



Still, Small Voice

PEGGY NOONAN

There is nothing more riveting than the sight and sound of powerful truths being spoken quietly. Mother Teresa broke almost all the rules of good speech writing during her National Prayer Breakfast address in 1994, but delivered an enormously powerful and deeply memorable speech.

Now that I have spoken of things to keep in as you write and give a speech, I want to talk about somebody who broke almost all the rules and still gave a speech that was deeply memorable and enormously powerful. I do this to inspire you. Ultimately your own way is the best way, and mistakes are not always mistakes.

On February 3, 1994, Mother Teresa came to Washington and gave a speech that left the entire audience dazzled and part of it dismayed, including a United States senator who turned to his wife after Mother Teresa concluded and said, "Is my jaw up yet?"

It was the annual National Prayer Breakfast at the Hilton Hotel and three thousand people were there, including most of official Washington. The breakfast is always an interesting and unusual gathering in the capital in that it is informed by an unspoken goodwill and because famous people, usually political figures, are invited to talk about what they rarely talk about in public: their understanding of God, their pursuit of him, his place in their lives. The assumption is that they will speak candidly, and from what I've seen they pretty much do. I have attended three of the breakfasts over the years and been touched by the candor and also the sweetness of much of what I have heard. (I wish I'd been at the one back in the '70s when the Catholic bishop Fulton J. Sheen began his remarks with a mock-stern, "Fellow sinners," and turned to President Carter to say, "And that means you, too." Carter and the audience roared.)



By tradition the president of the United States and the first lady always attend, and on this day in 1994 Bill and Hillary Clinton were up there on the dais, as were the vice president and Mrs. Gore and a dozen other important people, senators, and Supreme Court justices.

The busy ballroom hummed. Everyone seemed happy to be there, they were friendly and talkative. It was 7:30 in the morning and people had the undefended, approachable look morning sleepiness can give. There was an air of excitement and anticipation: An appearance by Mother Teresa was always an event, for she was not only a saint but a very old one who would not be with us forever.

When I saw her on television or in the papers I always thought of Malcolm Muggeridge, who journeyed to Calcutta to interview her for the BBC in 1969 and who reported the following. His interview with Mother Teresa had been difficult to arrange and would take place in Calcutta's Home for the Dying, a dimly lit cavern in which filming would be, according to the experienced cameraman, quite impossible.

Nonetheless it would be their only chance to see the reluctant nun in her habitat, and so they gave it a go and hoped. Later in London the film was developed to reveal that the room was lit, beautifully and fully, by a radiant light. Where did it come from? No one knew. The cameraman insisted it could not happen as it happened. Muggeridge, a renowned intellectual and yet also an intelligent man, immediately thought: God did this. He wrote of the incident in his book *Something Beautiful for God*, the bestseller that introduced Mother Teresa to the West, which began to give so generously to her order that its work was able to spread across the globe. What he wrote was, "I myself am absolutely convinced that the technically unaccountable light is, in fact, the Kindly Light Cardinal Newman refers to... Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying is overflowing with love. ... This love is luminous, like the halos artists have seen and made visible round the heads of the saints. I find it not at all surprising that the luminosity should register on a photographic film."

And now here she was — or rather here we were, at 7:45 a.m., waiting. She was not on the dais, presumably because you cannot ask a saint to sit around fidgeting with breakfast rolls and talking NAFTA. That is what presidents are for. And Mr. Clinton did his part with his usual friendliness, listening attentively and applauding warmly as the first speakers rose to welcome the crowd.

Then she was introduced and came from behind a parted curtain to walk slowly to the podium. She was small and moved slowly, hunched forward slightly as those with osteoporosis often are. She wore a white, blue-edged, floor-length habit and looked weathered, frail and tough as wire.

As she stepped up onto a little platform that had been placed beneath the podium there was great applause. She nodded at it. Then she took her speech in her hand and began to read from it in a soft singsong voice:

Make us worthy, Lord, to serve our fellow men throughout the world who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them through our hands this day their daily bread, and by our understanding love, give peace and joy.

No thank you, no smile. She just stood there holding the speech and looking down at it. She didn't look up or make eye contact, nor did she gesture with her hands. For the next twenty-five minutes she never said anything designed to elicit applause. She just read, and appeared sometimes to be ad-libbing from, her text.

