

## TEACHING—AND LEARNING FROM—KIDS WHO STUTTER

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Joseph P. Jordan

I titled my talk today “Teaching—and Learning from—Kids Who Stutter.” I should say that I was a kid who stuttered. I’m still that kid. When I was in college—18, and feeling very *old*—I went into office hours and told a professor what I thought was strange epiphany: “I’m 18 and I still feel like a little boy.” He smiled and said, “You’ll always feel that way.”

This is very difficult for me, talking in front of a group. It’s one of my biggest fears. When I was little I’d do anything to avoid this sort of thing: I’d feign sickness, hide in the bathroom, walk out of class when it was my turn to speak. Most teachers didn’t quite know what to do with me when it came to my speech. They let me do what I thought was best.

Was it “best” for me to become an English teacher and do, many times a week, what a part of me intensely dislikes doing? I don’t know. Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I took this road. Like the speaker in that poem, I could look back at that choice and impose heroic-sounding justifications for choosing this road and not the other. I could say what people often want to hear me say: I teach *because* it’s hard for me, *because* I’m facing down a demon, etc.

But that explanation never sits well with me. Often after teaching a class, I look at the scrawl on the whiteboard, much of which is totally illegible (I write on the board when I can’t say a word, and my handwriting is so bad that no one can read it), and I can’t help but thinking that the universe is playing a joke on me—or maybe I’m playing a joke on it? I’m a writing teacher who often doesn’t talk in complete sentences, who tells students to imitate their “speaking voice.” The irony isn’t lost on me.

I showed a draft of this talk to my twin brother and, about the last paragraph, he said, “You make it sound like you’re pathetic. You’re not!” I hope he’s right. But one of the insidious things about stuttering is that, whether or not you *feel* pathetic, you usually assume that others think of you as pitiful.

This past summer I hoped to find answers about my stutter and how it defines me, or at least be around others who might have similar questions, by working at CAMP SAY, a two-week long summer camp for kids who stutter and their friends and family members based outside of Hendersonville, NC. The camp is based on an assumption that, in the stuttering world, is sort of radical: that how you speak is perfectly OK. I've only been talking for a few minutes but you can sense my shame over how I talk. CAMP SAY's mission is to undo that shame or, even better, prevent it from locking in at an early age. The speech pathologists at the camp stutter. So do most of the counselors. So does the founder—the wonderful Taro Alexander, who's also a working actor.

If you're a kid who stutters, and you come to the camp with the idea—most stutterers have this idea – that you *can't say* your name, or where you come from, or what your favorite song is and why, you step out of the bus and realize that here *you can and you will*. One of the coolest things about CAMP SAY—and one of the things that makes it so unlike the rest of the world—is that you have whatever time you need to talk. I was paired with a little girl who would take minutes to say a single sentence. She couldn't help spitting when she talked. And sometimes picked at her arm so bad that it bled. But when I talked to her I never interrupted her, never tried to “help” by speaking the word that stood at the cusp of her lips. This was her time and it was my job to listen to her as I would listen to any other normal 10 year old, even if it listening to her took all day.

CAMP SAY has its origins in New York City. It's part of an umbrella organization now called, simply, SAY—for “The Stuttering Association of the Young.” It began as a weekend program in which kids who stutter wrote and eventually performed their own creative pieces—plays, comedy skits, musical acts. Whatever you imagine kids with severe stutters cannot do, these kids do.

I was planning on *inspiring* these kids. I'm the teacher, after all. I talk for a (scant) living. Of course it was the other way around.

On the first day of CAMP, the counselors/teachers had to perform a skit in front of the campers. We had to say our names. I turned to a fellow

counselor and told him I was afraid I'd stutter on my name. He said back to me, "Do it. They'll love you for it."

And I did stutter on my name. During these two weeks I stuttered more than ever. This surprised me. I thought being around 200 people who stutter would relax me, would make things easier. But it was the exact opposite for me and for many of the campers.

I don't have time to go into the physical or psychological explanations why people stutter. Let me just say that stuttering is largely mysterious as to why it happens, but it does seem intricately related to social anxiety. I never stutter when I'm talking to a dog, or playing a sport. I don't stutter when I'm reading a book to a little kid—that is, I don't stutter up until the age when that kid starts noticing something's odd about how I talk. Then I stutter all the time.

