

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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DON'T

DROP

THE

MIC

**THE POWER OF YOUR WORDS
CAN CHANGE THE WORLD**



Don't Drop the Mic

PART I

Introduction: The Voice of Hope

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

—John 1:1,14 kjv

The book you're now reading is not the one I first envisioned.

In fact, I was a bit reluctant to write a book about communication at all because I consider myself much more a practitioner than a professor, more preacher than a pedagogue, and more personal than professional in my approach. Throughout the years, though, I have been asked many times by younger men and women for advice, counsel, and wisdom on how to

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communicate effectively. Many of these requests referred to preaching, which is certainly an area of experiential expertise, but as my ministry expanded and new opportunities led me into speaking, writing, creating, and producing, I was frequently asked for tips on communicating in a variety of media.

Then my friend Dr. Frank Thomas, both a seminary professor and a pastor, urged me to share the wisdom I've gleaned from my own experiences, along with my observations and practical suggestions about how to maximize your message at the microphone. With his help, which I'll explain in Chapter 1, I grew excited about considering how I do what I do and how this knowledge can help others. Thinking of my overall concept for this book, I was taken by the duality and paradox of what it means to "drop the mic."

On the one hand, having a mic-drop moment conveys the powerful, resonant impact virtually every communicator desires to have with his or her audience. While you may not literally drop the mic after you speak at the city council meeting, school fundraiser, board of directors' retreat, or church event, you definitely want to make the most of those opportunities when you're required to impart a message. You want to leave listeners impressed and inspired, informed and intrigued, by what you have shared.

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On the other hand, dropping the mic can also mean fumbling those same opportunities, either out of fear, a lack of experience, unfamiliarity with your audience, a lack of preparation, or other barriers we will discuss. This kind of mic drop costs you more than you realize and results in misunderstanding, confusion, ambiguity, and diminished confidence in your own abilities to communicate. While every time you speak may not be an earth-shattering, standing-ovation, mic-drop moment, it can be a completed connection of contextual conversation between you and your audience.

Every speaker either creates more distance between himself and his audience, or closes the gap and bridges those differences. My desire is to help you make the most of your mic, whatever it may be, and connect with those receiving your message. Along the way I hope you will realize the unparalleled power of successful communication even as you practice it more productively, passionately, and potently. And let me assure you, I will be learning right along with you!

You see, for the past few months, I have been preaching in an empty church sanctuary due to the need to limit human contact and shelter at home in order to prevent the perpetuation of the COVID-19 virus. Just as the global pandemic has touched and altered all facets of human life, so, too, has it required

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church to marry technology with tenacity in order to create connections, facilitate corporate worship across countless screens, lift up one another in prayer, and experience sermons intended to empower, equip, and enhance our faith during these calamitous times.

Prior to the pandemic, at the Potter's House we would often stream live services and provide video archives of past services and sermons for our global online congregation. In many ways, though, our electronic capabilities and Internet offerings seemed ancillary, if not peripheral, to in-person participation for the thriving community actively involved in our main church and affiliated sister churches. Then our awareness of the virus descended and changed everything. We maximized our technical capacity for reaching out, connecting, and communicating as a church body. Small groups began meeting with Zoom for their Bible studies, and social media became the method of reaching out to those in need. Overnight, our online audience increased by 200 percent.

The coronavirus amplified the power of the microphone, and I was not about to let it drop. I was bombarded with requests for interviews, overwhelmed by personal calls and texts from people wanting my opinions on how to function in the pandemic, and

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sought by pastors and ministry leaders for counsel on conducting their services and meetings.

All that sustained us was our words. We had no vaccine or distribution plans for vaccinations. No one knew what to do, where to turn, or exactly what to believe. A reporter interviewing me from a well-known conservative station asked how I prayed for our nation. Another journalist from a liberal news outlet engaging me on the pandemic asked if I would pray for our nation and our world on the spot.

Feeling a responsibility to use my platform to combat the contagion, I invited doctors, scientists, medical experts, and the surgeon general from our state to address my online viewers with critical information about how to prevent the spread of the virus and how to proceed if they had been exposed or were experiencing symptoms. I also asked psychologists, counselors, and therapists to advise us on how to maintain our mental health by keeping depression, anxiety, fear, and anger at bay. Financial advisors and employment coaches also participated.

Words were our most powerful weapons as we sought to educate ourselves and each other about the scientific specifics of this unprecedented virus. Words became our lifelines against loneliness and isolation

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as we endured separation from loved ones, coworkers, community members, and church family.

This crisis left our nation more separated than ever before. We could not leave our homes, shake hands, or hug loved ones and friends. We grieved alone, struggled alone, died alone. Working from home, we had to learn to command an audience online while our kids cried for more cereal, the cat attacked the sofa, and the doorbell rang with our order of groceries.

Like so many of us, I was stuck at home but never busier. While I was not traveling as usual, I communicated with more people in more venues around the world than I had ever done. I joined my voice with those of other faith leaders in hopes of easing the anguish and angst of us all, knowing our greatest offering was simply hope itself. The Potter's House did what we could to safely meet the needs of our members, our neighbors, and our global ministry community.

We helped feed the hungry, providing more than three thousand meals to third-shift hospital workers who found food outlets and carry-out restaurants often closed when they got off work. This seemed just as important as disseminating trustworthy information about the virus as well as praying for the spiritual

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needs of individual souls. When Jesus was preaching and people got hungry, he fed the five thousand before trying to impart his teaching. Following his example, we tried to lead using the power of our global mic, supporting the ecosystem and sustaining connection.

Logging in to connect with people from all over the world while wearing my pajama bottoms and T-shirt, I offered whatever words of wisdom, of encouragement, of hope I could. I spoke with Neil Caputo on Fox News, Gayle King on *CBS This Morning*, my friends on *Good Morning America*, TBN—conservative and liberal without discrimination. I was bombarded by pastors calling from Nigeria, the United Kingdom, Australia, and around the world, all seeking to learn and share best practices for how to serve in the midst of a phenomenon without precedent in our lifetimes.

Regardless of the different demographics we served, we shared a common enemy and faced a common crisis. We needed the synergism of different cultures, ideologies, and practices in order to find a sustainable cure to ensure our individual and collective survival. Everywhere imaginable, I continued speaking, teaching, sharing, and dispelling myths that were killing us. I didn't hesitate and was one of the first pastors to speak out against keeping church open during the

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pandemic. No matter what the consequences, I did not want our services to become a petri dish for the coronavirus.

Every day I talked to pastors who are now on respirators or suffering through the symptoms of the virus because they continued to operate as usual until it was too late. Statistically, African Americans comprise roughly half of all casualties of the coronavirus in our country. The Latinx community has also been hit hard.

