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## **The Pain of the Injustice of Being Blamed**

**By Steve Sheasby**

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Steve (a person who stammers) was shown a copy of The Narrative Forum by Jan Logan, a Speech & Language Therapist. He felt moved to write about a recent sequence of emails that he perceived as a therapeutic document and this has evolved into an article of four parts. In Part One Steve offers his perspective on the writing and receiving of therapeutic documents, whilst Part Two takes the form of a 'Letter of Complaint'. In Part Three Steve responds to some questions about his experience of conversations that are informed by narrative ideas, and in Part Four Steve invites readers to offer their reflections and responses.

Part One: Therapeutic Documents

This article is, in part, a response to Lynne Bradshaw's article on therapeutic documents 'Taking Time to Take the Time' in the second edition of The Narrative Forum. I should first explain that I am a 'client', or maybe that should be 'student', as I (a person who sometimes stammers) am doing stammering therapy at the City Lit, a centre for adult learning in London. A speech & language therapist there with whom I've had quite a bit of contact is Jan Logan. She is 'into' narrative therapy and recently sent me a copy of The Narrative Forum because I too am interested in it.

I was reading it on the train going home a few days ago along with an email therapeutic document I had just received from Jan. The juxtaposition of the two started me thinking: "wouldn't it be fun for a 'client' to submit something". So I have!

During my year and a half of stammering therapy/counselling at the City Lit, I have had fairly regular email dialogue with Jan. I include in this article excerpts of a sequence of four recent emails. In the first one I mention an event in passing. In the second one Jan asks me about it. In the third one I describe the event, and in the fourth one Jan sends me a therapeutic document. The event took place in a City Lit evening class called 'Express yourself through drama: for people who stammer' run by Rachel Everard (mentioned in the first email) and Gavin Campbell (mentioned in the third email). Paul is a buddy I met on a City Lit stammering course.

The 'iceberg' mentioned in the third email is a model of stammering in which the overt features are above the water line and the covert features (negative feelings and avoidances) are below.

This is the sequence of emails:

Hi Jan,

... Met up with Paul last night - he saw some significance in the improvised drama I did a couple of days before my Dad's death in Rachel's class. But I don't know ...

Dear Steve,

... Interesting about Paul's take on things – I would be interested to hear more about this – I didn't know about the improvised drama although I understand that some of the sessions did get pretty 'deep'. I wonder how that was for you and what the improvised drama was about?

Hi Jan,

... About the improvised drama. About 3 months ago I was sitting in a pub with Paul and I mentioned that I had been spontaneously remembering 'bad' stammering events from my childhood. He asked about them and I told him the 'worst'. I was about 13 or 14 and I was making a tool-bag for the tools for my bike. I was enjoying doing something with my Dad and enthusiastic about the bike. I must have stammered a lot because he suddenly snapped something like "Stammering is not an attractive thing to do!". We finished the bag and then I went off to the loo and cried.

Paul was the first person I'd told this to and it was quite a thing to tell someone this painful/shameful(?) thing. Well anyway at the start of a Drama class Gavin asked me if I had an improvised drama idea, and I thought 'Why not play around with this situation?' Maybe I had an idea of changing the ending of the story. Anyway, two of us re-enacted the scene a couple of times with the class watching and then I thought 'What if I played my Dad?'. So we did this. Then a couple of other people in the class re-enacted the scene a couple of times. The class was all taken up with this situation which had been the most hurtful for me during my life. Now I can put words to it, "the pain of the injustice of being blamed for my stammering". Less than 2 days later my Dad was dead.

Why did I suggest re-enacting the scene? Revenge? To bring the iceberg above the water-line so that the sun can melt it? Or the bravura of jumping in with both feet? Probably a bit of all of these. Anyway, am I glad I did it when I did it? Yes.

