartz’s program and of Hollins and seemed to be functionally fluent. As for victimization, I didn’t see that attitude in the other participants, but the experience of being a severe stutterer among so many recovering stutterers brought it out in myself. I ate lunch with three members (who are now friends) and who were all fairly fluent. Listening to them make small talk caused me to feel sorry for myself. I coped by not speaking (and therefore not stuttering).

The Symposium's saving event was a talk by a man named Ames who, I was told, was a successful tax accountant and the head of the Speak Easy chapter in New York City. Ames took the podium with a prepared speech consisting of many pages. He proceeded to stutter on virtually every word and sometimes blocked with no sound coming out for many seconds. I felt a guilty glee that, ha! here is someone who speaks worse than I. But my glee turned to impatience when I realized that he intended to read every word on every page of his speech. Were I him, I thought (thankful that I wasn't), I'd skip the whole middle section—make my introductory remarks and then jump right into the finale. “Ladies and gentlemen,” I would have said, “I would like to conclude by thanking you for listening to me.”

But Ames persisted. The others in the audience sat there, keeping eye contact with him, not fidgeting, hanging on to his every stuttered word. When he finished, they all applauded, and then went up to tell him how well he did. I was dumbfounded. The cynic in me thought, “of course, we're applauding: he's done!” But I knew that was a cheapshot. I felt like the unknowing Mr. Jones in that old Bob Dylan song. Something was happening here and I didn't know what it was. It was only when I got home and thought about it that I came to understand that instead of being obsessed by his fluency (or lack of it) as I was, the others were responding to his courage. Their compliments were not expressions of empty sentiment but deep admiration. If he could get up and speak like that in public, so could they—and so could I.

It was my memory of Ames' speech that inspired me to go to the second symposium. This time I wasn't a stranger. People from the first year remembered me and seemed sincerely glad that I had come back. They engaged me in small talk. I started to stop judging my own speech. The other participants began to take on personalities of their own. I was amazed at the diversity of the group but no one fit the image of hapless, pathetic stutterer that still persisted in my consciousness. I started enjoying myself, and I've been to most every Symposium thereafter.

After my second symposium, Bob Gathman, the head of Speak Easy, called and asked if I wanted to be on a panel the next year. I couldn't say, “no.” I was proud to be asked but terrified at the

thought. I forget what the topic was, but I was very nervous making my presentation and I stuttered badly. Afterwards, I received many compliments. My cynicism of “...but I stuttered” started to give way to a more gracious, “well, at least I did it.” Those two sides of me are still embattled, but graciousness is winning.

I’ve been on a Speak Easy panel at almost every Symposium since. My nervousness has slowly given way to anticipation. I’m no longer anxious weeks before the event, and my palms no longer sweat when I’m introduced. If anything, the stress I feel is more the result of excitement than it is of apprehension. Each year, I feel less fearful of stuttering and more in control of my emotions. Moreover, I’ve learned to appreciate the compliments as earned credit. I’m told—and I believe it—that my example has inspired others to become more open about their stuttering and start speaking more in public. I’ve become a role model, just as Ames Bleda was a role model for me. That is the power of mutual aid, the idea that underlies self help.

At first, I carefully prepared my remarks; now I like to wing my way through a presentation. This may not be the best strategy for fluency. Ames for example, is now almost fluent when he reads prepared remarks, but his stuttering reasserts itself when he’s speaking spontaneously. With me, it’s the other way around. Reading from a printed page inhibits me. Perhaps this reflects a shortcoming, my own lack of discipline. But spontaneous speech feels natural to me. I like to compare myself to a jazz musician riffing. I generally know what I’m going to say and I never substitute words in order to avoid a block. But I like to improvise, play with words and hone ideas. But perhaps it’s not jazz that inspires me, but the habits of a writer. I like to edit as I speak, and so come closer to achieving the emotional truth of what I want to say. With practice, I’m learning to monitor my speech by momentarily detaching myself from the substance of what I am saying in order to focus on how I am speaking. It’s not easy for me to make that break. Sometimes I concentrate on speaking slowly and throw in occasional voluntary stutters. Other times I pay more attention to my presence as a speaker: Am I making eye contact? Using my hands appropriately? Pausing in appropriate places? Do I have the patience to carefully describe a scene in order to make a point—or even (and

here's where timing is everything) tell a joke. We who stutter know so little about speaking in public. We expend so much energy trying not to stutter that we rarely focus on the positive things we need to do in order to communicate effectively.

