

Sometimes We Are Fluent,
Sometimes We Are Not...Why?

By Roddy Grubbs

SOMETIMES WE ARE FLUENT, SOMETIMES WE ARE NOT. WHY?

Various participants in a neurosemantics group on Yahoo have recently stated the following thoughts and wonderings in this question:

“Why are we fluent in the therapist office and then once we leave we have difficulties?”

How the heck does the brain know I am talking to my cat and not a live, breathing person (I stutter among all people)?

Why is it we can sing and be fluent regardless of the audience?

Myself, I can feel fluency when I am alone even before forming a word with my mouth....there is a blockage somewhere in the brain when talking to a JUDGEMENTAL PRESENCE. I capitalize judgemental presence because most PWS can talk to an animal and be fluent...

I am ... completely fluent and relaxed when speaking to my dog or a very young child.

For persons who stutter (PWS), these real-life situations wreak havoc in one's life and psyche.

Why do I always block when speaking to a JUDGEMENTAL PRESENCE?

Why can I be fluent when in situation A, but I stutter in situation B?

Why do I freeze up in situation C, but speak freely in situation D?

Why is it easy to speak in situation E, but almost impossible to say anything in situation F?

Why is this happening to me and I seem to have no control over it?

What in the hell is going on anyway, damn it?

I've struggled with those questions. I've anguished with them; I've felt utterly frustrated by my experience with them. I've cried as I felt helpless in the spotlight of their illumination. I've yelled and screamed in bitter anger at the seeming wall beyond which I could not get. I've walked in these shoes.

But let's step back from that whirling vortex of energy and frustration. Let's stand to the side in a place of safety, and observe this and talk about this some.

Whew!

What is not happening here is that there is not a mechanical or electrical or digital mechanism that is firing off and "doing this to me". There is no virus in my system, no bacteria in my blood that "causes" these things to occur (as though I could get a shot or a vaccine to cure myself).

There is no defective or aberrant gene that "makes me stutter". There is no radio frequency chip buried in my body that receives a signal and then fires off this dreaded thing called stuttering.

At the core of what is happening is my "EVALUATION" of the situation that I have encountered. Some situations are evaluated as benign; others as "danger". When a situation is encountered, I first sense it, then I perceive it, then I evaluate it; and all of this occurs faster than I can blink my eyelids. My "brain and being" "recognize" this situation to be "just like" some other situation that I have encountered in my life.

My brain and being "know" how to respond to my evaluation – they've learned this starting a long time

ago, they repeat their response unwaveringly, and they have a deep and long memory of “what to do about this”.

They activate this memory by sending out chemical and electrical messages to my body about how to respond: how to stand, how to hold my head, how to tighten or to loosen my thoracic muscles, where to focus or not to focus my eyes, how much to engage the muscles of what is called the Valsalva mechanism, whether to flee or fight or stay relaxed, who I am – what is my stature – in relation to what I have encountered, and on and on this goes.

When I evaluate a situation as “danger”, I have found that sometimes I have some conscious awareness of this evaluation; like if one says “when I encounter a JUDGMENTAL PRESENCE, then...” One has a little conscious awareness of this evaluation, as evidenced by labeling this as “JUDGMENTAL PRESENCE”.

But, most of the time all of this evaluating takes place “within me but outside of my conscious awareness”. Evaluating happens this way many more times than the other way. That’s part of why I have cried out in anguish “why is this happening to me?”

So, let’s talk about this “EVALUATING” a little bit.

I need and desire to know what is going on in the evaluating that is occurring “within me but outside of my conscious awareness”.

I approach it from the perspective that the parts of my being that are doing this lightening fast evaluating (a) are not stupid, (b) are not at war with my conscious awareness, and (c) are working real hard to achieve something that it feels is a very positive thing to be achieved for me.

So, I welcome it as “my friend”. It is part of me that is trying to help me. It only wants “what is best” for me – that is, what’s best as “it” sees it. I can trust this part of me. It is my friend.

So, I get into a quiet place, alone, and I think back to a “troublesome situation” wherein I was stuttering (actually, I do more than merely think back, I really focus on it and step back into it as though it were happening again), and I think “OK, what are you trying to do for me?”, “how are you trying to help me?”, “what do you believe is actually happening here?” I welcome any and all responses.

