

## Valuing Diversity

**Diverse experience teaches you more about yourself, helps you develop solid relationships and sharpens your presence on the speaking platform.**

I bought tickets for a Moms Mabley Concert. Yes, that was in the 1960s. A famous black comedienne, she was playing in Oakland, California, with a local black rock band which I had never heard of. It was an experience I'll always remember. When we arrived at the theatre, we estimated that there were about 1000 fans attending the performance. And there were maybe 10 people in the whole building who were not African-American. For the first time, this white guy from North Dakota knew what it felt like to be a minority in a large crowd. My awareness grew and my comfort zone expanded. The concert was terrific.

Valuing diversity and expanding your comfort zones is a pathway to a richer life and a more powerful presence as a speaker. Stepping outside gives you boundless new perspectives and new levels of understanding. With understanding comes appreciation. With appreciation comes life enrichment. And along the path, the experiences you gain will strengthen your speaking skills.

In the 1970s, I again found myself outside my comfort zone. I traveled to Japan. My ten-day vacation included the usual tourist experiences, taking public transportation and walking the city streets looking for accommodations in a strange city with nothing but a map and a phrase book. On a crowded city street, this six-foot-three-inch white guy felt like an outsider. Checking into my first Japanese Inn I discovered that they didn't speak a word of English. Another great experience. I loved Japan.

Soon after that, while enrolled in American Sign Language classes, I attended a basketball game between two deaf schools. Once again I was an outsider in a gymnasium filled with people communicating in a foreign language. I'll always remember the band. Two bass drums. The vibration of the drum beats could be felt by everyone in the gym. It was an enriching visit to an outside world, and I never had to leave town.

Since those days, I've always been on the lookout for opportunities to experience something new. Have you visited a Jewish Synagogue or a Catholic mass? Have you toured a mental hospital? Have you visited a prison to give a speech to the inmates? Have you attended a gay pride parade? Have you attended a black gospel music concert? As an introvert, have you found yourself at a Karaoke Bar where you were seemingly surrounded by extroverts and summoned the courage to jump on stage, grab the microphone and sing a song? These are a few of the things I've done to expose myself to new and varied experiences with people different from me. And I always discovered that, for the most part, they weren't so different at all.

I recommend similar experiences to you. Stepping outside your comfort zone helps you to experience, understand and appreciate the lives of others. It will make you comfortable with how we are different and amazed at how we are alike. It will make you a better and wiser person and speaker. It will deepen the content of your talks. It will enhance your delivery style. It will enrich your life.

Diverse experiences will improve the content of your presentations because they will broaden your story base. Exposed to a rich variety of cultures and people, you'll develop personal stories with far more depth and variety than you currently have. Through my experiences I've added stories about the deaf, about gays and about African-Americans, all through my personal interaction with people. Your presentation content will also be sharpened because you'll be more in tune with your audiences. An unexpected fringe benefit of watching Moms Mabley perform to a nearly all-black audience was the opportunity to peek into the lives, concerns and thinking of the African-American culture. Her comedy routine at the concert in Oakland wasn't the same material she used on the Ed Sullivan Show! With a better understanding of cultures and people you'll make a stronger connection with the today's increasingly diverse audiences. Your material will begin to appeal to a larger range of audiences which will magnify your impact as you reach a wider audience base.

Exposing yourself to diverse cultures can improve your presentation skills. I was amazed to discover how the language of the deaf, American Sign Language, is a more richly expressive language than spoken English. Watch a deaf person communicate and you won't see an inanimate talking head. You'll see someone whose face lights up when she speaks. You'll see someone whose body gets involved in the communication. You would probably be a better presenter if you could communicate as effectively as the deaf. Also, just as you can enrich your presentation with a study of various theatre and other performance styles, visiting other cultures exposes you to a variety of entertainment styles you wouldn't otherwise see. While in Japan I attended a traditional Kabuki Theatre performance. The music and movement were unlike anything I had seen before. And watching a black gospel choir in action is a study in communicating with meaning and emotion.

Expanding your experience in the diverse world also sharpens your ability to create humor. This is partly because you will see a wide variety of new humor styles. Black, gay and Jewish cultures are rich with humor. But in addition to seeing new styles of humor, you also learn to think differently. A foundation of humor is the ability to see things differently. At the core of creating original humor is your ability to create new relationships between concepts and things. At the base of most humor is a fresh connection between two previously unconnected thoughts. Your experiences in a diverse world will strengthen your ability to create humor.

Living in the diverse world will enrich your life. Experiencing how people are more alike than different, you'll gain a refreshing appreciation for the true goodness of people. By gaining a deeper understanding of people, you'll understand yourself better. You'll develop new skills for relating and interacting with a wide variety of people.

You'll better understand what makes other people tick. And by taking the risk of stepping outside your comfort zone you'll search for even more adventures. With success comes the courage to step outside again and again. And we all know that a fulfilling life comes not from the destination but from the journey.

Value diversity, expand your horizons, become a more powerful speaker and enrich your life.

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