

## On Becoming a Non-Stammering Stammerer

by David Mitchell

Imagine that when you vocalize a word that begins with, say, 'N' your mouth suddenly seizes up. The word refuses to form. In mid-flow, your sentence stalls. Your puzzled listeners frown: there is a rule governing the length of pauses in sentences, which you are violating. You double, then treble, then quadruple your efforts to say the word, but all that forms is a gagging 'n – n – n – ' noise. Your head heats up, as if an accelerator was being slammed as heavily as the brake pedal. Your eyeballs swell. Your face becomes distorted like an epileptic's. Firecrackers of mortification go off in and around your skull as your listeners begin to get the picture. One keeps an artificially calm face as if nothing odd is happening. Another is looking embarrassed, though compared to you, he doesn't know the meaning of the word. Another looks away – to hide a smile? Finally one delivers the coup de grace and says the unsayable word for you, confident that they have performed a great favour. Now imagine that this isn't a once every two or three months occurrence, or even two or three weeks: this is going to happen to you two or three times a *sentence*. Finally, imagine that you are no longer in the company of liberal-minded *Observer* readers: imagine that you are back in your schoolyard.

I guess I was about seven or eight when I became aware that something was wrong with my speech. My memory recalls an aggressively summery afternoon, perhaps during the drought of 1976. Our teacher asked a question to which the answer – improbably, given our age, but Miss Hyde's expectations were high – was 'Napoleon'. I stuck my hand up, eager to impress her, but what happened next is described above. Sure, it was humiliating – a couple of girls began giggling – but more than that, as the same mystery illness struck again and again, it was terrifying. What on Earth was wrong with me? What was it called? Why was I the only person on the planet to suffer from this ailment? I had memories of going to a clinic in Southport with a Fisher Price Multi-Storey Car Park because I was three or four years old before I began to speak, but those experiences were of a far lesser, more pleasant order. What were the rules that governed how it came and went? Why only words that began with 'n'? Soon, I would be nine, and what would I do when people asked me how old I was?

The speech therapist was a lady named Mrs Lester who had the looks and kindly nature of a white witch. I felt a scab of shame about these visits, and lied to my classmates when they wanted to know why I was leaving school

early every other Tuesday. Mrs Lester got me to talk in time to a metronome, read from picture-books, and keep a rudimentary journal of when I stammered and how I felt. This did me a lot of good in the short run, yet no good at all in the long. During my sessions with Mrs Lester, I hardly stammered at all, and after a few sessions she duly reassured my mum that there was nothing much to worry about and that I would probably grow out of it. Doubtless we all found solace in this optimistic prognosis. (Speech therapy as a branch of psychiatry, I'm guessing, was in its adolescence in the late 70s and for once I'd be pleased if this article provokes miffed letters from speech therapists or their patients pointing out that treatments have come on a long way since then.) But outside the compass of Mrs Lester's benign influence, the stammer would be back. Eventually I had to conclude that this wasn't like my hayfever, which could be cured by taking Piriton. Asking to go back to Mrs Lester would have fortified everyone's image of me as a kid with a problem; bad news in a life-period where social acceptance and, indeed, survival, lies in normality. So, apart from a few more speech therapy sessions when I was thirteen – when the same pattern of cure and relapse was repeated – this was something I would have to wrestle with alone.

Children compensate for a lack of lexicon with simile or metaphor, and I got into the habit of visualizing my stammer as a sort of shady homunculus – an anti-matter Gollum – who lived at the base of my tongue. Me and him were pitted in an endless war, like NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The homunculus avoided predictable patterns. It might let me speak unimpeded until I lowered my vigilance, then strike. It might highlight stammer-words coming up in conversation, and cackle as my anxiety triggered an attack. It shows a baffling disdain for conventional wisdom. Stressful situations, you might think, would aggravate a stammer, but this isn't necessarily the case. At my first public reading as a soon-to-be-published writer in London with A.S. Byatt – probably the nerviest moment of my adult life – my stammer went AWOL. Other times, while happy and relaxed and with friends and family, it would strike without warning or mercy. You just never know. It is absent when I sing, when I am alone and speaking to myself, when I speak with another stammerer, and when I speak in dreams. Telephones were bad news for much of my life. Answerphones were less so. Speaking to a stammerer with a more pronounced stammer than my own. Stammerers who have a troubled relationship with their mother or father – I don't – tell me that visiting the parental house would provoke their stammer, but in my case I've never noticed an improvement or worsening. Over the years I have noticed, however, that it flares up in Spring and dies down in Autumn. Where's the logic in all of this? How was I supposed to defeat this enemy when his behaviour is so inconsistent?

