



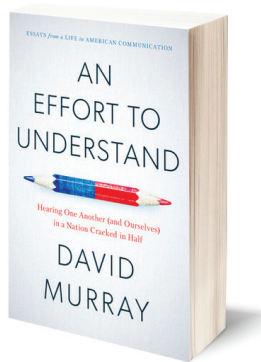
# THINKING OUT LOUD

## A PSA WHITEPAPER

### What Is “An Effort to Understand”? And What Does It Mean to Us?

*How all communicators should change the way they speak and write—and listen, to others and to themselves—to create a more responsible rhetoric, in “a nation cracked in half.”*

By David Murray,  
executive director of the Professional  
Speechwriters Association and publisher  
of *Vital Speeches of the Day*



**Editor's note:** This is an abridged version of the introduction to my new book, *An Effort to Understand: Hearing One Another (and Ourselves) in a Nation Cracked in Half*, out March 2, from *Disruption Books*. (Preorder here.)

—David Murray

“Do they know about Martin Luther King?”

You can hear Senator Robert F. Kennedy ask someone this as he stands on the back of a flatbed truck in the early-spring dark, on a street corner in a park in an all-Black neighborhood in North Indianapolis.

You can just make out the answer of a white official: “We have left it up to you.”

Kennedy hesitates for exactly two seconds, and then makes a request that must have come to members of the ebullient crowd as the first signal that this was not going to be a typical campaign rally.

“Could you lower those signs, please?” Another two seconds.

“I have some very sad news for all of you . . . and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee.”

The whole crowd screams at once, then grows quiet just as quickly, which might have surprised Kennedy. He waits nine seconds before beginning again.

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort. In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are, and what direction we want to move in.

That was April 4, 1968, about a year before I was born.

Hundreds of times, I've listened to the speech that Kennedy went on to deliver that night. I've shown it to audiences of writers all over the United States and all over the world. Every time I've shown it, it has meant something more to me. And every year, it seems to me less a relic of America's past and more a haunting prediction of America's future.

The speech is only five minutes long, and 543 words. When you hear a speech that short that many times over a period of time, different words begin to get under your skin and start to itch:

We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization—Black people amongst Blacks, white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion and love.

That phrase: *an effort to understand*. A little later he repeats it again: “But we have to make an effort in the United States. We have to make an effort to understand.” It sounds so bland. So obvious. So preachy. So white.

So why did he say it three times to an all-Black crowd reeling in shock and despair?

And why did they listen?

---

My fascination with Robert Kennedy began with a story about his own assassination, only two months later—told to me by my mother when I was very young. Kennedy was shot after a midnight celebration of his victory in the California primary. My mother learned the news in the morning through her clock radio. In the 1960s, clock radios were a big thing.

Instead of a harsh ring or tone for your alarm, the radio would come on. The news must’ve crept in through her sleep that night, because she remembered waking up already crying. “For Bobby,” she explained to me.

What kind of politician could make my intellectual, often sardonic mother cry like that? Who could make her call him Bobby?

My interest in Kennedy’s Indianapolis speech, on the other hand, was professional at first. As the editor of a magazine called *Vital Speeches of the Day*, I was getting invited by groups of professional speechwriters and other communicators to give speeches about what makes speeches great. I soon figured out it was good to show clips from speeches, so audiences could see and hear and feel what I was talking about. Kennedy’s speech had a few advantages: It was short, and I could show the whole thing. It also had a subtly sophisticated structure, and it achieved a lot, rhetorically speaking, in just a few minutes’ time. And it was old enough that it didn’t divide my audience along political lines.

And Kennedy’s Indianapolis speech added one more benefit to my lectures, in the heroic stories that bookended it: Beforehand, Kennedy had insisted on

showing up to deliver the speech even though all his advisors had cautioned against it and the local police had refused to give him an escort. And afterward? That night every major city in America burned with riots—except Indianapolis, where Bobby Kennedy had called for peace.

