Unnaturally Silent: Stuttering, Selective Mutism and Me

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When I was two years old, I was mauled by a dog who seized my head in its jaws, driving its canines deep into my brain. More than two hundred stitches were needed to repair the damage, and I contracted meningoencephalitis, a severe inflammation of both the delicate tissues of the brain and the protective membranes which enclose it. I suffered a state of prolonged disrupted consciousness as a result, lying unwaking for weeks.

I was profoundly changed by this experience. Before, I was a happy, babbling toddler. Afterwards, I was unnaturally silent. When I could be coaxed to speak, my speech was hesitant, broken. I was diagnosed with selective mutism and stuttering at the age of eight. Years of speech therapy helped me acquire the semblance of fluency, yet it remains a silent struggle for me.

To speak is painful and shameful.

Writing, however, is effortless, like flying in dreams.

From the time I could first hold a pencil, I wrote. My first poem was published when I was thirteen, my first story when I was nineteen, my first essay when I was twenty-three, and my first novel when I was thirty. I have made my living from my writing since I was in my twenties. My published work ranges from biography and memoir, picture books, personal essays, poetry, to dozens of novels for all ages, translated into more than twenty languages.

Strangely, I am also a sought-after lecturer, speaker, and oral storyteller who performs at festivals around the world. I'm a frequent guest on radio, podcasts, and other spoken word events, and I recently recorded the audio edition of one of my most popular books, a task that involved vocalising the voices of imps, mermaids, ogres, and witches.

Strangely, because speaking is still so difficult for me.

I have many secret tricks to avoid words that are traps, phrases that are pitfalls. Every conversation is an exhausting act of conscious concealment, every word a performance, a pantomime, a tap dance on a high wire.

Why? people ask. Why bother speaking when it would be so much easier to be silent?

Spoken language is not just another faculty or skill, neurologist Oliver Sacks once wrote. "It is what makes thought possible, what separates thought from nonthought, what separates the human from the nonhuman" (60). Being able to speak our thoughts, express our emotions, and tell our unique and unreplicable story is essential to our idea of what it is to be human. Being unable to speak is dehumanising. It can lead to an acute sense of disconnection and isolation, made worse by other people's quickness to mimic and mock the dysfluent speaker. Yet not to speak is to be silenced. After a lifetime of struggling to recover speech, I refuse to be rendered voiceless again.

Oral language is formulated in the brain, communicated through the neural system to the vocal apparatus, and articulated aloud through the exhalation of breath through the mouth. The movements of the tongue, lips, jaw, and larynx during speech are among the most rapid and complex of human motor activities. More than one hundred muscles are used to create just one word. To pronounce that word coherently requires precision and accuracy in the spatial positioning of the tongue, the shaping of the lips, the control of air through the vocal chords. It is not surprising that people sometimes falter in their verbal fluency (Bobrick 19).

However, for a small percentage of the world's population, speaking at all can seem virtually impossible. Dysphemia (from the ancient Greek *dys* meaning "bad" and *phḗmē* meaning "speech") is a hypernym for a wide range of speech impediments, most of which I have. Stuttering is the best known. Simply put, it is a disorder in the rhythm of speech in which the person who stutters knows precisely what they wish to say but is unable to articulate it without difficulty.

"It is an old curse," Dr Barry Guitar, a foremost lecturer in speech-language pathology, has written. "There is evidence to suggest that it was present in Chinese, Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures more than 40 centuries ago" (5). The Egyptian hieroglyph thought to represent a stutterer shows a man seated, pointing to his mouth. His rising words are blocked by a zigzag pictogram that seems to represent the broken intonations that accompanies stuttering (Lichtheim 261). Pronounced *nit-nit*, the very sound of this hieroglyph seems to mimic a stutterer's involuntary repetitions.

Moses is thought to be the first stutterer recorded in literary history. When told he had been chosen to lead his people out of bondage, Moses answered "O my Lord, I am not eloquent . . . I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue." God answered him "Who hath made man's mouth? Who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind?" (qtd. in Shell 71). It is said Moses's lack of eloquence was due to an injury as a child. Playing in the king's lap, he tried to grab his crown. His councillors feared his action was a bad omen, and that Moses would one day be a threat to the throne. They decided he must be put to death. One of the councillors suggested testing him first. They set two bowls before him. One contained gold and jewels, the other red-hot coals. The child reached for the glittering gems, but an angel intervened and directed him towards the other bowl. Moses picked up a glowing coal and put it into his mouth (Shell 114).

