

GREAT COMMUNICATORS USE HUMOR, STORIES AND SINCERITY by Bill Sanders

HUMOR: HOW AND WHY

Join me while I speak to twenty eight hundred high school students.

It's Friday afternoon, in a gym with loud fans, kids high on April and Mountain Dew and a sound system that barely works. (Makes Wednesday night youth group look a little better doesn't it.) Prayer for the Lord to open hearts and minds to my message and to grab their attention has replaced any nervousness that I would normally feel. Knowing how many confused, hurting and angry kids are in front of me has replaced my need for attention or applause.

Never teach on an empty spirit. I forget where I heard it but it's so true. If I don't win them over to me it doesn't matter how good the meat of my message is, they simply won't hear it. Zig Ziglar taught me the power of humor years ago. As I walk to grab the microphone from the principal I shoot up one more prayer, "Go to work Lord!" Here goes.

"How many of you have been in school long enough to know that, even if this assembly is no good, **IT BEATS CLASS!**" (I motion for them to applaud if they agree and about half do, pleasantly surprised that maybe this won't be another boring assembly.) "How come the teachers always clap the loudest?" (This gets the teachers in the act.)

"Remember elementary school. Everything you did you did in single file line. When I was in school you couldn't go to class if you weren't in line. You couldn't go to the cafeteria or to the playground if you weren't in line. What made me the maddest back then is that you couldn't even go to the bathroom if you weren't in line. I remember more than once saying to my buddies, **'HURRY UP, I'VE GOT TO GO!'**"

"I asked a first grader as he passed me looking straight ahead, perfectly placed in his line, What's your name?" He kept walking and five feet past me he turned his head and said, **We don't know you.**" (This one worked pretty well. Some of the jocks even got it.)

"Elementary kids are cool. They talk for no reason. The other day a second grader looked up at me, a total stranger, and said, **"MY MOM LOST THIRTY SEVEN POUNDS!"** I replied, **"I BET SHE'S GLAD YOUR TELLING ME!"** (Yes, it's working. Some kids are nudging their friends to stop talking as they keep their eyes on me straining to hear the next punch line)

"Another kid said with a worried look, "My dog had six puppies." I answered, "Cool." He continued, "Uh uh." I asked, "Why?" He said, **"CAUSE SHE ATE THREE OF UM!"** (Even the teachers are getting these. The principal, welllllll. I stopped trying to figure them out twenty years ago.)

A sixth grader told me, “I know what you mean, talking about dirty bedrooms. Nine days ago I threw a pair of my underwear on the wall.” “I said, “So?” He said with his eyes bugged wide open, **“SOOOO, THEY’RE STILL STUCK ON THE WALL, THAT’S WHY!”** “I just walked away. **I DIDN’T WANT TO KNOW WHY. I’M STILL HOPING THEY GOT STUCK ON AN OLD NAIL. If IT’S ANY OTHER REASON, I DON’T WANT TO KNOW!”**

“How many of you have parents who are way too good at embarrassing you in public? (Even though it’s not cool to let the speaker know you are into his talk, three fourths are raising their hands not realizing that they are actually participating.) Do you know why we embarrass you in public at this age? **IT’S BECAUSE OF WHAT YOU DID TO US IN PUBLIC, WHEN YOU WERE BABIES!**” (Sometimes, I’ll get right into my message here because I have their attention, but they are a good receptive audience and I wanted to reward them so I told a quick story that took another two minutes. All in all this routine only took about six minutes and brought every pair of eyes on my every word. I was earning the right to get in their faces with the truth.)

Teens are the most perceptive group of listeners in the world. You can con a con, and fool a fool, but you cannot kid a kid. They know if you care and truly love them and they appreciate me making this enjoyable and giving them a fast moving laughter filled assembly.

“My daughter got me good when I took her for her kindergarten physical. I had to prove to my wife I could handle something important without her. Everything went fine until the doctor handed me the cup for the urine sample. I gave it to her and pushed her into the bathroom. She said, oh no, we’re in this together. **I’M HOLDING ON, YOU HOLD THE CUP! I STARTED YELLING FOR ALL THE NURSES IN THE HALL TO HEAR, YOU’RE MISSING THE CUP AND HITTING MY HAND!**”

Humor. What good is it? No good at all if you don’t want to get and keep anyone’s attention. Or as a friend of mine once said, “You don’t have to use humor, if you don’t **WANT to GET PAID.**” The kids in your audience have a thousand things on their minds. Everything from: “How do I look?”; “Have I embarrassed myself yet?”; “Why are they looking at me?”; “If this God you are talking about is so great, why am I so ugly, and why do I want to kill myself?” to “How would it feel to kill my parents who look so good in church but don’t even know I exist?”

It’s hard to disagree with someone you are laughing with. The sitcoms have sold their brand of religion by using humor for years. Late night TV, shock jocks, the Comedy Channel, MTV, the kid in the hall telling the dirty joke, all use humor to get and keep teens attention. You don’t have to be a joke teller. Just tell funny stuff that has happened to you or what your ‘Erma Bombeck neighbor’ shared with you last week over coffee. It doesn’t have to be Ken Davis gut splitting funny. It’s merely meant to wake them up and get them to zero in on you and not their neighbor.

ONLY USE HUMOR THAT FITS YOU AND YOUR PERSONALITY

- Humor isn't always jokes. The best humor is Bill Cosby stuff that actually happened to you or some one you know.
- Keep a journal of funny stuff. Look for it everywhere. With your kids, at church, in the newspaper. It's everywhere if you will simply be on the lookout.
- Practice telling funny stuff with your family or friends to see if it works. Just by changing one or two words can make something funny from not understanding the punch line at all. I try my stuff on my buddies on the golf course.
- Don't try to be any one else. You have to be comfortable with what you use or they will surely pick up on it. You will always have more confidence in telling stories that affected you personally. Try and recapture how you felt when it happened and let your emotions, facial expressions, and words put them at the scene of the laugh.

