



THINKING OUT LOUD

A PSA WHITEPAPER

A Provocation from the Pulpit: Dead Preachers Challenge Living Speechwriters

Six contrary ideas worth considering, from people who wrote and delivered sermons every week over hundreds of years.

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INTRODUCTION: A SPEECHWRITING GUY READS A BOOK ABOUT PREACHING AND LEARNS A LOT ABOUT SPEECHWRITING

The only thing worse than being told how to think about a subject by a dead white male is not being told how to think about a subject at all.

Or as **David Martyn Lloyd-Jones** puts it in the preface to his 1971 book *Preaching & Preachers*, "Some may object to my dogmatic assertions; but I do not apologize for them. Every preacher should believe strongly in his own method; and if I cannot persuade all of the rightness of mine, I can at least stimulate them to think and to consider other possibilities."

Over the last year, I've been preparing for the birth of **Vital Sermons**, an ambitious grandchild to 83-year-old *Vital Speeches of the Day*. I think I know what makes a good speech. I needed some grounding on what makes a good sermon, and *Preaching & Preachers* kept popping up as one of the best books on sermons, even though it's almost 50 years old and its author, the minister of London's Westminster Chapel for three decades, has been dead now for almost four.

From Lloyd-Jones and the great preachers on whose shoulders he stood, I did learn something about what makes a good sermon and a good preacher.

The book also helped me clarify and articulate my ideas on good speechwriting. And to my occasional consternation, what I learned contradicts some of what I've taught speechwriters over the years, and what many of us have come to accept as true about our business.

That would please the old Welsh preacher, who believed, "If people can listen to us without becoming anxious about themselves or reflecting on themselves we have not been preaching. [Preaching] addresses us in such a manner as to bring us under judgment; and it deals with us in a way that we feel that our whole life is involved, and we go out saying, 'I can never go back and live just as I did before. This has done something to me ... I am a different person as the result of listening to this.'"

I've extracted six ideas from the book that changed or tempered the way I think about speechwriting and speechwriters. Maybe they'll do something to you, too. —DM

1. The professionalization of speechwriting is a danger to great speechmaking.

Modern society considers "professionalization" strictly a good thing. Unsurprisingly, so do the organizers and members of the Professional

Speechwriters Association. But at our second PSA World Conference, longtime Hillary Clinton speechwriter Lissa Muscatine, the keynoter, said she was concerned that, to the extent the PSA and other organizations succeeded in making speechwriting a teachable, repeatable, routinized practice, we might drive out the spontaneity, the life, the art that make speeches magic—that make magic speeches.

I thought Muscatine's worry, even though it was expressed with equanimity, was overwrought and maybe even a little nostalgic for the misty old days when all manner of disillusioned lawyers, newspaper writers and literary-minded misfits talked themselves into or found themselves in speechwriting jobs, where they learned by the seat of their pants.

Are we really worried that writing speeches for powerful people in charge of vast institutions being whipsawed by contrary economic and political and social forces—are we concerned that is going to become rote, just because the PSA puts would-be speechwriters through a Speechwriting School and lets working speechwriters meet one another once a year at a World Conference?

Still, Muscatine's point nagged at me—because I enjoyed those misty old days, and the eccentric speechwriters who thrived during them. And because I also see, in some of the speeches I consider for *Vital Speeches of the Day* and the Cicero Speechwriting Awards, some evidence of formula—e.g., a predictable personal anecdote in every speech, as if it's a box to be checked by a speechwriter who is trying to keep up with best practices.

Lloyd-Jones' book reminded me that professionalism has not always had a good connotation—and for good reason.

He refers to the “terrible danger of professionalism” in preaching, and he begins by pointing out a difference between preachers and mere “pulpiteers.” Pulpiteers, who Lloyd-Jones says came to prominence toward the end of the 19th century, “were men who could occupy a pulpit and dominate it, and dominate the people. They were professionals. There was a good deal of showmanship in them, and they were experts at handling congregations and playing on their emotions. ... These pulpiteers were to me—with my view of preaching—an abomination.”

