

The power of speaking



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OCTOBER 2020**

The human voice is the instrument we all play, but very few people have ever had any training in how to use it effectively. This is a complex, versatile and powerful skill, and it is extraordinary that we don't teach or test it in most schools.

Your voice is your breath projected into the world; it's the only part of you that you can send forth outside of your own body. Powerful speaking is a key life skill, for several reasons.

INSPIRATION

I live in Orkney, a set of islands off the north coast of Scotland that are liberally scattered with antiquities from prehistory. Possibly the most famous is Ring of Brodgar, a stone circle dating back to around 3,000 BC. Each of the 60 huge stones that originally formed the ring (27 are still standing) had to be dragged miles to the site before being erected, which must have taken incredible organization and determination, not to mention teamwork, for these Neolithic people. Even with modern equipment this would be a major operation. These people had no power other than their own muscles; they worked of their own volition, unlike the slave laborers who built the pyramids. They must have been very highly motivated.

I often wonder who had the idea to create this seminal structure, which some scientists believe inspired all the stone circles in the UK, culminating in Stonehenge. Whoever it was must have been a potent speaker indeed, to inspire thousands to commit so much time and energy over many years to such a huge project.

Throughout human history, powerful speakers have inspired people to change their beliefs, create or destroy social systems, adopt personal lifestyles, follow religious or philosophical paths, take up arms and fight, form

movements, work in teams — and build monuments. Innumerable great sporting performances have been triggered by an inspirational talk from a coach or captain.

If you want to make a difference in the world, you will most likely need to inspire others, and you may need to be a leader. Your voice is the most powerful tool you have for these things.

PERSUASION

Possibly the most famous and strongest form of vocal persuasion is hypnosis. You may have seen high-speed onstage hypnotism, where the hypnotist instantly induces trance states and the uses spoken suggestions to have people change their behavior even after the trance ends. Strong suggestions made to the subconscious are not confined to the entertainment industry; hypnosis is now a widely acknowledged and relatively mainstream therapeutic tool, able (subject to an individual's level of suggestibility) to reduce pain, help stop smoking and clear skin complaints, among other uses.

Persuasion in its widest context is critical in life. Many achievements are beyond the scope of one person acting alone, which means we very often need to persuade others to help us or join our team in order to achieve our goals.

The voice plays a key role in the process of persuasion — not only what we say, but also how we say it. Some people struggle to have their voice heard, while others seem to carry natural authority. Stature and body language play a role, but the largest part of this authority derives from speaking, in which both content and delivery play their parts. When you gain power and authority in your speaking, you can be more persuasive and achieve more of your goals by enrolling people in your passions.

HEALTH

If you've ever had the experience of not being listened to, not being able to make a dent in an argument, being disrespected, feeling invisible in a group, not being taken seriously, being talked over, being continually interrupted, or secretly crying out to be heard, then you know that the inability to express oneself clearly and powerfully is bad for you. It's debilitating and frustrating to be ignored. It creates stress and anxiety if it continues or repeats in relationships — and it can eventually cause sickness or even violence. I suspect that at least some of the antisocial behavior from young people in urban environments arises from this feeling of frustration: nobody's listening to me, nobody cares, so why should I?

If only we taught our children how to express themselves clearly and powerfully, how much less ill health, stress and violence would we see in the world?

STORIES

One of the most potent styles of speaking is storytelling. We all love a story: as soon as we hear the words, "Once upon a time..." our inner child wakes up; we metaphorically curl up and look forward to the wonders to come. For as long as language has existed, I'm willing to bet that people have told stories to share their day, keep alive the exploits of legendary heroes, pass on cultural traditions, or simply to soothe their children to sleep.

For many millennia, stories have been among the most powerful tools in the essential task of passing knowledge and history on from one generation to the next, or from one group to another. Writing has been available only for around five thousand years, so from the development of complex language (estimated at up to 100,000 years ago) all human knowledge was spread simply by speaking and listening. Throughout those many years, countless groups of humans have sat around fires at night listening with wonder and rapt attention to a local sage or storyteller pass on tales that carried wisdom from the past.

