



THINKING OUT LOUD

A PSA WHITEPAPER

Leadership Communication: All I Know for Sure

Ideas and observations on leaders and their speechwriters, on dream speeches and speechwriting nightmares.

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INTRODUCTION: ONE NIGHTMARE AT A TIME

My first journalism assignment straight out of college was as the “Speechwriters’ Worst Nightmares” columnist for a weekly eight-page publication called *Speechwriter’s Newsletter*. My process for generating this column was simple enough. I went down the *Speechwriter’s Newsletter* subscriber rolls—about 600 souls, if I remember right—and called people up and asked them if they could think of any professional “nightmares” that they wished to share with the readership.

I was surprised and impressed by three things:

First, no speechwriter was ever stumped for a nightmare. The speechwriter’s job—with its simultaneous anonymity requirement and proximity to power (so close but so far away)—is inherently absurd, and lends itself to unpredictable circumstances and moments of madness. The question was always: Which horror story would the speechwriter tell? (Many speechwriters were good for several columns each, and some might have been able to write a weekly nightmare column of their own.)

Secondly, speechwriters are good storytellers, so as for crafting their troubles into compelling narratives—they’d done it for me, probably debuting the yarn at the family dinner table. It was a doable assignment for a green journalist. I just had to press “record.”

Finally, speechwriters wanted a chance to tell their stories to someone, anyone, who might actually understand. Knowing my column would be read by other speechwriters, they confessed so willingly and at such length that the problem was editing the column down. (And dealing with the occasional call-backs on deadline day. “Scratch that! I thought of a better one!”)

I’ve traveled far afield journalistically since those days—covered politics and art, travel and sports and ballet and murder. But I’ve always stayed in touch with speechwriters. I like speechwriters for the same reason I like all kinds of abnormal people: They can’t pretend that they’ve got everything figured out, that life has unfolded as they’d planned. They’re improvisers, economically, ethically, morally and intellectually. And improvisers are more fun to write about, and to drink with.

I hope their eccentric subject justifies the eclectic nature of these short essays about the few things I think I know for sure about speechwriting. From columns at *Vital Speeches’* website and posts on my personal blog *Writing Boots*, these pieces are lashed together exactly the way all speechwriting wisdom is: Client by client. Assignment by assignment. Dilemma by dilemma. And nightmare by nightmare.

“THE REASON I CALLED YOU ALL TOGETHER” ... IS EMOTIONAL, NOT INTELLECTUAL

“Ladies and gentlemen, the reason I called you all together this evening ...” —Thomas Murray, my dad, at the beginning of every family dinner.

Maybe I ask too much when I advise speechwriters that, “A speech that doesn’t move people emotionally—the doing of which requires the courageous sharing of emotion on behalf of the speaker—should not be a speech.”

After I said such a thing at a communication conference, a woman came up and told me her speaker is an intellectual who refuses to tell personal stories in order to connect with the audience. How to convince her?

I replied that convincing her to tell personal stories may be impossible, and also unnecessary. But as an intellectual, her speaker should be able to understand this: There are much more efficient and convenient ways to get across rational arguments and data, than dragging hundreds of people out of their lives and into one room to hear you read aloud what you might as well have sent them in a PDF.

*She must understand that the only possible justification for inconveniencing so many people—and working the hell out of her speechwriter and herself—is to take advantage of the unique fact of a speech: The ability to look people straight in the eye and convince them **physically** of something about you that your printed word can’t get across. Supreme confidence, perhaps. Intensity. Sincerity. Charm. Humor. Warmth. Courage. Love.*

You don’t have to spin personal yarns to get those attributes across. In fact, my conference questioner says her client conveys a sense of caring by interviewing audience members ahead of their speech and meaningfully working their comments into her talk.

Great! Whatever works!

But whatever you do—and this is a claim I’m ready to defend—a speech must show the audience something about the speaker that they could never have learned from reading the text. And that thing, usually, is not intellectual, but rather, emotional. The speech itself can be intellectual—should be intellectual—but the speaker must justify all this by giving something emotional, which is the only way to make the audience glad they came, and the speaker glad she went.

Tell me I’m wrong.

REACHING THE INNER FOURTH-GRADER: HOW TO MAKE A BORING SPEAKER INTERESTING

Wherever I speak around the world, I get the same question: How do I animate and effervesce my wooden, flat speaker?

Bring in a speaking coach, is the easy answer.

Too easy, in many cases. Coaches can polish a rough speaker, but teaching a stiff speaker to act animated is like tying ropes to the arms and legs of a corpse.

Speakers are stiff because they are scared. And they are scared because they should be scared. For they have permanently stolen an hour from the lives of many human souls, and they know full well they don't have anything to say that is of real importance *even to themselves*, let alone to this innocent crowd.

Fear and public speaking have gone together since the first fourth-grade teacher forced the first fourth-grader to choose from a list of five weary topics on which to give a speech to the class. And the fourth-grader felt like a fraud because he was *made* to be a fraud, forced to pretend he had a genuine, studied, heartfelt, unique and useful opinion about "How does pollution affect society?" Or was it, "Are zoos good for animals?"

And so the fourth-grader stood, shame-faced but brave, in front of classmates with whom he or she had exchanged fart jokes earlier that very morning and pretended to be an authority on the benefits and drawbacks of cloning (while the classmates, with mixed success, pretended to care). And said the expected things for the required amount of time and sat down and hoped that the next such assignment would be preceded by death.

And that's pretty much exactly how public speaking went down for the fourth-grader, as he or she passed through junior high, high school and college, where the phony passion was applied to mouthing rote arguments for or against euthanasia, raising the drinking age and the legalization of drugs, exactly in that order.

Then a merciful decade or two passed—during the fourth-grader's early work life, when most of the speeches were being given by the elders—and the fourth-grader's oratorical participation consisted mostly of pretending to be interested in other speakers who were pretending to be interesting.

But then one day the fourth-grader became a manager. And soon an executive. And then a senior executive. And finally the call came: Would the fourth-grader honor a faceless audience by appearing at a random leadership forum and delivering a speech on an unspecified topic?

That's when the fourth-grader became your client. And you wonder why your client is elusive and would appear to prefer to focus on any aspect of her work rather than the speech that's coming up. Don't be surprised! Your client is a fourth-grader! And do you know who you are? In the fourth-grader's mind, you are the teacher, who is trying to get the fourth-grader to choose one of the five weary topics that you have suggested!

Long before the fourth-grader understood his or her own mind well enough to have anything genuine to say that could be sustained over more than a single minute of oratory, he or she had utterly disassociated public speaking from true candor and intimate communication. So if you are to recouple these two concepts in your fourth-grader's fully grown (and thus half-ossified) mind, you will have a hell of a job ahead of you.

You have to ascertain something true and deep about what motivated the speaker to climb all the way from the fourth grade to the position of CEO of your company. Are we dealing here with a brilliant or dogged engineer? A passionate financial analyst? A natural motivator of people? An idealistic believer in the industry? Or just a gasoline-driven ambitious maniac? Whatever the qualities that got the fourth-grader all the way to this exalted position (far ahead of all of the fourth-grader's classmates)—well, you've got to understand something about where those qualities came from, and how they connect today with the fourth-grader who's still inside.

And *now* you're threatening to write a speech that's outside of the five suggested topics. A speech that feels like something only your fourth-grader could give—because it's about his grandpa, it's about what she did over the summer, it's about why he doesn't like to get a haircut, or why she thinks it's better to be a tomboy than a girly-girl. And suddenly, the fourth-grader isn't so focused on the PowerPoint deck. Suddenly the fourth-grader is up for trying it without a lectern. Suddenly the fourth-grader is laughing on stage, and wondering aloud whether you should maybe be videotaping this speech, to send to all the employees.

Because she suddenly realizes: She can't remember giving a speech that sounds so much like herself.

