

# SNEAK PREVIEW

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## CONFESSIONS OF A PUBLIC SPEAKER



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## The attack of the butterflies

*“The best speakers know enough to be scared...the only difference between the pros and the novices is that the pros have trained the butterflies to fly in formation.”*

Edward R. Murrow

While there are good reasons people fear public speaking, until I see someone flee from the lectern mid-presentation, running for his life through the fire exit on stage left, we can't say public speaking is scarier than death. This oddly popular factoid, commonly stated as “Did you know people would rather die than speak in public?” is a classic case of why you should ask people how they know what they think they know. This “fact” implies people will, if given the chance, choose to jump off buildings or swallow cyanide capsules rather than give a short presentation to their co-workers. Since this doesn't happen in the real world—no suicide note has ever mentioned an upcoming presentation as the reason for leaving this world—it's worth asking: where does this factoid come from?

The source is *The Book of Lists* by David Wallechinsky et al. (William Morrow), a trivia book first published in 1977. It included a list of things people were afraid of, and public speaking came in at number one. Here's the list, titled “The Worst Human Fears”:

1. Speaking before a group
2. Heights
3. Insects and bugs
4. Financial problems
5. Deep Water
6. Sickness
7. Death
8. Flying
9. Loneliness
10. Dogs

11. Driving/Riding in a car

12. Darkness

13. Elevators

14. Escalators

People who mention this factoid haven't seen the list because if they had seen it, they'd know it's too silly and strange to be taken seriously. *The Book of Lists* says a team of market researchers asked 3,000 Americans the simple question, "What are you most afraid of?", but they allowed them to write down as many answers as they wanted. Since there was no list to pick from, the survey data is far from scientific. Worse, no information is provided about who these people were.<sup>1</sup> We have no way of knowing whether these people were representative of the rest of us. I know I avoid most surveys I'm asked to fill out, as do many of you, which begs the question why we place so much faith in survey-based research.

When you do look at the list, it's easy to see that people fear heights (#2), deep water (#5), sickness (#6), and flying (#8) because of the likelihood of dying from those things. Add them up, and death easily comes in first place, restoring the Grim Reaper's fearsome reputation. Facts about public speaking are often misleading since they frequently come from people selling services, such as books, that benefit from making public speaking seem as scary as possible.<sup>2</sup> Even if the research were done properly, people will tend to list fears of minor things they encounter in every day life more often than more fearsome but abstract experiences like dying.

When thinking about fun things like death, bad surveys, and public speaking, the best place to start is with the realization that no has died from giving a bad presentation. Well, at least one person did, President William Henry Harrison, but he developed pneumonia after giving the longest inaugural address in U.S. history. The easy lesson from his story: keep it short or you might die. This exception aside, by the time you're important enough, like Gandhi or Lincoln, for someone to want to kill you, it's not the public speaking that's going to do you in. Malcolm X was shot at the beginning of a speech in 1965, but he was a fantastic speaker (if anything, he was killed because he spoke too well). Lincoln was assassinated *watching* other people on stage. He was shot from behind his seat, which points out one major advantage of giving a lecture: it's unlikely someone will sneak up from behind you to do you in without the audience noticing. Being on stage behind a lectern gave safety to President George W. Bush in his last public appearance in Iraq when, in disgust, an Iraqi reporter threw one, then a second shoe at him. Watching the onslaught from the stage, Bush had the advantage and nimbly dodged them both.

The real danger is always in the crowds. Fans of rock bands like The Who, Pearl Jam, and the Rolling Stones have been killed in the stands. And although the drummer for Spinal Tap did mysteriously explode while performing, very few real on-stage deaths have ever been reported in the history of the world. The danger of crowds is why some people prefer the aisle seats—they can quickly escape, whether they're fleeing from fire or boredom. If you're on stage, not only do you have better access to the fire exits, but should you faint,

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of lists doesn't say, but it's likely their source was the 1973 report published by the Bruskin/Goldkin agency.

<sup>2</sup> If you combined this list to create scariest thing possible, it'd be to give a presentation, in an airplane at 35,000 feet, near a spider web, while doing your taxes, sitting in the deep end of a pool in the airplane, feeling ill, with the lights out, next to an escalator that leads to an elevator.

fall down, or suffer a heart attack, everyone in attendance will know immediately and call an ambulance for you. The next time you're at the front of the room to give a presentation, you should know that, by all logic, you are the safest person there. The problem is that our brains are wired to believe the opposite; see Figure 2-1.



