

Lemonade: (The power of facing your fears)

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This is a story about self-empowerment. About facing fears, overcoming challenges, taking control, gathering strength, and living a life that is aligned with the authentic self. This is my story about making lemonade...

I stutter. I've stuttered essentially my entire life. I also avoided my stuttering for most of my formative years, until one day in my mid 20's. I was always shy. My parents tell me that as a preschool child, I was slow to warm up to new situations, to new people and that I began stuttering somewhere between the ages of 4 and 6. I had speech therapy when I was about 7 for a very short time, but I don't remember it. Perhaps I blocked it out of my memory. Thinking back to middle school and high school, I don't recall how much I stuttered. I think it's because I opted to stay quiet instead of stuttering. My stuttering has always mild, but I was extremely afraid of it! This fear silenced me. I did everything I could to hide it, like most people who stutter. I avoided phone calls, even with my grandparents. I did everything I could, unsuccessfully usually, to get out of thanking them for Christmas and birthday gifts. I avoided talking in groups of friends, usually just taking the role of the shy, quiet kid. I avoided words and would scan ahead in my sentences for any that I feared. I'd find some other way of saying what I wanted to say. My sentences sometimes sounded awkward, and may have garnered odd looks, but it was sure better than stuttering.

I struggled in my first year of college. I was stuttering a lot and couldn't hide it. I couldn't say my name when introducing myself. I dropped classes left and right if on the first day I found out we'd have to give a class presentation. Some classes I just stopped going to and preferred an F instead of facing all those people again, wondering what they thought of me because I couldn't say my name. I dropped out after my first year.

I tried to run from the shame, embarrassment, frustration and helplessness, but the stuttering, and the feelings, followed me everywhere I went. I chose not to say something witty because I might stutter. I chose not to comment on something I had wanted to because I might stutter. What would they think if they knew I couldn't talk? I quit jobs because I had to answer the phone and struggled to say things like, "Thank you for calling Round Table Pizza. This is Bailey, how may I help you?". I didn't date because I was too afraid of not being able to get my words out when calling a girl I liked. I would often pace around the living room for 20 minutes or more just to make a phone call that ended up being a 20 second voicemail. I was so embarrassed about it, that it was safer to avoid those phone calls. So I did. I paced and paced and never called...and never dated. I allowed my stuttering to make decisions for me.

One day, in my mid-20s, I was feeling a particular frustration about not dating. At that time I didn't know why I was struggling with dating so much. There was a moment when a light bulb went off, and I realized it was because I stuttered. That might have been the first time I actually connected my difficulty speaking and communicating with the word "stuttering". It all made sense. I immediately thought to myself, "I don't know why I stutter. Why do I stutter?"

That moment changed my life. It was the first time I said to myself, "I accept my stuttering. I accept myself as a person who stutters." From that point on all I could think about was finding the answer to that question. I started by writing a senior thesis for my Bachelor of Science in Chemistry/Biochemistry on the topic of brain chemistry and stuttering. It ended up winning first

place in a school-wide writing competition, beating out even the English and creative writing majors. From there I went to the National Institute of Deafness and other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), where I did genetic research on stuttering. That research turned into a PhD program in conjunction with the University of Maryland. I was on a quest to understand stuttering and what causes it. I wanted to know, "Why do I stutter?" Little did I know that the question I was asking was not the question I was trying to answer. I was working on answering the question, "What causes stuttering?" The question I was really asking was much more esoteric. I wanted to know, "What is my purpose on this planet as someone who stutters?" The answer? So that I can support other people who stutter to overcome their fears and challenges associated with speaking. This was a huge shift in thinking for me that changed the trajectory of my life. I left the PhD, took a Master's degree and moved back to the SF Bay Area, eventually going back to school to become a speech and language pathologist.

Simultaneously with searching for the causes of stuttering, I also began talking about my stuttering; with my parents (with whom I had never spoken about it before), with my friends, with girls I liked (one of them even telling me she thought my stuttering was hot, but I still never called her), in classes when I had to introduce myself. I was disclosing and advertising my stuttering left and right and it was great! A huge weight lifted. I took my life back. I stopped letting that monster make decisions for me.

I'll never forget the first time I disclosed my stuttering to a group of peers when I had to introduce myself on the first day of class. It was not my lucky day. I was the last person to introduce myself. That meant I had time for anxiety to build while 30 of my peers introduced themselves first. Needless to say I don't remember anyone's name from that class. Not even the cute, strawberry blonde who approached me after class to tell me how impressed she was that I told the class that I stuttered. I thought, "Wow! That felt really good! I disclosed my stuttering, let go of my fear, and said my name with the greatest of ease for the first time ever! and, this really cute girl came up to me to tell me how brave I had been and how impressed she was!" Let me tell you, this all made for a pretty great reward!

I had another friend help me realize that actually I was quite lucky because of my stuttering. He pointed out that if I was talking to a girl I liked, and that if she couldn't put up with my stuttering, then she wasn't worth my time. I had a built in litmus test that was quite effective. Great! Another friend's mom commented one day that she liked the way I spoke. That was perhaps the first time I realized that I could stutter and be a good communicator. Also great! These experiences helped me make friends with my stuttering, empowering me. I faced that monster, made friends with it, and transformed it from the single most negative thing in my life to one of the most positive things in my life. I want other people who stutter to experience that too.

I am now approaching my mid-40's. It's been almost 20 years since I first posed the question to myself, "Why do I stutter?". Today, I can say that I am living my life's mission and doing what I had set out to do the day I decided to withdraw from that PhD. I have a private practice supporting adults and children who stutter. I have a fulfilling and satisfying career, and I can't imagine doing anything else. There are so many great things that can come out of our experiences with our struggles. We just have to take those bitter lemons and make lemonade, and while we're at, why don't we add a little more sugar...