Actually, this doesn't happen suddenly at all. A speaker for a Danish government minister asked me not long ago about her client. "He doesn't like to tell personal stories," she said. "But I've gotten him to do it, and he knows they love it when he talks about the old car he bought and loves. And he knows that's always the part they remember."

Could she have a straight-up conversation with him about beginning to choose the topics he speaks on based on the issues he feels most personally

connected to? So that to whatever extent strategically advisable, every speech he gives is about his beloved old car—or his mother, or his freshman history professor, or his political mentor, or an intellectual revelation or a personal turning point or anything that’s as true to the fourth-grader as it is to the man. Yes, she said. She actually thought she could have that conversation.

I told her to keep me posted. She looked at me skeptically, but could see that I meant it. The speeches they generate together will all be in Danish. But if she succeeds, the communication they achieve will speak to us all.

A COMMUNICATOR’S PERFECT BOSS: LYNDON JOHNSON?

Lyndon Baines Johnson was as close to a sociopath as you’d ever want running the country. Manipulative, abusive, ruthless and conniving: These were some of his best qualities, the ones that writer Robert Caro celebrates in *The Passage of Power*, the latest in his epic serial biography of the former president. Though Johnson’s power-mad personality hurt him in a number of ways, it also made him the genius of persuasion who passed civil rights legislation that no other president ever could.

But I read Caro’s book with the mind of a communicator (because that’s the only mind I’ve got). And as a communication client—and I believe Johnson’s chief speechwriters Horace Busby, Liz Carpenter and Bill Moyers would back me up on this if the first two were alive or the last one was talking about his Johnson years—President Johnson was close to perfect.

He had the three main attributes every confident communicator looks for in a boss:

1. ON CORE ISSUES, AN IDEAL BOSS KNOWS MORE THAN YOU.

You don’t want to be thinking for the boss, you want to be helping the boss frame arguments she has thoroughly thought through.

For instance: In 1963, when Vice President Johnson was helping make President Kennedy’s case for civil rights legislation, he was invited to make a speech at the 100th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address.

A few days before the Memorial Day weekend, he had Busby come out to [his house], and they sat by the swimming pool and talked, with Johnson doing most of the talking, about what should be in the speech. He expected Busby to follow their usual practice and turn his rough views into a polished speech, but this time the speechwriter didn’t think much

polishing was required. “I knew what I had heard,” he says. He had been writing speeches for Lyndon Johnson for 15 years, and he felt that this time Johnson had said exactly what he wanted to say. In Busby’s car was a large, clumsy recording device, and, he recalls, as he was driving away ... “I stopped the car a half a block away and recorded what we’d been saying pretty much as” he remembered it, and the next morning took the recording to his office and had the secretary transcribe it.

To the transcription he added two introductory paragraphs and one at the end, and turned it in to Johnson, who delivered it to great acclaim. Its core:

One hundred years ago, the slave was freed. One hundred years later, the Negro remains in bondage to the color of his skin. The Negro today asks justice. We do not answer him—we do not answer those who lie beneath this soil—when we reply to the Negro by asking, “Patience.” ... To ask for patience from the Negro is to ask him to give more of what he has already given enough. ... The Negro says, “Now.” Others say, “Never.” The voice of responsible Americans—the voices of those who died here and the great man who spoke here—their voices say, “Together.” There is no other way.

Now what writer could put words that strong into the mouth of a boss who hadn’t said them first?

2. AN IDEAL BOSS KNOWS WHAT MOTIVATES THE PEOPLE WHO WORK FOR HIM OR HER—INCLUDING YOU, THE COMMUNICATOR.

Upon assuming the presidency after the assassination of President Kennedy, Johnson needed to retain Kennedy’s staff to give a sense of continuity, and no one was more important to retain than Kennedy’s chief speechwriter Ted Sorensen, whose help he needed immediately, for a speech to a joint session of the U.S. Congress.

Trouble was, Sorensen despised Johnson almost as much as he’d loved Kennedy, whose death he was grieving deeply.

Of all Kennedy’s men, none had been hit harder. McGrory had seen him, at Andrews, “white-faced and stricken, unseeing and unhearing”; as Johnson walked through the West Wing on the way to his office, Ted Sorensen had been sitting alone at the Cabinet table, weeping. ... “Kindly, strongly, generously he told me how sorry he was, how deeply he felt for me, how well he knew what I had been to President Kennedy for eleven years, and that he, LBJ, now needed me even more.” Sorensen said, he was to recall, “Good-bye and thank you, Mr. President.” Hanging up the phone, he broke into tears again, “unable to face the fact that I had just addressed that title to someone other than John F. Kennedy.”

And yet Sorensen ultimately stayed on, and only days after Kennedy's death, drafted the speech that Johnson delivered to Congress.

Just as you would, for a client who expressed such understanding and sympathy to you.

3. MOST IMPORTANTLY, AN IDEAL BOSS BELIEVES DEEPLY THAT COMMUNICATION CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Many bosses believe they've gotten ahead by keeping their mouth shut and not saying anything stupid. Those are not the kinds of bosses you want to work for. On the other hand ...

Working on Sorensen's draft on the day of the speech to Congress, alone in the Oval Office, hours before the speech, Johnson made edits that show his great instincts as a persuader his conviction about the importance of communication: His edits were small, but they added drama. The text in front of Lyndon Johnson included the phrase "the dream of education for our youth." Johnson changed it to "the dream of education for our children." The text spoke of the dream of "jobs for all who seek them." "For all who seek them—and need them," Johnson wrote in. The text urged the passage of Kennedy's tax bill "for which he fought." "For which he fought—all this long year," Johnson added. It urged the passage of Kennedy's civil rights bill "for which he fought." "For which he fought so long," Johnson added.

And the text wasn't being edited just for drama.

It was being edited—by this man who knew that he had never been able to speak effectively before large audiences—to help him speak effectively this time, the most important time. To try to keep himself from rushing through it, blurring its meaning and its force—as, for thirty years, despite every effort, he had almost invariably done—he had it retyped in one-sentence paragraphs in an attempt to make himself pause between the sentences. Then, because he had used that device before and it hadn't worked, he reinforced it by writing in, in hand, between many paragraphs as a reminder to himself, "Pause." And then, as if he was afraid he would nevertheless still speak too fast, he wrote "Pause—Pause."

The time spent recruiting Sorensen—and editing the speech Sorensen wrote—paid off.

"All I have I would have gladly given not to be standing here today," he began. The sentence was eloquent, sorrowful. A hush fell over the Chamber, the hush of hundreds of men and women so intent on a speaker's words that they barely moved.

"The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest

deed of our time," he said. "Today John Fitzgerald Kennedy lives on in the immortal words and works that he left behind. He lives on in the mind and memories of mankind. He lives on in the hearts of his countrymen." The next lines on the page in front of Lyndon Johnson were "No words are sad enough to express our sense of loss. No words are strong enough to express our determination to continue the forward thrust of America that he began." But the words as Johnson spoke them did express that sense and that determination—because of the way he spoke them: so slowly, with a deep, grave dignity behind them, that they seemed to reverberate across the rows of listeners before him and above him. . . .

He concluded the speech by slowly, steadily speaking the lines, "America, America, God shed his grace on thee. And crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea."

The speech had been interrupted by applause 31 times and the ovation at the end was thunderous—in the hall as it would be in the press the next day.

"Yet it wasn't the applause that most forcefully struck some of the reporters watching the scene from the Press Gallery, but the tears. "Everywhere you looked," Hugh Sidey said, "people were crying."

Communicators who believe in communication and want to put it to work—and that's not all of us, I know—will look for bosses who believe in it, too. And when they find one, they'll tolerate some ugly means in order to help those bosses achieve truly worthy ends.

HOW TO WRITE A THREE-MINUTE SPEECH IN 10 MINUTES FLAT

My pals were meeting me at the corner tavern in 15 minutes, when my wife came to me needing help writing remarks for a memorial service two days hence. Being the editor of *Vital Speeches of the Day* magazine and the executive director of the Professional Speechwriters Association, I was clearly obligated to help. Being just another self-involved husband, I said, "REALLY? Now?!"

