Exploring Difference Between Motivational Speaking and Preaching
By: Argrow “Kit” Evans

What is the difference between motivational speaking and preaching? This is a question I have pondered for a long time. In October of 2008 I gave a motivational talk about violence, violence prevention, and nonviolence. During the talk I shared my personal testimony about surviving sexual violence. This was the first time I had shared that story with a large audience, here hundreds of people. While relating my testimony I remember feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit entering into the auditorium space within the midst of people of all ethnicities, ages, and religions. As I told my story of violence, assault with a knife, wrestling for my life, and an attempted rape, my unscripted words started to come from somewhere much deeper than myself. When I finished my testimony I raised my hands and head to the ceiling, acknowledging that there was something much greater than myself present in the room. Tears streamed down my face. I could hear people crying and clapping, and I also felt a silent presence amongst some. After the talk many students and staff came up to me and spoke about their experiences with violence, bullying, and healing, and even about their relationship with God. Some spoke about how the talk inspired and empowered them.

This experience occurred when I first started doing motivational speaking for the National Association of Students Against Violence Everywhere and a month after I accepted my call to preach. This extremely powerful speaking engagement is the source from where my question about the difference between motivational speaking and preaching stems. Though I was not preaching directly from the Bible, the Holy Spirit still showed up in a way that assisted me in connecting people in the audience with the
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grace and love of God. The goal of this paper is to explore the purpose of preaching and motivational speaking, the training that is recommended for each, how each vocation uses story telling, and the context in which each role takes place. In order to effectively explore these areas, I will be using book sources as well as data from interviews with one motivational speaker and five ministers representing four Christian denominational affiliations.

There are similarities between motivational speaking and preaching, but there are also differences. The purpose of motivational speaking is to inspire and to empower personally and professionally, while preaching connects people with the word of God, which helps to transform people’s spiritual self and, thus, impact their life. The training of motivational speakers is focused primarily on the speakers becoming experts and gaining skills to market their expertise; there is no required blueprint for training. In contrast, training of preachers focuses on learning the doctrine, history, Bible, theology, preaching, and ethics of a faith tradition. Religious denominations may require years of ministerial training in preparation for the ordained preaching ministry. Motivational speakers use stories to offer moral examples for different issues, whereas stories from preachers are centered on biblical accounts. For the motivational speaker the context is consistently changing, while the preacher usually serves the same community on a regular basis.

Purpose

On the surface the purpose of motivational speaking and preaching seems similar:
to inspire and empower people to live healthy and productive lives. The purpose of a motivational speaker is to "motivate audience members to overcome challenges, achieve their dreams, and improve their life."¹ Motivational speakers specialize in different areas of expertise such as business and personal finance, sales and negotiations training, management, team building, creative communications, and women-focused forums. This specialization assists the particular organization and/or its group members through speakers promoting and sharing empowering information that will enhance development within a specific area. Al Duncan is a motivational speaker who is a Cross-Generational Communication Specialist and leading youth empowerment advocate. He uses his expertise to work with troubled young people and at risk youth. According to Mr. Duncan, "the purpose of my motivational speaking (and products) is to help empower and enhance the lives of young people, as well as those who work with them. The mission of all of my businesses is to promote and enhance youth development and empowerment."² Mr. Duncan's reflection supports the idea of a motivational speaker as one who helps to enhance personal development and to empower; however, he also emphasizes the fact that motivational speaking is a business.

Motivational speakers promote their expertise, and they promote their products; speaking engagements and the “information business” are a major source of income for them. Motivational speaking is more explicit about profit and business. Developing products to sell, such as t-shirts, calendars, training materials, videos, books, and CDs

² Al Duncan. Interview by author, 2 December 2010, Berkeley, CA. Data Questionnaire.
based on the speakers’ expertise, significantly increases their income. Thus, though there is a strong focus on the audience and its needs, there is also an emphasis on the motivational speakers’ entrepreneurial enterprise, which is perhaps one of the key differences between motivational speaking and preaching.