Why? Because pulpiteers “preached not because they were bursting with truths which could not help finding expression, but because they were masters of fine phrases and lived in an age in which fine phrases had value. ... You see, the form had become more important than the substance, the oratory and eloquence became things in and of themselves, and ultimately preaching became a form of entertainment.”

You've seen, haven't you, the **TED Talk about nothing?**

Preaching, Lloyd-Jones says, "is certainly not a matter of rules or regulations; and much of the trouble I think arises because people do regard it as a matter of instructions and rules and regulations of dos and don'ts. It is not that. ... Preaching is something one recognizes when one hears it.

"You will never teach a man to be a preacher if he is not already one. All your books such as *The A.B.C. of Preaching* or *Preaching Made Easy* should be thrown into the fire as soon as possible."

He goes on to call the modern practice of videotaping preachers so that they can see and improve upon their speaking style "reprehensible in the extreme," and "instruction in the art of the prostitute."

In order to get better, a young minister should rather "listen to other preachers, the best and most experienced."

The main skill in a preacher, Lloyd-Jones finally thunders, is "the love of God, the love of souls, a knowledge of the Truth, and the Holy Spirit within you."

Is that not true, if you change out some of the religious terminology for the emotional and philosophical, for a speechwriter and the speaker too?

To the extent that we agree with the great minister's warnings about professionalism—and Muscatine's echoes of same—how ought we heed them?

For the PSA's part, we must offer a variety of instructors and mentors and sources (living and dead!)—people of great imagination who have their own many splendored love of writing and oratory and writers and speakers.

As for a speechwriter, you might study far afield of the speechwriting trade—and consciously try to avoid resembling the caricature that Lloyd-Jones drew of the professional: "a man who is always watching himself," more interested in "techniques" than ideas, out of touch with the self and always imitating how others write.

2. Storytelling is not next to godliness.

Even in Lloyd-Jones' era there was much talk about "the inability of people in general today to listen to sermons and especially long sermons." His sermons ran long—about 45 minutes—"and I certainly do not spend my time in telling stories!"

Having harrumphed, Lloyd-Jones confessed confusion:

People like stories, they like illustrations. I have never understood why, but people seem to like ministers who are always talking about their own families. I always find that very boring when I am listening, and I cannot understand a preacher who likes doing that. Surely there is a good deal of conceit about it. Why should people be more interested in the preacher's children than in those of other people? They have their own children and they could multiply such stories equally well themselves. The argument for this, generally, is that it introduces a "personal touch." ...

That is a thing certain people like, and that is actually what some preachers do; and you can well see how it can pander to that which is lowest and worst in many members of the congregation. It is sheer carnality, a kind of lust and desire to know personal details about people.

Storytelling is carnality? I say, Sir!

Lest you dismiss Lloyd-Jones as a hopeless old prude—hear him out, as he tells a story to illustrate the difference between storytelling employed for sheer spellbinding, and for truth telling.

There was a preacher in Wales at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century called Robert Roberts. ... He was preaching one day in a very crowded chapel ... about the sinner not heeding warnings—enjoying himself and ignoring the intimations of the coming Judgment. To enforce this he used a vivid illustration. Some people staying at the seaside had gone walking along the beach. There were rocks leading out to the sea—a sort of promontory of rocks going well out. The tide was out so they had walked along to the very end of the little promontory, and having done so lay down on their backs basking in the sun. They were enjoying themselves tremendously, sleeping and reading and so on. But they had not noticed that the tide had turned and was beginning to come in very slowly. They paid no attention to this; but the tide continued to lap the rocks on both sides and slowly to encircle them and their promontory. The preacher worked this up graphically to the point at which the people "came to themselves" and realized their predicament. There was still just enough time for them to get back on to the beach and listen to the warning voices from the shore. Roberts so worked up this illustration with his powerful imagination, that when he used his equally powerful voice to represent the shouted warnings of the people on the shore to the others to escape immediately for their lives, it is recorded, and said to be literally true, that the entire congregation rose to its feet and ran out of the chapel!

