

THE FEELING OF FLUENCY

BY John Harrison

The Feeling of Fluency

What is it like to be fluent? What does it actually *feel* like? When those who stutter think about fluency, their focus is almost always on their speech, rather than on their feelings. They see fluency as simply an absence of blocking. They believe that once fluent, they will be exactly the same person they are now; only their speech will change.

But fluency goes far beyond that. Fluency is a state of being. This state of being is called for whenever a person is called upon to perform any spontaneous act.

Real fluency is not about controlling speech...or about controlling anything for that matter. It's about letting go, so that blocks become irrelevant.

Real fluency is about speaking without self-consciousness. You have an intention to express a thought or an idea, and suddenly, you realize you've done so. It just seems to happen.

This mindset will be found, not just in speech, but also in other forms of expression where the person operates fluently and intuitively without any awareness of self.

What follows is a short collection of personal stories that illustrate the components required to create the *experience* of true fluency.

Why have I used stories?

I discovered years ago that the best way to communicate an idea is by framing it in real life experience. You may think that some of the details are unnecessary. However, I've found that when I want to understand what someone else has experienced, it helps for me to be there with them, in their skin, to understand what they're thinking and feeling. I want to feel what they felt. So let me take you along on some personal journeys that helped to clarify my difficulty with the feeling of fluency.

THE NEED TO SURRENDER

This first story is an account of how I learned to read at 3,000 words a minute and then lost the skill because I could not tolerate the feeling of fluency.

"Whoa!" you're probably thinking. "People can't

read that fast and actually understand what they're reading."

Not true. A certain percentage of the population is comprised of naturally fast readers. President John F. Kennedy was one of those people. So was my sister Joan. Back in grammar school, Joan routinely read two to three books every weekend. And she comprehended everything she read.

Most people crawl along at 200 to 300 words per minute. They're constantly going back to reread sentences and paragraphs. By contrast, Joan could read an entire novel standing in a bookstore and be able to tell you what she read. I've met people who could read at 10,000 words a minute. And I've heard of one woman who could read at 50,000 words a minute by running her eyes down one page and up the facing page.

I know this sounds unbelievable. It did to me, too. And if I hadn't learned to read at 3,000 words per minute, I never would have believed it.

There are some interesting parallels between verbal fluency and reading "fluency." They involve a similar mindset. I'm going to tell you about how I learned to read at super fast speeds, how I lost that ability, and what I learned from that experience that related directly to my stuttering.

READING DYNAMICS

One day back in the mid-1960s I happened to notice a newspaper ad for a speed reading program. It was called Evelyn Wood Reading Dynamics, and I was totally stunned by their claims. The typical ad for remedial reading classes talked about doubling or tripling one's reading speed. That by itself would have been compelling. But the ad for Reading Dynamics was promising much more.

"Imagine," said the ad, "that you were able to read at speeds as high as 4,000 or 5,000 words a minute.

"Impossible," I thought. "Must be a misprint." I read it again. No, that's what it said; in fact, those same high reading speeds were alluded to several times in the ad.

In those days I was reading around 200-300 words a minute, so the idea of increasing my reading speed 15 times was an outrageous thought. Yet, the ad quoted people who said they were reading at astronomical speeds. Of course, I couldn't resist, and the next week I signed up.

In the first class I attended at a downtown hotel, Doreen, the instructor, explained that this would be a

different reading experience than we had ever had before.

"You mean we'll really be skimming the material," someone volunteered.

"No," she answered. "You'll actually be seeing all the words, but you'll be using your eye and mind in a different way." Doreen explained that the typical person scans left to right, line by line. We, on the other hand, were going to read in a zig-zag pattern, using our hand as a pacer to keep our eye moving down the page.

"But how can you understand what you're reading?" someone asked.

"That's not a problem," she said. "Let me demonstrate."

Doreen explained that our eye was capable of picking up chunks of text at a glance, and if we concentrated, not on the words, but on using a broad focus and following the thought expressed in the text, our brain would automatically gather in the words and put it all together. We would totally understand what we were reading. But it would take a great deal of practice until we could do this. She then pulled out a soft cover book that someone had bought in the shop downstairs just minutes before class began.

"Find me several pages to read," she said to one of the students as she handed him the book. The student opened the book at random.

"Here," he said, "read the next three pages."

As we sat transfixed, Doreen ran her hand down the first page in a zig-zag fashion, then the next page and the one after that. She read the three pages in about 12 seconds. Then she handed the book back to the student."

"Okay, let me tell you what I read."

Doreen took three minutes to summarize in detail what she had just read while the student corroborated her remarks. She had indeed read and understood what was on all three pages.

Wow!

Seeing someone read this fast was impressive. But *my* reading this fast was another matter.

EXTREME FRUSTRATION

In the first class of this 10-week program, we were asked to give up our old way of reading and start

practicing the new way. That was unbearably frustrating. Week after week, none of us could even get close to understanding what we were reading using this new technique. True, some general impressions were getting through, but to say I was understanding what my eye was "reading" was an overstatement. The only thing I accomplished was to chew up a lot of pencils.

"Don't worry," said Doreen. "You'll get it. Just keep working."

During class in the eighth week, something happened that spurred me on. I was involved in yet another frustrating practice exercise when a woman student suddenly shouted out excitedly, "I'm doing it! Wow! This is wild!"