Most of us with fluency disorders did not receive them from an angel bidding us to swallow a burning ember. The cause lies deep within our brains, in the key language centres known as Broca's area and Wernicke's area after the scientists who first identified them. Both play a pivotal role in understanding and producing language. Both are found in the dominant side of the brain which, for most people, is the left hemisphere.

Broca's area is the motor speech area, and is found in the frontal lobe, above and behind the left eye. It is the key part of the brain utilised in speech production, coordinating the activities of the muscles of the larynx and pharynx, as well as those of the lips, jaw and tongue. Wernicke's area is found in the temporal lobe, at the back of the head just above the brain stem and behind the left ear, close to the auditory processing centre. It is associated with language comprehension (Pinker 305–09).

There are three primary causes of dysphemia—polygenic, neurogenic, and psychogenic. The first means a predisposition to speech impediments that is inheritable, linked to a complex array of different genes. This form of dysfluency usually manifests around the age of three, during the development of the neural system underlying speech production. It usually resolves itself naturally or with early speech pathology intervention (Guitar 143).

Neurogenic dysphemia is caused by brain trauma such as an injury, stroke, seizure, tumour, or a degenerative disease such as Alzheimer's. Psychogenic speech disorders arise from emotional or psychological causes. The most common example of this is what was for many years called elective mutism, a term I have always hated. It implies I chose to be silent. The truth is there was no choice. My jaw, my throat, and my tongue were painfully stiff and unwieldy, my chest felt as if it was being crushed with boulders. It was hard to breathe, hard to move. No matter how hard I tried, I was unable to force my mouth to utter the words I wished to say.

The condition was was first identified by the German physician Adolph Kussmaul in 1877 in a treatise entitled *Disturbances of Speech*. He called the disorder "aphasia voluntaria," for there was no physical cause for the child's silence and so it was assumed that the child refused to speak out of wilfulness, defiance, disobedience, rudeness, or as a form of emotional manipulation. Many were punished as a result (Kotrba 9-10).

The term "elective mutism" was coined by the Swiss child psychiatrist Moritz Tramer in 1934, but this debilitating anxiety disorder did not begin to be fully studied or understood until the work of Alice Sluckin in the 1960s. Born into a Jewish family in Prague, she and her family fled the Nazis when she was a young woman. Sluckin was able to reach safety in England, but her family perished in the Holocaust. Her own traumatic experiences in the war led her to have an unusual sensitivity to the struggles of people who find it overwhelmingly difficult to speak, particularly in unfamiliar or threatening situations. Her term for the condition was "situational mutism," and her groundbreaking treatment approach included art, music, and play therapy (Kocovska).

Nowadays, it is understood that someone with situational mutism does not simply refuse to speak. They are literally unable to do so. Their silence is an involuntary freeze response to perceived threats or fearful situations, and punishment will only reinforce their sense of being unsafe.

Just as harmful is the psychological harm done by a lifetime of being teased and derided. Wendell Johnson, an influential speech pathologist who was himself a stutterer, composed an essay titled "Speech Disorders" in the days leading up to his death in 1965. He wrote: "Persons with speech disorders, like other handicapped persons, have traditionally known the scorn, ridicule, and even revulsion of their society" (1193).

I do not remember a time when talking was not difficult for me, and when I was not teased by my peers. When I was attacked by the dog, I was only two years and two months old. At that age, most children are beginning to fit words into simple sentences, such as "bye-bye" and "what that?," using intonation to indicate a question.

I did not speak much after the accident. My lack of volubility was accompanied by timidity. I clung to my mother, and would hide my face if addressed by strangers. I had nightmares, and wet my bed. I used to point at what I wanted and make little inarticulate cries. My older sister translated for me.

"Katie wants milk," she would say.

"Katie must use her words," my mother would reply.

