

Reframing our story

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I often have people ask me how they can begin speaking at conferences. I don't know why, but I'm always a bit wary of people who are eager to hop on the conference circuit. It's silly. I certainly wanted to speak at conferences before I did it. I would open up a brochure, see the sparkling faces, and think, *Why are they speaking and I'm not?* Speaking is a calling, like anything else. Most of us have an interest in pursuing and honing our craft. So I don't know why it makes me nervous when other people want to do it.

Maybe it's because I want to say, "Be careful what you wish for. It's hard on your family. It's even hard on your body." I want to tell them all of my mistakes. But then I just sound silly, ungrateful, or not aware of my privilege. The truth is, I've been speaking at about two to three conferences every month for almost eight years, and I still really love doing this. I don't know how long it will last, and I get nervous because speaking is now my primary source of income. I'm pretty sure my fifteen minutes will be up at any moment. But I love being on the move and meeting new people. I don't have a lot of travel anxiety or the need to control details, so that's helpful. (Although, as many times as I have been stuck in the airport with no way to get to my conference venue, I wish I had paid a little more attention to the particulars.)

I suppose I just see speaking as a means to an end, and if there's no end (in our case, a message that needs to be communicated), then what's the motivation? Why would we want to speak? Plus, if I'm honest, I have to say that I'm a little uncomfortable and tired of being a well-worn stepping stone along someone's path to greater things.

Anyways. I always tell people the same thing: you have to have *content*. You need to have done something extraordinary in your position, or studied something deeply. Which usually translates into starting something new, growing something old, being artistically creative, earning a Ph.D., or writing a book. I encourage people to speak to support their thought and work, not the other way around. There are ways to get a lot of traction in a little time, but try to resist the temptation. Think tortoise. Not hare.

On the other hand, I never hesitate when someone wants to write. I try to do everything I can for people who want to put words on a page. Although my hours are limited, and I never get to do as much as I'd like for people, it's always exciting when someone begins a writing life.

Why? Because I've seen families crash and burn on the Christian celebrity circuit. I've seen lives crushed by it. I know that we can get competitive and jealous and say nasty things. I've seen how we get so addicted to praise that we can't handle criticism. I've seen people drink too much and fall into unhealthy relationships because people adore us a lot more on the road than they do at home. I know how hard the re-entry into the family is, when we suddenly have to make our space in this unit that's been humming along fine (or sometimes better) without us. I know, because these things could happen to me at any moment. I'm not trying to be over-dramatic--the same things can be said of pastors who are well-guarded from criticism (most aren't).

The difference between conference speaking and creating content is that when we write, we generally become healthier humans. Many of you are now flashing through images in your mind. You're thinking about the drunk writer who can't get out of her head. You're imagining Mavis Gary in [Young Adult](#) or Eddie Morra in [Limitless](#), or the hundreds of authors in history who write drunk and edit sober.

A productive writing life is not that way. [This article](#) reminds me of one of the many joys of writing. It allows us to reframe our story. It helps us to be honest and makes us resilient humans. So when a friend wants to start writing, I love to support that. But it's not always because of what will happen externally. It's not always because people will get published, or because they will end up on the speaking circuit. It's the internal process of discovery that excites me.