

Hands

Henry M. Halff

Northwest Toastmasters

December 5, 2005

The idea for this speech came to me at the end of last week's meeting. I was looking at the criteria for this project, things like "Was the speech based on research?" and "Is the topic of interest to the audience." I'm a researcher, but I have to confess that most of my research is of interest to a very small number of people, and that number is getting smaller with every passing year. I was pondering this problem when I glanced at one of the tiny comment slips given to me that week. The slip had this advice, "Keep your hands down."

"Aha!" I said to myself, "I could, perhaps, do some research on the role of hands in public speaking. To do this properly, I would have first surveyed the literature on the subject, but what fun is that? Instead, I decided to look at the ways that a few notable public speakers use their hands and see what I could learn from just watching them, or rather videos of their speeches, actually, videos that I could find on the Internet. So, last week, I spent a few hours looking for and at videos of eminent public speakers. I formed a few impressions from what I saw and it's those impressions that I want to share with you today. Before doing so, I must issue a disclaimer. These are impressions only, based on a small and unsystematic sample. Still, I'd wager that most so-called experts' opinions are based on no data whatsoever.

Impression Number 1. If you want to use your hands, get out from behind the podium. The hands of Richard Nixon behind the podium remained on the podium, with a few exceptions. The hands of Richard Nixon seated in a chair were as fluid and expressive as one could possibly hope. Nixon was the only one that exhibited this pattern. Speakers behind a podium, with very few exceptions use the podium to hide their hands. Put them on stage and they begin to use their hands to express themselves.

Impression Number 2. Your hands, and indeed your entire body, speak even when you're not using them to speak. Take Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Computer. When Jobs speaks, he prowls the stage like a tiger, his arms at his side with elbows slightly bent, like a wrestler. It is a stance that tells the audience to expect to be surprised, amazed, blown away. And that is precisely what Jobs tries to do in his presentations. Quite often, he uses his hands to carry the surprise around with him on the stage.

Contrast Jobs with Bill Gates, CEO of Microsoft. Gates preferred stance is one with his hands folded in front of him. He has one gesture. Sometimes he varies it when he gets really excited. Gates is the exact opposite of Jobs. His stance is one that your mother

might take, one that conveys, “Trust me. I’m going to take care of you.” That, I think, is what most people really want to hear from a company like Microsoft.

Impression Number 3. If you don’t know how to use your hands, there is one type of gesture that seems to be universally understood. Bill Gates uses it when he goes like this. But, I think it first came to my attention in the hands (quite literally) of one of the great orators of the 20th century, John F. Kennedy. Those of you who saw JFK on TV may remember that he had the habit of pretending to bang on the table, even when behind the podium. (Nikita Khrushchev actually did bang on the table, but I don’t think this went over as well as Kennedy’s faux banging.) Let me also say this about Jack Kennedy. He did not stick to one form of this gesture. He had many variations. However, they all had one thing in common; they were rhythmic, as is Bill Gates’ gesture, and Lyndon Baines Johnson’s, Richard Nixon’s, and many others. The use of rhythmic gestures of whatever nature seems to have the powerful effect of entraining the audience and bringing them along with you as you speak.

In summary, if you want to use your hands effectively, and you put some credence in my opinions, you need to get rid of the podium, use your stance—not just your motions—and get rhythm.