

Speech Impediments and the Sweet Success of Self-Teaching

by Kevin Lacke

My mother still has the voicemail message saved. The voicemail message is of me saying two sentences- “I’m going to Dan and Luke’s house. I’ll be home before dinner.” One seven word sentence and one five word sentence. How long should this take to say? I timed myself saying it just now and it took 2.79 seconds. The voicemail message that my mom saved was 2 minutes and 25 seconds of me struggling to utter these two simple sentences. Instead of speaking these two sentences clearly, the message sounds like “I I I I I I I’mmmmm gu-gu-gu going to D-d-d-dan and luke’s hu-hu-house. I I I I I I I ‘ll be hu-hu-hu-home bu-bu-bu-bu-before din-n-n-n-n-n-n-er.” Clearly, I do not still sound like this today, and I have my speech therapist and parents to thank for that. However, it was not an easy road to overcome my intense stutter. It involved a drift between my parents and me as well as countless hours of teaching myself material. My mother did not save this message to make fun of me but rather to remind me of what I came from and all the progress I have made in my educational career. This ability to teach myself that I learned at such a young age has come in handy countless times over the years and is one of the reasons why my defeat of my stutter was one of the most important events in my educational career.

One simple voicemail message can represent years and years of a boy struggling with speech therapy and drifting from his family in the process. The infamous voicemail message was recorded when I was nine years old. However, my stutter was not always that difficult to listen to. It did not start to get noticeably bad until I was about eight or nine. When I was six and seven years old, I still stumbled on a few words but was mostly clear and coherent. I was a typical elementary school student. I would go to school, go to daycare since both of my parents worked, and then come home. Since I had so much time to kill at daycare, I would always finish the minuscule amount of homework that I was assigned every night long before I would go home. This was so enjoyable because it meant I had nothing to do for school at night, and instead of doing homework, I could spend time with my family. I have one sibling--a younger sister who was never really interested in sports. Fortunately, my father would almost always play catch with me outside at night in the spring and early fall when he got home from work. We would just go out to the front yard and throw the football around for hours. Those two- or three-hour long football catch sessions were some of the best memories from my childhood. I remember it would be so dark that we were both barely able to see, but we did not care. I would dive, sprint, and jump to catch the bullet passes my dad was throwing. All of those grass stains and scrapes from the pavement were worth it every time he said “Nice job, Kev,” or “Awesome catch, kid.” Knowing that my dad was impressed with my football skills meant the world to me. After playing for a while, either my mom or dad would make dinner, and we would head inside and eat. Then, we would all gather around the television and watch Full House or some other family show until about nine o’clock, when my sister and I would head off to bed. The weekends were hardly any different (except for a couple of hours on Saturday and Sunday being devoted to chores/housework). In the winter, my father and I would play catch in the snow while we were supposed to be shoveling. Sometimes, my sister would come outside too and build a fort in the snow. Occasionally, we would even ski or snowboard on the weekends down some of the small hills in my town. These were the best years of my life because everything was so simple. There

were hardly any legitimate responsibilities or stresses and everyone in my family got along. However, this was all about to disappear.

It's almost funny how something as simple as struggling to say a few words can drastically change one's life. My unnoticeable stutter suddenly became noticeable. I struggled to say different types of words. When someone has a stutter, they rarely stutter over random words. It is usually words that begin with or contain a certain letter or consonant sound or a string of words that have a certain pattern. Needless to say, over the next year or two, I was able to say less and less consonant sounds or strings of words without stuttering. My parents obviously noticed it first and kind of played it off as nothing. However, it got worse and worse until it was to the point where it was taking me a minute to say a single sentence. My teachers were getting annoyed because I was holding up class whenever I would raise my hand and answer a question. For a month in my fourth grade class, I do not think I was called on once despite raising my hand dozens of times each day. My friends were also annoyed because every time I would offer my input to a conversation or even worse, try to tell a story, it would take forever, and everyone would just be sitting there watching me struggle to utter something. It was awful because I knew they just wanted to be nice and let me talk but at the same time did not want me to because when I told a joke, it would take up half a lunch period. I felt so conflicted because I wanted friends, but I also wanted my friends to like me, and it is really hard to like someone when it's painful to listen to them speak. Unfortunately, a lot of my friends could not put up with my talking and stopped asking me to hangout. Luckily, a couple stuck around. Words cannot describe how highly I think of them for staying friends with a kid who could barely talk. I am still best friends with these people today and am forever grateful that they stayed my friends.