Speechwriters appreciate that tidy grace note. If you write speeches for a living, you like to think that a speech has the power to make good things happen, all by itself. But that story seemed a little too immaculate to me, even just in terms of logistics: a five-minute speech in a little park on the north side of Indianapolis prevented a whole city from rioting?

Eventually, that became another itch I wanted to scratch.

---

For an article I was writing to mark the fiftieth anniversary of MLK's death and Kennedy's speech, in 2018, a friend and I drove from Chicago to Indianapolis, to see the spot where that flatbed truck had been parked—and to try to find someone who had been there that night. There's a really wonderful sculpture at the corner, showing Kennedy and King reaching toward one another across a sidewalk.

The neighborhood is still mostly Black, still pretty poor. Kountry Kitchen Soul Food Place is within walking distance, and we ate lunch there and asked a few old-timers about April 4, 1968. One said he knew a guy who had been there that night, and who was now in city politics. I got the guy's number, and when I returned home to Chicago, I called him up.

Indianapolis City Councilman William Oliver was willing to talk about that night, but like the overwhelming majority of Black residents of Indianapolis, he hadn't been at Kennedy's rally. Still, he gave me exactly what I needed.

A twenty-eight-year-old screw machine operator at the local Chrysler plant in 1968, Oliver was actually at another political rally three miles across town, this one for Congressman Andrew Jacobs, who was running for reelection, backed by the United Auto Workers union. Oliver was aware that Kennedy was in town, but he wouldn't have attended the Kennedy rally anyhow, because it was located in a neighborhood unfriendly to the neighborhood he grew up in: "I had no business going there, and they had no business going where I was."

And anyway, Oliver said to me, "Who was Bobby Kennedy?" All he knew about the Kennedys as a kid was that it seemed as though they were "kind of procrastinating about civil rights in the South."

As a matter of fact, Martin Luther King hadn't exactly mesmerized young Oliver either. King was maligned in the local Indianapolis papers for being disruptive on one hand and ineffective on the other, and Oliver was influenced by those views. He thinks a lot more people—even Black people—claim to have marched with King, whether literally or figuratively, than actually did. But as Oliver describes the night he learned King was killed—when word spread through the crowd at the Jacobs rally “and the women started wailing”—he recalls a feeling of “emptiness, like, ‘They . . . they . . . have taken something away from us. One of the few good things about the whole world was this Martin King. Is he really gone?’ It took our hope away.”

As Oliver said to me, “I didn’t know he was here—until he was gone.” In any case, Oliver is annoyed that Robert Kennedy gets credit for calming down Indianapolis that night. He remembers many times since then in his life when racial unrest begat violence in various American cities. For local cultural reasons that Oliver doesn’t understand, Indianapolis’s Black community never resorted, he said, to “burnin’ down the town.”

Kennedy?

No, said Oliver. “He didn’t do this.”

Every April 4, Oliver attends a remembrance at the site of the speech, along with a few hundred other Indianapolis residents. It seems to him that each year, Kennedy’s speech gets more emphasis and Martin Luther King’s life gets less. And Oliver thinks to himself, *Wait a minute. We’re making a monument out of someone who just passed on the information.*

Of course, Kennedy did much more with that speech than pass on the news of King’s death. Oliver confessed to me he’d never actually seen the whole speech before. I sent him a YouTube link and asked him to watch it. He watched it twice. “I would appreciate it today,” he told me afterward. “I can feel every word of that now, and it almost makes me want to tear up.”

The day after his speech in Indianapolis, with the help of his speechwriters, Kennedy gave a more formal, more philosophical version at the City Club of Cleveland. “We must admit the vanity of our false distinctions among men and learn to find our own advancement in the search for the advancement of all,” he said.

We must recognize that this short life can neither be ennobled or enriched by hatred or revenge . . . that those who live with us are our brothers, that they share with us the same short movement of life, that they seek—as we do—nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment they can.

What was Oliver doing on April 5, while Kennedy was addressing white men in suits over dessert at the City Club luncheon? “What day of the week was it?” he asked me. It was a Friday. He probably went to work at the Chrysler plant.

