

## 13 Ways of Looking at a Stammer

*By David Mitchell*

It's a great honour to be here, and although I've used these words to begin a few lectures in my life, in this case the words are especially heartfelt. Many of you will recognize the allusion in my title to the poem by the great modernist American poet, Wallace Stevens, whose most famous poem is called '13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.' It would be ideal if I could at this point state that Stevens was a stammerer, like the British poet Philip Larkin, or that his 'Blackbird' poem was about stammering, but neither statement would be true. But the poem is about the multifacetedness of phenomena, and reminds me how the human mind shares the urge of most media organs to first simplify, then exaggerate. So I hope you'll allow me to read you Steven's poem (and I hope his estate doesn't come after me for copyright infringement) – it's short, lucid, beautiful, and think of it as a Gin and Tonic flavoured with a drop or two of Bergamot before the pasta is served up...

I

Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II

I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.  
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window  
With barbaric glass.  
The shadow of the blackbird  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Traced in the shadow  
An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,  
Why do you imagine golden birds?  
Do you not see how the blackbird  
Walks around the feet  
Of the women about you?

VIII

I know noble accents  
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
But I know, too,  
That the blackbird is involved  
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
It marked the edge

Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds  
Flying in a green light,  
Even the bawds of euphony  
Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coach.  
Once, a fear pierced him,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.  
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.

Isn't that a beaut? My 13 year old stammering self would never have believed that aged 44 I'd be in the Netherlands quoting poetry to an audience of 200, believe me. [I'd phone him up to tell him the good news, but I don't have his number and he isn't on email for some reasons.] So, for my lecture, I thought I'd follow Wallace Steven's example by identifying and dicussing 13 ways of looking at a stammer. At first I was afraid I couldn't reach 13, but I found once I got going, the various viewpoints started to flow. I've sequenced them in a sort of dark-to-light order, so if the first few feel a little nihilistic, don't despair – the cavalry is on the way...

One. A stammer can be looked upon as a **curse**. A curse causes harm and misery for its victim, and for us stammerers, it can certainly feel that harm and misery are precisely what our stammers cause. I think many of us have a sort of First Contact with our stammers – an anecdote when we first became aware that something was wrong with our speech, and we couldn't speak as effortlessly as the other kids were speaking. Or in fact, we found we couldn't speak at all. Shared or secret, these first contact memories burn in our memories with all the red hot shame that kids are prone to. Not fitting in is a first-degree crime at that age. My own first contact memory, for what it's worth, is linked with a game of Hangman – I don't know if this game is international or just in the Anglophonic world, but it's a rather brutal word game where you guess a whole word by guessing at its component letters, one by one. For each wrong guess you draw a part of a gallows and a hanged man, until either you guess the word correctly, or the poor man is hanged. Anyway one day, I must have been 7 or 8, we were playing hangman at school and I knew the answer: 'Napoleon' – a strange word for our teacher to choose, I admit, but there it is. I put my hand up to answer and... Experienced my very first recorded stammer. I know I don't need to describe how that feels to anyone here. I felt, quite literally, cursed – like some witch had placed a spell on my mouth and tongue, to stop me saying the bloody word. It happened again, again, again... I dreaded my ninth birthday, because then when someone asked me how old I was, I would be faced with the choice of stammering or lying. I remember thinking that I'd never be able to get a job unless it was a lighthouse keeper, and that girlfriends, marriage and children obviously weren't going to be for me. I remember thinking, *What have I done to deserve this curse?*

