

Do stammerers like me a favour - don't finish my sentences

Ben Cooke

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Believe it or not, having a stammer can be a kind of a gift

Peter Ormerod

Along with Ed Balls, Gareth Gates, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, I stutter. Yes it can be awkward, but it's intrinsic to who I am and what I do



▲ Ed Balls strikes a blow for those of us who have suffered jeers and derision because our voices have refused to do what we want them to: Photograph: S Meddle/ITV/REX/Shutterstock

It's an odd feeling, not being able to say your name. Not being able to say what you want to say is odd enough, but your name? You've been asked for it since you can remember being asked for anything. It's precious; it's you. It's presented no difficulties before. And yet there it is, stuck somewhere, somewhere in your brain, somewhere in your throat, stubbornly lodged. It just won't come out.

And you know it's not going to come out, and the person you're trying to speak to knows it's not going to come out, which just makes it harder to make it come out. Usually when your vocal organs seize up like this, you reach for a synonym. There will be a word somewhere that means pretty much the same thing and starts with an unproblematic sound, and your mind has become skilled at this task. But your name has no synonym. It's precious; it's you.

So you have to try to force it out. You're already flushed, perhaps acquiring a patina of perspiration, and this is just going to make it worse. And then: *bang!*, out it explodes, with the force and subtlety of a bullet, the first phoneme blurted deafeningly, and you try to say your first name and surname as if they're one, which sounds unintelligible but removes a dangerous pause. The process has taken perhaps 15 clock seconds, but it's 20 head minutes. A conversation may then break out, but it never really flows, never really recovers from the false start.

You wouldn't have thought we needed a [Stammering Awareness Day](#), but that's what [today is](#). Everyone's fully aware of stammering; they know a stammer when they hear one. And yet the condition remains widely misunderstood. Facts about stammering cannot be repeated enough: people who stammer are not all [Arkwrights](#) or [Kens](#), although some of us may be; stammers come and go; stammers disappear when singing or talking in unison (so church services are typically stammer-free zones); stammers tell you nothing about the stammerer (the condition is surely the only thing Gareth Gates has in common with Ludwig Wittgenstein); stammering is the same as stuttering. Stammerers, as a rule, would prefer their well-meaning listeners not to finish words or sentences for them (although I happen not to mind). The characteristics of the stammer will vary from stammerer to stammerer. People who consider themselves fluent speakers often stammer more than they think they do. Stammerers can feel socially isolated, reluctant to join in with group conversations, and school can be miserable for them.

Those are some of the things about stammering of which the public could be more aware. But there's another form of awareness, too, and it's the awareness that stammerers have of their own condition. Because I've come to see mine not as something that limits my life, but as something that is integral to it. More than that: it can almost be seen as a gift.

My stammer helps me appreciate what I might otherwise take for granted: the freedom of writing. When I write, I can say whatever I want, whenever I want. Writing brings me a sense of liberation. Words hold no fear; they return to their proper state, to be deployed at will.

Indeed, I'm convinced that my stammer is why I do what I do. While speaking sometimes feels like hurtling into one brick wall after another, writing feels like bathing in a lagoon. All the colours and textures of language are there to be plucked like fruit. I'm certainly not saying that I make the most of that freedom, but I doubt that the pleasure I derive from it would be quite so sweet were my speech more silken.

And it helps that stammerers have a new hero: Ed Balls. The man previously best known for [Twitter-based vanity](#) and political bullishness has now danced into the nation's affections, and is displaying a certain pride in his impediment as he does so. A [tweet](#) aimed at the unkind remarks of a newspaper columnist pinpoints adroitly the prejudice that still lingers, and strikes a blow for those of us who have suffered jeers and derision because our voices have refused to do what we want them to.

There are of course times when I would rather not have a stammer. I would certainly like it to be more predictable; as it is, I have no idea when or how it will strike. Conversations with strangers can be smooth as caramel; chats with family members can be juddering and faltering. There will be people reading this who know me and won't know of my stammer; there will be others who know little else about me. It's frustrating, yes. But it also holds for me a sort of mystery, and it has shaped my life, who I am. For better or for worse, I wouldn't be me without it. And it's deep in that name of mine.

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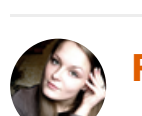
cassandrasshrink22 Oct 2016 5:44

34 ↑

Thanks for the article - as someone who gets their words out but blushes at the drop of a hat I've a tiny inkling of the avoidance strategies you would have to use. When what's normal for you is seen as a weakness it takes courage to be who you be. More power to your voice - and Ed Balls' as well..

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7 ↑

I'm mostly over my stammer now but having to say my name doing registration was one of the most horrible experiences in secondary school. Even now I find myself starting with "my name is. . ." instead of just saying my name.

Really blighted my childhood and youth but you're right, it becomes part of your identity so one has to make peace with it and accept yourself.

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Indeed, and people do forget this. For many so-called "disabled" people, what others unthinkingly call a "disability" is in fact a blessing. People may be well-meaning, but they are often not actually helping, but instead hurting.

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We should not downplay the fact that disabilities are an extra hurdle in life - along with many others - unhappy upbringing, divorce, bereavement, terminal illness etc etc. The issue is whether you can turn these things around and get positives out of a negative. Fair play to those who do. But calling them 'blessings' is a stretch too far

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14 ↑

I remember many years ago I worked in a bookshop and a lady came to the till with a copy of a book called "The Gift of Dyslexia." As she slammed it down in front of me, she muttered "it's not a bloody gift, you know." So I'm guessing all perspectives are pretty personal.

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