

Beginning with Words: What it Means to Stutter

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It begins thus: it is as if the air disappears from your throat and your mouth; and your tongue, stricken with shock at this loss, would be left to fumble and search for ways to form words. It would try again, and again. It would fail every time. Your jaws would tense and become difficult to pry apart, the back of your neck aflutter with hundreds of little tremors, and it would all only stop when you do; it would only stop when you stop trying, and oh what exquisite relief. Sometimes at the height of excitement it would be like tripping over words and running into a barrier, only to slam into it repeatedly, and the only way out of this mess would be to realign the words and the sounds, and to start again.

It is called *utal* or *bulol*: stammering or stuttering. The more technical terms for it are speech dysfluency or verbal non-fluency, a condition wherein words and syllables are repeated (re-re-repeated) or prolonged (pppppprolonged) unnecessarily. It is a curious little speech impediment in that it has no physical source or cause, no crooked obstruction of mouth-parts to disrupt speech, no hard blow to the head that would cause any such speech-related parts of the brain to malfunction. We all have stories of distant relatives who, as children had been natural lefties, been forced to write instead with their right hands because all desks at that time had been built exclusively for righties. This forcible switching, elders continue to explain, somehow confuses the right side of the brain and the left side of the brain, resulting in the stuttering. Unfortunately, this illustrates nothing ex-

cept that the elders know just as much about stuttering as they know about the hemispheres of the human brain and the workings within. However there might be truth to the *bulol* origin story, in that the stuttering comes not from the forced switching of writing hands and the bumbling confusion of brain parts, but from psychological pressure and trauma. One can only imagine, through the stories our parents would tell us about how fortunate we are, that we had not been made to kneel on raw peas and grains for every misconduct, had our skirts pulled to our ankles for every series of wrong recitation answers, and how the lefties would have had their right arms bound to their writing desks, a hearty slap to the head received for any of the left hand's attempts at rescue. And one would wonder why entire generations before ours did not all stutter.

Even until today, people are misinformed about the causes of stuttering; there are not very many speech pathologists in the country for the large amount of people with speech impediments, let alone people who stutter. Because it does not have a physical cause, it is very often dismissed. To this day, my mother remains convinced that an inner ear infection had been the cause of my stuttering, and would mention a time when I had been almost crushed by a motorcycle as a little girl. It had baffled them so, how this little girl they had so ensured from birth to be gifted in letters (by inserting a dictionary under my pillow as a newborn, handing me newspapers as early as nine months old) would suddenly be overcome by stuttering.

“Maybe,” my father offered, “maybe it is because you read too fast and think too fast that your mouth gets left behind.” I would be made to read aloud, scolded and told to begin again when the beginning of a stutter would emerge, and in their frustration my parents would ask me what was wrong? What was wrong?

I don't know, I would tremble, I don't know.

However, it is the nature of all things to have physical origins. I remember a time when I did not stutter. I was small and loud and read well, and delighted teachers would send me off to spelling bees and oratorical contests and kindergarten-level beauty pageants where I would enthusiastically

quote Joyce Kilmer. Then again perhaps it could be attributed to a child's blind confidence, a fragile and temperamental thing that breaks as easily as it comes.

We started moving from the walled-in security of a subdivision that was slowly becoming too crowded to a remote *bukid* somewhere along the lower hills of Mt. Banoi, from a small school with one class per grade to the bigger and more popular Catholic School with more than five sections per grade, and more nuns than I had ever seen in my life up and about and outside of church.

My stuttering began then, feebly. I was bullied relentlessly; I would find my notebooks and sketchbooks torn and scribbled on, my glasses snapped in half, my watercolors all mixed to a murky brown. Boys would push me down the stairs yelling, "Lola, get a cane!" and the girls religiously avoided me because I had preferred the company of the schoolyard cats and insects and books. I was taken from a peaceful ideal environment and thrown unceremoniously into a pit teeming with the beginnings of social segregation and bias, with pre-set rules and ranking that I was not prepared for. I still do not think of them then as children, to have been so capable of creating their own primitive form of hierarchies and rules, their own adapted forms of torment because openly fighting was forbidden under the watchful eye of the Lord: a crucifix in every room, a speaker announcing pre-recorded prayers. It was more of a wilderness than our new home, being built hidden away among the trees.

Stuttering is not an all-encompassing condition; there are certain situations when stuttering does not happen. There is undisrupted speech flow. Stuttering is a fickle and selective condition. One day you find yourself engaging in a perfectly eloquent conversation with a child, or an animal, with specific people, or even with yourself, and you wonder why that can't be the case with everything and everybody else.