She spoke of God, of love, of families, and told us we must love each other and care for each other. As she spoke I looked around. There were 3000 people in the room, with a plate before each of cool scrambled eggs and warm fruit. They did not eat, but listened, leaning forward in an attitude of unconscious communion. The audience was composed of liberal Democrats, conservative Republicans, and moderates of all persuasion. Perhaps half were Christian members of the prayer breakfast movement, some quite seriously devout and some less so — there's a bit of this-world networking that goes on. The other half was a mix: Muslims, Jews, searchers, agnostics and atheists, reporters and bureaucrats, waiters and diplomats. A good-natured and attentive mix. And they all loved her. But as

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the speech continued it became more pointed. Since Christ, she said, gave up everything to do his Father's will, so must we be willing to give up everything to do God's will:

If we are not willing to give whatever it takes to do good to one another, sin is still in us. That is why we, too, must give to each other until it hurts. It is not enough for us to say, "I love God." I also have to love my neighbor. St. John said that you are a liar if you say you love God and you don't love your neighbor. How can you love God, whom you do not see, if you do not love your neighbor, whom you see, whom you touch, with whom you live? And so it is very important for us to realize that love, to be true, has to hurt. I must be willing to give whatever it takes not to harm other people, and, in fact, to do good to them... Otherwise, there is no true love in me and I bring injustice, not peace, to those around me.

To some in the crowd these words constituted a strong moving admonition. To some they were pretty pieties. But to some, to the theologically sophisticated, her words seemed to be addressing the doctrine of sola fide, faith alone. The Catholic Church teaches that faith without works is not enough. Protestantism teaches that faith alone is sufficient for salvation. In my sincere but deservedly humble view this is a frustrating disagreement because it is marked most by a kind of willful misunderstanding, but it is a real one, and goes to the heart of resistance to Christian reunification.

So things were getting interesting. And people in the audience were starting to look at each other, eyebrows up.

Then she spoke of how, when Jesus was dying on the cross, he said, "I thirst." He was thirsting, she said, and is thirsting, for our love. And we are all like this, we all thirst.

I can never forget the experience I had in the sitting room where they kept all these old parents of sons and daughters who had just put them into an institution and forgotten them, maybe. I saw that in that home, these old people had everything — good food, comfortable place, television, everything — but everyone was looking toward the door. And I did not see a single one with a smile on their face. I turned to a sister and I asked, "Why do these people who have every comfort here, they are looking toward the door? why are they not smiling? I'm so used to seeing the smiles on our people. Even the dying ones smile." And Sister said, "This is the way it is nearly every day. They are expecting, they are hoping that the son or the daughter will come to visit them. They are hurt because they are forgotten." And see, this neglect to love brings spiritual poverty. Maybe in our own family we have somebody who is feeling lonely, who is feeling sick, who is feeling worried. Are we there? Are we willing to give until it hurts in order to be with our family, or do we put our interests first?

Those are challenging words, and would be experienced as such by an audience dominated by middle-aged people some of whom haven't talked to Mom and Pop in a while, or didn't talk enough when Mom and Pop were here. It was the kind of truth that makes people shift a little in their seats, or shift psychically to other thoughts.

Then came this:

In the families of the West, she said, it is not unusual that (the) father and the mother are so busy they have no time for their children, or perhaps they are not even married or have given up on their marriage. So the children go to the streets and get involved in drugs and other things." This is tragic, she said, for it is within the child that the love and peace of adulthood begin, therefore it is within the family that love and peace must begin.

There was a bit more shifting now, for an audience composed of humans is an audience composed of

sinner, and an audience dominated by busy boomer parents is composed of veterans of sin, the unmarried and divorced.

She continued, "But I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because Jesus said, 'If you receive a little child, you receive me.' So every abortion is the denial of receiving Jesus, the neglect of receiving Jesus."

Well, silence. Cool deep silence in the cool round cavern for just about 1.3 seconds. And then applause started on the right hand side of the room, and spread, and deepened, and now the room was swept with people applauding, and they would not stop for what I believe was five or six minutes. As they clapped they began to stand, in another wave from the right of the room to the center and the left.

But not everyone applauded. The president and first lady, seated within a few feet of Mother Teresa on the dais, were not applauding. Nor were the vice president and Mrs. Gore. They looked like seated statues at Madame Tussaud's. They glistened in the lights and moved not a muscle, looking at the speaker in a determinedly semi-pleasant way.

I was applauding at my table, and most of my table mates were standing, and I turned to look at what the friendly and intelligent woman to my right was doing. We had had a nice conversation before the speaking began. She was a lawyer, the wife of member of the Clinton administration, a modern and attractive blond-haired woman in her late forties of early fifties.

She was not applauding. She was staring straight ahead, impassively, if you can call white lips and a stricken expression impassive.

Now, Mother Teresa is not perhaps schooled in the ways of world capitals and perhaps did not know that having said her piece and won the moment she was supposed to go back to the airier, less dramatic assertions on which we all agree.

Instead she said this:

(Abortion) is really a war against the child, and I hate the killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that the mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another? How do we persuade a woman not to have an abortion? As always, we must persuade her with love... The father of that child, however, must also give until it hurts. By abortion, the mother does not learn to live, but kills even her own child to solve her problem. And by abortion, the father is taught that he does not have to take any responsibility at all for the child he has brought into that world. So that father is likely to put other women into the same trouble. So abortion just leads to more abortion.

Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching its people to love one another but to use any violence to get what they want. This is why the greatest destroyer of love and peace is abortion.

Again applause, and I looked once more to the woman on my right. As the applause spread she sat

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back in her chair and folded her hands on her lap. Then she briskly reached for her purse and took out a notepad. She took out a slim gold pen. It gleamed in the ballroom lights. She started writing down words.

I couldn't resist, I peered as un-obviously as I could to see what she was writing. "Shop Rite," it said on the hospital-white pad. "Cleaners."

She was making a To Do list. That was how she detached from the moment. She did not like what she had just heard but she couldn't walk out, couldn't boo, so she made a little list of things to do.

I looked toward the dais. Hillary Clinton was still staring straight ahead, unmoving. I imagined her looking at my table mate and yelling over, "Don't forget the Tide."

Mother Teresa now spoke of fighting abortion with adoption, of telling hospitals and police stations and frightened young girls, "Please don't kill the child. I want the child. Give me the child. I'm willing to accept any child who would be aborted and to give that child to a married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child."

Later I was to remember this part as Mother Teresa's carpet bombing. Then she dropped the big one:

I know that couples have to plan their family, and for that there is natural family planning. The way to plan the family is natural family planning, not contraception. In destroying the power of giving life or loving through contraception, a husband or wife is doing something to self. This turns the attention to self, and so it destroys the gift of love in him and her. In loving, the husband and wife turn the attention to each other, as happens in natural family planning, and not to self, as happens in contraception. Once that loving is destroyed by contraception, abortion follows very easily. That's why I never give a child to a family that has used contraception, because if the mother has destroyed the power of loving, how will she love my child?

It was at this point that the senator turned to his wife and asked if his jaw was still up.

It was something, the silence and surprise with which her words were received. Perhaps she didn't know that we don't talk about birth control in speeches in America. Perhaps she didn't know, or care, that her words were, as they say, not "healing" but "divisive," dividing not only Protestant from Catholic but Catholic from Catholic. It was all so unhappily unadorned, explicit, impolitic. And it was wonderful, like a big fresh drink of water, bracing in its directness and its uncompromising tone.

And of course it was startling, too, as if someone had spoken in favor of the Volsted Act. And indeed the Clintons and Gores looked, by the end, as if they'd heard someone promise to outlaw Merlot.

And Mother Teresa seemed neither to notice nor to care. She finished her speech to a standing ovation and left as she had entered, silently, through a parted curtain, in a flash of blue and white.

Her speech was a great success in that it was clear and strong, seriously meant, seriously stated, seriously argued, and seriously received. She spoke with a complete indifference to the conventions of speech giving, not only in her presentation — reading the text as if she were reading some dry old document aloud, rarely looking up, rarely using her voice to emphasize, rarely using inflection, expression, or gesturing — but in her message. She softened nothing, did not deflect division but defined it. She came with a sword.

She could do this, of course, because she had a natural and unknown authority. She has the standing of

a saint. May you pursue and achieve such standing as you think and work and write and speak.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

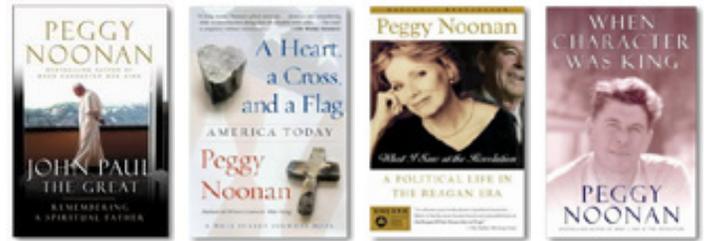
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See the full text of [Mother Teresa's National Prayer Breakfast address](#)

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THE AUTHOR

Peggy Noonan is a contributing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*. She is also a contributing editor of *Time* magazine and *Good Housekeeping*, a member of the board of the Manhattan Institute and author, most recently, of [John Paul the Great: Remembering a Spiritual Father](#). Ms. Noonan was special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. In 1988 she was chief speechwriter for Vice President George Bush as he ran for the presidency. Her first book, [What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era](#), was published in 1990. She is also author of [Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness](#) (1994), [On Speaking Well](#) (1998), [The Case Against Hillary Clinton](#) (2000) [When Character Was King](#) (2001) and [A Heart, A Cross, And A Flag: America Today](#) (2003).



Before entering the Reagan White House, she was a producer at CBS News in New York, where she wrote and produced Dan Rather's daily radio commentary. She also wrote television news specials for CBS News. In 1978 and 1979 she was an adjunct professor of journalism at New York University. Ms. Noonan lives in New York.

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