Secondly, a stammer is an **inhibitor**; a preventer; an opportunity-reducer; a life-shrinker. Over the years, my stammer has led me to avoid answering the phone, even though I knew a potential employer was calling; slam *down* the phone when I'd finally summoned up the courage to phone a girl I liked because I couldn't say my own name for God's sake; ask for tea when I really wanted coffee (I couldn't say 'c'); say (for years) "What are you up to today?" instead of "What are you doing today?" (couldn't say "doing"); beg a sympathetic vice-principle to be excused the Sixth Form Prefect's duty of reading an assembly to the whole high school; the list goes on and on. Every day was a trip through a linguistic minefield without a border. In the same way my stammer prevented me from saying certain consonants in a sentence, it seemed that my stammer would also block off a range of life-experiences, major and minor. I remember my well-meaning mother trying to get me to consider her rather directionless son to consider his future career, and remarking that "Teaching's out, isn't it, because of your stammer?" This was one of the few occasions that either of my parents referred to my disfluency even obliquely: nor was it a subject I ever brought up. My mum was only trying to be helpful, of course, but I've rarely felt as mortified or miserable – it wasn't that I harboured a burning desire to be a teacher, it was the casual way that a single remark could slam shut a whole vocation. In the event, I taught English for 10 years, happily and pretty much fluently, but that's another story.

A third way of looking at a stammer is as a **source of self-loathing**. Like most teenagers, I constantly fretted that I was failing to be the suave, witty, popular individual that the world seems to tell you you need to be to survive and prosper. As a stammerer, I carried an extra 50kg burden of guilt that I couldn't even get a sentence out without looking like I was having some sort of fit. Unknowingly, I had bought into the myth that stammering is caused by a lack of will-power. When a classmate or a teacher wasn't yelling *Spit It Out!* or *For God's Sake, Just Say It!*, I was yelling the same sort of disgusted exhortation at myself for not trying hard enough. I was duped by the all-persuasive force of popular wisdom. It didn't occur to me to consider that a stammerer *has* to be a blast-furnace of will-power, just to dial a number or walk up to a ticket

counter or to risk answering a question in class instead of mumbling, “*Don’t know, Sir.*” The Quaker movement seek to make decisions via slow consensus rather than instant votes because the Majority are often wrong: and regarding stammering, the Majority narrative is lamentably wrong-headed. Stammering is *not* caused by a lack of will-power, and this view is as lazy and pernicious as it is false. (And while will-power is indeed a marvellous thing that can allow you to march unaided all the way the South Pole, unless you also possess the right experience, equipment and training, your marvellous will-power can end up killing you via hypothermia and starvation.)

A stammer is **a humiliator**. Why is it so humiliating when we stammer? Might it be because it infantilizes us? Look, we’re all grown up, but we can’t even talk. Or could it be because of what of how we look when we lock on a word – eyes popping, reddening, sweating, garbling, gabbling, breathing all over the place, like we’re fighting a losing battle against demonic possession? The opposite of dignified, anyway. Or do we experience humiliation for the same reason (I argue) that we feel self-loathing – because we buy into a narrative which states that stammering is a misfortune we’re too weak to counter. If the latter, why would society evolve such a heartless narrative? The world can be a heartless place, and mockery is one way of bolstering one’s own ego at the expense of another. Freudian ideas about laughter being a reflex reaction to something unknown and frightening may also be useful: if the person you’re speaking with doesn’t know you have a stammer and you hit a bad block, then a nervous flutter is an understandable response, even if that reaction is unwelcome. Our playground or workplace tormentors humiliate us because it is in their nature to do so. Kinder souls unintentionally humiliate us because they don’t know we don’t want them to finish our sentences for us. Stammering is humiliating because to refuse to be humiliated costs us levels of self-respect that we can’t always maintain. The good news that I’d like to tell my 13 year old self, however, is that self-respect is not a faculty you are either born with or born without. Self-respect is a muscle that can be trained and as well as strained. As you age, it becomes harder for others to humiliate you without your consent.