When I started to stutter I took to the company of animals, for they needed no words, and my grandfather who had taken up residency in a small shack he built from the ground, tending to the land and the trees and the livestock. He had little need for words too, choosing only to converse lengthily in Ilocano to my mother, disappearing for long periods of time into the mountains. He did not find it annoying that I asked too many questions.

“*Tatay*, is honey supposed to be that dark?”

“It depends on what the bees eat.”

“Why don’t you throw out the chicken blood?”

“Because it is delicious cooked with rice.”

“Why does the turkey make that sound when we call out?”

“Because it wants to be a superstar, the only voice on the mountain.”

“Why does the wind howl at night?”

“Because it is looking for the edge of the world.”

Soon of course there would be no need for questions because I needed only to come nearer, for him to explain whatever it was that he was doing. He would teach me how to catch the little chicks that scurried off over the banana leaves chasing their mother’s hindquarters, how to climb a tree without any slippers on, how to descend a steep slope sideways, and which trees were which, how to tell which fruits were ripe. He hid kittens under his bed and showed me where to hold them, told me why their mother would always be quick to snatch them up again. He showed me how the only way to kill termites was to pour gas on them, because they ate so much wood they were too hard to crush, and he allowed me tiny sips of *tuba* whenever he came back from one of his excursions in the rain with only his shorts on and an *itak* tied to his waist.

“If any of those boys hurt you again,” he told me one day, “tell them your *lolo* knows how to use an *itak*.”

“But they will arrest you.”

“They’ll never find me up here!”

How I had loved him. Until his disease started to take him. As did mine.

Since stuttering depends so much on the delicate balance that is someone’s psychological well-being, it becomes exacerbated if that balance is even slightly tipped, or utterly disturbed. The social pressure to speak properly, to begin with, eventually creates a fear of stuttering that inevitably leads to worse fits of stuttering. Mockery and teasing is another cause: a stutterer is a constant source of comic relief. An uncle with a really, really bad stut-

ter was the butt of all jokes at every family reunion. Everyone would playfully chide him, “Just spit it out already!” to which his stutter would doubly worsen, much to the entertainment of all.

Dinners at home would not be so different, with my sisters making little musical numbers out of words I messed up. I would find no reprieve from my mother, who would join in this game. I would be itching to abandon the table but dinner was always family time, and one would not be allowed to indulge in such selfishness.

I could not explain how or why the stuttering got worse; perhaps it had something to do with childhood, or the onset of puberty when all children are at their most vulnerable. I had no friends at school, and refused to take part in recitations, deathly afraid of messing up in public. I supposed then, one could turn to God, as we were all wont and advised to, with the added convenience of three nearby chapels and the city church connected to the school through what I fancied were secret labyrinths the nuns used to come to and fro whenever they needed.

The church was a beautiful place to be in at noon, cool and dark and quiet, with its locked doors and stained glass windows casting very colorful shadows on the floor. At night I would dream of a huge pair of stone feet rising in the darkness behind those locked doors. Thinking I had found God, I covered myself with assurance. Yes you are going to be fine because you know where to find God.

Misfortune has its ways of hounding you, however. In the fifth grade I was nine going on ten, and I had to undergo the rites of Confirmation, preparations for which were to start a year earlier. I had tried to make myself pious like the virginal young saints our teachers had told us so much about, still very beautiful in their suffering, with God waiting to whisk them away the moment they died.

We were lined up and as I knelt before the priest in what would turn out to be my very last confession, the world too held its breath. He drew me so close to him that I could only confess my sins through whispers, and somehow his hands found their way from my shoulders to my chest to my trembling clasped hands to my waist to my skirt to my legs, and “I can’t hear you, what else have you done, come closer,” and he smelled like new laundry laced with sweat, and there was a sharp and heavy feeling at the center of all things like somehow I was not one with my own skin, and

I could think of no more sins so I made them up until I could think of no more, and finally when I was sent to pray how many “Hail Marys” I could remember only that I was so confused about why the world remained so still and my schoolmates so calm. And when I went to a teacher to report the incident, the words became strangled at the threshold of my mouth, and impatiently she told me to sit down as my body sought other ways of letting its troubles be known and I threw up all over the chapel floor.

There were no words for me after that, and every time I would be made to speak I would always feel like telling lies. I stuttered so badly I could not make it past one sentence read aloud, so I avoided the canteen because I could not pronounce the food that I wanted.