As I grew older, I spent a lot of time sick in hospital. I took refuge in reading books, writing stories, and inventing complex imaginative games. Because I was reading and writing from a young age, my mother thought my quietness was just shyness. It was not until I began school that anyone realised that I had trouble with my words.

Or, as I might have inadvertently expressed myself, "wobble with my turds."

For I had a cluster of speech impediments, ranging from metaphasis (transposition of consonants or vowels), clonic stuttering (repetitions of syllables or words), tonic stuttering (prolonged blockages to speech that often became fixed and painful), rhotacism (difficulty in pronouncing the "r" sound), and affricate disorder (transposing "sh" and "ch" sounds so that saying "fish and chip shop" was an embarrassing ordeal). All of which was difficult to diagnose and treat because of my general reluctance to speak.

My dysphemia was most probably caused by the injuries I suffered when the dog seized my head in his jaws. One of his lower canines pierced through the back of my skull, driving deep into the part of the brain where Wernicke's area is located. An upper canine punctured my left tear duct, missing my eye by a fraction of a millimetre, and penetrating my frontal lobe where Broca's area is positioned.

However, the emotional and psychological cost of my childhood accident, and the numerous incarcerations in hospital which followed, cannot be underestimated.

Growing up, I felt very alone. The only representation of a stutterer in my world was Porky Pig. When I was in primary school, the other children tormented me by mimicking the Warner Brothers cartoon character's signature sign-off: "Th-Th-Th-That's all, folks!" Another common playground taunt was singing, "K-K-Katies, K-K-Katies," the advertising jingle for a popular women's clothing brand.

I especially hated it when teachers asked each student to read aloud in turn. I would wait with intensifying dread, reading my intended passage over and over again till I knew it by heart. It did not matter. By the time the tip of the teacher's long wooden pointer was aimed directly at me, my throat would be rigid and paralysed, my larynx so constricted I could not breathe, my lungs compressed, my jaw so tight with tension it felt like it was forged from iron. I would try to speak, my mouth contorting, my hands twisting the hem of my school tunic into a knot, but all I could produce was a string of uneven, broken syllables. Other times I would be so blocked, I could not utter a single sound. Soon teachers would no longer point at me. It was like I was invisible as well as mute.

"The speech impediment labeled stuttering is often used as a crude formulaic storytelling device that adheres to basic misconceptions about the condition," Jeffrey K. Johnson writes in *The Visualization of the Twisted Tongue*. "The stutterer is not a true representation of a person but . . . the physical embodiment of his speech impediment. His only purpose is to stutter and thus amuse. . . . This storytelling shorthand has developed out of the popular misconception that stuttering is a sign of weakness" (245–48). Disability academic Joshua St Pierre expands on this idea in *The Construction of the Disabled Speaker*: "[S]tutterers . . . unlike many other disabled people, are often expected to perform on the same terms as the able-bodied. Disfluency can thus be interpreted as a distinctly *moral* failure: the failure of a stutterer's will and self-discipline" (10).

Living in a society used to stuttering as a sign of feebleness or failure, it is no wonder that the children at my school found me an object of derision. I grew quieter and more withdrawn. Sometimes I did not speak once during the entire school day. I spent my recess and lunch alone, reading. I searched for stories about children who could not speak. The only place I found them was in fairy tales: "Six Swans," a tale collected by the Grimm brothers in which a girl must not speak for seven years if she is to break the curse upon her swan brothers, and "The Little Mermaid," a Hans Christian Andersen story in which a mermaid willingly submits to having her tongue cut out in exchange for human legs.

In 1988, Emily Style wrote about the importance of children's books to

> function both as window and as mirror, in order to reflect and reveal most accurately both a multicultural world and the student herself or himself. If the student is understood as occupying a dwelling of self, education needs to enable the student to look through window frames in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his own reality reflected.

Dr Kaitlin Jackson, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Special Education at Fayette State University, has recently extended this idea to stress the importance of stories that affirm and validate the identities of children who may be living with some kind of physical or sensory impairment. "There is also a substantial gap in the representation of disabled children in children's literature, especially those books in which disability is not the theme or main point of the text," she wrote. "Disability [remains] an extremely underrepresented identity dimension in children's literature" (58). Stories which act as metaphorical mirrors empower children by showing they belong in the world and are valued and seen. Without ever encountering anyone who shared my struggles, my sense of alienation and otherness was overwhelming.

