

BLURT

ARE YOU HOLDING BACK?

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CHAPTER ONE

BLURT

I have to confess I'm really frustrated when, year in and year out, people maintain their tunnel vision about stuttering. For years and years, people were mystified by their speech blocks. Nobody knew what they were about. Then along came the speech clinicians and researchers who offered a simple and logical explanation: "Stuttering is what you do to keep yourself from stuttering."

The world hungrily claimed this as The Explanation. "Hurray!" said everyone. "We now have an answer that makes sense."

Whenever that happens, the blinders go on. People stop looking. We assume that our new explanation is the *entire* answer. We limit our perspective. We stop questioning whether there were other parts of the problem that need to be factored in.

Fortunately, not everyone has fallen into that trap. I've met many individuals who have substantially, or fully, recovered from stuttering, and all of them looked beyond the obvious. They developed a keen awareness of themselves as people. They made an effort to notice how they thought and felt, and they correlated those actions and experiences with their ability to speak.

Ultimately, they came to understand that underlying their speech blocks was *a need to hold back, and that the reasons for holding back were linked to many facets of their life*, not just to a fear of stuttering. The self-knowledge they developed became an integral part of their recovery.

If you're one of those individuals for whom constant practice of speech controls is not working...or if the effort to remain fluent has become too difficult...perhaps it's not because you haven't been practicing hard enough. Maybe it's because you are still holding back and haven't let go. Maybe your speech is still organized around holding back, rather than letting go.

If that's the case, it's time to broaden your field of vision. It's time to look beyond your fear of stuttering and start discovering the ways your speech

blocks are intimately connected to all the various aspects of who you are.

For example, maybe we are quick to say “Oh, I could never see myself doing that!” even though *that* may be something as innocuous as dancing the Charleston, asking someone for a date, or getting change from a busy clerk at the corner newsstand. To do any of these things would cause us to feel as if we were acting out of character. As a public speaker, for example, I simply couldn't see myself as someone who could cut loose and have fun.

So every time my excitement would rise during a speaking situation, I'd block it out...by locking my lips, tongue, vocal cords or chest until the forbidden feelings passed. This way, I avoided experiencing – that is, “owning” – my various other sides, and saw only the tight, constricted, blocked personality that I had come to accept as the real me.

The truth is that somewhere along the way we cast ourselves into a diminished role – frequently that of the accommodating person, the Walter Mitty who is more interested in pleasing others than pleasing himself (or herself.) We took our excitement and natural enthusiasm and aliveness—our REAL SELF—and learned how to block it out so no one, *not even we*, could see it.

It was the perfect crime, because after a while we forgot that there ever was a part of ourselves we killed off. There was no *corpus delicti*. The only thing left was the smoking gun, the mechanism that we created to keep our unwanted self in check – the speech block.

What's so insidious about speech blocks – in fact, *any* kind of blocks – is that in masking out those aspects of ourselves we're uncomfortable with, they help to create a confined and sometimes distorted self-image.

Once that self-image becomes fixed, we then interpret everything that subsequently happens in a way that fits the image. No wonder we become stuck. We confuse our Self-Image with our True Self, and consequently, we never venture beyond to discover what other exciting possibilities might be available to us.

So isn't it time to get out of that constricting straight jacket called a diminished self-image?

Since I was a kid. I didn't want to talk funny or do anything that would set me apart from others. I just wanted to be accepted; I wanted to belong. So I always refrained from doing anything that would make me stand out.

It was different if I were alone. I could talk to myself in the mirror or read aloud with never any trouble, but the moment anyone entered my field of view, my self-awareness kicked in, and I would start judging myself. How

was I doing? Was I okay? Was I doing it right? I was seeing and evaluating myself through the other person's eyes. And that's when I would start to block.

In reality, there was no way I could know what the other person was actually thinking unless I asked. But it would make no difference, because I'd project onto the other person what I was thinking about myself.

Then I'd react to that projection by holding back.

Did this happen with everyone? Of course not, because not everyone qualified as a straw man who could reflect back my own feelings. I never stuttered in the presence of a two-year-old, because I couldn't project my judgemental self onto a two-year-old. Ditto, my dog. For someone to trigger my performance fears, that someone had to be old enough or smart enough so I could cast them as a critic.

How did my self-consciousness get started in the first place? My guess is, early on I concluded that being loved was dependent on performing in an acceptable way. As I grew up, I continued to make the same assumptions, and I projected the image of judge onto anyone who could qualify in the role — teachers, bus drivers, storekeepers, you name it.

Why did I do this?

According to transactional analysis, as we grow up, we learn to play three basic roles — child, parent and adult. As we move through life, we flip in and out of these roles, depending on the kind of relationship we're in and what's happening. But many people who stutter seem to chronically lock themselves in a parent/child scenario.

For years, I couldn't drive into a gas station and say "fill it up" to the attendant without either feeling like I was ordering him around (parent role), or asking for acceptance (child role). In either case, playing the child or the parent brought up feelings that made me very uncomfortable, feelings I didn't want to experience. So in threatening situations, I'd block them out by not allowing myself to speak. I'd tighten up and create a speech block until the feelings subsided.

There are many people who stutter who feel like a child every time they pick up the phone, or who feel judged every time another person enters the room. For those who carry this burden, the only remedy is to make an effort to see the world...not as they think it is...but as it really is.

I still occasionally become uncomfortable when my wipers are on and other people's aren't. The old tendencies are still there. I'll probably never get over them completely. But instead of automatically shutting my wipers off, I now stop and ask myself — "What do you want?" I question whether my need to

be like other people is more important than doing what will give me a greater sense of myself. Usually, by becoming aware, I can choose what I want to do and feel okay about it.

But if the compulsion persists...if I'm still preoccupied with getting the other drivers on the highway to accept me as okay...I use this as an indication that some other relationships in my life aren't going well. Somewhere, things aren't right. I'm not feeling okay about *myself*, and I begin to look for what may be really going on.

I'm not always successful at identifying the problem. But at the very least, I get to clarify one thing. Namely, it's not some anonymous car jockey driving a black Mustang whose approval I'm seeking.

It's my own.

And when I want the approval of others, I begin to hold back.

ONE APPROACH TO HOLDING BACK

You can begin to get an idea why, when I speak to clients about stuttering, I often insist that they use the phrase "holding back" rather than the word "stuttering."

There are many reasons for this, but I'll mention one....and that reason is because when I say "I am holding back" rather than "I stutter" I am taking responsibility for what is going on. I am no longer a passive by-stander. When I take responsibility, something happens: I become proactive. I no longer feel victimized. It no longer seems that stuttering is something that "happens" to me. I once again have hope! Maybe I can do something about this!

I had a client by the name of Ken whose attitude toward his stuttering was changing, and as is often the case, his stuttering eased as his attitude changed. But I got an email from him one day informing me that he seemed to really be in a "holding back" mindset. So I had a suggestion. "Would you be willing to speak to the group you are speaking to at TWICE your normal volume? I know this sounds crazy, but it's harder to hold back if you're letting go by speaking in a bigger voice."

I do this all the time in the public speaking workshops I run. I use this exercise to demonstrate cognitive dissonance. This refers (in this case) to the difference between how you see yourself versus how others experience you. I demonstrate cognitive dissonance by asking for a volunteer who typically talks in a quiet voice. Usually the volunteer is a woman. Let's say her name is Marjory. I then ask Marjory to talk for a bit and after a minute I stop her.

“Would you be willing to double your volume?” I ask her.

She does this, and her volume goes up a notch. After another minute I stop her again and ask if she'd be willing to double the volume she was now speaking at (i.e. so Marjory will now be speaking at four times her original volume).

After she talks at that level for a minute or so, I thank her and ask her to stay in front of the group for a bit. I then go to the white board and draw a scale from 1 to 10. “With 10 being a very loud voice and 1 a very quiet voice, at what level were you just speaking at?” I askd her. Invariably, Marjory says 9.5 or 10.

“Okay, let's do a reality check”, I say.

I turn to the class and explain that I'm going to go up the scale from 1 to 10. “When I reach the volume level that Marjory was speaking, please raise your hand.”

“Okay, anybody hear Marjory speaking at #1 level?”

No hands.

“Two?”

No hands

“Three?”

No hands.

“Four?”

I always seem to get one hand at four.

Not this time.

“Five?”

Most of the hands go up.

“Six?”

The rest of the hands go up.

Seven....eight...nine...ten...?

No hands.

I say to the group: “So Marjory heard herself speaking at a 9.5 loudness level, and you heard her speaking at a 5 level. Okay, now let's take this one step further. “Marjory, how do you think people saw you?”

