

Stage fright: When preachers panic

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [March 6, 2007](#) issue

When I was young, the youth leader of our church would occasionally ask for someone to give a testimony during the worship service. All the kids would get quiet, shuffle their feet and squirm. For some reason I would feel the responsibility of the group shift slowly to my shoulders. The silence became more and more uncomfortable until at last I would give in and speak up.

“I’ll do it,” I would say, dragging the words out to make sure that my reluctance was duly noted. The moments leading up to the dreaded event were horrible. My anxiety would peak, my stomach would turn upside down, and I would bounce my right knee up and down furiously on the ball of my foot.

The first trick I discovered was telling myself it would be over soon. I knew that I could bear anything for a short time. Then, when I got behind the pulpit to speak, I found it wasn’t so bad after all. And when it was over, the feeling of relief was so powerful that I would become giddy, joking more than usual and expecting everyone to be in as good a mood as I was.

Unfortunately, once you volunteer to give a testimony, the youth minister is likely to make eye contact with you the next time something like that is needed. I ended up being the person that others expected to speak on behalf of the youth of our church.

I developed another trick. I would avoid looking at anyone in the pews while I was talking. I would stare over their heads or move my eyes around quickly so as not to dwell on any one face: I was afraid of what I might see in their faces. I was very protective of the artificial courage that I had delicately constructed in my heart, fragile as a house of cards. And so I would toss my words out into the congregation, then turn abruptly and sit down quickly. I never saw the love that would have been visible in their faces if only I had looked.

Years passed. Opportunities to give testimonies or “little talks” came to me. Then I went to seminary and ended up with a vocation that requires me to stand before a congregation and preach every Sunday.

I still needed tricks to get me through the sermon in the early days. I used to imagine that I was talking to just one person. “Forget the crowd,” I would say to myself, “and just pretend you’re talking to your best friend.” This trick worked well, but sometimes I would become too informal. And if the preacher is too informal in the pulpit, he becomes a comic figure. He preaches like someone forcing a laugh.

The last trick I learned was to breathe deeply and relax. When I was relaxed, preaching became enjoyable. I could look at the faces of my friends and learn from what I saw there. The visual interaction with the audience would alter—to some extent—the delivery of the sermon. I was able to speak with the ease of a conversationalist, but not lose my filters and forget what I was doing.

Sadly, this last trick is available only after you’ve preached for a few years. You can’t make yourself relax. If you could, no one would ever be afraid of speaking before a congregation.

Still more years went by, and I have eased carefully into the early part of middle age. Preaching is a joy for me, and I don’t need tricks anymore. Being relaxed before the church is my natural state now. I’m aware of how much I love the people who look back at me. We have shared our lives in both good times and hard times. We are on a spiritual journey together, and my part in our shared journey is to live the preaching life and allow myself to collide with scripture. Their part is to hear about that collision on Sunday mornings. My sermon is not the most important thing happening, but it is my part of the great kingdom drama. Preaching is a craft and an esoteric art; I give myself to it with joy.

I see the sermon as a whole during the week, when I organize it and find the clarity and brevity that I seek. When I stand to speak, the sermon breaks apart into 10 or 12 little sermons, small chunks of information. Each piece has a short life of its own. When the last of these living ideas passes through my lips, the sermon is over. I have delivered a fragile, shifting, imperfect cloud of thoughts and prayers into my community of friends. Before I sit down, those ideas are already spreading and thinning, dying or taking root in the minds of the people. What happens with my words now is not for me to worry about.

One more sermon is done. One more in a long line of sermons that stretches out both into my past and into my future. When I was younger, the moment after the sermon was very emotional. If I thought I did well, I was elated. If I was unhappy with

the sermon, I felt the dark shadow of depression settling over me.

Nowadays, I feel neither. Preaching is my vocation. My friends are glad to let me do this because it is something I know how to do. They each have their own vocations and callings in the kingdom. We're all in this together.

I do experience a moment of clarity at the end of each sermon. I know that I am a man in the service of God and the church. And that's a good thing for anyone to know.