Sonofabitch! Someone broke through. Instantly, my competitive spirit was engaged. Dammit, if that woman could do it, why couldn't I? I applied myself with additional fervor. All I could think of was being left behind by someone who did what I couldn't do. It was maddening.

The ninth week found me still deep in frustration. It just wasn't working. *What kind of an experience was I looking for?* It wasn't clear. I simply couldn't imagine running my eye in a criss-cross pattern down the page and understanding what I was reading. How could you

read anything that way? True, I could get an impression of the material, similar to what I routinely did when I scanned. But that wasn't "reading." However, I continued to conscientiously practice every night.

In the tenth and final class, I still hadn't had a breakthrough experience, but I did notice that there was something different. I had this *feeling* that something was going to happen. I couldn't put my finger on it. It was just a sense that I was close to something. While nothing dramatic happened in that last class, that expectant feeling continued to hang over me.

The course was officially over. But I decided to attend the practice session that was held on Saturday to give it one last try.

I showed up on Saturday feeling both resolute and desperate. This was it. If I didn't make it now, my investment was for naught. Besides, there was the matter of that woman who broke through and perhaps others as well. I just hated being left behind.

BREAKTHROUGH

Half way through the class I was reading a short novel by John Steinbeck called *The Pearl*. The writing was visual and graphic, and the text was easy to comprehend. I found myself racing faster and faster to

see how the story unfolded.

Then it happened.

Suddenly, I was no longer reading. I was thinking the book. The story was taking place inside my head. It was like watching a movie. As my hand criss-crossed down the page, it felt as if I was scooping up the text and funneling it directly into my brain. It required no effort. I was racing along, and all I had to do was to surrender my mind to the page. The meaning seemed to float over the text as the story with all its visuals played itself out on my internal movie screen.

I was reading, but it was unlike any previous reading experience I had ever had.

As I practiced reading this new way, I felt oddly different. It was a reckless, powerful, *fluent* feeling, like being able to predict the future or move pencils with my mind. I was giddy with success.

I took the bus back to my apartment, and on the ride back, I made another interesting discovery. I could run my eyes across the advertising cards inside the bus and know instantly what they said. I didn't have to read them in the normal way. One quick impression, and I could tell you what was on a particular card. My eye and brain were now functioning together.

I had learned the skill. But I suddenly found myself with a new set of problems.

This new skill made me very uncomfortable. True, I could read a novel at 3,000 words a minute. That felt good. But I was not comfortable with the feeling that I had to surrender my mind to the page. I found it difficult to trust the process.

All my life, I had strived to keep myself under control. I never trusted my intuitions. I never gave in to my instincts. I constantly worried about being wrong. I always had a tight grip on my emotions. However, reading this way called for doing just the opposite. I had to let go and give up control. I had to give in and simply follow along with my mind. I had to surrender, and *that made me feel vulnerable*. I just didn't want to give in to the experience.

So instead of practicing at two to three times the speed I could comfortably read at, as they had recommended, I went the other way. I began to slow down my speed to make sure I didn't miss anything. I began to grab for meaning. What I was doing was trying to gain "control" over my reading experience, like years before, I had tried to gain control over my speech.

Gradually, my reading speed dropped lower and lower as I worked to get every last detail. 2,000 words a

minute...1,500 words a minute...1,000 a minute...each day I read a little slower, until one day, I was reading so slow that the eye/brain connection could no longer work, and I found to my despair that I had lost the skill.

Try as I could, I wasn't able to get it back.

AN UNWILLINGNESS TO CHANGE

Why couldn't I hold onto the skill? It is clear that at that time, I was not ready to handle the trust and surrender required to read "dynamically." What was called for was just too uncomfortable for me and not compatible with my need to be in control.

I subsequently did research for an M.A. thesis on Reading Dynamics at San Francisco State College. In preparation, I interviewed several instructors from the course. I was curious to find out which professions had the easiest time with dynamic reading, and which had the most difficulty.

"Musicians have the easiest time," said Doreen, the instructor who had taken me through the program. "They're used to working intuitively." Musicians know what it's like to give themselves to the music. They recognize the importance of surrendering to the experience, trusting their feelings, and not consciously controlling what they're doing. I guess you'd say that in

those performance moments, 'the music is playing them.'"

One of the program's best instructors was an accomplished organist. When she realized that certain complex pieces called for her to read music at thousands of notes a minute, she suddenly understood that she already had the proper mindset, and it was just a question of applying that same feeling to reading. In fact, she told me of musicians who were able to actually "hear" the music in their mind when they read sheet music using the same dynamic reading techniques.

"I'm curious," I asked her. "Which profession has the most difficult time with this reading technique?"

"Lawyers," said Doreen.

Of course. Lawyers do not automatically trust words. They're constantly looking for shades of meaning. Wrong phrasing can make or break a case, so they feel compelled to scrutinize every word. Because of this habit of thought, attorneys were not, as a rule, successful in mastering dynamic reading.

One thing I concluded from my research was that most people were not able to master the dynamic reading technique. Apparently, the Reading Dynamics organization eventually came to the same conclusion. They ultimately changed their advertising

claims, promising only to triple a student's reading speed.

My speculation was that the experience of surrender was not something that most people were comfortable with. I certainly wasn't. True, I was able to by-pass that problem for a short time when my competitiveness was awakened. I broke through because another person in the class had done it before me. But the feeling of competition was short-lived. And so was my reading skill. Without the crutch of competition, I could not sustain the ability to read dynamically.