All the more reason to communicate truth. We could not afford to buy into cultural myths about drinking hot water or holding our breath. We had to disseminate what was medically and scientifically known. I am probably the least qualified person to talk about the virus. I am not a doctor, scientist, political leader, or surgeon general, but my people trust me! They know I will never compromise the truth. They know I am fully committed to their health and well-being, regardless of whether we agree on all social, political, or theological issues.

At the time the pandemic gripped us all, I had more than eleven thousand people registered to attend my annual leadership conference, but I didn't think twice about canceling it. I would never use my platform to perpetuate anything that puts others' health

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and well-being at risk. Using your power of communication to address the people within your network of relationships means knowing when to say no and when to say yes.

Even as it felt like we were sinking on the *Titanic*, we pooled our resources to keep our communities afloat. With relatives battling the virus and close friends dying, so many pastors continued to preach in front of empty pews in order to offer words of hope and spiritual power to those they serve. From mega-church founders to storefront pastors, we all collaborated on how to be relevant in serving the needs of their congregations and the world at large.

Why? Because the words of a leader are never more important than during a crisis. Local officials asked our church counselors to talk with first responders over the phone. Through it all, we didn't miss a service—in fact, I added more online services! I know how important it is to have a calming voice say, “I'm in it with you. You're not alone!” We worship together to remind us that God is still with us, in our midst, at work in us and through us.

Even those of us blessed with resources, income, and relationships have experienced trauma from the collective, cumulative, and comprehensive losses all around us. There's hardly a black person in America

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who doesn't know someone who has died from the virus. We saw bodies stacked in hotel rooms, eighteen-wheelers, and industrial storage freezers. We watched government leaders contradicting one another or competing for resources as if we were vying for a spot in the Olympics rather than fighting to stay alive on a daily basis. We did everything imaginable to keep ourselves and others from freaking out, but the emotional fallout, the effects of trauma, and PTSD are going to last beyond my lifetime.

Through all the uncertainty, fear, anxiety, anger, death, and grief, our words continue to give us life. They give us strength and courage, faith and hope. Our words matter now more than ever. Communication is as vital to human existence as air, water, food, and shelter. Using the power of written and spoken language, we can express our love, defend our rights, attain our education, persuade an opponent, defeat an adversary, and entertain millions of readers and listeners. Thanks to social media and online methodology, we can connect with millions of other people around the world.

As long as we can speak, we have hope.

Communication converts ideas into words and words into actions. From the moment an infant learns to associate the comfort of his mother's embrace with crying out in distress, human beings learn to

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communicate. Hearing sounds repeated forms patterns. Patterns become languages even as they retain distinct and colorful dialects.

It's no coincidence that the sacred gift of God's Son is expressed as "Word... made flesh" (John 1:14 kjv). Because words of truth always have the power to save us and set us free. We make a sacred offering when we're willing to speak the truth. We receive a sacred gift when we're willing to listen.

Sometimes the best way to beat an invisible enemy is with an invisible weapon. The coronavirus pandemic and everything in its wake remind us that language is surely one of our greatest resources. Our words form the strongest defense and provide the most effective tool. They equip us, empower us, entertain us, and enlighten us.

No, this is not the book I first envisioned.

Instead, I pray it is more relevant, more powerful, and more helpful to you as you accept the mic on the platform you've been given.

Your voice is needed.

Don't drop the mic!

CHAPTER I

The Gift of Speech

First learn the meaning of what you say, and then speak.

—Epictetus

Our words vibrate with the power of possibility. Just as circuits channel the crackle of electric currents, words form messages, whether written or spoken, that have changed the course of history countless times. I first felt the sparks of the charge they could carry as a boy clustered with my family around our television set. Our little house was the last house on the left at the end of a dead-end street, paved now but then just a dirt road, in Charleston, West Virginia. I can still see the ragged couch we all perched on to watch a console filled with tubes in the back and

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a screen in front made of glass as thick as my grandmother's bifocals.

It was the early sixties and our country was fractured by the Vietnam War, the Woodstock era, and the growing civil rights movement. Willie Mays was playing ball and the Supremes were as popular as Beyoncé is today. Lucy was eating more candy than she could pass down the factory assembly line, Aunt Bee was baking pies in Mayberry, and Lassie was the dog every child wanted!

One night, however, stands out more than all the rest. On the *Six O'Clock News*, we watched as a young man in a black suit enthralled a large crowd of listeners then called colored people. We soon learned he was a Baptist preacher named Dr. Martin Luther King, and never in my young life had I heard a speaker with such a melodious voice deliver tones with the cadence of a song.

As captivating as his speech was, I remember becoming distracted by an even more impressive revelation: My father was sitting with us and watching Dr. King. Through weary, heavy-lidded eyes, my father gazed so intently, his admiration for the man on the small screen unmistakable. Seldom did my father get to sit and watch TV with the rest of us. He was far too

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busy working to keep the electric bill paid to enjoy the frivolity of television programing. But watching Dr. King with the rest of us, my father had never seemed so engrossed in anything that I could recall.

Dr. King's controversial message of nonviolent resistance to the injustice of the times was as amazing to me as it was to my father. Against barking dogs and fire hoses spewing a deluge of hate, in an atmosphere of unbridled violence aimed at innocent people merely exercising their First Amendment rights, Dr. King stood firm with no weapons, no army tanks, nothing but the passionate elocution electrifying his audience with the sound of his voice and a message of hope.

No matter what his adversaries did to him, he just kept on speaking! His courage was remarkable. His cadence was legendary. It was then that I first realized the power of a man with a microphone. I'm not sure how to quantify the level of his impression on me as a child. Was it his message that moved me? Or maybe it was my father's rapt gaze at him? Whatever the allure, that night left me with one unforgettable takeaway: *A man with a microphone could change the world!*

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Power of Life and Death

Dr. King's example illustrates the power of communication to accomplish what wars, weapons, and web wizardry cannot achieve. He ignited an awareness in me, along with millions of others, that what we say can divert devastation and unify those willing to listen with understanding. Dr. King illustrated and amplified the timeless truth I had learned in Sunday school that the tongue has the power over life and death (Proverbs 18:21).

This wisdom remains as timely as ever. Now more than ever, the power of communication commands our public attention as well as our personal interactions. Simply put, the sharper our array of communication skills, the more successful we become in virtually every endeavor.

Who among us can honestly say that their lives, loves, and even their livelihood won't benefit from developing and maintaining better communication skills? Whether they're used for conflict resolution in a tempestuous personal relationship with someone we love or whether we are interviewing for a career change that could affect the level to which we live,

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work, and play, we have a much better chance at success if we can communicate effectively.