Growing up, I had not a bloody clue. All I knew was that this defect was a fatal disadvantage in the more nakedly-aggressive world of children. During a

dispute any antagonist could, and happily did, mimic a stutter, bystanders would laugh and, of course, win the day. Luckily for all involved, I never had the physique to maim my enemies, only the imagination to fantasize doing so. My sole strategy for damage limitation was a sort of alphabetical avoidance. You scan sentences ahead for stammer-words and navigate your sentence in such a way that you won't need those words. Rather like Georges Perec writing 'A Void' without the letter 'e', except you have a lot less time to sit and think. (One good friend, a child-stammerer who grew up in Pakistan and who is a novelist in his adult life, went so far as giving up speaking altogether for several years, and communicated by means of a pen and pad. This scheme, alas, was never going to wash in Worcestershire.) Thanks to this strategy, I managed to semi-conceal my speech defect, at a price. I lived in constant fear of being detected, exposed, named and shamed. Furthermore, a policy of avoiding 'dangerous' letters means that you don't volunteer answers in class. When a teacher asked me something directly, often I had to feign ignorance and weather the displeasure. Worse still, schoolchildren are sometimes obliged to read aloud in public. Nativity plays, harvest festivals: stone-cold living hell! For years, I dreaded being anointed a sixth-form prefect, because these Chosen Ones had to read a passage of their own choice at assembly. I was made prefect, and after much agonizing went to the deputy headmistress on my knees to plead for clemency. (She granted my stay of execution without a second thought, and if you're reading this in your well-earned retirement, Mrs Bassett, as I hope you are, that was the right move.) Similarly, when roles for A-level Shakespeare were divvied up I'd always pray to get minor courtiers or messengers in a hurry. In bad seasons I'd have to approach English teachers on the sly and ask to be excused being a speaking role altogether. I dreaded saying the words "because of my stammer" as much as I dreaded them already knowing that I had one. They complied, but not without an element of 'You need to pull your socks up' in their compliance. I could only agree. I was getting worried about employment. The Thatcherite policy of compensating for the lack of jobs by getting schools to teach the art of the job interview was in full swing, but how could I impress my brilliance upon a prospective employer if I couldn't spit my name out? And what would stop an employer firing me once my deception became known? Would I have to be a monk in a silent order or a crofter or a light-house keeper? Pulling my socks up was a wonderful idea, but in the context of a stammer, nobody seemed to be able to tell me *how*.

My primary source of solace and information – TV – was, in this case, sod-all help. The few stammerers on TV were comic figures and served only to inflict 3<sup>rd</sup> degree embarrassment burns. Ronnie Barker played a stammering grocer on 'Open All Hours' called Arkwright, who, I notice, still provokes gales of pre-recorded laughter with his hilarious portrayal of a dour stammerer on satellite TV. I used to sweat just knowing it was on, sure it would blow my skimpy cover at school. Michael Palin's later portrayal of a stammerer in 'A

Fish Called Wanda' was more sympathetic, but my toes would still curl in shame by proxy. This film, like the portrayal of the theatre owner in 'Shakespeare in Love', perpetuates one of the myths that informed non-stammerers' dealings with me. I label this myth as the In At The Deep End Cure, which states that if you subject a stammerer to his or her Room 101 – addressing a large hostile public – the stammerer will magically disappear. Bullshit, alas. Anecdotal history may remember a few such temporary 'cures', but when it comes to countless occasions when a stammerer has buckled under such pressure – never really unbuckles – history is less reliable. Another myth – the one behind my teachers' reluctance to let me off the public-speaking – I would call the Will-Power Myth. This one maintains that a stammerer is analogous to a newly wheelchair-bound character in a heartwarming American film. The doctors say he'll never walk again, but his gritty determination proves them wrong. This myth cost me angry years of believing that I stammered because I wasn't trying hard enough *not* to stammer. That homunculus *feeds* off gritty determination. Like a forcefield, the more will-power you throw at it, the stronger it gets, and the more surely you'll end up as a gibbering, face-contorted comedy spectacle like Arkwright the Grocer. What's more – and this myth lay behind my speech therapist's metronome, now I think of it – you can't 'reboot' your speech software, or 'practice' your way out of a speech defect. Whatever a stammer is, it isn't a dodgy golf swing.

Whilst I am happy to damn the comic exploitation to the fiery pit, the stubbornness of stammering myths is understandable. It is, if you like, the impediment that cannot say its name. People show fewer inhibitions about discussing blindness with blind people or deafness with deaf people. Stammering maintains a patina of shame. Strangers wish to avoid the awkwardness of confronting a stammerer in full throttle. My own friends and family feel that even to mention the subject would cause the same mortification as the act of stammering itself, and until pretty recently they would have been right. Even in that finest depository of experience we call literature, I know only one excellent essay by John Updike which rang very true, and very little else. (You can always tell, by the way, if a fictional stammering character is depicted from personal experience: a counterfeit stammers on words beginning with random letters of the alphabet, whilst the real McCoy stammers on words only beginning with two or three.) This brings me to why I am writing this article (and, indeed, *Black Swan Green*). My minor aim is to give non-stammerers an idea of what living with a speech defect is like. My major aim is to communicate what I wish someone had told me when I was a boy about handling a stammer, in the hope that it might prove helpful to anyone having to survive in a hostile schoolyard or workplace. Given stammering's wide taxonomy, what I write below won't be useful for everyone living with a homunculus in the tongue. But at one time or another, including right now, what follows has been useful for me.