*Figure 2-1. When you see the left, your brain sees the right.*

Our brains, for all their wonders, identify the following four things as being very bad for survival:

- Standing alone
- In open territory with no place to hide
- Without a weapon
- In front of a large crowd of creatures staring at you

In the long history of all living things, any situation where all the above were true was very bad for you. It meant the odds were high that you would soon be attacked and eaten alive. Many predators hunt in packs, and their easiest prey are those who stand alone, without a weapon, out on a flat area of land where there is little cover (e.g., a stage). Our ancestors, the ones who survived, developed a fear response to these situations. This means despite my 15 years of teaching classes, running workshops, and giving lectures, no matter how comfortable I appear to the audience when at the front of the room, it's a scientific fact my brain and body will experience some kind of fear before, and often while, I'm speaking.

The design of the brain's wiring—given it's long operational history, hundreds of thousands of years older than the history of public speaking, or speaking at all for that matter—makes it impossible to stop fearing what it knows is the worst tactical situation for a person to be in. There is no way to turn it off, at least not completely. This wiring is so primal that it lives in the oldest part of our brains where, like many of the brain's other important functions, we have almost no control.

Take, for example, the simple act of breathing. Right now, try to hold your breath. The average person can go for a minute or so, but as the pain intensifies—pain generated by your nervous system to stop you from doing stupid things like killing yourself—your body will eventually force you to give in. Your brain desperately wants you to live and will do many things without asking permission to help you survive. Even if you're particularly

stubborn, and you make yourself pass out from lack of oxygen, guess what happens? You live anyway. Your ever faithful amygdala, one of the oldest parts of your brain, takes over, continuing to regulate your breathing, heart rate, and a thousand other things you never think about until you come to your senses (literally and figuratively).

For years I was in denial about my public speaking fears. When people asked, after seeing me speak, whether I get nervous, I always did the stupid machismo thing. I'd smirk, as if to say, "Who me? Only mere mortals get nervous." At some level, I'd always known my answer was bullshit, but I didn't know the science, nor had I studied what others had to say. It turns out there are consistent reports from famous public figures confirming that, despite their talents and success, their brains have the same wiring as ours:

- Mark Twain, who made most of his income from speaking, not writing, said, "There are two types of speakers: those that are nervous and those that are liars."
- Elvis Presley said, "I've never gotten over what they call stage fright. I go through it every show."
- Thomas Jefferson was so afraid of public speaking he had someone else read the State of the Union address (George Washington didn't like speaking either).
- Bono, of U2, claims to get nervous the morning of every one of the thousands of shows he's performed.
- Winston Churchill, JFK, Margaret Thatcher, Barbara Walters, Johnny Carson, Barbara Streisand, and Ian Holm have all reported fears of public communication.<sup>3</sup>
- Aristotle, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Winston Churchill, John Updike, Jack Welch, and James Earl Jones all had stutters and were nervous speakers at one time in their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Even if you could completely shut off these fear-response systems, which is the first thing people with fears of public speaking want to do, it would be a bad idea for two reasons. First, having the old parts of our brains in control of our fear responses is a good thing. If a legion of escaped half-lion, half-ninja warriors were to fall through the ceiling and surround you—with the sole mission of converting your fine flesh into thin sandwich-ready slices—do you want the burden of consciously deciding how fast to increase your heart rate, or which muscles to fire first to get your legs moving so you can run away? Your conscious mind cannot work fast enough to do these things in the small amount of time you'd have to survive. It's good that fear responses are controlled by the subconscious parts of our minds, since those are the only parts with fast enough wires to do anything useful when real danger happens.

The downside is this fear-response wiring causes problems because our lives today are very safe. Few of us are regularly chased by lions, or wrestle alligators on our way to work, making our fear-response programming out of sync with much of modern life. As a result, the same stress responses we used for survival for millions of years get applied to non-survival situations by our eager brains. We develop ulcers, high blood pressure, headaches, and other physical problems in part because our stress systems aren't designed to handle the "dangers" of our brave new world: computer crashes, micromanaging bosses, 12-way conference calls, and long commutes in rush hour traffic. If we were chased by tigers on the way to give a presentation, we'd likely find the presentation not nearly as scary; our perspective on what things are worth fearing would have been freshly calibrated.

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<sup>3</sup> From *Conquer Your Speech Anxiety*, Karen Kangas Dwyer (Wadsworth).

<sup>4</sup> *The Francis Effect*, M. F. Fensholt (Oakmont Press), p. 286.

Second, fear focuses attention. All the fun, interesting things in life come with fears. Want to ask that cute girl out on a date? Thinking of applying for that cool job? Want to write a novel? Start a company? All good things come with the possibility of failure, whether it's rejection, disappointment, or embarrassment, and fear of those failures is what motivates many people to do the work necessary to be successful. It's the fear of failure that gives us the energy to proactively prevent failures from happening. Many psychological causes of fear in work situations, being laughed at by coworkers or looking stupid in front of the boss, can also be seen as opportunities to impress or prove your value. Curiously enough, there may be little difference biologically between fear of failure and anticipation of success. In his excellent book *Brain Rules* (Pear Press), Dr. John Medina points out that it is very difficult for the body to distinguish between states of arousal and states of anxiety:

Many of the same mechanisms that cause you to shrink in horror from a predator are also used when you are having sex—or even while you are consuming your Thanksgiving dinner. To your body, saber-toothed tigers and orgasms and turkey gravy look remarkably similar. An aroused physiological state is characteristic of both stress and pleasure.