In my own case, I have learned that when I evaluate a situation as “danger”, then “my brain and being” try to protect me from that danger. I ask “what is the danger and how are you trying to protect me?” Protecting me from danger started when I was very, very young –

even at birth.

The danger might be verbal, or even physical; but it is perceived as “a danger to my safety and well being”, as threatening in every way. “My being” reacts both in ways that came natural to it and in ways that it has learned, as it tries to protect me. And “my being” has been protecting me for all of my life.

And so it continues today. At the heart of my responses to some things – at the heart of my evaluation that this situation is “danger” – is a physiological response to tighten my thoracic muscles, to engage the muscles that make up what is called the Valsalva mechanism, and to respond with heightened anxiety, stress, edging toward panic.

And guess what? When I respond in this way, it is just about impossible for me to breathe in any way that approaches “normal”. That means that almost instantly air is not flowing out over my vocal chords. And speech cannot occur if air is not flowing out over one’s vocal chords. I can fight against that all I want, but “no air out equals no sounds”, let alone any speech.

Now, layer on top of the tensed up thoracic muscles and fully engaged Valsalva muscles, some anxiety, fear, anxiousness about being unable to speak as I

want to speak, worry over what others are thinking, suppressed anger over “what is happening to me”, and, buddy, you’ve got the perfect ingredients for blocking and halting and cutting off my own words..... one great case of “stuttering”. But, that stuttering is just the symptom of the real problem! The *real problem* is how I respond when I evaluate a situation as “dangerous”.....yes?

As I began to “understand myself and my reactions” better, I also began to work on changing the seemingly “natural and immediate” response that I had to these situations. For various reasons, I had difficulty “retraining my brain and being” to respond in different ways than the ways they had learned to respond. I remember once even thinking “don’t tell me not to believe what I believe! I know what I believe and you aren’t going to change that!”

Then it dawned on me to approach this differently. Since “my brain and being” were trying to protect me from real and harmful dangers, I saw that they were simply trying to do what they know how to do; “doing that task” is their strength.

They are quite accomplished and skilled at doing what they know best to do. Therefore, don’t fight that, don’t try to change that; use that strength, but try to redirect it a little. Let them keep doing what they do best, but

just shift their focus.

So, I started telling myself, “You know, the REAL danger out there is not what someone will say to me, nor what they might try to do to me. I’m a grown man. I’m strong. I’m aware and alert. I can and will handle those more minor dangers. Instead, the REAL danger is that I would go into a panic, seize up all of my muscles, not be able to move, not be able to breathe, just flat out panic and turn into a mumbling ball of jello! Now that’s THE REAL danger.

So, “brain and being”, protect me from THAT danger. Do what you do best and protect me from what REALLY threatens me!

My naturally learned way to respond to something perceived/evaluated as “danger” was to panic and to experience great anxiety. But now, let’s shift that around. “Brain and being”, protect me from the danger of my panicking and “doing anxiety”. That danger is the real and present danger from which you, quite skilled and able, can do a great job of protecting me.

When I sense “danger”, protect me from “the danger of panicking in this situation” by keeping me calm and relaxed. Relax my thoracic muscles. Relax my Valsalva muscles. Breathe deeply into my lungs, expand my abdomen. Stand tall. Look someone in the

eye. Feel proud and strong.

Think about the mental images that stimulate a feeling of strength and courage. Think about the mental images that stimulate a feeling of “relax”. Yes, continue to be my friend, my guardian, and protect me from the biggest danger that I face. And renew this mission and purpose every day. Repeat this consciously over and over; it will be good for me to have all of these thoughts fire off in the blink of an eye!

And guess what? When I evaluate a situation in this way, air flows out over my vocal chords easily and naturally. I am in a great state of mind. Speech flows easily. My “brain and being” have protected me once again. It has fulfilled its mission. It has performed its intention. It has again done what it does best.

I have found this all very useful for me. I try to focus my thoughts on these thoughts every day, instead of simply letting my mind think whatever it might naturally turn to and think about.

This kind of refocusing for my brain and inner being has given me a way to move through and beyond the questions and frustrations that arise out of being fluent sometimes but not others.

The tools that I use are the same tools that every single one of us has to begin or to continue the journey of changing how we evaluate situations and of creating new paths to explore.