“Surely at this point,” Lloyd-Jones concludes, “we have crossed the line which divides the legitimate from the wrong use of the imagination. What was affecting the people I have been describing in those stories was surely not the Truth; it was the graphic delineation of a scene. It was the powerful and perhaps overwrought imagination of the preacher. . . . It is our business to make sure that what moves the people is the Truth and not our imagination.”

Now: Is this a real worry for a workaday modern speechwriter, who is only trying to warm up a speech with a little personal anecdote, to make the boss appear human?

No. But it should be a worry for the ambitious speechwriter and client who want to make a big splash with a big speech. They have been told that stories are the only way to do that—or the most powerful way, in any case. And so after much effort (and usually cajoling and weedling by the speechwriter) they seize on a compelling yarn, and then write a speech in its service.

The result? See “**Rhetorical Pink Slime**” (Murray, 2017), about the young CEO who tells an employee audience a “deeply personal” story about his absentee father and racist grandparents—and how it all led to him becoming CEO of a real estate company and rolling out a new vision statement that morning!

Stories are wonderfully powerful—the aforementioned CEO received a standing ovation—which is why they must be used not to titillate, to distract, to soft-shoe, to snake-charm an audience into loving the speaker. The speech ought to start with a genuine idea—or the Truth, as Lloyd-Jones puts it—and the story should be chosen to get that idea across.

And if you can’t find the right story to do it, find something else that will.

3. A “call to action” is not the Holy Grail.

Just as many pointy-headed communication consultants insist that every communication effort must be measured, there’s a type of geeky speechwriting instructor who insists that every speech has to conclude with a call to action. Because otherwise, what’s the point?

In church, the call to action is called an “altar call,” whereby at the close of the sermon the preacher asks people to make a spiritual commitment on the spot—sometimes, even by physically approaching the pulpit.

Lloyd-Jones said he’d been criticized after some sermons for not making “an appeal for immediate decisions.” Parishioners have said, “I am quite sure that if you had only made an appeal you would have had a great response.”

But he rarely did so, despite the fashion of the time, because he was afraid of what he called spurious conversions. “The common practice of ‘altar calls,’ Lloyd-Jones writes, “seems to have introduced a new kind of mentality, a carnality expressing itself as an unhealthy interest in numbers.”

There’s that word again!

Rather than an altar call at the end, Lloyd-Jones advocates for a call all the way through.

The appeal must be in the Truth itself, and in the message. As you preach, your sermon should be applying it all the time, and especially of course, at the end, when you come to the final application and to the climax. But the appeal is a part of the message; it should be so inevitably. The sermon should lead men to see that this is the only thing to do. The appeal should be implicit throughout the whole body of the sermon, and in all that you are doing.

Whether or not a speaker issues a call to action, to whatever extent he or she attempts to measure the response to a speech, the speaker will in the best case be left with the uncertainty expressed in a typical journal entry of the Anglican cleric John Wesley, paraphrased by Lloyd-Jones: “Preached at such and such a place. Many seemed to be deeply affected, but God alone knows how deeply.”

No matter how many carnal “likes” the sermon got on Facebook.

4. Authenticity is as complicated as morality.

Speechwriters put forth their desire to increase their speaker’s “authenticity” most plainly when they complain that the speaker “is great in small groups, but wooden at the lectern.” Speechwriters want the speaker’s personal charm and warmth to come across in keynote speeches the way it does at cocktail receptions.

They’re asking more than they know. It is far easier to come across genuine in front of a small audience than a large one, because we know whom we are speaking to, and thus forge a direct connection to those people. Even if they’re strangers, we can in a small group “listen with our tongue,” gauging their reaction to our remarks and adjusting as we go.

That doesn’t work at Davos.