However, my teachers were not as considerate. They began to tolerate my participation in class less and less until finally my fourth grade teacher recommended that I be put into the special education program. I was understanding all of the material that was being taught and was even near the top of my class in math, science, reading, and social studies. Prior to my stutter getting bad, I was consistently in the advanced math group that would learn concepts meant for students in middle school. However, despite all of this, I was still recommended for special education because I was holding up the class. Mrs. Coleman (my teacher) thought that there was no way she could let me participate in class while also getting through all the material that the state required her to teach. Thankfully, my mother was adamant about not being put in the special education program. This was mainly because the special ed. program in my town had a horrible reputation of being a "one size fits all" program in which things were taught to everyone at the same very slow pace. The program also had a reputation of being "non-escapable." This simply meant that once you were in the program, there's a good chance you would stay in it through high school. My mother then discussed the possibility of me visiting Mrs. Giangregorio (the school speech therapist) but also staying in the non-special education program. Mrs. Coleman strongly opposed this plan because I would miss so much class time while I was working with Mrs. Giangregorio, but my mother put her foot down and insisted. If it had not been for the fact that my mother is very stubborn and my above-average scores on the MCAS, I probably would not even be at this school or even in college at all. It is so interesting to think that I was one elementary school teacher's recommendation away from my entire life being different. I would have had different schoolwork, different friends, and even a different prospect of what I would be doing with the rest of my life. Had this teacher forced me to take special education classes,

there is a good chance I would not want to be a physical therapist because I simply would not have been able to attend a competitive university and receive the training necessary for this kind of job had I been put in the “inescapable” special education program at my school. After my mother and teacher finally came to an understanding, I embarked on the journey of balancing schoolwork with speech therapy.

I began working with Mrs. Giangregorio during the winter of fourth grade. We met for about two hours each day, usually from 11-1. We arranged it this way because even though I would have to miss recess and lunch, I would miss the least amount of class time. Anyone who has ever been in speech therapy can relate to how painful it is. As someone who has been through both physical therapy for a fractured femur and speech therapy for a stutter, I can honestly say that I would rather be in physical therapy for two years than have to do speech therapy for another month. Reading the same basic sentence hundreds and hundreds of times for hours and hours on end and still not being able to get through it clearly was one of the most frustrating experiences of my life. Read the following sentence: “The building was built by big brown buses.” Now read it about 2000 more times in front of someone else--and make sure to have them tell you that you’re doing something wrong each time. This is how I spent my time over the course of a couple months during those 11-1 sessions. When I came back to class, I was exhausted. I did not even want to participate because of the pure mental fatigue of speech therapy. I also could not participate because I did not understand what was going on since I missed about an hour of instruction each day.

When I got home, there was no more playing catch with my dad outside. Instead, there was me sitting in my room struggling to teach myself geometry concepts while my family watched television downstairs without me. I really do not blame them at all. I was so nasty and bitter towards them after they came home from work that they did not want to spend time with me or help me with my homework. There was no more snowboarding or skiing on the weekends. On the weekends, I slept instead. I had to. It was really the only way my nine-year old mind could make it through a week when I was up until midnight or 1 am teaching myself math or science when I was already mentally fatigued from speech therapy earlier that day. The best years of my life transformed into six months of busting my ass just to get by in school. This pattern continued and eventually my body stopped cooperating. I started falling asleep in class. Then, to make matters worse, Mrs. Giangregorio was no longer able to meet with me during the 11-1 spot so I had to go from 8-10 instead, which meant I would miss another hour of class each day.

I knew I had to change something drastically because my mind and my body could not possibly keep up with this schedule much longer. Fortunately, I started getting better at teaching myself. I learned little strategies that worked well for me. I started understanding myself and my learning style a lot better and was able to be much more efficient in my studying. For example, when reviewing a math concept, I learn best by seeing a problem done for me and then attempting the same problem. Learning better techniques for teaching myself saved so much time, allowed me to sleep significantly more, and helped me do better in school.

After spending two hours per day in speech therapy, my stutter was improving, as well. Then, I got the fantastic news from Mrs. Giangregorio: I would be able to switch to one-hour sessions. This was such a confidence boost because I was convinced this lady would never let me cut

down on my hours. She was a perfectionist and would not let me move on to another sentence until I could say it in clearer English than she could. Soon after, Mrs. Giangregorio told me I would no longer have to come to speech therapy. I smiled the biggest smile my parents had ever seen on my face after I heard this news. I was finally able to go to class again and start living a normal life at school.

