

## CHAPTER 1

# *Born To Speak*

## *They Are the Silent Many*

*In the beginning was the word  
And then the spoken word.*

*All over the earth,  
Every nation has a language.*

*Every tribe has a grammar  
And a dialect with a meaning.*

*To speak is to be human.  
To speak is to be seen.*

Frances, a treasurer in a large corporation, has a group of male executives working for her. She goes into a state of shock when asked to give a weekly report. Her senior status does not lessen her anxiety. She fears her colleagues will criticize her for having the nerve to “stand up there and shoot her mouth off.”

Frances describes her debilitating panic to a roomful of sympathetic nods from fellow TalkPower workshop participants. “I could see them sitting there, hating me.” Her problem started when an older brother verbally taunted and bullied her. “He never let up.” That hurtful, childhood voice haunts her everyday of her working life.

Frances is hardly alone. Another participant says:

*When I first came in here and I saw all of you—so intelligent-looking, so successful—I wanted to turn around and leave. I said, “Oh no. This is not the right place for me . . . I am a nut . . . These people are probably a little nervous—not like me. I am going to stand out and be completely humiliated if I speak.”*

—Lisa, architect

Once this confession is made, others come forward:

*“I had the same feeling.”*

*“That’s exactly how I felt.”*

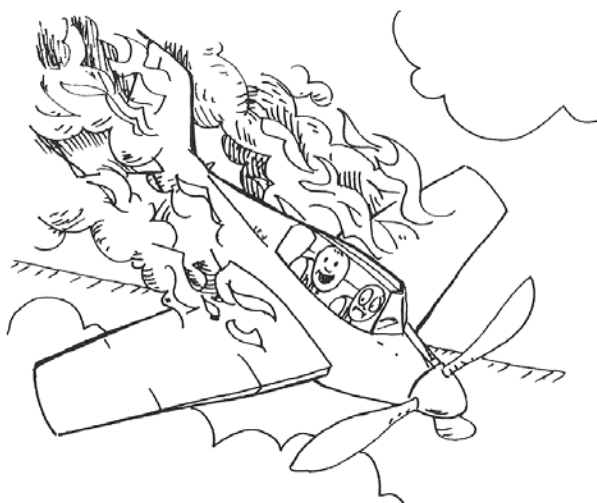
*“I almost left.”*

*“I promised myself that I would not come back after lunch.”*

This scenario is not unusual. For the past twenty years I have had the rare privilege of working with and observing thousands of professionals who have attained the highest levels of achievement. These attractive, successful people, with every reason to feel confident and proud of themselves, all suffer from fear of speaking in public and feelings of low self-worth.

When people pass up opportunities for saying even a few words at small meetings, they lose the chance to become accustomed to speaking. Avoidance leads to further avoidance, and what began as a lack of confidence, or a feeling of inhibition, becomes an actual phobia.

A phobia is an irrational fear that leads to avoidance. *The Book of Lists* states that fear of public speaking is the number one phobia in the United States, affecting a majority of people.



*There’s something about speaking in public that makes a violent death a piece of cake.*

### ***Why Are You So Anxious?***

Many of my clients and students are completely mystified as to why they become so anxious when they have to speak in front of a group. “After all,” they say, “I am great in a one-on-one. My friends tell me I’m very witty and persuasive. But put me in front of half a dozen people and I’m not just tongue-tied, I’m speechless.”

“I spend days preparing for a speech, but when I face an audience, everything flies out of my head. I can’t understand why!”

Where did this problem begin? Certainly, you were not born with it. Healthy babies come into the world kicking and screaming. They express themselves when they are wet, tired, hungry, or uncomfortable. No doubt about it, babies cry loud and clear.

When did your silence begin? Where did you learn to hold back? When was your urge to express extinguished?

*Even as a young child, I was often put down by my family and told that I should not talk because I didn’t know enough about a subject. This made me very quiet and, I guess, shy. And now when I am sitting in a meeting and my boss asks me a question, I freeze up and I feel as if I am ten years old.*

—Sheila, designer

In 70% of the questionnaires that are filled out in my classes, one theme resonates again and again: early experience with shaming, public humiliation, harsh criticism and taunting.

*During my preadolescence, when my voice was very high, often on the phone I would be identified as a female. . . . My two brothers and their friends would tease and humiliate me. I think it was then that I stopped talking. At least, I try as much as possible not to talk.*

—Ted, editor

## ***Self Blame***

I have found that many people who suffer from childhood humiliation and shame have no idea how damaging these experiences can be. Often, they are children from “good homes” whose families are models of familial devotion in the community. Hiding their pain, they blame themselves for their “problem,” feeling guilty and ungrateful for having any negative thoughts about their parents, siblings, or teachers.

