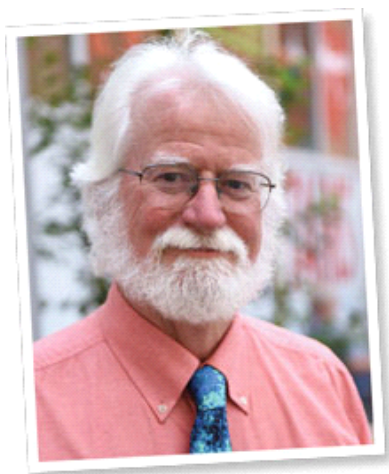


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# Speaking of Speaking

*John Friel*



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Ever had a road trip that seemed like it would never end? Most of us have. My recent sojourn from Pennsylvania to (finally!) Maine involved more traffic, traffic jams and construction zones than you'd think could possibly fit into 500 miles. But there they were.

Sitting helpless at the wheel brought back a lesson learned during my truck-driving days: Some things you can control, some you can't. No use fuming about it. Surrounded by thousands like me, sealed in our steel and glass cocoons, my mind wandered to, of all things, public speaking.

Have you ever been invited to speak to a group and begged off? Or, worse, accepted and then thought, O God! What have I done? How do I get out of this?

There's a Crosby, Stills & Nash song that goes, "Oh, when you were young/Did you envy all the dancers who had all the nerve?" We've all envied someone. For me, it wasn't dancers; it was the speakers who had the nerve to get up on their hind legs and seemingly just think out loud. Never thought I could do that.

If that's also your hang-up, you're not alone. Public speaking is a major fear for many. Some say it's the biggest phobia of all, something 74% of Americans fear more than death. Others rank it #3, behind death and spiders.

In high school and college, I would have eaten spiders rather than speak. I was awful—especially compared to classmates who seemed born for the spotlight. You could wake my friend Art up at 3:00 a.m., say "You're on," and he'd give you 20 good minutes. A natural.

Working in live theater, I was happiest behind the scenes, running lights, building sets, stage-managing. The other side of the curtain? No thanks, it's safer in the shadows. But, secretly, most backstage folk are watching the actors and thinking, I could deliver that line/sing that song better.

At some point, I said yes to a hort event speaking engagement. Surprisingly, it went OK. Invitations kept coming. I opined all over the U.S. and Canada, on new varieties, grasses, succulents and nomenclature, in venues large and small, to home gardeners, professional growers and societies. I still haven't used all those frequent flier miles.

At my best, I wasn't great. Consider what follows as proof that "those who can't do, teach."

My worst “What have I done?” moment came after accepting a gig in western Canada, a solid Zone 4 or 3b. Yikes! What could I, from the Zone 6b banana belt, possibly contribute? I picked the hardiest plants I knew. When one seemed marginal, I’d qualify it apologetically. Every time, a hand shot up and an audience member chirped, “It overwinters for me and I’m Zone 3!” Whew. Thank goodness plants can’t read maps.

Public speaking is a creative act. Creativity is part chutzpah, part insecurity. Anyone who’s been paid for a story, a painting or an hour onstage had to muster the courage to put their stuff out there, figuring it was at least as good as others they’d seen. When it works, there’s relief, elation and vindication, followed by self-doubt: Can I do it again? Or was that a fluke?

So if you’ve agreed to speak, then panicked, take a deep breath. Then do your homework. Rehearse. Anxiety diminishes in direct proportion to how well you know your material. Still jumpy? You’re probably trying to do too much in your allotted time. Be realistic. Identify your important points and start shedding the lesser ones.

Don’t condescend to your audience. (Condescending is, like, talking down to someone.) Most are at least as smart as you, but know this: They’re rooting for you. You’re among friends who respect not only your knowledge—and you know you have some to share—but also your chutzpah, your willingness to do something that scares them to death.

Has someone told you to imagine your audience naked? Please don’t. We’re your friends, remember? Instead, pick someone and speak directly to that person. Then switch to someone else. Make eye contact. Insert something humorous occasionally.

If all else fails, open that can of spiders you brought along. **GP**

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