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Alan Rabinowitz's Keynote Speech at SFA Conference in Minneapolis

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Nearly 20 years ago, I stood before the Prime Minister of Belize and convinced him to set up the world's first and only jaguar preserve. Ten years ago I sat with tribal headmen asking their help in setting up one of the world's largest Himalayan parks to preserve species of animals that few people have ever seen or heard of. A little more than a year ago, in March 2004, I sat with the military dictators of Myanmar and signed into law the world's largest tiger reserve, 8,500 square miles, an area almost the size of the state of Vermont. Four weeks ago I was meeting with the Presidents of Costa Rica and Panama, trying to convince these heads of state to be the first signatories to a ground breaking concept that would create a continuous natural corridor for jaguars from Mexico to Argentina.

For the last 25 years of my life, I have lived and explored some of the most remote places on earth. I have rappelled deep into caves chasing bats, I have captured and tracked bears, jaguars, leopards, tigers, and rhinos. I have discovered the second smallest, most primitive deer in the world in northern Burma, and then found its closest relative in the cloud forests of the Annamite Mtns between Laos and Vietnam. I have documented lost cultures such as the Taron, the world's only Mongoloid pygmies in the eastern Himalayas. I have been called the Indiana Jones of wildlife science by the New York Times and given lectures and talks all over the world, to crowds of thousands.

People often ask me, how do you do what you do, how do you have such confidence in yourself, what makes you special. I think of a little boy put in special classes for disturbed children because he couldn't get the words out the way others did. The boy decided that it was easier to just not speak to people at all. Instead he'd go home and sit in a dark corner of a closet spilling his heart out to turtles and chameleons. I never liked that word special.

How do I do what I do?

Catching jaguars and tigers, negotiating with presidents and dictators – that's easy stuff! The challenge for me has been living with the little stuttering, insecure boy inside, the boy who'd come home from school every day and yearn for the darkness and safety of his closet.

I tell people now that stuttering has been a gift. And I believe that. But make no mistake about my words. It was a gift realized only after years of tremendous pain and suffering that I believe no young person should have to go through. I stuttered for as long as I can

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remember and as a child my blocks became so severe that my body would twist and spasm when I tried to speak. Often, I would make myself physically sick so that I wouldn't have to talk to or be around people. When I was in grade school in the NY public school system, I was called out of class each day to be placed in what the other kids called the retarded class. I once stabbed a pencil through my hand and had to be taken to the hospital so that I wouldn't have to read in front of the class.

The most memorable event in my childhood occurred when I was 15 and I wasn't able to say my last name to request my mother's groceries that she'd left for me to pick up at the supermarket. The cashier apologized to the people waiting behind me, explaining I was clearly mentally disturbed. So I exaggerated my spasms, imitating the way I thought a disturbed person might act, giving in to the fears and misconceptions of the people around me. I thought it would be easier. But when I walked out of that store, I knew that I had just cheated myself out of everything that I was and wanted to be. And I swore that I would never deny myself again. My life's goal shifted from wanting to be like other people to a determination that I would be better than everyone else. That became the driving force in my life, and I never looked back. Until now.

One of the most frequent questions I am asked is how I came to love animals so much. People expect many kinds of answers but never what I give them. Animals were the only things I could talk to as a child. Animals listened and let me pour my heart out. At some point in my youth I clearly remember realizing that animals were like me, even the most powerful ones I'd read about or see on television – they had no voice, they were often misunderstood, and they wanted nothing more than to live their life as best they could apart from the world of people.

As I grew into my teens, I got used to my stuttering and, like many stutterers, became very proficient at all the tricks to avoid situations I didn't want to deal with. My parents never knew quite what to do with me. In the early years, they simply believed I would grow out of what they called my shyness and tension. They thought I was too smart, or too excitable, but that eventually everything would work itself out. When they finally faced the fact that everything was not okay with me, I was already a teenager so we tried whatever seemed available - drugs, hypnotherapy, psychologists, and a host of speech specialists. Nothing seemed to help.

While I loved my parents, their greatest mistake was their denial of my stuttering and the belief that to talk about the problem with me or in front of me would only hurt me more. So they too became outsiders in my world. They were never there to hug me when the pain was at its worst. And they never came to sit quietly with me in the darkness.

All of the speech therapists I worked with basically told me I should accept who I was, stuttering and all, and move on. But that wasn't what I wanted to hear nor did it make anything any better. I refused to accept myself as a stutterer. I saw no reason why I shouldn't and couldn't be a fluent speaker despite no one seeming to encourage me towards that end. There seemed to be little literature on the subject at the time and there were no computers, no internet, no way to find out whether there were others out there like me and how they dealt with it. I was the only one like me I knew. So I lived in two worlds – the world of people where I stuttered, and my closeted world with animals where I did not.

One day, a fortuitous event changed everything. My mother overheard another woman talking in a bank and learned about Starbuck's clinic in Geneseo, NY. I was 18 years old, in college, never had a girlfriend, never went to a school dance, and never knew what it was like to speak a complete sentence fluently. Then my life again shifted.

