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Public speaking is scary but when mastered, empowering

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Columnist

I may have retired from teaching children but not from teaching altogether. For the last few years, I've been teaching adults at the Academy for Lifelong Learning (ALL) located at Cape Cod Community College. It's a neat program. Volunteers run 6- to 12-week courses on a whole galaxy of subjects. I've been teaching courses on theology, history and politics, but I decided this fall to try doing something that I've long done in middle and high school settings. I offered a course on **public speaking**.

In a number of surveys conducted over the years, Americans have indicated their number one fear — more than cancer or sharks — is being made to get up and speak in front of a group. Adolescents already have lots of reasons to be uncomfortable and it's understandable why, as a group, they might be reluctant to become **public** speakers. If people are already retired, where's the need to master a new discipline after you're more or less off the stage?

To fully answer the question, we need to go way back to the 1970s. I was in my late 20s, working for a rocket company in Arizona. I used to visit Phoenix schools, launch a few rockets if space permitted and then teach a few classes. Pretty quickly, I hit on an interesting intellectual exercise.

I'd ask the class to assume that either we just had a war, or were about to have one, or that we had environmentally wrecked the planet to the point where we needed to build an ark in Earth orbit. Once we figured out how to stabilize the thing and be sure it worked, we would send it out into space, searching for a new habitable planet. The ark was big enough to handle maybe 30 families. Generations would be born and die in the ark we had to design.

How would we live? Would we be organized in nuclear families or something more like a hippie commune? Would we need laws and if so of what kind? How would our laws be enforced? Since we'd have to grow our own food in the ark, what sorts of foods made the most sense? Space for farms would be limited and pretty soon, somebody would question whether having cows on board made any sense or not. Would we need a government? How would

that

be set up?

You gather by now that we're really asking the kids to decide how we're supposed to live. Somewhere along there, I realized that I was put on Earth to be a teacher. Also without realizing it, I was beginning to find a way of teaching that would continue for the rest of my life.

So what did the kids decide? At first, there seemed to be no pattern. Some classes created authoritarian worlds in which one in five residents was a cop. Others created hippie communes. At first there seemed to be no pattern to it until finally it came clear. The group would be moved by the most persuasive speaker in the room. If the best speaker was a pessimist about human nature, we got a police state. If the best speaker was an optimist, we got some kind of hippie paradise.

All sorts of arguments exist as possibilities and data too. But, often as not, it's *eloquence* — especially in democratic settings — that carries the day. When a school eventually hired me, it was to create a **public speaking** program there. It would remain an academic focus for my next 42 years of teaching.

Now I can tell you why groups of seniors signed up for **public speaking**. *It's empowering*. Several preachers and the former headmaster of a school inhabit my classroom. These are people who have already been **speaking in public** for some time. What they have in common is what all the students taking courses at the Academy for Lifelong Learning exhibit: they're still hungry for more knowledge. They're still hungry to strengthen themselves intellectually and morally.

Retirement is not just a financial challenge for us as we age. If we've been lucky, we used to have a place to go every day, staffed with people we liked or even loved. We'd been blessed with work that made our lives meaningful. It's fitting to finally step aside and offer our place to younger people working their way up. But then we have to find new connections, new ways to grow in strength and wisdom.

Seeing a class of elders delivering slam poems and some of the great oratory of American history fills me with hope. It ain't over till it's over. We still have chances to perfect ourselves, bond with others and contribute something. That is, after all, what life is for.

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