Hi Steve,

Thank you for sharing your reflections and memories of your experiences of stammering as a child. It does sound as if you remembered some very painful memories but I'm glad you were able to share them with someone as sensitive and insightful as Paul – I imagine that would be as safe a place as you could find to begin to talk about some very painful experiences which had been unspoken about up until then. I also believe it can be helpful and important to identify the source of the injustice and that the influences of the social context in which we live often goes unnoticed as the root of much oppression.

It sounds as if the drama improvisation really helped you to find words to describe your experience of stammering - "The pain of the injustice of being blamed..." is very powerful and I imagine is something that many people who stammer might identify with and important for you to have acknowledged. In terms of why you suggested re-enacting the scene - I have to say from what I know of you, "the bravura of jumping in with both feet" rung some bells! As did the notion of working on raising your iceberg out of the water to melt it in the

sunshine – I feel you have seized every opportunity to do this so I guess I am not at all surprised that you chose to explore this experience more fully when given the chance. How sad that your dad should die so soon after the experience of re-engaging with this experience. I'm very glad you are ok with your decision. ...

I recognised this sequence of emails, and in particular the last one, straight away as a valuable therapeutic document. How? Because I wanted to print it out and have it 'in black and white'. I wanted to use it to thicken my alternative narrative of *Approach* (being more open about stammering) rather than *Avoidance* (attempting to conceal stammering). I have since read and re-read it many times in different situations.

During my time at the City Lit, I've learnt a surprising thing: that stammering is not the problem! I'll repeat that: stammering is *not* the problem. The Avoidance of stammering is the problem. Jan says, "What Avoidance in this context means is that in order to try and conceal the stammering, many people avoid a broad range of experiences and opportunities". The Avoidance works at various levels: at the sound, the word, the speech, the situation, the relationship, the feelings, and the role level. For example, The Avoidance is working at the sound level when I say "My name is er er my name is er Steve" rather than just stammering on "Steve". The Avoidance works at the word level when I change a 'difficult' word to an 'easier' word.

At the role level, Avoidance stopped me from talking about being a stammerer. That is why the above email dialogue is important to me because it shows that I'm starting to acknowledge the history of the problem. In this history I associated stammering with fear, frustration, embarrassment, shame and guilt. So the Avoidance started off as a coping strategy, but ended up dominating my life. For example, two years ago if I got to my local train station and the ticket machine was out-of-order and I didn't have a pen and paper to write down what I wanted, I would walk two miles to the next station. The Avoidance feeds the fear of stammering and so tends to make the stammering itself more severe.

During this process of change I'm glad I've have Jan 'supporting me from behind', although this has led to a number of complaints....

Part Two: A letter of Complaint

Dear Ms Logan,

I wish to make a complaint.

I better first explain who I am. I am the 'little man' who sits down Steve Sheasby's throat next to his vocal folds, and when a light on the wall comes on, I shut the vocal folds. Simple as that, the light comes on, I slam shut the vocal folds. Light comes on, I slam the door.

I've been doing this for a fair few years now. I've not always been down here, I started off in the mouth, doing repetitions, but that was easy. When external conditions changed (around the time Steve went to school) I moved down here, I looked on it as promotion. I've been a diligent, conscientious worker. Light comes on, I slam the door.

But over the past year or so, I've noticed things are changing. And I blame *you* and your colleagues at the City Lit. I'm not happy; there is no two ways about it. I'll explain. For a

start, the light on the wall is coming on a lot less frequently, and I mean a *lot* less. And another thing, when it does come on, it's not nearly as bright as it used to be. There are strange things resonating around here: phrases like 'double approach-avoidance conflict' and odd acronyms like 'vfm'. Don't ask me what they mean. But I have learnt one thing, that the light is controlled by something or somebody called 'The Avoidance'. I sent a note in the internal mail to 'The Avoidance' airing my concern about how quiet things are for me down here. 'The Avoidance' sent back some spectacles ("to see the light easier when it's not as bright") and a note saying that when things are quiet I should go back up into the mouth. I'll give it a try. But I know one thing, things ain't what they used to be.

