

Learning from a Master: The Power of Oprah's Speech

When Oprah Winfrey opened with the image of her childhood self sitting on that linoleum kitchen floor in Milwaukee in 1964 as she watched Sidney Poitier make history at the Oscars, she was doing something that all great speakers do: make an instant, riveting connection with people through stories. But Oprah's acceptance speech for the Cecil B. DeMille Award at the Golden Globes the other night didn't rock the house just because she told a few great stories. Her powerhouse oration employed every wise, skillful, inspirational technique we know of to move and persuade an audience. *Any audience. In any boardroom, any conference room, any lecture hall.* Come with us as we look at how she got people on their feet, and what you can learn from her if you're serious about inspiring people to "buy" your project or idea.

Give me passion or give me death. Oprah's speech sizzled because first and foremost, she had a laser-focused, passionate message that her audience could relate to: "What I know for sure is that speaking your truth is the most powerful tool we all have." She introduced her message early on and it echoed throughout her speech via images, word choices and another story, of a black woman named Recy Taylor, a victim of a brutal attack in Alabama in 1944. After describing what happened back in the 40s, Oprah fast-forwards to the present to make it even more relevant: "Recy Taylor died ten days ago, just shy of her 98th birthday. She lived as we all have lived, too many years in a culture broken by brutally powerful men. For too long, women have not been heard or believed if they dare speak the truth . . ." Later in her speech, she gives us the message again, from a different perspective. Speaking about the media, "We also know it's the insatiable dedication to uncovering the absolute truth that keeps us from turning a blind eye to corruption and injustice."

The art of the speech. The organization, rhythm, and imagery of Oprah's speech were masterworks in delivery. Take her opening. Rather than starting off with a predictable, long, blah-blah list of thank yous for the award, she gives us this: "In 1964, I was a little girl sitting on the linoleum floor of my mother's house watching Anne Bancroft present the Oscar for best actor . . ." You've got *my* attention, Oprah!

Takeaways from Oprah's Speech:

Just a few of the powerful techniques she employed to rock the house (and that all speakers can learn from):

- ✓ Deliver a clear, focused, passionate message that is repeated and illustrated throughout the talk.
- ✓ Use vivid stories, economically told, to reach and connect with the audience.
- ✓ Bookend the speech on a high note (solving a problem, offering hope).
- ✓ Zoom from the general to the specific, to provide examples that reinforce the message.
- ✓ Own the stage: make eye contact with the audience, use pauses to dramatic effect, and use your voice (tone, volume) to ring home your points.

Let's take a look at some of the other artful elements she employed:

Story Efficiency. Not only did Oprah open with a vivid, goosebump-making story, she told it in 90 seconds, with not a single word wasted. She set the context. She created dialogue. She illuminated characters with the position on the floor and the elegant white tie against Poitier's black skin or her mom coming through the door bone tired from cleaning other people's houses...and embracing the realization of a tectonic shift with a series of "Amen's." Powerful stories told economically reach and move people in amazing ways.

The reason for rhythm. The flow of and rhythmic repetitions in Oprah's speech worked together to make for an extraordinarily moving and memorable experience. One structural example is the masterful way she bookended her speech with visions of hope. In her personal opening story, she shows us a little girl who was inspired by the first black man to win an Oscar. In her closing, she offers hope for the future: "So I want all the girls watching here, now, to know that a new day is on the horizon!" Another master stroke is the ebb and flow of going from the general to the specific, as when she went from talking about the abuse problem in general to getting specific about who has been affected: "They are domestic workers and farm workers. They are working in factories and they work in restaurants and they're in academia, engineering, medicine and science." Shifts in perspective like this helped bring her message to life. Then there's the simple power in the way she repeated words and phrases to make the message more memorable: "But their time is up. Their time is up. Their time is UP!"

Clear and bright, like a diamond. It almost goes without saying that much of the power in Oprah's speech came from her expert oration. It was colorful, articulate, and delivered with a rising tone and volume when her content called for it, and dramatic pauses that had people on the edge of their seats. Back on the kitchen floor: "I tried many, many times to explain what a moment like that means to a little girl, a kid watching from the cheap seats as my mom came through the door bone tired from cleaning other people's houses."

Oprah's speech will be recorded in history as a game changer. We're interested in your reaction. What was most compelling for you? How does that speech have any application to you next time you get up to speak?

For the full transcript: <http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/08/entertainment/oprah-globes-speech-transcript/index.html>

To watch the video: <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/1.833633>