



Out With It: How Stuttering Helped Me Find My Voice

By Katherine Preston

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A “compassionate, unflinching memoir” (David Mitchell, author of *Cloud Atlas*) by a young woman who fought for years to change who she was until she finally found her voice and learned to embrace her imperfection.

Imagine waking up one day to find your words trapped inside your head, leaving you unable to say what you feel, think, want, or need...

That’s exactly what happened to Katherine Preston at the age of seven. Thus began a seventeen-year battle with her stutter, hiding her shame and denying anything was wrong. Finally, exhausted and humiliated, she left her home in London to travel around America meeting hundreds of stutterers- including celebrities, psychologists, writers, and others from all walks of life- as well as speech therapists and researchers. What began as a vague search for a cure became a journey that debunked the misconceptions shrouding the condition, and a love story that transformed her definition of normal.

Out With It is an anthology of expertise and experience that sheds light on an ancient problem that today affects 60 million people worldwide. It is a heartwarming memoir and a journalistic feat, a story about understanding yourself an learning to embrace the voice within.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Out With It* is both a compassionate, unflinching memoir and an anatomy of life with a stammer. Katherine Preston offers affirmation for the millions of us who live with a speech disfluency and practical insight for those who don't. I highly recommend this astute and engaging book." (David Mitchell, author of *Cloud Atlas*)

"Katherine Preston is an upbeat and inspiring example of how to deal with a problem that concerns so many and yet is acknowledged by so few. *Out With It* deserves the widest possible audience." (Michael Palin, actor, author, and founder of the Michael Palin Centre for Stammering Children)

"Katherine Preston's memoir is an astute and personal exploration on the human experience.... A must-read." (Emily Blunt, actress)

"A frank, encouraging, and fresh exploration of a problem that's more widespread than we think. *Out With It* is a welcome addition to the small body of literature on this fascinating and mysterious subject." (Margaret Drabble, author of *The Peppered Moth* and *A Pattern in the Carpet: A Personal History with Jigsaws*)

"*Out With It* is a highly personal, vivid, and affecting account of one woman's journey from disability to wholeness through self-acceptance. It is sure to engage anyone who has traveled down a kindred path." (Benson Bobrick, author of *The Caliph's Splendor* and *Knotted Tongues: Stuttering in History and the Quest for a Cure*)

"Katherine Preston is an extraordinary new literary voice and a triumphant storyteller of her generation. How she got there is a captivating tale and we are all the richer for her experience and her arrival." (Carl Bernstein, author of *A Woman in Charge: The Life of Hillary Rodham Clinton*)

"I've spent decades helping others reach their peak level of physical fitness and realize that the strength within creates the picture of health on the outside. Though I may look like a tough guy, I've fought my own inner battle with stuttering for most of my life. In *Out With It*, Katherine Preston describes, in such great detail, what it's like to not be able to express yourself clearly and without ridicule. With her memoir, she's become a voice for anyone with speech issues. My only complaint is that she didn't write it sooner." (Jake Steinfeld, Chairman & CEO, *Body by Jake*; Founder, Major League Lacrosse; Chairman of the National Foundation for Governors' Fitness Councils)

"An inspiring memoir.... Readers expecting a fairy-tale ending when they finish the book can't have been reading very closely, but Preston comes to a truce with stuttering, and her battles with it make for engaging reading." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"Preston's book pulses with wit and energy, and the realities of how difficult living with [stuttering] is painted vividly.... Preston is unflinching and funny; she manages to find a happy balance of education, memoir, and feel-good-factor that few books actually achieve, concluding that it is our 'imperfections that ultimately make us beautiful.' Never saccharine or pandering, Preston's book is a triumph of telling your story without fear or glossing over the harder to look at details." (*Publishers Weekly* (starred review))

About the Author

Katherine Preston is a writer, public speaker, and a regular contributor to *Psychology Today*. Raised in England, she currently lives in San Francisco. Find out more at KatherinePreston.com.

