

How to
Speak Effectively
Without Notes

By
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The most effective public speech is simply private speech before a somewhat larger company,—conversation on a larger stage. I suspect that this was probably far more true than we usually suppose of the great speeches and great speakers of the past. We read their orations, and they seem to us to be very unlike the kind of conversation that we carry on to-day; and we think that they must have been as unlike the kind of conversation that was carried on in those days;—we consider that the orations of those days were very different from the

orations of to-day. But I do not believe that those speeches could have had the power they did have if they were as unlike the conversation of those days as they are unlike the conversation of our day,—if people had not been accustomed then, in their ordinary conversation, to that same style of speech. Their orations represented more likely the same kind of language and the same kind of speaking which they employed in their ordinary conversation. But whether or not that was true in the old days, I am sure it is true now. The most effective kind of public speaking is not oratory. Striving to speak like a great speaker or to produce a great oration is the surest way to fail.

I was reading in one of the papers, a while ago, of a member of the British Parliament, who has written a large history of the English people of modern times, but who had made a failure in Parliament. In this account the paper said that the trouble with Mr. — was that he was too clever, too eloquent, that he talked too brilliantly. He made such great speeches that people got tired of listening to him. What they wanted was something direct, simple, straightforward,—on the plane of men's

ordinary thought and speech. And I believe that most speeches fail nowadays which are not simply colloquial conversational talks of men with men. They have to be, of course, a little different from our ordinary conversation, a little less colloquial and more sustained, but the best of our public speeches are in the main the same kind of talk that we would hear from a man if he were sitting down in the room, trying to convince us of something, or to persuade us to accept his views.

Now the question is as to whether that kind of effective public speaking can be done without notes. I think the better question would be whether that kind of public speaking can be done *with* notes. We would think that private conversation very funny that was read to us from a note-book or manuscript. It would seem a very strange and unnatural conversation. We would like to have the conversation adapt itself to our mood at the time; we would like to break in upon it; to be given a chance, here and there, to take it in, instead of having it all read off to us easily, smoothly. And yet the wonder is that there can be a great deal of effective speaking read right off of manuscript.

Dr. H. Clay Trumbull, in "War Memories of an Army Chaplain," I think, tells us that his regiment did not care for extempore speaking. He says that he heard a couple of soldiers who came up to the door of the tent where he was preaching and saw that he was not reading from a manuscript, say, "Oh, the Chaplain's just talking," and they walked away. And he said that he found by experience that the sermons which he wrote out very carefully and then read were the most impressive ones, and were the kind of sermons that the soldiers desired to hear. And I have been reading to-day a speech of the late Principal Caird of the University of Glasgow. In it he spoke of Thomas Chalmers, the great Scottish preacher. Let me read what he said:

I think there never was a proof of the power of genuine eloquence to triumph over extrinsic defects of voice and manner so remarkable as that of our great modern Scottish preacher, Chalmers. Few if any here are old enough to have heard him, but if there be any one who has chanced to listen to one of his great sermons or speeches I need not remind him how little the conventional graces of oratory contributed to their marvellous effect. No grandeur or dignity of person, no polish or refinement of speech

or gesture, a voice without sweetness or melody, an articulation thick and guttural, an accent not merely broadly Scottish, but of undisguised provincialism; instead of commanding and varied action aptly following the changeful turns of thought and feeling, a continual see-sawing of the air with one hand, whilst the other followed the lines of the closely-read manuscript—such were the physical conditions which, in the case of this great orator, seemed to render anything approaching to eloquence impossible. Yet he broke through them all. To him these outward hindrances were but as withes and small cords, when under that inspiration, be it what it may, which gives a great speaker resistless sway over the souls of men. It was said that when Canning and Grey—men themselves not only of great intellectual power, but remarkable for those accessories of voice and manner that can hold listening assemblies enthralled for hours—went to hear Chalmers in London, these old and practised parliamentary hands could not resist the magic of his eloquence, and that, as the last words fell from his lips, Canning whispered to his neighbor, “The Scotsman beats us all.”

And yet his speaking was just this kind of speaking to which I have been referring. He read it all off a manuscript.