“Loud” answers Marjory. “You know...pushy.”

“Okay, group. Let's say that the first time you ever heard Marjorie speak, she spoke at the double-doubled level, how would you describe her? What kind of adjectives would come to mind if you were asked to describe her? Just call them out and I'll write them on the board.”

“Strong” says one person.

“Assertive,” says another.

“Confident”

“In charge.”

“A leader.”

“Commanding.”

I continue to write down descriptive adjectives until the audience has no more suggestions to offer. Often, the list is quite long.

I turn to Marjory. “That is called 'cognitive dissonance'”, I say. “You saw yourself as speaking at a 9.5 level. To you, it was outrageously loud. The audience, on the other hand, simply experienced you as speaking forcefully and very much in the normal range. They also experience you as confident and in charge.”

It is a real eye-opening experience for the audience. And for Marjorie, well, she can hardly believe it.

I've done this dozens of times, and it always works out the same way.

I know this will take some nerve on your part, but would you be willing to double or even quadruple your volume, even though you might have blocks? I guarantee that it will feel strange. But you actually have nothing to lose, and you might make some interesting discoveries.

At the very least, we'll all be rooting for you, and we'll all be interested to hear what your experience is, no matter what.

CHAPTER II

HOLDING BACK

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?” Hmmmmm. 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. Then it became clear. I was worried that 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. 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 explain away what had happened. But that is not my experience. Through the years I’ve noticed that when I come upon a real 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.

Recently, one of the members of "Neurosemanticsofstuttering" wrote an email I'd like to share with you:

"My search about the subject of stuttering began in the library. I looked up 'stuttering' and found about 20 books. I read for hours and hours. This was a great relief for me because I realized that I was not alone. But what those books had to say did not answer my questions. I continued my search.

I met a great speech therapist in Pittsburgh. He helped me open the doors to many opportunities, including having the confidence to start my own business. Just what I had always wanted to do! But as good as my therapist was, I eventually had more questions about stuttering that his model was not able to answer for me. Questions like,

"Why am I fluent outside of the home, but when I speak with my family I stutter?" and

"Why is it that when I think of myself as a stutterer I will stutter, but when I forget that I stutter, I am fluent?"

Just to clarify, I did not come from an abusive home. My parents and sisters were loving towards me, and they were always patient to hear what I had to say.

Recently, I made some observations about my stuttering that I would like to share with you. These insights have given me hope of finding a way out.

One of these observations came to me just the other night. I was at a local jazz club with a good friend of mine. Before the band had a chance to start playing, my friend and I engaged in some conversation. My stuttering mentality was in full force. I blocked throughout our conversation, hesitated initiating conversation most of the time, and avoided certain words as well.

WHEN THE MUSIC STOPPED

Then something happened. The band started playing very loud. Now I had to

yell at the top of my lungs to be heard by my friend. But I was totally fluent! I even initiated some topics of discussion, and I can't even remember avoiding any words. Then the music stopped, and I was back to blocking again.

I couldn't help but think to myself, "Why did I go back to stuttering without the loud music playing?"

The answer was obvious: *I was holding back.*

I couldn't hold back when the music was loud because my friend would have trouble understanding me with my stuttering over the loud music. So I let loose and shouted at the top of my lungs in order to be understood. The stuttering mentality took a back seat. I was fluent.

But what was I holding back when the music wasn't playing and I was stuttering? What did I want to block out of my consciousness? What was I afraid of saying? How was I afraid of coming across to my friend? I didn't have any ready answers.

A MATTER OF FASTING

Another observation I made occurred over the past month. Because of my religious background we engage in fasting. Fasting involves eating before sunrise and after sunset, but not partaking of food or drink between those times. As you can imagine, this is a powerful exercise that can really test your discipline of mind over body.

The first several days of the fast take some getting used to. By noon your body is crying out for nourishment and water. But you have to learn to let go of those thoughts and not allow your body to control your mind.

Something interesting happened to me during those first several days. I became naturally fluent in many situations that I would have stuttered in. What was going on here? How was this situation similar to the jazz club scenario?

What I observed was that my mind was so focused on my fundamental needs of hunger and thirst that I forgot about the stuttering. All I could think of was "When am I going to eat. Boy, am I thirsty." I wasn't even thinking about being a person who stutters!

Then one afternoon during the fast a client of mine called and asked me to troubleshoot a computer problem. Before I arrived at their office, I found myself anticipating what would happen with the client. Though I was very

thirsty and hungry, it had become a familiar feeling and no longer held my attention. This left my mind free to run scripts of the situation over and over again. I started to feel the familiar tension and stress that accompanies stuttering, and sure enough, when I spoke, I noticed that I was blocking again.

We have had problems with this client and dealing with them face-to-face has always been a sticking point with me. Because they have a tendency to take advantage of their contract beyond what is allowed, my supervisor always instructs me to be firm in my dealings with them. So how have I traditionally dealt with stressful situations like this? I anticipate what might happen. I try to hold my ground, take control and get the upper-hand. This means I have to come across as powerful and confident.

But what if I go too far, and they terminate their contract? I will be at fault. I may get fired. So what do I do?

You guessed it: *I hold back.*

And the way I learned to do that was with stuttering and blocking.

Through these observations, I realized something about the basic building block from which the stuttering mentality feeds. I use my speech blocks to mask out feelings that I don't think will be appropriate or that I don't want to experience. I have found this to be a recurring pattern. By contrast, when I am just living in the moment, these questions don't come up at all, and I am naturally fluent. The stuttering mentality is gone.

These are the kinds of observations I've been making about my stuttering that I've found to be useful. Perhaps you may want to ask yourself the same kinds of questions. Don't worry if you can't find an answer immediately. Just keep asking. Over time, you'll notice that the same patterns come up again and again. When you start seeing the patterns, that is when you can start making changes.

WHAT DID HOLDING BACK MEAN TO ME?

Another thing: I always wondered what "holding back" meant. In my experience it means not allowing yourself to feel negative feelings. By not allowing yourself to experience these negative feelings, you cannot open up to the corresponding highs. I think this is becoming a lot clearer to me. Most of the blocking which occurs during speech is the result of nonverbal inner inabilities to flow with how one feels. This is, I feel, part of the reason why I blocked persistently during the interview.

Interviews are also challenging because you have to play a role, and this can be challenging for someone who needs to get in touch with how he feels. The role can almost mask what the person feels, unless the feelings at the moment

of the interview are acceptable to projecting a favourable image of oneself.

Two nights ago I felt down, and this stayed with me all day. Everything I saw, I saw through the glasses of someone who was down. It occurred to me, however, that I wasn't down; I was holding back from feeling what was going on. I was on the water's edge, afraid to jump into the cold water, afraid of the initial shock of the icy water. If, however, I just jumped in, the shock would hit but would diminish as my body got used to temperature.

In the evening I suddenly realized what I was doing and let myself feel what I was holding back.

I got onto a bus, and the way I spoke mirrored how I felt, and this was okay. After about half an hour of really getting down with the negative feelings, my head felt clear, and I felt good.

Later, I went into a shop to sell a piece of equipment. I didn't even think about stammering. I was too busy trying to connect with the person. He seemed a nice chap, and I wanted to get friendly with him. Then he told me that he had been verbally abused by two shoplifters and that he had threatened them with violence. I didn't want to get on the wrong side of this guy in case he threatened me. I tried to become invisible. I didn't want to annoy him. I tried to be a *good boy*. This caused me to hold back.

Sunday I watched a sad movie, I knew it was sad because I had seen it before. Events have occurred in my life recently, and I have tried to let myself experience the feelings that they have invoked. I watched the movie and used it to feel the negative feelings that I'd been carrying around with me as a consequence of the events (I broke up with my girlfriend).

I cried and really let go.

Experiencing the feelings hurt. I could feel something in the pit of my stomach, but I stayed with it. Recently I have been discussing what has been happening to me with my parents, I told them that I hadn't cried for years, nor had I really laughed for the same duration.

After a recent conversation with my mother I wondered how I was totally fluent with her for an hour.

And then I began to hold back.

"Why?" I wondered.

I traced the conversation back and found out that I wanted to not think about a carpet fitter who my mother briefly suggested, could come down to my flat to fit a carpet. This was only briefly mentioned. I know the fitter and have negative feelings, not toward him, but toward his son.

I tried to block these feeling out and this led to me holding back for two hours until my mother left. I could not process what was being said with clarity, I wasn't letting myself flow. What I feel I have learned is that I can have an acute reaction to something which I'm not consciously aware of and this can lead to holding back for days and sometimes even weeks and beyond."

