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Why Talking Is Easier While You're "Being" Someone Else

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WHY TALKING IS EASIER WHILE YOU'RE "BEING" SOMEONE ELSE....

Do you find it easier to talk if you take on someone else's personality? Why is it that many people who stutter have absolutely no difficulty with their speech when they're acting on stage? Maybe this story will help to shed light on this Chinese puzzle.

All through school I lived in perpetual fear of speaking in front of an audience, so it was with quaking knees that I awaited the approach of the senior play, a traditional production for the graduating class.

In my skit I was cast as our French teacher, Monsieur Quinche. I had to recite a poem having to do with my prowess as a teacher and my universal appeal to women. (This was something of a joke, as Monsieur was a rather rotund, outmoded fixture who spent years parked behind his desk, dictating irregular verbs that nobody ever remembered.)

As opening night approached, I suffered the expected queasy stomach. I couldn't shake the fear of becoming totally blocked in front of hundreds of parents, teachers and classmates. I wondered how I could ever survive the disgrace.

Well, surprise. Armageddon didn't take place. I stood up in front of the audience, opened my mouth, and in heavily accented English,

out came the lyrics. I still remember the opening lines:

I'm ze teachaire of ze houaire,
I'm ze teachaire of ze year.
' My language is known from 'ere to 'ere to 'ere.
It's ze language of savoir faire.
Who am I? I'm Woodmere's Pierre."

I was dramatic. I was flamboyant. And I was *totally fluent*.

So what was going on? How did I carry it off? Why was I able to talk fluently when I assumed another personality?

SELF IMAGE VS. TOTAL SELF

As we grow up, we learn to see ourselves in a particular way. My self-image back in school was of a nice, unassertive person. I always blended in with the crowd. Strong feelings had no place in my life. It made me uneasy to stand out.

Let's represent the concept of Self-Image with a circle.

There was also another me, a more complete me which we'll call my Total Self, because it represented the totality of who I really was: my thoughts, abilities, feelings, experiences, beliefs, my physical self...everything known and unknown about me. The works. We'll represent the concept of Total Self with a second circle.

Now, let me pose a question. If there is a major overlap between those two circles - that is, if how I see myself is how I really am - what kind of a person would I be?

You're right. I'd be self-accepting. I'd be a well-grounded person because I'd be in touch with my personal resources. I'd see and accept the different sides of myself - my strengths, weaknesses, arrogance, humor, sadness, caring, jealousies, generosity, pettiness and so on.

Obviously, not all parts of myself would be included within my self-image. All of us have capabilities or hidden sides we'll never get in touch with, at least, not in this lifetime. Furthermore, a certain amount of self-delusion is a part of human nature. But by and large, if most of what we see is an accurate portrayal, we're in good shape.

Now look at the next set of circles.

What kind of person are we describing here?

A certified psychotic.

This person has rejected everything about himself. He does have a self-image, of course, but it's comprised of beliefs that have no basis in reality. The guy in the mental ward who thinks he's Napoleon or Jesus Christ would be a good example.

The average person falls somewhere in between these two extremes and can be represented by the following set of interlocking circles.

As you can see, there's a large area of congruency where the person is really in touch with who he (or she) is. Plus there are smaller areas where the individual is not aware of his true self as well as areas where he sees qualities and characteristics that aren't actually there.

For example, notice the part of the "Self-Image" circle to the right of the overlap area. This is where a particular false image of

ourselves would reside - for example, a perception of ourselves as helpless when we're anything but. Now look at the part of the "Total Self" circle to the left of the overlap - this corresponds to the side of us that's 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.

The area to the left is precisely where I hid my image as a public speaker. I simply couldn't see myself as someone who could cut loose and have fun (although as an adult I have discovered that I very much enjoy speaking in front of people.)

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*.

How, then was I able to come off so strongly in the senior play?

TAKING ON THE FRENCHMAN'S PERSONALITY

I had seen enough Maurice Chevalier movies to have a vivid picture of how the stereotypical Frenchman was supposed to act - effusive, flamboyant, debonair; a person who is not afraid to display what he feels, not only in words but with his whole body. (How totally unlike my own self-image he was.)

Consequently, when I assumed the role of a Frenchman, there was

no need to hold back; there was nothing to block. I could let go and have fun, *because I knew people would accept my spontaneity and energy as long as I played that role. My behavior was appropriate for the image.* If we were to diagram what was happening, it would look like the schematic below.

If you had asked me during Senior Night whether that was me, I would have told you - "Oh no! I'm not like that."

Well, was it me, or wasn't it?

Of course it was me.

It just wasn't the me that I identified with.

Notice that although my performance as the Frenchman fell outside my own self-image, it was still within the larger area defined as my Real Self. It had to be. *If it weren't me, I couldn't have done what I did.*

What might we speculate, then, about people who stutter.

For one thing, we might postulate that most of us have a self-image that constricts us. During my many years with the National Stuttering Project, it has been my impression that most of us who have grown up with a stuttering problem are stronger personalities than our self-image will allow - more opinionated, more emotional, more excited (and more exciting!), more turned on, more responsible, more authoritative (and also, less perfect and less nice) than we ever dreamed we could be.

But 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 delecti*. 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 - for example, turning a well-rounded individual into a "square" (see diagram.)

_ 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.

If you find it easier to speak as someone else, then maybe it's time to look at what it is about your present self-image that doesn't give you that same freedom; then find a way to expand your self-image so that more of you can fit inside. You need to find safe situations where you can try out other roles; a place where you can experiment and search for the total you. It may be therapy. It may be one of the growth trainings such as The Forum or Lifespring. It may be a Dale Carnegie course or the Toastmasters Club. It may be an NSP chapter meeting, workshop or convention. Whatever.

After all, isn't it time to get out of that constricting straight jacket called a *diminished self-image* and into something that fits?