I remember the good old days when I would slam the door and hold my foot against it for 7 or 8 seconds. Then on the very next word, slam it shut again. If things don't buck up soon, I'm telling you, I'm not ruling out early retirement.

Yours etc.

Part Three: Exploring the Experience of Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy invites us to think of the problem as the problem and the person as the person. That is, the person is not the problem. Narrative therapists therefore often 'externalise' the problem, and I noticed that you talk about Avoidance in such a way. How did Avoidance come to be externalised and named in this way?

After reading Alice Morgan's 'What is Narrative Therapy?', I thought that calling the problem 'the Avoidance' might be an interesting way to proceed. I found Alice Morgan's book after Jan suggested I check out www.dulwichcentre.com.au. This suggestion was in line with therapy in the role of 'active student' rather than as 'patient', an important aspect of stammering therapy at the City Lit.

As can be seen from above, there has been an element of self-therapy in the therapeutic process. The initial interest, however, was generated by Jan. It was one afternoon on a three-week intensive integrated stammering course I attended in May of last year, that some of our group acted as outsider witnesses to a person on a previous course telling their story on video. Our responses were videoed to be played back to the person. This intrigued me. An important aspect of the integrated approach to stammering therapy is the provision of choices and options. I decided to pursue the narrative therapy option.

What this was like for you? What difference did it make to think of the problem as the problem, and the person (you) as the person?

Previously, I would associate the anticipation and occurrence of stammering with huge amounts of fear, shame, guilt, embarrassment, and avoidance. Then I would feel guilty about my avoidances. And then I would feel a coward. Through group therapy at the City Lit, I have come to realise that these are quite common responses.

Externalisation helped me realise that I had started to utilize Avoidance as a coping strategy, but that it had come to dominate my life. This is not unusual for severe stammerers, but a coping strategy I used as a child is not necessarily appropriate for a forty-six year old adult. I had stammering therapy between the ages of five and eighteen, but left thinking I was a

failure at stammering therapy! I returned to therapy probably because I got fed up with suffering.

What has this made possible for you?

I now know that Avoidance is just one voice. I let it have its say. But I don't let it have the final say. This has opened up a world of possibilities. Three recent 'sparkling events' are:

1. Saying a few words at the ceremony when I got my Outstanding Adult Learner's Award from the actor Kevin Spacey.
2. Giving a thirty-minute presentation at the British Stammering Association London Open Day.
3. Presenting an hour-long workshop at The British Stammering Association's Conference.

You talk a little about understanding Jan's email as a therapeutic document, and speak about seeing it in 'black and white'. Could you say a little more about what difference it makes to you seeing these words rather than just hearing them?

To me the printed word has authority and permanence. These are things I need to thicken my alternative narrative of Approach.

Also I was not a very good listener (something that is quite common among stammerers). Maybe I was so wrapped up in the act of speaking, or too wrapped up in the negative feelings I associated with speaking, to really listen to what was being said.

Do you re-read these emails/documents at particular times?

I print the emails out. I re-read them in different situations but I suppose mainly on the train going to and from work. Reading them in a public place seems important to me. I also re-read them at home when I'm really relaxed and calm, and hence more receptive to their message. This re-reading of a document usually goes on for about a week. I've just started collating documentation surrounding recent 'sparkling events' into some sort of book form.

How are the emails helpful?

There is a definite upturn in my mood when I re-read them. It seems to give me a feeling of confidence. My old story was one in which I constantly lived with fear and shame, and this became the norm. These pieces of paper encapsulate the 'sparkling events' that tell me that my life is changing. They are windows through which I see my future life. And I like what I see!

I consider the email dialogue with Jan to be important in thickening my new alternative narrative of Approach. Jan has said:

"At the end of therapy, many people who stammer have moved away from the dominant story where stammering has the upper hand, and gained a new relationship with stammering, one that supports easier speech. However, once back in the outside world many slip back into the old story where stammering is experienced as something shameful to be avoided, often at great cost".