The tavern is five minutes away. The speech needed to be about three minutes long. We had to write it in 10 minutes. There's a story problem for you, kids. Huffily, I pulled the laptop across the kitchen table, opened a new TextEdit doc—TextEdit feels like a notepad rather than a blank page to me, and so seems like less pressure—had Cristie sit across from me and said as if at the funeral itself, "And now we'd like Cristie Bosch to say a few words about Chloe." Cristie smiled, but I looked at her exactly as all the faces would be looking at her if she had indeed just been put, spontaneously, on the spot: earnestly and expectantly.

She started talking. I started typing. She opened with a naturally funny line about sharing a birthday with Chloe. A birthday, and cigarettes. She told about the moment she first realized Chloe's unique gift, she relayed a story that backed that up—a story specific enough to actually mention a book called *The Runaway Bunny*—also naturally funny. She talked about another happy chapter in her relationship with Chloe and backed that up with another story.

She had her act amazingly together, though I don't think she knew it until that moment. I helped by shaping the phrasing just a bit, inserting a few rhetorical devices, drawing bright lines around themes and repeating some language at the end that she'd used in the beginning.

I also suggested some turns of phrase that Cristie immediately rejected on grounds that they were too purple for her taste or gilded the lily unnecessarily. I acceded to her instincts unquestioningly, of course.

Within 10 minutes, we had a three-minute talk that, after Cristie rehearsed it a few times, deeply touched the family and educated everyone else about the real character and best spirit of a woman who was gone forever.

In this process, there were a lot of factors in our favor, not least of all 21 years of intellectual and emotional chemistry, a common knowledge of the compelling subject in question and of the audience as well—and, always helpful, an urgent deadline.

Still, it occurred to me that at its essence, this is how the best speech collaboration is done: The speaker is pressured to say what he or she really thinks. The speechwriter writes it down verbatim, perhaps suggesting minor improvements in real time, perhaps waiting until afterward to do strategic adding and subtracting, filing and sanding. It worked insanely well for my wife and me. And I arrived at the J&M Tavern just as my pals were pulling up.

AUTHENTICITY IS THE SECRET TO LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION? IT'S MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT

And here comes a prominent business professor who actually thinks *authenticity is bullshit*.

"Leaders don't need to be true to themselves; in fact, being authentic is the opposite of what they should do," writes Stanford's Jeffrey Pfeffer in a currently popular book called *Leadership BS*. "Each of us plays a number of different roles in our lives, and people behave and think differently in each of those roles, so

demanding authenticity doesn't make sense."

All of our namby-pamby talk about how leaders are most convincing when they're speaking from the heart? Which heart? Pfeffer asks.

"One of the most important leadership skills is the ability to put on a show ... to act like a leader, to act in a way that inspires confidence and garners support—even if the person doing the performance does not actually feel confident or powerful."

To me, Pfeffer sounds like he's being purposely disingenuous. I'd love to ask him if he thinks the "role" he plays as a husband or a father isn't any kind of true self—or at least a truer self than the "role" he plays with his students or his colleagues or his administrative assistant. Are they utterly separate roles or just different sides of one soul? Surely he doesn't boil down all of his life's behavior as merely pragmatic reactions to the drama at hand? I'm pretty sure a person who felt that way would not write books.

Pfeffer's idea isn't merely simplistic, it also old—too old to be called provocative by anyone who has read Shakespeare: "all the world's a stage, and all men and women merely players."

But the endurance of this amoral vision forces us to acknowledge it. It forces us to question, as Pfeffer does, the authenticity notion that the leadership industry (and also the leadership communication industry, of which I must consider myself a part)—has been making too simple-mindedly.

"The leadership industry is so obsessively focused on ... what should leaders do and how things ought to be," Pfeffer writes, "that it has largely ignored asking the fundamental question of what actually is true and why."

And this, my friends in and around the leadership communication industry, is where and why we must be careful. Because we want leadership to be closely tied to authenticity. We want it because authenticity is good and we want to be good. We want to be involved in a noble social enterprise, not a mercenary racket.

But if we believe all the time what we want to believe, our counsel will be appropriate to the clients we wish we had rather than the ones we have. And those clients will notice. (And maybe they've noticed already.)

To be effective and moral actors, we must do four things simultaneously:

- Believe in a kind of authenticity as a leadership ideal.
- Acknowledge the more complicated way many leaders actually behave.

- Bring ourselves to acknowledge that some of those leaders actually know what they're doing.
- And nevertheless seek other leaders—leaders whose versions of authenticity give us the chance to do our best work—to serve.

CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE YOUR BOSS? YOU'D BETTER! HERE'S HOW.

The Murrays got a puppy. I'd like to introduce him, and then we'll talk about him.

Cute little fellow.

Yeah, yeah. Within the first week: I had spent \$1,000 on the dog and on Snakeoil Sprays, Piss Pads, Special Baggies, Gourmet Food and Other Stuff That Dog Owners Didn't Need Until PetSmart Told Them They Needed®.

I had felt the warm ooze of Charlie's shit between my bare toes.

I had mopped up Charlie's piss maybe a dozen times.

Only a dozen, because I'd taken Charlie down the three flights of stairs probably 60 times.

I had bellowed "no" several hundred times.

I had lain awake for many black hours waiting for Charlie to stop barking from his cage. I can tell you that he barks at the rate of 62 times per minute.

Sleep deprived, I had gotten into a bitter e-mail argument with a well-meaning relative who feels strongly that I should refer to the cage as a "kennel," because "cage sounds like the zoo."

I had risen seven mornings before sunup to take Charlie out.

I had had a conversation about "buyer's remorse" with my wife. Tyrannically but sincerely, I told her the thought, however natural, is simply unacceptable.

I had missed five workouts, unable to leave Charlie at the house to go running, unwilling to drag him down the sidewalk as I jogged. (Finally, I got over it, and now drag him down the sidewalk.)

My wife told me I need to be "strategic" about when I wrestle with him, "So he knows when it's OK to bite." I told her I didn't know what "strategic" meant in this context. She said, "Like, maybe just don't wrestle with him at all."

I had told Scout she mustn't run from Charlie when he nips at her. She continues to run from Charlie every time he nips at her. "I'm scared!" (Oh, and don't think I don't know you're finding fault with my leadership already; I use the word "I" too much, and "we" too little. Well I'm running a three-ring circus here, and I don't have time to play tiddlywinks with everybody's ego.)

I have my strategies and objectives—for potty training, and less urgent forms

of obedience—and I'm sticking to them, and demanding that everyone in the household sticks to them. But do I know they're going to work? No, and so I furtively check the websites of pet "experts" to see if they've got any other strategies that might work better.

I feel helpless, put-upon, a little scared ... and sorry for himself—the way CEOs feel. The way all people feel who have power but not complete control. Hunches but no guarantees. Good intentions but a propensity to stumble occasionally.

One morning several years ago—must have been awhile ago, because I was still smoking—I was hung over, and out of cigarettes. I fumbled in my closet and found my cleanest dirty shorts. I stumbled down the stairs and ambled down the city sidewalk. It was a terribly bright summer morning, and I squinted and tried to herd random synapses into thoughts.

I took a step and felt a squish under my right foot, and a splatter on my left calf. I looked down. *I had stepped on a baby bird.* I had stepped on a baby bird! It was dead. There was nothing to do but continue to the gas station, calling myself names: You big stupid oaf. You reckless, addled monster. You drunken, clumsy giant.

"Yes, give me a pack of Marlboro Lights, please. And a book of matches." For days and weeks, I told everyone that story, as a sort of serial confession. Everyone told me there was nothing I could have done. It was an accident. A baby bird on a sidewalk was probably going to die anyway. I probably even saved it an agonizing death.

