

OPENING AND STRUCTURING A MASTERFUL TALK

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Truly masterful speaking is about being with your audience in a *real* way. It's about sharing yourself *fully*. It's about starting with the focus on your listeners and letting yourself be inspired by them.

When you do establish the relationship and earn the privilege to share your information and your message, it must come from what you know most deeply in your heart and soul—from what we call your “essential knowing.”

In this report we discuss the nature of essential knowing and how to access it, and then provide a structure for bringing that knowing into the opening and structure of a masterful talk.

Essential Knowing

Our experience with many professional speakers is that they tend to shape their talks out of the latest version of their edited and refined body of knowledge, leaving out the nitty-gritty human interest of how they came, usually through turbulence, into what they now know deep down. When incorporating stories from their lives to open a talk and make teaching points along the way, they use tried and true vignettes performed and choreographed to the gesture. And aspiring speakers emulate this conventional standard by embellishing, crafting and polishing their own dramatic “signature stories.”

This approach may create slick presentations, but since it often tends to bypass the speaker's true voice and resonance, it distances him or her from the heart and soul of audiences.

For a talk to thrive with life and electricity, the content must be boldly connected to what we call the “essential knowing” of the speaker. Essential knowing is the vast, raw intuition the speaker experienced directly as a child, and struggled to express, or needed to stifle in order to survive. Our lack of language skills, in combination with the limited (and sometimes negative) listening available to us, may have driven our full range of essential knowing underground, even to ourselves.

Those of us called to service in enlightened leadership are the fortunate ones within whom that knowing never stopped operating and developing, like weeds shooting up through cracks in the sidewalk. Through the crucible of life experience, trial and error, we evolved a body of professional knowledge, which continues to unfold and refine itself daily. But the raw essential knowing we embodied at age 5 is still at the chaotic core of our roiling passion to serve, and accessing the right words for its ever-emerging nuances is a lifelong challenge.

Reflecting, on the platform, the raw energy of the fire and frustration you the speaker went through to get there is what makes you accessible and irresistible to the audience. They

recognize the whole truth when it shimmers in their presence and they can find the place within themselves that resonates with that truth.

Weaving the rich strands of essential knowing into talks requires a different brand of content development than is conventionally practiced. Essential knowing cannot be brainstormed, and very few can write it or find the true language for it on our own no matter how much time we give ourselves in a quiet place.

What is often required is tender, open listening that encourages words to arise from silence at their own pace. Long-forgotten moments from one's life emerge which can be turned into stories with meanings and messages. These are not the knock-down drag-out melodramas common to many orators. Rather, they are the earthy, juicy, simple vignettes that make a talk come alive with humanity and engagement.

In coaching speakers, our first priority is to facilitate and listen out an array of often forgotten life moments. Some of these are the defining moments from which articulate knowing naturally emerges on the razor's edge of awareness. These moments deliver us to the source of our deep well of essential knowing and, when we are willing to hang out there in guided self-inquiry, provide shape for our stories, messages, perspectives, and information from the platform.

The Talk Opening

This report focuses on the opening of your talk, a critical period of less than five minutes that eases you into a relationship with your audience by establishing the kind of rapport that compels rapt attention.

The first task is to select a defining moment from your life to open with, one that invites them into a journey to the heart of shared humanity.

You make that invitation irresistible right from the start by paying special attention to the silent beginning, the opening sentence of the defining moment, and reliving the story of that moment.

The Silent Beginning

The silence between the end of the applause and the first words out of your mouth is the most critical time in rapport building. You cannot get that opportunity back once you start to speak. Something special happens in a room when the speaker is willing to come to a complete rest ("start from stop" we say) and allow the listeners to be the shining lights. Let them awe you with the beauty of their soul radiating through their eyes. Hold your words until something real has been established in the room. When you take the time to let your feet sink deeply into the earth, they will feel the ground under them too.

This is the time when you communicate that you are also listening, not just speaking. When they realize you are truly there with them—and *for* them—a subtle and powerful energy shift happens in the room. As you model what paying real attention looks and feels like, they find themselves listening deeply before you have said a word.

But to do this, you must be willing and capable of standing in stillness.

This meeting place of two worlds, yours and theirs, is where you gently join. This is the beginning of a relationship, where you communicate that they are included, welcomed in, invited to co-create an experience with you.

The speaking event you want to share with them can only happen if the listeners are tuned in, and for this to happen, you must tune into them first. They may be sitting there with expectations, hopes, prejudices, distractions and judgments, but instead of meeting them at that superficial edge of evaluation, you enter into the vast silent now. When you master this revolutionary act of listening, you are able to transform the narrower energy of intellect into their willingness to join you.

