Say It Well

FIND YOUR VOICE

SPEAK YOUR MIND

INSPIRE ANY AUDIENCE

Terry Szuplat

WHITE HOUSE SPEECHWRITER

FOR BARACK OBAMA

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For Mary, Jack, and Claire

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. . . let me think clearly and brightly;
let me live, love and say it well in good sentences,
let me someday see who I am . . .

—SYLVIA PLATH

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Introduction

The Way We Talk

I was shaking.

It was almost time for me to speak, and I could feel my heart starting to race. I shifted anxiously in my seat, desperately thinking of ways to escape.

I don't have to do this.
I'll just smile and politely decline. "No thanks. Not tonight. Maybe another time."
Disaster averted.
Dignity preserved.

But it was too late.

"And now," a voice announced, "give it up for Terry!"

Every eye in the room was on me. I started to talk into the microphone, but I sensed my voice trembling. Then I thought about the audience hearing my voice trembling, which only made my voice tremble more. I tried to hold the pages of my speech steady, but my hands were shaking. I thought about the audience seeing my hands shaking, which only made them shake more.

For a moment, I felt like I was out of my body—floating above, looking down on myself as I stammered and quivered. My mouth was moving, but the only sound I heard was the Voice of Doubt in my head:

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They can see that you're nervous.
You're going to screw up and embarrass yourself.
Please, just let this be over.

The way I was stressing out, you'd think I was delivering a major address to a huge audience. Far from it. I was in a karaoke bar with my coworkers—fellow staffers at the White House, where I was a speechwriter for President Barack Obama. We were on a work trip in Yokohama, Japan, and after a week of grueling international travel, we'd gone out for the night to unwind. I knew the audience. They were my friends. I spoke from my seat and didn't even have to stand up.

In fact, I wasn't even delivering a speech (or doing karaoke) at all. It was a silly little skit I'd written about Obama and other world leaders scrambling to pull the world economy out of a ditch like a wrecked car—a fun parody of a story Obama loved to tell back home on the campaign trail. In other words, it was no big deal. It didn't matter whether I nailed it or flopped, which made my nerves all the more frustrating.

Why was this happening?

In my gut, I knew. Even though I've been a professional speechwriter for nearly my entire adult life, for most of that time I'd been uncomfortable with public speaking myself. I was a speech*writer* who couldn't seem to hack it as a speech *giver*.

It's not like I avoided public speaking altogether. I could usually handle talking to a small group or giving a eulogy at a family funeral. And sometimes I wasn't half bad. Most of the time, though, just the idea of speaking in front of a group of people left me wracked with anxiety. So, for most of my life, I largely stayed where I felt safe—behind the scenes, writing speeches for others.

But I paid a price.

I spent so many years helping President Obama and other leaders speak in *their* voice that, over time, I lost my own. I coached speak-

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ers on how to tell *their* stories, but the idea of sharing mine could be nauseating. I was able to draft remarks for Obama, who, even his critics agree, is one of the world's great speakers, but I struggled with a meaningless skit.

Somehow, I made it through that night at the bar, though it's mostly a blur. My coworkers laughed and applauded. But walking back to our hotel through the empty streets of a city far from home, I felt helpless.

All I could do, it seemed, was hope that my fear of public speaking might fade over time.

It didn't.

When Obama's presidency was over, I left the White House and tried putting myself out there more—doing interviews and speaking to small classes of college students. Sometimes I was fine. Other times, not so much.

During one live TV interview, I tensed up, started stumbling over my words, and then just stopped talking altogether. I froze. Mercifully, the interviewer ended the segment, and I darted out of the studio, embarrassed.

Another time, on a conference call with a group of young foreign policy activists, my mouth dried up in the middle of my presentation, sending me into a full-on coughing spasm. The host put me on mute while I lunged for a glass of water and tried to collect myself.

At an intimate dinner with colleagues, everyone around the table took turns giving toasts and then looked at me to offer one as well. But I couldn't summon the courage. I just sat there, looking down at my plate. After a few seconds of awkward silence, the conversation moved on, and I spent the rest of the evening replaying my party foul in my mind.

Clearly, I wasn't meant to be a public speaker. Or a private speaker.