SIMILIARITIES

Some time later, I developed further insight into the ability of my mind to "see" meaning when my wife Doris and I took up conversational Spanish in preparation for an upcoming trip to Mexico. My teacher was Ralph, a Spanish translator at the company where we both worked.

We only had six weeks to get up to speed before we left for Mexico City. In our hour sessions with Ralph, he drilled us in familiar phrases, and to my delight, I noticed that eventually, if he talked slowly and clearly, I could understand exactly what he was saying *provided I didn't focus on the words*. If I focused on the meaning, I could follow his train of thought. My brain made sense of it. But if I worried about missing something

and shifted focus to the words themselves, everything he said turned instantly to gibberish.

It was the Reading Dynamics experience all over again.

To understand Spanish, I had to surrender. I had to simply allow my mind to follow the sense of what Ralph was saying and trust that I would understand *without worrying about what I might be missing*. I could not grasp at the meaning. I had to let it happen to me. As I became familiar with more and more words and phrases, I was able to understand more and more of what Ralph said to me. But if at any moment I was afraid of missing the meaning of a word and changed my focus to the words themselves, I instantly lost the train of thought.

In short, *I could not directly control the experience in order to master it*. Mastery only came through repetition, trust and surrender.

This parallels my early experiences with stuttering. Back in my school days, I did not automatically trust that I would be okay when speaking to another person. My comfort with the verbal transaction would constantly ebb and flow. Often I was afraid of doing it wrong. I did not trust.

But there was something else I was missing, something that at the time I could not put my finger on.

"The consciousness of self is the greatest hindrance to the proper execution of all physical action." – *Bruce Lee*

With Reading Dynamics, you're working with the brain's higher centers. These higher centers routinely allow a person to do remarkable things. I have seen individuals perform feats that could only have been done by trusting their higher intelligence. You've surely seen some of these as well.

- The first time I watched a young Olympic gymnast work the balance beam, not only did she twirl on the beam, she even performed backward flips without using her hands. The next contestant astounded me even more. She mounted by leaping on a springboard and doing a forward somersault, landing securely on the beam. How could anybody trust themselves enough to do that? It was just stunning.
- I have seen even more astounding feats of trust. Some years ago the Russian circus came to San Francisco. Tight rope acts are *de rigeur* for any circus. But in this circus I saw a performer who walked up the slanted guy wire that

supported the tight rope from the ground. Can you imagine how difficult that is? Then he did a truly "impossible" feat. While still on the guy wire, *he did a backward flip!* To this day, I don't know how anyone could land on a slanted wire. And he did it *six times a week!*

- Have you ever watched the Blue Angels, the daredevil aerial acrobatics team that performs air shows around the world? In some acts two planes fly toward each other at over 350 mph. They clear each other by inches at a combined air speed of over 700 mph. That's trust.
- How about the pianist who sits down with the symphony orchestra and plays Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* without ever looking at a page of sheet music. He has memorized the music, the fingering, everything. He simply trusts that his mind and body will perform it, and as he plays, the music unfolds automatically in his mind like the perforated roll that controls a player piano.
- Ditto the actor who loses himself in the role of Hamlet. Beautiful phrases in Elizabethan English roll off his tongue, and he or she simply trusts that they will come out the right way in the right order.
- Practitioners of aikido must retrain themselves to

react differently when physically attacked. Instead of defensively challenging the attacker, they turn their body to flow with the assailant, then guide the person to the ground. In the beginning these reactions are counter-intuitive. A person naturally wants to adopt a defensive posture and put up an arm to block a punch or directly confront the attacker. The trainee needs to trust that the proven techniques of aikido will work more effectively, even though it takes a while to build confidence in them.

- Every pilot in training will tell you about the first time he or she did a solo landing. It's all about self-trust.
- How about the championship tennis player who, one shot away from defeat and with everything on the line, puts his faith in a higher power and risks everything on one go-for-broke forehand. He surrenders to the moment, turns around his game, and eventually wins the tournament.
- Then there is the Zen archer who, seemingly without aiming, shoots the arrow into the center of the bullseye...and then splits the first arrow with a second.

The rigorous training of the Zen archer is described

in the seminal book *Zen in the Art of Archery*," written in the early 1950s by Eugen Herrigel. What struck me as I read Herrigel's autobiographic account was the degree to which the student has to surrender himself to the discipline. He has to practice in a way that was totally foreign to my own way of functioning:

- He had to shoot thousands of arrows that totally missed their mark and not be discouraged by his lack of success.
- He had to train his instincts without consciously trying.
- He had to forego any time limits on his quest for success but simply accept that it would take as long as it was going to take.
- He had to put his ego aside and fully surrender to the experience – i.e.: not personally identify with either his successes or his failures.
- He had to be guided and driven solely by his intention.

What is it that inspires some people to put themselves at risk in situations where, to succeed, they have to surrender themselves to a higher force that they cannot consciously control?

Why are some willing to take this chance, and others are afraid to act? And what does it take to be willing to put yourself at risk? What gives you the courage to

act?

Part of it is trust. You have to let go and trust.

This is the first requirement of fluency. The second requirement is having conviction and a clear intention.

The next story will help shed light on this issue.