Despite the fact that I no longer had to teach myself every night, things did not go back to normal. I was so disconnected from my family after all the time I missed spending with them. They had inside jokes and stories that I just could not relate to. I found a passage from Rodriguez's essay that I can relate to quite well. The passage comes from the section where he is discussing drifting from his parents and reads, "The kind of allegiance the young student might have given his mother and father only days earlier, he transfers to the teacher" (Rodriguez 518).

I feel this is so relevant because during speech therapy, I gave all of my attention and energy to Mrs. Giangregorio. When I got home, I devoted the rest of my energy to teaching myself material and gave none to my family. My relationship with my parents was never really the same after this experience. We definitely drifted significantly. While my relationship with my parents suffered, my sister's relationship with them improved drastically. Growing up, there had really never been "favorite" children in my house. However, after the speech therapy experience, my sister had assumed the role of favorite, and it killed me to see this happening. I became more independent and started tuning them out at home much like Rodriguez did. One of the most relatable passages in "The Achievement of Desire" is when Rodriguez says, "I kept so much, so often, to myself. I rarely looked away from my books-or back on my memories. Nights when relatives visited and the front rooms were warmed by Spanish, I slipped out of house" (520). I see myself in this passage because I did the same. After getting to know myself so well from teaching myself for hours every night, I knew myself better than I knew my family, so I spent more time alone.

In sixth grade, I was once again forced to teach myself and spend more time alone while at home. However, this time, it was much easier since I already knew myself quite well from my previous experiences with teaching myself. I broke my femur while playing football at the beginning of sixth grade. I underwent surgery and had a metal plate and six screws put in my leg to stabilize the bone while it healed. After the surgery, I missed a great deal of school because I was on heavy pain medication. While I was at home, my friends brought me assignments from my teacher to complete during my recovery, and once again, I had to teach myself concepts that I missed from not being in class. This time, however, it was much easier because of my past experience. I was completely caught up with the rest of the class by the time I returned and did not skip a beat when I transitioned back into going to school again. I learned even more about myself over that month that I was not able to attend any school at all. I learned the skill of speed reading through being forced to read hundreds and hundreds of pages of material. Had I not learned how to properly teach myself through my speech therapy experience, there is no doubt it would have been nearly impossible to essentially home-school myself for a month in sixth grade.

My favorite example of the skills I learned in fourth grade coming in handy did not even occur until the summer before my senior year of high school. I was supposed to take pre-calculus during my senior year, but my guidance counselor told me I would have a tough time being

accepted into any of the colleges that were at the top of my list if I did not take calculus. After he told me this, I talked with the chair of the Math Department and asked if I could teach myself pre-calculus over the summer and take the final before senior year in order to take calculus my senior year. He said that would be fine, but I would have to take the final in late July before schedules were determined and receive a grade of above an 80 to represent complete mastery of the course. Our last day of school was June 15th. This meant I would have a month and a half to teach myself all of the material that is covered in a nine-month math class and completely master it. I began studying the day after I took my advanced algebra final on the last day of junior year. I studied every single day and used the techniques that I learned in 4th grade to teach myself. For example, I learn math best by seeing a problem done for me and then attempting the same problem on my own. I used this and a few other strategies that I learned during my 4th and 6th grade self-teaching experiences in order to get through the 300 page pre-calculus textbook. I took the final on July 29th and got an 87. I had passed pre-calculus and was able to take calculus during my senior year of high school. Despite being 8 years apart, the skills that I learned in self-teaching while overcoming my stutter in 4th grade helped me in 12th grade and continue to help me today.

My educational career has been a journey of connected experiences. However, no experience has had a more profound impact on my life than my victory over my stutter during 4th grade. It's interesting to think that a child who was one phone call away from being placed into a special education program ended up teaching himself a nine-month course in one month and was ultimately admitted to a few fairly competitive universities, one of them being Northeastern. After all of this, I have come to understand that sometimes, the best learning is done outside the classroom.

Works Cited

Rodriguez, Richard. "The Achievement of Desire" *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. By David Bartholomae and Tony Petrosky. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. N. pag. Print.