This is where you and they make an unspoken agreement; that something real is about to happen, that you are including them in the journey, that their presence has weight. You are coming into real time with them, the pace at which people get to genuinely know each other. You have communicated that you are not in a hurry, that simply being together is what matters first.

This expanding moment together is a demonstration of your commitment to being open to intimacy. You are revealing yourself in the human form, no masks, no pretenses. Stripped of words, gestures, and any shred of performance, you stand in the fullness of natural presence. Natural presence wakes people up to their own nature, where they live in their hearts, where life grabs them, rips them apart, breaks them into pieces, and carries them into transformational moments where wholeness is possible.

We are often asked: "How much time should I take in silence?" or "Won't they get uncomfortable?" The answer is: When you *really* stop, there is no room for the thought, "When do I start?" Rather, you are having a complete experience that defines its own time parameter. In certain environments, this will be as little as one deep breath, in others it can stretch to minutes.

The Opening Sentence

People are paying rapt attention. The first words you say give them a place to gather in real time as a community. The words need to be concise, precise, clear and simple, establishing a time, a place, a universal situation. You want to speak them conversationally into the twinkling eyes of one listener. (No drama, no attempt at humor or mystery, just the facts.) Then you need to come to another complete stop while the audience registers the point and place in time and gathers right there. This requires at least another deep breath.

There is a deeper significance of drawing people to a time and place together. When we bring an entire audience to a private moment, we give them more than a peek—we transport them into an instant in our lives. Before they know it, they have joined you in that moment. It becomes a shared moment. They are experiencing it *with* you.

A good opening sentence delivered into the listening evokes a clear mental picture such that the listeners can't help wanting to hear the rest of the story. Listen to this one: "I was lying on the sidewalk, my bicycle tangled between my legs, and my 10 year old son started to cry."

Defining Moments

The opening story starts at a defining moment in your life that can be told in one or two minutes. It may be part of a larger story that shows up later in the talk. The defining moment leads to a learning for you, then transitions into your message/information—what you are here today to share with them.

An effective talk is built on the solid foundation of many life moments, each of which moves briskly from story to learning (meaning of the story) to teaching (message of the story).

A life moment is simply a point in time when something of significance happened.

We each have thousands of life moments (many of them defining moments), small and large, archived in our psyche, but they are often below the level of consciousness, latent. When we allow relaxed time to recall them, more and more come to consciousness, sometimes in a flood of memories. Some have found that keeping a "Life Moments" journal is helpful. Others have had great results accessing such moments through the eyes of a listening partner or group. When you gaze at a willing listener without efforting to remember, the eyes of another in your past can come through that person's eyes and a life moment will come through. There is a tendency to evaluate certain moments that come to mind as insignificant, or with no learning or teaching attached to it. Don't! Just write an identifying phrase for it so you'll remember it, and move on. When we allow the less significant moments to surface and be honored, stronger ones surface. And those "less significant" ones often turn out to pack a hidden wallop, once the learning and teaching is listened out.

Any moment has value. All are connected at the source. One moment unfolds into another if you remain open and aware. The discovery of the meaning of a moment is a transformational process as we let ourselves be led to the aha! How? By listening to the connection; by just saying, "And what this means ..." or "What I learned ..." or "Why I'm telling you this..." or "Why this is important..." or "What I know now is....." It's like opening a channel, a space, a void, and the answer arrives.

The story of a moment can unravel into many layers, many messages. Meaning exists in all things and in all time. A moment is really an eternity. A moment lives because we pay attention to it. In every day life we often let our moments become missed opportunities for connection with ourselves, others, and the divine.

When staying open to the moment, an attitude of awe and curiosity is called for. Surrender to the not knowing. "I don't know" is the threshold into possibilities, as opposed to the rigid position of attaching to what is known. What you know now is not what you will know in the next moment, the ever changing, open now.

Freshness, aliveness, the life force, life juice gets released when you stand in the not knowing and invite meaning into existence—your *personal* meaning—and discover its relevance to the lives of others.

How does a personal moment become a universal shared experience? In the deep well of human experience, tragedy and exaltation are mingled: birth, death, loss, change, celebration. Being human means that we are all of that deep well. Tapping into our own experience takes us down and into the deeper shared human well.

Our lives are a string of moments. You don't need a life-threatening experience to have a meaningful message to share. Do you find yourself comparing your moments with the epic "signature stories" that professional speakers often tell? Do you find yourself vainly searching for dramatic episodes in your life with big meaning that supports your information and message? Do you dismiss the simple moments that come to mind? Your true power is packed within those untapped moments, and the gift you have for the listening world depends on unpacking the meaning from those moments. When you allow such moments from different times in your life to surface and be collected, they build on each other and resonate into patterns that become the fabric of new and ever more powerful talks and programs.