That, to me, is how powerful people usually do their damage: by accident. And how they get over it: quickly, and with the help of their powerful friends. Understanding power requires the same effort as understanding poverty—empathizing with it in every way we can.

One of the few things I wrote in college that I still stand behind is a line I wrote in a short story: "All people feel the same things. We just don't feel them at the same time."

And since speechwriters work for people in power—indeed, communicate for people in power—it's important for speechwriters to know as much about power as they can.

And the best way to understand powerful people is to understand how we deal with power when we have it; and to admit that we do not always deal with it well.

IT'S WHINY AT THE TOP: WHY YOUR BOSS IS MORE INCLINED TOWARD SELF-PITY THAN YOU

The other day my 11-year-old daughter asked me, more or less out of the blue, whether I ever feel sorry for myself. I said I was sure I do, but I was stumped to tell her when. "When you're about to set off on a long run?" she suggested. Yeah, I acknowledged, but then couldn't think of too many more regular occasions for self-pity.

I have a loving family, I have plentiful friends, I have meaningful work, usually enough but not too much. I know how to spend my spare time and spare dimes. And what worries and frustrations I have generally seem of my own making, or part of a normal life, or both.

And aside from rainy days and Mondays, I think most people feel that way about their lives—including a lot of people who I think have it worse than I do. People in wheelchairs never admit to thinking, "Why me?" Firemen never think of themselves as "heroes," and they don't whine about the boredom of the job either. And what does everyone say who came to riches from rags? "We never knew we were poor."

You know what kind of people feel sorry for themselves the most? In my experience, it's powerful people: leaders of small organizations, or departments inside big organizations, or big organizations.

You know why? Because their fate, ironically, seems less in their control than ours seems in our control. No matter how hard they worked to achieve their leadership position, they feel thrust into it. No matter how easy it would be for them to cash out and move on, they can't see that path.

And no matter how good a leadership team they've built around them, no one works harder or thinks more clearly than they. They are Andy Griffith, the only sane adult in Mayberry, surrounded and supported by the doltish, the deranged and the daft.

And they have payroll to meet! Also, regulations are too strict, taxes are too high, the media is too liberal. And worst of all, no one—not employees, the customers, the investors—feels sorry for them!

Quite the contrary: People sniff out self-pity in leaders, and they find it. They disdain the big-city mayor who seems pained to take media questions. They despise the director of a failing nonprofit who bores the board with weedy details of projects and daily problems, to show them how hard she's working and how much she has to put up with. They depose the oil company CEO who lets slip during an environmental disaster, "I want my life back."

Leaders are at once the most self-pitying people in our society, and the least pitied by others. People who help them communicate—hell, all of us—should keep that in mind. If we work for a put-upon leader who we like, we should strive, ourselves, to be more Opie and less Barney. If we invest in an organization and smell self-sorrow at the top, we should run. And if we somehow find ourselves in a position to get rid of a leader who has begun to see him- or herself as a victim of circumstance, we should do so, and find a proven winner and happy warrior for a replacement.

A leader is a dealer in hope, Napoleon said. You can't give other people hope if you're feeling sorry for yourself.

The one thing we should not be, when we discover that a leader wishes he or she were anywhere else but here—even a leader making a great deal more money and possessing a much higher social status than we—is surprised.

BUT THE THING IS, GRAVITAS WAS BULLSHIT ALL ALONG. WHAT WE NEED IS “HONITAS.”

A few years ago a columnist named Rob Walker blew taps last week for “gravitas.” “A few months ago, my wife challenged me to name three people in public life today who really have gravitas,” he wrote. “Practically the only person we could agree on was Nelson Mandela ... who promptly died.”

(This guy has heady conversations with his wife!)

He went on to point out that presidents, news anchors, serious actors—these people all used to have gravitas. But now the president kicks it with Zach Galifawhatshishame, politicians routinely host Saturday Night Live ... and you laughed at the very idea of a serious actor.

Perhaps you expect the editor of *Vital Speeches of the Day* to bewail the death of the death of gravitas as the End of Seriousness. Well, it's not called *Vital Speeches Back in the Day*. I'm somewhat sanguine about the swansong of solemn superiors.

First of all, gravitas was never a good thing. Secondly, it's not even close to dead.

What was the matter with gravitas? To the extent that it implied its owner was above the shits and the giggles and nervous jiggles of the rest of us, gravitas was nothing more than a bluff, and a dangerous one at that. It put leaders of institutions—or as Vonnegut rightly called them, “guessers”—in a position as dads, and it allowed citizens to comfortably revert to their familiar and cozy

role of women and children. “That’s the way it is,” Walter Cronkite told us, and we were grateful he didn’t send us to bed without dinner.

Gravitas was a guy thing, and good riddance to it. Except that it still is a guy thing, though now it’s sometimes employed by women. And just because we don’t see it on TV anymore doesn’t mean it’s gone. Gravitas is alive and well in companies, in universities and in the military. Do you think people cracked wise with Steve Jobs? Warren Buffet is amiable and good-humored, but does anybody put a whoopie cushion on his chair? As Harvard University’s president would not say to the U.S. Defense Secretary, *hellz to the no*.

We’ve lost our taste for gravitas in popular culture. But we don’t live in popular culture, do we? We live at work, and most of the leaders of the institutions we work for aren’t exactly begging us consider them equals. (Nor do we want to see them as equals who just happen to make ten million dollars a year.) When the CEO shows up, everybody sits up straighter, and any exceptions only prove the rule.

Where gravitas still counts, gravitas is still thriving.

What we need in our institutions and in our culture, is something like gravitas, but something more honest. Something like the relationship between readers and prominent opinion writers.

People don’t read op/ed pieces or columns or blogs by and large, looking for new ideas. They read them, usually, for something like leadership. They want to hear from someone who is anointed an expert—because she’s the CEO of Ford Motor Company, because he runs the Red Cross, because she has covered six presidents for *The New York Times*, because he has been writing about technology since the advent of the Internet.

Except in situations of extreme uncertainty—think, invasions, assassinations, epidemics and earthquakes—people don’t necessarily want to be told, “That’s the way it is.” But they want to be told “That’s the way I think it is” by someone they feel they know, and by someone who lots of their friends are reading. For 30 years, whenever something happened in Chicago, the first question was one word: “DidjareadRoyko?”

Not that Mike Royko was infallible or his opinions unassailable—he was a known alcoholic and, increasingly, a bitter man. But we knew he knew Chicago politics and culture as well as anybody and better than most. And we’d known him for all these years. So he was a frame of reference. His take on a thing gave a community something to agree or disagree with, to begin a conversation that would result in a collective consensus, however uneasy. That’s the kind of gravitas we need: Honest gravitas, earned by real expertise

and reliability over time.

And the good news is, we have it! But it comes in different forms. Thanks to Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert and John Oliver, we now turn to comics at the end of the day, hoping to learn something about what we think about the foreign events and domestic confusion we vaguely try to understand as we rush through our lives.

You don't have to be stentorian or aloof or humorless to have honitas. You have to be square with your audience about what your credentials are, and what is the source of your authority and the extent of your claim on the truth. And you have to be interesting or appealing, somehow.

Which means, any one of us could have honitas—and almost all of us do have it in particular situations at work and at home.

A shift from gravitas to honitas: It's happening, and it's good. And that's the way I think it is.

NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE: TWO CULTURES DIVIDED BY A COMMON RHETORIC

I'm writing this missive from a bar at the Brussels airport, with the best-earned beer I've had in a while at my elbow—a boozy Duvel gold blonde—and another on ice.

I just came from a nine-hour day of presenting three different versions of my Speechwriting Jam Session speech highlight reel to three wholly different crowds of big European government types, at the headquarters of the European Commission here. And submitting myself to their natural skepticism during extended Q&As, one lasting 75 minutes.

Oui, another Duvel, merci.

The sessions actually went far better than I'd feared—and as I think about it, better than I'd dreamed, too. Why? Because by now in my embarrassingly pinpointed field of study of speechwriting and political rhetoric, I have an answer for just about everything.