Reverend Karen Oliveto from Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco, California speaks to this difference: "Motivational speaking is focused on You (the motivational speaker), where they rely on their own power, and preaching is focused on God, where the preacher relies on God's power." The Bible is used as a source to communicate God’s love, grace, teachings, and blueprint for living in the midst of struggles, hurt, pain, joy, happiness, peace. Preaching is a "mode of witness to the gospel. It is to help the congregation name and interpret the divine presence and purpose. It witnesses to God’s unconditional love and call for justice." Preaching also inspires transformation for individuals and convinces hearers of the need for their “soul salvation” drawing them into new or a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, God, the Divine, the Holy.

Though preaching and motivational speaking both provide encouragement and inspiration to the listener, there is tension between the two vocations that exists. Preaching works to connect people to the power and love of God through the biblical text that can transform lives and empower people to live out principles that are Bible-based.

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4 Reverend Karen Oliveto. Interview by author, 30 November 2010, Berkeley, CA. Data Questionnaire.
6 Reverend Sandra Blair. Interview by author, 8 December 2010, Berkeley, CA. Data Questionnaire.
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Conversely, motivational speaking connects people with the motivational speaker’s experiences, which empower and inspire individuals to be the best they can be professionally and personally. Duncan sums it up clearly by stating, "people expect preachers to help them save their souls and help them transform their lives. People expect motivational speakers to help them reach their personal and professional goals.”

Training

Vocational training is important to look at in comparing motivational speaking with preaching. The training processes differ widely. Some people enter the business of motivational speaking because "no special education, experience, or connections are needed to get started and succeed.” However, there is a great need for the aspiring motivational speaker to develop their personal area of expertise or niche. Walters notes, “speakers are booked because they are experts: experts at humor, motivation, or with information and insights in a specific area of knowledge.” This expertise often stems from the personal and professional experiences of the individual. Motivational Speaker Al Duncan states, "My personal and professional experiences are the cornerstone of my speaking.”

But credentials can also be beneficial for the motivational speaker. With credentials speakers are able to market themselves much easier. Credentials can come from a range of areas. For example, if the speaker has an academic degree in an area of

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7 Al Duncan. Interview by author, 2 December 2010, Berkeley, CA. Data Questionnaire.
10 Al Duncan. Interview by author, 2 December 2010, Berkeley, CA. Data Questionnaire.
expertise, has authored books, and has presented to other organizations, all these accomplishments can be extremely helpful in getting hired by an organization and serve as a form of symbolic capital. Walters suggests that the motivational speaker “should be so familiar with their subject so that no one can stump the speaker with a question.”

Skill areas of development for the motivational speaker include speechwriting, determining the goal of a speech, and developing a thesis. Successful speakers are able to analyze the speaking context and use storytelling as a means of communicating with their audiences. Important traits of a good speaker also include "confidence, credibility, dynamism, and naturalness." These skills are mostly nurtured with practice by joining public speaking organizations such as the National Speaker’s Association, Toastmaster's International, and/or working with a public speaking coach.

Since motivational speaking is an entrepreneurial endeavor for the individual there are also business skills that must be learned. A small business workshop could be helpful with setting up a company name and bookkeeping system, obtaining licenses and any insurance needed, writing contracts, and paying taxes.

But there is no set blueprint for the training of a motivational speaker. Because it is a personal business, there is no consistent community of accountability, so the training varies for each speaker. In contrast, many faith traditions require preachers who seek to

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be ordained clergy the mandate to complete denominational training courses and a
seminary degree.

The training of a preacher is important because preachers not only interpret the
word of God for their faith community, but they also reinforce the history, doctrine,
ethics, and practices of that particular faith tradition. Though denominational and
seminary school is not required for all preachers, good preachers spend a lot of time
studying. It is imperative for the preacher to continuously study “biblical studies,
theology, pastoral care, church history, homiletics, and liturgy.”¹⁵ Some denominations
require ministerial education for ordained ministry.

