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President-elect Joe Biden speaks at his transition headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware, Nov.

President-elect Joe Biden speaks at his transition headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware, Nov. 24. (CNS/Reuters/Joshua Roberts)



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In the years of his early childhood in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Wilmington, Delaware, Joe Biden's working-class parents enrolled him in Catholic schools. St. Helena's run by the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary was one, and another, Holy Rosary with the Sisters of St. Joseph. The nuns who taught him, Biden writes in his 2007 memoir, *Promises to Keep*, are "one of the reasons I'm still a practicing Catholic." He says, "They taught reading and writing and math and geography and history, but embedded in the curriculum also were the concepts of decency, fair play, and virtue."

If a lapse ever occurred, it came in young Biden's seventh-grade class at St. Helena's when he was called on to read aloud a passage about Sir Walter Raleigh. But he had a disability: stuttering. Awaiting his turn to read, "I could feel myself panic." When the words came out bumpily, the nun had some fun and became a

mimic: "Mr. Bu-bu-bu-bu-biden," she called him.

Humiliated and angered, the boy fled the classroom and walked home to tell his mother what happened. With her Joey in tow, she drove to the school and confronted the nun: "If you ever speak to my son like that again, I'll come back and rip that bonnet off your head."

According to the National Stuttering Association, whose motto is "If you stutter, you are not alone," an estimated 3 million Americans have the neurological disorder, along with 70 million globally. The communication handicap, which causes oral unevenness and syllabic repetitions when words are sounded, affects men three or four times more than it affects women. The association reports that 5% of all children go through periods of the disability, though only 1% permanently.

The community of stutterers includes the famous and successful: such names as King George VI, Winston Churchill, Marilyn Monroe and James Earl Jones. Not to be overlooked is Hollywood's most famous stutterer: Porky Pig, the Warner Brothers Loony Tunes cartoon character who ended his sets with "Th-th-th-that's all, folks."

In the literary world, John Updike, hailed by many for his captivating and stylish prose, wrote in the essay "Getting the Words Out": "There is no doubt that I have lots of words inside me; it's just that at moments, like rush-hour traffic at the mouth of a tunnel, they jam and I can't get them out."

When asked by an NPR interviewer if some of his fiction was sexist, Updike replied: "I myself plead not g-guilty to the charge [that]...women in my books [are] s-s-second rate c-c-citizens."

As with the disease of alcoholism, where those who recover are still alcoholics except that they don't drink, those who overcome stuttering are still stutterers except they speak clearly. Biden writes in *Promises to Keep* that he defeated his problem "with a lot of hard work and with the support of my teachers and my family. But I have never really let go of my impedimenta. It's not a heavy load, but it's always with me, like a touchstone, as a reminder that everyone carries his or her own burdens — most of them a lot bigger than mine — and nobody deserves to be made to feel smaller for having them, and nobody should be consigned to carry them alone."

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I, too, carry the speaking impediment, an ailment that I trace to my days of childhood stuttering and that I endured into college. In grade school in a small village on Long Island, I was laughed at by classmates for stuttering and bullied by older kids who called out after school, "Hey, C-C-C-Colman, how you d-d-d-doing?"

The kind of panic that stung Biden at St. Helena's, the muscle tension and trembling of it all, is one that assaulted me at Glen Head Elementary. The jitters of being called on in class were so severe that I never ate breakfast before coming to school: If I did, I might throw up in front of everyone when called on to read aloud or give a five-minute talk in front of everyone in a speech class. Decades and decades later, I still can't eat breakfast.

Some stutterers design strategies to survive despite our handicap and what battles the future might hold as we journey through life. I remember confiding to my eighth-grade speech therapist that I was going to become a writer. Why, she asked. I answered: Writers just go into a room. We close the door and never have to talk to anyone. No one will know I stutter. No one will laugh at me. No one will tell me to get some help.

In high school, I was befriended by an English teacher who encouraged me to write a paper for him every night. I loved it. Writing became a passion, one that guided me throughout Spring Hill College, a Jesuit school in Mobile, Alabama. I wrote for the school newspaper all four years. My stuttering slowly eased away.

My grade school dream of becoming a writer did come true, but nowhere in my boyhood did I imagine I would not only overcome my stutter, but I would earn decent sums of money giving speeches at colleges or conferences and with more than 30 appearances on C-SPAN to boot.

The fright of public speaking is called glossophobia. Joe Biden, who at 77 has given uncountable political speeches and surely with more to come in his presidency, conquered it. To his credit, he makes no pretense at being an orator. Instead, his speeches and interviews are marked with slips of the tongue, verbal pivots, an occasional tic, rambling sentences in need of periods.

Those, though, are minor negatives, amid so many positives that reveal his character. Honesty, heartfelt reflections, mindfulness and often enough humility. Just the kind of graces needed right about now.

[Colman McCarthy, the author of *I'd Rather Teach Peace*, has written for NCR since 1965.]