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As time went on, I tried to avoid it as much as possible. If someone invited me to talk to their group about working at the White House, I made up an excuse about why I couldn't. At dinners, I watched silently as others delivered toasts that got everyone raising their glasses. For me, it just felt safer not to speak.

Then, one day, an unexpected phone call forced me to face my fears.

"Hello, this is Antti Mustakallio," said the voice on the other end of the line, in a crisp Nordic accent. He said he was one of the very few speechwriters in Finland.

"So, I hear you give a lot of speeches about giving speeches?" he asked.

"Oh, absolutely," I said, mustering as much false confidence as I could. "I love it."

Antti wanted me to come to a conference later that year in his hometown of Hämeenlinna. A few hundred miles from the Artic Circle. In November.

"I would like you to deliver a keynote speech about how to deliver a speech. It will be onstage with an audience of three hundred people."

I almost hung up. Antti kept talking, but I wasn't really listening. The scenes of my past failures flashed through my mind.

"I'll think about it," I told him, with no intention of thinking about it.

But then, in the days that followed . . . I began to think about it. I was now in my late forties. I was being given a great opportunity, which I'd miss if I let my fears continue to control me. How many more experiences would I pass up—and later come to regret? Was I going to hide from public speaking for the rest of my life? Plus, what's the worst that could happen? If I flopped, no one back home would know. It would be in Finland. In November.

Maybe I *could* do this. Maybe this time could be different. Maybe

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I could try to remember the lessons I'd learned as a speechwriter, including for President Obama, and use them to develop and deliver a speech for myself.

Fortunately, I had plenty of lessons to draw on.

I was fortunate to write for Barack Obama across all eight years of his presidency. It was the most exhilarating and uplifting—and at times exhausting and terrifying—experience of my professional life. I learned from him every day as he connected with audiences around the world, which I witnessed up close while joining him on trips to more than forty countries.

In Kenya, flying with Obama aboard the presidential helicopter, Marine One, I looked down and saw the streets of Nairobi filled with people ecstatic over his return to his father's country, some with handmade signs that read "Welcome home!"

In Vietnam, where throngs of people lined the streets of Ho Chi Minh City to get a glimpse of his motorcade, the crowd—perhaps thinking they'd seen Obama—broke through the police line and chased me and other staff into a hotel.

The crush of the crowd was so strong in Tanzania that our staff bus got separated from the motorcade and hit a telephone pole, which smashed one of the bus' windows and sent shattered glass across the laps of frightened staff.

Moments like that could be nerve-racking. But they were also revealing. With the power of his words and story of his life, Obama tapped into something universal: ideals, values, and aspirations that transcend boundaries of race, religion, country, and culture. And *how* he connected with his audiences—including people who didn't necessarily agree with his politics—can offer lessons for us all.

When I started writing this book, a speechwriter I'd worked with at the White House joked, "What? You're going to give away all our secrets?!"

Well, yeah.

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And why not?

Yes, speechwriters are supposed to be ghosts—heard but not seen. And for more than twenty-five years, that was me: behind the scenes, largely invisible, penning the words in private that a president, members of Congress, executives, activists, and celebrities spoke in public. But why should these leaders be the only ones to benefit from these skills?

The art of public speaking is a skill we *all* need—now more than ever.

It's been two decades since a presidential speechwriter offered a book of advice on public speaking. Since then, the world has changed. A new generation of young people—diverse, restless, hopeful—are raising their voices, demanding to be heard. We're finally beginning to talk more openly about systemic issues that for too long were swept under the rug. Everyone—whether you're an elected official, a business executive, or a school principal—is now expected to speak to world events and complex issues of race, religion, and individual rights.

At the same time, raging political and social debates have turned language into a battlefield where words are wielded like weapons. Some people seem oblivious to how language from a bygone era, especially around race, can inflict pain on communities that historically have been marginalized. Other people can sometimes be quick to shame or condemn well-intentioned family, friends, or colleagues who struggle to keep pace with the rapidly evolving vocabulary around identity, sex, and gender.

From what I can tell, most people feel caught between the front lines—trapped in a rhetorical no-man's land—not wanting to fall back on the coarse language of a cruel past, but unsure how to move forward without misstepping and setting off a linguistic land mine that can destroy their relationships, career, or reputation.

