

FROM STUTTERING TO STABILITY

By Anonymous

(with Bob Bodenhamer)

When I was 19 years old, I made the most meaningful decision of my life. No, I am not talking about marriage, although that is very meaningful. I am talking about the decision to become a Christian. From that point on, my perspective of life and the world did a 180-degree turn. However, becoming a Christian did not end my stuttering, and the disappointment I felt over God's seeming lack of concern about my speech problem was no small matter through the years.

But I will revisit that issue a little further on.

Now, you would think that most people who stutter would avoid professions that require a lot of speaking. This is probably true, however, for some unknown reason, 12 years ago I was drawn to a profession that not only required a lot of speaking but also a lot of public speaking. In actuality, it is due to the dynamics of my profession that set me on a relentless path to overcome stuttering.

PREVIOUS TREATMENT

Before I go on to how I moved from stuttering to stability, I think it is noteworthy to mention that

I have tried some of the more popular treatments for stuttering with minimal success. After becoming very disenchanted (and thousands of dollars poorer), I began doing research on my own to see if I could discover the key to unlocking the mystery behind my stuttering.

You see, I have always been bothered by the theories that stuttering is caused by a physical defect in the speaking mechanism and/or brain. It made me feel disempowered, like my only hope was to wait until they invented a magic pill that would cure stuttering. It also did not take rocket science to figure out that my speech mechanisms were in good working order since even my most difficult words could be spoken fluently in certain situations.

And then there was that ever-present anxiety that always preceded the stuttering. Hmm, I wonder what would happen if there were no anxiety? This is where the story gets really interesting. One day several months ago I was surfing around on the National Stuttering Association's web site when I spotted the book *How To Conquer Your Fears of Speaking Before People* by John C. Harrison. I ordered the book, and when it arrived I immediately began devouring its contents.

The first part of the book talked about specific techniques that people who stutter could use to be an effective public speaker. While this portion of the book was good, it was the second portion that was like a breath of fresh air.

The second part reflected John's feelings about

stuttering, including the premise that if you are trying to solve a problem without making headway, chances are that you are trying to solve the wrong problem. He felt that many stuttering treatments are not inclusive enough to fully describe the full dynamics of what drives stuttering.

John went on to describe what he has termed the "Stuttering Hexagon," an interconnected system comprised of six points: physical behaviors, emotions, perceptions, beliefs, intentions, and physiological responses. Every point is connected to every other point.

John explained that if a person who stutters has previously been working on one point of the Hexagon, such as speech production, but has not worked to change any of the other points such as emotions or beliefs, those other parts will continue to have a negative affect on the system as a whole. They will continue to throw the entire system off, leaving the person vulnerable to stuttering.

So each point must be effectively dealt with.

He also contended that to make the stuttering disappear you can't focus on solving it; you must focus on dissolving it. In other words, to remove the problem you must destroy its structure.

John's Stuttering Hexagon was the most accurate description of the mystery behind stuttering that I

had read to date. And the fact that after 25 or 30 years of stuttering he was able to defeat it himself gave me the final boost I needed to know that I, too, could overcome stuttering.

As excellent as John's book was, however, it was never intended to be a therapy program or provide techniques for becoming more fluent. So at the end of the book I was left with the question, "How do I get all of the points on the Hexagon positively biased?"

Little did I know that shortly I would discover the answer.

NEURO-SEMANTICS

Throughout his book John recommended several other books to read, one of which was *Awaken the Giant Within* by Anthony Robbins.

Reading Anthony Robbins' book was my first introduction to Neuro-Linguistics Programming (NLP). Eventually this book led me to *The User's Manual for the Brain*, which is a comprehensive manual covering the NLP Practitioner course and is written by Bob G. Bodenhamer, D.Min. and L. Michael Hall, Ph.D., cofounders of Neuro-Semantics (NS).

As I was reading the books on NLP I became very excited about the potential of these techniques in getting the Stuttering Hexagon to become positively biased as it related to my inability to speak fluently. Practicing some of the techniques in *Awaken the Giant Within* proved to be mildly helpful.

