

*My Strangled Speech* by Dan Slater

I started to stutter at 4, says Dan Slater in *The Washington Post*, and I still fear stumbling over words.

What I remember most about my stutter is not the stupefying vocal paralysis, the pursed eyes, or the daily ordeal of gagging on my own speech, sounds ricocheting off the back of my teeth like pennies trying to escape a piggy bank. Those were merely the mechanics of stuttering, the realities to which one who stutters adjusts his expectations of life. Rather, what was most pervasive about my stutter is the strange role it played in determining how I felt about others, about you.

My stutter became a barometer of how much confidence I felt in your presence. Did I perceive you as friendly, patient, kind? Or as brash and aggressive? How genuine was your smile? Did you admire my talents, or were you wary of my more unseemly traits? In this way I divided the world into two types of people: those around whom I stuttered and those around whom I might not.

The onset of my stutter occurred under typical circumstances: I was 4; I had a father who carried a stutter into adulthood; and, at the time, my parents were engaged in a bitter, protracted, Reagan-era divorce that seemed destined for mutually assured destruction.

My mother chronicled my speech problems in her diaries from the period. Sept. 26, 1981: "Daniel has been biting his fingernails for the past several weeks; along with stuttering up." July 8, 1982: "After phone call [with his father] Danny stuttering quite a bit, blocking on words."

In fact, my father and I had different stutters. His was what speech therapists consider the more traditional kind, in which the first syllable of a word gets repeated. "Bus" might sound like "aba-aba-abus." Mine was a blockage, a less extreme version of what King George VI, portrayed by Colin Firth, must deal with in the new movie *The King's Speech*.

My vocal cords would strangle certain sounds. Hard consonants — K's, D's, hard C's, and hard G's — gave me hell. A year of speech therapy in childhood helped me develop a set of tools for defeating the impediment, or at least concealing it well enough to fool most of the people most of the time. Like many other stutterers, I evolved a verbal dexterity. Embarking on a sentence was like taking a handoff and running through the line of scrimmage: I'd look five or 10 words upfield, and if I saw a mean word, such as "camping," I'd stiff-arm it and cut back hard in search of a less-resistant path, opting perhaps for something more literal: "I want to sleep in the woods this weekend."

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But the strategies of substitution and circumlocution were never foolproof. The stuttering rat always lurks. When I was 14 years old, I wanted to ask a girl to the high school dance. Unfortunately, her name was Kim. I sweated it out for a few days, waiting for gumption to arrive. When I finally called Kim's house, her mother answered.

"Yeah hi, I was wondering if ahhh ... if ahhh ... if ... "

I needed to bust through that K. But all I could do was pant, breathless, as the K clung to the roof of my mouth like a cat in a tree.

I breathed deeply and said at once: "YeahhiIwaswonderingifKimwasthere."

"Kim?" her mother said with a laugh. "Are you sure?"

Another deep breath: "Ohyeah I'msureKim."

When Kim took the phone, she told me her mom thought it was funny that I'd forgotten whom I'd called. I laughed along with them, of course, because it was preferable to forget the name of a girl you liked than to be thought an idiot.

MORE THAN 3 million Americans stutter, about 1 percent of the population. Stuttering afflicts four times as many males as females. Five percent of preschool children stutter as a normal developmental trend and outgrow it without therapy. While no single cause has been identified, stuttering is thought to result from a combination of genetics (about 60 percent of those who stutter have a family member who stutters), neurophysiology, and family dynamics, such as a legacy of high achievement (and the persistent pressures to perform that typically accompany it).

Stuttering, like other enigmatic ailments, has a checkered past. Beginning more than 2,000 years ago, one ridiculous theory followed another. Aristotle, who may have stuttered, believed the stutterer's tongue was too thick and therefore "too sluggish to keep pace with the imagination." Galen, the Greek doctor, claimed the stutterer's tongue was too wet; the Roman physician Celsus suggested gargling and massages to strengthen a weak tongue. Such quackery reached its logical climax in the 19th century, when Johann Friedrich Dieffenbach, the Prussian

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plastic surgeon, decided that people stuttered because their tongues were too unwieldy. In several cases he cut the organ down to size.

It wasn't until the early 20th century that serious steps were taken to understand and treat stuttering. Therapists tended to focus on the adolescent context in which stuttering evolves. Albert Murphy, a speech pathologist at Boston University, promoted a psychogenic theory, suggesting that the roots of stuttering "lie in disturbed interpersonal relationships and the stutterer's fractured self-image."