*My father was a very respected orthodontist. All of my colleagues knew him and thought very highly of him. . . . He was a very accomplished man. I felt so inadequate next to him. . . . Of course he was very critical and tough on me. I really feel it when I am at a meeting with other professionals. I know people are looking at me and comparing me to my father, and I feel so demolished, I become speechless.*

—Philip, orthodontist

### ***Discipline or Abuse?***

Verbal pounding is not considered child abuse nor does it fall into the category of criminal neglect. No social worker will show up to investigate a parent who calls his child “stupid” everyday. Yet, this is psychological abuse. It destroys self-esteem and confidence, making any kind of public performance an ordeal, if not a devastating experience.

*I went to a very strict school. “Children should be seen and not heard” was the prevailing philosophy. We were discouraged from speaking up in class unless we were asked a direct question. In the beginning I was very outgoing, but I was punished so many times for speaking up that I became very quiet.*

—Felicia, medical student

There is no escape. The incidents where one is required to make some sort of an appearance under the glare of public scrutiny are everywhere. While the necessity for performing has never been greater, the number of people who suffer from performance anxiety and fear of public speaking has grown to epidemic proportions.

### ***Performance Anxiety Appears in Many Situations***

- Presenting a formal speech in front of an audience
- Meeting around a table
- In a circle where you have to introduce yourself
- Asking or answering a question in class
- Playing golf, tennis, or any spectator sport
- Making a toast

- Interviewing for a job
- Being photographed or videotaped
- Getting married, as in walking down the aisle or repeating the vows
- Speaking at a PTA or a board meeting
- Delivering an eulogy
- Appearing on the witness stand
- TV interviewing
- Giving a press conference
- Appearing in court, as an attorney
- As an actor performing at an audition or at an opening night or accepting an award
- As a musician, playing an instrument
- Having your name called, as in being paged, and having to stand up and walk across a room
- Accepting an award

There are many other times when you become self-conscious because you are the center of attention. In all of these scenarios, if you fear that you are going to be judged, you are no longer involved in the comfortable, safe, orderly exchange of dialogue that takes place in a conversation. Your mind jumps to thoughts about what the other person thinks about you and what you are saying. My clients and students have the following thoughts at this moment of high visibility.

### *Nasty Self-talk*

“They don’t like me.”

“I didn’t do enough research.”

“I sound so stupid.”

“I am going to blow this.”

“I’m taking too much time.”

“I sound terrible.”

“I’m going to get killed in the Q&A.”

“I feel humiliated.”

“They see right through me and know that I am a fraud.”

“They are disgusted with me.”  
“My voice is monotonous.”  
“My suit is too tight.”  
“I look old.”  
“I am fat.”  
“I am skinny.”  
“My voice shakes.”  
“I am boring.”  
“My hair is a mess.”  
“They are smarter than me.”  
“I want to run out of here.”  
“I’ve got to get this over with.”  
“Who needs this?”  
“If only there were a hurricane, then they’d cancel.”  
“I am embarrassed.”  
“I’m a mess.”  
“They’re sitting there hating me.”  
“I wish I were dead.”  
“They can see how I’m shaking.”  
“I wish a bomb could go off somewhere so I could stop.”  
“I’m going to get sick.”

People try to deal with their pain in therapy. Hiding their low self-esteem so that it does not seem to intrude or disrupt their lives, they manage to cope, even to become successful in their careers. However, when it comes to speaking in public, the effects of low self-esteem are devastating.

The following list describes the various conditioning factors that I have discovered result in fear of speaking in public. Do any of these apply to you? Check those that do.

- Authoritarian parents
- Abusive parents
- Overly critical parents
- Perfectionist parents

- Obsessive parental focus on child's behavior
- Alcoholic parents
- Depressed parents
- Parents with low self-esteem
- Jealous older brothers or sisters
- Abusive teachers
- Shaming, relatives, neighbors, etc.
- Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome

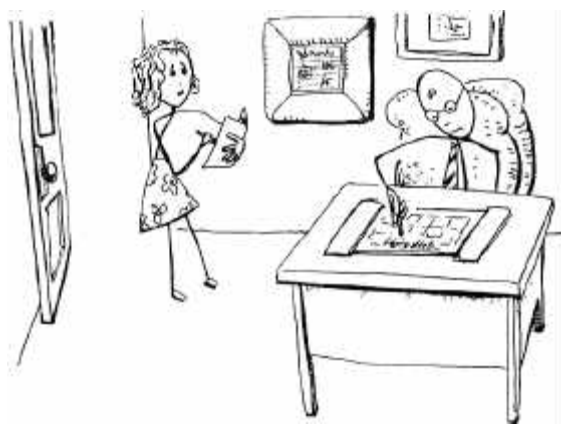
Public speaking phobia can also be caused by negative attention that a child receives because of characteristics that are different.