Assuming he's right, why would this be? In both cases, it's because your body has prepared energy for you to use. The body doesn't care whether it's for good reasons or bad, it just knows it must prepare for something to happen. If you pretend to have no fears of public speaking, you deny yourself the natural energy your body is giving you. Anxiety creates a kind of energy you can use, just as excitement does. Ian Tyson, a stand-up comedian and motivational speaker, offered this gem of advice: "The body's reaction to fear and excitement is the same...so it becomes a mental decision: am I afraid or am I excited?" If the body can't tell the difference, it's up to us to use our instincts to help rather than hurt us. The best way to do this is to plan before you speak. When you are actually giving a presentation, there are many variables out of your control—it's OK and normal to have some fear of them. But in the days or hours beforehand, you can do many things to prepare yourself and take control of the factors you *can* do something about.

## What to do before you speak

The main advantage a speaker has over the audience is knowing what comes next. Comedians—the best public speakers—achieve what they do largely because you don't see the punch lines coming. To create a similar advantage, I, like George Carlin or Chris Rock, practice my material. It's the only way I learn how to get from one point to another, or to tell each story or fact in the best way to set up the next one. And when I say I practice, I mean I stand up at my desk, imagine an audience around me, and present exactly as if it were the real thing. If I plan to do something in the presentation, I practice it. But I don't practice to make perfect, and I don't memorize. If I did either, I'd sound like a robot, or worse, like a person trying very hard to say things in an exact, specific, and entirely unnatural style, which people can spot a mile away. My intent is simply to know my material so well that I'm very comfortable with it. Confidence, not perfection, is the goal.

Can you guess what most people who are worried about their presentation refuse to do? Practice. When I'm asked to coach someone on their presentation, and he sends me his slides, do you know the first question I ask? Did you practice? Usually he says no, surprised this would be so important. As if other performers like rock bands and Shakespearean actors don't need to rehearse to get their material right. The slides are not the performance: you, the speaker, are the performance. And it turns out most of the advice you find in all the great books on public speaking, including advice about slides, is difficult to apply if you don't practice.



The most pragmatic reason for practice is it allows me to safely make dozens of mistakes and correct them before anyone ever sees it. It's possible I'm not a better public speaker than anyone else—I'm just better at catching and fixing problems.

When I practice, especially with a draft of new material, I run into many issues. And when I stumble or get confused, I stop and make a choice:

- Can I make this work if I try it again?
- Does this slide or the previous need to change?
- Can a photograph and a story replace all this text?
- Is there a better lead-in to this point from the previous point?
- Will things improve if I just rip this point/slide/idea out completely?

I repeat this process until I can get through the entire talk without making major mistakes. Since I'm more afraid of giving a horrible presentation than I am of practicing for a few hours, practice wins. The energy from my fear of failing and looking stupid in front of a crowd fuels me to work harder to avoid that from happening. It's that simple.

Now, while everyone is free to practice—it requires no special intelligence or magic powers—most people don't because:

- It's not fun
- It takes time
- They feel silly doing it
- They assume no one else does
- Their fear of speaking leads to procrastination, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of misery

I know I look like an idiot standing in my underwear at home, talking to a room of imaginary people, practicing a presentation. When I practice in hotel rooms, which I often do, I'm worried at any moment the maid will barge in mid-sentence, and I'd have to attempt to explain why on earth I'm lecturing to myself in my underwear. But I'd rather face those fears in the comfort of my own room—with my own mini-bar, on my own time, over and over as many times as I wish—than in front of a real crowd, a crowd that is likely capturing my performance on videos and podcasts, recording what I'm doing for all time. There are no do-overs when you're doing the real thing.

By the time I present to an actual audience, it's not really the first time at all. In fact, by the third or fourth time I practice a talk, I can do a decent job without any slides, as I've learned how to make the key points by heart. This confidence that comes from practicing makes it possible to improvise and respond to unexpected things—like hecklers, tough questions, bored audiences, or equipment failures—that might occur during the talk. If I hadn't practiced, I'd be so worried about my material I'd be unable to pay attention to anything else, much less anticipate what's coming from the audience. I admit that even with all my practice I may still do a bad job, make mistakes, or disappoint the crowd, but I can be certain the cause will not be that I was afraid of, or confused by, my own slides. An entire universe of fears and mistakes goes away simply by having confidence in your material.