These must surely be exceptions. As a friend of mine, who is a business man here in the city, said to me just the other day in regard

to a certain preacher: "I can never remember anything that that preacher says. As soon as I go away, I forget everything that he has said—I cannot carry it away with me. He has it all written down on paper; how am I to remember it if he cannot remember it himself?" And I think that the great majority of people take this same view. And it is only a rare and exceptional man who can read a speech out of a book or from a paper and drive the truth home. I know men who write out their speeches and memorize them. That kind of speaking surely makes slaves of men. After a little while it wears out one's brain to do that sort of thing; and if a great sickness comes upon a man his worn mind may be the last thing to recover from that sickness. And there will be times in every worker's life when the method of reading will be impossible as well as ineffective. President Harrison said that when he began the practise of law he used to write out his arguments and then read them to his jury. One time the case dragged on until evening and there was no light in the courtroom. There he was with his argument written out, not able to read it, and there was the

jury, and there the judge sat, and he had to go forward with the case, and he could not read his notes and he was absolutely dependent upon them. He made up his mind that he would learn to speak in such a way as to be indifferent to circumstances.

And it is not only that this kind of speaking enslaves one, but it hampers one and makes him unadaptive to circumstances. Not everybody can imagine in advance just how the audience is going to feel. He cannot know in advance just what sort of people are going to compose his audience. How then, as the time draws near, will he be able to speak most effectively to them the message which he wishes to deliver? Of course, speaking in the way I am doing to-night, is not nearly so smooth and even as having it written out and reading it off. But we need to remember that people listen extemporaneously, just as we speak extemporaneously. Nine-tenths of an audience never detect the grammatical errors of the speaker. He may stumble never so much,—he may notice it a little himself,—but not one person out of ten of those people to whom he is speaking will notice that he made any slips. As Principal Caird says:

We cannot apply the same standard, either as to matter or form, to written and spoken prose composition. It is even possible that the speaker who should aim at literary excellence would be going on a false quest, and that the qualities which made his work good as literature would mar or vitiate it as oratory. A reported speech, indeed, becomes literature, but it is not to be judged of as such, but as a composition primarily addressed to the ear, and producing its effect, whether instruction or persuasion, whether intelligent conviction or emotion and action, under the condition of being rapidly spoken and rapidly apprehended. And this condition obviously implies that many qualities which are meritorious in a book of treatise—profundity or subtlety of thought, closeness and consecution of argument, elaborate refinement and beauty of style, expression nicely adapted to the most delicate shades of thought,—would not only involve waste of labour in a spoken address, but might mar or frustrate its effectiveness. A realistic painter who bestows infinite pains in copying the form and color of every pebble on the bank of brook or stream, and every reticulation of each leaf on the spray that overhangs it, not only squanders effort in achieving microscopic accuracy, but distracts by irrelevant detail the eye of the observer, and destroys the general idea or impression of the landscape. And a like result may attend elaboration of thought and fastidious nicety of form in a spoken composition. Such minute finish is either lost and unappreciated by the auditor, or, while

he pauses to admire it, his attention is diverted, and he loses the thread of the discourse or argument.

If one of the greatest speakers of his day, the man who was said even to exceed Mr. Gladstone in his power and earnestness as a public speaker, the head of a great University, if he could feel justified in stumbling over the grammatical proprieties, surely we small people need feel no shame over doing so. Mr. Moody used to do it constantly, but it did not destroy the effectiveness of what he was saying. I have known college presidents who have gone in at one end of a sentence and never came out at the other. Sometimes they have used two negatives, or a plural verb and a singular subject, but all these little roughnesses and crudities of form may have only added power to what they were saying. It is the power of persuading and of convincing people,—the power of driving truth home, of making truth clear and plain and appealing and commanding to them, that is the great thing. Grammatical correctness and precision are desirable things, but absolute smoothness is not indispensable. I cannot imagine a lawyer who is trying to persuade and convince a jury hesitating to be frag-

mentary, incomplete at times, in order to get his points driven home to the minds and hearts of the men to whom he is speaking.