As I embark upon the task of sharing about the significance of speaking and the powerful gift of communication we have been given, I hope you will find my humble offering beneficial in a variety of settings. While I have become a lifelong student and practitioner of communications, I do not write this book in an attitude of arrogance or superiority. Rather, my intent is to enhance our respect for the art of speaking and to enhance our eloquence as preachers, presenters, politicians, performers, poets, and entrepreneurs.

By sharing the ever-evolving journey of my own linguistic development, I hope my pitfalls can divert the direction of your own discourse, providing you with a clearer understanding of what's involved when we share language to convey meaning. Being a communicator myself, I understand its significance within the human experience, the importance of it in our relationships, our emotional equilibrium, and our creative expressions, as well as its vital significance as a lens outside ourselves into other lifestyles, cultures, communities, and businesses.

History would be vandalized if we lost the great speeches and founding documents that have

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developed, defined, and deepened the human condition. Great men and women have opened their mouths and changed the world. Writers have picked up their pens never knowing of the countless readers their missives would inspire, instruct, and entertain beyond their intended recipients.

You and I wield this same kind of power today.

Method of the Message

While technology gives us the ability to converse with people around the world with split-second speed and impeccable accuracy, it is not the power source of our communication. Now, I will try to avoid the propensity often exhibited among my generation to bemoan the development of technology—in part because it is this very innovation that enables me to pen these words in a cohesive, comprehensive manner as efficiently and effectively as possible! You and I have access to spell-check, grammar correction, auto-fill, and other linguistic conveniences that Shakespeare could never have imagined, not to mention methods such as e-mail, texts, tweets, and other social media.

Interestingly enough, we now live in an era when computerized voices guide us through prompts

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whenever we call for customer service assistance from major corporations. Other companies employ international troubleshooters to address domestic questions and concerns, which we may notice from the accented voice responding to our inquiry.

Listening devices such as Siri and Alexa, coupled with audio activation of autotype, record our speech patterns and repeated phrasing in order to program around our patterns. Key words on Instagram have replaced blog sites, and the convenience of tweets has replaced heartfelt talks on virtually every topic. I often wonder if our memories have shrunk as our phones have become smarter than their buyers!

Before you scoff at the notion of artificial intelligence robbing your brain of its old job, let me ask you, how many phone numbers do you remember? How many poems, Bible verses, and sports stats can you recite? Before we had such powerful cyber capabilities, we relied on our memories, emoting speeches and conversations that led our nation, solved our conflicts, united our families, and educated our children. For the most part, text and tweets have replaced much of the personal nature of communication. Minds groping for the right word have been replaced by our fingers looking for the right button!

While the Internet and language-interfacing

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technology have provided a way for us to conduct meetings without having to travel, to inform others without invading their personal space, to celebrate family milestones without traveling any miles, they have also impaired the way we correspond. When limits of time, screen space, and character quantity dictate our directives, we lose more than eloquence in the details. Artful statements become archaic as personal styles of expressing ourselves to the fullest degree have become less central to cultural modes of communication.

I'm sure you realize that communication invites all the senses from the human eye to the listening ear. Authentic communication, however, isn't just audio, but it is also audiovisual if not multisensory. Communication for us as humans is an interesting mix of subliminal signals as well as audible sounds. A pause, a raised eyebrow, the hint of a smile—they convey just as much as our diction, tone, and style of speech.

Effective communication allows our body language and voice inflection to unite with our linguistics. The connection of all these modes creates a symphonic experience of expression that crescendos into a more elaborate concerto of sensory impressions received by our listeners. Looking back, I've reflected many times on how Dr. King mastered this fusion of speaker and

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speech, language and listener, method and message. I suspect all the great communicators that have made an impression on you similarly reflect this same rhetorical radiance.

Technology has increased the size of our potential audience, but have we compromised the unspoken intimacy of reading between the lines? Of feeling a message deep in our bones before our minds even have time to process it? Like a flood spilling across the plains, our online communication may cover more surface area but lacks the depth to create a current. Without diminishing the benefits of technology, we must consider how to maximize the quality of our communication, how to retain the rhetorical rhythms and lyrical linguistics that penetrate our hearts and minds, not just our eyes and ears.

Successful communication requires an exchange of understanding that transcends the syllables we hear or the sentences we see. Successful communication requires mastering the art of translation.

Lost in Translation

Communication, no matter how eloquent or effusive it may be, is incomplete if understanding isn't achieved.

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Connecting with the recipient of your message is an essential element of successful communication because being understood is the ultimate objective. Words may be exchanged in a common language, but without understanding both the methods and the manners, the message is usually incomplete.

Understanding serves as the glue of effective communication. Being understood and understanding others require shared consideration of context, motive, intention, and culture. Understanding leads to shared space where common values emerge, along with goals of mutual benefit. Your emotional seedbed flourishes in an environment where you are understood. Your economic fortitude is enhanced; your value to the team accrues when you are able both to understand others and to be understood; and your ability to lead grows proportionately.

If the goal of communication is understanding, then it involves sharing more than the same established alphabet, language, and vocabulary. Speakers of the same language must still translate one another's messages within a cultural context and familiarity. We see this across historical periods, generational slang, and regional figures of speech.

For example, I have a friend from the rural South who often expresses his suspicion or doubt about

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something by declaring, “Something in that milk ain’t clean!” The first few times I heard his colloquialism, I chuckled at the homespun wisdom of this memorable metaphor. Such phrasing had a freshness that caught my attention and conjured up a specific image. Over time, the expression began penetrating my thoughts, taking up residence in my head, until—guess what?—I started saying it, too! While I didn’t intentionally decide to adopt it, subconsciously I became influenced by the speech of another person!

Is this not how we all learn to communicate when as infants we appropriate language from our parents? From simple vocabulary words and names to phrases and complete thoughts, we formulate our messaging by memorizing alphabetic and linguistic constructions. Sheer repetition establishes the most basic foundation of communication until we master other aspects of language and expression. While using the same letters and language is essential at first, we often overlook the idiosyncrasies of our mother tongue. We rarely consider that something that comes as naturally as speaking could be enhanced or endangered depending on what we do with what we have been given.

Speaking seems and feels natural, though, only because our first language, in my case English, isn’t spoken merely because we studied it. We assimilate it

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because our parents or family members modeled it in their speech to us. Not just their vernacular or vocabulary, but also their intensity of tone, implementation of humor, or overall tenor conveyed consistently in our home and early environments. Like handheld mirrors, we reflect what's closest to us, or where we've been, and who we listen to, without even being aware that they are programming our speech through the filters of our sensory and neurological experiences.

