**HOW I RECOVERED FROM**

**CHRONIC STUTTERING**

**by John C. Harrison**

*SOLVING THE UNSOLVABLE*

The reason why we haven’t been more successful in addressing stuttering since speech pathology was first introduced as a field of study in the 1920s is that for all this time...in my opinion and in the opinion of a growing

number of others...stuttering has been incorrectly characterized.

We’ve been using the wrong paradigm. We’ve been solving the wrong problem.

If you’re trying to solve a problem, the way you *define* and *frame* the problem has everything to do with whether you’ll be able to come up with an answer. Employing the right paradigm is important because a paradigm filters incoming information. Anything that doesn’t fall within the defined

characteristics of the paradigm is deemed to be unimportant and irrelevant, although much of what remains unnoticed may be necessary to solve the problem.

Another reason why we’ve been stuck in our thinking about stuttering is that, by and large, most of us focus our attention in looking for answers in all the familiar places.

It’s like the man who’s walking home one night, and comes upon a fellow crawling around on his knees under a street light, obviously looking for something.

*“Hey, buddy, need some help?”*

*“Sure do,” says the man. “I lost my car keys.”*

*“Well, let me give you a hand,” says the passerby.*

 *And for the next five minutes they both crawl around under the street light, looking for the keys.*

*Finally, the passer-by says, “Are you sure you lost the keys here?”*

*“Oh no,” says the man. “I lost them over there,” and points to a section of grass beyond the reach of the light.*

*“Well, for pete’s sake,” says the passerby in frustration. “Why are you looking here?”*

*“Light’s better,” says the man.*

The reason why I’m standing here talking to you today, having disappeared my stuttering, is in part because I never looked for answers in the “well-lit” familiar places. Why? Well, for one thing, I had a simple block and never developed a lot of secondary behaviors. Therefore, I never worked with a speech therapist. Therefore, I never got into the traditional thinking about stuttering as something you had to control. Therefore, my search for answers was not colored by other people’s ideas. I was not told what was important and what was not. I never developed the familiar filters through which most people viewed stuttering. And that’s why I was able to see more clearly what was going on with my speech.

What I discovered over time was that my stuttering was not about my speech per se. It was about *my comfort in communicating with others.* It was a problem that involved *all* of me — how I thought, how I felt, how I spoke, how I was programmed to respond.

By the way, when I say “stuttering,” I’m not talking about the easy and unconscious disfluencies that many people have when they’re upset, confused, embarrassed, uncertain, or discombobulated (what I call *bobulating).* I’m talking about struggled, blocked speech in which you are unable to say one or more words in a timely manner; speech that feels “stuck.”

Although I’ve shared pieces of how I recovered, I’ve never before told the overall story. So that’s what I’m going to do here. I’m going to talk about the key factors that contributed to my recovery. I’ll also relate this to the Stuttering Hexagon so you can see how the changes in my speech were a reflection of the way I changed *as a person.*

*EARLY EXPERIENCES*

My dysfluent speech began when I was three years old. My mother and grandmother had gone to Europe for six weeks, and the day my mother returned, I took her into the garden and said, “Mommy, look look look at the flower.” I don’t remember that day. But I do know that by the age of four, my father was very concerned about my speech and started running me around to various experts. One of them told my father that I was a nervous child and that I seemed to stutter more when my mother was around.

There are also indications that, although I started out with a very close and intimate relationship with my mom, something happened to change this. I don’t know what it was. But by the age of seven or eight, I no longer liked to have her hug me. I was prone to hold in my feelings. I also remember that I was an extremely sensitive child and that it didn’t take much to hurt my feelings.

*SENSITIVITY AND STUTTERING*

NSA member Libby Oyler, who is both a person who stutters and a speech language pathologist, conducted some fascinating research on the relationship of sensitivity and stuttering for her Ph.D. thesis. The numbers she gave me took me by surprise. Libby found that although 15 to 20 percent of the general population can be classified as “highly sensitive,” that number climbs to a startling 83 percent for people who stutter.

What does “highly sensitive” mean?

On the plus side, it means that you’re more intuitive. You pick up feelings and subtle aspects of communication, both verbal and nonverbal, that don’t register with less sensitivepeople. But it also means you’re more quickly aroused. Your senses areeasily stimulated and sometimes, overwhelmed. You react more stronglywhen somebody yells at you. It’s easier to get you excited or upset. Ifsomebody doesn’t like the way you act, they don’t have to yell at you oropenly mock you to deliver their message. They just have to raise aneyebrow or give you a look, and the message comes through loud and clear.