It would be interesting, if there were time, to take up several great speakers and to try to get their methods in this matter. I will speak of one or two in connection with this matter of learning to speak effectively without notes.

I was reading, last week, "The Lights and Shadows of a Long Episcopate," by Bishop Whipple, the Bishop of Minnesota. It is full of illustrations of the necessity of a man's being free and ready in his talk. He tells of a preacher who worked among factory men. He was preaching one day to them when an agnostic interrupted him and said: "Sir, I understand that you believe in the devil; I should like to see the devil." "Oh, have patience, my friend," the preacher replied. Now he could never have thought that out in advance. He did not know that any one in that crowd was going to talk that way, but he was ready to take advantage of the opportunity. Bishop Whipple says that when he himself began to preach he used to write out his sermon on Monday, tear it up, write it again, and tear it up again. At last he

would get it finally and finishedly written. Well, he gave that up after a while and preached without writing, for he would not have had time to look after his Indians if he had kept on writing his sermons. No man eager to serve men and to do a full man's work in the world could go on wasting his time in repetitious writing in that fashion all his life.

Mr. Moody used to preach by subjects. When he was reading papers or books he would make memoranda of interesting passages and slip them into big brown envelopes which he kept for that purpose, and bye and bye, when the envelopes got fat, he would arrange all his material as effectively as possible for his address, constructing a rough outline to be clothed and filled in as the occasion of speaking demanded.

But each one of us has to work out his own ways,—the ways that will help him most. I have never written out a speech since I was in college—there I only wrote orations and essays that had to be written. When I began Christian work and was still a student in college I wrote out a sermon on “I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ,

and him crucified." It was the only sermon I ever wrote out in my life. As I was going to speak at a place near my home, I took this written sermon along with me; but in the morning on which I was to read it I did not feel quite comfortable about it, and so just stood up and talked to the people instead. In the evening I said to the friend with whom I was staying, "I've got a sermon I've written; I think I had better preach that sermon; what do you think?" "Don't you do it,—get up and talk to them again," he said; and in the evening I got up and talked to them again. I have never written a sermon from that day to this.

When I was asked to speak here this evening, I was given the subject: "How to Speak Effectively Without Notes." Last evening, on my way home on the train, I began to think of the points I ought to speak of, and then when I got home I wrote them down, and chose the order in which they were to come—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. There were four or five subheads under six and several under eight. Now these are the notes of what I am saying this evening, written down on the two sides of this little sheet of paper. After one has been at it a while, he

knows how to make the different divisions stand out in a sufficiently distinct way to impress the memory. And if the points are logically arranged, he should know what comes after each one easily enough; so that if he has spent a little time thinking over it, he has all the points established in his mind. It will be necessary for him to go over it again and again and again in his mind. From one point of view it is a very wasteful method,—from another point of view the very best way. I have gone over a speech from twenty to forty times in my mind, and it was never the same at any two of those times; the same speech and yet fifty speeches on that same subject—and all following that same line of thought. And I think that any of us can train ourselves to learn to speak in this way or a better one,—by preparing a little skeleton,—by committing that to memory, and then having the line of thought clear in our minds; there is always that backbone of thought to which to return, and which we know will bring us through to a fixed end. At the same time, there is plenty of room to say new things that will occur to us as we speak that never occurred to us before.

Now let me venture a few practical suggestions, following on this personal experience.

In the *first* place, I think it is indispensable to the most effective speaking to have an aim,—a purpose in our speaking; a truth we want to express, a conviction we want to get people to share, a proposition we want to prove. We ought to say to ourselves: “Now what do I want to teach those people; what do I want to get them to believe? What error do they hold which I want to destroy? What cause do I serve?” There is a combative quality in us which stirs the whole man to better action. We must have an end to attain—an opposition to break down, an indifference to melt, that our speech may attain its highest measure of effectiveness. I wonder a great deal at the ability of the old speakers of the Lyceum platform to keep up; even the best of them did not keep up. Wendell Phillips was at his best, not when he was speaking of the lost arts, but when he was pleading the cause of his fellow-man. The speaker must have a high ethical concern, a desire to convince his audience of some right and true thing; that what he has to present concerns them.