In some societies, this powerful oral tradition still exists. Indian classical music has no written form at all: all the complex, lengthy ragas are learned by rote, transmitted from guru to shishya by word of mouth and demonstration. The same applies in many surviving folk music cultures, including that here in Orkney, where it seems almost every child plays an instrument, but not many play from sheet music. Traditional folk music often encapsulates old stories in its lyrics, even if we don't understand the references now; the same is true of many nursery rhymes. The indigenous peoples of Australia can safely navigate the vast expanses of the outback on 'song lines', paths that they follow by reciting the words of songs that list landmarks, waterholes and other way finders. Even in the text-obsessed West, there are still many professional storytellers plying their trade, and storytelling festivals exist in the US, UK, India, Dubai and many other countries. Stories still have power!

THE PROBLEM

Speaking and listening are natural, fast, efficient, powerful, nuanced and rich ways to communicate, and yet we barely give them a thought; we certainly don't generally teach them with the same devotion we award to reading, writing, mathematics or motor skills. Yes, we joyfully celebrate our child's first words, but as soon as conversation is flowing we take it for granted — meanwhile, we have many milestones spread over years in reading, writing and mathematics (we call them exams) and in motor skills (from walking to riding a bike to driving a car to athletic or sporting achievements).

Wondering why this was so was the reason I got into the sound business in the first place: it seemed so clear to me that we were missing out on something really important by taking for granted listening and speaking. Let's try to unpack the key forces that are working against the ears.

SPEAKING VERSUS WRITING

Speaking is ancient: expert opinion on the dawn of complex language varies from 60,000 to 100,000 years ago. Writing is much more recent, developing around 4,000 years ago. For most of human history, all knowledge has been handed down orally — but writing has sprinted past speaking in its short existence and it now dominates communication in our ocular world.

I absolutely accept the benefits of writing. It can be propagated, copied and published, and many of the world's greatest revolutions in thought or belief result from this. It is fixed and can be referred to, as with a contract. It can be asynchronous, so I can email you while you sleep in another time zone and you can read my message the next day when you wake.

However, I do believe the pendulum has swung too far, which is why many organizations are now training people in listening and speaking skills. It's interesting to note that my TED talk on speaking has been viewed

five times as often as the one on listening. We prioritize sending over receiving, just as we prioritize written communication over spoken.

I think there are several reasons for the dominance of the eyes over the ears in the modern world.

NOISE

The world is noisy, and getting noisier. Since the Industrial Revolution, we've been surrounding ourselves with mechanical, and now electronic, noises, some of them very loud indeed. Transport has always been noisy — the Romans had to introduce ordinances to control the clatter of carts in the streets of their capital two thousand years ago — but now we have pervasive jet engines and tire noise to contend with. My friend Bernie Krause, the world's most eminent nature sound recordist, relates that it once took 20 hours to get 15 minutes of usable recorded material. "Now it takes 200 hours," he says.

Once we needed to listen carefully, because sound was meaningful: if you were sharing a cave with some bears or tigers, you'd better be listening carefully! Now most noise is meaningless, so we have developed the habit of suppressing it, and we move around the world simply not listening.

The result of this of course is more noise, to the point where the World Health Organization (WHO) rates noise pollution as the second-largest global threat to health, just behind air pollution. The WHO estimates that in Europe over one million years of healthy life are lost every year to traffic noise pollution. As we've seen, eight million Europeans are having their sleep disrupted night after night by traffic noise, with drastic effects on their health, as well as huge resulting costs — up to two percent of GDP according to official estimates, which amounts to over 300 billion euros a year.

Noise pervades many vital spaces because we design them with eyes, not ears.

In classrooms, acoustics are often so bad that speech intelligibility is less than 50 percent for pupils more than a few feet from the teacher, while noise levels during groupwork are exceeding levels dangerous for the health of teachers and children.

In hospitals, noise levels are up to 12 times the WHO recommended maximum, which means patients struggle to sleep — and sleeping is how we get well. It's no surprise that noise is the number one complaint of patients in US hospitals. Studies have shown that simply sensitizing staff to the sounds they are making can cut noise levels by up to three quarters, so just listening can make a massive difference.

In offices, noise is again the number one complaint, with millions feeling the frustration of trying to concentrate in open-plan spaces that are designed to support only one kind of working: collaboration. We clearly need much more quiet working space.

The story goes on, in hotels, in shops, in restaurants, in airports and train stations, and even in our homes. Noise is all around us. We need to start listening in order to control it and stop these negative effects on health, effectiveness and happiness.

TECHNOLOGY

The breakthroughs in communication of the last several decades have almost all been text-based: email, SMS, instant messaging and social media all rely on eyes and fingers. The result is that millions of people would rather have a conversation in writing than in sound.