CHAPTER 3

IN PRAISE OF HAVING FUN

When asked what surprises him most, the Dalai Lama replied:

"Man surprises me most.
He sacrifices his health in order to make money.
Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health.
And then he is so anxious about the future
that he does not enjoy the present.
The result being that he does not live in the present or the future.
He lives as if he is never going to die, and
then dies having never really lived."

"So what would you advise?" the
interviewer asked.

"Simple. Have fun. Why else are you here?" the Dalai Lama
replied.

FUN WRECKERS

Early April of my 12th year was a time of gnawing fear. Our seventh grade class was planning to present a scene from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and I was assigned a minor role. I can't remember my exact part, but I do remember a particular line that's been engraved in my mind these 45 years.

The line was, "I came with Hermia hither."

My anticipation of delivering that line wrecked my life for a month. For the secret truth was that I stuttered, and one of the sounds I stuttered on was "h".

Often as not, I would lock up on the “h” sound. Simply stop talking. And then to hide my embarrassment, I would pretend that I forgot what I was saying, or I’d substitute another word.

The problem was, I was stuck with Shakespeare’s words. I couldn’t substitute. So for three weeks I had nightmares of standing before the entire grammar school with the words “Hermia hither” stuck in my throat and the deafening silence of the auditorium pounding in my years.

I got through the performance, just barely, by rushing into “Hermia hither” with a kamikaze-like abandon reserved for skydivers on their first leap. My secret was safe. I had survived another speaking situation.

As you might gather, speaking was no fun for me as a kid. Nor is it for most people, young or old. A survey of the public’s ten greatest fears places public speaking number one on the list with death trailing behind in the number three or four position.

I eventually got over the stuttering problem. But it wasn’t simply because I worked on my speech. I also worked on my ability to have *fun* while I was speaking. That took the pressure off the performance, got me in touch with myself, and transformed the experience into something positive. I have since wondered why having fun is not universally recognized as one of the most powerful catalysts to change.

Fun is usually presented as the icing on the cake. That little misguided belief has created more havoc in my life, because what seems to be true is that having fun is not just the icing, *it’s also the cake*; it’s the wellspring of my strength, identity and creativity.

Right now I can imagine some harried mother saying, “For god’s sake, George, don’t let the kids read this!” When your kids want to horse around at just the time they should be scrubbing in the tub or struggling with their homework, the very last thing you want them to hear is that fun is “the cake.” After all, we *know* that fun is not serious. It’s what goes on *after* the bath and the homework are done. It’s recreation. It’s...it’s...well, it’s FUN. Right?

We keep thinking about fun like we do about sugar. It tastes good in small doses, but in quantity, it’ll wreck us.

Quite the contrary. I have seen what the power of having fun can do.

THE LIBERATING POWER OF FUN

A few years back at a chapter meeting of the National Stuttering Association we were taking turns making short talks, when eventually we got around to a diminutive lady named Lila. As Lila began her speech, she spoke in her typical voice, a flat, brittle voice punctuated by frequent blocks. It was also

apparent that she was locked in her survival mode. You know, unsmiling, eyes staring into space, looking like she'd rather be doing anything else than standing there talking to us.

I thought maybe I could help her out and halfway through her presentation I took the liberty of interrupting her.

“Lila,” I said, “are you having any fun?” “No.” “How come?” “I’m afraid you aren’t g-g-g-going to l-l-like what I say.” That was easy to believe. Her whole manner said “Don’t be mad at me.

I’ll be good. I’ll do it right.” “Lila,” I said. “Why don’t you start over, but this time, speak the way

you’ve always *wanted* to speak. Forget what *we* want; do what *you* want. Be dramatic. Be silly. Be outrageous. Whatever it is that turns you on. *Whatever* you do is fine with the rest of us.”

Lila began again, her voice stronger but still tentative.

“Fantastic,” I coached. “Now even more energy. Liven it up. Have some fun. We know you’re a ham!”

Well, that touched a nerve. It turned out that Lila was a closet ham, and for the first time the world had not only recognized it but actually encouraged it. She didn’t have to play the shy, retiring type.

Lila cut loose, and her energy, her whole demeanor changed. Within a few moments she was fooling around, and as her confidence grew, she came totally alive. But the most remarkable thing was that once she began to have fun, *Lila didn’t stutter*.

Now, we weren’t speech therapists. We were only encouraging Lila to have fun, something she was evidently not willing to do for herself. Having fun liberated Lila’s power; it set her free. And that, in turn, liberated her ability to express herself without holding back.

What became clear that evening was how deeply we can be affected by our willingness, or unwillingness, to have fun.

HOW WE'RE PROGRAMMED

If you’re like me, you were told a lot of things as a kid. You were told how to eat, dress, behave, grow up. And later, how to make money, raise kids and, if you read Hemingway in English 101, how to die with grace.

But not too many people enlightened me about fun. Oh, they told me *what* was supposed to be fun and what wasn’t. But the *having* of fun was left up to me. Consequently, I learned about it on a catch-as-catch-can basis and developed some beliefs that may sound familiar.

Belief #1—Work isn't fun. My father cleared that up for me one summer's day while I was still in high school. I was making extra spending money typing envelopes at his office. It was a boring job, and I must have complained because he turned to me and said, "Work's not supposed to be fun. Work is WORK!"

Got it? Fun is what you do in the off-hours. Work is where you *struggle* and deal with *problems*. I heard about taxes, inefficient employees, missed deadlines; I heard about everything that went wrong. But very seldom did my father, or anyone else for that matter, ever tell me what they loved—or even liked—about their work. I still see that tendency in myself and in others; we talk about what's wrong, but don't put as much energy into talking about what's right.

Belief #2—Fun is a reward for being good. This is a spin-off of belief #1. It sounds like this:

"Do your homework, or you can't go out and play." "Clean up your room, or I won't take you to the circus tomorrow." To have fun I learned that you had to barter and be a certain kind of

person. The currency was usually good behavior.

Belief #3—Fun is always second to achievement. I wouldn't say I had a particularly difficult childhood. But I do know that having fun was not a major emphasis in a middle-class upbringing. It certainly took a back seat to good grades and other visible signs of achievement.

Typical example: one afternoon I came back from the golf course having chosen not to play but practice instead. I had hit out three buckets of balls on the practice tee until my hands were red, and I really felt satisfied with my performance. I'd belted 'em a country mile. When I walked in the living room, my father looked up from the newspaper. "How'd it go?" he asked. "Good," I said. "What did you shoot?"

"I didn't. I just hit balls."

"You should have played," my father said, his disappointment barely hidden. "You need to score to know how you're doing."

End of conversation.

Well, he was right there. Nobody ever shot an 82 on the practice tee. But on the other hand, it didn't seem that my having a good time counted for anything. In fairness to my father, I should say that his response was not much different from what any of my friend's fathers might have said. Maybe it was a characteristic of their generation, but I never heard adults put

pleasure on a par with achievement.

Belief #4—Other people know what is fun for you. God knows they are persistent in telling you. When you're a kid, the adult world is full of helpful suggestions:

“Go outside and play baseball. It's fun.” (I hated baseball. They always stuck me in center field, and I dropped every fly ball hit to me.)

“C'mon with us. You'll have fun at Aunt Jessie's.” (Sitting around with a bunch of grown-ups was hardly inspiring to a 10-year-old.)

“Fun” is having to attend to the children's symphony at Carnegie Hall when you'd rather be out playing cowboys and Indians with the kids next door.

Such are the ways that attitudes are formed in childhood. And it doesn't really change when you get older. Want to know what constitutes fun? Just read *Playboy*, the travel brochures or watch the beer commercials on TV. The media is full of advice on the good life. So people flock to the Friday night bars looking for a good time. And they buy faster cars and take longer vacations and still deal with that nagging feeling that something is missing.

The truth is, fun is a process, a very personal process that involves not only *what* you're doing but how and why you're doing it. This story will elaborate.

Back in the Dark Ages when I was 25, I was living in New York City with some of my old high school buddies and bringing my laundry back to my parent's home on Long Island. You get the picture. One day, more or less on impulse, I made a plane reservation to San Francisco. Two weeks later, I was three thousand miles from home and on my own for the first time in my life.

It was a grand adventure. I located a place to live, found a good job and discovered what independence felt like.

One night I was in the middle of washing my socks, when I suddenly realized that this inane activity was actually fun. I couldn't believe it. For years I had resisted doing anything useful around the house. And now here I was up to my wrists in Tide, squishing socks in the sink and having a grand old time. Buddha had his great epiphany beneath a bo tree. I had my revelation in the Baker Acres Residence Club over a sink full of soapy socks. In that moment I understood that having fun is another way of saying “I'm doing what gives me the greatest sense of my own self worth.”