No Such Thing As Failure

In 1992, Einer Boberg, a highly regarded Canadian speech pathologist (who died in 1995), spoke at a Speak Easy Symposium about the latest neurological research. A stutterer himself, Boberg said that his lifelong quest to answer the puzzle of stuttering had led him from the specialized field of speech pathology to the field of neuropsychology where, he said, the answers to the puzzle would ultimately be found. As the founder and director of one of Canada's best known speech clinics, Boberg was intent on discovering why some stutterers responded to therapy, while others, despite their motivation and hard work, did not. Although evidence is not conclusive, he said, "there is growing indications that stutterers have some type of central nervous system deficit which might account for the differences between stutterers and normal speakers as well as the differences between groups of stutterers in their response to therapy..."

"Some stutterers have a substantial deficit and will need to struggle heroically to gain control, and will need to monitor almost continually to maintain control over their unruly system," Boberg said. "Other stutterers with less neuropsychological involvement may be able to gain speech control rather quickly, switch to automatic pilot and maintain those gains with little effort."

"It will no longer be appropriate," Boberg concluded, to aim for 100% fluency or control. "We are now recognizing that most stutterers, who start therapy as adults or teens, will likely have to work at controlling their stutter for many years, if not their entire life."

More and more speech pathologists, frustrated by the number of clients who go through therapy and either are not helped or are helped for a while but then, out on their own, quickly relapse, agree with this view. Dr. Eugene Cooper, the chair of the Department of Communication Disorders at the University of Alabama, who, in his early days as a therapist focused on what he believed to be the psychological cause of stuttering, now concludes that "there are different types of stuttering, that stuttering results

from multiple, co-existing, and interactive physiological, psychological, and environmental factors, and that not all of stuttering is curable.” Dr. Cooper has coined a term, “Chronic Perseverative Syndrome”—or “CPS”—to identify the approximately one in five who have disfluency problems in childhood and who, because of the severity of their core problem, will never be totally fluent, except, perhaps, through lifelong struggle.

I believe that I am among the one in five who, in Dr. Cooper’s estimate, fit the CPS diagnosis. I believe that I will always stutter and will always have to work on my speech in order to make it more palatable to my listeners and to myself. That my difficulties in therapy have now been recognized as having an objective cause, is a great relief to me....

The idea that stuttering is, for some people, incurable, strikes some stutterers and therapists as defeatist. Cooper himself has been accused by colleagues of presenting a “doomsday message” and, by claiming that for some a cure is impossible, violating professional ethics.

The idea that stuttering might be caused by an organic neurological flaw is similarly contentious. On an internet discussion group on stuttering, I, and others who believe in a neurological cause, have been accused of rationalizing our own failure at therapy, and looking for an excuse not to try and improve our speech. At an NSP workshop on holistic therapy, one speech pathologist assailed proponents of CPS for giving up on their clients.

All children are born perfect, he insisted, and all stutterers can achieve fluency if they want it badly enough. In other words, those who don’t become fluent have no one to blame but themselves. I don’t buy that and neither should you.

What people believe about the cause of stuttering has nothing to do with what stutterers can do to improve their speech. Those who argue for a neurological cause do not dismiss the importance that psychological and environmental issues play on stuttering. A neurological disfunction creates the predisposition to stutter. Stress-inducing psychological and social (environmental) factors bring the actual incidents of stuttering on.

John Harrison, with his hexagonal paradigm, is correct in showing the interaction of learned behaviors on the physiological flaw. The first incidents of stuttering in childhood may be a direct result of neurological mis-wiring. But the experience of childhood stuttering transforms speech, which should be natural and easy) into an abnormally difficult psycho- emotional nightmare.

And it's that nightmare, different in content for each individual stutterer, that creates the psycho- emotional environmental stressors that bring about the actual stuttering. With some who stutter, the neurological defect is great while in others it is slight. One can work to improve oneself at all the other learned hexagonal points and still end up with a core stuttering problem. Others who stutter may have only a minor neurological glitch but deep psycho-emotional problems as a result of their mild stuttering. What Boberg and Cooper are saying, and what I believe, is that even with the best speech therapy, psychological counseling, stress management, and the mutual support and inspiration that comes from participation in self-help, some of us are still going to stutter. Just as there are many fluent people who are miserable, chronic stuttering doesn't preclude one's living a useful and happy life.

I may fail the fluency test most every time I open my mouth, but I'm pretty satisfied (and sometimes astonished) by what I've done with my life....

Stutterers of my generation grew up ignorant about our disability. We didn't have internet discussion groups, self-help groups, or phone pals to help us. Therapists knew very little about what they were doing, raised false expectations and made promises they couldn't fulfill, and blamed their failures on the clients.