Denominational ministerial training and a seminary degree can be extremely
helpful training for the preacher. However, as Allen notes, “completing the M.Div, D.
Min, or Ph.D is only the beginning of ministerial preparation because the theological
degree can not provide ministers with everything they need to know for service that will
last twenty, thirty, or forty years.”¹⁶ He suggests that reflective practice and continuing
education through experiences with a colleague group, the congregation and formal
continuing education help with the preachers continuous training and learning’s.

One extremely important aspect of ministerial training involves the preacher’s
understanding of how important God is when studying, preparing, and delivering a
sermon. Cannon articulates this as, “Bearing the Cross” which is “being made aware of

¹⁵ Lucy Lind Hogan, Graceful Speech: An Invitation to Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006),
45.
the divine and human dimensions in the study of homiletics.”¹⁷ She further expresses this point by stating, “if you are not preaching with a divine light, you ain’t got no business”¹⁸ in the pulpit. Preaching is not just about studying and speaking the word of God. In order to do this for God and with God it is necessary for the preacher to have a close relationship with the Divine through the practice of spiritual disciplines and other ways of connecting with God.

The training of a motivational speaker and preacher both requires discipline. However, a motivational speaker’s training is based on getting prepared to run a successful motivational speaking business wherein the speaker becomes an expert with a specific focus. Because there is not a blueprint for that training, it could take as long as 2 weeks, or it could take many years. In contrast, a preacher’s training is more focused on the faith tradition’s theology, history, church ethics and more. This training can take years to complete and is ultimately continuous. There is also a spiritual component to the preacher’s training that is important to nurture.

**Storytelling**

Storytelling is an essential component of both motivational speaking and preaching. However, story is used in different ways by the two vocations. Motivational speakers often use stories from their own personal lives. "As a motivational speaker the first place to look for material is in the speaker’s own personal life experiences. This is  

the key to credibility as a speaker. People want to hear about how to achieve success or overcome an obstacle from someone who has actually done it."^{19} Motivational speaker Al Duncan notes, "Storytelling is crucial to my speaking style. I am a master storyteller who relishes the opportunity to be completely transparent and authentic about my experiences in life."^{20}

The motivational speaker’s personal experiences are put into story form to include drama, excitement and to spark emotion. Motivational speakers do "exceptionally well in stirring up emotion."^{21} There are several guidelines for the motivational speaker’s use of story. The story should be 1) brief, 2) interesting and descriptive, 3) a story that the audience can relate to, and 4) have a moral.^{22} If a speaker uses someone else's story they are to always give credit to the person who told it initially.

Storytelling in preaching is used primarily to help make Bible stories come alive for individuals and communities. Reverend Sandra Blair notes, "narrative/story is very important to my preaching because it is a tool to bring the text alive and connect the message to the everyday context of the listeners. Without narrative, a sermon can be heavily didactic and may be too dense for persons to understand, or it may be too abstract to make it relevant to their lives."^{23} Boomershine suggests, “at the deepest and

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20 Al Duncan. Interview by author, 2 December 2010, Berkeley, CA. Data Questionnaire.
23 Reverend Sandra Blair. Interview by author, 8 December 2010, Berkeley, CA. Data Questionnaire.
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most profound level, the stories of our lives are empowered and given meaning by being connected to God’s story.”

Preachers place great emphasis on the Biblical story. Personal story is used by preachers only with caution. Reverend Joellynn Monahan notes, "I think sharing my own personal story in preaching requires appropriate self-disclosure. It’s important for me to share my story not for my own needs, but in service of the sermon and the needs of those hearing the word. As a minister I am aware that ministerial authority gives my story more importance in some people’s understanding. I strive to share my own story when it can be of help for listeners. My story is not the whole of the sermon, but a way of illustrating points of the sermon/scripture.”