My company The Sound Agency did some research with Edinburgh Stirling University into preferred channels and messages and it yielded some fascinating insights. Older people were wedded to email, while the middle generations loved SMS and the youngest preferred IM or social media platforms. This brings a whole new dimension to the generation gap: not only do the generations have different attitudes and vocabularies, but also entirely different channels of communication. All the samples agreed on one thing: they preferred to ask someone out, or break up with someone, in writing — possibly because in a scary conversation like that, it's safer not to be around to experience the response in person!

MIT professor and TED speaker Sherry Turkle has written an excellent book called *Alone Together* on the effects of technology on our relationships. She suggests that, far from bringing us together in a global village, technology is increasing alienation and pushing people apart as we move from a few deep relationships to many shallow ones. I agree with her. In my workshops, I sometimes ask for a show of hands if people do email in bed at night while lying next to their loved one. Increasingly the majority of the people in the room own up to this very destructive behavior, which I see as another nail in the coffin of spoken communication, driven in by the irresistible hammer of technology.

EDUCATION

We have four communication channels: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Two send; two receive. Two are for the eyes; two for the ears. Reading and writing are considered core skills in every curriculum in the world, while speaking is barely taught in schools — listening, even less so, maybe because it's a silent skill. Sadly, millions of children leave school every year having never been taught how to use their voice to its full to speak powerfully, or to listen consciously.

Listening is the doorway to understanding, and speaking is the strongest expression of ourselves in the world. We need to re-learn how to speak — and how to listen.

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

In my webinar for First Clearing and also in my fifth TED talk, I listed seven deadly sins of speaking. Of course, this is an arbitrary list, but since the talk went up on TED.com in 2015 I haven't had anyone suggest anything major that's missing, and many people have communicated how useful they find it.

I want to stress that I am not saying these seven things are inherently wrong and to be banned or deplored at all times. Most of them can be useful or at enjoyable in moderation, even if as guilty pleasures. However, I am suggesting that people who habitually exhibit any of these traits become harder to listen to, as well as less good at listening.

Let's meet the seven deadly sins in detail.

“NON MALE LOQUARE ABSENTI AMICO (SPEAK NO EVIL OF AN ABSENT FRIEND).”

TITUS MACCIUS PLAUTUS, TRINUMMUS IV, C. 190 BC

GOSSIP

My definition of gossip is speaking ill of someone who's not present. It's not gossip to praise someone who's not there, nor is it gossip to criticize someone to their face.

Gossip is probably the most common form of triangulated communication, which is usually a recipe for trouble. In triangulated communication, person A speaks to person C about an issue he or she has with person B instead of trying to solve the matter directly with person B, thus creating a triangle. Usually person A is seeking validation and/or sympathy. You can hear this going on any day if you sit on a bus or train and listen to the phone conversations around you: in my experience, the vast majority involve gossip in this fashion.

Gossip is seductive and so common that we tend to become desensitized to it; it becomes normal and acceptable. It's a multi-million-dollar business too, from the obvious specialists like celebrity magazines, TV shows, blogs and YouTube channels to the subtler instances in many quality media.

Gossips are superficially popular and it's tempting to listen in, especially if we're in a group who are all indulging. Nevertheless, everyone knows that the moment we leave, a gossip is likely to be speaking about us in exactly the same lurid, critical terms that were just being applied to someone else. Gossips are not credible; much of what they say is unsubstantiated and even malicious; often it is twisted or exaggerated for greater effect, producing a Chinese whispers effect that amplifies stories whilst insisting that every detail is true.

Exercise: *If you indulge in gossiping, try abstaining, initially for a short period. It may be that you can commit to do this for a day, or maybe a week, to start with. Be conscientious: this may involve not reading magazines, watching your usual TV, accessing your favorite blogs or website, and even not seeing certain friends or colleagues or walking away from some conversations. You can usually make an excuse to do so without letting people know what you're doing — or you could enroll some of your associates in the game and make it easier by holding one another accountable. This is non-trivial and may even be impossible for you, but even if you don't achieve 100 percent abstinence you will give yourself a chance to break the habit and set a new baseline.*

“THERE ARE NO TWO WORDS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE MORE HARMFUL THAN 'GOOD JOB.'”

TERENCE FLETCHER IN THE FILM *WHIPLASH*

CONDEMNING

Do you know anyone who habitually condemns or finds fault, for whom nothing is ever good enough, like the monstrous character Terence Fletcher as brilliantly portrayed by JK Simmons?

