

Say it with flowers ... or a text?

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A couple of weeks ago I led a workshop at the [Festival of Homiletics](#) called **The Word in a 140-Character World: Faithful Preaching in the Digital Age**. It was a variation on the Spirituality in the Smartphone Age material I've been [presenting](#) for a while now.

I speak and write a lot about technology, and at the heart of much of my work is **discernment**—discernment around questions like *How much social media is too much? Am I presenting an authentic picture of myself to the world? Does this interaction build community or tear it down?*

One piece of the discernment we don't talk about enough is how we decide which medium to use for various communication tasks. Back in the olden days, you pretty much had in-person or the Pony Express. Now we have in person, phone, text, letter, e-mail, direct message, posting on someone's Facebook wall, tweeting "at" someone, SnapChat, etc. How we say it is almost as important as what we say. (The medium is the message, still and always.)

I've had several experiences recently that reinforced the power of good discernment. They are all quite simple, but really speak to how powerful it is when you get the medium right.

1. Following the workshop, I got an e-mail from someone who suggested a word change to one of my slides to make it clearer. The person made a joke in his e-mail: I'm sending you this while sitting in the same room as you, and could probably tell you in person but I'll do this instead. It would have been splendid for him to stay and offer his comment face to face, but e-mail was better because now I have a written record of his feedback so I won't forget. Also the writer sensed, I think, that the suggestion was an emotionally neutral one, which makes e-mail an appropriate venue for it.
2. By contrast, a woman waited in the "chat line" to let me know—in a very constructive but pointed way—that the images I used in my presentation were

not representative of the fullness of humanity, racially and gender-wise. “What you are saying is important and you don’t want your message to be undermined,” she said, by predominantly male and white images. She was right—and I realized that while I think a lot about what I say, the images are often the last (and sometimes, sadly, last-minute) addition to the presentation. While it was not easy to hear her feedback in person, it was so much more constructive than e-mailing me, or even worse, tweeting it, which is what often happens at conferences when people are rankled by something a speaker says or does. I’ve rarely seen that go in a constructive direction—in fact, folks ending up jumping on the bandwagon to the point that the speaker can feel attacked, even if the initial criticism was valid. Incidentally, this person also took the time to wait until the crowd had died down, which was not necessary but certainly disarming.

3. My grandmother passed away a week ago. I have received a ton of condolence messages from people, and believe me when I tell you I appreciate them all. But I also received a phone call from a college friend. He left a wonderful, compassionate voicemail that comforted me greatly. I wouldn’t call his phone call a complete surprise, since he and I have stayed in touch in recent years. But the message was exceptional because I was not expecting to hear from him by phone. I share this not to make anyone feel bad who sent me an electronic message instead of calling. Rather it was a lesson for ME. How often do I choose the easy, expedient way, rather than the way of deeper connection?

We really are in the guinea pig generation. We have more ways to communicate than ever before. As a result, we must be attentive to the how, not just the what.

How have you seen the right medium enhance a message you sent or received? And how have you seen a message get undermined by the manner in which it was conveyed?

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