

THE TRAUMA OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

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I had the feeling of deadly eyes staring at that one trickle of sweat rolling down my forehead. I wanted to throw up because so many butterflies were flying in my stomach. I had that dreadful thought of seeing people throw tomatoes at my pretty dress. I always thought that public speaking was the scariest experience anyone could go through. I never imagined that the words I said could make an audience cry, laugh, or even become angry. But this inconceivable picture came true.

It was Monday, February 4, 1994, the day before the BIG SPEECH, and I was going over my speech for the hundredth time. Finally, I came to the conclusion that I knew this speech like the back of my hand. Then I realized I was not mentally prepared to give it. What steps would I take to prepare? What if I messed up? What if people laughed at me? Sweat started to flow down my face. I began to wonder what evil thought provoked me to do this? How could I (a mere mortal) give a good rendition of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech? In order to mentally prepare for this speech, I decided to rent "Mississippi Burning" and a video of Dr. King giving his speech. My English teacher, Mr. Zolof, told me that in order to recite a speech like this I had to feel what the original speaker was feeling. I had experienced a lot of discrimination in my life, but that was not enough. I had to step into Dr. King's shoes and see what he saw and feel what he felt. Now, whenever I write my own speeches and deliver them, I have to feel the words in every possible way so my audience can feel them too.

Next, I had to realize what was at stake. The speaker should realize how his or her words could make a difference. I knew the words I was saying could change a racist into a non-racist. All I had to do was say them right, so I could get the correct response. This was a big day in my predominantly white school's history. It was the first Black history program that the school had ever had, and I was the main attraction. All the weight was on my shoulders; I could not let Dr. King, the school, or the small population of black students in the school down.

Finally, the day of the speech came and I was ready. I put on my prettiest dress to wear because if one looks good, one feels good, and one does good. I practiced one more time before I left for school. The program was in the morning right after home room. Nearly everyone in the school was excited about the program. In the middle of homeroom, I left to go get ready for the program. Because I was going to be the last person to perform, the waiting almost drove me crazy. Seeing all those people and knowing their eyes would be upon me soon made me so nervous that the room began to spin. I knew I had to calm myself down. So I began to think about all the preparation I had gone through the day before: seeing "Mississippi Burning" and Dr. King giving his speech, realizing what was at stake and how I could make a difference by doing this speech. After reviewing everything I had done to prepare for this moment, I became calm and confident. When it was finally my turn to speak, I took complete control of the stage.

I became Dr. King. I was in his shoes. I felt the words I was saying, and my anger rising from those words. I became angry and sad because of the racism of then and of today. My

audience saw anger in my eyes, my gestures, and from the way I moved. My audience felt my anger and my sadness, and they responded with tears, clapping, and with nods of understanding. My audience was at my mercy; I was like the mother and they were my children. When I moved across the stage, my audience moved also. When I stomped, my audience jumped. When I became angry, they were angry also. I could bring them up or bring them down, depending on how I said the words of Dr. King. I could make my audience get up and take action. I felt the feeling of anger from my audience and that pushed me on. To them, I was Dr. King and this was my dream. When I finished, I looked out into the audience and saw half the people in the school wiping their eyes.

I recited that speech in the tenth grade. Every year after that, we had a Black history program, and I was the main attraction. Everyone still remembers my first speech and all the emotions that came from it. That speech opened up doors for me. From then on, I became the voice of Merrillville High. If they needed a representative to go somewhere and speak, I was called on. I went to different places and gave speeches that either I or someone else wrote. Because of that one speech, I became a well-known figure.

Public speaking can be a very scary trauma for anyone. To avoid the trauma the speaker should practice, feel the words being said, try to know and understand the audience, and finally, take control over the audience's emotions. Public speaking is an art form that can be mastered. Once it is mastered the audience will be at the speaker's mercy.