We've lost, it seems, the ability to communicate with one another.

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Too many leaders seem more intent on scoring rhetorical points against their opponents than engaging in the dialogue that democracy needs in order to function. Too many speakers seem more eager to drown out those with different views than to practice the persuasion that brings more people to their cause. Our airways and communities are flooded with misinformation and cruelty—vitriol that undermines the trust, understanding, and shared sense of purpose that we need to live and work together.

The way we talk has to change.

I worry, though, that, just when we need it the most, the art of public speaking often seems more complicated and intimidating than it needs to be. Too many books on rhetoric have overlooked the voices of women, people of color, and historically marginalized communities. Some books on public speaking can make your head spin with obscure words from ancient Greece and Rome. But I'm here to tell you that you don't need to know what *chiasmus* is to be a great speaker. One thing Obama never told us was "You know, this is a good speech, but what it really needs is more chiasmus."*

All the while, technology continues to transform how we talk to one another. For the first time in history, every one of us has a megaphone—our smartphones, social media, and Zoom—that allows us to instantly share our voice with the world, with all the power and peril that it brings. With the rise of artificial intelligence, chatbots are revolutionizing how we learn, create, and communicate—with untold benefits and dangers. This may be the

* Chiasmus is a rhetorical device in which a phrase mirrors a previous phrase in reverse, like when President John F. Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." And yes, sometimes Obama used it, like when he said, "My job is not to represent Washington to you, but to represent you to Washington." More often, though, Obama's rhetoric was rooted in direct and straightforward language, which reflected his belief not in the power of leaders to inspire their people, but in the power of the people to inspire their leaders. (See what I did there?)

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first book on public speaking in the age of AI, and I'll offer some thoughts on how we might harness this technology to sharpen our voice without losing the humanity that's at the heart of all great communication.

In short, the art of public speaking needs an upgrade—a new guide for our diverse and changing world, with practical tools for the presentations, pitches, talks, toasts, and tributes that we give in our daily lives.

I hope this book can be that guide for you.

But before we dive in, I have a confession: I never read a book about public speaking or took a class on rhetoric before I became a speechwriter. Every lesson I'll share in the chapters that follow I learned by doing. This is the book I wish I'd had when I started out on my own journey.

I'll take you behind the scenes at the White House—into the Oval Office and aboard Air Force One—and share never-before-heard insights from President Obama on his approach to public speaking both as a candidate and as president. You'll hear, for the first time in his own words, how he became the speaker who burst onto the world stage with his unforgettable speech at the 2004 Democratic convention in Boston. "We all have weaknesses in how we communicate with people," he told me once as he reflected on his evolution as a speaker in the years before the convention. "There were definitely some habits of mine that weren't particularly useful, which I had to learn to correct."

This book also includes insights from many of the speechwriters who wrote for President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. That's because even as I worked on hundreds of speeches in my windowless office in the basement of the West Wing (with mice scurrying through the ceiling), I was just one member of an extraordinary team. You'll see how we did it, but even more important, the mistakes we made (more than once, I thought I might lose my job),

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how we learned from them, and how you can apply these lessons to become a better speaker yourself.

You'll hear from some of the world's leading scholars, psychologists, and neuroscientists whose research shows why these lessons are so effective. Yes, public speaking is an art. But since leaving the White House, I've tried to understand the science of speaking—evidence-based approaches that can help us all communicate better.

Finally, even as we can learn from a gifted orator like Obama, I believe we can also learn by listening to one another. I'll introduce you to people from all walks of life who have used the lessons in this book—without even realizing it and without the help of a professional speechwriter—to deliver remarkable speeches, many of which went viral and inspired people around the world. Just about all their speeches, and every one of Obama's, are on the internet. As you read, I encourage you to take breaks, put this book down, find these speeches online, and enjoy them the way they were meant to be experienced. *Watch* them. *Listen* to them. *Feel* the connection between the speaker and the audience.

