

ANATOMY OF A BLOCK

BY JOHN C. HARRISON

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One day back in the spring of 1982 I walked into a camera shop on 24th street near where I live in San Francisco to pick up some prints.

The clerk, a pretty young girl, was at the other end of the counter, and when I came in, she strolled over to wait on me.

"What's your name?" she asked.

That question used to throw me into a panic, because I always blocked on my name. Always. But by 1982 stuttering was no longer an issue. Never thought about it. I liked talking to people, and never worried about speech, because my blocks had all but disappeared.

I started to say "Harrison", and suddenly found myself in a panic; I was locked up and totally blocked. All the old, familiar feelings had come back. I could feel my heart pounding.

So I stopped, took a breath, allowed myself to settle down, and while the woman stared at me, collected myself enough to say "Harrison."

I walked out of the store with my prints, feeling frazzled and totally mystified. Where in the world had that block come from?

Why had I suddenly fallen into the old pattern?

Stuttering was the furthest thing from my mind when I walked in. I never thought about stuttering any more, because it never happened, so I knew it wasn't a fear of stuttering that caused me to block.

At that point I did what I had always done in previous years when stuttering was a problem. I began playing the event over and over in my mind, trying to notice as much detail as possible to see if I could spot any clues, something that would explain what was going on.

"Where was the woman when I walked in?" I asked myself.

Let's see. I pictured the layout of the store. I had come in and stood at the cash register. The woman was at the other end of the counter talking to someone.

"Who was the other person? Anything significant in that?"

It was a guy.

"And what did he look like?"

Hmmmmmm. Oh yeah, he was a biker. Tough looking. Had tattoos on his arms and was wearing a Levi's vest.

"What else did you notice?"

Well, the two of them seemed to like talking to each other. The guy appeared very much taken with the girl.

"How did he seem to you?"

Scary looking. Reminded me of the tough guys on the block when I was a kid. I remember those guys. They lived in the next town. They all had mean looking eyes, and they petrified me.

"How did you respond to people like him when you were a kid?"

Well, if I were on the street when several tough guys passed by, I would make myself invisible so they couldn't see me and hassle me. I'd suck all my energy in. I'd blend into the background. I'd look like a tree, or a bush, or a brick wall. No energy would radiate from me until they had passed. Nothing.

"Did you have any other feelings or observations about the biker in the store?"

I guess I felt like I'd interrupted an important conversation, because the two of them were getting on so well together.

"How did that make you feel?"

I reviewed the scene once more, trying to recall how I felt. How did I feel? I really concentrated, and a malaise swept across me. The it came to me. I was worried that if he'd be irked because the girl had left him to wait on me.

"So what was your response in such situations when you were a kid?"

I'd hold back. I didn't want to stand out. I didn't want to seem too strong or too assertive.

"Because...."

Because it would put me in danger. The guy might give me trouble, so I didn't want him to " see" me.

"So in the camera store you...."

Right. I slipped back into the old program. I held back. I blocked my energy. I tried to make myself invisible, just like in the old days.

I had no sooner come to realize this than all the muscles in my neck and shoulders relaxed, all the muscles that had tightened during the moment of panic in the photo shop.

I know what you're thinking: that I was just trying to find a logical explanation for what happened. But that's not been my experience. Through the years I've noticed that when I

stumble on a truth, I have a physical reaction...a release. It's happened enough times so I've learned to recognize the signs.

Today, there's no doubt that I had stumbled on the answer. This brief experience taught me something. I used to think that I stuttered because I was afraid I was going to stutter. I thought that everything revolved around my fear of being blocked, and how people might react. That was undoubtedly true in many cases. But not always. And certainly not in this instance when stuttering was furthest from my mind.

I had an art teacher once who gave me an excellent piece of advice. I was taking a drawing class and was having trouble sketching the model who was standing arms akimbo. I just couldn't get the arms to look right. The teacher came over, watched me for a few minutes and then said, "Look at the spaces."

"Huh?"

"Look at the spaces. Instead of focusing all your attention on the outline of the arms, look at the spaces around the arms. Notice the empty space in the middle that's created when the model puts her hand on her hip. Study the shape of that space. Then draw it."

I noticed it.

I drew it.

And the drawing came magically together.

You can learn to do this around stuttering by looking at the spaces. Look at the experiences around the speech block, not just at the stuttering, itself.

See if you can tell what's going on.

What are you seeing?

What are you thinking and feeling?

What are your expectations, perceptions and beliefs?

Many of the answers to why you're holding back are hidden there. If you keep your mind open and don't allow yourself to obsessively focus only on your speech, you will begin to discover many interesting and useful things.