

COMMENTARY

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Learning to live with a disability as I grow older and it gets worse

Your Turn
Adam Ball
Guest columnist

My stutter began towards the end of high school, which is a relatively late onset. Looking back now, my symptoms then seem mild. I could still say anything I wanted to say, perhaps with a repeated syllable here or there. But still, from the start it was a source of embarrassment and anxiety for me. Something to be hidden. Thankfully the severity of my condition didn't really take off until graduate school, when my symptoms transitioned from mainly syllable repetition to something called blocking.

A block is when rather than not being able to finish a sound, you can't even start it. There is some bizarre disconnect in the brain between knowing what sound you want to make and actually making the sound. It reminds me of trying to run in a dream, or a mime struggling against an invisible wall. In general, stuttering is a strange, fickle beast. It affects some words but not others, sometimes but not always. It can be incredibly frustrating, and the inconsistency only makes it more so.

My fluency changes day by day, week by week, and year by year, but the overall trend seems to be one of decline. I am now in my first postdoctoral research position after receiving my Ph.D. in physics, and there is no hiding my stutter. I've resorted to introducing myself to new people by explaining that I stutter on my own name, and then holding up my ID for them to read.

In spite of these difficulties, I never thought of myself as having a disability until recently.

But as my stutter continues to worsen there are some day-to-day tasks, such as making a phone call, that on bad days I am not just slower at, but simply incapable of.

To be sure, stuttering is a relatively minor disability in the grand scheme of things. I believe that stuttering, and speech disorders more generally, receive inadequate attention from scientists and the media given how common and serious they are. About 5% of children and 1% of adults worldwide stutter. The severity varies, but for many it is truly detrimental to quality of life. Stuttering usually begins in early childhood, and it often affects social development and inflicts lasting trauma. Adults who stutter are twice as likely as non-stutterers to develop depression and anxiety disorders. Despite all this, the cause of stuttering remains a scientific mystery.

In media, depictions of stuttering are few and far between and most seem to use a character's stutter to represent some flaw, such as the timid Professor Quirrell in Harry Potter.

A notable exception is the film "The King's Speech," in which stammering is the main antagonist. But this depiction is still not entirely satisfying to me, because it is a story of overcoming a stutter as opposed to living with one. Likewise, public figures associated with the condition are almost invariably formerly afflicted.

For many adults who stutter, though, the reality is that nothing they can do will rid them of this troublesome pest.

The representation I would love to see, in movies or preferably in the real world, is confident, successful people who actively stutter.

Such representation would make us less invisible in society and help others understand us better. In generations past, many parents believed that a child's stutter was a sign of personal weakness, and punished it accordingly. Thankfully, this seems to be less common today, but vestiges of the sentiment remain. Some well-meaning loved ones seem to think that my stutter is merely a symptom of stress or anxiety, and that simply relaxing a bit will cure it. This is a harmful misconception. It reinforces the stereotype of people who stutter as timid and weak, but that is not the reality. The truth is that we are strong, we are confident, and we are ready to be seen.

Adam Ball is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Physics at Brown University.



The troubled westbound span of the Washington Bridge. DAVID DELPOIO/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL FILE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Concerned about lack of bidders for bridge project

Rhode Islanders were shaken earlier this month by the news that the deadline for contractors to submit bids for the replacement of the failed span of the Washington Bridge had passed without receipt of a single bid. State authorities now had to spend the holiday week attempting to devise a strategy for attracting qualified bidders without increasing the already eye-popping \$300-million estimate or pushing back the politically sensitive completion date.

Gov. McKee has tied his re-election efforts to the timely opening of the new span, targeted just ahead of the 2024 Democratic primary, where he will be seeking to cap his weirdly overachieving career with another full term. The rejected call for bids included generous incentives for early completion, paired with draconian penalties for delay.

Several factors contributed to the paucity of interest in taking on the project. First, construction firms, even those who concentrate on bridge projects, are very busy these days — there's plenty of less risky work to be had. Further, physical realities of the job are daunting, working only feet from an over-stressed interstate highway carrying two-way traffic on a span designed for one.

Even discounting those challenges, it is impossible to ignore the risks of delay arising from the demonstrable inefficiency and corruption of R.I. government. McKee's starting reluctance to clean house at RIDOT must only add to the contractors' unease. The prospect of being penalized for delays actually arising from political friction seems real at best and inevitable at worst. A revised invitation to bid must address these concerns.

James Bryant, Pawtucket

Vigilance against recurring historical patterns

In light of the recent Supreme Court decision granting the presidency unlimited immunity for official acts, it is pertinent to revisit historical precedents.