All at once I started noticing how men would look at me, and soon I began to despise the mere sight of them. To remedy this, much to my mother’s despair, I cut my hair very short and taped flat the hint of breasts under my loose shirts, hoping that maybe then they would stop looking. I began to hate the touch of people, including my mother, my sisters. I drew away when my father would reach out for my shoulder. *Tatay*, who used to greet us with head butts, I hated the most. He would try to embrace me and I would pull at his hair and push him away, but he would keep doing it still and he would not wince, and sometimes I would catch him with a puzzled look on his face that at the time I thought stupid, and I would despise him even more. Soon those puzzled looks would keep coming, and eventually we would have to move him from his shack and into our new house because he would be gone for days, lost in the mountains he once knew so well. In our new house, he would always want to reach out to touch me, and I hated him until he died.

And then, my mother got me a cat: a small white kitten littered with grey tabby markings. I called it Pickles, for the pickle-shaped markings across its back. That was before *Tatay* fully developed Alzheimer’s and I had just begun entertaining the idea of dressing like a boy. Those were happy days; I started to talk again, but mostly only to the cat. Pickles was one of my few friends, and my first coping mechanism. I found that there was something so honest about the way cats rubbed against you and sat close by; how, when they did not want to be held, they would be frank and let you know, and you would have to learn to keep a respectable distance; and they could be curt with you, but civil, until you learned how to ap-

proach them properly. There is a lot to be learned from cats. Soon I was brave enough to try and speak once again.

I discovered that cats thought it rude to stare, and I learned that it was easier to speak while looking away. Soon I found that speaking in a voice so low it was merely a bar above whispering hid the stuttering very well, and that when masked by the voices of other children speaking in unison was the only time that I could speak out loud.

These discoveries have come to light in the film *The King's Speech*, (which, to this day, I choose to consider a thriller rather than a drama) wherein the frustrated king-to-be is told to recite a Shakespearean monologue that he had previously blundered through, a second time, but with music being played into his ears. The result is a stutter-free recording. Another method to beat the stuttering is by saying things with a melody, and yet another is through aggressive fits of cussing. I wept with joy, glad to know that someone had made a serious film about stuttering, and that soon, people might even stop the teasing.

Of the most destructive ways of coping with stuttering is the resignation to silence. Self-expression is a frightening concept to consider, as it is most efficiently channeled through speaking, and very little else. A stut-terer would resign himself or herself to avoiding self- expression because of severe stuttering spells, and so in avoiding this frustration altogether, abandons the chance to speak up at all. It is so difficult to speak freely and spontaneously or to discuss big issues extensively. Once, for a public speaking class in college, I had prepared a speech of five sentences. But when the time came I could not recall anything of it, despite having memorized it so intently the night before.

Upbringing could either be blamed or credited for what coping mechanisms a stutterer would use to deal with speech problems. I had grown up skipping across social classes. I had relatives who lived in farms so remote and houses so small they used car batteries to channel electricity, and I had relatives so wealthy they could go for weekend shopping sprees across Asia on a whim. One moment I would be told to keep my head low and always watch my manners around the elders, to always do the *mano*. The next moment I would be told that city relatives did not do *mano* and would like it better that you do *beso* instead, and the older painted ladies would quite playfully ask us about boys. I grew up around frivolously and

wonderfully insane gay aunts and uncles and great-uncles, and severe, eccentric old ladies who told us to always keep our knees together, and that there is a right time and place to be outrageous and a separate time to be stoic. I grew up in between languages, the English of my father's friends and co-workers, and the English you should use with their children, the Ilocano of my grandparents in Zambales where I was born, the spirited and feverish Batangueno of the province where I grew up, and the fluid, watery Tagalog spoken in Manila.

We were told to adapt accordingly. I would adjust my English in school because my classmates made fun of my accent, as I would adjust accents to flow better around the stuttering, much like water around stones. I would not use the English I grew up with because it was a minefield of stutter-inducing words, so I would speak English like I spoke Manila Tagalog because it was not as dangerous that way. Soon I could only carry conversations by mimicking the behavior and mannerisms of whoever it was I spoke with, adjusting my voice and movements to theirs. I would pick up speech affectations and adapt them as my own, for I had very little to work with. It became a hobby to sit listening to people talk, with an unfulfilled longing to join in; and I would be in awe at how fluidly they would speak their minds, and how cleverly they could maneuver from one topic to another so quickly. I could not do this, but somehow I was able to manage.