Let us set before ourselves a definite principle that we want to convince people to adopt. We must speak to win, to persuade, with a heart of trust and regard for those to whom we speak, but it must be with a purpose, an end.

In the *second* place, it is a great help to put the definite points of a speech in the form of propositions, rather than in the form of a phrase or catch-word or exclamation. Set down your proposition, and then start in to explain, to illustrate, to commend, to prove that proposition. It is a great thing to keep our line of thought clear and definite, and it helps to put each point in the form of a statement, rather than as a catch-word. You can usually tell which of the two methods a public speaker is using, and there is never any doubt as to which is the more explicit and effective.

Third—In making the different points of your speech, be careful to put your strong ones after your weak ones. That is, put your weakest one first, then the next weaker and so on, gradually building up to your strongest, so that your strongest arguments will come at the close. It is still better to omit the weak ones altogether.

Fourth—Let us try to make each point clear. Do not leave anything unsaid to be dragged in later. Repeating a thing over and over again does not make it any stronger; it only introduces an element of weakness. If you think people have not grasped your thought, come around and set the truth before them in a new way. My father, who was a lawyer, told me that he would have to put a truth over and over again until he was sure that every one of the twelve men he had to convince saw through that point and laid hold on it. But make it clear as briefly and sharply as possible and then when we have made our issue clear, let us drop it and go on. To have a definite aim; to state our subject in the form of a definite proposition; to arrange our propositions according to their relative strength and so work up to the climax, to make each point clear and not stay on it too long,—are practical suggestions which will help.

Now a few *suggestions as to the manner of speaking.*

There are a good many things possible in speaking without notes which are not possible when you have to keep your eyes on your manu-

script. There is more power in your eye sometimes, than you may imagine. You will be able to attract the attention of some restless member of the audience. You look at him, and after a while he will become aware of this; will wonder why the speaker is paying especial attention to him, and will become quiet and attentive. Now you cannot do that if you are looking down at your manuscript. You ought to have your eyes free to roam about and look at people. So I say: *First*, keep your eyes on the audience to which you are speaking. *Second*, never waste a thought on a gesture. A gesture that has to be thought out in advance ought never to be used. The moment we begin to think of our gestures, they will be clumsy. Gestures will take care of themselves if we do not think about them. Let me read you something from Principal Caird:

Instead of studying and elaborately mimicing the tones and gestures by which joy, sorrow, penitence, hope, love, gratitude, naturally express themselves, or by which a speaker indicates assent, dissent, conviction, entreaty, interrogation, surprise, etc.—a process which not only involves vast labor, but at the best can only be partially successful—is not the simpler, shorter, infinitely more effective method to inspire mind and

soul with the feelings and sentiments themselves, and let them find their natural vehicle of expression? Suppose we adopted the same artificial expedient in private life, could anything be more ridiculous than to prescribe the emphasis, tones, pauses, gesticulations, by which the parental, conjugal, filial, and other sentiments may be appropriately expressed? How to sharpen or subdue the intonation, how to dispose of the hands and put down the foot, when in domestic life we desire to express sentiments the reverse of amicable; what is the proper pitch of voice by which an indignant parent shall indicate his displeasure at the profuse expenditure or other folly of his offspring; or what, in a most interesting and critical occasion for the youth of either sex, shall be the due and fitting degree of tenderness to infuse into eye and voice—I suppose we should make short work with an instructor who sought to prescribe to us on these and similar points. And the maxim which applies to private colloquy is not less applicable to public speaking. Think, feel, be master of your subject, let your imagination and heart be enkindled by it, and the appropriate form will come of itself.