Libby’s research also highlighted something else. About 10 to 15percent of the general population can be classified as *behaviorally inhibited.*

These people find it harder to be out in the world. They’re profoundly more vulnerable. They’re more subject to overarousal. It’s harder to calm them down. Their brain doesn’t regulate sensory integration well and doesn’t filter out information efficiently so they can relax. For the stuttering population, the percentage of behaviorally inhibited people is not 10 or 15 percent...it’s 42 percent.

Similar information was reported in the British Stammering Association’s July 2002 newsletter *Speaking Out* in a brief article about research conducted by speech-language pathologist Barry Guitar. People who stuttered were more nervous or tense or excessively excitable than people who didn’t. And they also had a greater startle response.

Did all that apply to me? I think so. If someone was cross with me, or raised their voice, just like that, I’d be upset. I was totally focused on pleasing others and on being nice.

And because I was highly sensitive, I was quick to pick up any signs of disapproval.

Is this hypersensitivity what caused my stuttering? No. But it was part of it.

*PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS*

I recall that as a small child when I used to say my prayers at night, they always began with, “Please, Oh Lord, help me to talk without stuttering, help me keep my back straight, and help prevent all wars.”

Help me keep my back straight? What boy in his right mind would pray for that? I’ll tell you what kind. A boy who didn’t feel he was okay the way he was and who was totally focused on pleasing his mom. Now if I had such a charge on keeping my back straight that I included it in my prayers, imagine the charge I had about stuttering, which was number one on the hierarchy.

Here are more things about me. I never got angry. In fact, I was uncomfortable with emotions, just like everyone else in my family. It wasn’t until the age of 30 in an encounter group that I ever got angry and blew up at another person. Imagine that. I went 30 years without ever getting angry. *And I thought that was perfectly natural.*

Then there was my compulsive need to do things right. In middle school, if I wrote a character like an “a” or an “e” too quickly and it filled in, I’d cross it out and write it correctly right above it....until the teacher finally

commanded me to stop doing that.

Is this perfectionism what caused my stuttering? No, it’s not what caused it. But it was a contributing factor.

My earliest memory of being really scared about speaking was when our seventh grade class had to perform a scene from a play at a middle school assembly. The play was Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream,* and I was

playing the part of Puck. I only had a couple of lines which started out — “I came with Hermia hither.”

Well, did I worry about *that* for four weeks! I was afraid I couldn’t say the “h” words. I was panicked about being in front of 100 kids and teachers and standing there with my mouth open, not being able to say a word...because I had this *speech* problem. That’s all I could see. I had this

speech problem.

I did survive it, because I had a trick. I discovered that if I could evacuate most of the air in my lungs, I could talk on the residual air and get the word out. And that’s what I did. When the time came, I said, “I came with (long exhale) Hermia hither.” Oh, I got some funny looks. But I got the words out.

Nevertheless, that experience and many others like it reinforced my belief that I had a speech problem. How wrong I was. I didn’t have a speech problem. I could speak just fine when I was alone. The problem lay in my

*relationship* with the people I was speaking to. I had a problem with *the experience of communicating to others*. It was my *experience* of expressing who *I* was that I had fears about. And it manifested itself in my speech.

*MY EARLY HEXAGON*

Let’s see what my hexagon looked like at the age of 12. I had a belief that it was dangerous to show my emotions. It was dangerous to be assertive. I believed that I had to do everything correctly. I believed that everyone was judging me...not just my speech...but *me*. I had very low self-esteem.

Whatever I did, I had a fear of not being good enough. And I had a fear of acting out of character with my passive self-image.

Speaking forcefully in front of the middle school, on the other hand, required self-esteem. Consequently, I had a conflict, and I resolved it by holding myself back.

By the age of twelve I had so completely made myself over to fit the expectations of others that I didn’t know who *I* was. Looking back to that “Hermia hither” moment, it’s very clear what I was afraid of. I was afraid of experiencing the excitement of being *me.* I was holding back *me,* using such strategies as locking my vocal cords, pursing my lips, and holding my breath. For some reason, there was something bad about showing up as myself.

How did this happen?

How did I get divorced from my real self?

How do any of us get so cut off from who we are that we feel compelled to hold back and create a false self?

*LOSING MYSELF*

One of the most elegant statements of how we lose ourselves appeared back in 1962 in a book by Abraham Maslow. Maslow was part of a group called the “third force psychologists.” These were psychologists whose main interest was not in pathology. They wanted to understand the self-realizing individual. The person who was super healthy, who consistently operated on a higher level than the rest of us. The person who frequently had what they called “peak experiences.”

What stops us all from being able to reach that same level of functioning?

As little children, we *need* the approval of others. We need it for safety. We need it for food. We need it for love and respect. The prospect of losing all that is terrifying. So if we have to choose between being loved and being ourselves, it’s no contest. We abandon ourselves and die a kind of secret psychic death.