During an intensive summer training program, Hal Starbuck, a severe and tortured stutterer himself, made me face the fact that I was a stutterer and would always be a stutterer. The difference, however, was that he promised to provide me with the tools and the ability to

become a completely fluent stutterer. I was no longer helpless and floundering. I was in control of my speech for the first time in my life. God, what a feeling. This was when stuttering started to become a gift, although I still didn't realize it at the time. Through my life of stuttering I had developed a level of compassion, sensitivity, understanding, and strength that I am sure I would not have had otherwise. And now, as I fluently conveyed thoughts and ideas to other human beings, these other parts of my personality could surface to guide my behavior and interaction with others. I would only begin to understand and value this years afterwards. The important thing at the time was that I was in control. I had the tools to speak fluently. I could let my two separate worlds start to merge.

But learning to speak fluently, while feeling wonderful, didn't heal the scar tissue that had accured from all those years of suffering. I still wanted little to do with humans at this point and I still had a long way to go to figure out who I was as a person and where my place was in the world. And what I now realized was that those who spoke fluently seemed to have little to say that was of any interest to me. I left everything I knew behind as soon as I could, I ran as fast and as far as I could – combining a need I felt to pay back the debt I owed to animals with the desire to test myself, physically and mentally, to be lost in the wild, the dark closets of the world, among people whose language I couldn't speak and whose lives were so hard that they had no time to dwell on their own or others misfortunes.

I spent years living in the field with animals doing research, establishing new protected areas, and writing scientific papers and popular books of my experiences. My standing and reputation in my field grew, but that meant little to me. People tried to make me something I was not – someone special, a hero, an altruist. And yet I saw nothing of that in myself. I was a little stuttering boy, now a man, who simply ran to the furthest reaches of the earth to be with animals and try to feel whole.

But it became harder and harder to run away and isolate myself as the wild world and the wildlife I had come to love was being lost around me. Tigers killed for their penis, rhinos for their horn, gorillas for their paws, elephants for their skin. There seemed no way for these magnificent creatures to convey their pain and suffering to the human species that was wiping them out. I had to be their voice, and I would live my life trying to give them a home where no one bothered them – give them their own little space in the closet.

But while I changed, the world did not so much. In 1986, upon the publication of my first book Jaguar, I was booked onto the Today Show with Bryant Gumbel, the number one morning show at the time. The publisher was thrilled because it meant the sale of many more books. The stipulation for my appearing, however, was that I had to promise, in writing, that I would not stutter on the show. I agreed. It was a challenge, and I knew I had the tools to be the completely fluent, articulate guest they wanted. It went well. And it reminded me why I ran from people in the first place, and why animals needed me so badly.

It has only been within the last few years that I have agreed to look back as I am doing now. To take the precious little time I have on this earth from my animals and my family, to talk about stuttering and my past. One reason is that I don't want other young people to go through what I went through. There is no need for it. The speech community has clearly gone through radical changes since I was a boy and organizations like the Stuttering Foundation of America have made it so that much more information on stuttering is available and stutterers have many more places to now turn for help. But we still have far to go. I am continually surprised to learn how little progress has been made in the knowledge and attitude of people towards stutterers.

My second reason for looking back is because my five year old son is a stutterer. I realized it the moment he started to speak. While we have a blue ribbon school system 45 miles north of New York City, I was shocked to learn how few speech clinicians and therapists knew how or even wanted to deal with stuttering. Many still see stuttering as a purely psychological malady while others believe it is not something that can be fixed. Few programs wish to deal with pre-schoolers because they are unable to clearly differentiate so-called normal disfluency with real stuttering, even though the data show that pre-school age is a crucial time to start addressing the issue of stuttering. And then there are the many concerned, well-intentioned clinicians and therapists I have met who have no written or visual

materials on stuttering and little to no training on the subject. They still place stutterers in mixed groups of children with various kinds of handicaps.

Through my son, I became involved again with the world of speech therapy. I sat in on some of the private and group sessions offered to children with speech problems. I was surprised at how often I heard some of the same words that were said to me as a child – slow down, calm down, think before you speak – things that have little or nothing to do with the cause of stuttering. Sometimes I hear condescension or dumbing down in the voice of therapists or I see their eyes wander as the child struggles. I recall how quickly the walls went up when I was a child, realizing that the person talking to me had no idea who I was inside and would rather be somewhere else. Occasionally, I hear frustration and even annoyance from speech therapists and clinicians who are perhaps overly stressed, tired, or having a bad day themselves. I cringe when this happens. How well I remember the pain I'd feel as a child at not even being able to please even this one person who was trying so hard to help me.

I will always believe that stuttering is a special little gift granted to certain people in this world, a little key that opens up parts of the human psyche that would not have been opened otherwise. But every stutterer has to come to that realization in their own time and in their own way, if at all.

Nice words and thoughts do not negate the handicap that stuttering can create in young and old alike. I never wanted to hear that I was special, that it was no big deal, or that I should simply ignore people who do or say foolish things. I felt broken inside. I wanted people, especially my parents and the speech clinicians, to look me in the eye when I stuttered, or ask me how it felt when I couldn't get the words out. I wanted desperately for someone to tell me that they could help me be a fluent speaker. Don't believe it if a stutterer tells you that it doesn't matter to them.

The fact that all of you are here today clearly means that you understand or wish to understand stuttering much better than most other people. I applaud that. I hope you understand that you have the potential to empower stutterers with the tools that can change their life, and make them feel whole again. It is not an easy road for either the stutterer or the clinician. But if you are willing to journey the long, arduous, often frustrating path of helping stutterers, then you will help change the world for many young people. And your reward is that, in doing so, you will share in their gift.

Alan Rabinowitz

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