2,600 FEET OVER CALISTOGA

My feet were sweaty and my stomach dropped as I looked straight down eighty-six floors to the street below. I was 10 years old, and I had gone with my parents to visit the Empire State building in New York. We were at the outside observation area eighty-six floors above the Manhattan streets.

Today, there's a wire fence that stops you from looking straight over the side. It was put there in the early 50s to prevent suicides after several depressed souls hurled themselves over the side. But back when I visited the Empire State building you could lean over the side, look straight down 86 floors, and feel yourself go weak in the knees. I was fascinated by the experience. I also hated it. I was afraid of falling.

Yet 17 years later, I found myself standing on a metal bar outside the door of a small airplane over

Calistoga, California. The wind was buffeting me at 80 miles per hour, forcing me to tighten my grip on a second bar that I was hanging onto for dear life.

I was about to experience my first parachute jump.

"So," you're thinking, "if John doesn't like heights and has a fear of falling, what is he doing hanging outside a plane at 2,600 feet?"

Let me explain. Back in New York in the late 1950s I was reading an issue of *Esquire* one day when I found a short article on a sport called skydiving. It seemed that a few hardy souls were free falling from planes over a little town called Orange, New Jersey. Imagine that. People were jumping out of planes *on purpose*. As uneasy as I was around heights, I began thinking that this was something I simply had to do.

I've always thought that behind my unease around heights was a secret urge to jump. Just impulsively throw myself over the edge. Why? I'm not really sure. I've heard that a fear of falling is analogous to a fear of failing. Perhaps that's it. All I knew was that I didn't trust heights, and that one day I would have to meet this fear by jumping out of an airplane.

A year after I arrived in California I met a young fellow, Jerry, at my army reserve meeting who was

making regular jumps at an airport in Calistoga, about an hour north of San Francisco. He sensed my interest and invited me to drive up with him that weekend to observe. I did, and all it did was to whet my interest even more. The following week I enrolled in the Parachute Club of America and set a date for my ground training which I completed the week after.

The day of my first jump I wrote out a short will and placed it in the sock drawer of my dresser. I then picked up Doris whom I was just starting to date, crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, and headed north toward Calistoga.

Calistoga is a quiet little town in the wine country about 60 miles northeast of San Francisco. It's noted for its mineral waters as well as for its hot springs where you can bake in a mud bath, then ease your way into a relaxing massage. There's also a large, naturally heated pool where families splash and frolic in the summer months. In addition, they have a small airport where, today, glider pilots can get a tow up to 5,000 feet, then cut loose and ride the thermals for as long as their luck holds. But back in 1962 there were no gliders, there were only jumpers. Lots of them.

When I arrived at the airport, Jerry was already there.

"C'mon," he said. "You're late, and you still gotta pack your chute."

Say what? "I thought I get a chute that's already packed," I replied. "I don't know how to pack a friggin' chute."

"It's easy. I'll show you," said Jerry. "We all pack our own."

I had visions of pulling the rip cord, and having nothing but a tangle of lines and silk trailing above me like a Roman candle.

We walked into the hangar. Jerry went over to a corner and picked up a pile that resembled a large bundle of laundry. "Here's the chute," he said. "Let me show you how to do this."

He stretched out the chute lengthwise, then began bunching and folding the canopy. Each time he folded a handful of canopy, he wrapped a rubber band around it to keep it in place.

"That's how you do it. Here, you finish."

I kneeled down and attempted to copy what Jerry did. Except where he bunched and tied a handful of chute every 15 seconds, I was taking a full minute. I was trying to get every bunch the same length.

"Oh for god's sake," said Jerry impatiently. "It's not brain surgery. You can just stuff it in the pack, and it would probably work fine."

I was not convinced.

I hurried as fast as I dared. When it was done, Jerry fitted me into the harness and clipped me together. We stood around for a few minutes until it was time to go and then walked over to the plane. It was a Piper Club with the door removed on the passenger side. Right outside the door were two metal bars welded to the body. One was a foot hold for when you stepped out of the door, the other was a hand hold.

We piled into the plane, and I was positioned as the second person out the door. The plane took off and slowly climbed in lazy circles. I have a brief mental snapshot of the altimeter as the plane reached 1,500 feet, and thinking "Oh my god, I'm really going to do this."

Today, if you want to free fall, you can make a tandem jump from 12,000 feet or more, strapped to the harness of an instructor. But back in the early 60s there were no tandem jumps, and newcomers were not allowed to freefall until they first completed five static line jumps. These are controlled jumps where the rip cord is attached to the plane so the chute opens automatically as the jumper falls away. All of us were

making static line jumps.

When we got to the jump altitude of 2,600 feet and were directly above the landing zone, the jumpmaster threw out a wind drift indicator. This is a weight with a small chute behind it that approximates the drift and rate of descent of a jumper with a fully inflated parachute. How far the indicator falls beyond the drop zone tells the jump master where the jumper needs to release on the other side of the target to give him the best chance of drifting onto the drop area.

In a few moments, the first jumper eased himself out the door and into the 80 mph wind. He was hanging there just an arm's length from me...and suddenly he was gone!

Then I got the sign that it was my turn, and I pulled myself out of the door. I was surprised by how strong the wind was as I held tightly onto the metal bar, all the while keeping my eye on the jump master who was fixated on the ground below. Suddenly he said, "Go!" and I released and pushed away.

