



Stuttering and Smoking

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Smoking had been popularized in particular the 1920s and the decades after, before the anti-smoking campaigns got started. The last signals so far came from the European Union, and lead into nation-wide bans on smoking. Apart from all the things smoking can causes or not cause and all the various discussions about it there are things that are not reported in the media that often. Like what smoking can be for people who stutter. This is a try to see some things from a different angle. In any case, shall this neither be a commercial for any tobacco brand nor a suggestion for smoking.

I started smoking at the age of 22, after having smoked several single sticks when I was 14 and 18. Yes, it looks funny somehow and I often wonder what children may think when seeing an adult person having such a thin stick between her or his lips which doesn't really look like a lollypop. I often damned the smoking when I was in my early twenties leading to a situation that I only smoked more than before. After three years it suddenly stopped when I was in India, in a spiritual place called Auroville. I asked a cab driver there whether he would smoke. He said yes and I so I gave him the pack of cigarettes I had. I smoked a few cigarettes more the weeks after but it felt strange. After a while I stopped it totally. I felt free of it until ... yes, until I asked a friend in summer 2006 if he could give me some tobacco. I ended up having three cigarettes this evening and wondered how come. I had started doing yoga exercises in 2001, stopped having alcohol in 2002 and quit eating meat in 2004. I hardly had any coffee nor black tea. And suddenly I started smoking again. Funny thing, somehow. I assume it is like stuttering ... there is no obvious reason why it comes and goes and in fact there is nothing bad in it as long as you know how to deal with it, I assume.

The “playing with your fears” method

When I was about 23 I (ab)used my wish not to buy a whole pack of cigarettes, which is easily finished within a day or two. Instead of buying my own sticks I asked people on the street if they would sell me one. 95% of the people asked would give it for free that was my experience. The only two incidences I remember was a taxi driver (coincidence? ☺) and a young guy. Apart from the wish to have a smoke it was mainly an exercise to start talking to people on the street. Yes, I used this addiction to deal with my fears. It is completely right that smoking was not really necessary since I could also have asked what time it would be. Yet, for some time it was quite alright, in particular since the German word for cigarette is “Zigarette” and starts with

“Z”, one of my most “beloved” letters to start a word with. Another slang word is “Kippe”. Starting with “K” it is also in my top five of “difficult to start with”-letters.

Could “higher forces” help?

Once I met a man in the area of Dresden, where I live, Dresden-Neustadt - commonly known as a place for partying. This roughly 1 sqkm large “Gründerzeit”-Viertel, where the first milk chocolate of the world was created in 1839 (just 100 m from my appartement), is reported to have one of the highest densities of bars and pubs in Germany. So, smoking is almost everywhere. So, I met this man, who was in his mid-50s, and he told me that he had used to have big problems with smoking and drinking for quite a long time. He then accepted the fact that he alone is not able to quit – neither drinking nor smoking. True or not, he said that he put it in the hands of God. He then smoked every cigarette consciously and after half a year it had gone. Well, in my case it did not work. I assume I did not really want it, but enjoyed the smoking more than I could imagine a time without doing it. At least not now. Yet, I know it will come. Like my stuttering has changed. So, why shouldn't smoking do?

Is acceptance the condition for a change?

All in all it begins with the acceptance of the very thing you do not like, you do not want to do anymore. If there is the slightest sign of aversion against something you will stick to it, I assume. So, I rather enjoy it as long as it is still there. I am not saying it is a good or bad thing. The cigarette cannot be blamed for getting smoked. It is me who smokes it. But I could think of how it was made, who made it, what is inside and such things. I have realised that industrial produced cigarettes create strange side-effects and so I changed to hand-rolled cigarettes, without filter. If I smoke I want to smoke and not inhale all the additives or the taste in/of the filter.

Yes, smoking can be relaxing and if you need something to relax it might be good to wonder why you need to relax. Is it the job that stresses you, some people, the weather ... no, the stress is only made by yourself. No-one and nothing else to blame for that. And not even you are to blame. But it is you who can change the feeling of stress. Similar to communicative situations in which you feel stressed. You have all the tools and instruments to help yourself or you can ask someone for help at least.

Why exchanging your addictions if you could enjoy them?

Once I met an US-American on the flight back from the 8th World Congress for People who Stutter in Croatia. He told me that he had started smoking when he was in the US Army some decades ago. Now, he said he was happy to have quit smoking. The only thing was that he now chewed five or six nicotine chewing gums a day. Well, is it useful to exchange one addiction with another? Would it be helpful to have a pill for stuttering?

You can find a dozen ways how to get rid of smoking, and some may really help; similar again to stuttering. How many therapies have been invented, proven to be good and ... how many people start again to stutter or to smoke? Maybe it is really like this: it is there to tell you something.

It is no secret that smokers start to communicate easier when they are together. It is a thing that connects them; similar to any other thing. The point that is important is to watch the way how you get connected to people. Is it for the mere reason of socialising or it is because you do not want to be alone? Attachments are easy to get; to drugs, to thoughts, to people ... to everything. The only way out of that is to question your own standpoint. The "Why am I doing this?" And if there is not quick answer then just enjoy what you do. If you can't enjoy it then you better search for some thing, someone else for a while. The problems you feel are in fact a challenge for yourself.

Give it a name ...

Last year I found a tobacco brand called 'Crossroad' and it seem to fit some parts of my everyday life. I felt the urge to make decisions, just like standing on a crossroad not exactly knowing what way to go. I sometimes enjoyed a cigarette of

"Crossroad" tobacco and it felt easier. Sometimes I smoke "American spirit" when I feel like having a look to the United States. And if you want to feel like the "Marlboro" man then smoke a "Marlboro". In the end smoking is just a sign of something unclear within you. You will get the reason and the instruments to make a change if you really want it. Then it will be quite easy to let it go. Just like it is with stuttering.

The "catching factor"

Just today a friend of mine was – when saying goodbye – somehow imitating stuttering. I was a bit confused and she said that stuttering might be contagious. "Isn't it like smoking? The herd instinct among humans." I smiled and said that I think that stuttering can be catching. Not like a disease but just because of the different sound of speaking caused by a repetition of syllables or words. What if this mass movement would be really like this? Not 1 per cent would stutter but 5 or even 50? What if the repetition of syllables or words would be "normal" then? Some researchers would maybe find out that these repeated words have a certain importance within the sentence said. Could stuttering then be an instrument to emphasize what you want to say?

The other side

I sometimes wonder what the real problem behind stuttering is. And I always come to the conclusion that it is only the fear of being different resulting from the fact that stuttering is seen as a way not to speak. The real problem is not the speaking itself but the fear of we do that. I think it is as simple as that. Well, it is in the middle of the night and I think I will have a last cigarette for today and will happily go to bed then, being glad that thinking about stuttering can be somehow creative, even if I don't know yet for what exact purpose. But is the purpose always important if we can enjoy something? Isn't it like enjoying love? Who cares why we enjoy love? Maybe it is just worth to love what we love for love's sake.

PS: When I am in a place with people I usually ask them if they mind me smoking. If possible I also smoke outside any public room. Yet, I believe in communicative ways to approach problems, not in interdictions.