But even with all the practice in the world, my body, like yours, will still decide for itself when to be afraid. Consider, for example, the strange world of sweaty palms. Why would sweaty palms be of use in life-or-death situations? I've had sweaty palms only once, right before I was televised on CNBC. At the start of the taping, sitting on an uncomfortable pink couch, trying to stay calm in the bright lights and cold air, I felt a strange lightness in my palms. With the cameras rolling, I held up my hands to see what was going on. I had to touch them to realize they were sweating. The weirdo that I am, I found this really funny, which, by coincidence, relieved some of my anxiety. The best theory from scientists is that primates, creatures who climb things, have greater dexterity if their hands are damp. It's the same reason why you touch your thumb to your tongue before trying to turn a page of a newspaper. My point is that parts of your body will respond in ancient ways to stress, no matter how prepared you are. That's OK. It doesn't mean you're weird or a coward, it just means your body is trying hard to save your life. It's nice of your body to do this in the same way it's nice of your dog to protect you from squirrels. It's hard to blame a dog for its instinctive behavior, and the same understanding should be applied to your own brain.

Since I respect my body's unstoppable fear responses, I have to go out of my way to calm down before I give a presentation. I want to make my body as relaxed as possible and exhaust as much physical energy early in the day. As a rule, I go to the gym the morning before a talk, with the goal of releasing any extra nervous energy before I get on stage. It's the only way I've found to naturally turn down those fear responses and lower the odds they'll fire. Other ways to reduce physical stress include:

- Getting to the venue early so you don't have to rush
- Doing tech and sound rehearsal well before your start time
- Walking around the stage so your body feels safe in the room
- Sitting in the audience so you have a physical sense of what they will see
- Eating early enough so you won't be hungry, but not right before your talk
- Talking to some people in the audience before you start (if it suits you), so it's no longer made up of strangers (friends are less likely to try and eat you)

All of these things allow you to get used to the physical environment you will be speaking in, which should minimize your body's sense of danger. A sound check lets your ears hear how you will sound when speaking, just as a stroll across the stage helps your body feel like it knows the terrain. These might seem like small things, but you must control all the factors you can to compensate for the bigger ones, the ones that arise during your talking that you cannot control. Speakers who arrive late, change their slides at the last minute, or never walk the stage until it's their turn to speak, and then complain about anxiety, have only themselves to blame. It's not the actual speaking that's the problem; they're failing to take responsibility for their body's unchangeable responses to stress.

There are also psychological reasons why public speaking is scary. These include fears like:

- Being judged, criticized, or laughed at
- Doing something embarrassing in front of other people
- Saying something stupid the crowd will never forget
- Boring people to sleep even when you say your best idea



We can minimize most of these fears by realizing that we speak in public all the time. You're already good at public speaking—the average person says 15,000 words a day. Unless you are reading this locked in solitary confinement, most of the words you say are said to other people. If you have a social life and go out on Friday night, you probably speak to 2, 3, or even 5 people all at the same time. Congratulations, you are already a practiced, successful public speaker. You speak to your coworkers, your family, and your friends. You use email and the Web, so you write things that are seen by dozens or hundreds of people every day. If you look at the above list of fears, they all apply in these situations as well.

In fact, there is a greater likelihood of being judged by people you know because they care about what you say. They have reasons to argue and disagree since what you do will affect them in ways a public speaker never can. An audience of strangers cares little and, at worst, will daydream or fall asleep, rendering them incapable of noticing any mistakes you make. While it's true many fears are irrational, and can't be dispelled by mere logic, if you can talk comfortably to people you know, then you possess the skills needed to speak to groups of people you don't know. Pay close attention next time you're listening to a good public speaker. The speaker is probably natural and comfortable, making you feel as though he's talking to a small group, despite how many people are actually in the audience.

Having a sense of control, even if it's just in your mind, is important for many performers. If you watch athletes and musicians, people who perform in front of massive crowds nightly, they all have pre-show rituals. LeBron James and Mike Bibby, all-star basketball players, chew their nails superstitiously before and during games. Michael Jordan wore his old University of North Carolina shorts under his NBA shorts in every game. Wayne Gretzky tucked his jersey into his hockey pants, something he learned to do before games as a kid. Wade Boggs ate chicken before every single game. These small acts of control, however random or bizarre to us, helped give them the confidence needed to face the out-of-control reality of their jobs. And their jobs are much harder than what public speakers do. For every point Michael Jordan ever scored, there was another well-paid professional athlete, or team of athletes, trying very hard to stop him from scoring.

So, unless a team of presentation terrorists steal your microphone mid-sentence, or put up their own projector and start showing their own slide deck—designed specifically to contradict your every point—you're free from pressures other performers face nightly. Small observations like this make it easier to laugh at nerves, even if they won't go away.

