

Why a writing workshop did more for my preaching than a preaching conference

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A few years ago I started to get a lot of affirmation for my preaching. People were listening, worship attendance was growing, and I was overhearing parishioners describe me as a good preacher. Soon this shaped my pastoral identity and led me to claim preaching as my “thing.”

This prompted me to attend a large preaching conference, to learn from the best in my field. Getting lost in a massive sanctuary full of preachers was paradise for an introvert like me. I relished the anonymity—while also envying the preaching “great” up front. *I wonder if I might ever be invited to be up there*, I thought to myself and shared with no one.

In fact, the only time I interacted with others was when the preacher forced me to. After a few of these “Turn to your neighbor” conversations, I found a new pew: a single-seater in the far stratosphere of the balcony, where no one was my neighbor.

Even from this isolated perch, I heard sermons that brought tears to my eyes. I took a lot of notes, and I left feeling inspired. So I attended the preaching conference again.

But something was missing. I would come home with better ideas, but not as a better preacher.

Then I moved to Illinois for a new job as a college chaplain. I loved the work, but my academic schedule prevented me from attending the preaching conference. On a whim, I decided to try something different: I signed up for a couple classes at the nearby Iowa Summer Writer’s Festival. I’d always loved to write. Maybe I’d even find a way to publish my sermons.

In Iowa, I was a lone M.Div. in a sea of MFAs. I took two classes, one on free-writing and one on “nonfiction for people with short attention spans.” I didn’t write sermons, but I did write about my faith. Others wrote about their childhoods, parenting, or the pain of death or divorce. We got to know each other intimately—especially since one

of the unspoken rules was to check your ego at the door.

But the first time I read my writing to the class, I reverted to my 13-year-old self. I giggled manically, smiled inappropriately and sweated profusely. What I had written was terrible—stiff, awkward sentences, filled with generic words like “nice”—yet I still had to read it aloud and receive feedback.

After I finished, the teacher shared some advice: “If you find yourself writing bad stuff, try to write even worse.” Was I supposed to take that as encouragement?

By Wednesday I was in crisis. “I suck at this,” I texted to a pastor friend. “This is the hardest thing I have ever done.”

I knew I was failing miserably. Everything I wrote was composed in fear, written to the expectations I assumed for myself as a pastor. I wrote stiff and safe.

My classmates responded with polite words, straining to encourage me. My teacher was ruthless. He said I wasn’t venturing far enough into the “wilderness” of humanity to be credible. Ouch. My ego was on the ropes.

Then something started to happen. I think it had to do with giving up, or giving in. I had been writing so poorly, I no longer felt the need to impress. So I loosened up and wrote with abandon, freeing myself from my overly pious pulpit. I wrote angry. I wrote questioning. I wrote silly. I swore a lot.

In other words, my genuine self emerged—a self that, to my surprise, wrote about faith with a depth of honesty I had never before dared. It was liberating to write so truthfully. It was also effective. My teacher finally smiled at me, and he said my words held wisdom. My classmates told me that if I wrote sermons like that, they’d come hear me preach.

The ego is a preacher’s greatest enemy. Nothing can steer us away from truth more quickly. In Iowa, we shared tremendous honesty, vulnerability and courage as a community of writers. Now I long to engage other preachers in a similar conversation.

We might contemplate questions like these: Why do we preachers feel pressured to be someone we are not? If we’re inspired by a humble carpenter, why does the pulpit aggrandize our egos and delude our sense of self? And do we dare tell the whole truth, for the sake of an authentic word?