Maslow wrote a seminal book called, *Towards a Psychology of Being,* which looked at these issues. In that book was a beautiful description, written by G. Allport, of how it is possible to lose yourself and isolate yourself from your deepest sources of power...and not even know that you’re doing it. Listen to Allport’s description of a child who’s forced to make that choice:

*He has not been accepted for himself,* as he is. *“Oh, they ‘love’ him, but they want him or force him or expect him to be different! Therefore he* must beunacceptable. *He himself learns to believe it and at last, even takes it for granted.*

*He has truly given himself up. No matter now whether he obeys them, whether he clings, rebels or withdraws — his behavior, his performance is all that matters. His center of gravity is in ‘them,’ not in himself. Yet, if he so much as noticed it, he’d think it natural enough. And the whole thing is entirely plausible; all invisible, automatic, and anonymous!*

 *This is the perfect paradox. Everything looks normal; no crime was intended; there is no corpse, no guilt. All we can see is the sun rising and setting as usual.*

*But what has happened? He has been rejected, not only by them, but by himself. (He is actually without a self.) What has he lost? Just the one true and vital part of himself: his own yes-feeling, which is his very capacity for growth, his root system.*

*But alas he is not dead. ‘Life’ goes on, and so must he. From the moment he gives himself up, and to the extent that he does so, all unknowingly he sets about to create and maintain a pseudo-self. But this is an expediency—a ‘self’ without wishes. This one shall be loved (or feared) where he is despised, strong where he is weak; it shall go through the motions (oh, but they are caricatures!) not for fun or joy, but for survival; not simply because it wants to move but because it has to obey.*

*This necessity is not life—not his life—it is a defense mechanism against death. From now on he will be torn apart by compulsive* (*unconscious)* needs *or ground*

*by (unconscious) conflicts into paralysis, every motion and every instant canceling out his being, his integrity; and all the while he is disguised as a normal person and expected to behave like one!*

So there I was, afraid to say, “I came with Hermia hither”...feeling that it was not okay to be myself in front of the middle school. But all I could see was that I had a stuttering problem.

*LIMITING RELATIONSHIPS*

Something that greatly contributes to the holding back process is the relationship you have with those around you. Have you noticed that it’s easy to speak to some people and impossible to speak to others without stuttering? I noticed that. When I was in middle school, I was shy and unassertive. I was not much of a presence in the class. But I had an experience around that time that caused me to wonder.

My parents had friends who lived in New Jersey, and they had a daughter named Barbara Lee. We were invited out there one weekend, and I spent two days with Barbara Lee and her crowd. I hardly recognized myself. I was outspoken, I was funny, I didn’t hold back, and I didn’t stutter. People listened to me if I had something to say. Then I went back home and instantly turned back into this shy, quiet kid that nobody listened to. A shy, quiet kid who held himself back and who stuttered.

In retrospect, it became clear that over time, my friends expected me to show up as shy and unassertive, and they related to me accordingly. I, in turn, related to them the way they related to me, and presto! I was locked in a role I couldn’t get out of.

Over the last 26 years, I’ve seen many examples of how a person gets locked into a role and how it affects his speech. One of these moments took place at an NSA chapter meeting about 20 years ago. Frank\* was an older fellow, a really nice, unassuming guy with a moderate stutter. One evening, it was my turn to run the meeting, and I came in with some silly poetry for people to read. What I gave to Frank was a stanza from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* *in Wonderland* in which the Mock Turtle is singing this plaintive song in a voice choked with sobs. Now keep in mind that Frank was a software engineer. The poem goes this way:

*Beautiful Soup, so rich and green,*

*Waiting in a hot tureen!*

*Who for such dainties would not stoop?*

*Soup of the evening, beautiful Soup!*

*Soup of the evening, beautiful Soup!*

*Beau—ootiful Soo—oop!*

*Beau—ootiful Soo—oop!*

*Soo—oop of the e—e—evening,*

*Beautiful, beautiful Soup!*

I told Frank to ham it up and be as silly and outrageous as he liked. He did. He was totally silly. Instead of speaking in his usual flat voice, he was really expressive, and Frank was totally fluent. At the end of the meeting, I asked Frank how he managed to let go so much. You know what he said to me?

“You gave me permission.”

What was interesting was that Frank’s wife also came to the meeting. She was a severe, stern-faced women who had no apparent interest in participating. She spent the entire meeting knitting. I looked at her and thought, “I know why Frank doesn’t let go and be himself. He married his mom. He was still caught up with being a good boy.”

So the people around you and how you relate to them will have a big impact on your willingness to let go — that is, if you choose to hand over your power to them.