I'd like to tell you about those first two seconds before the chute opened, but in truth, my anxiety level was so high that I have absolutely no recollection of it. I just know that when the chute opened, the plane was going merrily on its way, leaving me stranded in the

sky.

This was cool. I pulled on the toggles and turned first in one direction, then the other. Totally neat! Then I surveyed the scene. The light was clear and crisp, and downtown Calistoga lay below me with vineyards and houses stretching as far as the eye could see. It was all so novel and exciting that it didn't occur me to think about the hazards: the water towers, the phone lines, the public swimming pool, the vineyard with its hundreds of wooden stakes pointing menacingly in my direction. The field also had a fence bisecting it, and it was smaller than regulation size, something I didn't learn until later. None of that mattered. I felt totally on top of the world (which I was!)

As I drifted down, I concentrated on keeping myself facing into the wind. For a moment there, it looked like I might land on a large white horse grazing in the field. But at the last minute I drifted past the startled horse, hit the ground, and did a parachute landing fall – the standard forward roll that I had practiced in jump school. As Doris and Jerry ran toward me, I felt like I had just walked on the moon.

For the next week I basked in the glow of my derring-do. I was one heroic dude in my eyes. But perhaps I was not that daring after all. Other novice jumpers were in a hurry to get their five required static line jumps completed, and some made two jumps a

day. This allowed them to complete their static line jumps by the third weekend, and a few even did their first free fall. By contrast, I managed to stretch my five static line jumps over a six week period.

Then we had a short spate of bad weather. I drove up to Calistoga several times, but the winds were too strong for novice jumpers, and I ended up sitting around the airport watching the more experienced guys make their free falls. That's when I started to lose my nerve. Maybe I had too much time to think about it. Maybe I had satisfied my curiosity and the novelty was wearing off. Or maybe sitting around an airport chatting up the other jumpers was just not a scene I identified with.

Whatever the reasons, free falling started to lose its glow, my intention waned, and as it did, my mind began focusing on the dangers. As free falling slowly stopped holding interest for me, I was beset by images of landing in a vineyard or going off course and bouncing off a water tower, or even making news in the local papers by frying myself on a power line or injuring people when I landed in the swimming pool. Suppose the first chute didn't open. Would I have the presence of mind to open the reserve?

The more I thought of the dangers, the more I realized I didn't want to take the risk. If I got hurt for

doing something I didn't care that much about, I never could have forgiven myself. And so one day, feeling very incomplete, I gave up my dream of freefalling.

WHAT I LEARNED

Over time, I got past the disappointment, but it was only many years later that I understood the meaning of this experience with regard to stuttering. It had to do with the confidence I felt whenever I did something I truly *wanted* to do, and the confidence I *didn't* feel when I lacked those desires. Without conviction, I worried about the dangers. With a strong intention, I only focused on my purpose.

In high school, because my own feelings were seldom clear to me, I was always myself holding back when presenting in class or going up to a stranger or an authority figure. Because I was never grounded in what I wanted, I was so caught up with what I thought the other person wanted to hear that I became afraid to speak my mind. I was afraid I couldn't get it right for them. This, in turn, undercut my self-esteem.

Being in touch with what you like and want gives you the courage to act, and especially, to risk. In Calistoga, when I lost my passion to jump, I lost my nerve.

The same thing had happened with my speech.

UNCOVERING THE SECRET

How do you change this inability to trust? First, you have to figure out what's going on. Personal change calls for self-observation, because without it, you're flying in the dark.

One of the earliest observations I made about the relationship of courage, desire, and my willingness to put myself at risk took place around my thirteenth birthday. My folks belonged to a Reform Jewish temple. I had decided earlier that year that I wanted to be *bar mitzvahed*. To be frank, I wasn't very religious, but others in my class were celebrating their *bar mitzvah* and I guess I wanted to be part of the crowd.

The services at our temple were fairly secular, compared to the nearby Conservative Jewish temple, and rather than having to study Hebrew and read from the Torah, as my friends did who belonged to the other synagogue, all I had to do on my *bar mitzvah* was to recite a single paragraph of transliterated Hebrew.

Oh yes, there was one other requirement. It was traditional that the *bar mitzvah* boy participate in the Friday night service the previous evening where, at the end of the service, he stepped up to the pulpit and read

the announcements. So it came to pass that I found myself giving the announcements from a sheet that had been handed to me moments before.

"The men's.....club.....will
be.....meeting.....at the
te.....temple.....next.....
.....
.....Tuesday night
at.....SSSSSS.....
SSSSSSseven.....p.m."

It went on like that, one painful minute after another, until I had gotten through all the announcements. The shame and mortification I felt as I walked red-faced from the pulpit are still seared in my memory, half a century later.

But the next day, my experience was surprisingly different. Though I was worried about how I'd do with my short speech in Hebrew, it went off without a hitch. I had no trouble at all.

I made note of something that day which was borne out in later observations. I noticed that if I had something short to memorize, like a paragraph, and if I could go over it many, many times, if I could make it a part of me so that I felt it and "believed" it and *wanted* to deliver it, then the impulse to block was less likely to

arise. At the time, that puzzled me. Later, I began to understand why this was so.

When I rehearsed something over and over until it was familiar, I made it a part of me, and I felt fully grounded. *I knew and believed in what I had to say.* I could feel my attachment to the words. There was no ambiguity, no ambivalence.