As you do, you'll see why the lessons in this book can work for you too—no matter who you are or to whom you're speaking. Whether you give speeches for a living or are trying to summon the courage to speak for the very first time. Whether you're giving a toast, delivering a presentation at work, raising your voice for change, or running for office to deliver that change yourself. In fact, these lessons can help you be a more effective communicator in all sorts of situations—from a job interview to a difficult conversation with family, friends, or coworkers.

As you begin to apply these lessons in your own life, I hope that, together, we can also learn how to speak to one another—our families, neighbors, coworkers, and fellow citizens—with a greater sense of understanding and mutual respect. Most of us say that we want our public discourse to be more civil, but we don't seem to

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know how to get there. I've been fortunate to work with and learn from leaders, including President Obama, who have tried to forge a better path. This book shares those lessons as well—because if our diverse democracy is going to endure, we need to find a way to speak to one another with civility, empathy, and honesty.

So, yeah, there's a lot going on when we stand up and speak our mind in front of other people. It can be intimidating. Believe me, I know. But here's the first secret I want you to remember: you already have everything you need to succeed, including something powerful no one else has—your own unique voice.

That was the lesson from a visit Obama made to the small town of Greenwood, South Carolina, during his first presidential campaign. He'd been on the road nonstop. It was raining. He was wet, a little cranky, and there were only about twenty people in the room.

Then, just as he was getting ready to speak, a voice called out from the audience.

"Fired up!"

"Fired up!" the people yelled back.

"Ready to go!" the voice shouted.

"Ready to go!" the people yelled back.

Obama didn't know what was happening.

On it went, until Obama and everyone in the room was . . . well, fired up and ready to go.

The voice that energized the room that day belonged to Edith Childs, a local councilwoman and civil rights advocate, and for the rest of Obama's presidency her chant became a rallying cry. He loved to tell the story, especially at the end of big rallies—how a single person, a Black woman in her late fifties in a small, rural town, had inspired everyone around her.

"It just goes to show you how one voice can change a room," Obama would say, his voice growing stronger. "And if it can change a room, it can change a city! And if it can change a city, it can

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change a state! And if it can change a state, it can change a nation! And if it can change a nation, it can change the world!"

But how?

How do we *find* our voice? How do we speak up for what we believe? What do we say? And how do we say it so that we're inspiring the people around us to work together for the future we want? That's what this book is all about.

So . . .

Fired up?

Ready to go?

Let's do this.

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You Got This

(Really)

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CHAPTER 1

Love Your Sacred Story

Perhaps everything that frightens us
is, in its deepest essence, something
helpless that wants our love.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

The first step of giving any good speech or presentation—and where I think many of us struggle—is believing that we can. It's having the confidence that our voice matters and that we deserve to be heard. Too often, we *don't* believe it. We reject ourselves—we stay in the shadows and don't speak up—to protect ourselves from possibly being rejected by others.

As I debated whether to give the speech in Finland, I realized that this is what I'd been doing for so long.

I hadn't always been anxious about public speaking. Growing up in Falmouth, Massachusetts—a seaside town on Cape Cod with gray-shingled houses and a quaint main street where you always run into a friend—my parents and public school teachers always encouraged me to use my voice. And I enjoyed it.

I gave my first "speech" in the fourth grade, dressing up as President John F. Kennedy for a book report. I said something like

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"Ask not what your classroom can do for you, ask what you can do for your classroom!" (Cute, but zero points for originality.) I entered a speech contest at the local VFW, read scripts on camera for our high school's weekly TV news program, and, as president of our student government, presided over assemblies of hundreds of students.

Then I headed off to college in Washington, D.C., and I didn't give another speech for decades.

What happened?

The same thing that happens to a lot of people—maybe even you.

~

A fear of public speaking is one of the most common phobias in the world. Many of us, according to some surveys, fear it more than snakes, more than flying on a plane—more, I suspect, than snakes on a plane. I have a friend who, for years, dry heaved before every presentation he gave. As a speechwriter, I've worked with world-famous actors and actresses, some of whom have appeared naked on-screen, and they *still* get nervous when speaking to a live audience (with their clothes on). Toastmasters International, which helps people become better speakers, has members in nearly 150 countries. To struggle with public speaking, it seems, is to be human.