But I remained hopeful that this could ultimately be the mechanism that would throw me into speech stability. I felt that if I could just work with someone trained in Neuro-Linguistic Programming, that they might be able to walk me through the techniques that would prove most effective in getting me past my stutter.

My opportunity presented itself when midway through *The Users Manual for the Brain*, the authors gave a web site address for Neuro-Semantics.

The next day I visited the site and discovered that they provided private consultations. BINGO!!! I e-mail Bob Bodenhamer and requested a consultation with him.

When I received an e-mail back from Bob indicating his willingness to work with me, I was ecstatic. He indicated that he had limited experience with four or five clients who stuttered but had obtained successful outcomes utilizing the skills of Neuro-Linguistic Programming and Neuro-Semantics.

Bob also felt that he stood a real chance of helping me over the phone, which alleviated the necessity of my flying to North Carolina to meet with him. We set up the first phone consultation for the following Friday.

WHAT IS NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING?

Neuro-Linguistic Programming is a model that helps

you take charge of running your own brain by identifying disempowering thoughts, values, beliefs and perceptions and restructuring them to be more empowering.

Neuro-Semantics works with the higher level thought processes. It specifically involves our thoughts/feelings about our thoughts, emotions, memories, imaginations, perceptions, beliefs, etc. (i.e., fearing the fear of stuttering).

Bob sums up one of the major concepts of NLP/NS in his statement, "In NLP/NS we hold the belief that each person has all the resources that they need in order to 'fix' any cognitive (thinking) based problem they may have."

I don't know about you but that is music to my ears.

It is important to understand that Neuro-Semantics utilizes the person's own resources to bring about change. Everybody, regardless of his or her station in life, operates from a belief system. We reference this belief system in determining our self-esteem, our personal limitations, our viewpoint on the meaning of life, how others view us, what we can and cannot accomplish in life, and every other judgment we make about ourselves, others and the world we live in.

There are as many belief systems as there are people.

In assisting individuals to overcome cognitive

problems, Neuro-Semantics first attempts to discover the person's unique belief system and then utilizes it to bring about change.

SETTING THE STAGE

Let me tell you about the day I was handed the emotional tools to immediately control stuttering. The first tool was actually given to me by Bob through an e-mail he sent me on the day I requested a consultation with him. He had already determined through a previous e-mail that I held a strong Christian belief system and therefore, he used that system to bring about a change in how I perceived things relating to stuttering.

He said, "I do believe that there is a great chance of taking care of this through phone consultations and e-mail. For what will happen when your fear, anxiety and/or phobia comes into the presence of God?"

When I first read that e-mail my initial response was shock. Then laughter as I immediately envisioned a picture of three teeny, tiny men called Fear, Anxiety, and Phobia shrinking back and cowering in the awesome presence of God.

Bob had effectively used my belief in God to reframe my thoughts of fear, anxiety, and phobia by forcing them together, knowing full well that my beliefs would not allow the two to reside together. *(Notation from Bob Bodenhamer: In NLP/NS we hold the belief that each person has the resources needed for his or her own healing.*

We also believe in utilizing each individual's resources. We do not judge the resources; we simply use them. In Linda's case, her highest resource was her Christian faith. I have learned over the years that a person's religious beliefs usually provide the most effective resources, and that when they are applied to the problem state, the person will experience the greatest healing. However, even if you do not hold any religious beliefs, we believe you already have adequate resources to overcome any cognitively based problem you may have. The reason — every individual maintains high level beliefs, values, etc. that make for excellent healing resources.)

THE CONSULTATION

Then came the phone consultation. After a brief period of getting acquainted, Bob zeroed in on the feeling of anxiety that is so familiar to me and to so many others who stutter. He utilized a technique called "The Drop Down Through Technique" which has its foundation in the works of Alfred Korzybski in his classic work *Science and Sanity*. [This is a seminal work that outlines the ground rules for general semantics, a discipline that shows how our thinking and life experiences are shaped by the way we use language.]

The technique is designed to address unconscious thoughts like those that drive stuttering. The following transcript is taken from Bob's therapy notes.