What I discovered through my own recovery process was that, at the heart of it, stuttering isn’t a problem with the *production* of speech. All of us can talk just fine when we’re alone. It’s a problem with the *experience* of

speaking. It’s a problem with our discomfort when we communicate to particular individuals and in particular situations.

And it’s about the strategies we adopt to manage this discomfort.

What really frustrated me in high school was that one moment I’d be talking, and the next moment I’d be locked up and unable to say a word. I could talk to my friends in the school yard and be perfectly fluent, but giving

a book report in front of those same friends in the classroom, I’d only get a few words out before I’d block.

Sometimes I wished that I’d stutter all the time. At least then I’d know who I was.

*SOME EARLY DISCOVERIES*

I spent hours in my room, trying to figure out what was happening with my speech when I locked up. I’d tighten my tongue or purse my lips, but it just wasn’t the same. When I actually blocked, it seemed like something was happening *to* me. In fact, it was not until I got to college that I made any kind of progress with my speech.

In my sophomore year I took a class in public speaking, and because I was anxious about my stuttering, I decided to confess to the professor that I had a problem. He was very interested in helping, and invited me to come by after class. One thing he did that day was to get out some books and

pictures and explained to me how speech was created. It sounds like such an obvious thing, but nobody had ever done that before. For almost 20 years I had been totally in the dark about what was going on inside my throat and

chest when I spoke and when I blocked.

Now, for the first time, I could actually picture how speech was produced...what it looked like. The effect of that session with the speech professor was to take some of the mystery out of the speaking process. I could picture in my mind what I might be doing when I blocked. I don’t

know about you, but when I understand something, I don’t fear it as much.

I also took a big leap by giving a talk in my speech class about stuttering— the first time I talked publicly about it. The reaction of the class was great.

People were interested.

I didn’t feel like a weirdo, and it made speaking much easier for the rest of the semester.

By the time I graduated college, I still blocked, though not as much. But more than anything, I had started to observe, not just my stuttering, but all the areas around my stuttering. And while I didn’t have any answers, I was starting to define the questions.

*THE POWER OF OBSERVATION*

The ability to observe is absolutely critical if you want to change yourself in any way. Observing, in its highest form, is called mindfulness. It’s a meditation term. What it calls for is to clear your mind and simply notice what’s going on. Don’t just notice the familiar things. See if you can observe

everything, dispassionately, without an agenda. When you can do that...when you can observe without trying to fit what you see into any preexisting paradigm...it’s often surprising the kinds of things you discover.

For example, back in the 60’s when you couldn’t pump your own petrol, I’d drive into the service station near our apartment and have to ask the attendant to “Fill it up.” Some days I could say it perfectly without a hitch.

Other days, when the attendant came over, I *knew* I was going to block, and I’d have to resort to starter phrases like, “Mmmm, ahhhh ‘ow are ya an’ can ya fill it up please.”

Why were those days different?

If I were focusing only on my speech, I’d never been able to explain it. But by then I was routinely looking at all aspects of the speaking situation. You know what I finally realized? On the days when I was getting on with my wife, I had no trouble. But on days when I was feeling angry or resentful or hurt and was holding all my feelings in, those were the days I’d have trouble.

Then why was I having a problem with the attendant? I wasn’t hurt or angry at him. I discovered that if I allowed myself to connect in a personal way with someone else, what you might call having an encounter, or an open, direct communication, those other feelings would want to come out.

That was scary. I didn’t want to experience those repressed feelings. So I would get this danger signal from my body that there was something to fear, and my default reaction was to hold back and block.

What encouraged me to make observations like this? My mind was never shaped by the traditional beliefs of speech therapy, including the biggie—having to control my speech.

And because, I kept a broad focus, it was amazing the things I uncovered.

Most people are not very good observers. But they can learn to be. And this is critical if you want to get over this problem. I never had any formal speech therapy, but I did undertake my own. Whether or not you work with a therapist, there are a lot of things that *you* can do by yourself.

For example, just by experimenting, I discovered that if I released a little air before I spoke, I was less likely block. I later found out that this was the air flow technique promoted by Dr. Martin Schwartz in New York. If I did block, I discovered I could get a better handle on what I was doing if I repeated the block and then said the word the way I wanted to, without the block. Later I found out that this is was the “cancellation” process developed by Charles Van Riper.

I found that if I were really tense and took a deep breath, it helped to relax my body. This is somewhat similar to the costal breathing that’s an integral part of the McGuire program.

Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not against speech therapy. In a very real way, I did go through speech therapy. I went through my own. And it really does help to know what you’re doing when you stutter, to know it so well that you can reproduce it on purpose and learn to relax the muscles that you’re tightening. It’s like taking apart your tennis swing. The reason you hit too many balls into the net *may be* because you have a performance fear.