All my life other people had washed my socks. Now I was on my own, looking after my own needs, and it felt terrific. The experience of fun helped to clarify what had been missing in my life: my own sense of independence. And it helped to set the direction for the years that followed. (Since then,

having served its purpose, washing socks has sunk back to being a bore.)

FINDING YOUR DIRECTION

Taking fun seriously can be extremely useful in establishing a career path. Some years ago I met a woman named Susan Hanan who was Director of Career Counseling for a major bank in Spokane, Washington. An outgoing woman in her late 30s, she had a keen appreciation for the need to do work that is pleasurable. As a career counsellor, she used the pleasure principle in guiding people toward a rewarding career.

“There are so many people who are unhappy with their jobs,” she said. “And much of it stems from not working at things that give them pleasure. We’ve been taught to get an education, choose a career, and get a job. Bingo, just like that. But we’re encouraged to do all this without paying attention to what we like, to what turns us on, to what is fun. So is it surprising that people in their thirties and older go through identity crises in their work?”

“When people are considering a career change, our workshop teaches a methodology that seems amazingly simple. We tell them to start at the bottom; namely, look at what you *like* to do. Get in touch with those activities that make you feel powerful, turned on, excited. Is it helping people, solving problems, managing others? Define it. Then look for people whose jobs involve these activities. Find out how they got where they are and what you need to know or do in order to get there yourself. It’s just amazing how it works.”

That’s just arse-backwards from the way most of us were taught to choose careers. It puts status, money and doing what’s “right” in the back seat behind enjoying your job.

“When you approach work this way,” said Susan, “you may find that your present job, the one you thought you wanted to change, is ideal after all. To make it work for you, you may just need to expand it so it includes more of what you like to do.”

So fun turns out to be a kind of psychic compass. Even in foul weather, it can keep us pointed in the right direction by giving us a clear indication of what things are really important, not to other people, but to us *personally*. If you think about it, you’ll probably agree that it’s most often when you’re having fun that you have the clearest sense of who you are. It’s also when you do your best work.

On the other hand, when we lose our capacity for fun, we tend to drift, sometimes for a lifetime, or fall prey to someone whose clearer sense of direction and purpose we adopt for our own.

How do we rediscover what's fun for us? Here are some ideas:

Begin noticing what's going on. The path to enlightenment, says the Zen master, is to observe without judgement. During the day, stay tuned into to what you're doing, feeling, thinking. It's not easy, but keep watching. You don't have to act on your observations at this point. Just keep noticing.

Trust what you see. One of the things I learned from various personal growth trainings such as est and Lifespring is that I didn't often trust my own observations. I'd believe others before I'd believe myself. No wonder I had little self confidence or sense of what I liked.

Examine your beliefs objectively. Beliefs are deceiving, because we tend not to see them as beliefs at all but simply as "the way things are," I'm reminded of the woman who goes to the psychiatrist with a problem.

"Tell me how you spend your day," the psychiatrist says.

"Well," replies the lady, "I get out of bed. I put on my slippers and robe, I go to the bathroom, I brush my teeth, I throw up, I..."

"You THROW UP?" exclaims the psychiatrist. "Yes," says the lady. "Doesn't *everybody*?" As this story illustrates, it is often hard to separate the real world from

your perception of it. Many beliefs are so ingrained that it takes major "surgery" (like running off to San Francisco) to develop sufficient perspective.

Jaret Elbert, a San Francisco advertising copywriter and ex-New Yorker recalls some of her past beliefs about fun. She sees them as part of the culture.

"My society looked at fun the way it looked at eating chocolate chip cookies. There wasn't much nutritional value. You had to be good to get any. And if you got too much, you'd develop an upset stomach or break out."

"And," she adds, "it was a foregone conclusion that anyone who had lots of fun couldn't be very deep."

Broaden your ideas about what's fun. Most people see fun as only recreational. But that's just *one definition*; there are others. I found it fun to do this article, though I bashed the word processor a few times, tore my hair (what's left of it) in frustration, and threw away most of what I'd written.

See whether you've set limits on fun. Frequently, people have an alarm clock that tells them just how much fun they are entitled to have at any one time. After ten minutes, ten hours or whatever—rinnnnnnng!— the alarm goes off and the fun comes to an end. If that's something you do, begin looking at

why you don't deserve more fun than you give yourself. Come to think of it, having fun isn't something you deserve, any more than you "deserve" two arms and two legs. It's simply a part of who you are; an important part. And it has a remarkable ability to heal, as author Norman Cousins reported in a book in which he described how he defied the doctors and cured a life-threatening illness by simply increasing his capacity for fun.

To have fun is to rediscover your unique self and to capitalize on your greatest strengths and resources. So what, pray tell, are you waiting for?

CHAPTER 4

OTHER WAYS TO LET GO

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.

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

When learning to drive a car you initially focused obsessively on the pedals, the steering wheel, your position on the road, the other cars. You were overly conscious of pedestrians in the crosswalks. After a while you relaxed, the driving became automatic...and fluent.

Through my own experience (through Reading Dynamics, Lucky McDaniel, skydiving, and *bar mitzvah* stories), I saw that developing fluency in a complex skill is mastered through –

- having a clear intention
- mindless repetition without concern for consequences
- developing trust in yourself and in the process.

Yet, when it came to mastering speech, something ran amiss. We stopped trusting. We started holding back.

Over days and weeks and months, the holding back we practiced scores of times a day had consequences. We stumbled. We struggled. We developed unconscious avoidance patterns. These led to feelings of helplessness as well as a flood of negative beliefs and behaviors. Ultimately, we stopped believing we could trust our speech, others, even ourselves.

Several years ago I went jogging with a friend in Marin county north of San Francisco. It was a crisp, bright Sunday morning, and I was looking forward to the six mile jaunt around a public reservoir. As we got to the reservoir, we saw that the roadway was blocked to auto traffic by a chain stretched between two posts. My friend, Steve, who always likes a challenge, jumped over the chain. And I, the copycat, attempted to do the same.

What I hadn't counted on was that my legs had lost some of their resilience during the two miles it took to get to the reservoir. I found this out abruptly when in mid-jump my toe caught one of the links, and I tripped. I was more startled than hurt; my slightly skinned knee did not prevent me from continuing the run. But I left that day with some fears about jumping over chain fences.

Now let us advance time six months. I am running one afternoon around the San Francisco Marina, when it occurs to me that it might be fun to jog out past the yacht club to the tip of a promontory called Lighthouse Point. I take off on a route that leads me past the rows of moored yachts and power boats. At the end of the paved roadway the run leads me onto a dirt path. And there, stretched ominously across the path, is a single link chain.

My first instinct is to jump over it. Although the chain is high, it does not seem like it would tax my capabilities. And yet, a moment before I come to the chain, the memory of the earlier mishap rushes to my mind. I chicken out and run around the chain. On my return trip, I do the same.

That night I am bothered by having avoided the jump. It is not unlike the battles I fought in the past with stuttering. Although I used to chicken out many times at the last moment and start my sentences with "um" or "err", I always approached each speaking situation from the point of view that "this time I'm going to say the word without avoiding or substituting."

Now here I am again with a different problem but the same familiar feelings. I know that I'm going to make that run again, and I know that I *have* to jump over that chain.

The fears begin. I picture myself tripping and spraining an ankle, or worse. I see myself out at Lighthouse Point with a twisted foot and with nobody around to give me a lift back. Maybe I'd even get pneumonia in the chill evening air and die. (My mind easily lapses into melodrama over stuff like this.) As much as I tell myself I don't have to jump over the fence, the compulsion doesn't leave me alone. *I have to jump over it!*

Through the years I've learned a few things about how my mind functions,

and I notice now that it's doing a familiar number on me. It was a book by a plastic surgeon named Maxwell Maltz that first helped me identify this number and at the same time gave me my first useful tool against speech blocks. In his book *Psycho-Cybernetics* (still in print and well worth reading) Maltz compares the workings of the mind to that of the modern computer.

Maltz points out that the most powerful part of the mind, the subconscious, is an impersonal, problem-solving computer that is set up to solve whatever problems the conscious mind puts before it. The conscious mind is the "programmer." It defines the problem and feeds it into the subconscious. The programming "language" used by the conscious mind is called "mental imagery."

To demonstrate his point, Maltz describes a golf instructor who taught golf in a very unique manner. In his first lesson the instructor would have the student sit comfortably in an easy chair. He would then demonstrate to his pupil how a golf swing should look; in fact, he'd demonstrate it over and over again until the student had a clear *picture* of the total motion. Then he'd say to his student, "practice this swing in your mind each evening for 10 minutes over the next month before we have our second lesson. Just sit comfortably and picture how you'd like to hit the ball."