To find out why, I reached out to Boston University's Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, which put me in touch with Dr. Ellen Hendriksen. She's a clinical psychologist who treats people with social anxiety, including paralyzing fears of public speaking. "We're all social animals," Dr. Hendriksen explained to me. "We all need to feel safety, love, and belonging." Fears of being rejected by an audience, she said, may be rooted in our ancient survival instincts. "Rejection used to be fatal. If you were kicked

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out of your family or your tribe, you'd be cast to the wolves. You could literally die." Today, "*social* rejection can feel like a fast track to death."*

My own anxieties around public speaking as an adult started to make more sense.

Back home as a kid, I felt the safety, love, and belonging that Dr. Hendriksen described. Even in Washington, I was blessed with friendships and opportunities that should have bolstered my confidence. I worked on my first speech for a president, Bill Clinton, when I was a college intern at the White House.** I got my first speechwriting job a few years later, at the Pentagon, and went on to become the chief speechwriter for the secretary of defense. I fell in love with and married an extraordinary woman, Mary Abdella—smart, witty, loving, and my best friend. We had two beautiful children, Jack and Claire, who, when I'd work on speeches in my home office, would wiggle their tiny fingers under the door to get my attention and slide in notes ("Wen r u dun?").

Life was good.

A few months after President Obama took office, when I was thirty-six years old, I became one of his foreign policy speechwriters, and I'll never forget the day I met him for the first time. It was during a speechwriters' meeting in the West Wing office of David Axelrod, one of the president's close advisers. Obama had been in office only a few months, and I'd worked on his first address to a military commencement, at the Naval Academy.

* Some researchers think there might even be a genetic basis for our anxieties around public speaking. The genetic testing company 23andMe says that it identified "more than 800 genetic markers associated with a fear of public speaking." Dr. Alisa Lehman, a biologist at the company, told me that some of us "may be genetically predisposed to having a fear of public speaking." As I write this, 23andMe hasn't yet broken down the data, but perhaps future research may reveal who among us, based on our genetics, may be more likely to have these fears.

** I still have the president's schedule from that day, framed and hanging on my wall: "The Trip of the President to Kiev, Ukraine, May 11, 1995: Embassy Meet and Greet, U.S. Embassy gymnasium. Remarks: Terry Szuplat." As a twenty-two-year-old kid, I had to pinch myself, especially as a Ukrainian American.

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"Where's the new guy?" Obama asked, popping into Axe's office as he tossed around a football. "Nice job on the speech," he said, shaking my hand.

I felt like I was on top of the world.

And yet, the more time I spent in Washington—a town obsessed with pedigree, power, and wealth—the more I sometimes felt like I just didn't measure up.

Privileged family background? Not us Szuplats. My father's Ukrainian parents worked in a labor camp in Nazi Germany during World War II. When my dad, Stach, was a child, they emigrated to America and settled in the factory town of Amsterdam, New York. After a childhood spent partly on food stamps, he joined the Navy, and fell in love with and married my mum, Peggy, the eldest daughter of a large Irish Catholic family in Boston, who worked as a secretary.

Wealth? We didn't have any. As young newlyweds, my parents lived in a furnished trailer on the outskirts of my dad's hometown. After I was born, we lived in a small second-floor apartment in Roslindale, then a working-class section of Boston. My dad was a plumber's apprentice, and my parents lived paycheck to paycheck. By Fridays, he recalled years later, "we had just enough money for a six-pack of beer and pizza."

When Dad got a new job, we moved to Falmouth, down on Cape Cod, which, despite its reputation as a summer playground for the rich and famous, is home to proud year-rounders who work hard to get by and raise their families. Like anywhere, Falmouth had its inequalities too. "West Falmouth is old money," people joked to my mum back in the 1970s when we arrived, "North Falmouth is new money, and East Falmouth is no money."

We settled in East Falmouth. We lived on a two-mile-long boulevard of hundreds of houses, then mostly summer cottage rentals, and every morning Dad started his old Chevy Bel Air with

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the twist of a screwdriver. As my two younger sisters and I neared college, Dad took on extra plumbing jobs, and Mum went to work as a lunch lady at my high school, a night-school secretary, and, later, at the town library.

