



Stuttering: Saints, songs, and sites

Caroline Bowen

Saints

Born in Jonswil Switzerland in about 850, son of a distinguished family, Notker Balbulus monk, musician, organist, librarian, teacher, poet and patron saint of children who stutter, was educated at a convent in St Gall founded by Irish missionaries, died in 912, and was beatified in 1512. Balbulus means “the little stuttrer”.

I have it on good authority that the multi-talented Notker, also known as Notkar, was a firm favourite with Ekkehard IV, the historiographer of St Gall, who described him as “delicate of body but not of mind, stuttering of tongue but not of intellect, pushing boldly forward in things Divine, a vessel of the Holy Spirit without equal in his time” <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/pst00835.htm>.

Signs, symptoms and strategies

History does not recall how much its patron saint knew about stuttering and its management, but no doubt he experienced first-hand the signs and symptoms listed on the ASHA website <http://asha.org/speech/disabilities/stuttering.cfm>, and it is almost certain that he would have been familiar with the story, now featured in the stuttering FAQ for kids, of how Demosthenes of Athens (383–322 BC) <http://www.uga.edu/~demsoc/demosthenes.html> put a mouthful of pebbles to good use in perfecting his skills as an orator <http://www.mankato.msus.edu/dept/comdis/kuster/kids/kidfaq.html>.

Sequences

As a speech pathologist, what really fascinates me about the Blessed N is that he is reputed to be the author of the Sequences. The Sequences (or Sequentiae) emerged from the custom of prolonging the last syllable in the Allelu-iaaaaa of the Gradual, in the Mass between the Epistle and the Gospel. This long, variegated, non-meaningful aaaaa, called a jubilus, was sustained while the deacon climbed from the altar to the organ loft, where he would sing the Gospel of the day. Contemporary mystical interpreters held that the jubilus lacked meaning because it represented an echo of the jubilant music of heaven. But then the BNB stepped in and found a way to set Latin words to the notes in rhythmical prose for chanting. The name Sequence was applied to these chants, and also to regular metrical and rhymed hymns. Notker’s achievement, in taming and controlling the jubilus, marks the transition from the non-meaningful musical sequence to the literary or poetic sequence, and some thirty to fifty poems bear his name.

Control

There is a curious resonance between The Little Stutterer’s seizing control of the jubilatio and Bob Quesal’s <http://www.wiu.edu/users/mfrwq/whatisstut.html> reminder that:

Stuttering is a disorder of fluency characterized by various behaviours that interfere with the forward flow of speech. While all individuals are disfluent to some extent, on the surface what differentiates stutterers from nonstutterers is the frequency of their disfluency and/or the severity of their disfluency. However, the other factor that differentiates stutterers from

nonstutterers is that almost invariably the disfluencies that the stuttrer regards as “stutters” are accompanied by a feeling of loss of control. It is this loss of control, *which can’t be observed or experienced by the listener*, that is most problematic for the stuttrer.

Could it be that the saintly <http://saints.catholic.org/patron.html> Notker, frustrated by the paradox of being able to exact meticulous control over words on a page, notes on the organ, but not the syllables he spoke, found the inspiration for his Sequentiae in the commonly observed phenomenon that people who stutter are fluent when they sing? Did he join in with the singing? Was it liberating for him; therapeutic, even? In turning meaningless prolongations into words, had he discovered smooth speech <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ausspeak/qldspeak/whatsmooths.html>?

Songs

Thoughts of fluency and singing remind me of the true story of Marty Jezer’s <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/08/17/reviews/970817.17kennert.html> palpable relief and astonishment when he found himself intoning sing-song Hebrew prayers at his Bar Mitzvah, against all expectations, completely fluently:

I had found my voice and with it the rhythm of the prayer. I raced through the blessings in a clear alto voice, building confidence with each fluent word and able to segue, without a hitch, into the Torah text itself.

Morris Minor and the Majors’ Stutter Rap <http://groovetown.co.uk/s/373.shtml> is a far cry from Notker’s Sequences and Jezer’s Bar Mitzvah. But the message is loud and clear:

“Well no-one’s ever seen what I mean
From the age of n-n-n-n-n-thirteen
We’ve all been caught in a m-m-mouth trap
So join with us and do the st-st-st-st-st-st-stutter rap

Well it was ‘82 when I joined the boys
And I was hip, and I was cool, but now I’ve lost my poise
The kids, our fans, are starting to doubt
When you open your mouth and nothing comes out

And it breaks my heart that we’re not on the chart
‘cause the record’s nearly over when the vocals start
And I’m down and out, and I’m down on my luck
And I’m livin’ on my own and I’m dying for a fr-riend to
say “You’re great!”

But I’m under the hammer
‘cause all I seem to do is s-s-s-st-
Come on man!
s-s-s-st-stammer!