Invariably, during the second lesson when the student would actually play a round of golf, he'd shoot in the mid-90s, an extraordinary score for a beginning golfer.

Why does this work?"

Maltz explains that imagined experience is essentially no different than real experience. It only differs in *intensity*. Basically, the body/mind can be trained through imagined experience as effectively as through an actual physical enactment.

All athletes who attain any level of proficiency will tell you that a good mental picture is essential to a good performance. Jack Nicklaus says he never hits a golf ball before first visualizing exactly how he wants the shot to go. In fact, have you ever watched a world class high jumper before he starts down the runway toward the bar?

Sometimes you might catch him close his eyes for a moment. What he's doing is picturing what he wants his body to do; in effect, he's giving directions to his body. The clear, vivid picture he creates...a picture complete with emotions...is the program he's giving his subconscious "computer" to solve. He knows that without the proper picture, he'll never get his body to do what he wants it to.

All this was exactly opposite to what I was doing with the chain fence. My

fears were creating negative pictures, things I *didn't* want to happen. And yet, the more I thought about jumping over the chain, the more I continued to create these negative images over and over again...literally programming myself for failure.

Why was I doing this? Why was I finding it so hard to stop?

OUR GENETIC PROGRAMMING

To find the answer we have to move back in time to the days when prehistoric man roamed the earth. Like the other animals, man was programmed by nature for one essential task: survival. All his instincts, as well as his bodily functions, were set up to assure his survival in this harsh landscape. Today, although civilization has radically reconstructed our world, our bodies are still programmed for the simple task of survival.

If we're infected by a virus, antibodies rush in destroy them. If we're cut and bleeding, platelets staunch the flow of blood. If we're threatened by attack, the body releases adrenaline and other

chemicals to give us added energy so that we can exercise the same options available to prehistoric man — fight or flight.

Though there are tens of thousands of years that separate us from those prehistoric times, our minds and bodies are still governed by these basic evolutionary functions.

Let us look again at prehistoric man. He lived in perilous times. If he didn't pay attention to the ever present dangers, he could up as lunch meat for any of the many marauding carnivores.

Consequently, his mind, like the minds of all animals, was designed to protect him from danger through the process of creating *mental pictures* of any potential threat. For example, if he were in tiger country, his mind would create visual imagery of threatening tigers. These images would keep him alert to the danger and discourage a fatal lapse of attention. For if the imagery were not there to keep him alert, he might be surprised...and eaten!

Our minds still function this way. When we're walking down a deserted metropolitan street at night, most of us are alert to the danger of muggers, because if we're not we could be surprised and relieved or our wallets, or worse.

Similarly, if the tree in the back yard is leaning too far over the house, our fears create a mental picture of a crushed-in roof that impels us to take remedial action before the tree falls. As you can see, then, our minds function in ways designed to perpetuate our survival.

But evolution didn't anticipate modern society. Specifically, it didn't

anticipate a new and different kind of danger. A danger that relates, not to our physical survival, but to the survival of our ego in a *social* situation. Many of these fears revolve around tasks we have to perform. How will others judge us? Will they accept us? Or will we die from lack of love and acceptance? If we do perceive our performance in life or death terms, our body/mind will react as if we're confronted with a *physical* threat. It will force an image of the danger into our mind, so we can deal with it.

What are some of these threatening images? Here are a few common ones:

- *Introducing someone by the wrong name*
- *Hitting the wrong note during a piano recital*
- *Catching our foot on the high bar as you sail over*
- *Dripping paint onto the carpet*
- *Blocking on the word "big" as you're ordering a Big Mac.*

Each of these is another example of a performance fear. Now, jumping over a 7'2" high bar is not a life or death situation in the

literal sense. But suppose your track scholarship, or your national ranking, hung on that jump?

Giving a piano recital to your high school class or a verbal presentation to your boss does not have to be traumatic. But it might be if you cannot live without the approval of your classmates or your boss.

As far as our mind goes, survival is survival. It sees all dangers as potentially life-threatening. *And the way it is genetically programmed to handle threats is to project them into the conscious mind so that we can prepare for them.*

What happens when we ignore the threat?

Our body/mind is programmed to make us feel vulnerable and unprotected. In other words, we feel very, very uncomfortable whenever we choose not to pay attention to an approaching danger.

This makes perfect sense when we are challenged by a *physical* danger. (Threat: here comes the dinosaur. Image: the dinosaur is having us for lunch. Solution: pile those boulders in front of the cave entrance so we can hide inside and be protected.) But when we confront performance fears (of which stuttering is just one,) the body's lifesaving process actually works *against* us.

To understand this better, let's go back to the original example of my having to jump over the chain.

The perceived danger was that, if I jumped over the chain and caught my

foot, I'd trip and fall. My mind read this simply as "DANGER! Get ready. Prepare yourself." My genetic programming then caused my mind to project images of this danger into my conscious mind, so I could protect myself.

But hold on. My conscious mind is also the programmer for my subconscious. When I latched onto those vivid mental images of tripping on the chain, my subconscious was alerted.

"Whoopee!" said my subconscious computer. "Here's a new, interesting problem to solve. Let's check the "screen" and see what it is."

And what was on the screen? A picture of my tripping on the chain.

"Well, then," said my subconscious. "If that's the problem, let's figure out the best way for John to catch his foot and tumble."

Sound crazy? It's not. Remember, your subconscious is not concerned with being reasonable.

It simply solves whatever problem you put before it. It doesn't differentiate between "intelligent" problems and dumb or irrational problems. It tries to solve *all* problems with equal vigor and determination.

GETTING OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE

"Well," you say. "That should be easy enough to solve. All I have to do is picture what I *do* want to happen and let my subconscious solve that problem."

It's not that easy.

Our body/mind has a way of making us pay attention to imminent danger. Try and *not* notice the big, black spider crawling across the floor toward you. How do you feel? Vulnerable and unprotected and out of control because you're not doing anything about the threat. Most of us prefer to be frightened but *prepared* than to trust the tarantula's good intentions. That's how we're programmed to react. We are compelled to pay attention to what threatens us.

This is why, as much as I fought it, I had a hard time ignoring the pictures of myself tripping on the chain fence.

Then why didn't I trip when I finally went over the chain?

Thanks to Maxwell Maltz and his book...as well as years of practicing his visualization skills...I was able to go counter to my natural instincts for self-preservation. I kept forcing myself away from thinking about the danger. Instead, I pictured myself sailing cleanly over the chain. I did this over and over again.

But that wasn't all.

I also didn't resist feeling the vulnerability and general discomfort associated with not dealing with the threat directly. This was not easy to do. As I pictured myself sailing over the chain, the doubts would creep in. I would begin to feel anxious. I'd then have to force myself back, mentally and emotionally, to the positive experience of sailing over the chain. That would last for a while until the next round of self-doubts came in. I'd then repeat the process...over and over again. The key was being able to tolerate being uncomfortable.

After picturing successful jumps for a while, something interesting began to happen. My psyche, which (as Maxwell Maltz points out) does not basically differentiate between real and imagined experience, began to have a positive feeling about leaping over the chain. It's as if I'd actually jumped over the fence many times and was totally successful each time. I began to have a backlog of successful jumps. That, in turn, made the thought of a real jump less threatening. My fears began to abate. It was easier to concentrate on what I wanted to happen. And lo and behold, the actual leap, when I finally made it, was a piece of cake.

Was everything I did a guarantee that I'd be successful with the real jump?

No. There are no guarantees. But there were two things in my favor.

First, I was willing to live with the discomfort and uncertainty of what I was doing.

And secondly, I made sure that physically I was not doing anything to cause myself to trip. *To be successful at a skill, you must use a technique that is capable of bringing about the desired results.* I needed to make sure I was not dragging a foot or doing some little thing that was causing me to miss my mark.

THE EXPERIENCE OF FLUENCY

For as long as I can remember, my speech was subject to the same performance fears we've been discussing. I never just talked spontaneously and unconsciously like my classmates. My speech needed to be "right", because if it wasn't, then somehow, I was no good. My speech blocks were a threat to me — to my self-image and to others' acceptance of me.

Whenever I had to stand and talk in class or do any of the other speaking chores that frightened me, my mind would react as if I were in a life or death situation.

What was the threat? A speech block.

What did my mind do? It put the threat in my conscious mind, so I could deal with it.

What did my subconscious do? It “solved” the task (that is, the image) I put before it by creating the best way to block. And as far as blocks went, it created some dillies.

How did I get past this?