In our first phone conversation I associated the client into her anxiety, which simply means I had

her really feel the anxiety. She had a “heavy and tightening” feeling in her stomach, a feeling she described as “holding back.” Now move that up to the muscles that control the vocal cords and you have stuttering. From her position of experiencing this “heavy and tightening” feeling in her stomach I asked her to drop down through that feeling.

BOB: What do you feel underneath that feeling?

LINDA: I feel fear. Fear is there! (Note that here we have a thought of fear, which ties right into anxiety.)

BOB: Drop down through the fear. What do you feel under the fear?

LINDA: Nothing. I don't feel anything.

BOB: Good. Now, just imagine yourself opening up the “nothingness” and drop down through and out the other side of the nothingness?

LINDA: I see people. It is a little bit scary. They are watching me. They are expecting me to say something.

BOB: Yes. And, what does that mean to you?

LINDA: Well, I have a sense of wanting to go away and hide.

BOB: OK. That makes a lot of sense to someone who tends to stutter when she speaks to a group of people. Now, just drop down through that thought-feeling. What do you feel below that?

LINDA: Ummh. I feel safe. I feel pretty safe now.

BOB: You are doing really great now. That is good, and it is going to get better. Now, just drop down through the feeling of being safe. What or who is underneath that?

LINDA: I feel contentment. I feel alone but safe.

BOB: Now, just drop down through that feeling of contentment and safety. What or whom do you feel below that?

LINDA: Warmth. Total acceptance! I feel total acceptance. There is no judgment here. I see a yellow light.

BOB: Great. Is the light really bright?

LINDA: Yes, it is. It is very bright.

BOB: "Yes, I know it is very bright. And, who said, "He is the light of the world?"

LINDA: Jesus.

BOB: That is right and He is there isn't He?

LINDA: Yes, it is God. He is the Bright Light.

BOB: Very good, and just be right there with God in the presence of warmth and total acceptance. Now, what happens to the anxiety in the presence of God?

LINDA: It is gone.

BOB: What happens to the fear in the presence of God?

LINDA: It is gone.

BOB: What happens to the sense of wanting to go and hide in the presence of God?

LINDA: It is gone.

BOB: Yes, they are all gone, aren't they?

LINDA: Yes, they are.

BOB: And, in the presence of God, what happens to stuttering?

LINDA: It is gone.

BOB: Yes, and being there in the presence of God, notice what you see, hear and feel. Put a word or a phrase to that state so that when you recall that word or phrase you will immediately go into the presence of God. Anytime you have a sense that you might stutter, just go into the

presence of God and you will get total control of the stuttering.

Bob utilized my beliefs by having me “bring the negative thoughts into the presence of God” which forced me to apply my faith and belief in an all powerful God where, to me, each of those thoughts can’t possibly reside.

After we had completed this technique, Bob had me remember the first time I felt the anxiety related to stuttering. My first memory of feeling the anxiety was with my mom. From my experience, my mom was unhappy with my stuttering, and as a child I could easily detect her dissatisfaction with my speaking ability. Bob reframed this memory, which effectively removed the impact of those past perceptions.

EARLY RESULTS

How did this work in the following days after the 45 minute call with Bob? Well, I kept track. The following Monday and Tuesday at work I had nine occasions where anxiety set in. Eight of the nine times I used the technique Bob utilized during our consultation session, and the words flowed as smooth as butter.

However, one time I encountered a block that just came out of nowhere (no warning, just wham!). The progress was amazing, but now I wanted to ensure that the surprise blocks would not happen any longer. So I scheduled another session with Bob for the following Wednesday evening.

We spent an hour on the phone that evening working through some issues that I had no idea had buried their tentacles into the foundation of the stuttering. They had nothing to do with stuttering per se but everything to do with the anxiety behind the stuttering. The issues came up while Bob was trying to determine what specifically I was doing to trigger the speech block. I had indicated that my biggest challenge was speaking in front of groups as opposed to one-on-one conversation.