The question I posed to myself 20 years later was – "Why didn't I feel that same grounded-ness and confidence when I spoke spontaneously?"

Eventually, I got it. Speaking spontaneously involved doubt and uncertainty, and I found it difficult to speak with total conviction because *I never knew what I believed and whether or not it was right.* With rehearsed material, my feeling of conviction came through repetition. I could be spontaneous in my presentation, because I had already approved, sanitized, and vetted all the words. I became attached to those words. I claimed them as my own. I didn't have to worry about being right. It was a sure thing. That's one of the reasons why people don't seem to stutter when they sing. Everything – the words, the purpose, the emotional expression – is all worked out beforehand.

I find this issue prevalent in the stuttering world. Those who stutter talk about the fear of being

rejected. We grow up so much in need of personal validation that not getting it becomes a survival issue. To place that on the line is to risk rejection and psychic death.

Trusting myself to speak spontaneously and let go was akin to jumping out of the plane and not being certain that the chute would open. Without the conviction that I was doing *my* thing and doing it correctly, I just couldn't risk it.

TOP PERFORMERS GIVE UP CONSCIOUS CONTROL

This gets us to the central premise of this essay – the factor that weaves itself through everything we've been speaking about.

This is the issue of *trust*.

To do something fluently, you must give up conscious control and simply trust. You let go and trust.

The student of Zen archery has to shoot arrow after arrow at the target, trusting that if he follows the master's instructions and practices the right technique and form, that *eventually* the arrows will start hitting their mark. He must do it without thinking and without

making any effort whatsoever to consciously control what he's doing. He must shoot thousands upon thousands of arrows at the target until the inner manager, the mysterious "it" takes over and directs his efforts.

Everybody who achieves a high level of fluency such as the

- high wire tight rope walker
- Olympic gymnast
- trapeze artist
- downhill skier
- concert pianist
- prima ballerina
- juggler
- actor
- calligrapher
- race car driver
- aikido master
- motivational speaker
- student of Reading Dynamics

must adopt an attitude of trust. They do everything they can to master their skill, then at some point they give up conscious control and simply trust. They *must* trust, because the complexity of what they're trying to do, and the level at which they want to perform, falls outside their ability to control it consciously.

In fact, if the tight rope walker starts thinking about his feet, he may lose his balance.

The concert pianist who obsessively controls his fingers may end up stumbling over the notes.

The aikido master who thinks about what to do as his opponent strikes may lose his focus, and the match.

The professional actor who worries about remembering his lines will probably deliver a wooden performance. His focus will shift from "How do I want to" to "Can I do it?"

To perform all these tasks successfully, the practitioner gives over control to a higher power. *He* no longer controls what he's doing. His *intention* controls what he's doing. To perform all these skills fluently, he must trust that spontaneously being himself by losing himself will get the job done.

LEARNING ABOUT THE REMARKABLE CAPABILITIES OF THE MIND

It was October of 1968. I was in the barber chair at the Ambassador Health Club on Sutter Street in San Francisco, thumbing through the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*, when I came upon an article that caught my attention. The article was titled "Shooting by Instinct," and it described one Lucky McDaniel, a young 33-year-old instructor from Upson County, Georgia, who could

teach somebody to become a crack shot in a little more than an hour. Martin Kane, the author, started out by describing how someone typically approached the art of shooting.

Most skills allow you to attain a certain level of proficiency through conscious control. Target shooting is a good example. You take careful aim. You breathe according to plan. You watch the front sight drift back and forth across the target. You find it impossible to control the wavering sight, but you hope you can discover a rhythm that will permit you to let off the bullet at the correct instant. You try, therefore, to time the wavering of the sight, the beating of your heart, the extraordinary turbulence of your softest breathing. When you think you have all these things in rhythm, you do not pull the trigger. You squeeze it ever so gently, making sure you are holding your breath. You try to time the squeeze so that the bullet will let off between beats of your mounting pulse.

That sounded like the way I used to prepare myself to speak. But Lucky McDaniel had a different approach. He called it "instinct shooting" and it delivered virtually unbelievable results. In the article Kane recounted that...

...he taught me, in little more than an hour, to shoot

with such marvelous accuracy that soon I was hitting crawling beetles and tossed pennies with a BB [pellet] gun, with scarcely ever a miss. The first time I ever wore a pistol I was able to draw it and hit a pine cone in the road, at a distance of some 20 feet, six times out of six, shooting from the hip.

For an over-controlled person like myself, this was akin to heresy. How could someone learn to do this? The article went on.

...a student of the Lucky McDaniel method ("The Lucky McDaniel System of Muscular Coordination and Synchronization Between Eyes and Hands") does not trifle with the meticulous. A true McDaniel follower will go so far as to have the sights removed from his weapons because they are a hindrance to him. He will point rifle or pistol as naturally as he could point a finger, pretty much as good shotgunners do: Looking at what he wants to hit and quite disregarding the cant of his weapon or the state of his breathing, he pulls the trigger. He does not squeeze the trigger. He might even slap it, as shotgunners sometimes do. That is all. He hits the target, which may be a flying dime or an Alka-Seltzer tablet tossed into the air by Lucky.

