

Stuttering as Transformative: Silent Child Turned Adult Mystic

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"Silence is only frightening to people who are compulsively verbalizing."

—William S. Burroughs

Stuttering blows. Don't get me wrong: I'm not looking for sympathy; it's not like I'm fighting cancer or anything. To paint a picture: I'm young, I'm male, I'm white, I'm straight, and not too bad looking. So, even if my stutter's bad enough to notice, I'm not moping around feeling sorry for myself. In the grand scheme of things, I'm actually grateful that stuttering is about as big as my problems get.

None of which is meant to imply that stuttering doesn't blow. It most certainly does.

I remember grade school classmates who stuttered when they were young, and then it simply went away as they got older, as if it was being phased out like baby teeth or the belief in Santa Claus. I wasn't one of those kids. My stutter clutched on tight and never let go.

"You're a verbal scratcher," Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky) told me, after I finished reading a cut-up poem that he had assigned at a writing workshop. It wasn't a good stutter day; my stutter is always worse when I have to read out loud, when the words are predetermined. It was July 2011 in Boulder, Colorado at Naropa University, and we were in the final week of the Summer Writing Program at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.

"Huh?"

"Your stutter," he said, "it's pretty cool...what you're doing...what you do. It's like you're verbally scratching. You're a verbal scratcher." The class couldn't help but laugh. I couldn't either.

It was one of those rare moments where I felt good, even proud, of my impediment. It's amazing how much resentment, neglect, and ambivalence one can harbor toward oneself over the course of twenty-seven years.

DJ Spooky was one of the few people I had come across who didn't tip-toe around my stutter. He didn't ask my permission to comment; he just smiled and imparted to me the impression it made on him. The last time I remembered this happening was a few years back, during my undergraduate work. There was a girl I met at a house party who was a Psychology major and took matters of the mind very seriously. "It's endearing...your stutter," she said to me, buzzed and smiling, after I stumbled over my own name. "But it's also interesting. Like your subconscious is hiding something, even from you." There were a lot of girls who talked that way at Humboldt State University.

Every now and then during grad school I would have to participate in special events put on by the Jack Kerouac School, which included reading my work in public. The nights I didn't feel like struggling on a stage, at a podium, spotlight and all, in front of a dark room full of strangers, I would have someone else read my work for me. Usually it was a

theater friend or someone familiar with the emotional rhythms of storytelling. It wasn't my stutter that bothered me, per se; it was the fact that the words on the page weren't getting across the way they had sounded in my head. I had to learn the hard way that I physically could not express the words I had conjured up during those long and sleepless nights that always crawled into the small hours. The time spent on rhythm, tone, emotion, and the occasional run-on sentence; none of it was justified when rendered through my trembling lips.

I really didn't start thinking deeply about my stutter until I was about 19. It was around that time that my friend Annie said to me, "I think your stuttering grounds you," which I took as a compliment. My stuttering has certainly put me in my place over the years; it humbled me in a peculiar way. Perhaps in this life, for whatever reason, I must learn to just shut up and listen; observe life instead of thoughtlessly interjecting myself; empathize with those around me.

If I didn't stutter, I probably wouldn't have discovered my passion for the craft of writing. I doubt I would have even gone to college. I would have jumped into acting, one of the first things I had felt strongly about as a child, and nurtured a more extroverted life. I know this because I tried. When I was thirteen I begged my parents to enroll me in youth acting workshops, and they did, during summers in Santa Monica and North Hollywood. I was self-conscious at that point, ashamed of my stutter and in denial about it all at once. If nothing else, it interfered with dramatic and comedic timing. On some days I remember having to make sure it didn't look like I had been crying when my mom came to pick me up. Once I reached high school, I chilled out about the whole acting thing and my focus turned toward things like girls and sports.

During my junior year I noticed flyers around campus announcing auditions for West Side Story and felt a familiar rush. Sure, I realized that athletes usually don't go out for parts in the spring musical. But I knew I had to be a part of it. The audition went surprisingly well; it was a good stutter day. Even though my nerves were rattled I had my speech under control. I got a callback the next week and immediately the director pulled me to the side.

"Here's what's going on. I'm thinking about you for the part of Tony [the lead]. But I've got to know...are you able to speak with some reliable fluency?"

I shook my head no.

"Would you be able to be fluent if you knew the lines...like, if you already knew the words?"

I shook my head no. "Sometimes that makes it worse," I told him.

He had to respectfully rescind his offer for the lead, and I was cast as a principle dancer and Shark gang member. Maybe I should have lied. Maybe I should have just said "forget it" and taken a leap of faith. Maybe I should have not been so convinced of my own stutter. But for some reason I didn't think twice about being so upfront about it. Maybe I didn't want to waste anyone's time, or make things more complicated than they had to be. In any case, I had to shelve the first dream I ever really had, fading into the backdrop as a dancing silhouette. As amazing an experience as it was to be a part of that production, in the back of my mind I couldn't help feeling like some kind of phony,

sticking my nose where it didn't belong.

My stutter didn't hold me back too much in high school. I was a good student, did well at sports, and had a lot of friends. People liked me, regardless of my stutter. Even still, I wasn't okay with it. This caused me to adopt a lot of introverted habits. My thoughts never stuttered, and I liked that. The problem was that no one else could hear it.

It's not that I feel that my condition is a reflection of who I am, or a punishment for what I've done (at least not in this life anyway), but when a childhood career of speech therapy fails to rattle you to the core, you tend to develop a greater tolerance toward the more weird and unconventional methods.