In the *third* place, talk straight ahead. If you talk off to the sides, people cannot hear you at all. Of course, in many places this is not a very easy thing to do. Where the hall is shallow and wide, one is tempted to turn from side to side. Do not do it. Always

speak straight forward into the center of the audience. But I have heard of circumstances like that where the speaker, looking straight ahead, found difficulty in controlling himself. I heard of a preacher who used to preach facing a long aisle leading down to the entrance of the church. Well, one day while he was preaching, he saw a man sitting in a field opposite the church door, and presently a goat came along behind him. When the goat approached within the proper shooting distance he let himself go—right in the small of the man's back. Of course under circumstances like those it is very difficult for the preacher to keep talking right ahead. But the only way to speak to a great audience is to speak right straight forward into the center of it. The voice will spread out on either side. And there are very few preachers who cannot make an audience hear if they want to. If they will only talk right out they can be heard. There may be a certain stricture of the voice, at first, due to nervousness, but after a while one can accustom himself to talking conversationally. But any effort to speak in a tragical tone of voice is simply killing. There is no effectiveness or

ability to persuade people in speech of that fashion. We have to talk to them as if we were talking to them in the house or on the street,—in a perfectly natural conversational tone of voice; earnest, to be sure, but natural.

In the *fourth* place, let us eliminate all raw slang. Let us make sure that we use terse and fresh language, but not any raw slang. Get away also, however, from all hackneyed phrases, and the shorter the words the better. If we could only boil down our talk to short words, it is amazing how much more effective and powerful our language would be. Now and then, of course, we have to use long words; but it would be a great deal better if we could deliberately set ourselves to ruling out the long words and using shorter ones instead.

Now I have made four suggestions as to the matter of extemporaneous speaking, and four regarding the manner. Now I want to make *four more suggestions*.

In the *first* place, we ought to read a great many books and fewer newspapers. To read the newspapers too much debauches the mind, and breaks its power to keep long on any one line of thought. It makes the mind maudlin

and prostitute, and takes away its powers of concentration. We must read books and *good* books. There are not any of us here who cannot find time to read books. The boy David Livingstone found time to read. If he could we can. You remember that he went to work before he was nine years old in a cotton factory at Glasgow. He would begin work before six o'clock in the morning and did not get home until six at night. He went to school from eight to ten at night, and then from ten to twelve he would read and study. Then they would have to force him to go to bed. The only other chance he had to read was at his work in the cotton factory. He put a book at a certain place which he had to pass every time he followed his machine to and fro. Each time it took him a few seconds to pass that point, and every time he passed it he used his seconds to catch a word or two; then on and back until he got to the place again and could snatch a few words more. That is the way he began his education. After a while he had a chance to go off to school, and then he studied medicine. But he made his beginning just by snatching those few seconds at a time as he

worked away at the loom in the cotton factory. We, too, can read *good* books. That is the only way we can store our minds full with ideas and illustrations, so that they will suggest themselves to one's mind while he is speaking.

Especially *we must know our Bible*. A man who truly knows his Bible can preach a great and striking sermon without using a word of his own, just putting passages from the Bible together; and there are Churches where the ministers are able to do just this thing. I was attending a funeral just a few days ago where the services were conducted by one who spoke for twenty to twenty-five minutes. He did not have any Bible in his hand, yet every word he spoke was from the Bible. I have heard him conduct communion services, and every word that he said was quoted from the Bible. We cannot do better than to memorize the Bible,—that will give us a vocabulary. If we cannot read any other books, let us read the Bible and store it in our minds.

In the *third* place, we must be morally earnest in our lives in order to be morally earnest in what we say in our public speeches.

Without this quality, our speeches will be without power. That is what kindles the faith in others; not mere zealous words, but the living forth of our true personalities, the being our own sincere selves, getting all aglow with our moral faith and letting that impress itself upon men. It was that which made Mr. Gladstone and Mr. Bright the most powerful orators of their day, and Principal Caird as well. It was the fervor,—the intense moral earnestness of the men. It was the fact that they *believed*. I do not care how clever a man may be, he simply cannot hold his own with the man of true moral vigor. Moral earnestness was Mr. Gladstone's real power. He once gave these suggestions, some of which he did not himself follow:

First—Study plainness of language, always preferring the simpler word.

Second—Shortness of sentences.

Third—Distinctness of articulation.

Fourth—Test and question your own arguments beforehand, not waiting for critic or opponent.