But it may also be because you’re not swinging correctly.

Will changing your swing make you as good a player as Serena Williams?

Probably not. But having a proper swing *is* one of the factors that makes a good tennis player. And speaking in a way that does not interfere with the production of speech *is* one factor you may need to address in the recovery process.

So again, proper speaking technique is not the whole story. But it’s a part of it.

*CERTAIN PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS ARE*

*HELPFUL*

One's personality characteristics can also play a role in the recovery process. I just *hate* it when something doesn’t work right. As my wife, Doris, can tell you, I’ve stayed up many nights until 3 a.m. troubleshooting a problem on my Macintosh computer. Sometimes, that compulsiveness drives me a little batty. But as far as stuttering goes, it worked in my favor.

Because whenever I couldn’t speak, I was compulsively drawn to figuring out why.

It also helps if you’re counterphobic. When I’m afraid of something, I tend to manage the fear by moving toward the threat and dealing with it directly, rather than running away from it. For example, every time I got on a bus, I’d ask for a transfer, whether I wanted it or not. Sometimes I could say transfer, but most of the time, I couldn’t. I had to keep pushing it, because I was afraid of what would happen to me if I *didn’t.* I was afraid to hide.

*TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL*

At the age of 25, I left New York and a safe job in my father’s ad agency and boarded a plane to California. Smartest move I ever made. I needed 3,000 miles between me and my family, not because they controlled my life, but because I needed them to tell me who I was. In California, I didn’t have that crutch. For the first time in my life, I was really on my own.

I found a job as an advertising copywriter. I found an apartment. And I joined the junior advertising club. The very first meeting, there were 45 people seated around a very large conference table, and the president of the club said, “Let’s start out by having everyone introduce themselves.” I was next to last. I couldn’t belong to this club if each meeting I had to go through the terror of introducing myself. I had to find a way to confront the fear directly, and that’s when I joined Toastmasters.

Toastmasters is one of the truly great organizations for those with speaking fears, because it gives you an opportunity to speak in front of others in a risk-free environment. Oops. Did I say “risk free?” Not quite.

It’s true, there are no consequences if you block or give a jumbled speech or even stand there with your mouth open and saying nothing. Nobody is going to fire you. And people in Toastmasters are always very supportive. But there is a risk. The risk is to your ego and your self-image. I don’t know how many times I left a Toastmasters meeting feeling like I came off poorly.

However, what those three years in Toastmasters did for me was to provide a place that offered both absolute safety *and* the experience of risk-taking. It was safe in that, even if I blocked or went blank or totally screwed up, there were no consequences. Nobody would tell me to find another job. Nobody would make fun of me. People were there to support me in becoming a better speaker.

It felt risky because my ego was on the line. I would sometimes go home totally mortified about how awful I must have looked in the meeting. Probably, I wasn’t awful. It was just my old self-consciousness and perfectionism coming up. But by showing up week after week, I slowly became more comfortable in front of people.

Very slowly I was starting to change how I saw myself. And that accelerated in a big way when I became involved with an organization called Synanon.

*THE POWER OF THE SYNANON GAME*

To give you a little background — Synanon was a unique 24-hour, residential, self-help rehabilitation program. The residents were all prostitutes, drug addicts, thieves, holdup artists, and other ex-felons you’d classify as people with acting out character disorders. I was drawn to the organization as a sponsor, as were many others in the community.

One of the unique contributions of Synanon was a form of group therapy called the Synanon Game. Drug addicts and other repeat offenders are hard to reach because they’re so manipulative. Being street-wise, they know all the right words to make a psychiatrist or counselor feel good. This

makes it really tough to get them to change their behavior.

So the founder of Synanon, an ex-alcoholic named Chuck Dederich, created a highly unique, group dynamic in which people could learn to *manipulate* each other into telling the truth. The only way to “win” in this game was to be candid and honest. If you weren’t, you’d get manipulated into all kinds of corners, and made to look very dumb and foolish.

The focus of the group would drift from one person to another. At one moment, you’d be on the hot seat. An hour later you’d be running the riot act on someone else. The Game was good, because not only did it pressure you into telling the truth, it also improved your ability to deal with others, and it gave you a chance to explore your feelings.

One evening in 1965 I and a group of sponsors were playing a Synanon Game in a living room in Sausalito, across the bay from San Francisco. In the group were a builder, a lawyer, a travel agent, a cartoonist and a dozen others like myself who you’d classify as ordinary people. We also had one Synanon resident with us by the name of Jack Hurst. During the game he said to me, “John, if you stay around for a while, we’re going to make your stuttering disappear.”

