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Incorporate Humor in Your Next Speech

By Stephen D. Boyd

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Some speakers say, "I could never use humor in my speech; I just don't feel comfortable with it." I believe that anyone can use humor and that it is a valuable tool in speaking. Appropriate humor relaxes an audience and makes it feel more comfortable with you as the speaker; humor can bring attention to the point you are making; and humor will help the audience better remember your point. It can break down barriers so that the audience is more receptive to your ideas.

First, let me make it easy for you to use humor. The best and most comfortable place to find humor for a speech is from your own personal experience. Think back on an embarrassing moment that you might have thought not funny at the time. Now that you can laugh at the experience, you understand the old adage "Humor is simply tragedy separated by time and space." Or think of a conversation that was funny. Remember the punch line and use it in your speech. Probably the least risky use of humor is a cartoon. The cartoon is separate from you and if people don't laugh, you don't feel responsible. (Be sure to secure permission to use it.) You're not trying to be a comedian; you just want to make it easy for people to pay attention and to help them remember your point.

Here are some suggestions on using humor to make your next speech have more impact.

1. Make sure the humor is funny to you. If you don't laugh or smile at the cartoon, joke, pun, one-liner, story, or other forms of humor, then you certainly cannot expect an audience to do so. A key to using humor is only using humor that makes you laugh or smile.

2. Before using humor in your speech, try it out with small groups of people. Do they seem to enjoy it? Even if your experimental group does not laugh or smile initially, don't give up on the humor, because the problem might be in the way you are delivering the joke or quip. I often use this line in talking about the importance of listening. "We are geared to a talk society. Someone said, 'The only reason we listen is so we can talk next!'" When I first tried that line, people did not smile; but I worked on the timing so that I paused and smiled after "listen" and that seemed to work. I was rushing through the

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punch line and did not give people time to be prepared for the humorous part. It took practice to get comfortable with the piece of humor. Only use humor in a speech after you are comfortable telling it from memory and have tested it.

3. Make sure the humor relates to the point you are making. Do not use humor that is simply there to make the audience laugh. The humor should tie in with some aspect of your speech. For example, I tell about my experience of getting braces at age 46 and how difficult it was for me to get used to the wires and rubber bands in my mouth. After I tell the story I make the point that you may have not had the braces problem I had, but we all have challenges in communicating well, and what we want to look at today are ways of making it easier for us to be more effective in speaking. The audience enjoys the story but also remembers the point that I'm making. If you don't tie your humor to your presentation, the audience may like the humor, but will wonder what point you are attempting to make.

4. Begin with something short. A starting point might be to summarize a cartoon and give the caption

as your humor. A thought-provoking yet clever line about a point you are making is another way to get started. For example, when I talk about creativity and getting out of your comfort zone, a line I found that worked well was, "Orville Wright did not have a pilot's license." In your reading, look for lines that make you smile; consider how they might be used in your next speech. Be careful about launching into a long humorous story—audiences are quick to forgive a single line that may not be funny, but they do not have much patience with a long anecdote that isn't worth the time. So start out with brief bits of humor.

5. When possible, choose humor that comes from people you interact with. You do not have to worry about people having heard it before, and you will feel more comfortable with what has happened to you. Find such experiences by looking for a humorous line or situation. For example, I was making a bank deposit recently at a drive-in window. When I asked to make a second deposit, the teller said solemnly, "I'm sorry, sir, but you'll have to go around the bank a second time to make a second deposit." We both laughed and I may have a line to work into a speech. If you have small children, listen for something they say that might be funny to an audience as well. Art Linkletter made a great living on the notion that "Kids say the darndest things."

6. Don't preview by saying, "Let me tell you a funny story." Let the audience decide for themselves. Look pleasant and smile as you launch into your funny line, but if no one smiles or laughs then just move on as though you meant for it to be serious. This approach takes the pressure off as you relate the humor. Remember you are not a comedian entertaining the audience; you are a serious speaker seeking to help the audience remember and pay attention by using humor as a tool.

Humor is simply another way of making a point with your audience, and it can help you be a more effective speaker. Look at humor as a tool in improving your speech in the manner of attention devices, smooth transitions, and solid structure. Remember, "A smile is a curve that straightens out a lot of things."

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more effectively to increase personal and professional performance. He can be reached at 800-727-6520 or visit

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communication skills.

The Graduation Speech: Farewell And Hello

By Analeese Burnabaker

Anyone who has ever graduated from anything – high school, college, or perhaps a program lasting only a few months – has sat through a graduation ceremony. No doubt that ceremony was filled with a variety of elements. Perhaps special music was played, perhaps someone shared on the accomplishments of the graduates, and maybe you had to share or present part of the ceremony. One element that is present in almost every graduation ceremony is the graduation speech.

There are two main types of graduation speeches that are often presented during graduation ceremonies. First, a common type of graduation speech is given by the valedictorian of the graduating class. If you were privileged to graduate at the top of your class, then you know this speech very well. This type of graduation speech is primarily an avenue upon which a member of the graduating class gets to share memories and advice for their fellow graduates. Students share laughter and sometimes tears over the memories that the graduation speech details. The speaker gives advice and encouragement for the graduates that are about to leave one phase of life and enter a new one.

A second type of graduation speech often found at a ceremony is given by someone outside of the graduating class. Similar to the valedictorian speech, this kind of graduation speech is meant to give encouragement, wisdom and advice for those entering a new phase of life. The speaker is usually someone of importance, a business owner or a person of prominence in academia. The graduation speech usually includes a combination of humor and seriousness.

Do you have the task of preparing a graduation speech for an upcoming ceremony? If so, it does not have to be as hard as it first sounds. Begin by brainstorming a list of ideas. What do you want to communicate to your audience in the graduation speech? Do you want to primarily use humor, or will you go for a more serious speech?

Once you have brainstormed plenty of ideas for the graduation speech, begin making an outline to organize your thoughts. Do not include anything outside of the main theme that you want to communicate. If there is a time limit on your graduation speech, be sure to keep your speech within that limit. Then just be creative and have fun with it. Make the graduation speech you give memorable by being uniquely you. You know how you can best relate to the audience, so do it. Be yourself and show your personality in the graduation speech. People will be more interested if they think you are being authentic in your words.

So, whether you are about to attend a graduation ceremony and hear a graduation speech or whether

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you are about to present a speech, enjoy it. Graduation speeches do not happen every day. They only happen on graduation day.

Analeese Burnabaker has given many graduation speeches in her day. She loves to consult with people who are about to speak at graduations or any other big events. Discover more at www.natural-aging.com.

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