

# Mark James Miller: Fear of Public Speaking in the Age of Anxiety

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Everyone knows we live in an “age of anxiety.” The English poet **W.H. Auden** coined the term in 1947 and, in the years since, it has become a catchphrase.

Americans are anxious about being the victim of a mass shooting; they fear walking alone in the dark; they are afraid of snakes and spiders; many suffer from fear of the number 13 — “triskaidekaphobia.” But survey after survey reveals that topping our list of fears is “glossophobia” — fear of speaking in public.

So many Americans are afraid to speak to an audience that comedian **Jerry Seinfeld** once joked, “Speaking in front of a crowd is the No. 1 fear of the average person ... No. 2 was death. That means to the average person if you have to be at a funeral, you would rather be in the casket than doing the eulogy.”

Seinfeld may have been given to overstatement, but not by much. As a teacher I have noticed that for most students, getting up in front of the class to make a presentation is a torturous experience.

For some, simply answering a question aloud from the relative safety of their desk is difficult. So it was no surprise to learn that for as many as 75 percent of Americans, the thought of making a speech is “scarier than rattlesnakes,” in the words of a communication professor, and is “the number one fear reported by people in the U.S.”

Why is public speaking so frightening to so many people? It is a fear akin to panic disorder. People freeze, perspire, tremble, experience a tightening of the throat, faint or nearly faint.

The reasons behind these physical symptoms are fear of looking foolish, of forgetting what they intended to say, boring the audience, fear of failure, fear of being judged, and fear of rejection — a kind of social ostracism that may be “hard-wired” into our makeup.

For those who do not have or have overcome glossophobia, the ability to speak to an audience is empowering, enabling them to communicate their ideas (and perhaps get the audience to act upon them) in a way that others cannot.

The spoken word connects with its audience on a deeper, more visceral level than the written word does. While the written word certainly can move people and cause them to have an emotional reaction — think of the Nazi book burnings in 1933 and the burning of the Koran by a fundamentalist church in Florida in 2011 — these are nothing compared to the screams of a crowd when a speaker moves them.

**Shakespeare** alluded to this in *Julius Caesar*, when Mark Antony addressed the mob of Romans by saying, “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears/I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.” Antony’s emotional speech has a far greater effect on the Romans than does Brutus’ less emotional and more rational approach.

Great speeches, like great writing, endure (and it is well to remember that all speeches begin with written words). The ability to reach an audience through the spoken word can have long-lasting consequences. In 1960 Sen. **John F. Kennedy**, D-Mass., began his presidential campaign considerably behind Republican Vice President **Richard Nixon**. But Kennedy was more articulate than Nixon (as well as better looking) and in the televised debates ran circles around him. This was the decisive factor in Kennedy’s come-from-behind victory that year.

Three years later, the **Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.** moved the nation’s conscience with his “I Have A Dream Speech” in Washington, just as, 100 years before, **President Abraham Lincoln** made the most famous speech ever given by an American at Gettysburg, beginning with the memorable words, “Four score and seven years ago ...”

But the ability to move an audience emotionally is a two-edged sword. The same year King spoke of having a dream, Alabama Gov. **George Wallace** brought an audience of white Southerners to a fever pitch by declaring “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!”

We have only to think of the hysterical mobs at the Nuremberg rallies, or of **Benito Mussolini** on the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia in Rome on June 10, 1940, to realize the truth of this: As the crowd below chanted, “Duce! Duce! Duce!” Mussolini announced, “An hour marked by destiny is striking the sky of our fatherland!” Italy, he told the crowd, was now at war, a war that would have disastrous consequences for the Italian people.

In spite of how frightening public speaking is — or perhaps because of it — it is a popular topic. Go to **Google** and type in “books on public speaking” and you will get more than 40 million responses! **Amazon** lists 4,500 books on public speaking, many of which are dedicated to or at least deal with how to overcome the fear that it brings along with it.

How can people overcome their fear of speaking to a crowd?

“Do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain,” in the words of **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, and while that may be an oversimplification of how to get over some deeply ingrained feelings, this is in essence what most of the experts on this topic advise.

If someone wants to get past their fear of public speaking then the way to do so is to get up in front of an audience and say something — “Just do it!” as the cliché says. Of course, careful preparation is important, realizing that public speaking is a skill that can be mastered, and knowing your audience all play a role.

Not everyone wants to speak in front of a crowd, and most people go most of their lives without doing so. Living in an age of anxiety, people see no need to add to their stress levels by taking on an extra-stressful task.

But conquering a fear — any fear, from the fear of heights to walking under a ladder — is empowering, and can help people, in the words of Lincoln’s first inaugural speech, find “the better angels of our nature.”

Perhaps if this happened, we could move on from the Age of Anxiety to another Age of Reason.

— *Mark James Miller is a teacher and writer, and has been a part-time English instructor at **Allan Hancock College** in Santa Maria since 1995. He is president of the **Part-Time Faculty Association of Allan Hancock College**, **California Federation of Teachers** Local 6185, and is an executive board member of the **Tri-Counties Central Labor Council**. [Click here to read previous columns](#). The opinions expressed are his own.*