Think of it this way: If a Chinese family had taken me home from the hospital, I would have grown up speaking Mandarin. I would've adopted the tone and timing that fit into the atmosphere and culture of my upbringing. If a family from Paris had taken me across the Atlantic Ocean at birth, I would likely be speaking French and regularly ordering croissants! So then the language we were first exposed to can often become our primary means of communication, complete with a twang, a staccato delivery, or a Southern drawl.

Because speech is reflective and reflexive, when you speak, you are telling me more than the sentences you construct. I am gathering information from both what's spoken and what's suggested by the way in which you speak. This kind of interpretation often gets labeled an impression, as in, the good kind you want to make on a prospective employer, an attractive

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date, or a new neighbor. Many times, we may not realize how much we convey beyond what we actually say!

Message Received

Where did we learn these nuanced ways of communicating? Those early exposures we had are like zip codes in that they identify general locations as to where we are in life, social status, generational phrasing, cultural colloquialisms, sense of humor, and intelligence. Early sights and sounds can leave us enunciating phrases with a British crispness or the rapid-fire, slurred speech of a street thug. Both speak English but can communicate very different messages even when speaking the same words!

We are influenced and often evaluated with early categorizations and often-permanent assumptions based on the tenor and texture of our speech. I know it's not fair, and I know it's not a completely accurate assessment. I'm just acknowledging that people do it every day! Shouldn't we know the full message we're sending?

Seeing, then, that our early and even later associations, experiences, and exposures can morph into a particular style as different as hip hop is from country music,

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we must master as many facets of our communication as possible, both to be understood and to understand others. Through these earliest influences we adopted dialects, shaped our accents, increased the use of certain colloquialisms, and established our euphemisms. Greater awareness of the language we speak, as well as how and why we say what we say the way we say it, is our first step toward more effective communication.

You aren't just a result of what you say. You are a result of who you listen to most often, engage with consistently, and spend time around socially! Who are you listening to? And did you ever realize that simply listening to them and dialoging consistently with them is programming you even after you walk away?

Sitting in counsel with those who communicate the way we wish we could can often improve our speaking styles. This sharpening can ultimately improve your economic bottom line, result in invitations to new opportunities, and enhance the number and quality of your relationships. Just as dogs hear high-pitched whistles that fall silent on human ears, our communication style will attract some and be ignored by others. All the more reason to be heard by those whose success you wish to emulate!

Let me ask you again: *Who* are you listening to?
More important, who is listening to *you*?

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Power in Presence

My mother wisely said that no one knows how intelligent or ignorant you are until you open your mouth. The moment we start to speak, we learn more than the words formed. We listen to diction, articulation, and accents. We garner further insight from the intensity of pitch and tone, all partnering together to convey more than mere words alone could do. Emotions slip through our tone like sand through an hourglass!

Gifted performers learn to master these nuances. One of my favorite actors has always been Denzel Washington. Like all iconic masters of the craft, he can carry a scene that has no words at all. His facial expressions can speak an entire story arc in a matter of moments, expressing more with a glare, a shudder, or a snarl than any words in the script could achieve. There's a scene in *Safe House* when Denzel's character is dying, and he controls the entire event without saying a word. It is gripping and quite intense. And when he has lines, this Academy Award winner uses both the power of what he says and how he delivers the lines to convey the essence of the character he is portraying.

We often call this quality “presence,” that intangible

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force that Denzel, along with so many other expert communicators, possesses and wields so judiciously. I maintain that presence, or whatever we choose to call it, emerges anytime our message and our methods unite to reinforce one another. In fact, it is virtually impossible to ascertain how a person feels about what is being said without hearing their voice and reading their body language. This is why texts, e-mails, letters, and transcripts may be open to misunderstanding or misinterpretation more frequently than personal delivery.

Who would want an attorney who couldn't bring himself to stand before the scrutiny of a perplexed jury and passionately deliver a compelling closing statement? Or how does a commissioned sales representative overcome the reluctance of a prospective customer if she doesn't have the ability to use the pageantry of language to close the deal? What would teachers do without the capacity for reframing, restating, and rearranging the words required for their students to absorb new concepts?

Everyone from the politician to the pulpiteer to the parent to the panelist relies on the sheer art of communication to compel transformative decisions every day. The use of language has transformed strangers into lovers, fueling the vehicle that transports them to

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the altar of a sacred sanctuary to share vows formalizing their union in holy matrimony. The eloquence of language was used to dissuade hostage takers and would-be assailants from igniting the violence of genocide in Rwanda and the atrocities of apartheid in South Africa. Powerful speech abolished the once-accepted societal plight of the South's Jim Crow laws, persuading the Supreme Court to purge our country from the hideous sin of slavery.

We have achieved milestones in human history because someone somewhere appreciated the power of the microphone, not the bullets of an AK47, the intimidation of an army tank, or the barking dogs on the side of nervous police. Counselors have used language to prevent suicides by talking those in despair away from the edge while mothers communicate to calm an agitated baby from hysteria to a slumbering rest. The vocal cords, coupled with tongue and teeth, have been as powerful as any weapon known to us. The Bible tells us even God used "the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21 niv).

Indeed, speech is a powerful tool!

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Speak from Your Soul

Down through the years, I've become best known for my communication as a preacher and public speaker. In addition to preaching and public speaking, however, I've also learned to adapt my communication methods and modalities through the movies I've produced, the television work I've done, and the many books I've written. Regardless of the medium, my communication style is a mix of all the previous men and women in the little world that I grew up in. It was born from an instinctive place, influenced by hearing many models.

My style comes from my soul because so much of what I communicate is some form of ministry. My speech and the style of my delivery began outside the camp of any academic training and beyond the doors of any seminary. Instead, I've relied on spirit and spunk, wind and warmth, compassion and conversation—all seasoned with a passionate and often poetic fusion of ancestry, heritage, and the power of a listening ear and open heart.

Nonetheless, I've always appreciated the academic perspective—theological, hermeneutical, and linguistic—showcased by many other preachers and

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ministry leaders. Which brings me back to my friend Dr. Frank Thomas and the catalyst for this book. Dr. Thomas and I met a number of years ago at an annual ministerial conference when he introduced himself and we began chatting about each other's presentations. I was immediately impressed with his credentials as well as his grounded, practical manner of discussing the more academic facets of preaching. A renowned scholar currently serving as the Director of the PhD Program in African American Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana, Dr. Thomas also teaches homiletics there and has frequently published on his findings.