Lloyd-Jones tells us about “Woodbine Willie,” an army chaplain in the First World War who in order to bond with the soldiers smoked cheap cigarettes

known as Woodbines. “In addition, he noticed also that most of the men could not speak without swearing, so he did the same. It was not that he wanted to swear, but he held the view that if you want to win men you have to use their language and you have to be like them in every respect.”

Woodbine Willie made a brief career of teaching his technique to other pastors around England. But ultimately its vogue was temporary, because as Lloyd-Jones summed up: “The world always expects [preachers] to be different. This idea that you are going to win people to the Christian faith by showing them that after all you are remarkably like them, is theologically and psychologically a profound blunder.”

That’s probably a legitimate concern of some speechwriting clients who resist attempts by their speechwriters to show they’re up on pop culture, and down with the peeps.

On the other hand and in the same breath, Lloyd-Jones warns against over-polished sermons: “What has this polishing of phrases, this writing and rewriting, to do with Truth? ... Can you conceive of the Apostle Paul spending three weeks in the preparation of one sermon, changing a word here and there, putting in another adjective or adding another bon mot?”

Lloyd-Jones discourages preachers from using too many quotations.

A sermon is a proclamation of the truth of God as mediated through the preacher. People do not want to listen to a string of quotations of what other people have thought and said. They have come to listen to you; you are the man of God, you have been called to the ministry, you have been ordained; and they want to hear this great truth as it comes through you, through the whole of your being.

Your speaker may not be delivering the truth of God, but he or she should be delivering some truth that he or she—and not Winston Churchill, Maya Angelou or Milton Friedman—is by his or her position in this institution at this moment in history at this gathering, uniquely “ordained” to say. So why pass the buck to Eleanor Roosevelt?

Fed up with reading quotations from the French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville, the legendary speechwriting teacher Jerry Tarver once instituted a “No Quote de Tocque” rule, and commanded all professional speechwriters to follow it. And two decades hence, it seems they have mostly done so. We could probably name some new historical figures in fashion—and we’d probably be better off refraining from quoting them too.

5. Audience analysis isn't the sure path to salvation.

"To love to preach is one thing," said the 17th century Anglican preacher Richard Cecil. "To love those to whom we preach is quite another."

Speechwriters begin the process of "loving" an audience through a prewriting processes they somewhat grandly call "audience analysis."

It is overemphasized, Lloyd-Jones suggested 40 years ago. I agree today.

Yes, knowing your audience—its level of interest in and knowledge of the subject of the speech—can help prevent the cautionary tale that Lloyd-Jones recalls of the woman who attended a service "in a famous church in Edinburgh where a great and learned professor had been preaching. Someone asked her on the way out whether she had enjoyed the sermon, and on her saying she had, asked her further, 'Were you able to follow him?' To which she replied, 'Far be it from me to presume to understand such a great man as that!'"

Martin Luther said every sermon must reach everyone—the "unlearned" first. He wrote: "When I preach I regard neither doctors nor magistrates, of whom I have above forty in the congregation. I have all my eyes on the servant maids and the children. And if the learned men are not well pleased with what they hear, well, the door is open."

But it is not only the education level of the audience that preachers and speechwriters must consider. It is the subject matter itself. And I cringe when I hear speechwriters talk about audience analysis as a method of finding out what a particular audience "wants to hear" from the speaker. Lloyd-Jones lays tongue to why:

We have become such experts, we think, in psychological understanding, and at dividing people up into groups—psychological, cultural, national, etc.—that we conclude as a result that what is right for one is not right for another, and so eventually become guilty of denying the Gospel. There is the ONE Gospel—the ONLY Gospel. . . . It is for the whole world, and the whole of humanity. Mankind is one. We have fallen into the grievous error of adopting modern psychological theories to such an extent that we evade the truth . . .

Obviously, wise speakers adjust the style and emphasis of a message to fit an audience of employees versus customers, industry experts versus community members. But all speakers should have, if not "ONE Gospel," at least one message or idea or point of view that they want to get across.

