

# From stage fright to confident embodiment of the gospel

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I want to explore with you the often-ignored experience of stage fright in leading Sunday morning worship. If you are a worship leader, preacher, scripture reader, song leader, choir member—anyone called on to speak up or sing out in worship—I hope you will benefit from the insights, exercises, and practices offered here. In the interests of integrating our minds, hearts, and bodies for the sake of worship, I invite you to view these pages as a kind of workbook. In each section I list questions and physical exercises. You may want to ponder these questions and do these exercises by yourself or with others—your worship committee or worship team, for example. Warning: We are focusing on the human body here. This gets physical and personal. But we need to go here to

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face stage fright and move to confident embodiment in Christian worship. You'll want to wear loose-fitting clothing!

Throughout this exploration we will be focusing on the body. I will refer to our bodies in performance. I use the word *performance* as a positive and general term that describes conscious and unconscious actions and habits of the body. This usage contrasts with a negative use of the word, which has the connotation of being showy or fake.

Performance as a positive and general term captures everything from shaking hands or waving to a friend to doing surgery or ballet. Performances are simply embodied ways of acting and being in the world. In this sense we are performing all day: our bodies are in motion, performing habitual, conscious, and unconscious tasks. In the context of this article, we will deal with preaching, leading worship, storytelling, and other actions that we deliberately do in worship as performances.

## **The body culture of your church**

Every congregation has its own body culture. As faith communities worship, we position our bodies and move in certain ways, yet we seldom ponder these movements. Picture your congregation in worship for a moment. Observe the bodies. In worship you are bodies in motion, in song, and in speech in service to God. You are not just talking and singing heads communicating with each other and with God on Sunday morning. You are bodies in communication. Some bodies are at the front leading, while the bodies in the congregation are sitting, standing, listening, singing. Which bodies are doing what? How are the bodies moving? How comfortable are those bodies in the worship space? Noticing bodies—including your own body—in worship will be your first step in understanding stage fright.

What is the body culture of your church? Don't be too analytical; just observe without judgment. In the church where I worshiped as a boy, the congregation sat most of the time, and once in a while we stood and held a hymn book. There were times when I used my hands to pass the offering plate. Also, we would walk forward for the children's story. Those were the four most common bodily movements in our worship service: sitting, standing, passing the offering plate, and walking to the front. The leaders of worship, mostly men, would sit facing the congregation and then walk to the pulpit and speak or lead singing there. Once in a while the preacher, my dad, would tell a story or recite a poem from beside the pulpit. Even as a child I noted that people walked to the pulpit in a way different from the way they normally walked. They moved formally, taking deliberate, dignified steps.

Recall and write down the bodily movements common in your worship setting, both those of the congregation and those of the leaders. Now perform these movements in your worship space. Sit, stand with a hymn book, walk to the pulpit, etc. Take it slow, so you can notice what your body is doing. Try this exercise on your own or do it with others.

After you perform these actions, ask yourself: What do you notice? Which of these movements do you appreciate? Which ones make you uneasy? Speculate about where some of these movements came from historically. Can you think of an instance when someone tried to do body movements that are not usually

done at your church? For example, if raising your arms in praise is not a part of your congregation's body culture, what happens when someone does this? What does your church's body culture say about your congregation?

A next step might be to compare your body culture to the body culture of another church you have experienced. If you are doing this exercise in a group, try a show-and-tell approach. Imagine my surprise when I attended a Jamaican Pentecostal church. People stood a lot more, and they swayed to the music.

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Hands were lifted high in praise. Many people spoke back to the preacher as he preached. There were many times when we all went to the front for prayer. Those who have attended Catholic or Orthodox services may want to show and tell the movements of those body cultures. Speculate about why certain movements or body positions are important for your tradition or for another tradition.

An optional exercise might include noting other body cultures in our society. What is the body culture of fans at a basketball or

hockey game? What is the body culture of your school or place of work? How do these other body cultures differ from that of your congregation's worship? What might account for those differences?

You don't need to arrive at any grand conclusions, make any decisions, or theologize deeply here. Simply observe your church's body movements, try them out, try out some others—and take some time to ponder and discuss what you have noted.

### **What's with the butterflies?**

When faced with the task of public speaking, people commonly speak of having butterflies in their stomach. This experience of butterflies is different for different people. Your experience of butterflies might be a matter of a few of them fluttering gently when you are in the public eye. For someone else, it might feel as though a hundred large, angry butterflies are colliding when she merely considers the prospect of public speaking.