Times have changed. Early intervention can do wonders for preschoolers. Parents are no longer made to feel guilty for their child's stuttering; nor do they need to feel helpless as their child struggles. There is a lot parents can do to help their children overcome early childhood fluency problems. Success is not sure-fire, however. Some children, even with good therapy and understanding parents, will end up like me, chronic stutterers. But there is no longer a need to feel despair or be isolated. There's less rivalry among therapists and their programs now and more willingness to

learn from what their clients are telling them.

The best therapists have learned to integrate different forms of speech therapy. A program of precision fluency may work for one client; while another might respond best to stuttering modification. More and more therapists are coming to understand that perfect fluency is not always a helpful goal. And that psychological counseling may be necessary to prepare a stutterer for beneficial speech therapy. Most important of all, a stuttering community now exists to provide guidance and support for children and their parents and for adults who stutter.

That's not to say that all is perfect. There's a lot of bad advice emanating from pediatricians and psychologists who still think stuttering is a form of neurotic behavior, or that if you don't talk about stuttering, the child will outgrow it. Despite a lot of dedicated speech/language pathologists, few SLPs are adequately trained in stuttering therapy, and in many public school districts, speech therapy is inadequate.

It took me most of my life to learn about stuttering and to come to understand my own speaking disability. Knowledge of stuttering is now available to anyone who cares to look for it and listen.

Electronic Fluency Aids

Article from the ASHA SID4 newsletter (October 1999)

This article is about electronic devices for stuttering. Some call them “fluency aids.” I prefer the term “anti-struggling” devices, because what they do is change the nature of my stuttering and, as a result, remove the burden of stuttered speech. Few people who stutter are familiar with them. Other than through self-help and internet discussion groups, there is no way for the manufacturers of these devices to advertise their existence. In the past, speech pathologists were hostile towards their use, but that hostility has diminished. While some professionals still oppose their use as a matter of principle (stutterers should not depend on a “crutch” for fluency), most professionals are simply unaware of their existence or, if they are aware, have never seen them used.

In addition to describing some of the devices, I will argue that electronic devices can play an important role in helping stutterers communicate more effectively. They can be put to good use in therapy programs, especially in transfer situations. And they can help young people overcome the traumatic experience of giving public presentations in school. These devices, I will argue, need to be taken more seriously by the professional community.

A brief personal note: I’m 58 and still, measurably, a severe stutterer. I’ve had every kind of therapy imaginable. I’ve been through the Hollins precision fluency shaping twice, the second-time for free because early on during my first three-week session, Dr. Ronald Webster, who heads the program, noted my difficulty achieving a proper gentle onset, even within the confines of the clinic. I’ve used electronic devices since 1984. I still stutter, but not as badly. I’ve become, thanks to the example and encouragement of members of Speak Easy and the National Stuttering Association (formerly National Stuttering Project)—as well as to the portable DAF and Edinburgh Masker devices I use when speaking—an effective

public speaker, not only at self-help gatherings but in meetings of people who do not stutter.

The electronic devices I am familiar with are the Edinburgh Masker and those manufactured by Thomas David Kehoe of Casa Futura Technology. I have used the Masker for more than fifteen years. In the past year or so, I've been experimenting with the Casa Futura's devices. All are portable and battery-operated. Each consists of a small box-like unit that can be worn (and hidden) on a belt or in a pocket. Two wires (hidden under a shirt) attach to the unit. One goes to a dime-sized throat microphone that can be taped (with double-sided tape) to a point on the neck near the vocal chords (it can also be held tight to the spot with an elastic band). The second wire goes to inconspicuous earphones (there are a variety in use). When you speak, you hear a particular noise (depending on the device) and this will aid your fluency.

The Edinburgh Masker produces white noise, a masking sound that drowns out the sound of your own voice. The noise stays on for a fraction of a second after you stop speaking. This allows you to move easily from one word to the next without the masking sound switching on and off. The Masker, which comes from the United Kingdom, is no longer being manufactured, but I've heard from the British Stammerers Association that production might be resumed.

Thomas David Kehoe, himself a person who stutters, manufactures three units. Two are portable. A pocket DAF (delayed auditory feedback) unit and a newer FAF (frequency-shifted auditory feedback) unit. Kehoe also manufactures a desktop model for use with a telephone. Phone companies in some states will provide them free of charge to people who stutter. (For information, contact Casa Futura). The desktop models are also used in clinics. They contain components that enable clients to monitor their precision-shaping fluency targets. Many speech clinics use them. I used the desktop model for the telephone and will attest to its effectiveness. But my focus here is on the portable pocket models.