How can we write speeches for audiences of different cultures proficient in different languages? Speak simply, about things that matter to every human being, regardless of culture.

How do I convince my boss not to use PowerPoint? Draw a distinction between presentations and speeches, and point out that no speech that has remained in human memory was ever accompanied by PowerPoint.

How do I get my rigormortistic speaker to appear to be a human being? Find some intersection between their personal interest and professional responsibility, and aim speeches at it. (If there is no intersection, you are screwed; but then, so is the organization that the soulless careerist leads.)

I'm even ready, after years of presenting sessions for international organizations mostly peopled by women, for women who thank me for flying all this way and to share my wisdom with them, HOWEVER: *How dare I use my Jam Session to promote my personal brand of American misogyny?* Too many speeches by men, not enough speeches by non-Americans in general (I showed only three) and non-American women in particular (the two women's speeches I showed were both by Americans).

I wasn't exactly prepared, this time, for accusations that women's speeches I showed—one by late U.S. Rep. Barbara Jordan and the other by New York State Rep. Diane Savino—were examples of women speaking in the “male style” of aggressiveness and “me, me, me.” As opposed, it was angrily explained to me during the Q&A, to Hillary Clinton's and Angela Merkel's speeches, which are somehow of a “softer,” more inclusive style.

I asked one of the women to give me an example of the kind of “woman's” speaking style she was referring to. I expressed my honest lack of understanding of what my questioner actually meant by this sort of speech.

She mumbled a couple of names of speakers and referred to Merkel's victory speech, given the day before, in which Merkel—this was my insight—said she appreciated the mandate given her and that she would use it “carefully” or some such. Not that I believed this was some fundamental difference in rhetoric from President Obama—or Mister Rogers, whose simultaneously spellbinding and deeply gentle testimony I had just shown.

Thankfully a third woman interrupted with a speech I couldn't have written in a more masculine style myself, about how there is no such thing as a woman's speaking style. Rather, there are two types of rhetoric—persuasive and empathetic (or some such) and how any good speaker, regardless of gender, should be able to handle them both, depending on the situation.

After that the day was downhill, in a happy way—through a 90-minute session with the EU's heads of communication, and down into a flowery valley of fellow speechwriters. I always quote Ruth Gordon who told Bud Cort in *Harold & Maude* that she has a way with people, because, “They're my species, Harold.”

Speechwriters—at home and abroad—are my species.

And after all, I leave Brussels—for a quick session in Copenhagen and a party with friends there, and then home—with less a sense of accomplishment and more one of astonished gratitude that perfectly capable adult intellectuals had minds open enough to allow an American “speech expert” to share his admittedly American rhetorical techniques in their halls. (Try to imagine the situation in reverse; you can’t.)

So here’s to the European Commission—I’m onto Leffe now, which is only 6.6% alcohol, and I’m beginning to calm down—and to the European Parliament and the European Union and Europe itself. May your open-mindedness overcome your blinders and your bitterness be overwhelmed by the light of your generosity of spirit.

And may mine, too. (I’ll tell you one more thing before I leave the bar to catch my flight: We make better Belgian waffles than Belgians make hot dogs.)

WHY DO SPEECHWRITERS HAVE TO BE GHOSTS?

Once a President Obama speechwriter sat with reporters and previewed a big speech the day before its delivery. To many speechwriters, this was a new low on a steady fall away from the traditional speechwriter’s creed of anonymity. Their perspective is well-represented by longtime freelance speechwriter Erick Dittus, who wrote in response to a query I made about whether the practice was a good idea:

From my perspective, the answer is almost an absolute no. Someone from the State Department, yes; or maybe the Press Secretary, but not the speechwriter. This is a bad trend that seems to be getting worse. Peggy Noonan was the first Presidential speechwriter of note to raise her hand and say, “I wrote that great line,” simultaneous to when it was being given, and then George Stephanopolous and a few others followed with President Clinton.

Before President-elect Obama even gives the inaugural address we learn about the lifestyles (Red Bull or Mountain Dew, Video games or Film, etc.) And then a discussion of sources (who they talked to or their assistants talked to put it all together)... and then the post mortem raising of the hand.

Fortunately, the ethics of the Obama people are light years ahead of Noonan. They at least seem to understand that the President just might be a step ahead of them, and that they are the sometime vehicle, not the driver of the speech.

Yet regardless of whether it's post, or pre-delivery each time we raise our hand (and yes I know the press is prodding for information) we undermine the brand (our speaker).

If you talk to Clark Judge—who wrote a bunch of Reagan and Bush-I speeches—you won't learn of a word that he wrote. Same went for James Fallows when he wrote for Carter, and to the best of my knowledge William Safire and company didn't claim credit (where it may have been due) for Richard Nixon's utterances.

Do I read with great interest what White House speechwriter are talking about their before a particular speech is presented? Yes. As a ghost who's written for 61 CEO's, and several elected officials I read most anything I can about craft [and the burdens] of fellow wordsmiths.

Yet, regardless of this natural curiosity, I would rather not have access to these ideas until well after a particular speech is written.

Why? Again, I believe it undermines our goal of promoting the speaker's [and I presume our] agenda.

While the outing of the speechwriter may meet the feint curiosity needs of the unsavvy citizen who knows little about the craft and the partnerships most good speeches entail, it decreases the dynamic energy of the message and the messenger. And that's not what we're supposed to be doing.

So... let the speechwriters write memoirs about their contributions and do the talk show circuit AFTER they leave the White House, not before the speech is given. We're collaborative ghosts not pure authors. If we want to see our name in print write a book or quit the relatively high paying job of ghosting speeches and become a journalist.

Over the years as an observer of the speechwriting business, I've been forced to take a stand on this issue, and I've chosen Dittus's stand. Witness my stern lecture to the White House's chief speechwriter only last fall, when I predicted that his attention-seeking would get him bounced out of the job within a year. But I've never felt quite as strongly about it as I've tried to sound.

And you know what? I think I'm coming around to another point of view—the one that says: Screw it: If speeches don't hold up to transparency—if we can't be moved despite a general understanding of how they're made, then maybe we should question how they're made, rather than scream for more secrecy. No one knows better than I do about how speeches are made, and I don't think my ear is any more jaundiced. A good speech well delivered is a good speech well delivered. The very best speeches—Obama's Philadelphia speech on race comes to mind—are always deeply rooted in the soul of the speaker, whether a speechwriter helped craft them or not. That's a law of spiritual physics.

It's the only law, as far as I'm concerned, and one that can't be broken even if we try. If you heard that Philadelphia speech, and a speechwriter came out and said she wrote it from whole cloth and handed it to Obama 30 seconds before he went on ... you simply wouldn't believe it.

Because human beings know authenticity when we hear it (or we ought to), and we can measure it in a hundred increments by a thousand different means. Whether or not we know the name of a speaker's literary collaborator ahead of time or afterward is a very small factor in our consideration.

If I had a speechwriting client who told me she wanted me to be a ghost, I'd be a ghost. And if a speechwriting client didn't specify how I ought to behave, I also think I'd err on the side of the ghostly. But like President Bush before him, President Obama doesn't mind having his speechwriters talk about the speeches they write, and so to go to battle on this issue as if it's some kind of moral code—well, I respect speechwriters who do, but I ain't gonna do it anymore.

YOUR SPEECHWRITER: AN OPERATOR'S MANUAL

As far as PR positions go, the speechwriter probably has one of the most interesting (and borderline absurd) jobs. One describes his marching orders from the CEO as: "Write down my thoughts as if I had them."

Until recently, this group didn't have a formal forum to share what they do. But with the advent of the Professional Speechwriters Association over the past couple of years, we can now look into the realities of this position, thanks to the results of its annual membership surveys, which yield insights about modern speechwriters that their managers and colleagues might find useful, as they try to coax sustainable excellence from this peculiar, but potentially powerful PR position.