During my guest appearance on the Stutter Talk podcast in the spring of 2011, I mentioned adopting a more spiritual outlook toward my stutter, considering the possibility of karmic debt rather than some freak physiological phenomenon. To be clear, it's not some retail New Age sentiment I chose to adopt, nor is it some desperate, subconscious need for feigned enlightenment. I've come to terms with my stutter, and it's welcome to crash on my couch whenever it pleases. What I'm referring to is more an exercise in mystical introspection, philosophical focus, what Carl Jung called "individuation." Individuation is described as a psychological process of integrating the conscious mind with the unconscious mind, while still maintaining one's relative autonomy. If practiced diligently it can serve as reconciliation between the Free Will vs. Destiny conundrum. It's the only semblance of a faith that I possess.

It wasn't too long ago that it dawned on me: a stutter isn't something to hide or fix, but it's a catalyst for developing neglected inner strengths and skills. It's kind of like the universe slapping you in the face and telling you to pay attention.

This is not to suggest that speech therapy never helped me; indeed it did. It taught me not to rush myself, to reteach myself how to breathe, to not to be on other people's time and rhythm but my own, and to sometimes sliiiiiide out my words when I get stuck. Things like that. I learned clever little tricks that made it easier to socialize and to forget that I often talk in muted halts while farting through my nose.

But like many Western remedies, generally speaking, it seeks to patch symptoms rather than meditate on the root of the ailment. When I wasn't frequenting school-issued or private speech therapists, I sought out certified hypnotherapists, empathic mediums, and initiated seers. It gets tricky in this realm though. In the book *Practical Occultism in Daily Life*, British occultist and author Dion Fortune (1890-1946) stressed great discernment when dabbling in the world of what she called "professional occultism":

The problem of the horoscope is a very perplexing one. A horoscope can be a very great help; it can also be a most pernicious influence, full of poisonous suggestions. Everything depends upon the wisdom and spiritual quality of the astrologer. The right kind of astrologer can be as helpful as the right kind of priest. Let it be remembered, however, that the professional, advertising astrologer is obliged to do an enormous amount of hack-work and it is almost impossible for him to keep his spiritual virginity...I have never seen anything but harm come from running round from one soothsayer to another. (p. 42)

This isn't some neon carnival gimmick, or the fleeting horoscope pages of *Teen Vogue*. As it turns out, I was seeking an outmoded, misunderstood, and nearly forgotten practice

of inner exploration, and one without any stake in commodity or commerce. I found its study to be a very solitary and lonesome process, much like the experience of stuttering: It's yours to deal with and yours alone. Of course it's both beneficial and lucky to have a support system, but no matter how many cheerleaders show up to your big game, you're still the one who has to play all four quarters.

With the difficulty of finding a reliable occultist, a large part of my preternatural exploration was done on my own, via combining the traditions of Vedic Hinduism (of which I learned a great deal during my time at Naropa University) and Western Esotericism (in which I've always been interested, even as a child). I willingly followed the trajectory of my own intuition. When I was lucky I would coincidentally run into good-natured magicians (in Aleister Crowley's sense of the word) whose livelihood did not rely on giving psychic readings, and who were able to aid me in my pursuit.

What good have my mystic findings done me? I suppose it's helped to eliminate a great deal of the fear that comes along with speaking. In my experience, 90% of my actual stuttering stems from the assumption, the fear, that it's inevitable; the fear that I'll look stupid in front of others. Maybe I do look stupid, maybe I don't. I don't really have to deal with looking at myself when I talk. But being a stutterer, and becoming aware of myself as a stutterer, I've come close to perfecting what I like to call the Art of Not Giving a S***.

As a lot of my fellow stutterers can probably attest, it's so easy to give into the silent terror that comes with anticipating bad stuttering blocks. It took twenty some odd years but I finally got sick of it; fed up. Why let something I can't even explain have control over me? I thought to myself. The often overlooked act of simply not caring has become a great aid for me in recent years. In my experience, if I don't care about my stutter, then those around me won't care either.

Writing is my outlet, and a fortunate one. It's a way for people to hear the voice that's in my head, the voice that fostered me as a teen, kept me confident. It was my best friend in a lot of ways. It may sound crazy to call a voice in your head your best friend, but maybe not when you feel it to be the most authentic thing about yourself. Some people aren't fortunate enough to possess a physical manifestation of their own karma. A situation of karma is usually much less tangible, more cryptic, often taking entire lifetimes to be realized and worked out. For me, having a speech impediment is a direct result of something unresolved—one of the many beacons for self-actualization. I'm trying to use it to my advantage the best I can. Since my immersion into the "real world" of adults and cultivating a professional life, my stutter has not hindered me from performing stand-up comedy, discussing my film reviews on podcasts, networking with potential employers, or even working nights in a bar. In fact, the more I'm vocal about it, and the more humor about it that I express, the easier it gets. Doing that cuts the tension and then everyone can relax, especially me.

I've come to find that a vital aspect of the psyche is cultivated within silence; some things in this world thrive in the dark. The inner trip I've taken via my speech impediment has greatly shaped who I am today, and though I can still feel a part of me that resents it, there's no part of me that regrets it. It's all still a work in progress and I can't really imagine a time when I won't be at odds with my stutter. Even still, I take it one day at a

time, balancing focus between both voices, written and spoken.

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***Brent Smith** was born and raised in Los Angeles. He is a writer and avid stutterer. Brent's work consists of transgressive fiction, pop culture features, and most recently scripts. He is the content and copy editor for 5 books to date and hopes to continue expanding his experience with various genres. He received a Master of Fine Arts from the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics and his training was very much received in the vein of the literary Beat Movement. Brent believes Rock N Roll to be the finest American invention.*

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