Fifth—Seek a thorough digestion of, and familiarity with, your subject, and rely mainly on these to prompt the proper words.

Sixth—Remember that if you are to sway an audi-

ence you must besides thinking out your matter, watch them all along.

Nobody can attain the glory of eloquence without the height of zeal and toil and knowledge.

But his own power came from his moral vehemence. Especially in his later years he spoke like an angel in wrath.

In the *fourth* place, do not imitate anybody else; do not try to adapt yourself too much to the personality of the audience to which you are speaking. A very dear friend of mine who died just a little while ago walked home with me this last Fall after a meeting which we had both attended, and where I had spoken. At the meeting I had tried to adapt the truth I was trying to present to what I knew to be the mental prejudices of the people to whom I was speaking, and she asked me: "Do you think that one does his best work in speaking out his own thoughts, or does he do his best work by qualifying them to meet the point of view of the people whom he is addressing?" I believe that the great thing for us to do is to think out our own convictions for ourselves, and then just to get up and speak those convictions with kindness and tact and real love, but with-

out any compromise—without any toning down. The principles are ours. God must have given them to us for our message.

At the first speech many men have made they have broken down. Do not let yourself be discouraged. Let us keep at it until we know how. Remember the old story of Demosthenes and the pebbles. Remember D'Israeli's first failure. "I have begun several times, many things," he said, finishing his first speech in the House of Commons amid jeers and laughter at his failure, "and I have often succeeded at last; aye, sir, and though I sit down now, the time will come when you will hear me."

I remember going, some time ago, to speak at a political meeting. There was also a young lawyer to speak that evening. He had never been accustomed to speaking extemporaneously, and he had a long, written-out speech. When we got there there were six people in the audience, and that big speech of his, written on legal cap and tied up with ribbons somehow did not fit the crowd. The rest of us, appreciating the humor of the occasion, just spoke hit or miss, and we chaffed him; but my friend

went home that evening with his heart in his boots. He told a friend afterwards that he was completely discouraged, and he made up his mind, just as Mr. Harrison did, that he was not going to be tied that way again. So he started in to memorize Shakespeare, and there are some plays, now, I am told, that he could give all by himself. He can recite or talk for a whole evening without a scrap of paper or note of any kind; simply because he made up his mind to be prepared, so that he could go out among men and talk to them; so that he could express his convictions naturally and persuade men convincingly to accept those convictions as their own.

There is just *one other point*. Our hearts must be in it. There must be warmth and tenderness and love, and self-forgetfulness. Principal Caird has spoken the wise word here also:

If a speaker is thinking of himself and not of his subject, of the manner and not of the matter, if his attention is occupied with the modulation of his voice and the aptitude of his gestures, if an undercurrent ambition to be graceful, striking, emphatic, runs through all his fine sentences and stimulated emotions, he will be shorn of genuine power. Especially if, as

is almost certain to be the case, the audience detects the covert motive, their sense of reality is offended, they feel as if called to participate in an imposture, they become cold, guarded, unresponsive, and the speaker's hold on them is gone. For real, oratorical effect a speaker must never think of producing it. He must lose himself in his subject, be for the moment his subject. His speech must, so far as manner is concerned, have the spontaneity, the abandonment, the self-forgetfulness of inspiration. A speaker can suffuse articulate language with this deeper, subtler, underlying and all-potent language of nature. Lacking this organ of spiritual power, a discourse may have every intellectual excellence, but it will fall short of the highest effect. For often—

“Words are weak and far to seek
When wanted fifty-fold,
And so if silence do not speak,
And trembling lip and tearful cheek,
There's nothing told.”

Of course, crocodile tears everybody will recognize. You are not going to fool anybody. Assumed emotion, theatrical insincerity,—people will detect that. But earnest, genuine sincerity,—they will see *that* immediately. Surely, in speaking of Jesus Christ, in speaking of those great hopes on which humanity hangs, in making known to the world

the message of our Father's tender and yearning love,—if all this does not lay hold on us so that at times we can only speak of it with choked voice and tear-stained cheeks, my friends, we are not going to speak effectively anywhere or on any subject.