

From “Stuttering” to “Stability”

with Bobby G. Bodenhamer, D.Min.

Imagine with me, if you will, that it is tomorrow morning and like all other mornings you wake up to face another day as a person who stutters. You begin your normal morning routine that in all appearances resembles any non-stuttering person's morning routine. In fact, the only difference in your routine and a non-stutters routine is what is occurring in your mind. While the person who does not stutter is worrying about what to wear and if they are having a bad hair day, you are scanning ahead in your mind at what speaking threats might be awaiting you. You immediately feel anxious and fearful and begin to plan out how you can avoid threatening situations. The day plays out as you expected. . . you were able to avoid some situations, others you were not. By the time you arrive home at night you are emotionally drained and have expended all your energy trying to keep your stuttering problem at a minimum or, at best, hidden altogether. But what if on this particular evening when you arrive home something new happens and you are handed the emotional tools to immediately control the stuttering? Too good to be true? Another empty promise? Not so fast, it really happened.

I began stuttering at the age of five; by the age of seven I was proficient

at stuttering. I was fully equipped with every emotion and belief necessary to be good at stuttering. I carried those emotions and beliefs with me everywhere I went, even as I proceeded into adulthood. During my childhood school years, once a week, instead of being allowed to go outside to play at recess time, I was often whisked away to speech therapy. In high school my well-meaning teachers felt I would overcome stuttering by providing me ample speaking opportunities in front of the class. Then as a young adult I enlisted in the Army for four years to help pay for my college education. The Army recruiter promised that the Army could help me overcome stuttering; what he didn't tell me was that their technique was to scare the stuttering right out of me. None of these methods was very helpful.

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 on 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 down.

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 the dynamics of my profession that set me on a relentless path to overcome stuttering.

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 breathing a breath of fresh air.

The second part included John's feelings about stuttering which included an overall sense that if you are trying to solve a problem without making headway chances are that you are trying to solve the wrong problem. His book indicated that he felt many stuttering treatments are not inclusive enough to fully describe the full dynamics of what drives stuttering; basically, that a paradigm shift in the way we view stuttering is needed.

In his book, John states:

If stuttering were simply a problem with the mechanics of speech, we'd stutter all the time, even when we were alone. Rather, it seems to be an interactive system involving a number of different components,

only one of which is physical. It is the way these components interact that creates a self-reinforcing system.

John goes on to describe what he has termed "The Stuttering Hexagon." The Hexagon is composed of six points that include: physical behaviors, emotions, perceptions, beliefs, intentions, and physiological responses. On the Hexagon every point is connected to every other point. Concerning all points being connected John states:

This means that each element is influenced, either positively or negatively, by what's happening at the other locations on the Stuttering Hexagon. In other words, your emotions will influence your behaviors, perceptions, beliefs, unconscious programs and physiological responses.

For the remainder of the second part of the book John goes into detail explaining each of the six points on the Hexagon and how they interrelate with one another. If a person who stutters has previously been working on changing their debilitating beliefs and has been successful but still carries negative emotions from past childhood traumas or hurts those emotions will have a negative affect on the remaining points on the Hexagon and throw the entire system off, leaving the person still vulnerable to stuttering. So each point must be effectively dealt with. He also contends 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 that I needed to know that I too, could overcome stuttering.

As excellent as John's book was, 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.

Throughout his book John recommended several other books to read, one of which was *Awaken the Giant Within* by Anthony Robbins. Reading Anthony Robbins's book was my first introduction to Neuro-Linguistic 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., co-founders of Neuro-Semantics" (NS).

As I was reading the books on NLP I became very excited about the potential of these techniques being effective tools in getting the Stuttering Hexagon to be 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 for people who stutter.

