



COMMUNICATION FRUSTRATIONS

A STORY BY
GRAHAM CLARK

I am frustrated each and everyday in various situations I encounter, not all the time though. Perhaps it may just be a fly buzzing around, somebody turning a letter's pages in the incorrect order, waiting to be fed, and so on. Frustrations come in different degrees and have different effects on each of us, but the fact remains – everybody has to face them from time to time. Unfortunately, I have to say that in many instances our frustration level, those of augmented communicators, are more easily tampered with by things that are not under our control. Here are four of my more frustrating attempts to communicate.

Either/Or. “Graham, do you want me to do it or not?!” my mother yelled. Yes it was one of those days. I had just been transferred to the hospital in Durban, It was the early days of acceptance and we were busy having a tiff. “How the bladdy hell do you expect me to answer a choice question!” I spelled out, groaning in the process. She pulled back when it was pointed out to her. No, she didn't apologise, I think we knew that everything was part of the disability learning process. She rephrased the question.

Negative Questions. A nursing sister may walk into my little hospital room. “Don't you want the windows open? It's awfully stuffy in here.”

“Yes, I do want the windows open.” “Yes, I don't want the windows open” or “No, I do want the windows closed.” “No, I do want the windows open.” Confused? So am I!

Is it this? Let's admit it, in some instances it's both easier and quicker 'pointing' to things with one's eyes. Well, sometimes! Say I would like the pillow between my legs moved up. I begin by looking there, and the nurses begin asking questions. “Is it your feet?” they ask.

“No,” I indicate,

”Is it your leg?”

”No”, I reply.

”Is it on the basin?”

”No.”

”Is it on the chair?”

”No,” I say, thinking to myself, “You were hot when you were around my legs, why don't you try that again?”

”Is it your foot?” they ask again.

”No, I've already said it's not my foot, why ask again?” I mutter to myself.

”Are you sure it's not on the basin?”

”Come on, I've said no already, do you think I am stupid? Give me some credit,” says I, talking to myself.

”Okay, is it on the bed?”

”Yes,” I indicate.

"Is it on your body or your legs?"
"Oh no, not a choice question again! I say without acknowledging.
They rephrase the question after getting a blank look, "Is it on your body?"
"No," I reply.
"Is it on your legs?"
"Well, sort of." I answer.
"Is it your upper leg?"
"Well, sort of," I say.
"Is it the left one?"
"No."
"Is it the right one?"
"No."
"But is it somewhere down here?" they ask.
"Ahaa, yes," I agree.
"Is it the pillow?"
"Yes! Yes! Yes!" I say making sure they get the message.
"What about the pillow?" they ask!

Which letter is next? To be understood take a lot sometimes. I can remember this incident quite vividly; and because we all went through it together, it taught the family a most invaluable lesson, which I wish to share.

While in Addington Hospital in Durban, just after I became disabled, the family and some friends were standing around my bed visiting me one evening. They were all discussing various things and somehow got onto the subject of the horror of concentration camps during World War II. I felt like joining the discussion, by approached it from a completely different direction, which subsequently confused my mother to such a degree that we almost have another World War!

I had remembered reading an outstanding novel about atrocities at a concentration camp written by Leon Uris called QB VII and thought that mentioning the fact would enhance the conversation or steer it in another direction. Little did I know that the following half and hour would be taken up getting my point across.

I indicated that I wanted to speak, which in itself was a bit of a conversation damper, and my mother recognised the fact and proceeded to call out the letters, We both know the chart well by then, or so I thought...

I know what I was about to say, she didn't. Perhaps I sprung it on her from the blue yonder, but I still had the right to express myself and join in, Knowing that my father and brother were well read, I thought that giving the key letters might stimulate their minds enough to figure things out further.

When my mother got to H, I indicated that I wanted to go down the column, which she did, and got the letter I wanted, A Q. Immediately she said QU as usually a U follows a Q. I said to myself, "no, no, I just want the Q. I'm not going to begin spelling out that I don't want the U, That would confuse her totally, How can I say leave out the U, I want to explain that there's no U, oh man, If only I could talk!

She said, "Okay, let's start again from the beginning, maybe I missed something."

Again the letters were called out, and we ended up in the H column, I indicated that I didn't want the H, but wanted to go down the column. Once again we got to the Q, and I said, 'Yes, that's what I want.'

Once again a U was added without me asking for it. "This is ridiculous man," I thought to myself, "Is she nuts? Damn, I just want the Q. I'm not going through this again! She can be stubborn. So can I. Is she trying to push me to the breaking point?" I thought to myself. "Okay. I'll dig my heels in, too. Start again and I'll give you the same bloody answer. It is Q! Q! Q!"

"Let's try once more," Mom said "@, I, A, O... So it's the Q YOU WANT! WELL, WHAT LETTER FOLLOW! SURELY IT'S THE U!!!"

"Look, don't you yell at me. Do you think I don't know what letter I want! Grrrrr, give me some credit," I yelled inside.

A stern voice interrupted, "Just give the boy the Q, that's what he wants, then he can have it," my father said.

"OK, darling," my mother yelled, and strutted around the room as if to say, "You do it then, if you're so good."

Meanwhile the visitors were standing there with big, round eyes, not knowing what to say or do.

"OK, let's try the following letter, E, I, A, O... So you want something in the S row now, but there are no vowels, there must be a vowel!"

"Oh no, not again." I said to myself.

"You want the B, how can you have a Q and a B?" she said,

The same thing happened to B as had happened to the U, but fortunately, by this time, neither of us wanted to go through that again. It was accepted more easily this time around. I said to myself, "Come on, you learned goys, surely QB means something, it's Queen's Bench, don't you know?"

Nobody said anything after we established that it was in fact Q+B. What a disappointment!

The 7 was next. No problem, I thought. Back to E, I, A, O... We stopped at S and called out the letters in row S, "B, F, J... There's no more letters, surely it must be one of them, let's try again," she said.

"Oh no, not again, can't you see there's a 7 following the J, you made the damn chart anyway, you should know best!" I muttered to myself.

"E, I, A, O, S."

Once again we stopped at S and went down the row, got to J and I was told there were no more letters.

"Listen, I've had problems with the Q+B, I don't need more, man," I thought to myself.

The same thing happened, "Grrr, can't she understand?!" By now I was mad and was groaning pretty loudly from sheer frustration the visitors looked on at this show with mouths open, and the family was getting madder by the minute.

After another attempt, something told her to continue down the line and finally it was established that it was a number. As soon as the number was added to the Q+B, my dear old father piped up, “Queen’s Bench Seven.”

“Sigh,” I thought to myself. “It would have saved a lot of distress had you all paid attention throughout the ordeal, had we all been less frustrated, had you heard what I said and written it down, had I introduced the topic with more information, had this damn thing never happened to me. Grrr”

Quite understandably, not much more was left of the evening, nor was there much more communication between my mother and myself. The friends quietly bade us goodnight and disappeared down the hospital’s corridor, followed shortly by my parents. Needless to say, the numbers were used from then on, and the Q was only followed by a U once it had been confirmed by me.

About the author

Graham Clark lives in the most beautiful city in the world – Cape Town. Graham was disabled in 1984, at the age of twenty-five, by a stroke that left him completely paralysed and unable to speak. His passions are children, music and his speech output communication device, which enables him to access a computer and control his environment. He spends most of the day emailing fiends across the world, trying to write a book and watching any good documentary or a good game of cricket on television. Graham believes that the more he goes out to socialise or to advance issues of importance to people with disabilities, the more the public will feel relaxed with disabled people around. He is enjoying his early retirement despite the circumstances!