

**Passing Twice: A Proud Community of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual
and Transgender (GLBT) People Who Stutter**

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www.stuttertalk.com/stutterbook/

I always wondered if I was the only one. I thought for sure that no one else could be as messed up as I was.

I liked boys. And I stuttered.

Double Whammy. Total Freak.

No one else could ever discover my secrets. I knew I had to pretend. I had to pass. As straight. As fluent. As normal. I couldn't tell anyone in my little Texas town that I had a crush on my science teacher. No, not Miss Harvey, although I did admire the way her frosted hair framed her face. I wanted to be with Mr. Underwood. My feelings scared me as much as the idea of stuttering in front of my class, at my Scout troop, or at my church. I didn't know how to deal with any of this, but I did know that it was all shameful. They were both wrong. They both made me damaged goods.

My question became not, "How do I learn to live with these things," but instead, "How do I pass?" I started by dating girls. Sure, I was more interested in helping them pick out a flattering blouse than in getting my hand underneath said blouse, but I was kind of a great boyfriend. I paid lots of attention to their feelings. I wanted to hear about their problems. I was good with friendly advice about hair and makeup. And I never pressured them for sex.

I was equally masterful at hiding my stutter. I built a gigantic vocabulary, one especially rich in synonyms for words starting with vowels -- which should tell you what my deepest phobia was. And, as any scared kid would do, I often pretended that it just wasn't there. When necessary, I just kept my mouth shut. I knew I couldn't stutter if I just didn't speak at all.

I thank God every day that my parents didn't send me to an "ex-gay" ministry when I finally did come out to them. They never tried to get me not to be gay. They did, however, try to get me some help for my stutter. I can't blame them; teachers were requesting that they send me to speech therapy. After a bad day at school, Mom and Dad would come home to find me curled up in a ball on the couch, unable to say anything at all without blocking. Yet, when I would go to the counselor or the speech language pathologist or the expensive seminar, I would breeze through the sessions without a stutter in sight. If I knew how to do anything, it was how to pretend there was no problem. My excuses were as creative as my camouflage: I'm eccentric. I forget the answer. I answer the phone with "yes" instead of "hello" because I think it is more sophisticated. Hide. Substitute. Pretend. Those were my everyday obsessions. That was my way of life.

Years later, as an adult with a house and a job and a husband, I had learned to live openly as a happy gay man. It wasn't until I discovered Passing Twice that I found out that I could live just as happily with my stutter. Soon after we got a home computer, I found the group. I really don't remember how it happened. I just remember hating my speech, even after years of practicing whichever fluency technique seemed to help at the time. I still stuttered, and I was still embarrassed and ashamed of it. I had found so much good in the gay community, and this new Internet thing was supposed to connect everyone. Maybe there was a gay group for this, too. I did a search for "gay and stuttering." There it was. A website. A name. No one needed to explain the name Passing Twice to me. It was the story of my life.

I was scared, but I wrote to them. One of the founders of the group, the incredible Barry Yeoman, wrote me back right away. Needless to say, I was happy that this contact wasn't over the phone. I knew the safety of typing would enable me to tell more about myself and to open up more easily. Even with another stutterer, I was not comfortable blocking or stuttering with a real live person on the other end.

The group was incredibly welcoming right away. They encouraged me to introduce myself and to participate in the online conversations. Soon after finding them, I met many of these new friends in person at a National Stuttering Association (NSA) conference in Chicago. I felt that I already knew them from our cyber-conversations, and I loved putting faces with names and meeting new GLBT folks. We commandeered the dance floor at the conference and had a great time going out on the town together. Marching with my new brothers and sisters in the Chicago Pride Parade and chanting "We're q-q-q-q-queer and we s-s-s-s-stutter" has to be one of the best and proudest memories of my life.

I had tons of questions for the other members about stuttering. Firstly, why were they encouraging me to stutter openly? I remember being secretly very proud when one of our members, who was also a speech therapist, mentioned how rarely I stutter. I was also deeply uncomfortable around my new friends who blocked more severely or who chose not to substitute a word but to stutter loudly and proudly. This was too much for me. I liked them and everything, but, no thanks.

When I asked, though, they started talking about authenticity and about shame. Why not stutter out loud? Why be embarrassed about the way that I talk? Why let others tell me that I am damaged somehow? They encouraged me to pick a word starting with my scariest first letter and to let myself twitch my head, preform my lips and take a good long time to drag out that sound. My stuttering was celebrated, admired, and used as a way to feel community. I had never felt this before at all. My speech had only ever been baffling and embarrassing. It was my oldest, heaviest burden. The realization of how much shame I had carried about my speech started to resonate with me on a deep level. I also started to feel the connection more strongly between the two closets I had called my home for so many years.

As a grown man, I would never have stood for someone telling me I could only have certain kinds of jobs or live only in certain places because I'm gay, and I started to tell the truth about how I had limited myself because of my speech. I grew up believing that my speech precluded all sorts of activities. Through Passing Twice, I heard the stories of others, and I began to explore ways to stutter more openly. Each time I encountered an obstacle, I thought of the courage of the others in the group. I thought of Nora and her struggles with addiction. I read in the

newsletter about Pamela, our most active transgender member, and I remembered Jeff, a talented minister in our group. None of them had let stuttering get in the way of activism. None of them had decided to live with their mouths closed. They were living life out loud and in vivid color.

Through the gay rights movement, we have learned the dangers of silence. Many of us in Passing Twice were involved in ACT-UP or Queer Nation in the 1980s. We discovered that keeping our voices down made us invisible. By taking to the streets and screaming, we finally started to see AIDS mentioned in the press and in public policy decisions. ACT-UP changed the very nature of our public health delivery system.

Those of us involved in gay college groups had also seen first-hand the value of speaking our minds to those in power. As our great heroes in the early days of the movement taught us, by coming out, we change the minds of everyone in our lives and, eventually, everyone in the nation and the world. When we are out to our families, neighbors and friends, they can no longer say that they don't know anyone gay. It is much easier to judge or to discriminate against an unseen, unheard enemy. For many of us, coming out of the closet has been the most empowering, exhilarating, and terrifying decision of our lives.

We find that breaking down the doors of the stuttering closet sets us just as free. By casting a light into the darkness of that lonely place, we can start to see what is truly inside. We can own our stutters and love them. We can start to let go of some powerfully crippling shame. We tell the truth about ourselves and come to value our differences and our beautiful voices. We begin building communities that value us and connect us. We find our tribe.

Stuttering without shame is not always easy, just as living an openly gay life is not always the smoothest road. As long as we carry around our feelings of inadequacy or brokenness, we let those feelings keep us isolated. By living in silence, we let our differences define us. The message of Passing Twice is one of activism and acceptance. We will not be quiet. We know the dangers of keeping our heads down and our mouths shut. We feel the warmth and value of a diverse community based in common struggle and common solution. That solution is simple.

Tell the truth. Be proud of who you are. You are not alone.

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