

The King's Speech: Finding our Voice
New Members' Sunday
June 12, 2011
The United Church of Gainesville
Larry Reimer

**Genesis: 32: 22-29, Jacob wrestling with the stranger; Matthew 10:19;
Romans 8:26.**

When I was a child I stuttered. This year's best film, "The King's Speech" drew me in to the way I found my voice and how all of us find our voices.

"The King's Speech" begins in 1925, in England as Albert Frederick Arthur George, the Duke of York, known to his family as Bertie, is giving the closing speech at the British Empire Exhibition. It is painful to watch because his stuttering is completely debilitating. Bertie can console himself in that the crown will go to his older brother Edward.

But this brother Edward is the Edward who marries the twice divorced Wallis Simpson and abdicates the throne in 1936, and Bertie must become the king.

Bertie has gone through one unsuccessful attempt after another to overcome his speaking difficulties until his supportive and caring wife, the Duchess of York hears of an eccentric speech therapist named Lionel Logue and takes her husband to him for treatment.

In the course of his treatment, it is revealed that Bertie's domineering father forced him to be right handed when he would have naturally been a lefty. His legs were put into corrective splints because they thought he looked clumsily knock-kneed. When he stuttered, his father would shout at him, "Relax! Relax! Now speak up!" Unable to respond quickly enough, the child Albert sat silently, tears running down his cheeks. His brother Edward mocks him. It is no wonder that he stuttered.

I have asked UCG member John Lybas to share some reflections on his own way of speaking and finding his voice. John is a professor in the department of engineering, and he is going to explain something of the history of his stuttering and how he deals with it as an adult...

When Larry made a point of alerting me about his intention to speak on stuttering in his sermon today, he overestimated my own sensitivity. I have stuttered since as far back into childhood as I can remember, and I have learned to not be too self-conscious about the issue.

Growing up in the 1950's and 1960's I encountered responses to my stuttering such as: "Simply speak, its natural", "Slow down", "Calm down", "Stuttering is a lack of self-discipline", "You shouldn't speak in front of people because it makes others uncomfortable", and, maybe worst of all, something I read somewhere only a few years ago, "People stutter to aggravate others" (passive aggression). Believe me, this is not the case. At some point, I learned to not be deterred by poorly informed attitudes, and to simply speak as well as I could, while still being sure to be understood.

Until reaching college, I was not allowed to speak in front of people. During college, I started working on laboratory research under one of the faculty and eventually had to present my work at a student paper conference. I learned that when I had a well-prepared presentation built around equations and graphics, that my stuttering would be minimal. This is what I do every day in teaching structural engineering at the university.

I find that my stuttering is most likely to occur in unscripted conversation, the more unscripted and the more requiring of spontaneity, the more severe the stuttering problem. Telephone conversations are especially challenging. At times I may seem excited when speaking, when really it's just the stuttering causing breathing problems while talking.

I've come to realize that, in general, negative reactions to my stuttering are due to lack of information, and I've learned to not be too sensitive to those reactions. However, there is no doubt that stuttering does cause social problems, and I am very thankful to have found this community at UCG, where people are tolerant and accepting of one another's idiosyncrasies, and are guided by knowledge and understanding to be supportive of one another, instead of being trapped in fear and ignorance.

(John Lybas)

I deeply appreciate John's sharing. I will share some of my similar stuttering experiences later.

Anywhere from 5-15% of American children stutter for an extended period of time. About 25% of children go through a stage of development in which they stutter. Heidi Stein, who besides being our wonderful church school coordinator, is also a speech therapist, gave me excellent literature on this subject.

I stuttered quite significantly between the ages of 4-6, and studying this phenomenon has brought up some powerful understandings of my own childhood. In fact Heidi said she noticed me stuttering more often in last week's staff meeting. She told me that as I thought about stuttering for this sermon, I would probably do it more.

I remember my mother telling people that she was not about to let her firstborn son be left handed, so she forced me to be right handed.

I remember standing in the elevator in our Brooklyn, New York apartment getting stuck on a consonant as I tried to speak to a neighbor and my father exasperatingly shouting, "Just say it." Around that same time my twin sisters were born, and I pretty much lost my place in the family conversation. As a result I kept stuttering.

I had another speech difficulty, a lisp, that lasted into adolescence and which continues with a certain sibilant "s" in my speaking. For that I had surgery on my tongue (something I'm not sure anyone does anymore) and speech therapy.

Because of all of these issues I was quite personally drawn to this film. In "The King's Speech" Lionel Logue's key to breaking through Bertie's stammer is his insistence on being not only a therapist but also a friend. Bertie, a child in the isolation of a royal family whom we know all too well to have been and continues to this day to be dysfunctional, admits to Lionel that as a child he had no friends. As a friend Logue enters into Bertie's life and family system.