A stammer can be **a guilty secret**. I wasn’t the official stammerer at school, because my concealment mechanisms were usually *just* good enough to let me pass as not abnormally disfluent. In some ways this partial camouflage was a blessing, of course – I was humiliated less frequently, and less severely, but in other ways my In The Closet status as a stammerer contributed to the overall curse. Why? First because my coping mechanisms obscured my need for the speech therapy I could have benefited from; and second, because I lived in fear that I would be outed, humiliated and then be forced to usurp the official school stammerer from his throne of shame. I used to have a recurring nightmare that the zombie apocalypse had taken place, and I was the last human being on the Earth. In this nightmare I was able to survive by acting like a zombie, dressing like a zombie and grunting like a zombie, but the moment I made a slip and did or said something that marked me out as a fresh-meat human being, the real zombies stopped whatever they were doing and looked at me with a curious *huh?* Expression, and I knew that I had to wake up before they came from me and ripped my flesh apart. Now, being a relatively ‘high-functioning’ stammerer is a bit like living in that nightmare. I dreaded enemies guessing my guilty secret, because then I had no defences against them. When friends realized I had a speech disfluency, they avoided all mention of it out of tact, but that non-mention was as tangible as a mention because I knew they knew (of course) and I knew they pitied me. If, as Oscar Wilde said, homosexuality is the love that dare not say its name, then stammering is the disability that *can* not say its name.

Stammering is **a mystery**. Is stammering genetic? Well, how could it not be – it’s hardly bacterial or viral, is it? And there are too many of us from protective family

backgrounds for stammering to be the result of trauma or abuse, right? 1960s ideas about stammering starting in the ear of the parent are now decomposing in the landfill of decrepit ideas, along with the once-respected sciences of Phrenology and Eugenics. (Blame those idiot parents who don't know what they're doing, so very unlike *us* who did everything right!) And too many of us from un-upholstered backgrounds for stammering to arise from over-protection, yes? If stammering is a simple question of faulty neural connections, then how come so many of us *are* fluent for a while during infancy, but then lose that fluency aged 6 or 7 or 8? Yet how can stammering not be a neurological phenomenon if it's not merely muscular? If it is neural, can we 're-wire' those defective synapses like stroke-survivors? Is this what happens when a stammerer 'overcomes' his stammer and can end up communicating like an Irish bookkeeper on race-day? Is there a connection between autism and disorders on the autistic spectrum? Could they be distant relatives? If stammering is genetic, what factors cause the 'stammering gene' to be switched on? What is going on when non-stammering parents have a stammering kid? Why are stammers so fickle? Why can they come and go so inconsistently? How can they apparently "hide" from speech therapists? If stammering is stress-related, how can a stammerer like Charles I of England reportedly be given a 'free pass' at a trial held to determine whether or not he'll be executed? Why don't most of us stammer when we talk to dogs, plants or ourselves? Why don't we stammer when we sing? Why do the consonants on which we block shift over time? Why does the rest of the word apparently influence whether or not I'll stammer on the start of the word? So how come I have trouble with the American river's name "Shenandoah" but I'm able to say the name of the author of 1001 nights, "Scheherezade" or the Polish town "Szczecin"? How can I say the word "Captain" but not "Carole"? "Sit" but not "City"? Why do certain stammering treatments and programmes work on one stammerer but not on another? Even when they work, do they work forever, really, or is a relapse inevitable, adding to the woes of a stressed-out stammerer the knowledge that he's fallen back into old habits? How come the knowledge that you're speaking to another stammerer can affect the severity of your own disfluency? Can the severity of a stammer be measured objectively, like the Richter Scale measures earthquakes, or even phenomenologically, like the Beaufort Scale for wind-strength? As a novelist amongst academics, I often feel like an unwashed country relative at a posh city wedding – I can ask questions without having to posit answers. Nonetheless, if academics are working on these questions, I know you'd be very welcome at the next International Stammering Conference.