## Why speakers earn \$30,000 an hour

It's 7:47 a.m. at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, so early the sun is just starting to rise. It's an ungodly time and place for any writer to be outside. Writers aren't the most well-adjusted people, and it's telling that our preferred means of interaction with civilization is throwing paragraph-shaped grenades at people from behind the safety of a laptop. I know few writers who love mornings, and the doorman at my hotel—who wears a bright blue sailor's uniform as part of the nautical-themed thrill ride that is the Argonaut Hotel—is clearly on my side. He waves down a cab for me and gives a half smile from underneath his tired eyes, a smile that says, "Doesn't it suck to work this early?" Anyone who finishes the night shift with a sense of humor is a good man indeed. Or perhaps I just look like trash this morning and he finds my appearance entertaining. Maybe it's both.

People talk about sunrises as if they were magical things. Yet here at Fisherman's Wharf, the morning fog forming a glorious orange blanket around a late-winter sunrise, no one except the doorman, the cab driver, and me is awake and outside. You know why? People are lazy. Even if there was a sunrise at 7:47 a.m. as brilliant and soul-stirring as a wall-sized J. M. W. Turner masterpiece, a sunrise giving out hundred-dollar bills and tomorrow's lottery numbers, few of us would be out to see it. Most of the things we say are so wonderful and amazing lose without a fight to an extra hour of sleep. We'd wake up, think it over for a few moments, and fall back into the comfort of our dreams. Sleep deprivation is a curse of the modern age, a problem born from our technological things. Before Edison's light bulb, we averaged 10 hours a night; in 2009, we average nearly half that. And this means, when it comes to sunrises, judge people by what they do, not what they say.

On this morning the sun is putting on quite a show, but where are all the sunrise lovers? They're not with me out on the street. They're sleeping, just as I would be if I could. The truth is public speakers everywhere would have an easier time keeping their audience awake if more people actually slept well the night before. If the ascension of our nearest star, the source of all energy and life on earth, the universal symbol for all that is good, happy, and hopeful can't get people out of bed, what chance does a speaker have?

In all honesty I love the sunrise...it's the getting up to see it I hate. Sunrises are transcendent when viewed through a hotel window, from a comfy bed, when I'm not expected to do anything for anyone for hours. My professional problem is that public speaking is often scheduled hundreds of minutes on the wrong side of noon. And on the days I'm lucky enough to get top billing for an event, I earn an additional chronological treat: the keynote means I'm to set the tone for the day, a challenge that—given our limited understanding

of space and time—requires me to speak before anyone else. All this explains why, at 7:48 a.m. on a Tuesday, I am showered, cleaned, shaved, pruned, fed, and deodorized, wearing a pressed shirt and shiny shoes, in a cab on my way to the San Francisco waterfront. Like the gorgeous light from the sun still conquering the clouds over the San Francisco Bay outside my cab window, this morning is both great and horrible, a thrill and a bore. It's an amazing way to live, as I get paid to think and learn and exchange ideas—all things I love. But I'm far from home, going to a strange place, and performing for strangers, three stressful facts than mean anything can happen, especially since it's the worst of all times for my particular brain—early morning.

Making it to the venue is the first challenge a speaker-for-hire faces, and let me tell you, it's often a bigger challenge than the lecture itself. The lecture I know well since I created it. I have no one to blame if it stinks. And when I do finally arrive at the room I'm to speak in—even if it's the worst room in the world—I can try to adapt to whatever problems it has. But until I get to the room, until I make my way through the airports, cities, highways, conference centers, office complexes, and parking lots, I can't begin to get ready. Being in transit means, psychologically speaking, you are in the purgatory of being *almost* there. Unlike lecturing, where I feel in control, it's the things I can't control that create stress—like the taxi driver getting lost, the traffic jam a handful of miles from where I'm supposed to be, and the confusing corporate and college campuses impossible for visitors like me to navigate. How could anyone know Building 11 is next to Building 24 on Microsoft's main campus, or that the Kresge Auditorium is hiding behind Bexley Hall at MIT? From experience, I know there is nothing worse than being in the strange territory of very close and surprisingly far at the same time.

When I arrive at the Fort Mason complex, the venue for this particular Tuesday, I discover, as my taxi roars off, I'm far from where I need to be. Fort Mason is a sprawling Civil War-era military base, recently converted into a community center (see Figure 3-1). The word *complex* is apt. My instructions say to find Building A, but there are no signs, and, more importantly, no normal looking buildings, only endless rows of identical barracks, towers, and narrow parking lots. The Fort Mason Center has one major flaw: it skipped the conversion. It still looks like a place designed to kill you, not welcome you to fun community activities. There are fences, gates, barricades, barbed wire, and tall stone walls with sharp corners.



Figure 3-1. The speaking venue: the intimidating Fort Mason, San Francisco.

For comparison, there's a military museum in Kiev with two decommissioned World War II tanks at the main entrance, painted top to bottom with fun, peaceful swirls in bright rainbow colors (see Figure 3-2). Now that's a conversion—one day a death machine, the next a happy, silly plaything. Fort Mason, on the other hand, looks like a place the Spartans would say is too spartan. They'd demand a row of shrubs and fresh paint before they'd even consider moving in.