At the age of ten, I was taken to see a speech therapist. He was an older man, with thick frowning eyebrows and a heavy moustache. He scowled at me, asked my mother a great many questions, and ticked off a lot of boxes on a clipboard. I remember my mother defending herself and telling him I had no problems speaking at home. This was not quite true. I still stammered when I spoke, and called rabbits "wabbits." The throttling paralysis of mutism were, however, much less likely to occur at home, where I felt safe.

I was told to read out loud from a book. Every time I hesitated, or stumbled, he blared a horn at me. I hesitated and stumbled a lot. On his recommendation, I was sent to a stuttering camp over the school holidays. It was the first time I had ever met anyone else with a speech fluency disorder. We were not permitted to play or talk amongst ourselves. We had to sit at desks and recite set texts very slowly, like androids running low on batteries, while every stutter was met with the blast of a shrill whistle. We had also been given coupons at the beginning of the week to purchase all our food. Every time we stuttered, we lost a coupon. I stuttered so badly that I soon had no food coupons left, and had to go hungry.

At that time, in the mid-1970s, "response contingent punishment" was seen as the most effective cure for "defective articulation." I am just lucky that I was not administered electric shocks, like the young man described by speech pathologist Robert C. Marshall in August 1970: "[A]t the beginning of each session, finger electrodes from a Grason-Stadler-Psychogalconometer . . . were attached to the third and fourth fingers of the patient's left hand . . . a shock would be delivered following each error" (237–39).

Unsurprisingly, the stuttering camp was not a success. Soon afterwards, I began therapy with a different speech pathologist. She sat on the floor and played with me, then put on a cassette tape. It was Cat Stevens singing "Morning Has Broken." She passed me the lyrics, decorated with drawings of birds and flowers and a rising sun, and then began to sing along, encouraging me to join in. Hesitantly I sang the last line, "fresh from the word." When the music had finished, she asked me, "[D]id you realise you sang that without stuttering once?"

It was such a joyous revelation. I still cannot hear that song—more than 40 years later—without feeling chills all over my body. We sang the whole song together, then read the lyrics aloud. I matched my articulation to hers—slow and steady and sonorous. "That was fun," she said at the end. "Shall we sing another?"

The next song we sang was Cat Stevens' "Moonshadow," which has a repeated melodic phrase "oh, i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-if I ever . . ." The refrain is repeated four times, with the final chorus being, "Yes, if I ever lose my mouth, all my teeth north and south, yes, if I ever lose my mouth, oh,i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-if . . . I won't have to talk . . ."

She sang this last phrase really loudly, laughing, and then encouraged me to do the same. In doing so, she helped me overcome my acute shame at my inability to speak fluidly. Somehow she made me see that stuttering and other involuntary hesitations and repetitions can be utilised in a free and joyous way, and that difficulties in life can be faced with courage and optimism.

Then we read poems by A.A. Milne, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Walter de la Mare. I discovered I hardly stuttered at all when reading aloud poems that had a strong, swinging rhythm and a regular pattern of rhyme. She gave me a sheaf of poems to take home with me, suggesting I read them aloud each night to my mother. I went home radiant. Every night after dinner, my mother listened to me recite poetry, and dug out new poems for me to try. That was the beginning of my lifelong love affair with poetry.

"Morning Has Broken" was the tipping point for me. Through singing and reciting, I learned to control my breath, to slow down the phonation of my words, to govern my pitch and prosody, to predict the sounds to be uttered next. The more often I read a poem out loud, the more fluent I became. So I began to practise the articulation of words that were difficult for me, finding ways to anticipate and sidestep potential triggers for disfluency.

I repeated Year 6 at a different school. I had always loved creative writing, and had by that time produced numerous poems, stories, and novels. At my new school, my creative literary endeavours were warmly encouraged; a teacher set up a writing club for girls in my form which helped me make friends. A poem of mine was published in the school magazine. I remember the thrill I felt when I saw my name in print for the first time. I was determined to be an author when I grew up; I wanted to spend my days making words sing.