By this time I was turning the pages in total disbelief. For someone who had found it hard to just let

go and speak, the idea of shooting impulsively, with such results, was beyond my realm of experience. A bit later in the article, Kane described McDaniel's teaching method.

Lucky's method of instruction is a marvel of simplicity. There is, in fact, very little instruction because Lucky does not want to clutter the pupil's mind with inhibitions.

The pupil is handed a BB gun and told to shoot it at nothing a couple of times. He is asked if he has seen the pellet leave the barrel. When he has satisfied Lucky that he really has seen it, the pupil is permitted to shoot at objects tossed into the air by Lucky, who stands at his right side and a half-step to the rear. Practically the only advice he gets is to cheek the gun [bring the gun to the cheek] slightly and to look at the object without sighting along the barrel.

"Cheek it and shoot it," Lucky tells the pupil as he tosses up the first target, a rather large iron washer, a little bigger than a silver dollar.

The pupil generally misses.

"Where did the BB go?" Lucky asks.

The pupil says he saw the shot pass under the target.

"That's right," Lucky says, and tosses up the washer again. "Cheek it and shoot it." The pupil misses again, is asked where the BB went and again

he says it went under. Lucky agrees that it did. But on the fourth or fifth miss a pupil may say that he saw the BB pass over the target.

No," Lucky says firmly. "It never goes over. You'll never miss by shooting over it. Now try to shoot over it and you'll hit it."

The pupil tries to shoot over the washer. He hits it. In that instant he becomes a wing shot. Smaller and smaller washers are tossed into the air and the misses become very infrequent. Eventually the pupil is hitting penny-sized washers and is able to plink them on the top or bottom, as called for by Lucky.

This occurs in an incredibly few minutes, usually under a half hour. During that time the shooter has been kept very busy. Lucky gives him no time to think about what he is doing, no time to theorize, no time to tense up. Targets are tossed in fast succession while Lucky keeps up a patter of suggestion pretty much implying that this is just about the brightest pupil he ever has taught. The pupil is inclined to think so, too.

After establishing expertness with the BB gun, the shooter moves onto the .22 rifle. The routine is much the same except that targets may be anything from small clay pigeons to charcoal briquettes, either of which powders in a very satisfying way when hit by a bullet. There is almost never any difficulty in making the shift to the .22. The shooter now has ingrained ability to resist the temptation to aim. He just looks

at the target, pulls the trigger when, somehow, he senses that he is pointing properly. This is a very definite feeling but hard to describe. It is a feeling of empathy with the target. Establishment of this "sense" is the big fundamental of Lucky's teaching."

What occurred to me is that this is how children learn to speak. If there's no fear of stumbling or making mistakes, or if they don't inadvertently slip into bad speech habits, they follow a mindless process of trying, failing, and trying again and again until some inner process takes over control. And lo and behold, they begin to produce words. Kane continues:

One reason for seeing the BB leave the gun, Lucky says, is that he wants the pupil to "learn to focus on a single object without looking at everything else around."

"I tell him to hold the gun easy against the cheek, not force the cheek down to the gun in the regular way," he explains. "As soon as he begins to shoot I know what he is doing wrong. There are a thousand things he can do wrong. But I don't excite him. You've got to give him confidence or he'll tighten up. I tell him he's going to hit the target and most of the time I call 'em right. When he's shooting high I don't just point to where he should be shooting. I throw the objects and point while I'm throwing it. I keep this up steadily so he'll swing

into it. Then I keep shifting the target, like from one match to another on the ground, so we won't get wrapped up in one target.

"This is instinctive shooting and it's got to come easy."

Compare this method of shooting to the first method quoted in this section where the shooter painfully and deliberately tries to control every factor. To me the former smacks of a precision fluency shaping technique where the person is trying to consciously control every aspect of his or her speech. The difference between the two methods is that the second way of functioning is fluent. It simply flows. The first is not fluent, even though there may be an absence of speech blocks. Fluency isn't about an absence of blocks. It's about having flow.

To create flow, the one thing the spontaneous shooter and the spontaneous speaker have to have is *trust*.

You need to trust in something you can't feel or touch or consciously control, *precisely what we as people who stutter and block have trouble doing*.

Whereas you can learn to shoot a rifle by exercising conscious control and get passable results, getting results with speech that are simply passable are usually not considered satisfying. *Speaking fluently and*

expressively is a highly complex process that requires you to operate on an intuitive level. There are too many processes that need to be coordinated simultaneously to carry this out consciously. To have the words flow easily, they cannot be controlled by your conscious mind. They can only be controlled by your *intention*. Your subconscious, or what the Zen master would call your "it," runs the show.

When you try to deliberately control your speech, you end up interfering with a spontaneous act and the fluency breaks down. You may be able to speak without stuttering, but many people I've met through the years, people who have tried to control their speech, end up forsaking the fluency technique they had recently learned. They all offer the same reason for giving it up.

"Sure, I can talk that way," they say, "but when I do, I just don't feel like I'm me."

Well, that's no surprise. Self-expression is a spontaneous act. It involves subtle changes in pacing, volume, tonality, and the like. You cannot consciously control this and *feel* free to fully express yourself.

If you don't trust yourself to be spontaneous...if you cannot surrender to the moment...if you have a conflict in your intentions...if you cannot practice the skill and then forget about the practice and just perform the

skill...the interference is likely to trigger your self-consciousness. And you'll begin to pull back.