And so being at a camp with kids and adults who stutter is to be constantly aware of stuttering, which is bound to make some of us stutter more. Kids at CAMP SAY hoping for liberation from stuttering don't get it. But they do get a respite from bullies, external and internal—from the idea that they need to hide their stutter, that it's ugly or marks them as disabled. I taught writing classes every afternoon, and it quickly became obvious to me that the kids didn't necessarily want to write about stuttering. They didn't really want to write at all. What a relief—the chance to go somewhere, stutter up a storm, and feel, maybe, like an average kid. So in my writing classes, when I got them to stop talking about girls or Ariana Grande, I got poems about the New York Giants, about kissing and falling in love, about zombies in space. If god sent down an epiphany to me, through these kids' voices, it was that our voices are just everyday voices. I was once talking to a group of kids and I blocked on a word and said, under my breath, "I can't say it." One of them stood up and said, "Yes, you can." He was right. I took a breath and stuttered and said whatever it was I wanted to say. It was probably mundane and instantly forgettable. So strange an ideal for a speaker—to be mundane and forgettable.

So I left CAMP SAY and returned to CA and my job as a literature teacher. I was hoping the experience would help me look at students in their eyes when I talked to them; stop using markers and the

whiteboard; stop saying “I can’t say it” when I know that, if only I had more time, I can. But old habits die hard. I think of the last morning of Camp. The kids have a terrible time leaving. One boy, D’Amari—who for the two-weeks had an adorable but also very disconcerting habit of locking eye contact on you, smiling an ear-to-ear smile, and rapidly nodding his head—stands out in memory. There he stood, about 15 feet away from me, locking his eyes on me again, still smiling widely, but with tears flowing—flowing—from his eyes. He knew it was a tough world he was about to return to. Remember that CAMP SAY doesn’t preach that the stutter will go away.

So we’re left with it. It’s good and bad. In some ways I know it helps me as a teacher, especially a teacher of literature and writing. My efforts to find the “right” word might mirror my student’s. Students might – they often do – see me as approachable. There’s a lot of talk out there about making classrooms more democratic. Mine are, inescapably. Students often literally finish my sentences, whether I want them to or not. This semester I have one student who is always jumping in, often before I’ve even had a chance to get the word out. She’s wrong about the word I want to use about 95% of the time, but I can’t help smiling when I think about her. She’s trying to help.

Bob Hass has a wonderful poem called “Meditation at Lagunitas.” It begins, “All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking.” The poem is about (well, I don’t really know what it “about”), but it is concerned with the idea that words are inevitably elegies to what they signify. The word “tree,” for example, can never equal the thing with branches and leaves that the word labels. Whenever we talk, therefore, our speech makes manifest loss. The means for us to communicate with one another – words – inevitably speak to our separateness.

And yet words are, in some ways, all we have. The poem ends with Hass’s speaker repeating “blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.” It’s sad, this ending. The repetition feels desperate, as if the speaker is willing that one word— “blackberry”—to *mean* something, to *communicate* something tangible. With every repetition, we sense that the word failed in that endeavor. And so the need to keep repeating it.

But that ending is also beautiful: “blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.” Words might inevitably fail us, but we—all of us—keep talking and writing and trying to bridge the gap between me and you. Sometimes, in all of our starts and stops, and fumbling, we manage to say something pretty or worth listening to.

I wonder about a strange feature of many stutters. The word won’t come out—and it will. If I can’t say an “s” noise, I also can. I keep repeating the sound “s-s-s-s-s-s”—the sound that I “cannot” say.

The kids at CAMP SAY have difficulty speaking but they are also beautiful talkers. The body is capable of amazing things. The boy who goes through the motion of throwing an imaginary football to get the word out. The girl who, when she blocks, lets out a high-pitched scream before her voice returns to an almost inaudible whisper. The boy who rocks back and forth, back and forth, until one of his feet hits the ground at the moment the word finally escapes—and then does it all over again a few seconds later on another word.

This is body talking. And it’s perfectly OK. Better: it’s perfect.

# Meditation at Lagunitas

BY ROBERT HASS

All the new thinking is about loss.  
In this it resembles all the old thinking.  
The idea, for example, that each particular erases  
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-  
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk  
of that black birch is, by his presence,  
some tragic falling off from a first world  
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,  
because there is in this world no one thing  
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,  
a word is elegy to what it signifies.  
We talked about it late last night and in the voice  
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone  
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,  
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,  
*pine, hair, woman, you* and *I*. There was a woman  
I made love to and I remembered how, holding  
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,  
I felt a violent wonder at her presence  
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river  
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,  
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish  
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.  
Longing, we say, because desire is full  
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.  
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,  
the thing her father said that hurt her, what  
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous  
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.  
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,  
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.