A long time ago I began to get in touch with how other people must feel when they spoke with *pleasure* in front of people. They weren't just fluent. They were fluent *and* they were enjoying themselves. I remember the first time I attended a Dale Carnegie class. I was 24 years old. I sat in class that night and was swept away by the excitement of the trainer, because *he* was swept away by what he was doing.

Some day, I said to myself, I'm going to have that experience for myself; not just his fluency, but his *experience*. Over a number of years these images began to build. Every time I listened to a particularly good speaker, I tried to get in touch with how he must be feeling. I tried to get inside his skin. At first the thought frightened me, because being that kind of a forceful, assertive person was not consistent with my own self-image. But over time, that changed. Had I just left it at that, I could have gotten my speech to where it was enjoyable, even though I still experienced blocks.

But I also changed my technique of speaking. Over the years I discovered that I was doing specific things that interfered with my speech. My *technique* was bad. I would jam my tongue against the roof of my mouth. I would tighten my vocal cords. I'd purse my lips shut. I even held my breath. Any of these blocking techniques could (and did!) interfere with my ability to speak. Most of it was unconscious behavior.

I spent a lot of time observing exactly (and I mean exactly!) what I did when I blocked. I got to know my speech patterns so well that I can still duplicate my entire blocking routine at will.

Step-by-step I discovered what it felt like to relax all these tension points, and then I learned what it felt like to speak with everything relaxed. One day, very much like the day I first rode my bicycle, it came together. For the first time in a pressure situation I experienced the total feeling of what it was like to do it right. (Among other things it was scary.)

At some point, whatever skill you're trying to master, you have to let go of the technique and concentrate on the total experience.

A pianist must practice and practice a new piece, paying conscious attention to how and where he places his fingers on the keys. But when he's finally ready to perform the piece, such detailed observation will inhibit his playing. Stated another way, once the technique becomes second nature, he must let go of it and concentrate on the *total feeling* of the piece. He must experience

it as a *whole*. He must allow himself to be swept away.

And that means not trying to consciously control what he's doing.

If I have any bone to pick with the various fluency shaping programs, it's that so many of them lead you to believe that you must *always* concentrate on your speech. They miss the point. Focusing on your speech is essential in mastering a new technique.

But at some point you have to develop a sense of how it *feels* when it all comes together. Then you need to learn how to reproduce that feeling. It is at this point that positive imagery has its most powerful effect.

Those who learn a fluency technique without developing an ability to trust in their own spontaneity may be headed for considerable frustration. True, they'll know the mechanics of free speech. Yet, each time they speak, they'll still have a compulsion to hold back. They'll be pulled in opposite directions. This is why people who stutter are frequently disappointed when they learn a technique for fluency, only to discover that they are resisting using it.

For the moment let us summarize the basic points:

- Our bodies are programmed for survival. Our genetic programming makes certain that all threats to our well-being become conscious so that we can take appropriate action.
- Evolution did not prepare our unconscious survival reflexes to distinguish between physical threats and threats to our social well-being. Our body/mind perceives them both in the same survival terms.
- Our subconscious is an impersonal problem-solving computer. It solves “dumb” problems with the same energy and thoroughness it solves “intelligent” problems. It will solve whatever we visualize.
- Speaking (like any other kind of *performance* activity) requires us to visualize what we *want* to happen, as opposed to what we're *afraid* will happen.
- Deliberately not visualizing an imminent danger will make us feel vulnerable.
- We need to be able to tolerate feelings of vulnerability, ambiguity and uncertainty if we are to avoid fixating on the danger.
- Creating positive mental and emotional pictures will affect our nervous system in the same way as real life experiences. The only difference between a real and an imagined experience is intensity.

- We need to be committed to what we're doing. A strong commitment will keep us pressing forward when the going gets tough.
- We need to know enough about our speaking techniques to know if we're doing anything wrong. We need to develop a *feeling* of what it is to do it right.
- We need to be willing to let go.

It's great to work hard to rid yourself of debilitating speech blocks. But simply having an absence of blocks (ie; fluency at any price) may not be what you've really been searching for. What seems to be the ultimate objective for most of us is the ability to be authentically and expressively ourselves. To capture the feeling of true fluency, we have to first recapture the feeling of trust.

CHAPTER 5

ARRIVING AT “THE ZONE”

GIVE CONTROL TO THE HIGHER SELF

The “it.” Some call it the higher self. Until recently, this has been a foreign concept to most westerners, although it has become increasingly familiar to many Californians who have been exploring eastern thinking since the 1960s.

One Westerner who successfully translated these concepts into a contemporary setting is Tim Gallwey. His book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, which became a best seller, applies the same Zen principles to the sport of tennis.

Gallwey's approach is to encourage you to move your conscious mind out of the way and simply visualize, relax, and allow your inner self to take control. The technique calls for the person to develop proficiency in the sport with little conscious effort or “trying”. The ideas expressed in *The Inner Game of Tennis* are a near perfect blueprint for the mindset required to speak fluently if you change every mention of “tennis” to “speaking.”

Another notable example of the Zen approach appeared in the late 60s in an article in *Sports Illustrated* about Lucky McDaniel, a riflery instructor in Georgia, whose students achieved remarkable results. McDaniel followed an unorthodox teaching method. Instead of starting people out with 22 caliber rifles, he started them out with pellet guns. This allowed the person to actually watch the pellet as it sped toward the target. The person was instructed not to aim, but simply to watch the target, quickly point and shoot, and see where the pellet went. Just keep doing it over and over.

Because the person could see the pellet, he could tell how far off he was and could make corrections on the next shot. By training his unconscious mind...his “it”...to do the shooting, the individual eventually got to the point where he could automatically hit the target with the pellet, seemingly without aiming. At this point the person would graduate to a 22 rifle with extraordinary results. The approach was extremely reminiscent of that demonstrated by the Zen archer.

How does all this relate to speech? Children automatically learn to speak the Zen way — not by consciously thinking about it, but by *feeling* their way through the process—by watching, doing, emulating, failing and trying again until it works. It is a process that bypasses the conscious mind. Speech is such a complicated undertaking, and must happen so quickly and automatically, that the Zen approach is really the *only* way it can be mastered and practiced. If you don't think so, just listen to any play-by-play sports-caster. Or listen to a simultaneous translator at work. There can be no deliberate control because there is no time to operate consciously. Like the Zen archer, the person simply reacts.)

Of course, children do struggle when they're first learning to speak, but they're not doing it in a self-conscious way. They're doing it with the same intuitive mind set as the Zen archery student who keeps drawing the bow and keeps drawing it and keeps drawing it and keeps drawing it and keeps drawing it until one day everything comes together and the process takes place automatically.

WHEN THE SYSTEM BREAKS DOWN

Then what causes a child to become self-conscious about his speech and begin exercising deliberate control? I've observed three potential scenarios:

- (1) Self-consciousness can be triggered by speech blocks created when the child tries to assert himself while holding back his feelings (the classic approach-avoidance conflict).
- (2) Self-consciousness can be caused by speech blocks created by timing problems when the child tries to synchronize low-speed voluntary control of articulation with high-speed automatic vocal syllabic control. Or
- (3) Self-consciousness can be caused by speech blocks created when the child anticipates a need to *try hard* to get the words out and initiates a valsalva maneuver, an act which is counterproductive to speech. Whichever scenario holds sway

Anna Margolina, a friend from the neurosemanticsofstuttering Internet discussion group, describes this process as it is applied to playing a musical instrument: "First you learn how to position your fingers and play slowly, watching the result. But after many hours of practice you can let go, and you stop monitoring every sound. You just play.

As one of the great musicians said, it is frightening to see hands flying down below and wonder whose hands they are and how they can do what they are doing. The same with speaking. First you babble, you learn how to talk, and then you let go and just say whatever you want to say. In this mode you

shouldn't think about separate words that are coming. So you cannot have a thought - 'Oh, I will not be able to say this word.' You have just a stream of consciousness, and the words roll off your tongue." The attempt to exercise control over a spontaneous act ends up disrupting the speaking process, leaving the child feeling helpless, panicked, and afraid of subsequent speaking situations.

Now the ironic twist. Just like the child learns to speak by following a Zen-like approach, so does he learn to employ behaviors that are detrimental to his speech using the same unconscious process. He does it the Zen way, repeating these behaviors over and over until they become automatic and outside his conscious awareness. It's when these unconscious controls interfere with the timing and spontaneity of speech (or when fear and panic operate outside the person's awareness to cause the person to hold everything back in a long, prolonged block) that they transform themselves into a chronic and self-sustaining problem.