It is not surprising that stomachs show up when we talk of stage fright. The enteric nervous system with its 100 million neurons is

sometimes referred to as a second brain, connected to our other brain by the vagus nerve. Most of its fibers carry information from the gut to the brain, rather than the other way around. Our stomachs tell us when we are hungry and sometimes even what we need to eat. But our stomachs' communication is not just about food. When we hear bad news, we may feel as though we got kicked in the gut. We say that hard experiences are gut wrenching. In a situation of unease, grief, or pain, we may physically shield our stomach, folding ourselves in, as though in protecting our belly we protect our very self. If we are going to deal with stage fright, we need to talk about our guts.

When we need to perform in public, some of us experience not just butterflies but stomach-ache, vomiting, and loss of appetite. What is happening in our bodies in the case of stage fright is a fight-or-flight response. When we face a threat—an attacking animal or the prospect of public speaking, for example—our adrenal system shifts blood flow from our stomach and other systems to our muscles, heart, and brain, preparing us to fight or flee. Our stomach becomes distressed as a result. For those who are often anxious or nervous, these stress responses can cause chronic problems such as ulcers and diarrhea or constipation.<sup>1</sup>

For our purposes here, having a few butterflies is natural and good. Slight stress motivates us to prepare and then releases the adrenaline we need in order to perform in a given moment. In this case, our body is actually helping us do what we need to do. The body is putting out more energy for our public performance, which is just what we need. But for some of us, our bodies seem to work against us, protesting our public actions. Our bodies would have us flee the scene rather than stand in that place and preach the sermon or sing the song. We may stay there and do the thing we need to do, but underneath it all, the butterflies are warring.

Stage fright affects other systems in our body. In anticipation of or in the midst of public performance, we may experience shortness of breath, sweating, sleeplessness, dry mouth, a racing heart, and tense shoulders or jaw.

Again, the questions and exercises offered here are meant to help you notice without judgment. What bodily symptoms do you feel at the prospect of performing? Do you get nervous in a different way for different kinds of public performance? It may be

helpful here to take notes for a week or two and observe when and about what you feel anxious and where you are feeling that anxiety in your body.

A good exercise to do regularly, but especially on the morning of a performance, is this one: Lie on your back, take a few cleansing breaths, and spend a few minutes doing an inventory of your body. Where do you feel the stress? Breathing slowly, let your awareness move from your toes to your head. Be aware of your toes and your feet and your legs, moving up to your stomach, torso, arms, neck, and then head. Where are you tense? Try to release the tension you feel and just breathe. Now slowly let your awareness go the other way, from your head to your toes. Relax those parts of the body as you notice tension in them.

A good exercise to do alone or in a group is to stand and let your tummy go. Relax those muscles. Don't push your tummy out aggressively, just let it go. What does this feel like? Walk around like this for a few minutes and speak or sing, if you like. In our society we unconsciously keep those muscles really tight. But we don't need to, and if we just let those muscles go we have more energy for the performance at hand.

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A longer-term way to become more aware of your body in connection with stage fright would be to enroll in an acting or improv class. Most acting or improv classes are safe spaces where you can push yourself to explore

your body and voice. The goal here is not to become an "actor" in worship or in the pulpit but to face your fears in a safe place and to further integrate your body, voice, and intentions.

### **How our communities can help: The art of rehearsal**

Here we take another angle on stage fright and the possibilities of becoming a confident performer. Before we get to the crucial practice of rehearsal, we visit a theological and communal perspective on why we get so nervous in front of our people.

Stephen Webb's chapter "Stage Fright and the Origins of Christian Proclamation," in *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound*, gets to the root of the fears we

experience in congregational performance. Webb is following Paul Tillich, who in the middle of the last century made significant contributions to our understanding of anxiety. Webb notes that it is not surprising that we feel vulnerable and anxious when speaking in front of our beloved community. Speech is a strong expression of identity. My voice is me, and I identify my voice with my deepest self. But my identity and voice are also inseparable from my community. With my voice, identity, body, and community in such close relationship, I fear that if I misspeak, am at a loss for words, or simply blow a performance, my identity and my place in the community will be jeopardized. Fear of embarrass-

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ment and even public humiliation are close at hand here. In the worst-case scenario I might see my identity, my coexistence in community, and my cherished faith threatened by public performance. No wonder that some find speaking publicly, especially in their beloved church community, a terrifying venture.<sup>2</sup>

How sad that in our church communities we may feel more trepidation than in other places at the prospect of public performance. I have met many articulate people who refuse

to read scripture or preach in worship, even though they provide similar kinds of leadership in their daily work or in their school context. Another kind of story I hear from some is that they will not lead worship or accompany hymns because they have heard too many critiques, muted or overt, when a performance is less than perfect. While we likely do not intend to make our worship services places for flawless performance, we may send critical signals, giving people pause when it comes to accepting invitations to perform. Our trust in each other has eroded, and we wonder, can I blow it on Sunday morning and still belong as part of the community?