Lionel insists that he will call Bertie by that name, Bertie, not “your majesty”, or any other title. Lionel at one point reveals that he learned his trade treating shell shocked veterans of World War I. Bertie is no less than shell shocked by his own upbringing. Bertie’s pain is that severe, and his relationship with Lionel is one of shouting and struggling in which Lionel will not let him go. I see it as like the bible’s story of Jacob wrestling with the angel-like figure through the night. Like Jacob, Bertie wrestles through the midnight of his life, being put through a nightmare of curses, rage, singing, calisthenics and a brutal review of his own growing up, and he emerges with a wound and a blessing.

The irony of Bertie’s condition is that he cannot hide it. He becomes King George the VI of England. He must rally his country to endure and triumph over Germany in World War II. And who is he up against? History pairs him with the most infamous voice of evil in the world, Adolf Hitler. This is the arena in which Bertie must find his voice. The only role a King has in a time like this is to inspire, and he must inspire through speech.

Bertie does overcome, through the love of his wife, the perseverance of a therapist who will not leave his side, his own inner drive, a destiny he cannot avoid, and I believe, grace.

I feel somewhat the same way about preaching. I think all of us are innately afraid of public speaking. Few of us as ministers get up in the pulpit because we’re naturally good at it or that we truly enjoy mouthing off to a crowd of our peers about the word of God in our time. It is quite presumptuous to come before you with three points and a poem. I can tell you that before we are about to preach - all of us here - Sandy, Andy, Vince and I are nervous wrecks. We smile and greet you as you come in, but our stomachs are churning. If you look closely you’ll see our eyes batting right and left like a lion watching a band of crazed circling hyenas.

Why then do we take up this task called preaching? Because we are called by God, however known or unknown, summoned to this task like Bertie is summoned to become King George the VI and provide a voice to counter the Adolf Hitlers of our culture. We are called to speak, and responding to that call we find our voices. And, having found our voices, after the sermon has been preached and the word has been spoken, we can then say of preaching: “God, I love it!”

I think that in preparing for this sermon and studying this film, I discovered another reason why I so carefully write everything I present for sermons. It’s because I don’t want to get lost in my stammers or my and’s and uh’s. I want to make sure I know what I have been called to say. I think this is why I continue to have nightmares of appearing before you without my sermon text or my pants. I need everything in place to find my voice.

But like Martin Luther before the council, I have discovered that when it comes to preaching I find myself saying, “Here I stand, I can do no other.”

I think this is true of each of us. At some point, a voice, a power we cannot name calls us, and without knowing where the answer comes from we

respond like Isaiah in the darkened temple, “Here am I, send me.” We find our voices.

This is true of John Lybas, who out of his own stammer found his voice as a professor and discovered he could speak with clarity and confidence in the engineering field of his dreams.

It is true of those who join this church today, and every one of you who joined this church in your own day. None of you said, “I’d really like to stand up in front of everyone and tell you who I am in three succinct sentences.” But you were called, and you found your voice, you were welcomed.

You can see how Sandy found a voice the embodies our voices in the letter she wrote responding to Lake Yale Baptist Assembly’s decision to cancel our contract after 29 years of retreats at their facility because they discovered we are a church that welcomes all people regardless of sexual orientation.

The bible’s Jacob emerges from the dark night of his soul with a wound and a blessing and crosses the river, confident that he will be able to speak to the brother he betrayed years before and that he will find the words he needs.

Jesus tells his followers that in those times when we are challenged to speak truth to power, the words will come to us from a source we never knew we had, a spirit deep within. Paul says that in times when we do not even know how to speak the words of prayer, God’s spirit speaks for us with sighs too deep for words.

May you trust that God’s power rises out of your weakness, just like the faltering weakened King George finds the power to speak up to the smooth-talking Hitler. A strange power waits in you and me. Therefore we may trust that when it is required of us, we can and will find our voices through the grace of God.

Resources for Today’s sermon:

“Command Performances – the King’s Speech”, Anthony Lane [The New Yorker](#), November 29, 2010

“The King’s English, Albeit with Twisted Tongue” Manohla Dargis, [The New York Times](#), November 25, 2010

“The King’s Speech” reviewed by John M Williams, [The Stuttering Foundation](#)

“Voice Lessons”, William H. Willimon, [Christian Century](#), February 8, 2011

“The King’s Speech” Peter Travers, [Rolling Stone](#), November 24, 2010

“Prevent Stuttering in the Preschool Child: A speech Language Pathologist’s Guide to A Family Centered Approach.” Heidi Stein

A good website: <http://www.stutteringhelp.org/>