Electronic devices do not cure stuttering; no unit I know of produces perfect or automatic fluency. Each type of device seems to work differently for different people. And studies show different rates of improvement for different people. Some units have a carry-

over effect, but not for everyone. There is, I believe, a general consensus that these devices will improve the speech—to a lesser or greater degree—for most everyone who uses them.

In my case, the more conscious I am of using speech techniques (for me, slowing down and using voluntary stuttering) the more success I have with the devices. Once I begin vocalization, my speech comes fairly easily. I still stumble on consonants but my speech moves forward. Speech is no longer an exhausting effort. I still stutter, but I speak effectively.

I don't have much faith in subjective self-reporting (especially my own) and wish that my speech could be studied with and without one of these devices. Empirically, I know that they have made a difference. Friends who I've not seen in a long time almost always comment on my improved speech. More to the point, I speak more, and in all situations.

I always battled my fear of speech. To me, avoiding speech is worse than the actual spasms of stuttering. But sometimes speech was just too difficult—for me and my listeners. There were many times, before I used the Masker, that I wanted to speak but chose to keep silent.

Now I don't fear talking. Conversation is no longer an issue for me. I consider myself fluent, even though I am still stuttering. With the help of my devices, I've joined Toastmasters, and have come to delight in public speaking, not only at self-help conventions for people who stutter but for audiences of fluent people.

A few days ago, I spoke up at my local school board meeting. It was a heated topic, there was a large audience, and it was being broadcast live on cable access TV. I stuttered, but I held the attention of the audience. Without my DAF unit, I wouldn't have done it. It wasn't the fear of stuttering in public that would have stopped me. It was my level of disfluency; without my portable DAF, the audience would not have understood me. And that, not the fact of my stuttering, would have been humiliating.

I am most comfortable with the Masker, because I've used it longest. The noise sometimes bothers me, as do the plastic (custom-shaped) earplugs. On hot days, my perspiration sometimes short-circuits the

unit. (C'est la vie). The Casa Futura devices also have this problem, though the FAF and DAF sounds are much more easier to take than the white noise of the Masker.

The Masker (like the DAF) encourages monotonous speech. It wasn't difficult to overcome this drawback. I learned very quickly to make myself aware of inflection and speech dynamics. No one has ever called me a monotonous speaker.

Kehoe has suggested that the Masking sound, because of its harshness, adds tension to the vocal folds (taking away at least some of the advantage that the unit initially provides). I think he is right. The DAF and FAF seem to be much more relaxing, but again this is self-reporting. I would encourage a study that measures the effect of these devices on vocal folds tension.

The DAF is my unit of choice for public speaking. It slows my speech and seems to relax my speaking mechanism. I'll use it next week in a "humorous story" competition at my Toastmaster chapter. And I'll use it later at a writer's convention when I'm on a panel about "memoir writing." The problem with DAF is that it tends to pick-up background noise.

Not only do you hear your own speech in a delayed sequence, but you hear what other people are saying with a similar delay. This makes conversation difficult. Kehoe's unit allows you to lower the sensitivity of the microphone pick-up. This does cut down background noise, but it also lowers the volume of the DAF. I know two users who do well with their pocket DAF in conversation. I'm still trying to find an effective balance.

Speaking with the FAF unit is like choral reading. You hear the sound of your own voice as you are speaking. It's possible to adjust the pitch, and I'm still trying to find the optimum setting. Sometimes it works well when the pitch is only slightly altered. Other times it works better when what I hear is the sound of my voice a half or full-octave lower. I've yet to try it at a higher-pitch. For me, the FAF is a work-in-progress. It does lessen my disfluency and diminish my facial and speaking tension. How much? I wish I were part of a study.

Many severe stutterers, who suffer from what Dr. Eugene Cooper

calls “chronic perseverative syndrome” (CPS), could make use of these devices. These are stutterers who simply can’t communicate. An electronic aid could ease their struggle and allow them to communicate—even with a residual stutter.

Ultimately, the choice is up to the individual stutterer. But I would like speech pathologists to present these units as an option, especially for their clients who are having trouble transferring their techniques into real-world situations.

These units could also be offered to moderate stutters as an aid to public speaking, job interviews, and all those high-stress situations where good communication is necessary. A little boost in fluency could help them in their careers, in their studies, and in their social and civic activities.