As the child suffers the social consequences of malfunctioning speech, he changes how he feels about himself and others. He develops social strategies to protect himself from shame and embarrassment. He develops strategies for pushing out the difficult words, or hiding them. When these changes begin to influence and reinforce each other, the problem becomes self-perpetuating.

His reaction is similar to that of the professional golfer who, in trying very hard to sink an easy three foot putt to win the tournament, tightens up and jerks the putter to the left or right and blows his chance at glory. He then develops fears about little three foot putts. He starts to believe that he can't perform under pressure. His self-image changes to that of a loser and...well, you know the rest.

When therapy is limited to imposing a conscious set of controls on speech that is already over-controlled by fears and expectations, the person simply ends up layering one level of controls on top of another. On the other hand, if the individual is willing to address the total system—looking not only at how he blocks as a speaker, but how he blocks as a *person*—he gradually becomes more willing to address the fears that hold him back.

As the person begins to develop a more realistic self-image, he can begin to relax and simply accept what shows up. This was what happened in the ping-pong game with Andy. I knew my swing was fine, because I had practiced it for many years. I simply had to decide to live with the consequences of letting go.

Similarly, the person who stutters must get his speech technique in order by becoming conscious of the subtle ways he interferes with the spontaneous act of speaking. Then he must shift his awareness from the mechanics of

speaking to the total act of self-expression. He must decide to live with the consequences of letting go. Only then can his spontaneity be freely expressed as his higher self—his "it"—takes full command of the speaking process.

There are, then, two different strategies for creating fluency. One is to constantly and consciously control the dysfluency. This is the strategy you find in many speech therapy programs. It does work, but people are often left with a sense of artificiality and feeling unreal and detached from their authentic self. ("Sure, the technique works when I use it, but I just don't feel like *me*.")

Certainly, one can attain a level of fluency through controlled speech, just like an archer can attain a certain level of skill by consciously drawing the bow. But in the same way that a consciously drawn bow prevents the student from attaining the effortlessness and accuracy of the Zen archer, so does consciously controlling one's speech prevent the person who stutters from ever attaining truly spontaneous self-expression. Irony of ironies, an insurmountable barrier is created by the very method introduced to cure the problem.

The alternative approach is to practice the proper speech mechanics, and then know when to "get out of your own way" and practice letting go. This is where visualization comes into play. Every time I sat in an audience and was held in the thrall of a dynamic speaker, I asked myself, "What is he feeling? What is the *experience* like for him?" How would I feel if, like him, I could actually have *fun* while I was speaking?" To help me get back to spontaneous speech, I developed an emotional picture of what letting go felt like and then practiced giving over control of my speech to that picture.

Anyone who's mastered a musical instrument already understands the need to let go and just *do it*. While you're first learning a composition, you may have a need to focus on the notes and the fingering. But when you give a recital, your attention must shift to the experience of putting it all together and expressing yourself. If you were to focus on the notes and your fingering while you were giving the recital, at the very least, your presentation would be wooden; at worst, your focus would be on performing and your self-consciousness might even cause you to forget the notes altogether.

People who have fully recovered from stuttering—that is, people who have learned to speak spontaneously, the Zen way—will tell you that not only did their speech have to change, but other key aspects of their life as well. Over time, these changes coalesced into a new system that could support effortless, uninhibited self-expression. They created a fluency *system* in which their new speech behaviors, as well as their emotions, perceptions, beliefs, intentions and physiological responses all interactively supported each other. They

learned to recognize when it was time to work on conscious technique, and when it was necessary to step back, surrender control to the “it”, and allow their spontaneity to carry them forward.

I don't mean to suggest that bringing this about is a simple process. Permanently removing stuttering from your life so that even the impulse to block is no longer present is a complex and comprehensive undertaking. It usually takes place over a period of time by living it through, step- by-step, and people will approach the process with varying degrees of success.

Success will depend on a number of factors such as the number and intensity of bad experiences the person must overcome, the intensity of feelings that must be managed and explored, the number of bad speech habits that must be brought into awareness, the degree of support that exists in the person's immediate environment, genetic factors that may interfere with the speaking process, the person's motivation, the level of perfection they can live with, the person's beliefs, the talent of the therapist and the quality of the therapeutic relationship.

But if you understand the Zen-like nature of the system and how it works, you can identify which areas in your life, apart from your speech, also need to be addressed.

At the very least, this approach may lead you to a better game of ping- pong, as it did me. One Sunday a few years ago we drove out to visit Rich and Marcia, some friends of ours who live on the other side of San Francisco Bay. Every time we visit I always end up playing ping-pong with Rich; however, this particular afternoon Rich's 14-year-old son, Andy, was home, and since Andy was supposed to be a pretty good player, Rich said why didn't I play him a few games. I said fine.

Andy was better than good. His defense was terrific, and to my chagrin, he beat the pants off me in the first game. Throughout the game, I kept trying to slam the ball, but I was tight and uncoordinated, and all the balls went wild.

Then we started the second game, and I found myself holding back and not slamming the way I was before. To be truthful I was worried about the humiliation of losing another game to a 14-year-old. I began to play it safe. I was a quarter way into the game before I realized what I was doing. “Hold on, John,” I thought to myself. “This isn't going to work. If you don't go all out, Andy's going to wipe the floor with you again, because he's just too good.” So I made a choice to live with my discomfort about losing to Andy and went back to slamming...and missing...and soon Andy was ahead again.

Then about half way through the game, something happened. Perhaps my muscles had warmed up. Or perhaps I'd missed so many times that I no

longer cared. Maybe it was a combination of both. Whatever the reasons, I felt a change. I was suddenly confident, accurate and in control. I began making backhand slams and forehand slams.

I even slammed back Andy's serves. I added topspin, sidespin, backspin, and everything worked. Poor Andy. From that point on he didn't have a chance. I learned a lesson from that experience. I learned how important it was to say, "What the hell!" and not worry about the results.

Had I given into my fear and tried to control my erratic swing, I might never had gotten my old game back. Over-controlling my swing would have simply created more tightness and ruined my timing because I would have been imposing one set of controls on top of another. Most of us who grow up with a stuttering problem see our speech blocks as threats—something we need to control. So instead of learning when to consciously focus on our technique and when to focus on the total experience of speaking, we focus on our technique exclusively.

Of course, it's important to recognize and correct improper speech mechanics. But at some point, we also have to learn when to shift our attention away from speech mechanics and onto the *feelings* of trust and release, even if this doesn't immediately deliver the desired results.

We need to follow the example of the Zen archers who are able to perform remarkable feats of skill, all seemingly without effort.

The process of effortless performance is admirably described in the classic volume, *Zen in the Art of Archery*. The book was written in the early 1950's by Eugen Herrigel, a German philosopher who was invited to teach for several years at the University of Tokyo. Herrigel perceived his stay in Japan as a unique opportunity to get to know the country and its people, and especially, to develop a more intimate understanding of Buddhism and the "introspective practice of mysticism."

"For this much I had already heard," said Herrigel, "that there were in Japan a carefully guarded and living tradition of *Zen*; an art of instruction that had been tested over the centuries; and, most important of all, teachers of *Zen* astonishingly well versed in the art of spiritual guidance."

But the professor was informed that "it was quite hopeless for a European to attempt to penetrate into this realm of spiritual life—perhaps the strangest that the Far East has to offer—unless he began by learning one of the Japanese arts associated with *Zen*." So it was that Herrigel set out to find a master who could instruct him in the "artless art" of the *Zen* archer, and in due course, arranged with *Zen* Master Kenzo Awa to take him on as a student.

This short book is a fascinating account of Herrigel's struggles to acquire proficiency...the Zen way. The philosophy teacher describes the first demonstration in which Master Kenzo Awa “nocks” an arrow on the string, draws the bow, and seemingly without aiming, plunks the arrow squarely in the center of the target many yards away.

Herrigel is impressed.

But how is such a feat achieved?

As Herrigel learns, to gain mastery, the Zen archer must stop *trying* to shoot the arrow correctly. He must detach himself from his results. He must learn to relax his body at precisely the moment he would normally be tensed, to draw the bow “spiritually” with a kind of effortless strength, and to “get out of his own way” so that his higher power can take over. When he is able to give over control to the “it”, the arrows unerringly find the bulls eye, even though the archer seems hardly to be taking aim.

This is easier said than done. To arrive at this level of mastery, the archer must be willing to shoot thousands of arrows that are wide of the mark without worrying about how he’s doing or trying to consciously control the flight of the arrow. If he does try to take conscious control, he will preempt and disable his higher powers and the experience of mastery will continue to elude him.

What particularly struck me as I read the book was how it takes Herrigel the better part of a year just to learn how to properly draw the bow. An indication of success is when the mysterious “it” draws the bow, unconsciously and effortlessly, and the professor is not even aware that this has taken place.