Oh, yeah! Stuttering songs <http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/kuster/media/songs.html> and stories <http://www.msnbc.com/onair/nbc/dateline/stutter/stories.asp> abound on the internet, as well as a vast array of discussion forums and websites http://members.tripod.com/Caroline_Bowen/jmk-cb.htm.

Sites

Of these areas of the web, none is better organised than the Australian Stuttering Research Centre site <http://www.cchs.usyd.edu.au/asrc/index.html>, none more thoughtful

than Isobel Crichton-Smith <http://www.stammering.org/downunder.html> discussing the Lidcombe Program, none more authoritative than The Stuttering Home Page <http://www.stutteringhomepage.com>, nor more family-friendly than the Kids Health <http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/emotion/stuttering.html> pages for children, adolescents and parents, or more personal than Michael

Sugarman's few lines http://cahn.mnsu.edu/sharing1/_disc36/00000004.htm about talking to his daughter about his stuttering.

Find the online version of this article at http://members.tripod.com/Caroline_Bowen/webwords11.htm and contact the author at cbowen@ihug.com.au

OUTSIDE THE SQUARE

A speech pathologists' guide to Hollywood

Brenda Carey

My adventure "outside the square" began typically enough with a phone message at my private rooms requesting assistance with stuttering. What was unique about the request, was that I was being asked to teach stuttering – not teaching about stuttering, but teaching *how* to stutter.

An American director explained to me that she was filming a mini-series titled *Blonde* broadly based on the life of Marilyn Monroe, who stuttered from childhood. All attempts at teaching the child and adult actresses who were playing Marilyn Monroe to stutter had proven unsuccessful and was I available to assist? After saying that I was certainly interested, I was required to "audition" for the job, that is, demonstrate the type of stuttering that I would be teaching the actresses. Having read about Marilyn Monroe in the past, and heard her speak, I demonstrated a stutter which comprised rapid repetition of whole words. Evidently, I did a reasonable imitation, as I was told that I had the job.

What followed were several short meetings with each of the actresses during which time I demonstrated the "required" speech pattern, utilised examples on video, provided opportunities for practice and gave appropriate feedback. Teaching was done using both the dialogue from the script as well as informal activities. A favourite with the child actress was "Stutter Snap" with elaborate rules involving points deducted for non-stuttered responses!

Apparently both actresses enjoyed their time spent in speech pathology, because after my second visit with them I received a phone call from the production company saying that my presence had been requested on set, and that my "call" time was at 7 a.m. the following morning (I later learnt that that was to be my "call" time for the following fourteen days).

Life on set was bewildering. I was paid to do nothing for most of the time (although "required" to be there), to receive compliments from the director and actresses ("She's done a great job, hasn't she?"), to encourage the actresses with their stuttering and to consume the obligatory number of Danish pastries. The mother of the young actress, an American actress herself, was my guide in this new world and I tried to follow her advice: "This is show-biz, honey, relax!" Life outside the square was different, but I was trying my best to adapt to the rules. Finally it was explained to me that although the actresses were doing a fine job with their stuttering, I was needed should a "stuttering emergency" occur. That is, in the event of one of the actresses deciding that they had lost their ability to stutter, my job was to ensure

that things got back on track as quickly as possible. I understood that since so many people were standing around doing what appeared to be, well, nothing, that paying all these people extra hours to do nothing was to be avoided. Boy, life outside the square was strange, but I was learning fast!

Eventually sheer boredom drove me to create additional roles for myself. Some days on set no stuttering was required, but I, indispensable as I had become, was required. On these occasions, I decided to ensure authenticity permeated the set. So, for example, when a scene was being shot within a psychiatric ward (Marilyn Monroe's mother spent some time in one), I advised that sharp scissors were probably not a realistic prop. My attempts to provide input were taken exceedingly well and even encouraged. Did I think knitting needles would be suitable in a psychiatric hospital? How about macrame? Perhaps the most bizarre moment was when I was asked by the child

actor's mother whether she should accept a role for her child in a movie starring Nicole Kidman that required her nine-year-old child to swear. Being a responsible health care professional, I unhesitatingly advised her to tell her agent to turn them down. (Incidentally I believe that the movie discussed was the horror movie *The Others*, and I defend my decision!)

Well, I am happy to say that this brief time outside the square, while totally novel and frivolous, gave me ample time to reflect on why I so like to be inside the square: simply because helping people who truly need help feels good.

Postscript

It was with great interest that I read that *Blonde* had been almost unanimously poorly received by the critics in the United States. Happily, I also read in a well-known women's magazine, that the only "shining light" was the sensitive and accurate portrayal of Marilyn Monroe by Ms Poppy Montgomery, who was considered a "hot" Emmy nomination tip.

Brenda Carey is a private practitioner whose primary area of interest and practice is stuttering.

Correspondence to:
Brenda Carey

phone: (03) 9885 9057

email: PeterandBrenda@bigpond.com



Brenda Carey