*Figure 3-2. The National War Museum in Kiev, Ukraine.  
This is how to renovate a thing made for war.*

Trying to find my way, I stop at the front gate—which is what I do instinctively at gates near things looking like military bases—and only after long moments standing like an idiot do I realize I'm free to enter. No ID or white flag required. The gate is for cars, which explains the strange look from the guard: I'd been standing in the car lane the entire time. I wander aimlessly through the complex, surviving several dead-ends, wrong turns, and unlabeled parking lots, trying not to imagine snipers in the towers above, until I find Building A and happily step inside.

The event at Fort Mason is run by Adaptive Path, a Bay Area-design consulting company, and I know these folks well. They've hired me before, and I say hello to friendly faces. I soon meet Julia, one of the event organizers, and after a brief chat she hands me an envelope. I know that inside is a check for \$5,000, the fee for my services. I want to open it and look. My brain still thinks in 15-year-old terms of money, where \$100 is tons and \$500 is amazing. Anything over that simply does not exist in the surprisingly large 15-year-old part of my mind. I want to look inside, not because I don't trust Julia, but because I don't trust myself. I'm baffled at how adults pay other adults so much for doing boring, safe adult things. My childhood friend Doug drove his mom's Cadillac over the big hill on the wrong side of the entrance to the Whitestone Shopping Center in Queens at 60 miles per hour—with all of us screaming in the back seat—for free. He risked all of our lives without payment, other than his own insane but infectious pleasure. Meanwhile, bankers and hedge fund managers make millions playing with Excel spreadsheets, an activity with zero chance of bodily harm, save carpal tunnel syndrome. They earn more in a year than

the guys who put the roof on my house, paved the road that leads to it, or work as firemen and policemen to protect it will see in a lifetime. It's curious facts like these we'll have to explain twice when the aliens land.

In the movies, gangsters are always opening briefcases and counting money, but in real life, no one does this. It's awkward, strange, and slimy. Money for Americans, a culture cursed by our unshakable Puritanical roots, is loaded with lust and shame. Yet, our modern corporate culture values the accumulation of financial wealth above all else. The resulting contradiction causes much of what's wonderful and horrible about America. I suspect many of you jumped right to this chapter because of its title, or noticed it first when you skimmed through the table of contents. Not because you're evil, but because we're fascinated and revolted by money at the same time, especially regarding work that seems superficial, like public speaking. I know I'm paid for something that, in the grand scheme, is not Work. It's work, with a little *w*, but it's not shoveling coal, building houses, or fighting in wars, which earn the capital *W*. I will never hurt my back, ruin my lungs, or lose a limb as a public speaker (unless I lecture at a convention of drunk lion tamers). And despite the many questions that come to mind when Julia hands me that check, I cram it into my bag and head for the lectern where I can get to work.

I'm worth \$5,000 a lecture, and other speakers are worth \$30,000 or more for two reasons: the lecture circuit and free market economics.<sup>1</sup> People come up after I give a lecture and ask, "So when did you get on the lecture circuit?" And I respond by asking, "Do you know what the circuit is?" And they never have any idea. It's a term they've heard before, despite the fact it's never explained, and it somehow seems to be the only reasonable thing to ask a public speaker when you're trying to seem interested in what he does for a living. Well, here's the primer. Public speaking, as a professional activity, became popular in the U.S. before the Civil War. In the 1800s—decades before electricity, radio, movies, television, the Internet, or automobiles—entertainment was hard to find. It explains why so many people sang in church choirs, read books, or actually *talked* to each other for hours on end: there was no competition.

In the 1820s, a man named Josiah Holbrook developed the idea of a lecture series called Lyceum, named after the Greek theater where Aristotle lectured his students (for free). It was amazingly popular, the *American Idol* of its day. People everywhere wanted it to come to their town. By 1835, there were 3,000 of these events spread across the United States, primarily in New England. In 1867, some groups joined up to form the Associated Literary Society, which booked speakers on a singular, prescribed route from city to city across the country. This is the ubiquitous lecture circuit we hear people refer to all the time. Back then it was a singular thing you could get on. "Bye, honey, I'm going on the circuit, be back in six months," was something a famous lecturer might have said. It took that long to run the circuit across the country on horses and return home. Before the days of the Rolling Stones or U2, there were performers who survived the grueling months-long tours without double-decker tour buses, throngs of groupies, and all-hour parties.

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<sup>1</sup> In the interest of transparency and satisfying your curiosity, I average 25–30 lectures a year. Sometimes I'm paid as much as \$8,000 depending on the situation. Maybe a third of those lectures are paid only in travel expenses or small fees, since they're self-promotional or for causes I'd like to help. Roughly 40% of my income is from book royalties and the rest from speaking fees. So far, I average around \$100,000 a year, less than I made at Microsoft. However, I now have complete independence, which is worth infinitely more. I limit travel to once or twice a month, which means I turn away many gigs; I'd much rather have more time than money, since you can never earn more time.