I feel for anyone who grew up with such a parent — the kind who, when their child scores 95 in a test, demands to know what happened to the other five. It becomes wearing to be around someone whose listening is always for defects and failure, and whose speaking is endless castigation and condemnation.

Of course, we must condemn evil. As John Stuart Mill said in 1867: "Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing."

However, like the other six sins, this is a habit we can fall into where our default position becomes critical and condemnatory. It pays to check in and ask the question: am I over-critical? Do I give praise where it's due? Do I naturally give compliments? When is the last time I praised my family? My team or direct reports at work? My friends?

If your honest check-in reveals that you tend to be critical rather than encouraging by default, try the exercise.

Exercise: Praising

Buy a notebook or use a spreadsheet or notes app. Make a page or sheet for each of the people closest to you — family, friends and workmates could all be included — and then set a routine at the end of each day to log in one column instances when you condemn or criticize them and in another column instances when you praise, encourage or compliment them.

After a few weeks, your behavior will change as this feedback reveals the weight of your interactions. You may then wish to set yourself targets for praising until it becomes more and more natural and the condemning habit has been replaced by a more neutral stance where you give praise and criticism when they are appropriate, rather than condemning by rote.

NEGATIVITY

Next door to habitual condemnation is constant negativity. I told a story to illustrate this in my TED talk, and it's absolutely true. My mother suffered from dementia in the last years of her life and this intensified an already somewhat pessimistic outlook. Her world view became entirely negative, even on days when she was completely lucid. I went to visit her in hospital one day when she was recovering from a small fracture, bringing with me her favorite newspaper. As I handed it to her, I said "Oh look, it's October the first today." She replied: "Yes, isn't it awful?" If the date is awful, what hope is there? I tried to make a joke of it, but I knew inside that she was serious; as time passed, it became harder and harder to bring her out of the dark into any sort of light, and it made being in her company emotionally draining.

It is simply debilitating to stay around someone who is highly negative. We might say brightly: "What a lovely morning!" only to be dampened with "It's going to rain later." When this dynamic is repeated endlessly, it's like trying to push water uphill: our positive energy becomes sapped and we end up feeling low as well. The only solution is to leave for a while to recharge.

Exercise: watch NOT

Check in and ask yourself if the word NOT crops up regularly in your speaking. Any sentence including that word is likely to be negative: some people I have met unconsciously inject the word in almost every utterance. If in doubt, ask a friend or record some of your conversations to check. Encouraging people are easier to listen to!



DO NOT LISTEN TO THOSE WHO WEEP AND COMPLAIN, FOR THEIR DISEASE IS CONTAGIOUS.”

OG MANDINO

COMPLAINING

I’m a Brit so I know this one very well! Complaining is our national pastime, although fairness compels me to add that this habit does generally overlay a bulldog spirit that still exists today: we may complain, but we do tend to knuckle down when required.

Not all complaining is a sin. If a restaurant serves you a bad dish or if a person or institution fails to deliver on a promise, complain! If you can change anything you don’t like, it’s right and proper to take action and that often starts with complaining.

The kind of complaining I’m suggesting you pay attention to is the useless kind: complaining about the weather, the government, your neighbor, your sports team... anything that’s beyond your capacity or your willingness to take action about. If you can change it, act. If you can’t change it or you won’t act, complaining is simply viral misery, infecting the person you are complaining to with your own negative emotion.

This kind of complaining can become an unconscious habit. Do you know an inveterate complainer — someone who moans about just about everything; someone for whom nothing seems to be right? It’s hard to be around such a person, and hard to listen to them for any extended period.

Exercise: Gratitude

If you have fallen into the habit of complaining, sit down with a piece of paper and write a gratitude list. Write down everything you can think of that you have to be grateful for. This may include any positive aspects of your health; your relationships; your possessions; your achievements; your service for others; your legacy; your surroundings; your experiences. Write until you can’t think of anything else. Keep the list by you and reflect on it for a few minutes every day. Add to it every time you think of something new to be grateful for.

EXCUSES

The reverse side of the coin from desiring to look good is desperately trying to avoid looking bad. We all make mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes upset others by creating cost or other negative consequences for them. In the face of anger or pain, it’s tempting to remove ourselves from the line of fire by blaming something or someone else for what happened. “It wasn’t my fault — what could I do?” Sometimes that really is true, but very often if we look closely, we will find that we did have a major part to play in what happened.