- Large nose
- Skin condition
- Too short/too tall
- Large breasts
- Racial/religious difference
- Overweight/underweight
- Foreign accent
- Unsuitable attire
- Small or no breasts
- Different sexual orientation

## *Social Silence*

Trapped—silent—blaming themselves, phobic speakers hide among us. Millions of people who are so afraid of public exposure that they invent the most bizarre excuses to avoid speaking in public. Accidents, dead relatives, illnesses, robberies, and playing hooky, serve to avoid the dreadful task. These people have a common despair yet do not know one another and have no idea that so many others suffer as they do.

Many other groups come out, talking openly about their problems. People in Twelve Steps programs, for example, find support and dignity by telling their stories. They have learned the healing power of sharing and do not avoid speaking out. However, those



*Wednesday I have that sales talk.  
Make a note that I'll be home sick.  
I'm planning my illness even as we speak.*

with public speaking phobia would be horrified by such an idea. They have a terrible need for secrecy. Memories of past denigration are so painful that they are paralyzed by shame. Avoiding the natural impulse to reach out, they do not ask for help. Embarrassed, they withdraw and remain silent.

Donald, a workshop participant, introduced himself as a nuclear engineer. He mentioned that he had an identical twin brother. Donald's fear of public speaking was so intense that he found himself literally hiding from his manager on the days of the month when summary presentations were made. Later, when I asked if his brother had the same problem, Donald said he did not know. So deep was his shame that he had never even shared his problem with his twin brother.

This story is typical. To avoid public speaking, speech-phobic clients turn down jobs, promotions, invitations to chair meetings, to teach, to make a toast, even to accept an award. One CEO of a major corporation told me sadly that he had been invited to speak all over the world, but could never go. Another man fainted when he was nominated for an Oscar, so terrible was his anxiety about standing up to receive his award in public.

*I feel very damaged . . . like I have a major disadvantage when I stand in front of other people and have to speak. I am like a non-person.*

—Arthur, architect

## *National Silence*

Not only is there an individual silence about fear of speaking in public, there is also a national silence. The problem receives so little attention you would think it doesn't exist. For example, there are no public speaking phobia specialists attached to speech departments in colleges and universities. There is no National Public-Speaking Phobia Society; even the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, under the category of "speech," has no reference to this condition. In the speech category, although various esoteric conditions and maladies are cited, there is no listing of public-speaking phobia itself, although it has a name: *glossophobia*.

Why is it that in the United States—one of the few countries in the world where freedom of speech is guaranteed by a Constitution—fear of speaking in public is the number one phobia? This is a question I asked every time I appeared on radio or television during my first book tour. Nobody seemed to have an answer.

*When I was studying to be a speech teacher, fear of public speaking and nervousness was never mentioned. The assumption was if you did it long enough, you would get over it.*

—Helen Yalof, retired Chairman, Speech and Theater Dept.,  
City University, New York City

## *The Symptoms*

Speech-phobic people report three main categories of symptoms when speaking before groups: physical, mental and emotional.

### **PHYSICAL**

Physical symptoms of distress can begin weeks before making a presentation. High levels of stress trigger a nervous stomach, sleepless nights, and physical tension, called “anticipatory anxiety.” Just before and during the speech, symptoms of physical distress can include any or all of the following:

- *Rapid heartbeat*
- *Trembling knees, making it difficult to get up and walk to the podium or stand at ease in front of a group*
- *Quivering voice, often accompanied by a tightness in the throat or an accumulation of phlegm*
- *A feeling of faintness*
- *Stomach nervousness, sometimes to the point of nausea*
- *Hyperventilation, involving an uncontrolled gasping for air*
- *Eye-tearing*
- *Trembling hands or limbs*

### **MENTAL**

Mental dysfunction that can occur during a speech includes:

- *Thought-blocking—The speaker becomes speechless, having no idea what he intended to say next*
- *Repetition of words, phrases, or messages*
- *Loss of memory, including the inability to recall facts and figures accurately, and the omission of important points*
- *General disorganization*

## **EMOTIONAL**

Intense emotional distress brought on by having to speak in public, and all other types of performance, include symptoms such as:

- *Feeling out of control*
- *Terror, which often arises before the beginning of the speech*
- *Feeling overwhelmed*
- *A sense of being outside of one's body (dissociation)*
- *Helplessness, a childlike feeling of being unable to cope*
- *Feeling that your voice is coming from somewhere else*
- *Low self-esteem, a feeling of worthlessness, and failure*
- *Self-hatred, a feeling of disgust, and rage at oneself*
- *Embarrassment*
- *Panic (intense anxiety)*
- *Shame and humiliation following a presentation*
- *Fear of being discovered a fraud*
- *Tearfulness*

These three categories of symptoms interact with one another. An initial feeling of terror as you wait to be introduced can cause your heart to race uncontrollably. Your pounding heart feels even more frightening as your throat begins to tighten. Physical symptoms disrupt your concentration, causing you to lose track of the organization of your speech. You stumble over your words, repeat phrases, or leave out ideas. You become embarrassed and feel out of control.

*Whenever an opportunity comes up where I have to make a comment, address a group, or ask a question at a meeting, at that precise moment, all of my brain functions jam. And there I am, hopeless, shamed . . . I feel like a victim in front of a firing squad.*

—Irwin, accountant

## *Phobias Acquired Later in Life*

Some 70% of my students and clients recall that from early childhood they were shy and didn't speak up. The other 30% who suffer from public speaking phobia have a different story. These people were once excellent speakers. Generally outgoing, some were active in drama and debate clubs, were class valedictorians or presidents of school societies. They report this kind of experience:

*I have about a hundred people working for me, and there I was, in front of my entire staff, nervous but doing all right, I guess. We had just been awarded a major contract and this was to be the announcement. Suddenly I looked at them and I couldn't say a word; or even think a word. They just looked at me and the room got very quiet, and I started to get very warm, and I could feel my face turning red. . . . And I was totally speechless. It was the most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to me. I can't talk in front of groups anymore.*

—James, commercial real estate developer

Behavioral psychology tells us that phobias happen after a traumatic event—usually an experience that shakes the individual to his core—like a psychological near-death experience. One's sense of personal control and safety is utterly shattered at the deepest levels of self, resulting in post-traumatic stress syndrome. The stress reaction can appear immediately or up to two years after the traumatic event.



*Please, King Solomon, give me the half that's quiet.*

## *Precipitating Events*

Another interesting fact about phobias is that they follow the rule, “Different strokes for different folks.” For one person, the precipitating event could be tragic, like the death of a parent or child, a catastrophic illness, or a past sexual abuse, rape or incest. For another, moving to a new community, going away to college, or losing a job can produce a similar post-traumatic stress reaction.

No matter what the cause, or the variety of precipitating events, the result can be a phobia, such as fears of flying, driving, fear of heights, or enclosed places. The phobia, triggered by a particular event, can then generalize to other areas, such as fear of escalators or trains, or a sudden panic attack in front of an audience.

The panic attack causes an episode of thought-blocking and becomes another traumatic event that will not be forgotten. The next time an opportunity for speaking arises, you are psychologically transported to the past—and that moment when you were speechless. You simply cannot do it; you decline with some excuse. One avoidant experience leads to another, and in a very short time you have *glossophobia*: an irrational fear of speaking in public.

And so you join the silent many. Your voice is no longer heard, your reputation as a speaker, a thing of the past. You are silent, just like the person who cannot speak because of humiliation in childhood.

## *Understanding Why*

These “late bloomers” are always relieved to discover why they suddenly lost their ability to speak in public and that this mysterious malady can be healed with training. Time and time again I hear students say, “I lost my mother and we were very close. So that is why I became speechless at that meeting.” or “It happened to me when I started college and I was so afraid I couldn’t hack it.”

One man who called me before he attended the workshop said he had no idea what could have caused a sudden panic attack he experienced at a Rotary Club meeting he was chairing. Later, when he attended the TalkPower seminar, he said, “I was thinking about what you told me, and then after several days I realized that we tragically lost our little girl to a terrible illness around that time.” If you suddenly, for no apparent reason, have had an episode of speechlessness, understanding why you lost your ability to speak in public will help to motivate you to work with the training methods described in the following chapters.

*Notes*