The other side of this coin is that in community we have incredible resources to help each other lead worship on Sunday morning. We can rehearse and help each other to rehearse. Rehearsing or practicing is one of the surest ways to reduce stage fright and become able to confidently communicate in worship.

Questions to ponder on your own or with others are these: How does it feel to perform in church vs. other places such as school or work? What elements of worship do you lead with more confidence and which ones with less? In your church, who rehearses and who does not? Why? What are your congregation's unwritten expectations around performance?

One of the surest ways to deal with stage fright is to rehearse. When we know our stuff backward and forward, we feel more confident and our body is more inclined to get just the right amount of adrenaline. We get our body working for us, not against us.

Practice aloud on your own. Whether you are preaching, storytelling, or reading scripture, prepare and practice out loud

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and in the position and place where you will be performing. If the goal is public performance, we do well to start using our voices and bodies early on in preparation, so we can get our bodies into the game. When preparing a sermon, I find that it helps to read the scripture text out loud and often during the week, so I get used to the sound and vibration of the words.

Another practice to consider is rehearsing with others. In the same way that the worship band meets to practice, so the scripture readers, preacher, worship leader, and storyteller can meet to rehearse. This takes time, but it is helpful on a number of levels. Before Sunday we can get insight into how we are communicating. We become more comfortable in the space with our bodies, and we develop a community of worship leaders who can support each other on Sunday morning and beyond. It also makes sense for this small rehearsal community to gather and warm up together on Sunday morning before worship.<sup>3</sup>

In this little community that rehearses together, it is important to surround anxious people with love and support. Those of us who suffer from stage fright may need someone to talk to during the week. The night before or the hour before we preach or lead worship or tell a story, it may be important for another to pray with us, tell us that we are loved unconditionally, and remind us

that we have prepared well. Many of us who suffer from stage fright have voices in our heads that tell us we will fail. We need to hear voices that challenge these demons.

As noted above, constructive critique following Sunday worship is best done by those who have rehearsed together, because they have already built a relationship. Even here, it is best to have a good plan for how to debrief. I recommend Liz Lerman's critical response process.<sup>4</sup> It assumes an invested community and openness to speaking honestly to each other so that we can all get back to work and improve whatever it is that we are doing. Dancers, writers, actors, scientists, and many others have successfully used this method of conversation. A few of us have been using this process at the seminary where I work, when we give each other feedback on sermons, worship, and writing.

### **How God makes us confident**

Our bodies are fearfully and wonderfully made, and we do well to notice and befriend our bodies. These bodies can be avenues of God's grace. Some of our bodies are prone to great fear, yet there are paths that we can take to reduce that fear and allow our bodies to do what they need to do when they need to do it.

Our Sunday morning performance is an offering to God and to each other. That is all. What I offer is a fragile offering, for I am a human being. While I am invested in what I have practiced and performed, it is what I offer today. In this sermon I preach today, I am not carrying the truth with a capital T. I am carrying what I have found in my week of prayer and study and reflection and practice, and I offer it to God and to the community. I do not know all that this scripture text means, and I cannot capture all of it in my reading, but I do love this text, and this interpretation is what I offer on this day. I know there are many ways to tell this story, but today I offer this way of telling it. What we are doing on Sunday morning is offering the best we can do on that day to God and to each other. That is all, and together with the Spirit moving with and around our bodies in this space, that is enough.

A hymn I have come to love in connection with my own stage fright is "I will come to you in the silence," by David Haas. In the words of the chorus:



“Do not be afraid, I am with you.  
I have called you each by name.  
Come and follow me,  
I will bring you home;  
I love you and you are mine.”<sup>5</sup>

Often in our hymns we are singing to God or to each other. In this one, the congregation sings the words of Jesus directed to me and you. I need to hear these words before, during, and after my performance. Whatever happens, I need to hold fast to this great love that casts out fear.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Benjamin Rudy-Froese and James Nelson Gingerich, MD, for helping me understand the enteric nervous system.

<sup>2</sup> Steven H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 74–76.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Talashia Keim Yoder, family minister at College Mennonite Church and director of theater at Bethany Christian Schools (Goshen, IN), for invaluable insights on the art and benefits of rehearsal.

<sup>4</sup> Liz Lerman and John Borstel, *Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process: A Method for Getting Useful Feedback on Anything You Make, from Dance to Dessert* (Takoma Park, MD: Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Text and music © 1991 GIA Publications, Inc.

## About the author

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