To be truly fluent, speaking must be performed intuitively, just like reading dynamically must be carried out intuitively. And gymnastics. And high-wire-walking. And Aikido. And playing a musical instrument. And all the other skills that require performance at the highest of levels just to do them properly.

That to me is what fluency is all about.

HOW DOES ONE GAIN *REAL* FLUENCY?

In 1985, to prepare for a talk at the National Stuttering Association's first national convention, I sat down one day to see if I could come up with a paradigm for stuttering that encompassed everything I had discovered about the problem and about how I was able to disappear it.

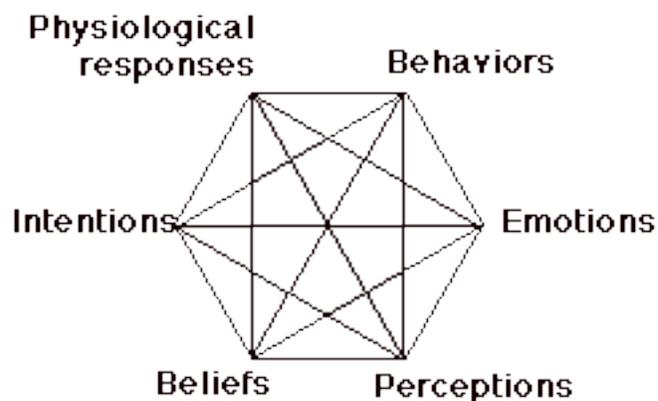
After years of personal growth programs, I understood stuttering, not simply as a speech problem, but as a *system* involving all of myself – an interactive system that was comprised of at least six essential components: behaviors, emotions, perceptions, beliefs, intentions and physiological responses.

This system could be visualized as a six-sided figure—in effect, a Stuttering Hexagon—in which *each point of the Hexagon affected and was affected by all the other points*. It was the dynamic moment-by-moment interaction of these six components that maintained the system’s homeostatic balance and that made it so difficult to change.

This model explained why you couldn’t just go to a therapist, work on your speech, and have those changes last. To make the changes permanent, you had to change the system that supported the way you spoke.

More to the point, in order to change your speech, you had to change *you*.

THE STUTTERING HEXAGON



I found the Hexagon a useful concept because it resolved the question of whether a speech block was emotional or physical or genetic or environmental. As

you can see by this paradigm, stuttering/blocking is not an either/or issue, but rather, a system that involves the constant interaction of *all these factors*. Blocking is emotional *and* physical *and* perceptual *and* genetic *and* environmental. Each point can exert either a negative or positive force on the other points.

Thus, in a system where most of the points are not supporting your ability to trust and assert yourself, there is little likelihood that gains in fluency or ease of self-expression will be lasting. On the other hand, if you have made gains all around the Hexagon, then this will support greater fluency, because you have not just changed your speech, you've changed the system that was leading you to hold back.

It is only by changing the system that you can create true, uninhibited, spontaneous, mindless fluency.

Unfortunately, many therapy programs adopt a strategy in which the focus is almost entirely on creating deliberate, physical fluency. This may lead to controlled fluency, but it actually creates a mindset that works against spontaneous fluency. It stops you from ever experiencing the *feeling* of fluency, which is mindless, spontaneous, and expressive.

So what did I do to become spontaneously fluent?

I couldn't change my physiological make-up. That was a given. It was encoded in my genes. How I reacted to stress and how quickly I switched into a fight or flight reaction was hard wired.

What was not hard-wired was how I framed my experience.

If I didn't frame a situation in crisis terms, I would not initiate crisis-managing strategies (blocks).

I changed my beliefs, not just about my speech, but about myself and about other people. That in turn would affect how I perceived my experiences moment by moment.

I resolved conflicts in my intentions – conflicts that fueled my desire to speak and hold back at the same time.

I learned to become more comfortable with my emotions.

I better understood what I did physically when I blocked and learned to relax the muscles that caused the block.

Over time, I made a lot of changes. I practiced speaking in front of others. I learned to become

assertive. I became comfortable expressing what I felt. I changed how I framed my experiences. Eventually, I dissolved my stuttering system and stopped thinking about stuttering altogether.

Very gradually, I ended up building a system in which spontaneous fluency and self-expression were possible.

SUMMARY

Though you may not realize it, you've been functioning in an intuitive mode all your life.

When you first learned to walk, you focused on placing one leg before the other. Then, one day, you did it instinctively.

When learning to drive a car you initially focused on the pedals, the steering wheel and your position on the road. You were conscious of pedestrians on the sidewalk. After a while, the driving process became automatic.

Similarly, when you first attempted to ride a bicycle, you experienced difficulty with your balance. You held back and applied the brake at every opportunity. Suddenly, one day it all came together. You gained the confidence to let go and pedal - enjoying a fluent ride.

Yet with speech, something ran amiss.

This essay looks at the parts of the fluency system – something that *should* operate in the same fashion – to see what has broken down

In both the Reading Dynamics and Lucky McDaniel stories, we saw that a complex skill is mastered through:

- having a clear intention
- mindless repetition without concern for consequences
- practicing trust.

In the skydiving and *bar mitzvah* stories, we saw that conviction and commitment have everything to do with a person's willingness to let go, give up control, and just be.

With the Hexagon, we saw that troubleshooting a complex skill calls for addressing it as a whole system.