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Out With It

PROLOGUE

London, September 1994

I CAN TASTE THE other side of my name, and yet it hangs resolutely out of reach. The wall has come down. My name has been broken in half. My tongue lies taut and heavy, the tip glued to the base of my mouth.

“KKKKK KK K K K K K K. K K K K K KK kkkkkkk kaaa kaa.”

I feel the familiar hand clench slowly around my throat. As the seconds pass, my chest twists tighter. Panic winds its way through my nervous system and holds my useless body hostage.

“KK kkkk kkk kaaa ka ka.”

My fingernails dig into my palms in penance. My knees lock my legs and freeze my body into position. My eyes widen desperately. I can taste the stale air as it slips out of my mouth. I have no idea if I will say the word or if I will be trapped here indefinitely.

Desperate, unfocused anger addles my brain and pricks at my pores. I hate the boy’s intrusion, I hate his cocky swagger and his half-cocked head. I hate the fact that my parents aren’t here to pick me up, I hate the stupid party and my stupid outfit. I hate everything and nothing. Because I can’t hate my stutter; I can’t shout at my stutter to vent my frustration.

As the sound of my name falters onwards, my thoughts wander further. Why did I even answer him? Why did I not just plead temporary deafness? I knew that I would stutter. I am ten years old and have been doing it spectacularly for the past three years. My name is the one word that never escapes my mouth unscathed.

But somehow I had lost my memory in the past couple of hours. I had forgotten that I was a stutterer, or forgotten that I should be scared of stuttering. We had been at a birthday party, and I was leaving the house basking in the glow of a slightly nauseous sugar rush. I was dragging a deflated balloon from my wrist, looking to see where Claire had gone, when the boy called out to ask my name. I recognized his face from the room and responded more out of politeness than anything else.

Thirty seconds have ticked by and I’m tired. I’m tired at the thought of speaking and tired by the breathless, unresolved end of my past expulsion. I wish I was home, wish I was anywhere but here on this stretch of endless gray pavement. My inquisitor is confused, and I hope that I can still recover. I force myself to believe that this time will be different. Like a madman, I pray for the same action to have a new outcome. I take a deep breath and run up at the word again.

“K K K K K K Kaaaa Kaaa . . .”

I watch confusion morph into mirth. I have really blown it now. I can almost hear the question forming in his brain as he smirks at me,

“What the hell?” He says it slowly and then breaks into giggles, “Did you forget your name?”

His face cracks open in glee. He waves at his friends dispersing out down the road. They look bored, and his raucous laughter promises its normal level of fabulous entertainment. They start wandering back to him.

“Tell us all your name.”

I am trapped and I know it. My options are: (a) refuse to say my name and be forced to face clever insults like “retard,” or (b) stutter. Neither fills me with joy. I flick my head round quickly. I can see Claire now. She’s striding down the road, at least five cars away. Her parents are waiting for us. I’m alone.

“What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue?”

I imagine myself asking him what exactly that phrase means. I have recently learnt the word cliché and picture myself silencing his taunts and leading us all into a friendly discussion on some of the crazier phrases we have heard people say. Sadly, my reality is a little less rosy. His friends are gathering now, and all five freshly scrubbed faces are staring at me.

“What are you looking at?” my bitter voice pipes up from nowhere. As clearly as I knew I couldn’t say my name, I knew that the nervous energy would propel my voice, allow me to utter something. I have learnt from bitter experience that anger makes me fluent, that I could be just like the rest of the world if only I would shout every question and swear my way through every answer.

Briefly, my question silences them. My accent is English, home counties, girly, nothing fabulously interesting. They look up at their ringleader. I suspect that they are wondering why he has called them over. They clearly have more important business to attend to, and two of them wander off, bored.

I relax for a moment, but the boy keeps staring at me. I feel like a monkey on a chain. I have not performed how he was hoping. He looks vaguely put out. His humiliation swells in front of me and billows out onto his ruddy cheeks. I try to walk away, my head held high and haughty, but something holds me to the cement. I have tasted fluency and now want to prove him wrong. I want to make him feel small.