Stammering is a **political issue**. I could spend my allotted hour discussing this aspect of stammering alone, but I'll confine myself to two political issues connected with stammering. **First:** should a welfare state provide access to speech therapy to help citizens with speech disfluencies? I would say Yes, if that state wishes to call itself civilized. In these financially-straitened times, however, speech therapy is a target even softer than libraries. If a local health authority shut down its audiology units and declared, "So, old people, no more money for hearing-aids" then barricades would be manned and blood would flow. But if speech and language therapy services get cut, what are the local stammerers going to do? March on the parliament building with a megaphone? We aren't a political block, we are relatively few in numbers, and our condition isn't life-threatening. To grow in influence, however, people have to overcome a natural reluctance – given the negatives stereotypes about stammerers that prevail – to "out" themselves as stammerers. But Speech and Language Therapy services, just as much as deaf-aids, are about the basic human right to communicate. The stammerer's prison is just as disabling as the deaf-sentence. Putting aside ethical questions, isn't there a broader monetary dividend to be had from liberating kids and adults alike from the confines of speech disfluency? Their life-chances are increased, as are their abilities

to repay the costs – relative peanuts, by the by – in the future. Speech and language therapy now creates taxpayers later. **Second:** the relationship between politics, culture and group narrative is close and vital. Politics is both the wind and the weathervane of change. Gay and lesbian people in the UK can now marry one another because they fought like hell for these reforms in realm of politics; bathrooms for people with disabilities are now all over Schipol airport because of politics; every major Japanese city, and numerous minor ones, have strips of indented tiles along the pavements so that visually-impaired people can walk in straight lines – because of politics. Exactly *how* people who stammer should mobilize isn't an area I can offer expertise, but national charities like the British Stammering Association in the UK and tireless organizations like StutterTalk in the USA surely have a crucial role to play. High on my wishlist of *what* we should be campaigning for, however, are: access to SLT services; a campaign to discourage elderly doctors telling worried parents, *Do nothing, it'll sort itself out of time, she'll grow out of her stammer naturally*; an end to the buck-passing of responsibility for SLT from health services to education departments and back again; the naming and shaming of public figures who mock stammerers, which should be as much a no-go zone as laughing at blind people for being unable to see, or the use of racist terminology. We need to dispel public ignorance. People in the world of the fluent do want to understand, and they do want to listen – as, I think, the success of *The King's Speech* showed.

A stammer is **a course in practical linguistics**. When I'm on the road promoting a book, I identify a few passages that work well when read aloud, and read these at bookshops and festivals and so forth. Inevitably, there'll be one or two stammer words in the passage. I know they're there, that they're waiting for me: some nights I can say them, but I keep synonyms for the sticky words or phrases up my sleeve, so that if I'm tired, or my stammer is especially bolshy, I have the possibility of substituting an alternative word. Back when I was 12 or 13, however, I used to have to 'self-autocue' all the time. I soon learned that some synonyms are more equal than others. I learnt that words are finely-calibrated things, whose meaning or force can be adjusted by inflection; that a single stress on a syllable can alter the centre of gravity of a phrase. I also learned about lexical register, that some words and phrases sound more educated and adult and Latinate, while other words and phrases are more 'street', more 'teen', maybe more Anglo-Saxon. Of course all native speakers of a language learn this intuitively too, but for an autocuing stammering kid it's a means of survival in the schoolyard – we *really* learn it. So if you're 12 and you can't say the 'm' in the phrase 'It's a matter of opinion', you can't simply substitute it with the word 'subjective' because then you get beaten up for talking posh. You need another phrase – and now, instantly, because the point about self-autocuing is that the other person doesn't cotton on to what you're doing. Sometimes there is no easy substitute, so you have to disassemble the sentences either side of the tricky phrase, and use conjunctions – but, and, so, however – to redirect the sentence back to your meaning. Without false modesty, I became a Junior Olympic-class self-autocuer in the English language – this more than anything helped me conceal the guilty secret of my stammer until I outed myself, many years later. What I want to say is that nowadays as a professional writer, I use this practical knowledge of the mechanics and electronics of speech every single day, and I bless it. Sometimes the difference between a curse and a blessing is about 20 years.