With a patchwork of Pell Grants, work-study jobs, and scholarships—and some money I'd saved from mowing lawns and a job at the Dollar Store—I was lucky to attend a great school, American University in Washington, D.C. The professors were world-class, and I was given life-changing opportunities—internships in the White House, the U.S. Senate, and, during a semester abroad, the British Parliament.

And yet, at just about every point in my career, it seemed like so many of the people I worked with had gone to the Ivy Leagues. In many ways, Washington can feel like a small town run by alumni of the country's most elite schools. It's often only a matter of time in any conversation before someone asks where you went to college, or graduate school (I didn't). And when you answer, you can almost feel yourself being sized up, assigned to your place in the hierarchy.

Truth be told, speechwriting was, at first, something of a fall-back. In college, I dreamed of becoming a lawyer and imagined myself arguing history-making cases before the Supreme Court. But a funny/not-so-funny thing happened on the way to law school. I didn't get in. Anywhere. (I've never been that good at standardized tests and my LSAT scores were . . . how might a lawyer say it . . . suboptimal.)

As I studied to retake the LSAT, I got the speechwriting job at the Pentagon, enjoyed it, and started having a different dream—maybe, just maybe, I could someday write speeches for a president and help tell America's story to the world. And my dream came true.

Despite all that, I did what so many of us do. Instead of being confident in who I *was*, I too often focused on what I *wasn't*. I hid it well. But in the recesses of my mind, there was always someone

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who was more deserving than me, more experienced, more qualified, or more credentialed.

That was my story—at least the story I often told myself.

To buck me up, my sister Erica, a talented artist on Cape Cod, sent me a book, *The War of Art*, by the author and screenwriter Steven Pressfield. He talks about the barriers to confidence and creativity and warns against defining ourselves in comparison to others. A person who "defines himself by his place in a pecking order," he wrote, will "evaluate his happiness/success/achievement by his rank within the hierarchy."

I'd been doing exactly that, I realized, for most of my professional life. Which meant the Voice of Doubt was always there, and it was at its most insistent on those few occasions when I tried to stand up and talk in front of other people.

You're out of your league.
You're going to mess up.
They're going to judge you.

I was still hearing that voice as I tried to decide whether to give the speech in Finland. Fortunately, I also found myself remembering another voice—President Obama's, and how he had told me about his own early struggles, both with his identity and as a speaker, and how he had worked to get better.

"I JUST STARTED FREEZING UP"

In 1981, students at Occidental College in Los Angeles held a rally against South Africa's brutal apartheid policy of racial segregation. Obama, then a nineteen-year-old sophomore, was the first speaker. He managed to get out only a few sentences, however, before two

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students rushed up, pretending to be South African security forces, and dragged him away—a bit of political theater to highlight the oppression of anti-apartheid activists.

"The whole thing was a farce," he explained years later, and his "one-minute oration" was "the biggest farce of all."[1]

"That's the last time you will ever hear another speech out of me," he told a friend. "I've got no business speaking for Black folks."

Decades later, I asked Obama what he meant. His struggles with his racial identity—with a white mother from Kansas and a Black father from Kenya, and having been largely raised by his white grandparents—were "part of" the reason for how he felt at the rally, he told me. More, though, it was rooted in larger doubts about his place in the world and whether his voice could make a difference.

"I think the starting point for effective speaking, for me at least, and for most people who I find persuasive," he said, "is do they have a sense of who they are and what they believe?" At the rally on campus that day, he recalled, "I was a callow youth who was trying to sort out who I was and what I believed. I was nineteen years old, thinking, 'Do I deserve to be in the spotlight? Do I have something specific to say about this topic when I'm still trying to sort out who am I and what I represent?'" The rally had given him a chance to raise his voice. But looking back on his younger self, he said, "I wasn't ready yet."

After college, Obama sometimes had the opposite problem—not a lack of confidence, but perhaps too much. For several years, he worked as a community organizer with churches on Chicago's South Side. "At that point, I was accustomed to speaking in front of people," he told me. "I was not naturally inclined to be nervous"—until one day when his swagger proved to be his undoing. It was a story I'd never heard.