Then, suddenly, it looks like he has realized something. I didn’t say my name. I see it cross his eyes, a flicker of hope. He has seen how he can redeem himself to the two remaining members of his fan club.

“Tell these guys your name,” he sneers at me.

“Why should I?”

Damn, why did I say that? Now he knows he has me. I have to do it now. Now they’re all looking at me.

The thing is, I know I’ll stutter. On my name I have no chance. And I desperately want to keep my dignity. A girl does not get dressed up in orange leggings and an oversized tie-dye T-shirt to lose her self-respect to a bunch of scruffy boys with no sense of style.

So I pull myself up to my full height. All four feet two inches of me stares up at them.

“K . . .”

“Katherine, Katherine Preston. And what’s it to you?” she practically spits at them. Claire stops and takes a replenishing breath. “Why do you even care? Why don’t you go and talk to your own friends, or are you that unpopular that you need to hassle girls who aren’t remotely interested in talking to you?”

She’s on a roll. Inwardly, relief splashes across my body. Her face is flushed from running back to me. There are now two of us. Two leggings-clad, vertically challenged warriors.

“I’m sure you have nothing better to do, but we have better places to be than wasting our time talking to you.”

She slips her arm through mine and we turn on the balls of our feet in unison. We swing away from them and march triumphantly down the road.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

She is still striding, all fierce and self-righteous. “God, I hate boys.”

“Me, too.”

We leave it at that. I pray that it will be the last time we will speak of it. I suspect it will. If we never mention it again, maybe she will forget about it and maybe I will.

She seems to forget almost instantly, but I can’t push it aside as quickly as I’d like. I sit in the backseat of her parents’ car and stare out at the familiar scenes of London as Claire tells them all about the party. As we drive down the embankment, along the dark stretch of the Thames, I replay the smirk on the boy’s face. As we drive past the familiar brick houses, I can still feel the fear lick around my insides. I can’t ignore the fact that I have been saved, that I can’t save myself. As absurdly grateful as I am to Claire, I feel pathetic. What kind of a kid can’t stick up for herself? What will I do the next time? What will I do if I am on my own?

That night I sit on the bottom bunk of my bed and address our new Labrador puppy. She is meant to be downstairs in the kitchen, but I have smuggled her up to my room. I suspect that we are both a little lonely. I am an only child and, as quiet as it can be at times, there are moments when it has its benefits. Right now, I’m grateful there’s no sister on the top bunk, no brother down the hall. Claire has been my best friend since I was four years old. She has barely been out of my sight in six years, but right now I can’t bear the thought of her company. I can’t stomach the idea of any company at all. Except Holly. Being a dog, Holly doesn’t count. I am certain that I’ll be fluent around her.

I have never stuttered in a room on my own, and I have never stuttered in front of an animal. I have always known what my fluent voice sounds like, have always known that it exists somewhere inside of me.

“Why am I such a stumbling wreck when I talk to people?” I whisper to Holly.

The quiet sound of my voice gives me some solace. It is comforting to hear that I’m not entirely broken, that I still have a voice, however meager it can sound at times.

“What’s wrong with me?”

Holly looks up, wags her tail, does a couple of laps on my bed, and then lies down looking at me. I grab the rope toy that I have brought up with me and watch her chase it manically for a few moments. She grabs hold and tugs until I let go. I watch her nudge it back towards me.

I wipe a couple of traitorous tears from my cheek. “I know, I know, you think I’m alright,” I don’t want Holly to think I am pathetic. She is under my care; I feel that I have someone else to look after for the first time in my life. I’m not keen to let her down and I want to keep her loyalty.

“But some people think I’m weird, a freak.” I am gulping a little as I watch her cock her head. She moves towards the side of the bed and, not wanting to let go of her warmth, I pull her into my lap and add, “Don’t worry—it’s mostly smelly boys.” I’m not sure who I’m trying to reassure.