After three years of having people see the most unflattering sides of me, I realized one day that Jack’s prophesy had come true. I still blocked on occasion, but after interacting with hundreds and hundreds of people in a very intimate setting, I had a different perception of myself, my speech, and other people. I realized that I didn’t block because I had something wrong with the way I talked. I blocked because I had difficulties with *the experience of* *communicating to others,* especially in particular situations*.*

It was as if I finally looked under the hood to see what was *really* making the car run. And it wasn’t what I thought it was.

What did I find?

Well, you name it. I had difficulties with self-assertion. I found it hard to express my feelings. I was a rampant perfectionist. I was overly sensitive. Most times, I didn’t know what I felt, and even when I did, I often wasn’t forthcoming because of how people might react. I had very

low self-esteem.

I was obsessively focused on being nice and pleasing others. I was constantly beset by my conflicting intentions. Oh yes, I also had a tendency to hold my breath and tighten my throat when I moved too far out of my comfort zone.

If I wanted to survive in those Games, something had to give. I couldn’t survive by being nice and trying to please everyone, because every time I did, I’d find myself pushed into corners and looking totally stupid. You see, people wanted you to define who YOU were. What YOU wanted. What YOU stood for. I didn’t start out having answers to any of these questions, but over time, the answers began to come.

In the Games, I also had my first exposure to strong emotions. In my family, people didn’t laugh hard and cry hard and argue hard. We were always restrained and guarded. But in the Games, quite the opposite was true. People laughed a lot. And cried a lot. And sometimes people got really angry and blew up.

Far from being intimidated, I found the energy exciting during those moments, as when a squadron of low flying jet fighters thunders in overhead and every part of you resonates with the noise. When I finally let go and blew up at somebody, it was a totally satisfying feeling!

After many, many hours of interacting with others in these Games, I stopped seeing what I was doing as something called “stuttering.” I started seeing it as a system of behaviors and personal characteristics that were organized in a way that caused me to hold back and block.

One of the big surprises was how much I was like everyone else. In the beginning, I felt different, in part because I stuttered. But week after week of listening to other people’s stories, I began to see that we were all pretty much the same. People are people. Eventually, it got to where, after just 10 minutes into the game, I would find a point of connection with everyone in the room.

*S. I. HAWAKAYA OPENS DOORS*

Another aspect of myself that changed was my relationship to authority.

Do you find it more difficult to talk to authority figures like a boss or a parent or an expert of some sort? My feelings toward authority began to evolve when I started taking graduate classes at San Francisco State College in the mid-60s. The most fascinating of those classes was taught by a nationally known general semanticist by the name of S. I. Hayakawa who had written a landmark book called *Language in Thought and Action.* Hayakawa was the most innovative and unorthodox teacher I’ve ever experienced.

In the first class, Hayakawa began by describing his grading system. “Everyone in the class is guaranteed a B,” he said. “No matter what you do, you’ll still get a B. At the end of the semester, if you feel your participation deserves an A, all you have to do is come and ask me, and I’ll give you an A. No questions asked. I only reserve the right to give an A to someone who I feel deserves it but is too modest to ask.”

I was shocked. I couldn’t believe my ears. For the first time in an academic setting, there was no pressure on me to perform. It was in Hayakawa’s class that I first realized how much I was intimidated by authority and how that undercut my own sense of self. Hayakawa asked us to write a paper a week on anything we wanted. Any length. Any subject. Any language. Because I didn’t have any requirements to fill, every word, right from the beginning, was mine. I wrote on the things that *I* wanted.

What a wonderful (and bizarre) experience that was. Back in college, if the professor asked us to write a 1000 word paper, *my* paper would start with word 1001. But in Hayakawa’s class, with every word I wrote, I experienced what it felt like to be my own person, to write from the heart, and to be supported and recognized by the authority at hand.

Slowly, I was beginning to become my own authority. You know how the classes unfolded? Twenty-five people would sit in a large circle. Around 7 p.m., Hayakawa would saunter in, sit down, look around, and say, “Well, what’ll we talk about tonight?”

Some people were intimidated by the lack of structure. I LOVED IT!!! How liberating it was! I could finally take a deep breath and be myself. I had never had that as a child. People were always telling me what to do, and how to do it. I never knew what it felt like to speak spontaneously, freely, and honestly in the presence of a non-judgmental authority figure and be totally supported.

In general semantics, which is what Hayakawa taught, I learned how the structure of language shaped my sense of reality. I began to see the way English forced me into either-or propositions and how easy it was to attach labels. I’m a success. I’m a failure. I’m a stutterer. I’m not a stutterer. I'm good. I'm bad. It gradually dawned on me that I was creating my own stressful world by my habits of thought.

General semantics gave me tools to circumvent these problems. I was encouraged to constantly challenge my own perceptions. If I blocked, and somebody smiled, I automatically assumed they were laughing at me.