The main difference between storytelling in preaching and in motivational speaking is that the latter focuses on the use of personal story for audience inspiration and empowerment and whereas the former focuses on storytelling to illustrate and support Biblical scripture for the inspiration and transformation of the congregation.

Context

The contexts in which motivational speakers and preachers operate also play a key role in the difference between the two vocations. Speaking engagement locations for the motivational speaker change continuously. "Speakers are hired by companies, conference organizers, associations, schools, and other groups.”

Talks can take place at conventions, seminars, meetings, dinners and the list goes on. A motivational speaker

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can be with a group for 20 minutes or a few days. However, once the speaker plants the seeds, which help promote personal development and empowerment, the speaker leaves that particular speaking engagement and community. Often after the talk the motivational speaker holds no accountability to that community, organization, or group of individuals.

The context within which a preacher works recognizes its venue (the church), but also the history, doctrine, and ethics of the faith community. The faith community is a context that forms both preacher and people.27 Reverend Sandra Blair notes:

“The context of a preacher is that of a religious tradition and, from a position of authority in that tradition, the preacher reinforces its doctrine, ethics and practices. Preachers’ listeners expect to hear a word of hope and inspiration that will both instruct them in the obligations of membership and discipleship, stir commitment, and encourage them to deal with the challenges of life. This context is not just a place where people receive the word of God through preaching, but it is a place where people have made a commitment to a faith community. It is in this place that members seek and find opportunities for fellowship, education, personal and spiritual growth, evangelism, stewardship, discipleship and leadership, as well as being able to contribute to the mission and ministry of the church.”28

It is in the context of the church that preachers are able to “discover patterns of thinking, personal and social behaviors, history, values, myths, symbols, feelings, and traditions” of the people, which helps the preacher, serve them more effectively.29 Ultimately, preachers are accountable to their community: they work, live, serve and preach in that community for extended amounts of time. They also develop close relationships with community members.

The key difference in the context of a motivational speaker and that of the preacher is clear. A motivational speaker’s context lasts for a short amount of time and requires no commitment to a particular community after the talk. In contrast, the preacher

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28 Reverend Sandra Blair. Interview by author, 8 December 2010, Berkeley, CA. Data Questionnaire.
works and preaches in a particular faith-based community or communities, with hourly, daily, weekly, and monthly connections to their community and its history, doctrine, ethics, and issues – all of which have an impact on the preacher’s preaching.

Conclusion

What is the difference between motivational speaking and preaching? It is clear to see that although there are similarities between motivational speaking and preaching, there are also a substantial number of differences. The purpose of motivational speaking is to motivate and empower people personally and professionally, while the purpose of preaching is to connect people with the Bible and share the “Good News”, which helps to transform people’s spiritual self. The training of motivational speakers is focused primarily on individual speakers becoming experts and gaining skills to market their expertise as business people and speakers who empower and help others enhance their development. There is no required amount of time necessary for this training and, in fact, no blueprint. The training of preachers is focused on learning the doctrine, history, bible, theology, preaching, and ethics of a faith tradition. Denominations may require extensive ministerial training in preparation for the ordained preaching ministry, which could take several years to complete.

Storytelling is vital for both vocations. However, the use of story by the motivational speaker revolves around stories about oneself to offer a moral, while stories from the preacher are centered on offering story that directly or indirectly connects to Biblical accounts. The context of storytelling is also important in comparing the two
vocations. For the motivational speaker the context is ever changing and there is often no commitment to one particular community. For the preacher the context is communal: the preacher works, fellowships, and serves the faith community or communities on a regular basis. The faith community’s history, ethics, doctrine, issues, and membership all impact how the preacher preaches and what the preacher preaches about.

My experience in 2008, feeling the Holy Spirit’s presence during a motivational talk, was unique. Though motivational speaking and preaching both inspire and empower, they have different purposes, training requirements, ways of telling story, and they work within different contexts. It is imperative to respectfully make these distinctions.
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Appendix 1

Interview Questions for Motivational Speaker

1) What is the person of your motivational speaking?