We uncovered various emotions associated with speaking before groups such as feeling outnumbered, out of control, vulnerable and exposed. But becoming fully conscience of those feelings caused only a minor amount of discomfort. There were other, deeper feelings that were not as easy to deal with.

As Bob worked with me to discover the "other" thoughts, they eventually came screaming to my conscience mind. My mind immediately began an internal war of "to tell or not to tell." After what seemed like a very inappropriate amount of hedging around in response to Bob's question, I came to the conclusion that if I ever wanted to be 100 percent free of stuttering, I was going to have to step out on a limb and be willing to deal with uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.

I knew I could skirt the issues, hang up, and continue having a certain level of problems in my speech, or I could meet them head on and

overcome the stuttering. The issues, although not the cause of my stuttering, certainly played a part in creating and maintaining the stuttering system. By refusing to experience what was going on during those moments I was constantly giving them the power to fuel my speech blocks. One of the great things about Neuro-Semantics is that it is not necessary to discuss the specifics of a given situation. (Because our brain works more from structure than content, the NS Practitioner usually needs very little content to assist the client in resolving the issue.) I never had to reveal much more than just the high level aspects of the issues. But I did have to be prepared to deal with the thoughts in my mind. That is not always easy.

However, going back to John's Stuttering Hexagon, the thoughts had to be effectively "reframed" in order to get all the points on the hexagon positively biased. The surprise blocks probably would never have gone away without effectively dealing with all of the issues behind the anxiety and fear.

For the remainder of the session Bob utilized specific Neuro-Semantic techniques to help bring about desensitization of the thoughts and beliefs I had developed from as early as five years old. By the end of the session we had discovered that anger toward some of the events surrounding my childhood was very apparent, what was even more significant was the anger I felt towards myself as a child. In essence, I blamed myself for my inadequacies and the things that went wrong in my youth.

The session came to an end, and we set up another appointment for the following week.

What is interesting is that after this session the speech blocks totally disappeared. The issues had not been completely resolved but apparently enough had been dealt with to cause the blocking to disappear. I still had many of the same familiar thoughts, and occasionally I would get the physical sense that I would stutter or block, but I never did. In essence the physiological aspects were still present which Bob later explained was a result of the muscles still being neurologically programmed (another point on the Stuttering Hexagon).

I am not sure, but I would venture to say that the stuttering may have eventually returned if we had not taken the time to deal with the anger I felt toward myself as a child.

Before I move to the third and final session it would be good to mention that during the three weeks I had been having phone consultations with Bob.

I was also reading *Games For Mastering Fear*, also by Michael Hall and Bob Bodenhamer. In my reading, I came upon their discussion of Cartesian Logic. This is a way to challenge a person's thinking and is composed of four questions, the last being, "What wouldn't happen if you did not keep your phobia (i.e. stuttering)?"

I answered the first three questions with relative ease, but once I got to that final question, I had a difficult time coming up with the answer until, out of nowhere, the statement, "It wouldn't keep people away from me" came slamming into my conscious mind. I was stunned trying to figure out where that came from. It was an almost laughable statement to me because I have always enjoyed being surrounded by people. But as quickly as the statement came to me, I realized exactly what it meant.

The four questions from Cartesian Logic are most effective in critical thinking. In the context of stuttering, ask yourself:

1. What will happen if I continue stuttering?
2. What will happen if I stop stuttering?
3. What will not happen if I continue stuttering?
4. What will not happen if I do not stop stuttering?

Trust your unconscious mind to give you the answers. Sometimes it is good to let someone else ask you these questions so you can concentrate on processing the answers.

Although people play a very important part in my life, I had learned early in life to keep most of my deepest thoughts and feelings private. Now I was remembering the many times people who have crossed my path had made comments on how "private" I was in sharing personal thoughts and feelings.

Stuttering was a way to keep people I loved in my

life...but at a safe distance. I was caught in a divided intention. On one hand, I wanted to speak to please my friends and family, but on the other, I wanted to hold back to please myself and feel safe. This ultimately resulted in experiencing speech blocks.

