

Where do you get your ideas?

By Keith Lee

In the first edition of the revived SAITSayers newsletter, I wrote an article about a movie that I had seen and included the following line:

Becoming involved with Toastmasters is not about learning to 'speechify', distort the truth or cover yourself through language; rather, it provides an opportunity for people to learn to find their own voice and develop a greater appreciation for the voices of others.

I still find that sentence hilarious -- and yes, 'speechify' is a real word (To make a speech; to harangue. [Used derisively or humorously]) -- because it speaks directly to what kind of misconceptions people can have about what Toastmasters is about. A friend of mine asked me, "Well, what do you speak about at these meetings?" I responded: "Anything you want!" For me, many of the speeches that I have presented to date have been derived from articles or stories that I have read, narratives about things that I have experienced or reflections on why I like the things that I like.

Two of my speeches were direct retellings of interesting stories that I had read. One of the first speeches that I prepared extensively for was derived on the first chapter of a book entitled "Banvard's Folly", written by Paul S. Collins. (The subtitle for Collins' book is "Thirteen Tales of People Who Didn't Change the World".) After picking up the book from Baskerville Books, an excellent second-hand bookshop in the Kensington area, I read the first chapter and immediately thought that it would make an excellent speech because several elements of Banvard's story resonated with of my own ideals and ambitions. A later speech was a reworking of an article from the New Yorker about the medical phenomenon known as "The Jake Leg" (Sept 14/03 issue; see Dan Baum's [website](#) at for the full article). With both the Banvard and Jake Leg projects, I took the key elements of the story that I could relate to and refocused specific details from the source material to fit my own themes. For instance, while Baum's original article explored more the sociopolitical aspects of the Jake Leg blight, in my speech, I chose to focus in on the impact the brothers left: "What kind of impression do you want to leave on the world? You may be leaving more of an impact than you know..."

Several of my talks were about personal experiences. Obviously my icebreaker speech was rooted in personal experience, but I also did speeches about my misadventures trying to find a replacement copy of a lost book, bad dreams I had about failing tests, and a nasty computer worm that hit my workplace. After doing three speeches "about myself", I began to feel uncomfortable giving speeches based on my own life because they felt like a bit of a cheat -- they usually required little research and seemed too "easy". However, a few months later, I began to appreciate that it is not the case for everyone; for some, it is a challenge to disclose information about themselves. At a club officer training session, an experienced Toastmaster related to me the story of a woman who had joined her club who insisted on giving speeches on neutral subjects and did not open up

to the club about any aspect of her personal life or background until her eighth or ninth speech, when she finally felt comfortable enough with the group to let them in.

For me, the most challenging and rewarding speeches that I have delivered to date have been projects where I tried to explain why I like the things that I like. For my eighth speech, I attempted to articulate exactly why I love a little toy pig that I found at a little shop at work. You might think that it would be difficult to try to flesh out such an idea beyond "It's cute and funny-looking and makes a metallic oinking sound if you squeeze it" but I actually had enough critical details and anecdotes to create a decent speech.

The speech that I am most proud of was a combination of the three types -- an attempt to explain the virtues of an article from the New Yorker (7/14/97) entitled "Kid Dynamite Blows Up", a account of the decline and fall of reviled boxer and convicted rapist Mike Tyson. For me, the article was meaningful not because I had any particular affection for the protagonist but because I was inspired by the ability of the writer to convey Mike Tyson's story with such clarity, humor and insight; I cared less about the story of Tyson and more about how effectively his story was being told. To that end, I wanted to showcase the writing and to accomplish this I memorized several of my favorite passages and recited them within an organized framework, explaining the three aspects of the piece that I felt made it work and offering the extended quotes as illustration and proof. One could protest that I was using someone else's words to make my point, but the words that I was using were meaningful to me; it was meaningful to learn them and study their intricacies and marvel at their power and resonance. To me, the passages offered an example of the kind of knowledge, perspective and facility with language that I would one day like to achieve.

In my opinion, the Toastmasters program is a way in which one can practice and build skills by learning to communicate ideas, and those ideas can have more power if they have personal meaning for the speaker. For my speech projects, I found inspiration from stories that I had read, personal experiences and the challenge of trying to qualify things that give me joy. Everyone is different; everyone has different stories that they can tell and would like to tell. The speaker can create any world that he or she chooses.

Dan Baum's Jake Leg article can be found at
<http://www.knoxandbaum.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/jakelegBW.pdf>

David Remnick's Kid Dynamite article can be found at
http://www.members.shaw.ca/kkylee/kid_dynamite.pdf