I soon discovered his balanced approach resulted from being a pastor for many years in addition to his education and expertise as a seminary professor. From my experience, the best teachers are also practitioners in their areas of expertise, and such is the case with Dr. Thomas. As we got better acquainted, we realized just how much we had in common despite the different paths taken in answering the call to ministry. He not only enjoyed my preaching over the years but began providing insight and analysis that left me stunned and humbled. Listening to Frank explain some of the sermons for which I'm best known, I felt like I was

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listening to halftime commentary by a veteran sports broadcaster reviewing highlights of his favorite ball games.

Intrigued as I was, I also felt intimidated and confessed that I had never considered the way I did what I do in the ways he described. Dr. Thomas then urged me to write a book in which I did just that—shared the wisdom I've gleaned about communication and analyzed it in ways that others would find helpful. He stressed the need to create a linguistic legacy for future generations studying preaching and my place in the historical canon of black preachers.

I chuckled at the lofty aspirations he wished to ignite in me, and I explained that I could never write such a book. Frankly, the very idea was both intimidating and intrusive! Such scrutiny of my communication style felt like a violation of the personal, intimate process of creation, a granular autopsy of what begins in the abstract birthing of an idea. It was like asking your grandmother to pass on a recipe that has become part of who she is, instinctively consisting of a dab of this and a smidgen of that.

“All the more reason to ask for the recipe while you can!” Dr. Thomas responded. The more I resisted, the more he persisted, until finally I told him I was willing to consider such an endeavor on one condition:

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that he actively participate by sharing some analytical insight afforded by his academic training. I knew that my attempts to explore the facets of the communication process would be limited without the unique perspective provided by the various lenses Dr. Thomas could provide. Intrigued by the creative challenge, he and I continued having conversations about the power of communication in our culture.

The result is this book you're now reading! As you will see, I often include Dr. Thomas's insight in my expository exploration of eloquence, drawing from both his vast historical knowledge as well as his own experience as a gifted communicator. In fact, I was so impressed by his overview of my preaching within a larger historical and theological perspective, I asked him to author his own chapters, which are collected in Part 5, "The Meal in the Message." There, Dr. Thomas runs with our cooking metaphor and unpacks it with a brilliance I trust you will find every bit as delicious and nourishing as a Sunday dinner!

My goal, as well as his, is not to promote my way of communication as the only or best way. We merely hope to challenge you to consider the forces and factors shaping your own style of communication even as you adapt, adjust, and aspire to new forms of self-expression. As we share the ways I often transform my

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thoughts into words to be shared with various audiences, I hope you can learn from what works for me as well as from the mistakes I've made along the way.

Sometimes we learn the most when our communication falls flat. In fact, I've heard some scholars suggest that I break every rule that they teach about preaching! While I apologize in advance for those broken rules, I do so without shame, because what I do works for me. So let's now discover what works best for you, even if we have to break some rules along the way. Let's learn the unspoken alphabet inside you waiting to unleash the language of your soul!

If nothing else, I hope to spark your passion for language, elevate its significance beyond the formalized rules of grammatical correctness into the lavish coloring of mundane moments, and inspire you to use all the hues and shades available as you wield your paintbrush of speech. Language is a gift and it's time you unwrapped it fully and maximized its potential to influence your life.

Many have been the pallbearers of their dreams simply because they didn't understand that enhancing their communication skills could be the conduit to reaching those dreams. The ability to speak can aid in helping people, serving the disenfranchised, increasing sales, reaching the masses, stopping wars,

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and gaining untold, boundless advancement, simply by commanding and channeling the constructive, creative force of language.

The more adept we become at using all available resources to convey our message, the greater our impact. From lovers to litigators, entrepreneurs to entertainers, and bloggers to board members, we all want to communicate more effectively, intimately, and efficiently. Whether you're interviewing for a new position, proposing a new business plan, auditioning for a performance, delivering a report for your committee, teaching Sunday school, or sharing your heart with a loved one, this book is for you!

Let's get started, shall we?

CHAPTER 2

Own the Fear Factor

What the mind doesn't understand, it worships or fears.

—Alice Walker

The first time I preached, or at least the first time I recall standing in the pulpit of a small country church in West Virginia, I was a teenager with more energy than eloquence, more ambition than experience. I'll never forget feeling as if my legs might give way and collapse like the accordion file my mother used to collect coupons. My mouth remained as dry as a desert while my heart felt like an anchor sinking into the depths of anxious uncertainty. The butterflies in my stomach morphed into frantic bees buzzing up into my brain in a swarm of colliding thoughts. I had

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prepared, rehearsed, prayed, asked others to pray, and rehearsed some more.

I doubt there were more than a hundred congregants gazing back at me that Sunday, but I might as well have been addressing crowds in a stadium on that first momentous occasion. Momentous, not necessarily for those in attendance—although I hope they received some spiritual nourishment from my delivery of God's Word that day—but momentous because I pushed through my fears. I refused to let my nerves rule my rhetoric and my doubts sabotage my sermon. I'm sure I stuttered, stammered, paused, and lost my place in the mental outline I had memorized so diligently and the notes I had written out so carefully.

But like David slaying Goliath, I loaded my words into the slingshot of faith and did what I sensed God might be calling me to do. I gave voice to expressions and ideas larger than myself and my understanding of the world. It was far from perfect, but it was a small victory that has had enormous consequences in my life. Since then, I have preached in churches before thousands of people, spoken on stages before world dignitaries, and prayed with presidents, but none of those occasions would have occurred if I had never stood in that pulpit as a young man determined to share what I had to say.

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Fear must never be the obstacle that blocks your development, growth, and maturity as a communicator. Fear of failing, fear of succeeding, fear of what others will think, fear of what your mama will think, fear of making a fool of yourself, fear of being misunderstood, criticized, and taken out of context—as with any area of personal growth, fear is likely to be part of the equation. When it comes to communicating, however, fear is but one variable among many, not the limitation that prevents you from being heard by those around you.

Owning your fear is the first step in facing it, and facing it to overcoming it.

The Sound of Your Voice

I'm often amazed that people rank speaking in public near the top of their list of worst fears. Known by the clinical word *glossophobia*, fear of public speaking terrifies some people more than death, divorce, cancer, unemployment, spiders, and snakes! Now all of those certainly frighten me, especially those last two, but allowing any of my fears to prevent me from doing what I'm made to do may be my greatest fear of all.

It's not that I no longer get nervous, anxious, or

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even fearful, prior to stepping onstage or standing in the pulpit. It's not that I can't relate to the stress of wanting to have other people understand the layered ideas that seem so clear in my mind yet often get tangled when I attempt to weave my words together. My amazement is because people who refuse to face their fear of communicating before crowds, corporate gatherings, or congregations lose more than they save by avoiding such opportunities. With communication, the old adage of "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" becomes "Nothing ventured, something lost."