I think narrative therapy is the key to the maintenance of my new relationship with stammering. I have recently set up an email support group for stammerers: a person is invited to recount a 'sparkling event', the other members respond, and then the person responds to the responses.

How many therapeutic sessions would you guess each document/email is worth to you?

This is a difficult question because I have only had ten 1:1 sessions with Jan, and they were at the start of the therapeutic process. A lot has changed since then. I do contact Jan regularly though by email usually surrounding some 'sparkling event'. It helps me to sort out in my mind what has occurred. And her responses help 'pin-down' the event even more. This is something that email has made possible.

In responding to you naming 'the pain of injustice of being blamed for my stammering', I noticed that Jan reflects on the importance to her of broadening the conversation to include contextual/social issues and this is something all narrative therapists hope to do. Could you say a little about your experience of joining with Jan in conversations that deconstruct and make visible wider social contexts, dominant social stories about norms and expectations, injustices and power relations?

Deconstruction pulls the rug out from under the feet of Avoidance. To function, Avoidance needs the negative thoughts and feelings I had learned to associate with stammering. So how and where did I learn these? My stammering, like most persons, probably started off as easy repetitions and prolongations when I was learning to speak as a child. It was other people's reactions to these early disfluencies that created the negative thoughts and feelings in me. In a similar way, when I was learning to walk I undoubtedly stumbled and fell over for a while. But nobody expected me to walk perfectly straight away. So what was the difference in learning to speak? Probably the difference was that they perceived that the disfluencies reflected badly on them. So I learned to associate the core stammering behaviour with negative thoughts and feelings. Then Avoidance appeared on the scene and offered itself as a coping strategy.

What was it like for you, to think and talk about these things in relation to stammering?

Deconstruction has helped me further to separate from the problem. Three techniques I was introduced to at the City Lit are helping me to do this:

1. Voluntary stammering: deliberately putting in two or three easy repetitions (or prolongations) on non-feared words.
2. Self-advertising: introducing myself as "I'm a stammerer, so I may need a little more time" (it is not an apology, but a simple statement of fact).
3. Stammering surveys: going up to people in the street and asking them if they have time to do a short survey about their attitudes to stammering.

The Avoidance hates No.3!

What has this made possible for you?

Deconstruction has made me feel less alone, reduced the guilt and the shame. I now see myself part of a group (1% of the population) that share common experiences of stammering

in a society that expects everyone to have easy fluency. A small example may illustrate this: I recently phoned up a stammering buddy who works as an Occupational Therapist for the NHS. No one was in his office, so I tried to leave a message on the answer-phone. But it was one of these ones that if there is a pause for a couple of seconds, it automatically cuts off: not ideal for someone utilising pauses to increase fluency!

I now have friends who stammer. I go to social events run for and by stammerers. The Avoidance liked to work with Isolation. But the Isolation has gone now.

I co-founded a self-help group for stammerers in London. We meet once a month in a pub, where the landlord reserves us a table. Writing this reminds me that I need to book a table at a restaurant for the group's first anniversary celebration ... I've just looked up the number and made the call. Just like that. I used my fluency techniques to help generate some fluency, and when I did stammer I stammered in a smoother easier manner. This was a 'sparkling event'. I've never booked a restaurant on the phone before. It's maybe not as grand as an hour-long presentation at a national conference, but it's still important to me.

Part Four: Hopes and Reflections

I began this article by saying that it was a response to Lynne Bradshaw's article 'Taking Time to Take the Time'. I'd like to thank Jan for her support in writing this article, and Sarah Walther for the opportunity to think about and to respond to her further questions about my experience. I hope that readers of The Narrative Forum have been interested in a small part of my story, and I have found that writing it down has already helped me to thicken my alternative narrative of Approach. Think what it will do if I see it in print!

Outsider witness responses or reflections about the contents of this article would be welcome and can be sent to Steve via Jan at jan.logan@citylit.ac.uk or via Sarah at cnforum@aol.com. Or visit www.stammering.org/sparkling.html where you can share or witness sparkling moments in relation to stammering.