I continued to search out books by writers that mirrored my own profound difficulty with spoken language. *Kilmeny of the Orchard* by L. M. Montgomery, published in 1910, has a protagonist who cannot speak, and is perhaps the first text in literary history to depict situational mutism. The moment in which Kilmeny finds her voice and saves her beloved's life by shouting out his name was a powerful moment for me, offering hope that recovery was possible. I still did not see myself in Kilmeny, though. She did not seem to mind not being able to speak. She felt no anxiety or humiliation, and demonstrated no visible struggle behaviours such as involuntary jerks of the head, thumping your own body with your fist as if to force the words out, or—my most common avoidance tactic—twisting my hair or my clothes into a tight corkscrew.

I remained a shy quiet girl, very aware of what John Updike has called the stutterer's "defective imperilled self" (100). I struggled to speak in social situations, found it hard to participate in class discussions, or to talk to strangers. My English teacher Mrs Fields observed these difficulties in me, and she set herself to coax me into greater confidence. She gave me books and poems to read, including Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in which she shares her own story of traumatic mutism. At the age of eight, Angelou was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend. He told her, "If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey," Angelou's brother (74). Although her rapist was charged and found guilty, he spent only one day in gaol. After his release, he was beaten to death, most probably by Angelou's uncles. Consequently, she stopped speaking. "Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people," she wrote (82).

Angelou did not speak again for five years. One day, though, a well-educated black woman named Mrs Bertha Flowers said to her: "Now, no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals. . . . Words mean more than what is set down on paper—it takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning" (91).

These words had a powerful effect on Angelou, who spoke for the first time since her rapist's death: "I said, 'yes, ma'am.' It was the least I could do, but it was the most also" (93). In my copy of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, these words are underlined.

Mrs Fields also gave me Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy" to read, with its stuttering phrases "I never could talk to you / The tongue stuck in my jaw" and "Ich, ich, ich, ich / I could hardly speak" (223), and introduced me to Emily Dickinson's poetry, with its disjointed stuttering cadences:

A *wounded* Deer - leaps highest—
I've heard the Hunter tell—
'Tis but the Extasy of *death*—
And then the Brake is still! (94)

My English teacher told me the American poet had been so crippled by social anxiety that she rarely left the house, and that—after her death—her sister had found thousands of poems hidden away, much as I had boxes full of my scribblings. I felt such an intense connection to Emily Dickinson that I began to read everything I could find written by, and about, her.

One of the things that speaks to me most powerfully about Dickinson's poetry is the way she uses silences and spaces, leaving room for ambiguity, mystery, and covert meanings. Her distinctive use of the dash—which appears more often than any single word in Dickinson's poetry—creates dissonant breaks in form which disrupt an easy surface reading of her works.

The Dickinson scholar Deirdre Fagan believes that dash represents "the unutterable" itself. Dickinson's numerous uses of the dash becomes "a thread between the sayable and the unsayable, a caesura between life and death, a pause, a gasp, sometimes a chasm over which one must make a leap of understanding" (70).

Emily Dickinson's struggles to express the inexpressible felt akin to mine, and taught me that sometimes silence—rather than being a failure—can be a source of private strength, a way of guarding one's sensitive inner self, and of opening up new ways of thinking. As she wrote in one of her most haunting poems:

> Pain—has an Element of Blank—
> It cannot recollect
> When it begun—or if there were
> A time when it was not (352)

That blank, that lacuna, can contain multitudes of possibilities.

My English teacher's sympathy and understanding, her realisation that I needed metaphorical mirrors in which to see myself, helped me understand that I was not alone in my struggle to speak. Many great writers had faced the same debility, including Lewis Carroll, Henry James and W. Somerset Maugham, who once wrote: "[M]y soul would have been quite different if I had not stammered" (qtd. in Brobick 141). My teacher also encouraged me to join the drama club and perform in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. I played the role of the third witch and discovered I do not stutter while I pretend to be somebody else. This too was revelatory.