2) How important is the use of narrative/story to your preaching? Do you use your own personal story in preaching?

3) Is your motivational speaking faith based or biblically based?

4) How is motivational speaking different from preaching?

5) How is being a motivational speaker different from being a preacher in terms of the context of each and the expectations of the listeners?

Interview Questions for Preachers

1) What is your faith tradition?

2) How important is the use of narrative/story to your preaching? Do you use your own personal story in preaching?

3) What is the purpose of preaching from your own perspective and that of your tradition? (Why do you preach? What is the purpose of preaching for you?)

4) How is preaching different from motivational preaching as witnessed in the speaking of persons like Zig Ziglar and Les Brown?

5) How is being a preacher different from being a motivational speaker in terms of the context of each and the expectations of the listeners?
Appendix 2

Interview Response
Motivational Speaker Al Duncan

1) The purpose of my motivational speaking (and products) is to help empower and enhance the lives of young people as well those who work with them. The mission of all of my businesses is to promote and enhance youth development and empowerment.

2) Storytelling and allegory is crucial to my speaking style. I am a master storyteller who relishes the opportunity to be completely transparent and authentic about my experiences in life. My personal and professional experiences are the cornerstone of my speaking. I also use a lot of parables to drive home my points.

3) No, unless I am asked to speak at a faith/spiritual based institution. In which case, I am willing to incorporate spiritual teachings. I take pride in fact that I get up in front of a diverse audience and inspire people without stepping on anyone’s religious beliefs.

4) Depending on the preacher or speaker the styles can be virtually the same. There are super-energetic preachers and motivational speakers (T.D. Jakes, Les Brown) and there are more content-oriented, conversational style preachers and speakers (Joel Osteen, Zig Ziglar). So I guess the main difference is the basis and focus of the principles that are being taught. A lot of times motivational speakers will be more business/professional focused whereas the preacher is more spiritual focused. Of course there are exceptions. (Wayne Dyer, spiritual based motivational speaker; Creflo Dollar, business/financial based preacher.)

5) People expect preachers to help them save their souls. People expect motivational speakers to help them reach their personal and professional goals. People expect both the preacher and the speaker to provide inspiration and life-changing information.
Appendix 3

Interview Responses, Preachers
Reverend Sandra Blair

1) African Methodist Episcopal Church

2) Narrative/story is very important to my preaching because it is a tool to bring the text alive and connect the message to the everyday context of the listeners. Without narrative a sermon can be heavily didactic and may be too dense for persons to understand, or it may be too abstract to make it relevant to their lives. Some Biblical text have an inherent narrative while for others a related narrative has to be ferreted out but finding it is part of the excitement of sermon preparation. I do use my own personal story in preaching but with caution. I think that congregants need to know that the preacher is human, and that the life and spiritual experiences of the preacher is a valuable mirror for people to see how God works in our lives. At the same time, we have to be discreet not to share things that are intensely personal, which may be confusing or distracting - in other words, "too much information".

3) The purpose of preaching from my perspective is to interpret the Word of God, to convict hearers of the need for their soul salvation, to inspire transformation, and to draw people to a new relationship with Jesus Christ. In my tradition - that of the Black Church and specifically the African Methodist Episcopal Church - the proclamation of the Word is the central focus of the worship experience. Except for the First Sunday when the Eucharist is served, the preaching moment is the climax when listeners are invited into membership and a life of Christian discipleship. Preaching aims at listeners making a commitment to be part of a community of faith where they can find opportunities for fellowship, education, personal and spiritual growth, evangelism, stewardship, discipleship and leadership, as well as being able to contribute to the mission and ministry of the church.