A stammer is **an empathy generator**. Who would I be if I'd never stammered at all? If, that day 36 years ago, I'd said "Napoleon" just fine, and everything else since, like all those people out there, the Normal People, who don't need to negotiate with their speech disorders, who can speak their mind as naturally breathing. For years, when I believed All You Need is Will-Power, I'd decide, *Right, Today's the Magic Day*; that from today, I'd stammer no more and be like everyone else. Now I'm no longer so sure I'd

wish it away quite so quickly – if by doing so I would also have to lose what my stammer has taught me. Not just about speech disfluencies, not just about practical linguistics, but about life lived outside the Kingdom of the Able, the Land of Hunkydory, the State of Wellbeing where your mind and body function as they are supposed to. I know a mild speech disfluency is a *very* mind affliction indeed compared to what untold millions – hundreds of millions – tolerate, but I like being a bit of an expert on Life with a Stammer. I'm proud of my knowledge of this tiny, tiny area of the human condition, and I wouldn't want to lose it. It makes me more compassionate to other stammerers, of course, but I also believe it gives me a slight connection with other comrades in adversity. If Life is a journey from ignorance to some kind of enlightenment, then a built-in disability is a sort of head-start. I'm not romanticizing it, or recommending, and I'm not agreeing with the Pope who reportedly told the parents of their kid wracked with cerebral palsy that God had made their son the way he is to give us all a lesson about how to love – a sentiment that makes me wince. I'm not saying that enlightenment is the *purpose* of disability, but I am saying that a degree of eventual enlightenment is very often a side-effect of a disability, if only because enlightenment can often be the only way of getting through to Friday. I'm also saying that pure and tactful Empathy enriches the Empathizer's mind just as much as it enriches the life of the Empathized-with. Giving is the gift that keeps on giving.

A stammer is **a challenge**, a big fat juicy challenge. A stammer discourages you from speaking because doing so can be so humiliating, yet here we are in a world of words, members of a species of ape that has risen to its present giddy heights via teamwork. Whether it's hunting woolly mammoths to extinction or damming (damning?) the Yangtze River, we dominate via language. So, how do us language-disable lot prosper in this world? Find ways to cope, that's what. We all have our own bag of tricks. I give mine names: the sledgehammer, where I force a word out – high risk, if it hammers back, but it generally does the job, sort of. My autocue – word avoidance – I've discussed. I also use a Fake Hesitation, where I pretend to consider my next word very carefully, and people think I'm a very thoughtful man indeed, while what I'm really doing is waiting for my stammer to drop its guard, so I can sneak the word through without it blocking me. It often works. It calms you down, too. Neatest of all is my Swiss Army Knife with which I cut words in half, and attach the first half to the word before, and the second half to the word that comes after, and Abracadabra, I've made a word disappear! I always have trouble with the word 'Salad' – God knows why – but I have no trouble with the word 'Thus' and no trouble with the made-up word 'Alad'. So instead of struggling with the order 'Can I have the salad, please?' I can say breeze through with a 'Can I have thus alad, please?' Challenges force you to be inventive, and to be brave. Yes, sometimes you'll fail, sometimes you'll stammer at a mortifying moment, sometimes you'll see that look of gormless astonishment on the other person's face, or pity. But at other times we do it. And isn't that a brilliant feeling?

A stammer is **not an enemy, but a part of yourself**. I view phrases such as "overcoming your stammer" or "conquering your disfluency" with suspicion – such language comes from the same ignorant and/or cruel mindset that says we lack will-power. The military metaphor turns stammerers into perpetual losers in a battle which we're too crap ever to win. Don't we have enough to handle without chucking self-disgust into the mix. I don't believe in a "cure" for stammering – not a cure analagous to antibiotics or grief-counselling, anyway – because I don't believe stammering is a disease. A stammer can be a major inconvenience, of course, but what it isn't is a sickness. Should we even be thinking of it as a pathology? A friend with personal experience of alcoholism once remarked that while he could never rid himself of the *potential* to relapse into alcoholism, he could aspire to become teetotal alcoholic. When I