This theory is at the heart of *The King's Speech*. Screenwriter David Seidler, a stutterer, focused on the trust-building process through which an Australian speech therapist coaxes out of King George his earliest memories. In the breakthrough scene, the king recounts his childhood torments inflicted by his older brother, Edward, the sting of ridicule, and his mistreatment at the hands of the royal nanny.

The psychogenic theory can be a seductive one — My parents screwed me up! — but it has largely fallen out of fashion, replaced by physiological diagnoses that call for techniques such as breathing exercises and delayed auditory feedback, which uses hearing-aid-like devices that play the stutterer's speech back to him.

FOR A STUTTERER, every speech hang-up carves a little more confidence out of him, leaving behind an ever-deepening sinkhole of shame and self-hatred. A child who stutters might excel at science, be a good reader, throw a perfect spiral pass, or demonstrate loyal friendship. But in his mind he only stutters, and that is all that matters. Every stuttering incident intensifies that feedback loop of failure inside his head — "Everyone thinks I'm an idiot" — making the next speech attempt even more difficult.

Yet small victories — even one fluent sentence — can be equally emboldening, because the stutterer is a powerful believer. "I'll keep trying to speak," he thinks, "because tomorrow I might just be able to." The trick, for me, was switching that internal soundtrack from "Oh no, here we go again" to "Breathe, relax, and let it ride."

When I was 8, my mother took me to a speech therapist. He was a bighearted, supremely patient man with whom I spent many afternoons discussing my favorite things: football, movies, and my baseball card collection. He taught me the "airflow" technique developed by Martin Schwartz, a professor at New York University Medical Center.

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Schwartz believed that stuttering is caused when the vocal cords clamp shut. To release them, the stutterer is instructed to sigh, inaudibly, just before speaking. Like a roller coaster, my speech therapist would tell me, the words get a free ride on the airflow.

After a year of therapy, I wasn't completely fluent, but I left with new confidence and a toolkit for dealing with my stutter. One of those tools entailed practicing fluency through imitation, whether quoting songs or spouting movie lines with my brother.

This was all about changing the feedback loop of failure: Psychologically, I could slide into a different character, no longer expecting to loathe the sound of my own voice. Physiologically, imitation provided new feedbacks to my breathing and voice mechanisms: a different pitch, a different articulation, and a different rate of speaking to which I could peg my own speech.

However, just as the word-switching technique was never foolproof, neither was imitation.

When I was 16, the stuttering rat emerged again. In a class about the legal system, I was assigned to be the prosecutor in a mock murder trial. I would have to write and deliver an opening statement. *A Few Good Men*, a movie about a military trial, had recently been released on video. I loved the way Kevin Bacon strutted before the jury, so self-assured and confident of his case against the defendants. So I practiced in his speaking style. I even wrote the last sentence of his monologue into my own statement.

The next morning, when I stepped to the podium, I tried to relax and breathe. But a straitjacket of stress shut me down; the muscles in my throat and chest choked off the air. Thanks to pure stubbornness, I persisted, blocking on every fifth word of a 500-word speech. By the time I reached the Kevin Bacon line — "These are the facts of the case and they are undisputed" — I couldn't move sentences with a dolly.

A couple of days later, the teacher stopped me in the hallway and said, "Dan, I had no idea. It was so courageous of you to try." She was a sweet woman, but it was the last thing I wanted to hear. The recognition of one's stutter can be as humiliating as the stutter itself. I'd been found out.

During college I ditched a couple of class presentations and made it through a couple of others. In law school I spoke fluently before groups on several occasions but declined an offer to

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be in the mock trial club. During six years in journalism, including a stint at The Wall Street Journal, I've found radio interviews to be much easier than videotaped segments.

I'm 33 now. I believe I'm mostly cured of my stutter. Yet when I recently visited a speech therapist in New York and spoke with him, he disagreed. He said that none of my speech during our meeting had indicated disfluency. But when I confessed that I switch words several times per day and think quite often about my stutter, he said: "A lot of energy goes into hiding it, to hoping no one finds out. You're thinking about it a lot. We would not call this a mark of success." Think about it a lot? But of course.

For all the empathy that can make a good speech therapist effective, perhaps there's one thing a non-stutterer can never understand: If we go to therapy, we think about it. If we don't go to therapy, we think about it. It's always there. Either it defines us or we find ways of accommodating it, working toward a state of peaceful coexistence, pushing on with the Kims and the Katies.