First off, consider how much easier it is to work with a stammer than a stutter. What's the difference? Some authorities maintain 'stutter' and 'stammer' are two words for the same thing, but I subscribe to the following definitions: a stutter is where the first syllable of the word is repeated over and over like a machine gun, without the second ever being reached. A stammer, in contrast, is where not even the first syllable can be articulated: there's just an ever-widening hole in the sentence. I believe that in this hole, this gap, you can find the silence, the calmness, you need to get the next word out. So, if your speech defect takes the form of a stutter, just some take time out when you get to the hazardous word. A stable starting point is better than frantic stress.

Secondly, when language is an enemy, there is a temptation to speak at machine gun speed to try and get the damn stuff over with as quickly as possible. Most humans, however, don't speak like CNN news-readers. Take your time. Your sentences are your creations and if your listeners aren't willing to let you go at your own pace, then to hell with them. This point also ushers in the strategy of the False Pause. If you're negotiating a stammer-word, feign a pause when you get to it. Pretend to be weighing up the best word to go next. Especially if your listeners think that this is just your ordinary speech pattern, they won't guess that what you're actually doing is waiting for the homunculous to back down, lower his guard or just lose interest. Quite often the word will just come out when you're not thinking about it too hard. If it doesn't, the false pause gives you the opportunity to abort the sentence, pretend to have thought of a better way to say it, and rephrase the sentence so you can make the same point without the stammer-word. A strategy of last resort, maybe, but a lot better than sounding like a broken Dalek.

I could call this next one the Brush-Past Method. I might be wrong, but I don't think you stammer on vowels. Right now one of my stammer letters is 'S', so if, say, I need to say the word 'serendipity' the trick is to pretend that the word is 'erendipity' (no problem there) but just sort of brush past the 's' sound on the way. Vocal momentum is then on your side, and the word often plops out without the clipped consonant being noticeable. A close relative to this strategy is what I could call the Chop-Up Method. For reasons I find interesting to speculate on, I always have difficulty with the second syllable in the word 'embarrass', even though 'b' isn't a stammer-letter for me right now. (These wild-card *bete noires* crop up sometimes.) The trick here is to treat it as two words, 'em' and 'barrass', with a short space in between. Yes, it sounds a bit odd, but a bit odd is okay.

The final strategy I wish to advocate is the longest-term one. It is less a linguistic dodge, and more about habit of mind. The 'stammer-trigger' has to

be linked to our perception of the listener: this is why we never stammer when alone. I believe we stammer primarily because we are anxious about being seen to stammer. If the stammer itself is immune to attack, as my own experience suggests, attack the anxiety. Cultivate an attitude of militant indifference to what our listeners might think if we were to stammer. Think, *Okay, I need – no, I want – some extra seconds until I feel ready to say the next word, and if you have a problem with that then \*\*\*\* you. In fact, go ahead and laugh right now, and I shan't waste any more time on you.* Certainly, this militant indifference comes more easily when you're a self-employed writer in your late 30s, but even to a tenth grade schoolkid in a rough North London comp who doesn't have the liberty of choosing the people he mixes with, this might be useful stuff. I hope so. Aside from bolstering fragile self-esteem, the more purely this indifference can be maintained, the more rarely it needs to be deployed. You stammer less.

I wish I could phone up my thirteen year-old self and tell him that there is no magic wand solution to stammering. He'd be crestfallen at first – this is what he's praying to find – but what I'd add should cheer him up: you can get sufficiently adept at the strategies outlined here that, like the snidey friends in the old *Head & Shoulders* ads, people stop defining you as a sufferer of this problem. Too many people who read proofs of *Black Swan Green* have asked me how I did my research on stammering: they can't all be trying to make me feel good about myself. Many people stumble over words, but aren't labelled as stammerers: just as earth tremors happen all the time, but are not registered as quakes until they exceed a certain threshold of severity. Aspire to bring the severity of your own stammer to down below this threshold. A famous alcoholic ex-footballer once spoke about the impossibility of 'curing' alcoholism: instead, he aspired to become a teetotal alcoholic. It is realistic and healthy for us, I think, to aspire to become non-stammering stammerers.

Here is my big idea: stop trying to kill your stammer. That metaphor about the homunculus, or the badly-behaved dog, or however you visualize it, eventually becomes a hindrance to resolution. Change how you perceive your stammer. Stop seeing it as an enemy to be vanquished: it is an integral part of the process of how you think, perceive others, and process language, and no good ever came of hating an integral part of yourself (as opposed to an undesirable character trait.) Your stammer informs your relationship with language and *enriches* it, if only because you need more structures and vocabulary at your command. Sure, a stammer interiorises you, but there is much to be said for thinking before you speak. Quite probably, if I could have produced unbroken, effortless sentences like my secretly-envied class-mates, I would never have felt the need to write them down, nor become a writer. Just as you have to live somewhere, you have to be some one, and as long as your defects, limitations and handicaps aren't alienating friends, why shouldn't they be as valid a set of

determinants for who you are and what your vocation is as your gifts? I spent too many years fighting an interminable, unwinnable, self-esteem-sapping war inside my own skull to apologise for the Chicken Soup For The Soul flavour of this conclusion. Namely, seek to understand your ‘defect’ – whatever form it takes – and learn from it. Befriend it.