And furthermore, what an audience wants to hear is *what a speaker has to say*.

Presumably they did not wander accidentally into the auditorium looking for a boat show.

And yes, of course, this interplay between “the pulpit and the pew” is dynamic as Lloyd-Jones acknowledges: “It is a part of the romance of preaching that it is always living and alive; it is never set, it is never formal. There is this constant interplay and reactions between the preacher and his people. You grow and develop together, and you have to make these adjustments.”

6. Oratory is immortal. So are its problems.

Though individual speechwriters suffer from a lack of job security, the speechwriting industry is remarkably technology-proof and even trend-proof.

Television and radio didn’t eliminate the appetite for in-person sermons, and YouTube won’t lessen the need for speeches.

Why? Because speeches, like sermons, are physical, visceral experiences.

Lloyd-Jones recalls a woman who told him, “The moment I entered your chapel and sat down on a seat amongst the people I was conscious of a power.” What power? “When you enter a church, a society, a company of God’s people,” Lloyd-Jones writes, “there is a factor which immediately comes into operation, which is reinforced still more by the preacher expounding the Word in the pulpit; and that is why preaching can never be replaced by either reading or by watching television or by any of those activities.”

As I point out to the audiences of speechwriters to whom I speak, the unique magic of a speech isn’t evident when the audience is gazing devotedly up at the speaker, but rather, when the audience members turn and look in affirmation at one another. (And sometimes when I say this, the speechwriters turn and look in affirmation at one another.)

Today, speechwriters also worry that traditional speeches are giving way to more spontaneous, informal interview-format or panel discussions.

Five decades ago preachers worried that more interactive, democratic “discussion” formats might supplant old-school preaching.

Essentially, Lloyd-Jones told them not to fret; the true preacher, he said, “is not there merely to talk to them, he is not there to entertain them. He is there—and I want to emphasize this—to do something to those people; he is there to produce results of various kinds, he is there to influence people.”

And anyone, religious or secular, who is trying to do that, will not leave the

matter to the chance of spontaneous exchange with an interlocutor. As long as leaders seek to *communicate* through the spoken word, speechwriters will have jobs.

No, speechwriters need not worry that their social role is fleeting. But the problems they wrestle with are stubborn, too. Lloyd-Jones deals with many practical and philosophical problems in this book—speech structure, speaker passion, ethics of argumentation—that speechwriters struggle with now as they have since Cicero.

For instance, on many pages in this book Lloyd-Jones discusses the tension between the need for thorough sermon preparation and the desire to appear spontaneous—essentially, full text versus bullet points.

“There are two main possibilities open to you: Should this be written out in full, or should it not? Once more it seems to me that the only sane thing is that you must not lay down an absolute law about this matter; because you will find that your laws will not stand up to the test of the history of preaching.”

Great preachers Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Thomas Chalmers, Jonathan Edwards—they all had different approaches to the full script-versus-notes question. And in the case of Edwards, his preference evolved during his career from the former to the latter. Edwards “obviously varied his method as he went on and developed. How wise he was in this respect, and in many others, also.”

Preaching and preachers, speechwriting and speakers: It was ever thus.

But what is also permanently true: When oratory works, it is divine.

“So it comes to this,” Lloyd-Jones concludes.

The preparation of sermons involves sweat and labor. It can be extremely difficult at times to get all this matter that you have found in the Scriptures into this particular form. It is like a potter fashioning something out of clay, or like a blacksmith making shoes for a horse; you have to keep putting the material into the fire and on to the anvil and hit it again and again with the hammer. Each time it is a bit better, but not quite right; so you put it back again and again until you are satisfied with it or can do no better. . . . It can be at times most difficult, most exhausting, most trying. But at the same time I can assure you that when you have finally succeeded you will experience one of the most glorious feelings that ever comes to a man on the face of this earth.

I know: I’m preaching to the choir.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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 1960s.

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.