



When your chute fails to open!

By Robert Thompson

To be or not to be...that is the question! But what is it, to truly be, what does that actually mean? Do we have the courage to explore what that might be? Or are you already thinking, I've read enough, this is going to be boring. Please indulge me, pause a moment, let the spirit breathe, hold this space and let us take a holy leap together... Hopefully as we float back down to earth, we may find some insights.

I am a communicator. I write, I tell my own stories, I discover the stories of others and write and share those. I enjoy the art of effective communication and speech-craft. Over the last ten years I have entered the International Speech contest through "Toastmasters International" and over the years I have won and lost and discovered much as I competed at different levels working my way through to compete at the National Championship level. After years of competition I reached my goal to represent Australia in the World Championships in Washington DC, USA. My wife Jan and I were overwhelmed to be part of a five thousand strong audience of TM members from countries all around the globe. It was a life changing moment.

However, having achieved that goal, things changed in my life. I discovered that where once my drive was to excel in writing, performing and competing, my focus had shifted as now I was being given assignments to visit different Toastmasters clubs and conferences to share things I had learnt. I gave lectures and ran workshops on effective communication and speech writing, teaching ways to deliver winning performances. I was embarking on a journey that was to be perhaps more challenging than winning the Australian Championships: I was now on a path to help others shine.

I became part of a program that helped long term unemployed people who were challenged by their poor literacy and communication skills. Through raising their self-confidence, coaching, spending time evaluating their performances and just taking time to be together, our group could see tangible results as everyone moved forward to achieve their goals of finding jobs in the workplace. Could one life lesson be that to "truly be" is to help others "truly be"? I journeyed on and hit a bump in the road when I was approached to help a new member of my club. I felt a bit out of my comfort zone when my club president asked me to mentor Mr B. I had heard Mr B share some impromptu

speaking roles previously and unfortunately, he was memorable for all the wrong reasons – there was much work to be done! Mr B was far senior to me and I was concerned that his lifetime of bad habits would be difficult to rectify, the idea of teaching-an-old-dog-new-tricks, so to speak, was not an appealing prospect. Mr B was a softly spoken man who had a slight stutter, coupled with a nervous demeanour. This was accentuated by the fact that he rarely looked you in the eye, furtively glancing here and there as if he was allergic to bees and had just spotted one flying around the room. He was however an affable and extremely friendly fellow. Mr B had never married but as a career soldier had travelled extensively. Being now retired he was keen to share about his travels. The first speech a Toastmaster gives at a club audience is called an “ice breaker” and the speaker is given the opportunity to share a bit about their own life. It is always easier to talk about your own story, as you are less reliant on notes and speaking from your own experiences you can engage more easily with your audience. Everyone has had an embarrassing moment, a challenge to overcome, or some funny story that is relatable for an audience. Mr B was looking forward to sharing about the many places he had journeyed as a foot soldier in the British armed forces. The evening arrived for the icebreaker and I was eager to hear Mr B’s story. I gave him some last-minute advice, but I didn’t feel I had his full attention, he was busy checking for bees around the room again.

The speech wasn’t a complete disaster, but it came close. We received a travelogue of 20 different destinations coupled with a lot of information about the pyramids. At the time, I felt it was eight minutes of my life that I would never get back. Later when I was sharing words of encouragement with him, I asked him the question. “In all your time in the army was there a defining moment when you experienced overwhelming fear, or thought your life was about to end – a moment you will never forget?” “Oh Yes” said Mr B, “the day I jumped out of a plane and my parachute failed to open.” I was flabbergasted that Mr B had chosen to focus on his travel to foreign lands and the joys of seeing the pyramids, as opposed to sharing the moment where he faced imminent death.

Since that speech I have often reflected on what we see as moments when we are truly alive, truly being, or experiencing being fully present. We as an audience are drawn like bees to the honeypot to such personal drama: focused anticipation, living vicarious moments of terror and excitement, we are drawn to the moment of life and death. We are drawn wide eyed to the drama of it all, because if this article was titled “And then I visited the pyramids” you may have just passed it by altogether. We think high drama is when we are “truly being”.

But have we got it the wrong way around? Could it be that “to be” is being able to appreciate the everyday beauty of our existence. When we can find this bliss, drink in the moment, be mindful and fully aware during

the ordinary aspects of life, I think in this space we are truly alive, we are truly being. Was Mr B on the right track after all?

Mathew 6:28 tells us “So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

This scripture sums up for me Christ’s message of seeing, being present and perhaps going deeper into the ordinary aspects of life. I have been fascinated by a recent documentary about the ocean currents that flow down the coast of eastern Australia. I was fascinated by the microscopic organisms that sustain life, the symbiotic relationships between the tiniest of plants and fish, these most amazing pictures that bring to life things we would never normally see or experience. The beauty of these microscopic organisms clothed more finely than great King Solomon in all his glory! It reminds me of that hymn “Look for the beautiful look for the true, sunshine and shadow are all around you”. Is ‘truly being’ about having the ability to see with new eyes!

Mr B was one of my failures as a dynamic speaker in Toastmasters. However, even though he had been a follower all of his life he went on to become a leader, President of a club and later, District Governor. Mr B shone in a different way to what I had intended for him, which perhaps brings me to another insight. We can’t hijack other people’s goals and visions, my vision for you may not be your vision. To find your own vision and be authentic is an important aspect of being. People choose their own path, and whilst we can try to walk in their shoes, we really only get a glimpse of their reality. Therefore, we can’t judge, we are called to love whilst holding true to our own sense of calling.

What have we discovered together then? What is it to truly be? I think it is about being authentic, about seeing the beauty in all things, about helping others to shine, about finding God within yourself and your neighbour and about choosing love over fear.

I’m sure there are more discoveries to be made. Thanks for spending some time wandering around my mind. I hope you have discovered in these stories some insights of your own. If you have, please feel free to share with me: perhaps we can have a “chapter two” at some time in the future.

I think as a final insight, it is important to reflect, to be in dialogue and open to the ideas of others. That takes discipline, and sometimes it takes courage to move into a place of change. I hope you enjoy experimenting with some new ideas and continue to grow into moments of “truly being”. However, there may be moments in your future experiences when you jump out into the unknown and discover your chute doesn’t open... all I can say is, avoid landing on the pyramids!