

FROM THE HEART

Human beings are a fearful lot. A quick skim of Dr. Google reveals a boatload of human fears, a tanker ship of phobias. It seems that we're all afraid of ... something, from thanatophobia (the fear of dying) all the way down to coulrophobia (the fear of clowns) and gingerphobia (the fear of redheads.)

In fact, if you can believe Google, thanatophobia is only the second most common human fear. So, care to guess what frightens people even more than the thought of dying?

It's called glossophobia. Never heard of it? Neither had I, but, statistically, you probably suffer from it. Google says it afflicts roughly 75% of the population and is far more common than more famous phobias, ahead of arachnophobia (fear of spiders, but you knew that) - ablutophobia (fear of bathing. Perhaps you didn't know that one) - astairophobia (fear of dancing in public. Actually, I just made that up). And many, many more. The world is awash in phobias.

But glossophobia tops the list. Any guesses yet?

To give you a clue, its symptoms include increased blood pressure, excessive perspiration, dry mouth, clammy hands, rapid heartbeat, a stiffening of the upper back muscles, trembling, nausea, intense anxiety and paralyzing fear at the very thought of it.

That's glossophobia. Glosso means tongue, if that gives you a hint ... Yes, it's the fear of speaking in public.

A friend of mine was recently given an award for his philanthropic efforts. He's an intelligent and accomplished person, no doubt a member of the Kingston 200. (Not up on the Kingston 200? See Frankly Speaking in the November issue of Profile.) I asked if he'd given a speech at the ceremony. "Are you crazy?" he replied. "Of course not. That's the last thing I'd do."

And I understood. Going all the way back to public school we had to stand up in front of the class and give "oral compositions". I hated it - even more than Health class - and I expect most of my classmates felt the same. (Surprisingly, our daughter actually won a public speaking competition in school, but she certainly didn't get that talent from me.)

Of course, some rare people are able to speechify in public with apparent ease. And hats off to them. But I wonder if a talent for public speaking isn't a little over-rated. Sort of like juggling. Sure it's hard but is it really useful? Really essential? In the political arena, for example, a gift for oratory is a definite asset for a candidate, but is it a reliable measuring stick as to who will make an effective public servant?

I expect there are many people who might be excellent at governing but who are just not good on their feet, so they can't win elections, or aren't comfortable even running. Have we missed out on, say, an outstanding Prime Minister (Robert Stanfield) because he just didn't come across as well in public as his great rival (Pierre Trudeau)? I know. I know. There were other factors. Stanfield couldn't catch a football either. But I digress ...

As for me, I managed to get through a large chunk of adulthood avoiding any sort of public speaking. But then, some years ago, I received a call telling me I'd won the Margaret Collier Award, a lifetime achievement award for an outstanding body of work by a writer in television. It's probably the most prestigious award in my field and I should have been thrilled. But my instantaneous reaction was quite different - a distinctly queasy feeling in the digestive organs. Does this mean, I ask, that I'll have to give - I don't even want to say it - a speech?

I voice the hope that this will be a 60-second quickie - zip up, grab the hardware, say thanks, and make a quick and merciful exit. No, no, I'm told. This is a special award. A big deal. There will be a thousand people paying rapt attention. Take as long as you like. Make a real speech.

A thousand people. A real speech. Words to strike a chill.

It doesn't help that I know about this a month ahead of time. I try not to think about it, but it's always there, lurking just below the surface - the speech, the speech - like some slimy creature in the Black Lagoon of my anxiety. Where does this irrational, almost primordial fear of speaking in public come from anyway? As my mother used to say, "What's the worst thing that can happen?"

Well, mum, Mark Twain said, "There are two types of public speakers - those who get nervous and those who are liars." And sorry, mum, I have to agree with Mark on this one. And the worst thing? Well, I could trip and fall, drop the hardware, lose my voice. I could go into the toilet and down the main sewer pipe into into the foulest cesspool in the darkest corner of ...

This exercise in positive thinking is interrupted by a call from a cheery fellow - "Congratulations! You must be thrilled!" - asking me to FAX my speech so they can put it in the teleprompter and telling me when to report for the dress rehearsal. Teleprompter? Dress rehearsal?!

"Just so you'll be comfortable."