OBSERVING WITH AN OPEN MIND

As Eastern philosophers will tell you, one can arrive at major truths simply by observing. Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, once observed that there’s a tendency among people in her field to be too quick to connect what they see to what they expect to see. She said that to really make a creative breakthrough, you can’t work this way. You need to observe with a *blank mind*.

You need to sit in the native village and simply observe. At some point you notice that these behaviors over here have something to do with those behaviors over there. Hmmm. What is that relationship? What does it mean? I’m not sure. I think I’ll watch some more. And so you watch some more. Now, it may be that you *are* watching the expected roles and rituals. But maybe not. Maybe it’s something completely new. That’s the kind of observing that leads to breakthroughs in anthropology as well as in any other

field.

I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. I used to buy my gasoline at a service station near my home (this was before the introduction of self-serve), and every time I drove in, it was my intention to say, "fill it up" to the attendant without either blocking or resorting to tricks or techniques to avoid blocking. Some days I could do this, and other days, I couldn't. For months I wondered why.

So I began to notice what was concurrently going on in my life.

What I discovered was that on days when I was getting along well with my wife, I would have little or no difficulty saying "Fill it up."

But on days when we weren't getting along, when I was feeling angry and resentful and holding back my feelings, I had great difficulty saying "fill it up" without resorting to tricks and starter devices, such as "Yeah, can you fill it up."

In this case my unexpressed feelings toward my wife carried over to my interchange with the service station attendant. I now had someone standing over me, and being lower down created a sense of being "less than" him. This in turn triggered my fear of authority and of expressing myself openly and assertively. If asked, I would have told you that my fear of stuttering was holding me back. But it was a lot more than that.

Gradually, I began to see the subtler ways in which emotions and other factors played into the stuttering system. Had I been locked into the traditional beliefs of speech therapy and focused on stuttering exclusively, I would never have "connected the dots."

Most speech-language pathologists are trained to work within a paradigm that calls for focusing their attention almost exclusively on speech and on the emotions closely tied to feared words and speaking situations. As a result, clients are not encouraged to look beyond their fear of stuttering, and thus remain oblivious to other potential contributing factors.

AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

Among the many people who stutter that I've met during more than 34 years as a member of the National Stuttering Association, I've encountered a small but significant group who, like myself, have recovered from stuttering. Many of us have followed different paths. One fellow I met in the early 80s took the thinking and philosophy learned in the martial arts and applied it successfully to his speech.

Saying our names is particularly difficult for stutterers. This may be because he perceives that people expect him to say it without hesitation (after all, he

should know what his own name is without having to think), and this pumps up his fear level and he begins to hold back. Consequently:

1. His adrenaline level skyrockets as his body marshals itself for fight or flight.
2. His heartbeat increases.
3. His blood pressure soars.
4. Blood rushes away from his stomach and toward his muscles.
5. His chest tightens.

All of this is a genetically driven response to prepare for danger. He's now in a stress reaction, ready to meet the threat. But this is not a physical danger, as the body believes.

It's a social danger.

No matter. The body doesn't perceive the difference. So here is a person (we'll call him Bob), trying to look relaxed and casual, while his body is marshaling its defenses for physical attack. Does all this help to build his confidence? It does not, because his *physiological response* to danger is creating additional insecurity and discomfort.

Bob has also conflicting *intentions*. On one hand, he wants to communicate with Sally; on the other hand, he is afraid of letting go and investing himself totally in the moment and perhaps be rejected. So his hidden intentions are negative as well.

If Bob says his name assertively, he'd be acting outside his comfort zone, reaching beyond what his self-image says is credible. Thus, as he goes to say the word "Bob," two overpowering fears surface:

- (1) the fear that he may block, and/or
- (2) the fear that he may come off as too aggressive.

What does he do? He retreats into his comfort zone and ***holds back***. But at the same time, he also tries to push out the word. If his will to speak and not speak are of equal strength, he'll find himself blocked, unable to move in either direction. The block in turn will generate a sense of panic which will render him "unconscious."

He will lose contact with his experience and with the other person. In desperation, he may try to forcefully break out of the block by trying to say the word any way he can. In so doing, he will execute a Valsalva maneuver, a strategy identified with performing acts of strenuous physical effort.

This calls for further locking of the throat, tightening of the abdominal muscles and building up of air pressure in the chest as he tries to push the words out. (As an alternative strategy, he may also *stall* by repeating the word “is” until he feels ready to say the word.)

He will continue to be blocked until the intensity of his panic begins to drop, at which point his muscles will begin to relax, and he will suddenly find himself able to continue on with the sentence. As we can see, then, his habitual *behaviors* are also a negative. So all the negatives reinforce each other, creating a self-supporting, negatively biased system.

The blocking system operates like a forward-looking radar that anticipates problems before they happen on a situation-by-situation and word-by-word basis.

REACTING TO A TONE OF VOICE

One trigger that brings on “holding back” is an individual’s tone of voice. Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco is in the business of rehabilitating drug addicts, prostitutes, convicted felons, and others with acting out character disorders, and they are more successful at it than any other organization in the world. Over a 30-year span, I’ve periodically donated my services to Delancey as an advertising copywriter and have supported them in other ways.

In 1993, I volunteered to teach a public speaking class at Delancey. One day after the class was concluded, I was on my way to my car when I decided to drop by the Delancey Street restaurant located in the same building to say hi to Abe, the maitre d’, whom I had known for 20 years. I didn’t see Abe when I walked in, so I asked the acting maitre d’ to tell Abe that John Harrison had stopped by and asked for him.

I turned to leave when suddenly the fellow I’d just spoken to abruptly called out, “What’d ya say ya name was?”

I turned back to give him my name again, and suddenly I found myself blocked. More specifically, I was in a panic state, frozen and unable to say a word.

Totally flustered, my head swirling, I was catapulted back 30 years to when I used to regularly block in situations like this. Feeling totally self-conscious, I stopped, took a deep breath, and finally was able to bring myself back to “consciousness” so that I could say “John Harrison.”

I left the restaurant upset and puzzled by the sudden appearance of an old reaction. Why did it happen? I’d had a wonderful class. I love Delancey Street—both the people and the organization. This was our favorite restaurant in San Francisco. I wasn’t thinking about my speech; that had stopped being

an issue over two decades ago.

The more I thought about it, the more I felt there was something in the fellow's tone of voice that had triggered my response.

This is precisely how an engram works. It's not necessarily the situation that triggers you, but some *part* of the situation that recalls an older event that was threatening in some way. Perhaps it had been a similar situation in which I'd blocked. Or perhaps there was something about the fellow himself. After all, almost all of the residents in Delancey had been in prison.

Almost any of the guys could sound tough. Maybe I was intimidated by his tone of voice. He may have barked the question because he saw me leaving and realized that he hadn't properly heard my name. Maybe that caused him to panic, and maybe I interpreted that panic as something else.

A threat?

A command?

His tone did catch me off guard. Or perhaps there was something about my mindset that day that simply made me more susceptible to his tone of voice. I'll never know. But I do know that for an instant, I was reliving an incident from an earlier time and place.

Single incidents like this only happened every few years. But when they did, they provided a quasi-laboratory setting to study the circumstances leading to a stuttering block.

The big difference between my response that night and how I would have responded 25 years ago is that, once the event was over, it was over. Though I was curious about it, I didn't brood about it. Nor did I see it as a problem with my speech, so it did not reawaken any speech fears. It was just one of those things that occasionally comes out of the blue.

Repeated positive experiences did not eradicate the old memories. They still existed. But it gave the individuals different ways of interpreting them and alternative ways to respond. They weren't stuck playing out "the same old tune." True, it took more effort to counteract the old responses whose roots reached back to early childhood. But motivated individuals were able to disrupt the old reaction patterns and relieve their symptoms, as effectively as if they had been treated with heavy-duty drugs like Prozac.

Says Goleman, "The brain remains plastic throughout life, though not to the spectacular extent seen in childhood. All learning implies a change in the brain, a strengthening of synaptic connection. The brain changes in the patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder show that emotional habits are malleable throughout life, with some sustained effort, even at the neural

level. What happens with the brain...is an analog of the effects all repeated or intense emotional experiences bring, for better or for worse.”

All of the above principles apply to chronic speech blocks. By freely speaking out in a clear audible voice, letting go and having fun, you can build alternative responses to holding back, even though the old memories will always exist in your emotional archives. The adage, “What doesn’t kill you will make you stronger” really applies. Eventually you will find yourself putting yourself at risk, at least in your own mind, speaking out, having fun, and even *forgetting* that you stutter.