The first thing to know about speechwriters is that many of them prefer to be referred to as something else. In fact, an argument broke out among the delegates at the first World Conference of the PSA about this point: "The term 'speechwriter' is limiting," someone said, questioning the wisdom of the name of the new association. One suggestion was to call it the "Leadership Communication Association," in order to acknowledge the broader role that so many speechwriters have: building thought leadership platforms, crafting executive messages for many media and coaching executives through various communication opportunities.

But other speechwriters rose to the defense of the old term. One person said it's useful because "it fences me off" from others in the organization who

would water the job down with other duties. A self-proclaimed “speechwriter” is a kind of brand that “excites people,” as opposed to broader, but blander descriptors such as “executive communicator.”

- **Don't hide your speechwriter**

PSA surveys regularly reveal that speechwriters are older, more likely to be male, better educated and better paid than their colleagues in public relations. The typical speechwriter is a 51-year-old man with a master's degree. More than half of the speechwriters surveyed make more than \$100,000 annually, with 23 percent pulling in more than \$150,000 (and half of those making more than \$200,000).

Speechwriters are also more likely than their well-coiffed PR colleagues to be unkempt, unruly, unconventional—or all of the above. But do not punish them for this. Every organization should have one person who is deeply—and perhaps even a little single-mindedly—devoted to helping the leader articulate the organization's point of view as compellingly as possible.

Most leaders know this and will tolerate—and sometimes embrace—a little eccentricity in a person who helps them sound, look and feel better in front of important audiences.

- **Help out your speechwriter**

Even with the best client-speechwriter chemistry—JFK called his speechwriter Ted Sorensen “my intellectual blood bank”—the speechwriter struggles to get sufficient access to achieve a real mind-meld with the boss.

Now add the litany of common troubles that PSA members listed in the survey: solitude, short deadlines, slow workflows, lawyers and indifference. Speechwriters resent clients who “don't care about content”—and bureaucrats who care too much: “I have to contend with constant micromanaging by people who see risk lurking in every corner and are afraid of letting the CEO take any kind of position,” one survey participant said. “They also have no feel for what constitutes good writing, yet exert a huge influence over the process.” A PR manager should not be one of those risk-averse bureaucrats. And when the lawyers or the HR staff or the compliance people start sucking the life from a piece of leadership communication, fight valiantly on your speechwriter's behalf.

Even if you don't win, your speechwriter will appreciate having an ally instead of one more institutional enemy.

- **Know what makes your speechwriter happy**

Asked what they like most about their work, speechwriters say “shaping public debates,” “finding and telling stories,” “intellectual and creative challenge and reward,” “the variety of topics and amazing people that I get to work with” and “the silent hours when I, through writing, try to understand and share something important.”

Speechwriters are like snowflakes; some succeed precisely because they’re CEO whisperers. But many of the ones worth keeping around are the oddest and most difficult to please. They have razor intellects, a restless curiosity and healthy—if not slightly obese—egos.

But remember, lots of speechwriters are older. So they know by now that life in leadership communication will not lay itself neatly before them. So if they can see that they are achieving something significant with their work, if they can be intellectually stimulated, if they feel that someone, somewhere in the organization believes that the corporate strategy can be advanced by articulate rhetoric and communication, they will stick around and keep giving their best, despite it all.

Thirty years ago, a corporate speechwriter wrote, “No one is recording these speeches. There are no books of them that readers save and treasure. Our files will be tossed on the scrap heap when we leave or retire. But we have been sitting at a typewriter making land, a sea, a sky, burning words. That’s enough. It is more than most have.”

In the end, it’s all your speechwriter requires. That, and a salary somewhere in the low six figures. But in exchange for helping your organization’s top leadership communicate compellingly, is that too much to ask?

SPEECHES DON’T ACHIEVE ANYTHING. SO WHY DO PEOPLE KEEP PAYING SPEECHWRITERS?

In a celebrated essay a few years ago in *The New Yorker* writer Ezra Klein asked, “Who listens to a president?”

As Evidence A in his case against the supposed power of presidential speeches, Klein offered a televised 2011 President Obama speech to Congress, on the American Jobs Act. The speech’s ratings were good, and the rhetoric was as persuasive as Obama and his speechwriting team could make it.

“But, in the days following the speech, Obama’s approval rating was essentially unchanged,” Klein writes. “The audience, apparently, had not been won over. Neither had Congress: the American Jobs Act was filibustered in the Senate

and ignored in the House. ... The President's effort at persuasion failed. The question is, could it have succeeded."

Klein must hope we imagine a White House Speechwriting Office full of shock, anger and recrimination. *If only we would have used my elephant-in-the-living room metaphor! The bill would have passed, and President Obama would have gained three points in the Gallup poll!*

The idea is absurd, because no one knows more than the speechwriters whose value Klein is questioning, just how limited their own power is. Speechwriters know, because of all the speeches they have written, the direct results they can point to are few and desolate between.

All communicators know the percentages. All writers do. Including Klein. You don't think he's wondering this morning why his well-written, widely read *New Yorker* piece didn't precipitate a mass firing of White House speechwriters and a reordering of the president's calendar to include fewer speeches and more tee times.

No, he knows that his piece, however good, will disappear into a trillion other words on the subject, into a vast cosmic wash that sways Americans in mysterious ways.

"The world will little note nor long remember what we say here," said President Lincoln once during yet another throwaway ceremonial address in a field in Gettysburg, Pa. And no one would have been more surprised to see the words of a speech that did nothing for the president's approval ratings and failed to hasten the end of a bloody war, chiseled into marble in a massive monument to him.

He would be surprised, however, to see an American scholar, seven score and nine years later, lauded in a national magazine for his discovery of the limits of the power of a single attempt at communication, presidential or otherwise. In fairness to Klein, he was only reporting the "insights" of a George Edwards, director of the Center for Presidential Studies at Texas A&M University. "Like many political scientists, Edwards is an empiricist," Klein writes. "He deals in numbers and tables and charts"

Propeller Headwards once delivered a presentation titled, "Presidential Rhetoric: What Difference Does It Make?" In it, he made a study of President Reagan's rhetoric, and found that it wasn't Reagan's speeches that convinced everyone that tax cuts were a good idea. No, Reagan was merely the beneficiary of trends in public opinion, "rather than their instigator."

"As one could imagine," Klein quotes Edwards as writing, "I was a big hit with

the auditorium full of dedicated scholars of rhetoric." Now it may be true that rhetoric scholars make unsupportable claims about the wonders that rhetoric can work. I don't know. I drink with practitioners of rhetoric, who can and must keep things in perspective, if only to manage the expectations of their client. In fact, among speechwriters and other professional communicators, the problem isn't their overestimation of the power of rhetoric, but that of their clients, who need to be reminded endlessly that their having said a thing doesn't equal the audience having heard it, let alone believed it.

"Edwards' views are no longer considered radical in political-science circles, in part because he has marshaled so much evidence in support of them." But mostly, I reckon, because he has presented such "evidence" as a flash of blinding insight—and gotten a fancy New Yorker writer to do the same.

Why do the editors of *The New Yorker* think there's a gullible audience for an article announcing the rediscovery that the earth is not the center of the solar system?

They must think people just don't understand just how mysterious communication is. Notice, I don't say "complex," because "complex" implies that with enough concentration, all the dynamics can be corralled and accounted for. Not with communication.

Klein and Propeller Headwards go so far as to show that in some cases a presidential speech actually has the opposite of its intended effect. As if this never happens in their marital arguments!

And as with a beleaguered spouse, a president's audience usually knows full well what he is trying to achieve with his words ... simultaneously suspects the speech is really about something else ... has developed infinite conflicting and yet deep-seated attitudes about the issue at hand ... is comparing the speech to everything else the spouse has ever said ... will compare the speech to everything the spouse ever says in the future. Or, on the other hand, may not be listening at all because she thinks she's heard it all a million times before. A president giving a speech is a quarterback throwing into very tight coverage.