By the time I left school, I was determined to be a writer. Stories and poems poured out of me, and I began slowly to be published. I studied for a BA in literature and linguistics, and was selected for one of the first creative writing courses in Australia. All through my 20s, I laboured over a novel in which my protagonist Sara suffers from such severe panic attacks she is unable to leave her home. She has certain rituals against harm—counting her steps, turning over her pillow three times before going to sleep, compulsively choosing a tarot card at random before making any decision. Sara dreams of being an artist like her famous father but can no longer bear to paint. She is a prisoner of her own fear.

In my late 20s, I rewrote my novel as the creative component of a Master of Arts in Creative Writing. It was eventually published as *Dancing on Knives,* the title inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, "The Little Mermaid," in which every step the protagonist takes hurts as if she is stepping on daggers. Sara's journey is one of learning self-understanding and self-acceptance, and of finding the courage to overcome her fears and speak out at last. However, *Dancing on Knives* is not just a story about a young woman overcoming her paralysing terror of the world. It's also a murder mystery, a family drama, a romance, a story about art and cooking and ghosts and tarot cards.

I later undertook a Doctorate of Creative Arts to research and write my novel *Bitter Greens,* a retelling of Rapunzel interwoven with the dramatic true life story of the woman who first wrote the tale. It is a story of imprisonment and escape, of wounding and healing, of the redemptive power of finding one's own voice and telling one's story. It is deeply rooted in my own experience as a child, my frequent illnesses and incarcerations in hospital, my recurring nightmares of being unable to scream or struggle free, and my lifelong fascination with fairy tales and their hidden symbolic meanings. The final line of *Bitter Greens* expresses one of my most fundamental beliefs about the power of human language: "It was by telling stories that I would save myself" (550).

Emily Dickinson once wrote: "tell all the truth but tell it slant" (563). I am telling my truth slant in my novels, creating characters who suffer, who are outsiders, who must endure what Susan Coolidge called "the School of Pain" in *What Katy Did* (133), as I did as a child. However, my books are never just about infirmity or illness. What I hope to do is create characters who are complex and fully human, with their own strengths and weaknesses, and whose story arc is not defined by their disability.

When I was trying to cure myself of my speech impediments, I began to read my poems aloud at poetry slams. My reasoning was that I would overcome my terror of sharing my writing and my terror of speaking aloud at the same time, through a kind of exposure therapy. Slowly the intensity of my fear faded, and nowadays I make my living as much by speaking as I do by writing.

I was not "cured." Speaking was still, and will always be, a struggle. Like most people with dysphemia, I feel a pervasive internal pressure to speak "normally." In *Becoming Dysfluent*, St Pierre writes that speaking fluently is, for a stutterer, "a compulsory yet impossible demand on our desires, energies, and materialities that must continually be re-enacted and maintained" (342). St Pierre calls this *liminal oppression*:

> No one would likely tell a quadriplegic to "walk already" . . . since it is understood that these actions are beyond their control. However, since a stutterer's disability is not understood as absolute . . . stuttering can evoke irritation out of listeners who wish that she could just "spit it out!" Implicit in this violence is the undergirding assumption that stuttering, unlike other disabilities, is ultimately within one's control. That stutterers are expected to communicate on the terms of the abled but cannot live up to these expectations is the basis of much of the shame and embarrassment accompanying their disability" ("Disabled Speaker" 18).

All animals communicate. Only humans speak. "Language is so tightly woven into human experience that it is scarcely possible to imagine life without it," Stephen Pinker writes. It is, he believes, as natural to humans to speak as it is for a spider to spin a web or for a bird to fly (15). Being unable to speak is therefore dehumanising. This is the source of the shame felt by people who are dysfluent.

It takes great courage to speak up when the act of articulating causes you pain.
It takes great strength of will to communicate your thoughts and beliefs when so many people around you mock, denigrate, and wilfully misunderstand you.

Recently, at a literary festival, I was asked why I chose to make so much of my living as an oral storyteller as well as a writer, when the spoken word is so very difficult for me.

"Is it defiance?" the convenor asked.

"Yes!" I replied.

Defiance.

I refuse to be rendered mute. I refuse to have my tongue severed at the root.

I will use every single one of those hundred muscles in my jaw and throat and tongue and larynx to speak with my own true voice.

Please listen.

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