My opportunity presented itself when midway through *The Users Manual For The Brain* the authors indicated a web site address for Neuro-Semantics (NS) ([www.neuro-semantics.com](http://www.neuro-<u>semantics.com</u>)). The next day I visited the site and discovered that they provided private consultations. BINGO!!!!!! Because of my Christian beliefs I chose to e-mail Bob Bodenhamer, D.Min. I knew through reading his book that he held the same Christian values that I did, so I felt an element of trust in contacting

him. (Later I discovered that L. Michael Hall, Ph.D. held the same beliefs also.) When I received an e-mail back from Bob indicating his willingness to work with me I was ecstatic!!!! He indicated that he indeed had limited experience with four or five clients who stuttered but had obtained successful outcomes utilizing the skills of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and Neuro-Semantics (NS). Bob also felt that he stood a real chance of helping me over the phone, which alleviated the necessity of me flying to North Carolina to meet with him. We set up the first phone consultation for the following Friday.

So the big question you may be asking is, "What is Neuro-Linguistic

Programming (NLP) and Neuro-Semantics (NS)?" NLP is a model that helps you take charge of your own brain by developing effective strategies and representing your experiences in an effective manner. Neuro-Semantics incorporates higher level "meanings" into the structure of subjectivity. Our "states" involve the primary level neuro-linguistic thoughts-and-feelings in response to something out there in the world. That defines a Primary State. A Meta-State involves more. It involves our thoughts-feelings about our thoughts, emotions, states, memories, imaginations, concepts, etc. It involves our meta-responses to previous responses. (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.

With that being explained, let me move on to tell you about our first phone session together and 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 consultation with him. He said, "... Since you love the Lord 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 the Lord?" 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 the Lord 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.

Then came the phone consultation. After a brief period of getting acquainted, Bob zeroed in on the feeling of anxiety that was so familiar to me, and to so many other people who stutter. He utilized a technique

called "Drop Down Through" which had its' foundation in the works of Alfred Korzybski in his classic work, *Science and Sanity*. From that work Dr. Tad James of Advanced Neuro-Dynamics devised the current "Drop Down Through" technique and later it was revised by Bob and Michael by adding additional resources to it from Neuro-Semantics. The technique is designed to address unconscious thoughts like those that drive stuttering. The following transcript is taken from the therapy notes of Bob Bodenhamer:

In our first phone conversation I (Bob) 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. 'What do you feel underneath that feeling?'

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

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

"Nothing. I don't feel anything."

"Good. Now, just imagine yourself opening up the 'nothingness.' And, drop down through and out the other side of the nothingness?"

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

"Yes. And, what does that mean to you?"

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

"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?"

"Ummh. I feel safe. I feel pretty safe now."

*"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 and **what** or **who** is underneath that?"*

"I feel contentment. I feel alone but safe."

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

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

"Great. Is the light really bright?"

"Yes, it is. It is very bright."

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

"Jesus."

"That is right and He is there isn't He?"

"Yes, it is God. He is the Bright Light."

"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?"

"It is gone."

"What happens to the fear in the presence of God?"

"It is gone."

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

"It is gone."

"Yes, they are all gone, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are."

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

"It is gone."

"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. And, anytime you have a sense that you might stutter, just go into the presence of God and

you will get totally control of the stuttering."

Bob utilized my beliefs in Jesus 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 each of those thoughts can't possibly reside. After we had completed this technique, Bob utilized The Transderivational Search technique by having 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 to effectively

remove the impact of those past perceptions.

So, the question is, "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 "going up to God" method 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 an issue that I had no idea had buried its tentacles into the foundation of the stuttering. It had nothing to do with stuttering per se but everything to do with the anxiety behind the stuttering. The issue 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 feelings associated with speaking before groups such as feeling outnumbered, out of control, vulnerable and exposed. Becoming fully conscious of those feelings caused only a minor amount of discomfort. However, the feelings behind those initial ones were not as easy to deal with. As Bob worked with me to discover the "other" thoughts, they eventually came screaming to my conscious mind. My mind immediately began an internal war of "to tell" and "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% free of stuttering I was going to have to step out on a limb and reveal what I have refused to discuss since my youth.

So what was this childhood thing that reinforced the stuttering? Well, like too many other children, while I was growing up I experienced some traumatic events. I knew I could skirt the issue, hang up, and continue having a certain level of problems in my speech OR I could meet it head on and overcome the stuttering. The two issues had intertwined and the trauma reinforced the stuttering. An important point to make is that one

of the great things about Neuro-Semantics is that it is not necessary to discuss the specifics of a given situation. I never had to reveal much more than just the high level aspects of the trauma. 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 it 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.