---

Tonight in the park where Robert F. Kennedy called for understanding a half century ago, Kennedy and Martin Luther King, their words still ringing out on YouTube, reach out to each other in perpetuity. As I reached out to William Oliver, and as the city councilman reached back out to me. As we must all reach out to one another and make an effort to understand, in our own difficult time now in the United States.

But of course my phone conversation with Oliver was too little, and fifty years too late. Am I able to travel back in time and tell a young Black screw machine operator that he should be more attuned, over the din of the late 1960s, to this particular Kennedy’s gentle words, sincerely offered and courageously delivered? No more than I can go back and hasten a young Bobby Kennedy’s plodding spiritual journey to social enlightenment—which also came too late, both for him and for the rest of the nation.

Surely our own effort to understand one another is just as urgent. Will it, also, be too little and too late? That’s up to us: me and you.

Communication requires listening as much as speaking. It requires deep listening and constant listening. It requires careful listening, imaginative listening, and repeated listening. And in our own time, if we are going to have a society that is worth living in, we must learn to truly listen, to hear. We must sense—with the tiniest cilia of our ears and the tenderest membranes of our hearts—not just the words of our friends and family, our coworkers and leaders, but the deepest intent of those words and their emotional source. We must listen with the assumption, so hard to sustain in the daily madness of American life, that the other person came by his or her views as honestly (or maybe as dishonestly) as we came to ours. And we must listen with the belief that with an effort, we can understand.

That’s communication, and that’s what this book is about. In these pages, I talk about my own evolution—from a writer who tried to draw crowds around my work by using words to start fights, to a communicator who gives most of my energy and talents to cultivating lots of rich, common soil where people can gather in peaceful productivity.

In these pages, I urge readers to join me in a near-spiritual movement toward thinking of communication as more than a means of persuading others to our

way of thinking, but as a way of thinking all its own—and indeed a way of life. I describe how the leaders in our lives ought to communicate, and I suggest what those leaders need from us. I talk politics: how we can all engage with one another more honestly on fraught subjects, and why we must do so. And I talk about how we can communicate more productively with our colleagues, more lovingly with our friends and family, and more thoughtfully with acquaintances and strangers.

This is not a call for “civility”; in fact, that concept gets a spanking in here. We will always have trouble in America, and we will always have discord. But I believe that Americans can have more peace when we crave it, more solidarity when we require it, and more trust when it comes right down to it—in every aspect of our American lives.

I believe that even the most politically opposed or culturally estranged or emotionally isolated Americans share vastly more common experience and values than we know—a reality we would become more consciously aware of if we redirected some of the intellectual energy we use to draw distinctions and describe our differences, and instead we applied that energy to see one another more clearly. And we would see ourselves more clearly as a result. As another Kennedy said—and as we were so brutally reminded in the coronavirus spring of 2020—“in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.”

Can we always understand? Maybe not.

But we can always make an effort to understand.

And if we want to call ourselves communicators, we always must.

**Editor’s note:** *The above was written almost a year ago—in early days of COVID and before George Floyd, before the presidential election and before January 6. You might argue that the ensuing time has made an effort to understand more difficult. I’d argue back that it makes it more important. [An Effort to Understand](#) is out March 2. I hope you’ll [pre-order your copy now](#), so that the whole communication community may read it together, and share our wisdom, as one. [Click here to order An Effort to Understand](#), anywhere books are sold.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Murray heads the global Professional Speechwriters Association and comments daily on communication issues on his popular blog Writing Boots. He is an award-winning journalist and is editor and publisher of *Vital Speeches of the Day*, one of the world's longest continuously published magazines. He is the author of *Raised By Mad Men*, a memoir about his advertising parents, and co-author of the New York Times bestseller *Tell My Sons: A Father's Last Letters*.

The son of two writers, Murray grew up in Hudson, Ohio, and studied English at Kent State University before moving to Chicago to make his own writing life. He lives in Chicago with his wife, Cristie Bosch, and daughter, Scout Murray.