He knows it. His speechwriters know it. And most of the listeners know it. But the ball must be thrown, mustn't it? "If you don't try it at all," political strategist Paul Begala tells Klein, "it guarantees you won't persuade anybody." A welder welds, a teacher teaches, a writer writes and a president leads—partly, through public proclamation.

Could the president spend less time giving ceremonial remarks and more time making personal relationships with legislators in private negotiations, as President Johnson did? I have wondered that myself. As an editor of a magazine of called

Vital Speeches of the Day, I can tell you that precious few speeches, presidential or otherwise, qualify as being “vital” communications. No one wishes more fervently than I for fewer symbolic speeches and more strategic ass-crackers. No one, except maybe the White House speechwriting team, and probably the president himself.

Are all these speeches really necessary? Could we be better spending our time in another way? I bet these questions have occurred to the White House people over and over again. I will someday put it to them.

But to point to presidential speeches that were ineffective and to suggest that speeches don’t do any good in general ...

“Who listens to a president?” Ezra Klein asks. More people, I hope, than listen to a *New Yorker* writer who takes four thousand words to tell us what we already know.

COMMUNICATION IS ACTION!

“You don’t earn trust back with one speech,” said David Axelrod after Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s Hail Mary address last week before Chicago’s City Council. “You earn trust back with actions.”

Et tu, David Axelrod?

You’d think the longtime advisor to Barack Obama would know well enough that the right speech is an action. Remember “A More Perfect Union,” Obama’s speech in Philadelphia about race? It singlehandedly diffused a crisis more dangerous to his political career than the 2014 police shooting of Laquan McDonald shooting was to Emanuel’s. The Philadelphia speech saved Obama’s candidacy by delivering something of such substance that it qualified as an act.

In that speech, Obama shared concrete, as-yet-unheard details from his past, revealing the racial complexity of his growing up, for which he offered material evidence: “my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.”

And in the course of that speech, he revealed—he showed—that he thinks deeper and better and truer on the subject of race in America than any one of his screaming critics. He demonstrated he understands the problem better than

you or you or you. And he offered his own candidacy as an incontrovertible example the progress can be made.

“The profound mistake of Reverend Wright’s sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society,” Obama said. “It’s that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress had been made; as if this country—a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black, Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old—is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know—what we have seen—is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity to hope—for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.”

And here—with enough sad irony to fill a Russian novel—we introduce Rahm Emanuel, eight racially troubled years later. In his rhetorical moment of truth, Emanuel offered an empty apology. “I’m sorry,” he said. For what, exactly? For hiding the video for 400 days? For lying about not having seen it? For knowing all along that the Laquan McDonald incident was just the tip of the dick of a police department that’s been impossibly corrupt since Capone was bootlegging Shirley Temples?

“I take responsibility for what happened because it happened on my watch.” Ah, yes—the oldest dodge in the book. When the furnace goes out, does Dad call the family together in the kitchen and take responsibility because the buck stops here? No, because he doesn’t feel responsible for the furnace going out. He swears, he shrugs, and he calls the (fucking) furnace guy.

During his speech, Emanuel pretended he felt responsible for the furnace going out, but the family didn’t buy it. He screeched and shouted and imitated mammal friends whose voices he has heard crack when they are in distress. But the speech was forgettable and thus regrettable because it offered nothing new—not even new platitudes! “This time it will and must be different,” he said. “It will be a bumpy road, a painful process and a long journey ...” What—not a trying time, an uphill battle, a daunting challenge? “This is not the Chicago we know and love,” Emanuel concluded. “This is not the police department we believe in and trust to protect our families and neighborhoods. This is not who we are. And this will not stand.”

Here’s what a speech would sound like if a mayor was actually trying to come to new terms. It would go something like this: “Like all Chicagoans, I am tempted to say, ‘This is not the Chicago we know and love. This is not the police department we believe in and trust to protect our families and neighborhoods. This is not who we are.’ In fact, I was so tempted to believe this that I used every rationale I could find to avoid seeing the Laquan McDonald video—and to keep you from seeing it, too. But now that we all have seen it, I’m afraid we

are forced to finally confront the fact that, actually, this is the Chicago we say we love. This atrocity and others have been committed by the police officers who we supposedly trust to protect our families and neighborhoods. I know this isn't who we want to be, but today is time to acknowledge the extent to which this is who we are. The question is—and it starts with me but lives with all of us, and it starts today—what are we willing to do to make our city the kind of place we wish it to be?"

That speech, David Axelrod, would be an action, because it would be a communication—the act, of one leader attempting to share a new piece of information, an acquired insight, a truly new commitment in forthright language and matching physical presence that audience cannot possibly mistake for "just a speech."

Emanuel didn't show up with a speech like that, because Emanuel isn't a guy like that. It's not the fault of speeches—just that speech, and the bloodless mayor who delivered it.

The distinction may be lost on some people, but communicators, at least, ought to keep track.

SLOUCHING TOWARD BLANDNESS: WHY OUR SPEAKERS PREFER PLATITUDES

As communicators, we often complain that the leaders we serve don't want to say anything meaningful. They prefer platitudes to specifics, bromides to personal opinions and dullness to daring. As one speechwriter said last year in response to a Professional Speechwriters Association survey, they need to be convinced "that it's okay to be interesting."

But of course leaders have very good reasons for their bias toward blandness. Millions and billions of them.

Over the holidays, I read an old issue of *Vital Speeches*—March 1, 1941. I read it closely. And I noticed that the ideas that were most clearly and memorably expressed were also the most laughable.

In a speech on railroad regulation, the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company complained about business being complained about. "If one observes the undercurrents in political and social life of today," M.W. Clement told the Pittsburgh Traffic Club, "it will be found that they deal with certain conceptions which are loosely expressed by catch phrases which 'label' them, and which people often do not analyze: such as 'power' and 'wealth'; men who

'run' America; men who 'control' industry; men who 'control' wealth ..."
Perhaps it was for this speech that "air quotes" were invented? Most of the speeches in the issue, not surprisingly, debated whether or when the United States should enter what was referred to as "the war in Europe." With Hitler on the march and England on the ropes, the majority of the speeches argued against U.S. involvement.

"They have been fighting in Europe for 2,000 years or more," said Kansas Senator Arthur Capper in a radio address, "and probably they will fight for the next 10,000 years, for that is their philosophy—fighting is their philosophy." Though that sounds remarkably familiar to the rhetorical carpet bombing our some of our politicians lay on the Middle East today, the sentiment is less embarrassing than the well-articulated argument for staying out of the war by Robert Maynard Hutchins, the young and powerful president of the University of Chicago.

"We Are Drifting Into Suicide," was the title of Hutchins' speech, also delivered over radio, on Jan. 23, 1941. His central argument was that the United States did not have democracy down well enough to go imposing it on other nations by intervening in the war. Hutchins listed human rights violations and democratic imperfections in America that "leave us a good deal short of that level of excellence which entitles us to convert the world by force of arms. ... We Americans have hardly begun to understand and practice the ideals that we are urged to force on others."

He called for a "new moral order in America," concluded that refining American democracy was the first order of business, and warned that people calling for European intervention were "turning aside the true path to freedom because it is easier to blame Hitler for our troubles than to fight for democracy at home. As Hitler made the Jews his scapegoat, so we are making Hitler ours. But Hitler did not spring full-armed from the brow of Satan. He sprang from the materialism and paganism of our times. In the long run we can beat what Hitler stands for only by beating the materialism and paganism that produced him."

What a magnificent load of imaginatively conceived, authoritatively expressed, sharply written poppycock!

Just as speechwriters of yesteryear, today's scribes are in grave danger of writing such stuff, because their bosses are always demanding it. By virtue of their positions in society, our leaders are encouraged by their boards, their investors and their campaign contributors, to hold some seriously peculiar and sometimes borderline insane positions on things. Positions that will preserve the calm that's keeping everybody's beautiful yachts afloat.