At first there was little money for speakers. The Lyceum was created as a public service, like an extension of your local library. It was a feel-good, grassroots, community-service movement aimed at educating people and popularizing ideas. These events were often free or low priced, such as 25 cents a ticket or \$1.50 for an entire season.<sup>2</sup> But by the 1850s, when high-end speakers like Daniel Webster, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Mark Twain dominated the circuit, prices for lectures went as high as \$20 a ticket—equivalent to about \$200 a seat in 2009. Of course, free lectures continued, and they always will, but the high end reached unprecedented levels for people giving speeches. In the late 1800s, it was something a famous person could do and earn more than enough money to make a comfortable living, which is exactly what many famous writers did.

Soon the free market took over. Air travel, radio, telephones, and everything else we take for granted today made the idea of a single circuit absurd. Lecture series, training conferences, and corporate meetings created thousands of events that needed new speakers every year. Some events don't pay, even charging speakers to attend (as it's seen as an honor to be invited to give a presentation), but many hire a few speakers to ensure things go well. For decades, there's been enough demand for speakers that speaker bureaus—talent agencies for public speakers—work as middlemen, matching people who want to have a lecture at their event and speakers, like me, who wish to be paid for giving lectures. If you want Bill Clinton, Madonna, or Stephen King to speak at your birthday party, and you have the cash (see Table 3-1), there is a speaker bureau representing each one of them that would like to make a deal with you. Which brings us back to whether I'm worth \$5,000.

*Table 3-1. High-end speakers and their fees.<sup>3</sup>*

Speaker	One-hour lecture fee
Bill Clinton	\$150,000+
Malcolm Gladwell	\$80,000
Garry Kasparov	\$75,000+
David Allen	\$50,000–\$75,000
Patrick Lencioni	\$50,000–\$75,000
Ben Stein	\$50,000–\$75,000
Wayne Gretsky	\$50,000+
Magic Johnson	\$50,000+
Bob Kostas	\$50,000+
Ray Kurzweil	\$35,000–\$50,000
Roger Staubach	\$25,000–\$30,000
Dave Barry	\$25,000–\$30,000

<sup>2</sup> *History of Public Speaking in America*, Robert T. Oliver (Allyn & Bacon), p. 461.

<sup>3</sup> These fees were compiled from public listings on various speaker bureau websites. Most sites note that these fees are variable and may change at any time. See <http://www.keyspeakers.com/> or <http://www.prosportspeaker.com/>.



My \$5,000 fee has nothing to do with me personally. I'm not paid for being Scott Berkun. I know I'm paid only for the value I provide to whoever hires me. If, for example, Adaptive Path can charge \$500 per person for an event, and they get 500 people to attend, that's \$250,000 in gross revenue for Adaptive Path. Part of what will allow them to charge that much, and draw that many people, are the speakers they will have. The bigger the names, the more prestigious their backgrounds, and the more interesting their presentations, the more people will come and the more they will be willing to pay. Even for private functions, say when Google or Ferrari throws an annual event for their employees, how much would it be worth to have a speaker who can make their staff a little smarter, better, or more motivated when returning to work? Maybe it's not worth \$30,000 or even \$5,000, but there is some economic value to what good speakers, on the right topics, do for people. It depends on how valuable the people in the room are to whoever is footing the bill. Even if it's just for entertainment, or for reminding the audience of important things they've forgotten, a good speaker is worth something. Think of the last boring lecture you were at: would you have paid a few bucks to make the speaker suck less? I bet you would.

The disappointing thing is, for these fees, speakers often don't do very well. After all, they're not being paid directly for their public-speaking skills. The raw economic value proposition is in drawing people to the event, and it's more likely people will come to an event featuring a famous person—even one they suspect is boring to listen to—than to hear the best public speaker in the world if that's his only claim to fame.<sup>4</sup> Two of the worst lectures I've attended were given by famous people: David Mamet (playwright, screenwriter, and director) and Nicholas Pileggi (author of *Wiseguy*, the novel Scorsese's *Goodfellas* was based on). Both occasions were author readings, which are notoriously boring and bad bets for good public speaking. Yet, in both cases, they filled their respective rooms impressively well. However, I bet no one in attendance got much from the experience of listening to them, except the right to say they saw a famous person speak, which perhaps is also worth something.

The challenge for event organizers, who have limited budgets and tough timelines, is to manage the three unavoidable criteria for picking people to talk at their events. They must find speakers who are:

1. Famous or credible for a relevant topic
2. Good at speaking
3. Available

Two out of three is often the best they can do. It's common to see good speakers who don't have much to say, as well as experts who are brilliant but boring. To secure someone with all three often requires some cash, and as a result, I am one of thousands of people at the low end of a very high pay scale activity.