“Why do I have to talk funny?” I nuzzle my forehead against the soft golden fuzz of her head and ruffle her ears until she starts to squirm in my arms. As I lift her to face me, I have stopped sniffing, “You know, if I was fluent, I could be an actress. Or a TV presenter. I would tell everyone everything that was on my mind. I’d be eloquent and witty and insightful. You would never be able to shut me up. I would enter competitions for people who could talk the most.”

She manages to wriggle free, jumps off the bed, and starts turning circles by the door. I lift her into the nook of my waist and, as silently as possible, creak my bedroom door open. I have to keep it quiet; the last thing I want to do is wake my parents. I creep out of my room and carry her squirming body back down the stairs to the kitchen. As I stretch my legs over the steps that I know will creak, I can see the boxes spilling out of various rooms. I can see my teddies breaking free of one cardboard box and our old photo albums sneaking out of another. I notice that my dad’s golf clubs are stacked up by the front door.

We are moving house, leaving our Knightsbridge town house and moving to a house far, far away in the countryside. For months I had begged my parents to leave London. I had presented my arguments relentlessly over days and weeks, slowly chipping away at their hesitancy. I had listed the benefits of living in the country: the cleaner air, the fields to run around in, the possibility of having a bigger home, the room to breathe. They had stalled, spoken to friends, whispered their conversations late into the night. Finally, they had agreed; we would give it a go, see if we liked it.

I had been ecstatic when they told me. Now I’m a little more nervous. Will it work? As I put Holly back into her bed, I whisper that she’ll love our new home, there will be hundreds of pheasants for her to chase all day. I promise her that, as much as I hate change, I think this is a good change, I hope it is. I reassure her that we are heading to a new place, a new beginning.

The discoloration on the wall next to her head catches my eye. I doubt that anyone else would see it, but I know it is there, however well disguised. I stare at the lick of fresh white paint and brush my fingers against the fine hairs of the brushstrokes. It is a guilty reminder of all the mornings that we have come down to find a pile of rubble under Holly’s tiny paws. A sad testament to all the nights she must have spent desperately tunneling into the brick wall of our kitchen.

I know that my dad has patiently filled in the holes every morning with plaster and taken out his paint pot before the real estate agent comes around with another prospective buyer to trample around our home. I have heard him joke with his friends that she’s impressively strong for a three-month-old puppy, that one day the plaster may all fall out, and whoever ends up with the house will worry that they’ve been landed with the ghost of gigantic termites. I hope that tonight she’ll stay asleep until the morning.

As I start to sneak back upstairs I resolve that this year will be different, that this year I will tackle my stutter once and for all. I will teach myself how to be the same as everyone else. I give myself a checklist:

1. Say my name very loudly out of my window ten times every evening.
2. Ask every stranger I meet on the street what the time is.
3. Take ten deep breaths every morning.
4. Watch how Mum speaks and talk like her.

Foolproof. I give myself just over six months. If I can speak fluently on my own, then surely I can make myself speak “properly” when I’m out in public. I tell myself that I’m just lazy, that I just have to try harder. Through force of will, I will make myself fluent by the age of eleven.

FOR MUCH of my childhood I made promises. I promised myself that I would change, that I would rid myself of my stutter. For much of my life I believed, unfairly, that it was simply a matter of willpower. Over the years I would watch myself fail at fluency, and every morning I would wake up with the dangerously impractical resolution that today would be different, that I would be stronger, that I would force my speech into submission. I stubbornly clung to the hope that one day I would wake up and the stutter would have simply disappeared.

When I was ten years old I was far too busy house-training my dog and trying to fit in at my new school, to make time in my day for getting comfortable in my own skin. I was far too focused on reaching for perfection and not at all interested in seeing the good in my unique speech patterns. I was obsessed with speech and desperate to get rid of my stutter.