General semantics taught me to question things like that. It taught me that my *perception* of reality was not reality at all. It was only my perception. The person could be smiling for any number of reasons. Maybe I just said something that reminded them of a funny experience. Maybe their drawers were too tight, and that smile was a grimace of pain.

Similarly, my beliefs were not reality. They were just a map of reality. I learned to question whether or not my maps were accurate and to not take anything I perceived on face value. Something I came to realize was that whenever someone was upset, I automatically thought it was because of something I’d done. That created additional stress.

It also put me in a one-down position, and it created fertile ground for speech blocks. Once I got in the habit of challenging my perceptions, I started to see that most events had many possible explanations.

Changing how I thought played a vital role in my recovery.

There were many, many things like those I just described that contributed to the broadening picture of myself and of the world at large. But I’m hoping that touching on some of the highlights will give you the flavor of the recovery process...and that you’ll see that stuttering is a problem that

involves *all* of you.

Do all perfectionists stutter? No. Does everyone who holds back his feelings, stutter? No. Are all highly sensitive people subject to stuttering? No. Do all people who grow up with a higher level of childhood disfluency stutter? No. Does everyone who gives up their real self and creates a false self stutter? No. Do all people who use the language in a nonself supportive way stutter? No.

But what happens when you take all these factors and pull them together? If you pull them together in the right way, you create a self-reinforcing system that’s greater than the sum of the parts. It’s not the parts, *but how they go together* that creates the blocking behaviors that most people call stuttering.

Remember, unless you put the parts together correctly, you don’t end up with chronic blocking.

*DRAMATICALLY DIFFERENT HEXAGONS*

By the age of 35, stuttering had pretty much disappeared from my life.

To understand why, it might be useful to compare my hexagons as an early teenager, and as someone in his mid-30s:

**John, age 15**

**BELIEFS**

I have no worth (low self-esteen).

I must be nice at all costs.

What I have to say is unimportant.

I have to please everyone.

People are focused on me.

The world wants me to be good.

Expressing feelings is bad.

The world has to meet my mother’s standard.

My needs always come second.

**PERCEPTIONS**

People are judging me.

I’m not measuring up.

I’m being aggressive.

The other person is speaking the truth.

**INTENTIONS**

My intentions to speak and not speak are fighting each other.

**PHYSIOLOGICAL RESPONSES**

I am sensitive and quick to react

**John, age 35**

**BELIEFS**

I am worthy (good self-esteem)

I must be genuinely me.

I have to please myself.

What I have to say is important

I have to please everybody. I have to please myself.

People are focused on themselves.

The world wants me to be me.

Expressing feelings is desirable.

The world is perfect the way it is.

I can decide when my needs have priority.

**PERCEPTIONS**

I’m the one who’s judging me.

I’m doing the best I can.

I’m being assertive.

The other person *may be* speaking

the “truth.” the truth (and maybe not.)

**INTENTIONS**

My intentions are in alignment.I’m clear when I want to speak. I'malso aware when I'm resisting speaking.

**PHYSIOLOGICAL RESPONSES**

I am sensitive and quick to react.

**PHYSICAL BEHAVIORS**

I tighten my lips and vocal chords and hold my breath when I’m worried about speaking.

I hold back.

**PHYSICAL BEHAVIORS**

I keep everything lose and supple.

I let go.

As you can see it wasn’t just my speech that had changed. It was the total me. I had a bigger, broader self-image that encompassed more of who I was. I had a more realistic appreciation of how the world “was.” I was more comfortable with my own feelings and with living in my own skin. My fluency wasn’t just the result of correcting bad speech habits, it had equally to do with my willingness to let go and be me.

*OUR UNDERSTANDING OF STUTTERING IS*

*BROADENING*

Where are we going with stuttering? Are we starting to make some progress? I think so. My guess is that midway through this decade, there will be definitive answers to what chronic stuttering is all about and how to approach it. In fact, I believe we have most of the answers right now, if we only recognize what we already know.

The reason why I think this will happen is similar to what is happening with the SETI project. SETI, as you may know, stands for the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence and is the program that is organizing the effort to find intelligent life in outer space. Among other things, SETI is collecting voluminous amounts of radio broadcasts from deep space. These data need to be processed and analyzed for instances of intelligent transmission. This takes enormous processing power, more supercomputer power than will ever be available to the organization. How could they take on such a challenge?

Several years ago, someone came up with a brilliant solution. Break the data down into small chunks and send them to hundreds of thousands of home computers. Instead of running screen savers, the computer owners would allow their machines to process the data when their computers were sitting idle. The data would then be sent back to SETI to be assembled and further processed.