To put the numbers so far in this chapter in perspective, the average adult on planet Earth earns \$8,200 a year (U.S. dollars). The average American makes about \$45,000. Since you see your paycheck, you know exactly where you stand. I think it would be smart for corporations to put information like this on their checks—it would prevent many people from complaining about what they don't have.<sup>5</sup> Almost half of the world's population

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<sup>4</sup> There is an annual competition for the world's best public speaker, but I bet you've never heard of the winners: [http://www.toastmasters.org/Members/MemberExperience/Contests/WorldChampions\\_1.aspx](http://www.toastmasters.org/Members/MemberExperience/Contests/WorldChampions_1.aspx).

<sup>5</sup> I also think it would be good if salaries were made public, which is why I offered my

doesn't have clean running water or reliable electricity, no matter how well they are paid. From a planetary view, if you're reading this book indoors, under an electric light, within walking distance to a stocked refrigerator or a take-out delivery menu you can afford to order from, and rarely find yourself worrying about malaria or dysentery, you are doing quite well. And if you're still not happy, compared to most of the galaxy, a place comprised of 99.9% dead, empty space, the fact you're even alive, and in the form of a species evolved enough to know you're alive, and educated enough to read books reminding you of how rare life is, makes you astronomically fortunate. We should be happy about this, but mostly it seems we're not.

Unfortunately, we know, care, and obsess more about the 10% of the world who earn more than we do, rather than the 90% who earn less. And although you might disapprove of my speaking fees, I'm no different from you. I'm well aware of speakers who earn more than me but who have less to say, and say it worse than I would. It's safe to say no matter where you stand, someone would be happy to be in your shoes, just as you'd be happy to be in someone else's. I know all too well that rock stars, movie actors, Fortune 100 executives, and professional athletes make millions annually just for endorsing things they had nothing to do with. If I'm overpaid, at least it was to perform a service where I risk getting booed off the stage. An endorsement is paid for liking, or merely pretending to like, something. It's not work in any familiar sense of the word, since it's a vague approval of work done by people the endorser has likely never met. Tiger Woods and LeBron James make \$50+ million a year from endorsements alone, an annual income so large it's more than the average American could earn in 10 lifetimes. This cannot seem fair, and in a philosophical sense it isn't. They are not doing anything for the greater good. They are not educating children, helping the poor, stopping wars, or curing diseases. In fact, depending on what they're endorsing, they're likely increasing our desire for what we don't have, can't afford, and probably don't need.

However, from another perspective, we all know people earn as much as they can argue for. If you're a fan of the free market, you must accept that if you feel underpaid, it's up to you to do something about it—the most free part of any market is *you*. You are free to quit and live in the woods like Thoreau. Or, start your own business where you decide how much you're paid. For me, this means if I ever want to earn as much for a lecture as Bill Clinton or Bob Kostas, I need to become way more famous by, in increasing order of desperation, writing better books, getting a better agent, or marrying Jessica Simpson. Of course, we are all free to complain about how unfair things are, as I am here. But let's be fair to people who earn more money than you think they should, including LeBron James, Tiger Woods, or even me. I bet if you picked an average American and his average job, and asked him using average language whether he'd rather be paid \$100,000 instead of \$45,000 for doing the same work, it's a safe bet that, on average, he'd say yes.

The only remaining defense for the speaker fees I'm paid is that I'm compensated for all the things everyone forgets I have to do in order to be capable of speaking. A keynote lecture to a large crowd takes about 60 minutes to deliver. Arguably this is more intense and stressful than the average office worker's entire week, but let's put that aside. To make and practice a new lecture takes two days of full-time work, which is 16 hours. Then consider my trip to get to the venue, including the security lines I have to wait in, the airplane flight I have to take, the cabs I have to ride in, the hotels I have to sleep in, and on it goes. Now many people can give lectures, and I'm not being paid simply for talking into a microphone. I'm

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fees and income. The overpaid and underpaid would be visible and more likely to be corrected. Or, total anarchy would ensue and civilization would end. Either way, it would be fun to watch.

paid for the decades of experience listed on my resume that, in theory, should make what I have to say interesting, provocative, entertaining, educational, inspiring, and whatever other adjectives the people who hire me mention in their marketing material. I'm good at teaching, which is uncommon and worth a few bucks, but lastly there is the ultimate factor: I'm paid to speak at one venue instead of speaking at another. When demand outweighs supply, there are fees to be paid. The more demand, the higher the fees.

The unspoken risk I run is having no salary. I have no pension. I have no extended contract guaranteeing me lecture gigs forever. This book could bomb or be destroyed in reviews, and my speaking career could come to an unfortunate and immediate end, which in the grand scheme of things would be OK. I didn't quit my job with the goal of earning \$30,000 an hour—I quit to see if I could pull this off at all. And now that I have for the past five years, my goal is to see how long I can make an independent living purely on the merits of what I write and what I say.