Think of the last talk or sermon that you were bored with and every minute seemed like an hour. It probably had nothing funny to wake your emotions and if I was a betting man I'd say it lacked the greatest teaching tool of all time. A well thought out, well told, story.

TELLING STORIES

Jesus never wasted anyone's time with facts and figures. He was more interested in touching lives than impressing people with his knowledge. He also had every pair of eyes on him while he talked. There was no looking around, note passing, yawning, or people too tired to keep their heads up while he spoke. There should never be any boredom with your teaching either.

He told stories. They were tricky to figure out and left people thinking of nothing else. They had a hidden meaning and I believe many of them were thought up on the spot depending where he was and whom he was trying to reach.

His one and only goal was to reach hearts and change lives. His work was his life. It was never boring nor did he ever refer to it as merely his 'job'. Why? He wanted to please his father above all else and he truly loved people and couldn't bear to think of them going through eternity without him.

He told one story after another. Everyone loves an interesting story that gets to the point, moves someone to tears or remembering their past. The "Chicken Soup For The Soul" series of books is living proof that today's readers and listeners want short interesting stories that inspire, uplift and challenge. You have the extra strength of The Word of God on your side to touch hearts and change lives but without the catsup, mustard and relish of stories to give it flavor, it might go uneaten.

Some keys to a great story are:

- Use as few words as possible. Zig Ziglar is booked two and three years in advance and it's not because his audiences like to be bored. He will tell a story 25 years later with the same words he used when he first developed it.
- Make sure the story touched your heart and aroused emotion in you when it happened to you or when you heard it. If a story only reaches your head it will go no further than reaching your student's head. (Never tell someone else's story without permission unless they are public domain!) If it touched your heart it will be able to reach into theirs as well.
- People think in terms of pictures and stories, not words and facts. Jesus knew this. He gave us many examples of painting word pictures that captured people's attention and demanded that a decision be made.
- Have a good storyteller listen to your stories on cassette or in person to point out where it slowed down or lost their attention. I'm honored that Zig would listen to my messages and tell me where to use humor or how I had a great chance to give a powerful ending but missed it because the story went too long. If you will send your stories or 30 minute or less talks to me on cassette with a return addressed envelope, I'll be delighted to listen to it and send back my comments on it's strengths and ways to make it more powerful.
- Get permission from the person that the story is about if at all possible.
- Never tell a story that paints someone in a negative light. Being open and vulnerable and showing your past mistakes and how God helped you grow from it will always be a powerful way to reach others.

Here's an example of a story that I heard from Jacob Aranza. I was fascinated by it and wanted to get the facts right so I contacted the uncle by phone and he gave me permission to tell it. Notice that I weave challenges in and out of the story. It has the power to keep someones' attention that they will listen to my challenges because they want to find out what happened to the characters I'm talking about.

First I set it up. "There are two ways to learn something. The easy way or the hard way. Many teens believe that experience is the best teacher. As my friend John Crudele says, 'Experience is the worst teacher. It gives the test first, the lesson second.' Your choice is to learn with your ears or your tears. Your eyes or your cry's. Here is the most amazing story I've ever heard in twenty-one years of speaking to people and writing books. It's amazing because it illustrates how so many of us learn things the hard painful way."

"Her name was Lisa Tucker. She was a twenty two-year-old single mom with one child. She bought the same lie many of you have. You can't enjoy the weekend or any social event unless you tip a few drinks. She stopped at a bar in Lafayette, Louisiana called Poets on her way home from work one night. As she drove home a few hours later she crossed the centerline and BOOM she hit a car head on and was killed instantly. That's not the amazing part of the story. You can see that any night of the week in your local paper and it hasn't stopped any of you yet. No, what's amazing is what happened one-year later. Only a few days from being exactly one year later. Another girl named Sarah

who had a husband and two children went to the same bar called Poets and drove home. She hit a telephone pole and died in the hospital about a week later. Listen close and see if you are bothered even a little bit by this story's ending, or are you too calloused and desensitized to care any more. **LISA AND SARAH TUCKER WENT TO THE SAME BAR, A YEAR APART. THEY BOTH BOUGHT THE LIE THAT DRINKING IS GOOD AND FUN. THEY BOTH DIED ON THE WAY HOME. LISA AND SARAH TUCKER WERE IDENTICAL TWINS!** They both learned the hard way. They didn't learn from each other or the millions of examples before them. As he wept on the phone, their uncle told me that the owner of the bar and the bartenders that poured the drinks didn't bother coming to either funeral. No one from any of the beer companies sent any flowers or cards or came to cry with us, he said. He then said something I will never forget and I don't want you to forget it either. He said, **WHY SHOULD THEY, THEY JUST LOST TWO CUSTOMERS, WE LOST TWO BABIES!"**

This story leaves people with their mouths open. They realize the truth of what I've just shared. All because of a powerful story. Fill your notes for your next talk with arrows that will engage the mind while they penetrate the heart.

SINCERITY

I've asked people why they called me to have me talk to their school or church and the single most often received answer is that they heard I was sincere and meant every word I said. It's so old I hate to use it but nothing else fits. People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care.

Bore no more. Open their senses and get your audiences attention with the use of humor. Keep it with well thought out stories that make people think and act. Above all else, be authentic and say what you mean because you mean what you say. Why? "...For we who teach will be judged by God with greater strictness." James 3:1