From there I was able to go back and evaluate the reason why I felt I needed to maintain so much privacy and also if it was something that was still a valid behavior to keep today. My conclusion was that as an adult, I do not need to protect myself from others by holding myself back in the same way I did as a child. I also have the ability to evaluate on a different basis what should be shared and what should be kept private. The rules of my childhood are no longer valid.

THE FINAL SESSION

Now on to the final session. During this session, Bob and I directly dealt with the anger I felt towards myself as a child. The session was the most difficult of the three. Bob had me go back and visit the little girl at age seven. He asked me to imagine her being in the presence of God but initially I was unable to do so because I felt she did not deserve to be with him. In fact, I felt that God himself would not want her there with him.

I knew in my head how ridiculous my thoughts were, but my emotions were filled with anger and contempt for the little girl. Eventually, Bob was able to find a way to get me to imagine the little

girl being in the presence of God, but it remained unnatural, and I despised her invading my relationship with God.

Then we shifted gears. Now the focus was on how the little girl felt. My comment to Bob was that she was "madder than spitfire." When Bob asked what or whom she was mad at, the inadequacies and events of the past were mentioned, but the real anger she was feeling was directed at the grown up me. She was angry that I was blaming her and that I refused to get on with my life. She wanted me to quit placing so much emphasis on the events of the past and to simply start being the adult. Wow!

After 30 minutes, Bob cut off the session to allow me time to process what had just occurred. That was a major turning point. The next day I sent Bob the following e-mail message:

After we hung up I had a lot of thoughts running through my mind. I thought of my seven-year-old niece. The day she was born she owned my heart. I desperately loved her and silently vowed to do everything in my power to ensure that she would never experience the same events and inadequacies that I experienced.

Then I came to realize that I did not have the power to completely protect her. Even my sister and brother-in-law did not have full power to protect their own daughter. So I determined to do what God did give me the power to do...to unconditionally love her no matter what happened,

to be her advocate throughout life, to encourage, and to help teach her how to love God and other people.

Then I began to wonder why I am able to love my niece so deeply regardless of what happens to her. If anything ever happened to her to make her feel inadequate, I would just want to hold her tight until the pain went away. Seems to me there should be no difference between my seven-year-old niece and myself as a child.

I see myself looking back 31 years at myself as a little girl, and I am shouting, "Pack your bags and get out of my life!" The little girl is looking forward 31 years and shouting, "Grow up, you're the adult! The answer is not back here!"

It dawned on me that she is right. No matter how many times I replay the tapes of the past, I won't discover the answer from a little girl. The little girl did the best she could with the resources she had. There are no answers in her mind. She is too young.

So I shout back down to her again, "Hold on, I'm coming back there." Now the little girl is smiling. I, being 38 years old and operating with a strong belief system, begin to move back toward her. When I reach her, I welcome her in my arms and give her the same love that I would give to my niece. I whisper to the little girl, "It was never about you." Then I move forward and visit that little girl at each stage in her life where she felt inadequate, and I repeat the same process.

So right now I feel better about that little girl. I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but today I not only look like an adult, I also think like one.

My first phone conversation with Bob took place on January 18, 2002. The immediate results were amazing. My second phone conversation was January 23, 2002. I have not experienced a speech block since that time. My third phone conversation was on January 30, 2002. I have not been angry at that little girl since.

In closing, I would like to mention that for me Neuro-Semantics was a very effective tool in getting the remaining points on the Hexagon in a positive mode. Although I believe that Neuro-Semantics can assist a great majority of people who stutter, I equally believe that the quick results I received were due in part to the work I had been (unknowingly) doing through the years, like attending self-help seminars, keeping journals, researching homeopathic treatments, and reading an endless amount of books. All of these contributed in getting the points on the Hexagon positively biased.

I have learned that the roots of the problem may be different for each individual, but the symptoms (anxiety, fear, muscle tension in the vocal cords and stomach, etc.) and the outcome (stuttering and blocking) appear to be the same. If, as suspected, emotions such as fear and anxiety are critical components of the Stuttering Hexagon, then Neuro-Semantics provides some useful tools for

alleviating these unconscious negative emotions and effecting major changes within the entire stuttering system.

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