And that's often why our leaders don't want to say anything. Because they'd

rather say nothing, than say these things. They'd rather play rhetorical rope-a-dope than lash out madly in defense of the status quo. And sensibly so. My dad used to say old people are quieter than young people, "Because old people have more to be quiet about."

So do many of the leaders we work for. We'll always push them to be clearer and more candid in their communications, because as writers, we advocate for the audience and the public, too. But we should not pretend to be puzzled by their preference not to.

WHY "CORPORATE STORYTELLING" WILL ALWAYS BE AN OXYMORON

Trying to get corporations to tell compelling stories is like expecting a laugh from your refrigerator.

In a talk I give on telling stories in corporations, I say corporate storytelling is so difficult because, for the very reasons that people love stories, corporations and their custodians hate them: Stories involve heroes and tension, and stories make concepts indelible and permanent. Whereas, corporations are made vulnerable by heroes, in the form of irreplaceable employees or customers. Corporations are made squeamish by the messy unpredictability of conflict. And corporations are brand changelings that don't like to be hemmed in by principles carved into stone by a vivid story. Wait a minute, George Washington can tell a lie?

But I'm thinking there's another, more fundamental reason companies have such a hard time telling stories that a human would actually repeat to another human.

My 12-year-old daughter Scout is a bright, well-socialized, perceptive, funny girl. She's surrounded by friends who have many of the same qualities. They're good students with fine vocabularies and perceptive minds. They say funny things, they make casual and astute observations about fellow classmates—"oh, she's a hot mess in the head"—and they genuinely want to communicate with adults.

And yet none of these girls can tell a story to save their lives. None of them. Can even begin to tell a story. And it's not just? Because, like, all their? Stories are told in uptalk?

It's because they have not learned the essential communication practice of imagining their listeners' frame of reference, and keeping it always in mind as

they tell the the tale. Without this fixed waypoint, the kids don't know where to begin the story, how to set the scene, how to place themselves in it, how to develop the other characters, which details to include and which to leave out, how long to make the story, how to pace it or how to end it. Christ almighty, do they not know how to end it!

These girls? Could give you? A firsthand account of the sinking of the Lusitania? And you would be, like—whatever-I-don't-know-I-guess-you-had-to-be-there?

It's the very same problem with corporations, who are also far too focused on themselves and challenged to see the world as the audience sees it (let alone themselves as their audience sees them). Hell, corporations are afraid to describe the world as they see it, lest they reveal the vision of faceless masses their Big Data shows them every day.

Well, Bub: Without a singular point of view and without at least a strong theoretical understanding of what might interest your audience, you're awfully hard-pressed to tell a story. Luckily, Scout's my daughter, and if she learns nothing else in the world, she will learn how to tell a decent story. And I bet her friends will, too.

But corporations?

I'm not holding?

My breath?

ON LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION: THE LIE COMMUNICATORS SHOULD STOP TELLING LEADERS (OR AT LEAST, STOP TELLING THEMSELVES)

"I have no ego."

I first heard a professional communicator say this when I was 23 years old, just out of college with an English degree—an aspiring poet and novelist, and working for a trade publisher that put out *Speechwriter's Newsletter*.

How could it be possible, I wondered, for a writer to have "no ego"? The question was urgent to me, as my own ego was under assault.

After all, it hadn't been my fond dream to be a cub reporter on a weekly newsletter that went out to a few hundred people who nobody knew existed.

No, I went to work there because *Bowler's Journal* had turned me down.

But though this work did not sate my literary ambition, it was interesting enough. I sensed I was learning a lot, and I gave myself fully.

Which meant dialing through the subscriber list to find the most harrowing yarns for a weekly page-seven column called "Speechwriters' Worst Nightmares."

It meant seeking interviews with the leading communication thinkers at the time—up to and including PR pioneer Edward Bernays, who was 101. (His "girlfriend" told me he was unavailable.)

Mostly, it meant quizzing veteran communicators earnestly, about their own ambition as writers, and how seriously they took their work. At regional lunch roundtables and global conference cocktail parties, this was the question I was always getting at. And the answers I was getting confused me.

"I have no ego," many of them would say. Or, "I check my ego at the door." Some claimed to have no personal attachment to the words they wrote: "I'm only there to help articulate my leader's ideas and capture my leader's voice."

I would stand there holding the scotch I was still trying to acquire a taste for, and wonder how any writer—thinker—human!—could ever come to such a spiritual dead zone, even for all the money in the world. I knew how much my green ideas mattered to me, how badly I wanted my mind to matter in the world. How did these folks—many of them with far better literary educations than mine, some of them with great journalism adventures in their past or books under their belt—how did they get to, "I have no ego."

It took me many years to realize: They didn't get there. They hadn't lost their ego, nor figured out how to put their intellect away for the workday like so many childish things. They were lying.

They were lying to their leaders, they were lying to their colleagues, they were lying to their spouses, they were lying to their old journalism buddies, and now they were lying to me. They had no choice, because they were also lying to themselves.

As I've come to know that many communicators falsely deny their egos, I've also come to know why: Helping leaders communicate is often brutal work. It's challenging intellectually, taxing emotionally, unrewarding socially and sometimes even agonizing morally. It's a lot easier to pretend you have no philosophy than to fit your philosophy to the complex situations a communication career throws at you.

But some communicators—many communicators I’ve known, and most of the ones I admire—are up to the job.

A single instance encircles the point: I once interviewed the speechwriter Terry Edmonds. Edmonds grew up in the projects in Baltimore, in a family that was sometimes on welfare. He went on to become the first African-American White House speechwriter, working for President Clinton.

When it came time to announce his Welfare Reform Act, President Clinton turned to Edmonds, even though he wasn’t the chief speechwriter, because Clinton thought Edmonds could handle the subject sensitively. Except, Edmonds “disagreed with the idea” of welfare reform—along with a number of other prominent African Americans in the administration, one of whom resigned in protest of the bill.

In the end, Edmonds decided to write the speech that announced the bill he disagreed with, because he decided he’d rather have a say in the way Clinton explained the bill—making sure the speech discussed methods “for helping people get off welfare in a way that did not destroy their lives”—than to have no say at all.

In the end, the speech Edmonds wrote stressed in a way another speechwriter’s effort likely would not have, that Clinton was “not abandoning his commitment” to help people up from poverty.

Edmonds hadn’t checked his intellect at the door, nor even pretended to abandon his ego.

“At some level I am still an angry black man,” Edmonds told me years later, after he’d gone on to become Clinton’s chief speechwriter and to other high-level communication jobs in the public and private sectors. “But it’s what you do with that anger.”

Admitting you still have anger—and ideas and convictions and a conscience—this is something some communicators have the courage to do, and other communicators do not.

I’ve been writing about the communication business for a quarter century since I started out at *Speechwriter’s Newsletter*. I like scotch now. I still have my ego. And my convictions about communication have only grown in number and in strength.

And one of them is: Leaders are far better served by the communicators who tactfully, imaginatively and unapologetically bring their minds to work than by the ones who pretend they don’t.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Murray is editor and publisher of *Vital Speeches of the Day*, an 80-year-old collection of the best oral communication in the world. He's also executive director of the Professional Speechwriters Association.

David writes and speaks frequently on corporate, political and personal communication issues.

David co-wrote the *New York Times*-bestselling memoir *Tell My Sons* (Random House, 2013) and a memoir *Raised By Mad Men*, about his parents, who worked in the ad business in the 1960's.

He has written feature stories on politics, golf, murder, hairpiece making, boxing, ballet, homelessness, motorcycling, the state supreme court, sailing, dinosaurs, professional poker and other related subjects.

His work has appeared in publications and media outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Magazine*, *Advertising Age*, *Sailing Magazine*, *Golf Magazine*, *Car Collector Magazine*, *Vibe*, the Huffington Post and Chicago Public Radio.

He lives with his wife and daughter in Chicago.