For when we allow others to speak for us, when we step away from the mic thrust in front of us by circumstances, then we relinquish power and defer our dreams. Ultimately, I cannot speak for you and your experience, no matter how much we may have in common or how many times we've shared meaningful moments. Consider how people often experience the same event in the same place at the same time and come away with very different interpretations, understandings, and experiences.

You only have to reflect on certain family stories from growing up to realize how differently each relative viewed the incident at the time it happened and how they've interpreted it since. What one of your siblings recalls as a fond incident in which you were

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teasing one another, you may consider a traumatic event that shifted your relationship into one of fearful antagonism. The same holds true for parents and children. I'm always amazed when one of my sons or daughters remembers a family event in radically different ways than I recall it.

Psychologists and neurologists tell us that not only do we experience the same events distinctly from one another, but our memories also color those events in unique shades and hues, both positively and negatively. Our personality, temperament, other experiences, and circumstances create individual viewpoints as distinct as our fingerprints. While there's nothing new under the sun, there are infinite ways to filter its light through the lens of your unique perspective!

My point is that if you're not willing to face whatever fears and apprehensions you may have about communicating in public, then you lose out and those around you lose as well. You may have the critical input that inspires your team to innovate new solutions to old problems. You might be the teacher capable of addressing students in variations of their own vernacular, revealing the relevancy of information others were not able to impart. You could be the next stand-up comic bringing laughter to millions of people. Or the next mediator facilitating peace among

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conflicted stakeholders. The next leader bringing communities together to foster change.

But if you're not willing to risk letting others hear the sound of your voice, then none of those will be possible. If you have a dream, if you feel called, if you're inspired to pursue your best life, then you must be willing to speak. You must be willing to communicate before you can hope to realize your full potential. Excuses will always pop up like weeds in the sidewalk cracks, but you must never let them keep you from moving forward and letting your voice be heard.

Giant Obstacles

As you muster courage and find your voice, take comfort in knowing that the fear of communicating publicly is nothing new. In fact, we see several notable examples of inexperienced, reluctant speakers in the Bible, including Moses, Gideon, and Esther. When I reflect on the various leaders God chose to call and anoint to serve his people, I'm struck by the fact that he never went with the obvious choice, at least from a human perspective.

Just consider the scenario when God sent his prophet Samuel to anoint Saul's successor as the next

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king of Israel. Samuel was sent to a little rural town called Bethlehem, important as the birthplace of not only this king but the King of Kings. Once in Bethlehem, Samuel followed the Lord's direction to the home of Jesse, where the prophet began going from son to son only to have God indicate that this was not the man: "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7 niv).

Running out of prospects, Samuel asked Jesse if there was anyone else in his household and discovered that the youngest son, David, a mere teenager, was out tending sheep. Surely, he could not be the one God had chosen as the next king! Yet, of course, he was indeed God's choice, a legendary leader later described as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22).

While David waited and matured into his position of royal authority, he gained plenty of experience in public speaking. He was certainly a gifted poet and lyricist, which we know from ample evidence in the many Psalms authored by him. But writing poems on a hillside while the sheep graze in green pastures is not the same thing as finding the right words in

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the heat of the moment, when those words have the potential to matter most.

We see young David in this kind of situation not long after Samuel had anointed him, most likely. As Israel fought off the invading Philistines, most able-bodied young men were conscripted into the king's army, including three of David's older brothers: Eliab, Abinadab, and Shammah (1 Samuel 17:13). Left at home to help with chores and tend his father's sheep, David finally got to see the front lines of battle when his father sent him to take food and supplies to his brothers there (1 Samuel 17:17–19).

Upon arrival, David discovered a huge obstacle loomed over the Hebrew soldiers: a giant warrior named Goliath. The warring armies had reached a standoff, with each positioned on a hillside separated by a valley between them. Blocking the Israelites' advancement to defend their borders, Goliath relished his role as merciless marauder and had quite a reputation even before creating this impasse. Specific details about this adversary explain why Saul and his men were “dismayed and terrified” (1 Samuel 17:11 niv) and “fled from him in great fear” (1 Samuel 17:24 niv).

Goliath was almost 10 feet tall, and his armor alone weighed about 150 pounds! Not only did he look the part of the snarling, militant mercenary, but this

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giant loved using the platform so many bullies create for themselves, using the microphone his size and military victories had given him to taunt his rivals (1 Samuel 17:4–10). The Philistine was so confident of his immense power in battle that he offered to distill the entire war into one man-to-man fight between himself and any of Saul’s men willing to take him on, winner take all. For good measure, Goliath added, “This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other.” This stalemate continued for 40 days, with the giant yelling his taunts every morning and evening.

Despite the centuries separating us in time, the giant’s jibes are remarkably similar to those of the trolls and haters on our social media today. Bullies will always brag, boast, and belittle those who oppose them or call them out on their abuse of power, position, or passion. In our virtual world of immediate, ubiquitous connectivity, everyone can have a voice, which unfortunately includes those who use their communication for intimidation. Ignoring them is sometimes the better part of wisdom, but there are occasions when you absolutely cannot avoid confronting someone who postures like Goliath, either online or in person. Especially if they are terrorizing those who are defenseless or trash-talking that which is sacred to you.

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Which is exactly why David was so upset! He heard Goliath mocking the God of Israel, whose soldiers refused to even attempt to engage in battle with the giant. Despite his youth, inexperience, and lack of proper equipment for battle, David knew he had to speak up and step out in faith by accepting the Philistine's challenge. Some occasions demand that you speak up and express the undiluted truth of an injustice that has transpired or make known the heinous offense perpetrated by those in authority.

You see, giants still exist today.

They go by names like Prejudice, Racism, Brutality, Inequality, and Oppression.

A Time to Speak

We have recently experienced an egregious trauma that necessitated not just one but millions of voices joining together in a chorus of outrage, grief, and pent-up anger that had been festering for untold generations. When George Perry Floyd Jr. was tragically and senselessly killed by a Minneapolis police officer before countless witnesses, millions more reached the tipping point of their silence. No longer could they weep in isolation or rage behind closed doors.

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No longer could they simply turn away or limit their anger to a singular text or isolated e-mail to others who they knew felt the same way.

No, on May 25, 2020, recognition of the other pandemic afflicting our nation reached a critical level in public awareness. There was no mistaking the blatant brutality and arrogant authority behind the merciless murder occurring before our eyes as the police officer's knee pinned his full weight along the neck of a defenseless man lying on the ground. For more than eight minutes, the unbearable weight pressed into the top of George Floyd's spine, squeezing life-giving air from his lungs as he hoarsely cried, "I can't breathe!"