I had to prepare everything beforehand, what to say to certain people, in certain situations, nothing extensive, small talk at most; oral reading assignments would have to be printed out and typed in such a manner that some words and syllables would be lumped together to form one cohesive, stutter-proof sentence. Years later in grad school I would meet, for the first time in my life, a speech pathologist who took the same class as I, and we were both very surprised to learn about what other stutters deployed to cope. I told her that I was quite good with really bad accents, and that I was less conscious about stuttering and myself in general when I have had a few liters of alcohol coursing through my bloodstream. So we began communicating in garbled interpretations of Scottish all night while getting happily drunk.

There were other less destructive means of course. I took to painting first when I was little, but my mother kept shoving drawing paper into my mouth because she thought it got in the way of my studies. I took to writing because it was easier to conceal. Soon it became an avenue to explore words and sounds that I desperately avoided but deeply desired to use. Here, I could use as many consonants as I desired, make longer sentences without missing a beat. Here I did not need to linger with beginning vowels, or trip over *tree* or *three* or *trifle*; did not need to say *tarbaho* instead of *trabaho* or say *chu-rinity* instead of *trinity*. Where with stuttering I would use replacement letters and skip entire words altogether, or distract myself from the onset of stuttering with long languorous *uhhhs* and *ums* and *yunggg ano*, *ah*, *gan'to* or *ganire*, with writing it was easier to organize words, and any mistakes could be rewritten, and you could afford to think long and hard for the right word or phrase to use. In writing I could be funny, or sarcastic, non-monotonous. I could change tones and voices without mimicry. I could trust the people, the characters, and I could know them entirely without being so guarded. I was freed.

The frustration would always remain of course, although there have been cases of stutterers curing themselves, or earpieces that would echo your voice to mimic the choral effect that discourages stuttering. I have read about a stutterer who used to shyly ask her fellow *jeepney* passengers to say “*para*” for her, who took drama classes and found herself cured; and watched this video about a boy with a stutter so bad it made my heart hurt just watching him, who is now a successful rapper; and a woman who, the first thing she did once her stuttering was cured, went to a restaurant and ordered what she had always wanted but could never say, *fettuccine*.

I read somewhere that people went into survival mode whenever they found themselves in a completely alien environment, that when faced with the prospect of a completely new beginning would very quickly find it in themselves to adapt, and I thought the idea so ridiculous that, disheartened, I told myself that I could never travel alone. I was content to live with several hundred cats, those sincere creatures, without human contact, with people joking that I would die of old age and all the cats I so loved would eat my body in a heartbeat. I had trouble with office jobs

because they required, at most, an advanced mastery of social interaction and spontaneity that I still could not muster. All I wanted to do was to keep to my desk and work and leave at the end of the day. I did not need the interaction, and I could pretend and mimic all I wanted, and people were going to remain such dark and slippery creatures, that I would prefer the furry warmth of cats and animals.

And then, one day—I cannot remember what day that was, only that my mother and I were talking about cats because she too liked cats, and *Tatay* did too, and the briefest of side-comments, so brief that had the conversation not been about cats I would have missed it entirely —she said, “*Tatay* arranged for you to have Pickles.”

I pried her with questions. And she explained that he had noticed that I had become lonely and so he had walked through the entire *barangay* looking for a solution. And then one of his drinking buddies had a cat called Queen who had recently had kittens. I saw him in my head then, all rugged and lean and gray-haired and handsome, scratching his nape and grinning, asking his buddy “Ay, *kumpadre*, might I have one of those kittens for my *apo*?” And I remembered then, how I had burned with hatred for him with his head in my gut, and his vacant expression, and how I had felt the slightest tinge of relief when he had died, so that no one would ever reach out and touch me that way ever again, but that all along touch had meant so many different things like words, and that I had been oblivious and bitter and despicable for far too long.

When my mother left for Batangas, I stumbled around the room looking for a face towel. And when I found it, I wept all night.

Stuttering usually tapers off through adulthood, and there are only about one in every five adults who stutter. I still do, but not as bad I used to. I had taken to heart what had been said about travel— about awakening the very human instinct to adapting to new environments and situations, running off to far-flung places without so much as a definite itinerary. And about how there was more to the world than caring about how well you sound, beginning with words.

Stuttering was as much a part of me as the hair on my head, or the abnormal bend in my spine, and all I needed was to take sports to ease the

pain, or wear larger slippers to counteract my weak balance and tiny feet. There are ways around everything, and taking them does not mean avoidance or fear. They are only a means to an end. Everything always means different things to different people. Like touch, like words, like how we say them, how we begin, and how we listen.