By Mario Cuomo, as told to Jean-Noel Bassior

Stirring Words

One of America's great orators reveals his homespun recipe for bringing a crowd to its feet

IT MAY BE HARD TO BELIEVE, but I have always been terrified of speaking in public. I never gave a speech in high school. And in college I received an "incomplete" in speech class because I didn't show up for the final exam.

There were many reasons for my shyness. When I was a kid, I spent a lot of time locked in the back of the grocery store my parents owned. No, it wasn't child abuse. My brother was almost killed by a car, and since I was the baby, my parents wouldn't let me out of their sight because there was no one to watch me.

Then, when I started school I spoke only Italian and everyone else spoke English, so I lost myself in books, and everyone regarded me as shy. I wasn't unfriendly, but I was not the gregarious, socializing type. When I signed a contract with the Pittsburgh Pirates at age 21, the scouting report said, "He's a very difficult fellow to get to know." (Years later, my opponents used that against me in a campaign.)

The first real speech I ever gave was in the Court of Appeals of the State of New York. It was also my first appearance as a lawyer in a courtroom. I was scared to death, but I won a reversal. Here's why: I knew the subject as well as it was humanly possible to know it, and I was comfortable in the setting because I'd worked in that court as a law clerk for two years.

I'm often asked for a formula or failproof method for giving a great speech. Here are some techniques I use, and they haven't failed me yet:

➤ **Speak from the heart** Believe in what you have to say—or don't say it. If you're passionate about your subject, the words will come—of course they will. I gave a speech at the 1984 Democratic convention, and people said it was a good speech.

Now, I'd never been a keynote speaker, and I told Fritz Mondale, "Nobody knows me—I was just elected governor of New York. Let Ted Kennedy do it."

But he said, "I want you."

Maybe he didn't want a powerhouse like Kennedy. I was freaked out as it was, but I had no idea how much media attention the speech was going to attract. That speech was not particularly well-written or well-spoken. But it was about the most fundamental beliefs I had about life, the simple truths I believe in with all my heart.

➤ **Write it out** Don't speak until you're sure you have something significant to say—and that you understand it so well you could explain it to an eight-year-old. If it's an important speech, I write it and rewrite it, though I seldom read a speech verbatim. You don't need the whole text in front of you, unless you want it the way a child wants a blanket. If you've written it enough, then you're familiar with it, and you can work off key phrases. Just read the lead sentences and certainly the *bon mots*—the nice expressions you're proud of. At the Democratic convention, I used the speech TelePrompTer, but I drove the operator crazy because

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I'd abandon it for several sentences at a time, then come back to the text. When you get the audience rolling, you can take that opportunity to embellish certain things that you know are being well-received.

➤ **Know your audience** Know who they are, what they expect to hear, and what they're accustomed to hearing. Are they men or women? What's their objective, their purpose in being there? Because that then becomes *your* purpose. If they've come to learn something about a subject, then you had better be sure to teach it to them.

And know the room. The worst is when they put bright lights in your eyes and black out the audience. Go early and ask questions like "What will the lighting be like?" I can't give a speech with the audience in darkness. I've got to see their faces.

I'll be candid with you. There are times when I've spoken extemporaneously and it worked out pretty well. But there's no comparison between the improvised speech and the one you've prepared. When I was governor, sometimes I'd give six or seven speeches a day to various small groups, and I'd jot down key phrases on note cards and speak off the cuff. But be careful: Extemporaneous comments can produce ambiguities. Once I was addressing a group of business leaders in New York, and I wanted to make the point that if we were bold enough with our policies and did some exciting things, we could succeed dramatically. For some reason, one of my brain cells suddenly sparked, and I quoted a line from a famous old poem by Leigh Hunt—one of my favorite childhood poets. "Like 'Abou Ben Adhem,'" I said, "we will lead all the rest."

One of the men in the audience turned to the woman sitting next to him and said, "That's not like the governor. What does he mean by 'a boob and Adam'? It sounds dirty to me."

Do techniques work—like imagining everyone in their underwear? I was giving a speech to a business group and it was to be followed by questions and answers about my policies. A woman got up to ask a question and she was obviously terrified, so I tried to relax her. I said, "Madam, please. We're all friends here. Don't worry—just talk." And she said, "Governor, I'm trying very hard to see you without your clothes." The place just erupted and I looked at my people and asked, "Did she just say what I think she said?"

If there is a technique, it's to be as natural as possible. You know how some people talk louder on the telephone because they're afraid you're not going to hear them? Some people do that with microphones, but it's better just to speak conversationally. Talk to small groups as if you're in their living room. Don't look over their heads or beyond them. Speak directly to them. If you're addressing a hundred or a thousand people, look at one person, then another, then a third—but really look at them.

Too many "ums" and "ahs" come from uncertainty. Again, the key is knowing your subject, really knowing what you want to say. I don't like practicing in front of a mirror, but that's because I don't like looking at myself, even in photographs. I suggest you practice giving the substance of the speech to your friends and family. Forget about the words. It's a mistake to concentrate on them because that puts too heavy a load on you—having to remember exactly the same words.

I've made speeches that were booed. When that happens, of course you suffer. But make sure you come back the next day and try it again.

Did I ever give a speech that fell flat? Oh, yes! I've made speeches that were booed. If I'm not passionate about the subject, I'm as mediocre as can be. When that happens, of course you suffer. But make sure you come back the next day and try it again. It's not bad for you. After a weak speech, when you review what you've done, you almost always conclude that you didn't know the subject or the audience as well as you should have. Lincoln is one of my heroes because of the magnificence of his expression. He was imperfect as a politician, with all the ego problems of most human beings, but his ability to express himself—the language he used, the clarity, the cogency, the beauty of it—that says a lot. And he worked on his speeches. He wrote the "Gettysburg Address" over and over again, draft after draft. He worked to improve himself, and he loved doing it.

Don't be afraid to share personal stories with the audience. I was asked about Monica Lewinsky after a lecture on the presidency and impeachment, and I said, "Look. I'm not going anywhere near that subject, and I'll tell you why: I don't know anything about sex." They started laughing, and I said, "Do you know what it's like to be a pre-Vatican Two Catholic raised to believe that anything you enjoy is sinful, and if you enjoy it a lot, it's a mortal sin—especially sex? To grow up hearing girls shouldn't wear patent leather shoes because of the reflection under the skirt? To get married when your only preparation was a conference with the priest who gives you a little book with pictures of the honeymoon?" The place went bonkers and I said, "Look, that's a true story," and they laughed again.

It was funny, because it's true. But is it a terribly clever story? No. The audience loves it because you're sharing your life with them—which shows that you're comfortable being with them, you like them, you trust them, you're trying to be helpful to them, you think of them as friends. And that makes all the difference.

Jean-Noel Bassior's most recent article for this magazine was "How to Be the Greatest Grandparent Ever," for the November–December 2001 issue.