



Why I love public speaking...

By Dorothy Tannahill-Moran

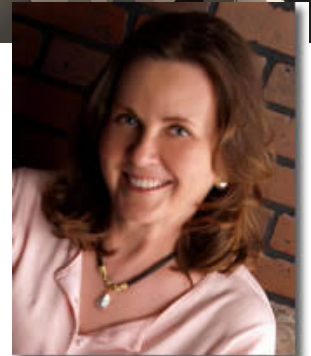
Let me paint the picture of just why that statement might seem unlikely.

I started this life as a shy, quiet child whose entire goal was to be invisible. The less I was noticed and flying under the radar of most people the better. I didn't want to be called on and certainly loathed being scolded or confronted. Yes, invisibility was a skill I had well-honed by the time I was a teenager.

But, my mother thought I needed to pursue things like speech classes to develop my self-confidence. As is so often the case, my teacher made the subject fun and broke down the process of public speaking into the various parts that for some reason, made sense. You could say, it did the trick and from there I was in speech and debate like a crazed person. I seem to have a talent for it having won debate tournaments and eventually first place in a state public speaking contest. It took me to nationals and a trip to Atlantic City.

You might think that the public speaking translated into becoming a more outgoing person but it didn't (and doesn't) work that way. But, I never shied away from an opportunity to get up in front of people and share some bit of knowledge. The skill of public speaking served me well through teaching, corporate management, and coaching. If I thought I knew something

that would be helpful to someone else, I'm always ready to share it.



So, to answer the question "Why do I love public speaking?" I have to say it stems from two innate forces within me. 1- I love to learn and collect information – especially about human behavior, workplace dynamics and food (!!!!) and 2- I love to share what I know with the goal of helping someone with that knowledge. I try my best to only share when asked and to limit what I say to simply avoid boring people. I can be like drinking from a fire hose when it comes to my beloved subjects and do know I've drowned people at times. (May they rest in peace) I'm trying to be better.

But, let's address the elephant in the room. I have SD so it would seem that SD would stop all that blabbing in front of a group. I know for many people with SD, it has caused them to withdraw from socializing and slowed down interactions where talking is involved. I would admit that once I was fully engaged in SD, it did cause me to change my strategies for socializing a bit but socializing is not the same as public speaking so the changes I made were minor. You see, when you're invisible, you aren't interacting that much to begin with and getting a word in has always been a challenge. SD didn't make it easier but it also didn't make it that much harder.

As to public speaking, it never stopped. Since acquiring SD, I became a career and leadership coach, which has had me speaking to groups in person and by doing hundreds of online webinars. The only thing I do differently is to let my audience know in the introduction that I have a vocal cord disorder and that's why I sound the way I do. I've been blessed with caring people tell me that they appreciated knowing what was going on with my voice because it caused them to be more attentive. Isn't getting a little bit of someone else's attention what we all want?

I know public speaking is some people's idea of a living nightmare with or without SD. It's not for everyone just as singing isn't or playing a sport isn't. I'm sure there are numerous things that don't sound like how you might want to spend your time. But, there are many endeavors like these that have the same characteristics such as the need to build skill and to use the skill; you pretty much have to be on some type of public display.

With all this background in speaking, you'd think I never get the jitters but that isn't the case. The weird thing is that I never really know when I'm going to get stage fright. I've yet to see a correlation between feeling nervous and things like whom I'm speaking to, how many I'm speaking to or what I'm speaking about. I just know that for each time I speak, I have things I need to do to help reduce that funky feeling of nerves. I do things like short meditations, I literally tell myself to have fun and I do the "Wonder Woman" pose suggested in Dr. Cuddy's book *Presence* to give me a jolt of confidence. The jitters soon go away once I speak but it's important for me to get as much control over my body as possible because it does negatively impact my SD voice.

If you have a desire to do any public speaking be it teaching, giving oral reports or as an NSDA Ambassador to Speech Pathology students AND you're concerned about your SD voice – don't be. I know that is easier said than done but I'd like for you to consider some insights and tips I'd like to share.

Speaking to a group of any size is very different from socializing or "close quarters" interaction.

First, when you are speaking you have a subject, preparation and a goal in mind. Socializing or chatting with a few people are generally open-ended and spontaneous in nature in terms of what you're talking about. If you have any introverted tendencies, you tend to listen more and find interactions exhausting.

Second, when you are speaking, other people you are speaking to are there to listen. When you're socializing other people, you're all there to speak. As we all know, some people will dominate the conversation and may have poor listening skills. I've also noticed a lot of people with impaired hearing and not just with my SD voice, which makes close-quarters interactions, a challenge.

The point I'm making is that public speaking is very different from socializing. If you are holding yourself back from getting up there and sharing because of socializing difficulties, it's not a fair comparison. The two things are very different.

If you don't have a history of public speaking before you acquired SD and you have a desire to do public speaking, don't toss out your dream.

The thing you do need is making a plan, which starts with learning how to do public speaking. Sure, to some degree it is just

getting on your feet and sharing information just like playing baseball when you toss a ball and swing a bat but that doesn't mean you're a "natural". You need to learn and to practice. A great way to learn and practice is with Toastmasters. You can find classes and even speech coaches to help you develop your skill. BTW, going through these types of skill-building will also help build your confidence.

If you're still concerned with the quality of your SD voice and your ability to be clear enough for people to understand you, you've got some experimentation to pursue.

I say experimentation because what I do or even speech therapist suggestions may not help you, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't experiment with various things to see what might help. Even if you've tried things that didn't help you conversationally, try them again in the context of public speaking. For me, I've discovered that talking louder than a conversational voice improves the quality of my SD voice. I'd have to consult with a speech professional to find out why but my theory is that talking louder changes your breath control and how you use your vocal cords.

I also pursued a voice rehabilitation clinic a few years ago and one major thing I learned was how to manage my vocal cords better. I learned how to be aware of them when I do and don't talk and I think that awareness has allowed me a bit of control. I know a woman who's SD almost disappears when she shifts into an "advertisement voice" or overly expressive. My point is that you have to experiment with your voice, your breath, and what's taking place in your body such as tension.

Start small and create tiny victories so you can grow your skill and confidence.

Be willing to be upfront and transparent about your vocal cord disorder. Too many of us with SD are embarrassed and unwilling to admit what you have to other people. You're more self-conscious than others of your voice and when you focus too much on you, you fail to connect with others. You are doing yourself a huge disservice with that level focus. You will find when you are open that others are willing to work with you but when you try to hide they take it as a lack of trust in them. Sure, we've all had people say rude and stupid things to us about our voice but you can avoid a lot of that with disclosure early in the game.

Look carefully at your reasons for wanting to do public speaking.

Your motivations or driving forces are no different in nature with this goal than any other. If you want to do it bad enough, you will find a way. Not to sound like an advertisement but a great thing you can do to combine a desire to speak publicly with your SD is by becoming an NSDA Ambassador. Doing this will help expose and educate upcoming speech professionals that may never otherwise learn or hear someone with SD and related vocal cord issues. You can do us all a favor.

Yes, I love to speak in public and I encourage you to join me and be heard.



National Spasmodic Dysphonia Association

Dedicated to improving the lives of people affected by spasmodic dysphonia and related voice conditions through programs of research, education, awareness and support

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