There is too much to say—books and books long after I am gone—about the intersection of issues and collision of political, social, racial, and cultural variables in that scene. With tears in my eyes as I write this, I will limit my focus to the absolute necessity of overcoming the fear of silence in order to vocalize the unmitigated outrage of such assaults. While many, many others—including Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and Atatiana Jefferson, just to name a recent few—have needlessly perished in fatal encounters with those supposedly dedicated and paid to serve and protect, the death of George Floyd opened a floodgate of voices

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protesting the undeniable assault and systemic racism within our society.

Millions of people rose up to speak, to tweet, to text, to e-mail, to cry and shout and demand reform, recognition, and restitution. They marched together, wept together, comforted one another, and demanded that others listen to their message, that Black lives matter just as much as those of any other human beings. In the midst of a global, uncontained viral pandemic, people risked coming together in a chorus of courage rather than suffer in silence or turn blind eyes away from the horror.

And I must say, it was the diversity of people I saw marching, speaking, and carrying signs that ignited sparks of hope in my soul. Yes, I was proud of my community and our willingness to protest with the same peaceful, passionate power as Dr. King's march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. And I would expect no less from my people who have suffered, endured, and persevered through generations of slavery, savagery, and segregation in order to attain the same basic human freedoms due every citizen in these United States of America.

What heartened me in the protests I observed following the death of George Floyd was the number of Caucasian men, women, and children I saw marching

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in lockstep with neighbors, friends, relatives, and strangers, showing they refused to be included in the passive privilege of their parentage. They showed that they were with us and would not remain silent, indifferent, or detached from this egregious pattern of injustice, violence, and brutality ripping apart the fabric of our nation.

Many of these people, both black and white, obviously overcame whatever fears and trepidations lurked inside because they could no longer endure the abuse of power and senseless killings outside. Suffering people have always found a way to communicate, from Lamentations and the Psalms of lament we see in Scripture to the gospel songs sung by slaves to liberate their spirits despite the captivity of their bodies. This form of communication is essential to human survival. Even in the midst of utter hopelessness, the kind experienced by captives during the Holocaust, people have dared to carve words of hope into floorboards or scribble prayers on scraps of trash. Human survival relies on our willingness to communicate, especially in the face of trauma.

We're told in Ecclesiastes that everything has a time and that timing is everything, including a time to speak and a time to be silent (Ecclesiastes 3:7). There are indeed times when we learn that our best

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contribution to a conversation is to keep quiet, but we must never allow fear to gag the truth when we know we must speak. Even when you feel like you don't have a microphone or any kind of platform from which others will hear the sound of your voice, you must still speak up, knowing that there will be opposition and attempts to silence you.

The Right Fit

David certainly faced opposition even as he valiantly chose to do what no one else, including the king, was willing to do—face the giant in a showdown to the death. Not surprising but disappointing nonetheless, the courageous shepherd got little support from his brothers, his comrades, and his king. His own brother apparently misinterpreted David's motive as ego rather than the conviction to stand up for his faith. Eliab basically accused David of being just like Goliath, boastful and arrogant: "I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle" (1 Samuel 17:28 niv).

When you use your voice to speak out, there will always be others who misinterpret your motives. Communicators with conviction will always make

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some people, particularly those who justify their own silence and inaction, uncomfortable and angry. These destructive discouragers either lack the courage required to speak into the microphone placed before them or fear the consequences of others just like them waiting to pounce and pulverize their message. When you know you are doing what God compels you to do, when you know the truth of what motivates you, then you must not be deterred by your detractors.

Nor should you be intimidated by would-be instructors, those people who, whether well intended or jealously skeptical, tell you not only what to say but how to say it! After David told King Saul, “Don’t worry about this Philistine—I’ll go fight him!” (1 Samuel 17:32 nlt), the king immediately dismissed him: “Don’t be ridiculous! There’s no way you can fight this Philistine and possibly win! You’re only a boy, and he’s been a man of war since his youth” (1 Samuel 17:33 nlt).

David, however, would not be stopped from communicating in both word and deed his faith-fueled fearlessness. He explained to Saul that he had killed lions and bears while protecting his sheep and believed that God would empower him to slay Goliath just as easily. It wasn’t the kind of experience the king or anyone else expected, but in David’s thinking,

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his past conquests required the same level of courage, determination, and skill.

Resigning himself to what he perceived as the young man's naïve determination, King Saul then tried to equip David with his own royal armor and sword. He not only offered his sword, helmet, and armor to the young man, but Saul actually dressed David in his own tunic (1 Samuel 17:32). Such an action by the king was bold as well as humbling.

Perhaps his offer was made out of pity or to relieve the cowardice whispering within his own conscience. Many times when you speak up and display leadership in the face of adversity, others will try to compel you to use their platforms and microphones. Their motives ultimately cannot be discerned, but they are often a mixture of guilt over their own cowardice, admiration of your courage, and obligation to make a token gesture for the watching eyes of other stakeholders. While you should weigh the benefits of accepting the mic someone else lends you, you should also be unafraid to politely decline.

Saul made an astounding gesture—kings don't offer their personal sword and armor to just anyone, and to David's credit, he tried on the royal weaponry. But then the young shepherd did something almost as courageous as facing Goliath—David declined the

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king's gift: "I cannot go in these," he said to Saul, "because I am not used to them" (1 Samuel 17:39 niv). This was not the politically correct, socially expedient response to make to the king!

But David knew this was not the time to be thinking about social etiquette and political correctness because the threat posed by Goliath loomed over all of them. Such a dangerous obstacle eclipsed any hurt feelings or royal breach of protocol Saul might have experienced.

When you have a God-given message to deliver, it may require you to risk stepping on a few toes, declining what others offer, disappointing them, and potentially hurting their feelings and losing their support. You certainly don't want to rush in and leave collateral damage in the wake of your communication unnecessarily, but at the same time you must not allow fear of what others may think to stifle your voice or censor your message.

Like David, you use what you know and sling your message!

And let your words land where they land.

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Keep It Real

After rejecting Saul's armor and sword, David took up his shepherd's staff and slingshot and reached into the nearby stream for five smooth stones (1 Samuel 17:40). He used what he felt comfortable using rather than the cumbersome, ill-fitting items offered by the king. David was a shepherd from a small, rural town with no military training or experience in battle. While others might be too embarrassed to use such crude weapons, especially when he could've used the finest available, David knew he had to rely on his strengths, the past experiences he did have, and familiar tools with which he was comfortable.

Instead of posturing like Goliath or the king, David brought himself and no one else to the microphone. If you want to overcome your fears of speaking in front of others, if you want to gain experience in order to develop as a communicator, then *start where you are*. And *be who you are!* Be true to who you are, where you came from, and what you know. Don't try to be anyone else. Don't try to use words with eight syllables just to impress! Don't act like you know what your audience has been through if you don't.