What about teens and children? I’d hate for children to become dependent on a device so much so that they’d give up speech therapy. On the other hand, these units, especially, the DAF device, can be an aid to therapy, helping the client to slow down and use techniques, even in difficult transfer situations.

There is nothing more devastating for a child who stutters than giving an oral presentation in class and not being able to get a fluent word out. For many kids, the humiliation they feel in class affects their self-esteem and their identity. Kids who are defeated by speech may have difficulty responding to therapy. The weight of defeat is simply too overwhelming.

An electronic device is no substitute for a sympathetic counselor, but it might make speaking in class less traumatic. Speaking success in a classroom setting would, I am sure, have a positive affect on the way children who stutter feel about themselves. And this could have a useful carryover affect on their attitude towards therapy, and of helping themselves.

The Casa Futura devices and the Edinburgh Masker are not the only electronic aids on the market, but they are the ones I’m familiar with. My plea, again, is that specialists in stuttering look at these devices as useful adjuncts to formal therapy. And that researchers gather some data on their effectiveness in real-life transfer situation. Electronic devices may, indeed, be a “crutch.” But some

of us are, in fact, verbal “crips.” People with hearing problems are encouraged to use hearing aids. Why, then, aren’t people who stutter encouraged to use fluency aids?

Not all will choose to use them, but the choice should be ours.

TRIBUTE TO MARTY JEZER

Originally posted to STUTT-L@LISTSERV.TEMPLE.EDU on June 20, 2005, and added here with permission of the author, Alan Badmington:

I was saddened to learn of Marty Jezer's passing.

My first contact with Marty occurred towards the end of 2000, when he emailed me shortly after I joined the ranks of Stutt-L. We learned that we had many things in common. We were of a similar age and belonged to a unique group of persons who stutter. Marty and I were both long-term users of the Edinburgh Masker, having acquired the small mechanical device back in the 1970's.

The majority of Edinburgh Masker owners discarded the apparatus many years ago due to lack of success and/or personal discomfort. Each time the wearer spoke, his/her own voice was obliterated by a buzzing sound, activated by a throat microphone and transmitted via wires/tubing and ear moulds. I persevered and wore my 'mechanical crutch' for more than two decades, while Marty had probably used his for nearly 30 years.

Although the device never provided Marty with a great degree of fluency, he frequently told me that he simply felt more comfortable while wearing it. We agreed that it gave

us the confidence to venture into speaking situations that we might, otherwise, have avoided.

During our many exchanges, we discovered that (in the 1960's) we had both attended a two weeks course in Jersey (a small island located between the UK and France), run by the late Dr Bill Kerr (from Scotland). With his typical frankness, Marty often referred to Kerr as a charlatan.

In addition to our lengthy emails, we also chatted by telephone and expressed a desire to meet in person. I mentioned that I was intending to cross the Atlantic to attend the National Stuttering Association Annual Convention in Anaheim, California in 2002. Initially, Marty doubted that he would be able to attend, but re-scheduled his commitments to be present. I was elated.

During the conference, we spent a considerable time in each other's company and I was thrilled that he found time to sit in on two of the workshops in which I was involved. I have just been looking at a photograph of Marty, Junior Tereva and me that was taken at the closing banquet. It brought back some poignant memories.

Those who had the privilege of meeting Marty could not fail to have been impressed by his immense presence. Despite his pronounced stutter (even when wearing his Edinburgh Masker) he was an excellent communicator. Although initially apprehensive about addressing audiences, he told me that relished the opportunities that had presented themselves during recent years.

My contact with Marty during the past year, or so, was

somewhat limited, although we continued to exchange emails from time to time. As some of you may know, production of the Edinburgh Masker ceased many years ago, making acquisition of spare parts problematical. However, as a result of my involvement with several Internet groups, I occasionally became aware of PWS who were in possession of surplus models/components. I passed this information to Marty.

I last called him several months ago when (unknown to me) he had just received some further treatment. We spoke only briefly because he was feeling tired and I arranged to call him at a later date. Sadly, I never did make that call.

Like myself (and many other PWS), Marty had a great affinity for the written word. He was a superb writer and journalist. He was also a warm human being who inspired and encouraged others by refusing to allow his stutter to stand in the way of whatever he wished to do in life. He achieved so much - his contributions were wide and varied.

Marty will be sadly missed, particularly within the stuttering community where he was held in such high esteem. My thoughts go out to his family and loved ones at this time.

Though his pen may now be silent, time will never erase the indelible memories that I retain of a truly remarkable man. Alan Badmington, Wales, UK