Every second that I spoke seemed to drag into a year. Every tiny interaction felt like an obstacle course ready to trip me up. I had started to watch others with jealous interest, and I fiercely guarded any fluency that I chanced upon. Less than ten stutters a day was a good day, over a hundred was a very bad day indeed. I was a happy child, I had a largely idyllic life, I rarely felt sorry for myself. Yet I was what my mum termed a “worrywart.” I was easily hurt, highly sensitive, and my emotions swung from intense joy to deep fear.

Having witnessed some of my struggles, my parents had tried to help. They had done their research and found the best speech therapists that London had to offer. They did anything they could, made any move they could, to make me feel secure and happy. Yet none of it was helping and, at ten years old, my misguided, self-taught attempts to find fluency began to feel like the only viable option. I had to succeed. If I didn’t become fluent, I wasn’t sure what would happen to me.

At the crux of it all I was terrified. I was afraid of what people would think of me, afraid of suffocating on my stillborn words, and afraid of the lack of control I had over my own speech. The terror crashed through my armor and made me desperate to fight.

For better or worse, I knew that I couldn’t hide my stutter, however much I tried. I felt like I had been dealt a hand of low cards at a poker table. No one had taught me the rules, but folding wasn’t an option, so I needed a strategy. I needed a way to either become normal or deal with not being normal. I didn’t know of any role models for stutterers: Porky Pig was hardly a leader of men, and the odd stutterer that I came across in films was classed as the comedy buffoon. With no roadmap, I barreled forward the best way I could.

I repeated words, went red in the face, looked at the floor, gasped for breath, and employed a little light pinching when I couldn't expel a single sound. Stuttering was my "thing," it exposed me and marked me as different. I dreamed of being "normal" and relentlessly worried about my "abnormality."

But I wasn't alone. As we got older, some girls started to worry about their weight, some threw up after every meal, some had acne that scarred their faces and filled their cupboards with fearful-looking creams, some had small boobs, others had big boobs. Others ran razors over their arms, making the skin under their school shirts raw and jagged. Some had to deal with the confusing territory of their sexuality. As exams started to mark the years of our lives, some cried into their textbooks as large red Cs and Ds stained their pages, and they worried that they were suited only for a lifetime of menial labor. We all fought ourselves and worried about what would happen to us. We all struggled to get comfortable in our own skins. Or I assume we did. No one spoke about it. We were English, after all.

As I was growing up, I created this myth that if I worked to better myself every day, I would eventually reach some nirvana of perfection where all my problems would disappear. I thought that hiding my stutter, or somehow magically growing out of my hesitant speech, was the only option. I saw my speech as something to be ashamed of, something only I did, something born of common laziness.

If some Tarot card-wielding fortuneteller had told my younger self that one day stuttering would be the driving force in my life, that it would push me to leave my life in London and set off on a mission to interview hundreds of fellow stutterers, I would have rolled my eyes. Having believed that I was one of a small handful of stutterers, I wonder if I would have been appalled or comforted to find out that there were millions of us across the globe. I'm certain that I would have demanded my money back if she had told me that my research into stuttering would turn into a memoir, that, in telling the stories of the people I met, I would realize that I was unraveling my own story.

And yet, at the age of twenty-four, I did just that. I set off on the road to spend a year with people like me, people who had at one time been labeled "abnormal." I set off on a quest to interview everyone from celebrities to hermits in order to find out what sort of lives they had created for themselves. My stutter, and my barely acknowledged search for a cure, led me across a country I had dreamed of exploring and to a final resolution that I would have never expected. As much as this is my story, it belongs to every stutterer, parent, friend, therapist, and researcher who spoke to me. It is as much their story as it is mine; it is my tribute to their courage and their honesty.

Out With It is about all of us and all the ways that it matters to make ourselves heard. It is about struggling with a different voice and speaking up regardless. It is about working out what you need to say, and finding the courage to say it. It is an account of my confounding journey to get to grips with being a "stutterer," about all the underprepared and uninformed ways that I tackled coming to terms with myself. Most of it isn't pretty. I'm sure a handy guidebook would have been appreciated, but this is the story of how I finally found my voice.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Catherine Poppe:

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