Be yourself and be real.

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I cannot tell you how many times I've heard young preachers deliver a sermon that fit them like a cheap suit two sizes too small! Why? Because they're trying to preach like me or Joel Osteen or Jesse Jackson or Billy Graham or the pastor who mentored them. One of the hardest lessons to learn as you overcome your fears, self-consciousness, and anxiety is to find your own groove, your own lane, and your own voice. Of course, you will display certain traits and qualities of the men and women who have influenced you and your message. But there's a big difference between implementation and imitation! Don't try to imitate someone else, but do implement aspects of what you admire, appreciate, and adore about them.

When the moment came for David to step up to the mic and deliver his message, he spoke the truth before following through and defeating the giant. Knowing you can back up your words with actions is crucial if you want to be heard, respected, and valued as a leader. As you and I know all too well, many people say what they believe others want to hear without the ability to follow through and transform their words into deeds. The temptation is great, whether leading a family, a classroom, a small group at church, your team at work, a board meeting, or government office.

As he stepped up to his mic, David also had to

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contend with major trash-talking from his opponent. Seeing the shepherd's staff in his young challenger's hand, Goliath taunted, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" (1 Samuel 17:43 niv). He didn't stop there either: "And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. 'Come here,' he said, 'and I'll give your flesh to the birds and wild animals!'" (1 Samuel 17:44 niv).

If Goliath expected to receive the same kind of insults and threats from David, then I wonder how he received David's response, which reveals a radically different perspective than the giant's trivial trash-talking:

David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the

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Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands." (1 Samuel 17:45–47 niv)

Before David defeated Goliath with his slingshot, he said what no one else had dared to say. He reframed the situation into something larger and more significant than a warrior bullying terrified soldiers or even than a battle determining Israel's fate. Saying David distilled the showdown into good versus evil oversimplifies the cultural and spiritual layers inherent in his viewpoint. In David's eyes, the Philistine giant represented more than merely an arrogant blowhard or undefeated adversary in battle—Goliath defied all that David held most sacred, his faith, his beliefs, and the power of God. In light of all that was at stake, David delivered his message by describing what he was about to do and why he was doing it.

Then he did it—with one stone, he toppled the giant!

Speak to Silence Your Fears

I pray you never have to face a ten-foot giant blocking your path, but if you do, I hope you will not allow your fear to prevent you from delivering the message only you can deliver. Most of the giants we encounter

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only appear to be bigger because of the stress of the situation and our limited vantage point. We allow our imagination to dwell on worst-case scenarios and second-guess what others will think about what we know we need to say.

Consequently, our fears and anxieties amplify and inflate the ways we see and hear those people and positions opposing us. By fixating on our fears, we compound potential obstacles in our path and subjectively increase the size of potential barriers. Fear is never insurmountable, however. You may always feel a little nervous or excited prior to speaking in front of a group, but you don't have to be held hostage by fear. So let's consider four different kinds of fearful reactions you may experience when speaking and how to overcome them.

The first is simply the physical and physiological responses your body produces under duress. When faced with a threatening situation, your autonomic nervous system cannot discern between a prowler, a python, and a podium! Mentally, you know the difference and the level of potential danger posed by each, but your body goes into red-alert mode and prepares for flight, fight, or freeze. Your blood pressure rises, your heart rate increases, and your breathing grows rapid and shallow. At the extreme end, you have a

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panic attack that incapacitates your ability to function. On a more moderate scale, you may feel weak, experience slight nausea, a dry mouth, and a tight throat.

Overcoming your physiological reaction to the fear of speaking requires hitting the pause button on your body's natural response and countering with a physical habit, practice, or routine that helps you relax. It could be something as simple as closing your eyes and breathing deeply while counting to ten. You might sip some water and focus on the sensation of the cool liquid gliding down your throat and into your body. Visualization is often effective to calm both your body and your mind, with some people imagining a tranquil scene of natural beauty and serenity such as the ocean, a mountaintop, or a lakeshore.

Many people, myself included, will pray silently for a few moments before they say their first words into the microphone. The key is to discover a practice that helps your body break out of the stress mode and into a more relaxed state of focus. This practice then becomes a strategy for handling this kind of fearful anxiety every time you speak, which hopefully decreases as you gain experience.

The mental and psychological aspects of fear must also be addressed before you step up to the mic. Assessing and expressing your fears often helps

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alleviate them. Recognizing that you're afraid of embarrassing yourself in front of your coworkers can help you avoid doing just that. Acknowledging that you become self-conscious and critical of yourself may reveal the need to recall or recite affirmations, particularly past positive responses from others as well as encouraging truths about your abilities.

Many people feel shameful about the prospect of public speaking because of past times when they didn't perform their best or felt embarrassed by mistakes they made. While there's no magic formula to dispel your past-performance shame, it can be addressed and diminished. Identify what elements of past incidents make you feel this shame and then come up with tactics to avoid them happening again. Control the environment as much as possible by making sure you have a place to put your notes, that the tech portion of your presentation works, and that you have water nearby.

These mental variables may be closely intertwined with the emotional dimension of your fears. While many speakers obviously are afraid of faltering when handed the mic, they may also fear succeeding just as much or more. Preparation, research, and rehearsal can aid in overcoming a fear of failure, but dazzling your audience can be as daunting as disappointing them! Because when you engage them with

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meaningful content delivered in an appealing manner, you create expectations—essentially your brand.

This is, of course, a good thing, but also can add pressure and generate stress. This fear of sustaining success is something most people in creative endeavors often experience. Performers are only as good as their latest performance, singers as hot as their last song, writers as in-demand as their last bestseller, and speakers as sought-out as their last sold-out event. The key to dealing with a fear of success is staying true to who you were that first time you spoke. Remember, David had no reservations about using a slingshot to slay a giant!

Finally, you may discover your fears also include a spiritual dimension, especially if you're ministering, preaching, teaching the Bible, and wanting to inspire and encourage your audience. You may worry that you have nothing new or worthwhile to offer. You may fret over whether your message will make a difference or, even worse, inadvertently have a negative impact in some way. These are valid concerns, but I would challenge you to go back to what inspires, uplifts, and ministers to you. What have you learned that is worth passing on? How have you seen God at work in your life recently?

Believe that God is the one who has placed you in

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this opportunity and trust that he will provide you with his message. When you look around and wonder why no one else is addressing the elephant in the room—especially if he's named Goliath—don't wait for someone else to speak! As David told his adversary, the battle belongs to the Lord. The same is true for us today. You have what it takes to overcome your fears and let your voice be heard.

Your time has come—so speak up!