Comfortable. It is to laugh.

Finally, the big day is upon me. On stage at the rehearsal there's no podium to lean on, to hide behind. The spotlight on me is blinding. The teleprompter is a TV screen at the back of the football field of a ballroom. I've forgotten my glasses and my words are an unreadable blur. I stumble. I mumble. I blank. I pull out my crumpled copy of the speech but I can't find my

place. I backtrack. I apologize. Finally, I stagger off the stage (the wrong way) muttering to myself "fiasco, fiasco".

The emcee for the event, a comedian of sorts, cracks "He has no social skills. He's a writer." Very funny. Then he offers me some professional advice. "Forget the teleprompter. Speak from the heart." Well, thanks. But all my heart is saying is "duh, duh, duh."

The next few hours pass in an anxious haze. Glossophobia has me in its gnarly grip. I feel as if I'm experiencing every one of the symptoms listed above. If I can't even get through a rehearsal how am I possibly going to get through the real thing? All too soon I'm seated in the packed ballroom. Someone is summarizing my career. I'm introduced. I manage not to trip on the steps up to the stage. I don't drop the hardware. There's a ray of hope. But I'm having trouble focusing on the distant teleprompter. The text is already scrolling. I can't find my first sentence. A thousand faces look up at me expectantly...

Words start coming out of my mouth - words I don't recognize. I realize, contrary to every fibre of common sense in my being, that I'm ad-libbing. I'm attempting to *speak from the heart!* - the single worst piece of advice I've ever received. There's a smattering of nervous laughter. I attempt an off-the-cuff joke. No smattering. I'm already halfway into the proverbial toilet.

Some atavistic survival instinct kicks in. I manage to spot my place on the teleprompter. But now my throat has tightened up so my voice sounds like a weird bat squeak. That's not fair! That wasn't even listed as one of the glossophobia symptoms! I desperately need a sip of water. But somehow I squeak through to the end, getting utterly lost only once.

Afterwards, light-headed with relief, I'm surprised when a couple of people comment favourably on my speech. Someone

remarks that it was "well structured." Well, what the heck, if I can't be brilliant and scintillating I'll settle for well-structured any day.

Over the years since I've had to speak in public on a few occasions, but I never learned to like it. And there's certainly no more ad libbing, no off the cuff stuff. Thinking is hard enough. Thinking on your feet is really hard. If something I say sounds spontaneous and "from the heart" I guarantee it's been meticulously written, and rewritten, and rewritten again. But the best laid plans ...

This past summer we had a gala evening at the Kingston Tennis Club to celebrate a million dollar rebuild of our decrepit, century old clubhouse. I had been the volunteer manager on the project and a couple of people thanked me for my efforts, which was all I expected.

But then Bob stood up. He started listing various contributions to the club over the years and after a few moments I realized - oh s***t!! - he's talking about me! He's got something in his hand. It looks like a plaque. I just know he's going to call me up in front of everyone. I'm going to have to give some sort of speech! Even worse - an impromptu speech!

Why did no one tell me?! So I could at least have written something down. Or arranged to be out of town.

I stop listening to Bob and try to marshal my thoughts. I wish he'd stop talking - about me - so I could think. He announces that I'm being awarded a lifetime membership to the club for "outstanding service." He waves me up, hands me the plaque with the dreaded words "The floor is yours."

Again there's no podium so I grab a chair to lean on. My mind is racing. And from somewhere a little voice whispers: "Speak from the heart."

So, I did.

I have almost no recollection of what I said. Although as soon as I'd finished I thought of three other things I should have said, four other people I should have thanked. But somehow I'd stumbled through it.

Afterwards someone asked me if I'd prepared my talk beforehand, which I took as a compliment. Someone else said it was "gracious" (I hope so.) Even "brilliant" (It wasn't.) And it certainly wasn't "well-structured". But it was from the heart. And apparently that was good enough.

And who knows, maybe I've discovered a new talent, kept hidden away all these years.

So, if you need someone to deliver a few witty yet pithy remarks at a wedding, an anniversary, a birthday, a bar mitzvah - a special occasion of any sort ...

DON'T ASK ME!!

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Doug Bowie is a playwright and screenwriter who lives - and occasionally extemporizes - in Kingston

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