As you develop the knack of accessing life moments from your past, you can begin practicing moving from story to learning to teaching, with a listening partner, or in a practice group where you feel safe. You will find that you have a marvelous, natural

capacity to take any point in time and spin it out naturally and concisely into a complete cycle of learning within two or three minutes, in the moment, without preparing.

This is the ultimate confidence and authority that an effective speaker brings to audiences. And to one's life. For when you can do this for any moment from the past, you can do it for any moment that comes up in the present. This is how an enlightened leader approaches daily life, for a day can be seen to consist of a series of defining moments, each with a learning and a teaching. When you come from this place, every "now" has the significance it deserves, and every situation you experience and every person you meet is your teacher.

At one of our *Speaking Circle* Facilitator Trainings we were sitting at the table for our Sunday lunch, a raucous occasion marked by spontaneous singing and stories. One of our participants looking pained, and another asked if she was okay. The room came to a hush as this person broke into tears and told us how she was seeing everyone else as great speakers and herself as pathetic. We all let her words and emotions land and have space. Then I asked her if she'd be willing to tell this story as a life moment. She nodded "yes," took a deep breath, and started: "Two minutes ago I was sitting at this table feeling like a failure." Noticing our immense listening, she took a deep, long breath. Then, all within one minute, she connected this experience with patterns in her past, realized the truth of the moment, remembered who she was, and spun out a teaching that we could each apply to our own self-esteem challenges.

The Rest of the Opening

The opening story is followed by a concise expression of what you learned in that experience that influenced you toward a lifework that brings you here today in all your passion to share your topic. Then an agenda of how you're going to do this (we suggest three headline sentences reflecting the three sections of the body of your talk, as outlined under "Agenda" below), followed by a concise promise of what they will get by the end of the time together.

The entire opening should be no more than five minutes, and is actually a closing, since it closes your listeners on being with you body, mind and soul.

Opening an Effective Talk – Summary of Steps

1. Start with a Life Moment

Open your talk with a defining or turning point moment in your life that led to a learning for you and passion around your topic, then transitions into what you are here to share with them today.

a. A full breath of Relational Presence

b. The opening sentence – Your first sentence gives your listeners a place to gather in real time as a community. These words concisely and precisely establish a scene and may include time and place and situation. You say it conversationally into the listening eyes of one listener with no added drama, mystery or attempt at humor. Just the facts.

c. Another full breath – This allows the audience to register a clear mental picture that they are drawn to and gather around as a community, as you also make a pilgrimage to that time and place.

d. Relive the story of that moment -- Bring yourself and your listeners to that moment as you share the rest of the story in about a minute. Longer than that is too much

information for this time in the talk since you haven't yet let them know the agenda and the promise. Let the facts speak for themselves simply, without added drama or embellishment. You want to let your listeners have their own experience, not transfix them with *your* experience. Be clear and concise, with no misdirection or glibness. Be real about what happened.

2. Transition to Meaning/Learning that Moment led to

When the story ends (and knowing where to end the story is another sensitivity you will learn in time) take a full breath, followed by a concise statement (one or two sentences) of what you learned in that experience that informed or inspired your life path.

3. Transition to Message/Teaching you are here to impart as a result of that learning

What is the message/teaching/information you are here today to impart in all your passion with this particular group? This sentence or two ends with the title of your talk.

4. Agenda

Outline the body of the talk in three sentences conforming to the three sections of the body of the talk. These sentences summarize:

- a. Awareness of the PROBLEM/pain/suffering you are addressing,
- b. The transformational POINT OF VIEW/new thinking/Aha! you are offering, and
- c. PLAN OF ACTION you will suggest.

5. Promise -- What's in it for them?

In one sentence, make the strongest promise that you expect to deliver. Then take a full breath.

6. Collect agreement

Collect their agreement that they are in the right room and are willing to take the journey with you. You may ask, "Are you ready?" or "Would this be helpful?" At this point you can expect a sea of faces nodding "yes, yes, we are with you!" Notice this.

Overview

Your opening has a finite ending to separate it from the body of your talk. You have provided crystal clarity on who you are, why you are here, what are we going to do today, and what's in it for them, which are the four elements they need to know to give you their undivided listening.

The entire opening should be no more than five minutes and is actually a closing, since it closes your listeners on being with you body, mind and soul. That provides that ground into which your message and/or information can now flow to them.