A similar process is already taking place around stuttering. With hundreds of thousands of consumers working to solve the problem, and with the Internet as the means to share their experiences, we now have the firepower to solve what so many people have thought was an unsolvable problem.

That’s because *everyone* is empowered to be part of the solution. Coming up with answers is no longer the exclusive domain of the professionals. It’s an effort that involves all of us.

For example, look how many people are on Stuttering Chat and how many participate on some other Internet forum relating to stuttering. Because of this huge dialogue taking place, ordinary people are doing extraordinary things. They’re writing books. They’re coming up with suggestions for therapy. And they’re helping researchers and speech pathologists to be better informed.

At the 2002 annual conference of the National Stuttering Association, we held the First Joint Symposium for Researchers and Consumers. This meeting, which was two years in the making, is, as far as I know, the first such gathering in the history of stuttering research.

It was designed to facilitate interactions between and among researchers and consumers on the subject of fluency disorders. For a day and a half, fifty scientists and clinicians, along with fifteen consumer advocates, discussed the current and future state of stuttering research and drafted ideas for future studies.

This is the kind of cooperation I’m talking about.

There have also been a number of speech professionals who have been intimately involved with the stuttering community through the Internet since the early 90s and through attending NSA chapter meetings and conferences. It’s been interesting to see how much they’ve grown and how their points of view have been transformed as a result.

*HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO*

You may be saying, “Great! But what can *I* do?” How can I start dismantling my stuttering hexagon. How can I start getting past my speech blocks? How can I get to where speaking is fun?”

For openers, start reading. Not just about stuttering. Broaden your reading to all those areas that have to do with who you are as a human being. Start being a good observer. Notice the subtle ways in which the way you function as a person affects your speech.

Start asking questions like —“Suppose I didn’t block in this situation, what might happen?” Don’t stop with the obvious answers like, “Well, if I didn’t block, I might stutter.” Go deeper.

What else might happen if you really showed up as the full version of who you are? Keep a journal. Get out of your comfort zone. Experiment. Try new things. Remember, there’s a good chance that the answers may not be under the street light, but in the dark where you have to feel your way around.

Get involved in programs that promote your growth as a person, like the Landmark Forum, or Toastmasters, or Speaking Freely (Speaking Circles) .

Get to know your stuttering behavior in intimate detail, so you can duplicate it on purpose, down to the finest degree. Know what you’re doing when you block. Don’t allow yourself to go unconscious. Work with a speech professional, if you need to, in order to get a handle on this.

And for Pete’s sake, get on the Internet if you’re not there already, and start dialoguing with people who have an enormous amount of wisdom and insight to share.

I’d like to conclude with a couple of e-mails posted on the Neurosemantics Internet forum on stuttering\* by several list members. These are people who have been profoundly affected by the discussions that have unfolded here.

The first is from Robert Strong in New Zealand. *I would like to share a little of my realizations that would have been*

*somewhat foreign to me 6 months ago. I, too, and probably most of you out there, wanted to consciously be rid of stuttering. I now realise that just letting go of my stutter would have left the same old me, just without a stutter. If I had “fixed” my stutter, life may have been easier, but I would have been in the same model of my world. It is myself that I have needed to heal. Healing myself enables me to change my life for the better... I have started a new journey that I didn’t realise was even there for me. And....here’s the EPIC part about it... the stutter leaves me as a consequence. Yes... it just leaves of it’s own free will. Wow! I don’t know about you guys and gals, but that bloooows me away.*

And finally, this piece from Prasun Sonwalkar. At the time, Prasun was a graduate student in England.

*This [neuro-semantics Internet] group is really making a difference to people’s lives. It’s amazing how technology facilitates this. I have progressed quite a distance, and have reached the point where I realize that effective speaking is so much more than just NOT stuttering! Since the last month or so, I have just not been caring whether I stutter or not, it is not that big a bother as it was some time ago. John’s ‘free fall’ concept [in an earlier e-mail, I compared letting go and speaking to bailing out of a plane]*

*is so useful, and when I free fell in the situations I earlier consistently avoided, things turned out real cool. In general there is so much less tension, feverishness, worry...maybe the real me is coming out. The most important thing of course is my own relationship with myself, which has*

*improved vastly. What would we do without this group!*

\*http://groups.yahoo.com/group/neurosemanticsofstuttering

Ladies and gentlemen, big changes are now taking place in the way we view stuttering. It’s happening now. There are thousands participating in the transformation.

Won’t you join in the fun?

REFERENCES

Carroll, L. (1965). *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* In R.L. Green (Ed.)

*The Works of Lewis Carroll.* Paul Hamlyn Ltd. London.

Maslow, A. (1962). *Towards a Psychology of Being.* D. Van Nostrand and Company. New York.