Prior to 1933, Germany operated under the Weimar Constitution, which, akin to our own constitution, distributed political authority among the president, the cabinet and the parliament (the Reichstag). The German president served as both head of state and commander in chief, with the authority to enact legislation by signing bills into law.

Notably, the Weimar Constitution included Article 48, which conferred upon the president the unrestricted ability to issue decrees, including the deployment of armed forces to safeguard public security, without parliamentary or judicial oversight. Drawing a parallel, the provision of unlimited immunity to our president for official acts bears similarity to Article 48, shielding the executive from prosecution and oversight from the Congress or courts.

One difference from Article 48 in our Constitution is that our Congress can impeach; but we already saw what happened two times there with the political party influence during impeachment proceedings, and our courts are supposed to be apolitical, in which many of us have lost that confidence.

Should Donald Trump secure reelection, given his proclamation of intent to act as a "dictator for a day," there exists a concern that he may exploit his presidential powers to undermine the checks and balances of our courts and Congress, akin to the Enabling Act of 1933. It is imperative that we remain vigilant against the recurrence of historical patterns. We cannot let history repeat itself.

John A. McLane, Westerly

'Wasting' money to rewrite history

In his excellent column, Christopher Ferguson reminded us of the folly committed by removing "Providence Plantations" from the state name ("RI erred in dropping 'Providence Plantations,'" Commentary, July 6).

As he noted, the name was used to distinguish the mainland portion of the state from the actual island. Roger Williams owned no slaves, and, in fact, treated the native peoples with respect — including paying a fair price for the land. The name was a part of our history, and an example of Rhode Island's quirkiness. Clearly, removing the phrase was an unfortunate overreaction.

Why are we wasting thousands of dollars to rewrite history? Let common sense return — along with "Prov-

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For both: Include your full name, full address and phone number. Write the text in the body of an email, or copy it in; don't attach a file of any kind. Then send them to letters@providencejournal.com, our address for both letters and longer pieces.

idence Plantations."

Oh, and for the record, Rhode Island was the first colony to outlaw slavery.

W. Bruce Glass, Cranston

Disparities in economic outcomes

In his commentary, Christopher Ferguson opines that cutting "Providence Plantations" from the state name was a mistake. He makes some sweeping conclusions without a factual basis, and tries to trick us with those he does use.

For example, in arguing that economic outcomes are not race-based, he points to the Bureau of Labor Statistics regarding the incomes of Asian women, but ignores the 2023 BLS reports that show significant gaps between Black and Latino/Hispanic men and women, and their white counterparts. Without any basis, he simply states that as for the criminal justice system, arrests and sentencing have nothing to do with race. In fact, the 2023 report of the United States Sentencing Commission shows that Black and Latino males and females receive harsher sentences than both male and female white defendants for the same crimes.

He concludes with the argument that, without "Providence Plantations," Rhode Island is simply an "awkward" name. Right.

Frank Pannozzi, Providence

Biden's mental acuity is the problem

Regarding Gordon Rowley's letter to the editor "Biden should step aside, Newsom step in" (Letters, July 6):

No, Mr. Rowley, the wrecking ball is Joe Biden for relying on his handlers to run this country for the last four years, the Democratic Party for allowing this to go on, and the media for covering this up.

For the last four years, Fox News has been reporting the many missteps and misspoken words that Joe Biden has made. For even mentioning this, Fox has been accused of lying, altering videos ("cheap fakes"), and destroying our democracy, among many other slanderous accusations. Now, all of a sudden, the rest of the media and most Democrats acknowledge what has been right before their eyes for four years.

It is not Biden's age. His mental acuity is the problem. He has no business being president now, never mind the next four years. This is the biggest political crime in our country ever, even worse than Watergate. The Democrats have lost their right to lead this country, and the media have lost their relevancy and their reason to exist.

As for Trump, he has already served as president for four years. He did not turn into Hitler; he did not ruin the country; he did his job. And Newsom? I don't care how "handsome" he is. Just look at what's happening in California.

Anni Rawcliffe, Warwick

Trials are more than court arguments, evidence

Re: "Why a state Supreme Court justice is seeking to change the way juries are picked," News, July 8:

Any jury might be assumed to consider the evidence in a trial, along with the arguments of prosecution and defense, and reach the same conclusions toward a verdict. The reality, however, is that those are passed through mental filters in each juror, based on life experiences, possible expectations from verdicts and other personal factors.

Justice Melissa Long's call to seek input from a variety of stakeholders highlights the filtered role of juries in arriving at verdicts. Justice is definitely not blind to influences outside courtroom arguments and evidence.

Spence Blakely, Portsmouth