4) Preaching and motivational speaking may draw on similar rhetorical techniques to capture and maintain the interest of listeners as well as persuade them to a new way of thinking and being. Both build on a thesis and work toward a conclusion. However, I see preaching as essentially different from motivational speaking. Motivational speaking is aimed at inspiring individuals to self-improvement and/or enhancing the growth strategies of corporate enterprises. Preaching aims at making a fundamental change in the mindset, lifestyle, priorities and heart of the listener - that is, conversion. Further it aims at inviting persons to be part of the Body of Christ, and on a regular basis instructs them in building a life of stewardship and in becoming disciples who in turn participate in furthering the work of the kin-dom of God.

5) While a motivational speaker may touch on spiritual issues, the context of a motivational speaker I believe to be more in a setting with individuals seeking greater personal fulfillment and with corporations motivating the productivity of their workforce. The context of a preacher is that of a religious tradition and from a position of authority in that tradition the preacher reinforces its doctrine, ethics and practices. With respect to expectations, a motivational speaker may be sought out for more individualistic reasons while preachers' listeners expect to hear a word of hope and inspiration that will both instruct them in the obligations of membership and discipleship, stir commitment, and encourage them to deal
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with the challenges of life. The preacher speaks to edify the Body of Christ, the Church of God, and to build on an eternal foundation that makes a difference not just in the lives of individuals but also in the world.

Reverend Joellynn Monahan

1) United Church of Christ

2) Narrative/story is often a way to connect people to the sermon; scripture text can be the narrative/story itself and that can be placed in conversation with real life/contemporary stories if appropriate to the sermon. Just as when I was working as a therapist, I think sharing my own personal story in preaching requires “appropriate self-disclosure”; it’s important for me to share my story not for my own needs, but in service of the sermon and the needs of those hearing the word; as a minister I am aware that ministerial authority gives my story more importance in some people’s understanding; I strive to share my own story when it can be of help for listeners; I am cautious regarding how my own story is not “The” story, just “a” story; I’m also careful of how my story also includes other people (partner, etc.) and make sure I have their permission in advance if they are part of the story; my story is not the whole of the sermon but a way of illustrating points of the sermon/scripture.

3) I preach to invite people into a deeper understanding of their life, faith, relationship to the holy; to me the sermon is not the pinnacle of worship but a way of reflecting on all we do in worship (despite my protestant ordination, my love of weekly communion reveals my Catholic upbringing!)

4) I am not very familiar with secular motivational speakers but have seen people like Tony Robbins, etc.; I would say that there many differences – most importantly the entire ritual of worship (prayer, music, readings, communion, etc.) as well as the sermon; my assumptions about motivational speaking is that an expert is telling me how to make my life better – in preaching I believe that the preacher invites God’s wisdom to be shared with the gathered community – wisdom that often does not have easy answers and often calls us to trouble the waters in our own life and the world

5) For me one major distinction is that in church it is not expected that I have my life together or am the best I can be – it is a place where I can be broken, bring my suffering, make mistakes and be forgiven – as well as all the joy and support for living a good life -I cannot really speak to the context of audiences of motivational speakers.
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Reverend Karen Oliveto

1) United Methodist Church

2) I had stopped using narrative in my preaching in recent years, but now that I am back in a local church, I am returning to more narrative preaching and including my own story. I pastor a congregation that has little to no encounter with the Gospel. My hope is that by sharing how the Story shows up in my own story, and how the Word is found in my own life, they can begin to see it reflected in their own. In this way, I am trying to model a way to think, reflect and live theologically.

4) For me, motivational speaking is focused on YOU and preaching is focused on GOD. Even when we talk about ourselves in preaching, it is always to point out where God is in our lives, moving us, changing us.

5) Motivational speaking has, as its end, a changed person, relying on his or her own power. Preaching’s end is not only a changed life, but also a changed world, relying on God’s power. My hope is that when I preach, and when I listen to preaching, that God is going to show up. I don’t think listeners (or speakers) expect that in motivational speaking.