"I remember it vividly," Obama said. He was twenty-four years old, in a high-rise in downtown Chicago, making a fundraising

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pitch to a conference room full of philanthropists. "I was feeling pretty cocky," he remembered. "I had not written down my remarks. I felt like I could go into any room and just sort of wing it, which was a bad mistake."

He started his presentation. "There are a bunch of people in suits," he recalled. "I'm looking a little raggedy and a little out of place. About four or five minutes into my presentation, I just started freezing up. I lost my train of thought."

"Why?" I asked.

"I was in an unfamiliar setting with unfamiliar people and one in which there were some stakes involved"—the money he needed to sustain his community organizing.

"I was terrible," he said. "I felt a little bit of flop sweat and hemmed and hawed, and got stuck, and was not particularly coherent."

I asked if he remembered how it had felt.

"You erase it from your mind," he joked at first. Then he turned more pensive.

"You feel," he said, pausing to find the words, "stupid and embarrassed."

So how did Obama get better?

There were four places, he told me, that shaped "the strands of my public-speaking style."

"EVERYBODY HAS A SACRED STORY"

After freezing up in that conference room, Obama continued working as a community organizer, which brought him to the first place where he learned to be a more effective speaker—church basements.

"Sometimes, I'd only have twelve people there," he said. "But step by step, speaking to bigger audiences gave me a baseline level

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of comfort in communicating to folks." As he did, he learned one of the most important lessons of communication—listening before you talk.

His remarks in those basements "were presentations, but they were also conversations" with residents and leaders from the neighborhoods, he recalled. "The best speakers are in a conversation with their audience. They're not talking *at* an audience. They're speaking *with* an audience"—and that includes listening to what's important to the people you're communicating with.

Those conversations, he said, "helped me understand how all of us put together a narrative for ourselves about our lives and what's important to us, where we've come from and where we're going, how that defines our values and what our fears and disappointments are."

"Everybody has a sacred story," he told me, "one that gets to their essential selves. And listening to other people tell their stories helped me understand my own."

As he listened in those church basements, he also learned how to be a better speaker from a second place—the pulpit upstairs. "You know who were good coaches for me?" he said. "All those Black pastors I was in church with. The pastor of a small storefront church who works for the bus company during the day and is there on a Saturday—you watch him tell a story to his little flock of a hundred people. There's a tradition there that is powerful, a particular oral history, a capacity to tell stories. Preachers know how to preach. Just listening and hearing and watching, I soaked a lot of that in." Of all the places where he learned to speak, listening to the pastors of Chicago, he said, "was probably the most valuable."

A few years later, he got his first big chance to show what he'd learned.

He was a twenty-eight-year-old law student at Harvard, and he'd

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been elected president of the *Law Review*. One of his responsibilities was to speak at the *Law Review*'s annual dinner and introduce that year's honoree—the civil rights icon and congressman John Lewis. "He was one of my childhood heroes," Obama told me. "I wanted to make sure that I did him justice."

"This was the first time I gave a big public speech in front of a large group of people that I did not know, in a setting that mattered to me, on a subject that I cared about. I took a lot of time to think through what I wanted to say. I wrote out the speech. I memorized the speech. And then I delivered the speech"—brief remarks, perhaps five to seven minutes, to a few hundred people.

To the best of his memory, Obama spoke about the importance of the rule of law and paid tribute to the lawyers, professors, and students who uphold it. As the first African American elected president of the *Law Review*, he touched on his own journey. And he delivered a heartfelt tribute to Lewis, who had endured brutal beatings and jailings for daring to stand up for civil rights—sacrifices that made Obama's own presence at that podium possible. And it seemed to work.

"It was the first time I felt like 'I've got the audience, I'm moving them, I'm telling a story that resonates with them,'" Obama said. It all came together—"the material, the moment, the delivery."*

Obama was starting to find his voice. Over the next decade, he worked to refine it, including in the third place where he learned to speak in front of an audience: the classroom. Even as he served in the Illinois State Senate, he taught classes at the University of Chicago Law School, delivering lectures on constitutional law, civil rights, and voting rights. "I'm getting up in front of a classroom of

* Obama's speech at the dinner seems to have been lost to history. He told me he doesn't have a copy of his remarks, and representatives from the *Law Review* told me they have no record of any of the speeches from that night.

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