heard that, a light-bulb went on: *I want to turn myself into a non-stammering stammerer*. I love this light-bulb. It isn't just a word-nerd's exercise in semantics (though I am a word-nerd, and proud of it.) This way of thinking is a part of my self-therapy. For all those years when I viewed my stammer as a cancer to be bombarded with the chemotherapy of will-power, it fought back ever more viciously. But once I started viewing my stammer as an intrinsic part of me, like my sticky-out ears or my right thumb or my left kidney, my stammer began to make concessions back. Really, that's how it felt. These days I think of my stammer as a lodger in my house. Eviction won't work – the lodger has a right to live here and a black-belt in karate. But if I treat the lodger with respect – and better yet, with humour and affection – then the lodger respects me back, and allows me to give lectures like this or even live TV without blocking my words too much, or too often. This détente has been in place for 15 years or so, and compared to Cold War (and Hot War at times) of the preceding 20 years, both me and my stammer are much happier. And if I *do* block on a word and someone has a problem with that, then to hell with it, it's their problem, not mine. I don't mean to imply that speech therapy isn't worth bothering with – far from it. Speech therapy can help – in some cases a lot – but the key verb is “help”. Hopes that speech therapy will, and should, eradicate the problem like a pest-controller are liable to end in dismay. Let's think more creatively, holistically and respectfully about our stammers.

A stammer is a **bridge**. That's my wildest claim so far, at first sight – surely a speech disorder is a destroyer of bridges between people, not something that connects them? But the fact is that if human beings had evolved without this particular condition, none of us would be at this conference today. (And I for one am delighted to be here.) We are everywhere, us stammerers, in all cultures, in all language groups, in all historical periods. We struggle with this particular card we've been dealt by genetics, we get by, we find ways to lessen its impact, we live our lives and enjoy the good stuff and tolerate the less-than-great stuff. Let's be proud of our resilience even if we don't always feel resilient. Let's share our insiders' knowledge to help other stammerers. Let's share our own bags of tricks. Let's seek to break taboos surrounding disfluencies, to reject old stereotypes, to use social media to kick back harder at people who kick us, and – to quote Sam Goldwyn-Meyer – let's come up with some 'brand new clichés' about disfluency. Let's build these new narratives from our courage and fortitude, not from our ridicule or victimhood. Let's be ambassadors and role-models. Let's get the message to kids who stammer that it's okay, your stammer won't have the stranglehold on your life you think it will. Stammering may not be cool, but neither are purple espadrilles or a deep knowledge of *Star Trek*. Being a teenager who refuses to be defined or humiliated by a stammer, however, that is very cool indeed. Being a teenager who can say, calmly if stammeringly, “Yes, I stammer, and it's part of who I am, but it's not what I am, and if you have a problem with my stammer, then thanks for letting me know that I don't need to waste any time on you” – that, in this middle-aged guy's opinion, is the quintessence of cool. Being a teenager who doesn't collaborate with the majority view that a stammer as a source of shame, but is strong enough to refer to it with wit and intelligence – believe me, that will win you the girl (or boy) at the end of the party. Good times.

In my original lecture I stopped at this point, after only 12 Ways of Looking At A Stammer. In the spirit of a stammer being a bridge, I asked – a bit cheekily – for members of the audience to come up to me afterwards with ideas for the 13<sup>th</sup>. Several did so, and though all the suggestions were thoughtful, the idea I liked most was from a man who had flown all the way from Perth in Western Australia, and who earns a living by – amongst other things – teaching public speaking. I won't name him here, but you know who you are (and g'day mate.) Judging from his fluency he's learned to coexist with his stammer very peacefully indeed, but he begins his public speaking classes by playing a

video clip of himself taken only a few years ago where he repeatedly blocks and has a very hard time getting a single sentence out. “This proves to my clients,” he told me (I quote from memory) “that if *I* can do it, anyone can do it. It’s my own unique selling-point. So you know what *my* thirteenth way of looking at a stammer would be? A gift.”

Amen to that.