I’m sure you’ve made excuses at some point in your life, and you’ve probably had it done to you many times. It is common human behavior, but as with the other deadly sins of communication, the problem arises if it becomes a habit. Some people are blame-throwers, casting themselves as eternal victims with the fault being everywhere but here. This kind of behavior creates two costs.

First, it’s dishonest, or at best dissembling, so it undermines trust. People don’t give credence to someone who blithely bends or breaks the truth simply to look good.

Second, it obstructs growth. If we refuse to take responsibility for an error or failing, it is very likely to recur: you can't fix something that you swear is not broken. This kind of denial can be very destructive, obscuring self-awareness to the point where we think we are other than what we really are. The first step in transforming anything is to be aware of it. Repeated excuses deny us the chance to improve, because we believe there's nothing wrong with us. Mistakes are crucial for innovation: organizations that don't tolerate mistakes all tend to ossify, failing to lead or even to adapt as the world changes.

Exercise: effective apologies

When you make a mistake — and we all do that from time to time — simply apologize, commit not to do it again, and say what you will put in place to make sure you don't. This could be a new practice or structure of some kind.

EXAGGERATION AND LYING

We talked about embellishment earlier in the context of the Looking Good leech. However, embellishment is not restricted to hyperbole; it can express itself in embroidery of the truth. I wonder if you've ever claimed to have read a book you haven't read, or to have watched a movie you've never seen, or to have known someone you really don't know? I suspect we've all done this kind of thing at some point. Mild embroidery like this is relatively harmless, and sometimes it can be a form of rapport-building to warp our reality just a little to fit more comfortably with someone else's — but beware, lying is just around the corner.

As with all the seven sins, this behavior can become habitual and progressive: lies tend to beget more lies, which can lead to embarrassment, pain and even tragedy. This is a common theme in fiction, from Shakespeare's plays, many of which revolve around lies resulting in either laughter or tears, to the disturbing book and film *The Talented Mr. Ripley* which brilliantly depicts how lies escalate and trap the perpetrator in pain. There is a reason for this literary fascination with lying: it is very common and it can be dramatically destructive.

The effect on communication is seismic. If anyone is recognized as a habitual liar, their words are at best suspect, and at worst completely disregarded.

Exercise: Rigorous honesty

Pay attention for a few days to your honesty level. We all like to think we're totally honest, but few people are: white lies pop out to make people feel better or avoid criticism or punishment; maybe exaggerations become habitual to curry favor and be more respected. If you spot any pattern, take stock and consider instituting a rule of absolute honesty in the area of concern. In my experience, settling for near-honesty is not as effective as an absolute commitment where the line is clear and you do not cross it. Be careful not to hurt people around you with rigorous honesty: it is always possible to say nothing, or if compliments are demanded and you cannot honestly give one, you can use double-edged praise, like one actor passionately (and honestly) telling another that his performance was 'unforgettable'.

DOGMATISM

The Being Right habit is foursquare behind this sin. Most of the time, the shells fired in the conversational battle to be right are opinions. I grew up in a household where opinions and facts were rarely differentiated, which gave rise to a lot of table thumping and raised voices. These days, I believe this distinction is critical for

harmony so I offer a gentle suggestion in my talks and I'll make it to you now. Try using the phrase: "Would you like my opinion about that?" You do have to be ready for the answer no! Sadly, all over the world in billions of conversations every day, opinions are given without seeking any permission, often forcefully or even violently.

Internalizing this distinction between opinions and facts is a crucial foundation of humility, and a necessary condition for peaceful coexistence. The sun will rise tomorrow morning. My name is Julian. My book is called *How To Be Heard*. These are facts and there is no point disputing them. However, much of daily conversation involves opinions — about sport, politics, society, other people's behavior, the best course of action in a business or in a team, likely outcomes in the future, or effects of past actions (even historians love to disagree!). The problem lies in attachment. When we identify our own worth with our opinions, we become upset or angry when they are challenged; this is the fear-based energy that drives many arguments and confrontations.

Of course, we need to stay true to our values and our beliefs without being blown about by everyone else's, but we also need to have the capacity to learn and grow. We are not our opinions: we create or collect them.

Exercise: clarity on opinions

Practice being conscious of the difference between you and your opinions, you may find life becoming much more serene — and more interesting too, as you may be more open to new thoughts and perspectives.

It's important to be aware of the seven deadly sins of speaking. Removing these energy drains will dramatically improve the power of your speaking, and help you to access the many benefits for your happiness, effectiveness and wellbeing.



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