

Article:

The genesis of *The Suspect Speaker*

Before and After.

Before. James Stephens was a teacher, musician and music director, a journalist and event manager – as well as a husband, father and grandfather. He was a voracious reader, a fluent writer and confident speaker.

James had a stroke in January 2015.

He collapsed, paralysed on his right side. The hospital intervention was rapid and they administered a ‘clot-busting’ injection. His limbs were free but his speech was ... absent.

After. After, he had aphasia.

Aphasia is the loss of a previously held ability to articulate ideas or comprehend spoken or written language. It is a result of damage to the brain caused by injury or disease – in this case, James's stroke.

Most of our conversation is by email. Talking is still difficult for James.

‘The whole thing about aphasia,’ James says by email, ‘it doesn’t impair intelligence. It is a communication disorder. My brain knows all the words and concepts but sometimes my tongue doesn’t agree.’

‘I can be stuck on expressing certain words, or my syntax is all over the place. Numbers can be tricky. I often mix genders up – that can be amusing or disastrous!’

‘Initially, I couldn’t talk, read or write. I drew pictures and timelines for my family. They were puzzling! After two or three weeks, I could announce one or two words: No, Yes, Left, Right, Yum, Yuck!’

‘I could read a headline of the newspaper, or maybe the first sentence - but that was it. My tired brain was protesting and I had lots of sleep.’

James had expert help with Speech Language, Musical, and Curative Eurhythmy therapies. These were a blessing, but it was a tough track to climb.

‘I was determined to read and write again – it was always part of my life Before. I created a blog, and wrote down quotes. I had to write each letter down individually – I could not read them! But I expected that a literary ‘quote’ would be a succinct and worthy entry for my blog. After six weeks, I could recognise most of the words, and after three months I was adding a sentence or two.’

James entered a blog-post, every day, for 396 days. By that time, most of the blog was James’s creation and opinions.

‘Most of that year, I was a ‘stunned mullet’ – dazed and uncomprehending. My brain said: ‘Huh! I have a stroke. Ah well.’ My wife and family were more concerned than I was! Now I realise, that I was quite impaired.’

The particular presentation of James's aphasia made it impossible to work in his old careers. He could understand one or two people – if they spoke slowly – but a meeting or a crowd of people was too much. His speaking is still hesitant or stuck.

'The recovery from aphasia can improve but it doesn't go away! Every so often, someone says: "I often mix up the words, or have a mental block." I want to say to them: 'With aphasia, this is every conversation, all day, every day!' But usually, they have moved on and I can't get my word in.'

After: Optimistically he reinvented himself.
James is an author.

'Even after six years, I can only read four or five pages in a novel and that is enough. But I want to express what aphasia wrecks on an individual. And NOT only the person who has aphasia. It significantly affects the families, carers and supporters as well.'

'So, I created a book (and an ebook) comprising of fifteen short **short** stories. *The Suspect Speaker*. All the stories are about people who have difficulty in verbal communication. People with aphasia.'

'Each one has three versions – an A, B, C versions. When I was in 'recovery' in the first or second year I could read sparse, short sentences. These are the 'A' versions.

'The 'B' versions are longer, and more descriptive words. For me, these were suitable for my third year 'recovery'. The 'C' versions are longer and more detailed, but not parenthetical! These would be ideal for my fourth or longer year 'recovery'.

'The beauty of these stories is that can build up. After a person reads the 'A' version, in later years s/he can read the 'B' version. They know the gist of the story, but they can have a richer experience. And so with the 'C' version later.'

'And, a lot of people with aphasia like to have carers or family that **read** to them. The 'C' version would be ideal for reading to them.

'**And**, the stories illustrate the effect that living with aphasia brings – the frustrations and the blessings, anger and opportunities. I know that many people don't realise the effect that aphasia can have.

If you meet a person with aphasia, what should you do?

'Patience. Don't insert the words you think they want to say until they indicate that they want help. Give an opportunity to have paper and pen for drawing. Keep the background noise low. But mostly - patience.

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The Suspect Speaker

ebook versions : books2read.com/suspectspeaker

Amazon paperback version: amzn.to/38xzSGX