So for the remainder of the session Bob utilized specific time lining techniques to help bring about desensitization of the memories as they related to the childhood issues. By the end of the session we had discovered that while anger toward 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 the events of the past. 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 issue had not been completely resolved but apparently enough had been dealt with to cause the blocking to disappear. I still had the "thoughts" of being a stutterer 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 that I had been having phone consultations with Bob I was also reading *Mastering Your Fears* written by Bob and L. Michael Hall Ph. D. While reading it I eventually came upon the 'Cartesian Logic,' which is a mechanism to challenge a person's thinking. It is composed of four questions, the final question 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 the final question (after I figured out what it was really asking) 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 just as quickly as the statement came to me I realized exactly what it meant. 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 happy to take care of

them emotionally but I could never allow them to take care of me emotionally. This, I suppose, was a behavior that I learned early in my childhood. As I reflected back on this I could plainly see how it was a protection mechanism. When friends and family would start asking questions that I perceived as threatening I immediately would begin to block and stutter. This was a way to let them know that I was not willing to go there with them and it worked quite nicely. Nobody wanted to watch me struggle when I spoke, so they usually dropped the subject. So there it was... the primary benefit I was receiving by stuttering.

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 have the stuttering protect me any longer. 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.

Now on to the final session. During this session, Bob and I directly dealt with that intense hatred. 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 bring her up to 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 dislike and contempt for the little girl. Eventually, Bob was able to find a way to get me to bring the little girl to 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 seven-year-old girl felt. My comment to Bob was that she was "madder than spitfire." When Bob asked what or whom she was mad at, the events of the past were certainly mentioned, but the real anger she was feeling was at the grown-up me. Her anger was 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 certainly was a major turning point. The next day I sent Bob the following e-mail message:

...After we hung up I went in to work out (great time for thinking and processing information) I had a lot of thoughts running through my mind. Let me bore you with some of them.

I was thinking of my seven-year-old niece (good age huh?). In 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 a traumatic childhood. Then I came to realize that God did not give me the power to completely protect her. He did not even give my sister and brother-in-law full power to protect their own daughter. So I determined to do what he 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. So 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 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 at age seven.

So then I see myself looking back 31 years at a seven-year-old girl and I am shouting, "Pack your bags and get out of my life!" The seven-year-old 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 seven year old. The seven year old did the best she could with the resources she had. There are no answers in her mind, she is only seven. 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 filled with the Spirit of God, 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. An interesting thing happens then, we both look at the individual who was responsible for the events of the past and we see something new...the emptiness within that person's soul. I whisper to the little girl, "It was never about you." Then I move forward and visit that little girl at each stage of trauma while she is growing up and I repeat the same process.

Then another thought occurred to me. Continuing to live with the mind of a seven-year-old traumatized girl is in direct violation of all the values and beliefs I hold as an adult. Beliefs such as: Jesus has come to set me free, I am saved by grace not by works, I am a new creature in Christ, I do not fear those who can kill my body but have no power to destroy my soul, and all the other wonderful Biblical truths that I hang my life on. And then there are your words ringing in my ears as you quoted Paul, "When I was a child I thought as a child but now I put childish thinking behind me."

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

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 stuttered since that time. My third phone conversation was on January 30, 2002. I have loved that little seven-year-old ever since.

So, in closing, I have to ask. Was God really unconcerned with my speech problem for the past 32 years? I am of the opinion that he was very concerned about the stuttering. In fact, I believe his concern went way beyond the stuttering to the heart of who I am. I am convinced he was more concerned with healing all of me, not just a symptom of stuttering.

ENDNOTES:

This article was written with the assistance of Bob G. Bodenhamer, D. Min. to whom I am incredibly grateful not only for his assistance in writing this article but also for his assistance in helping me achieve the tremendous results I have received by utilizing Neuro-semantics.

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