

Chapter Four

Performing the Text

Whether the text performed is the day's Scripture lesson or the sermon manuscript itself, there are performance rules and rules of thumb that can make the difference between a live word and a dead speech. It might even be said that there are one or two principles that can make as much as a 50 percent difference, just in themselves. It certainly is the case that a number of the rubrics that undergird performance are relatively easy to teach and learn. It will be the aim of this chapter to show how the good and efficient use of such smart rules can help produce enlivened and embodied sermons.

However, as much difference as a few good rules can make, they cannot bring a text to life. Only a faithful interpreter can do that. Faithful interpretation is a function of integrity, exegesis, and self-knowledge. It is fueled by desire and sometimes by love. It involves the giving of self.

◆◆ THE PERFORMER AS INTERPRETER ◆◆

Both the biblical text and the sermon text are arrested performances until that moment in the Sunday morning worship hour when they are performed for and with the assembled congregation. It is the preacher's job to continue the life of the text—to offer it to the hearer with the freshness and immediacy that began at its inception.

This means more than wumping up energy and enthusiasm and more than foisting a general intensity onto the text in the vague hope that that will simulate "life." Continuing or resuming the life of an arrested performance means taking responsibility not only for the energy and effectiveness of the physical voice but for interpretation and incarnation.

It is the preacher's job to perform the text for the congregation in such a way that it will slip directly from the listener's ear to the brain. It is not the preacher's job to tell the listener's brain what to think. However, it is the responsibility of the preacher to remove all foreseeable impediments to the listener's ear. The preacher's goal is to deliver the text to the listener's ear shaped in such a way that it will be possible for the listener to take it in quickly and begin his or her own (mental, emotional, spiritual) work of digestion.

It is the preacher's job to make some decisions about which pieces of the text deserve priority, about which aspects of the text should be divided from each other and which are important to keep linked. The preacher decides what layers of connotative meaning can be added and what rhythm and meter are most consonant with the text's life. Likewise, it is the job of the preacher to sniff out the shape of the text, to see where it peaks and what devices it uses to build momentum to reach that point. Obviously it is also the preacher who decides which part of her or his face and body will carry forward the life of the text. The preacher runs the text through his or her own internal circuits as it comes out his or her mouth. The preacher does all of these things whether she or he means to or not. The only question is whether the preacher will be purposeful or thoughtless about the doing.

There are, of course, people who read the Scripture and preach who consciously adhere to what they call a "neutral" reading style. Often out of a deep respect for the text (this approach usually focuses on the reading of Scripture, although a few proponents may apply the principle to preaching as well), these readers/preachers aim to deliver a "pure" reading of the text. They see the job description of the reader/preacher as that of a reading machine. The reader's goal, in this view, is to get the words off the page and

out into the air without adding a jot or tittle to them. These readers aim for as plain a reading of the text as is possible, in the belief that each listener should be allowed to make his or her own interpretation.

The problem with this approach, of course, is that there is no such thing as a reading that is not an interpretation. The text as it exists on the page has already been subject to at least one layer of interpretation. It has been translated—and it may have been emended, redacted, and edited, as well. The act of oral performance inevitably adds another layer of interpretation. Once a reader starts picking the words up off the page and sending them out into the air with his or her voice, she or he is interpreting. (Even what seems to be a given about the text often involves a subtle decision on the part of the reader. The reader chooses, for example, whether to pause at commas or only for the purposes of breathing. Such a decision can, in some cases, be an important interpretive decision.) There is no noninterpretation option; there is only the choice between being in charge of the interpretation or hapless about it.

◆◆◆ VOCALICS: THE ART OF ORCHESTRATION ◆◆◆

The foundation of a careful, skilled performance may be said to be comprised of four basic materials: rate, pitch, volume, and (the use of) pause. These elements of oral performance are known as “vocalics.” Ideally, the control of these elements creates a reading that is orchestrated to match (and, therefore, express or animate) the moves and rhythms of the text.

The name of the vocalics game is variety. The skillful interpreter combines and recombines these four elements of oral communication to express the life of the text, never staying with any one combination long enough for it to bore the listener’s ear. Of course, the reader/preacher’s decisions about the changing combinations are cued not by some anxious desire to keep the listener’s attention, but by the text. The ultimate purpose of the four building blocks is to interpret and express the life of the text. In general and for example:

Performing the Text

- a fast rate, rising pitch, high volume, no-pause combination can express a text’s acceleration or increasing intensity: “My heart says to Thee, hide not Thy face from me; Cast me not away.”
- a slow rate, low pitch, low volume, long/frequent pause combination can express the meditative quality of another text: “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside still waters, He restoreth my soul....”
- a moderate rate, low pitch, low volume, no-pause combination can help convey a text’s menacing feel: “Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.”
- a slow rate, low pitch, high volume, short pause combination can communicate something of the text’s agony: “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”

The possibilities for combining and recombining rate, pitch, volume, and pause to create different effects are nearly endless. While they should not be applied to the text in a mechanical or haphazard way, experimenting with these four speech-regulators can help a faithful interpreter find and orchestrate the music of the text.

Such a process begins with rehearsal. The only way to make responsible decisions about orchestration is by exploring the options with voice and body—starting early and continuing to return to the experiment—throughout the sermon preparation process. There is no such thing as a silent rehearsal. There is no such thing as a sedentary rehearsal. In order to begin the kind of creative work that this chapter describes, the preacher’s voice and body must be activated.

◆◆◆ PHRASING: THE ART OF PAUSE ◆◆◆

A phrase in oral communication—as in music—is a unit of meaning. For the purpose of oral reading, a phrase may be defined as a group of words that expresses a thought, image, or movement. Every sentence is comprised of at least one phrase. Some phrases are enhanced when a reader pauses after them, some are not. The trick is in knowing one kind of sentence from another.

The twin aims of careful phrasing are (1) to keep related

thoughts grouped together and (2) to allow the listener such short periods of silence, pauses, as are necessary in order for the listener to absorb the message. A general awareness of these goals will go a long way in guiding the sensitive reader/preacher in the use of pause. However, there are a few famous pitfalls worth warning beginners about—and reminding old hands of.

1. *Never phrase at the opening of quotation marks.* If you could only remember one rule of phrasing, this would be the one to choose. Whenever you are reading Scripture in church on Sunday morning and come to a comma that is followed by quotation marks, a red flag should go up in your mind: *do not pause*. It may go against every instinct and every model you have ever had, but don't do it. A pause throws back the listener's attention to the word immediately preceding it. Do you really think that the word *said* or *saying* is worth highlighting? See how much more easily the sense of the sentence is conveyed if you step on that connecting word as you would on a bar of soap. Step on it and slide into the meat of the quote. Keep the listener focused on the substance, not the stage directions.

Common: Jesus opened his mouth and taught them saying, (pause) "Blessed are the merciful."

Better: Jesus opened his mouth (pause) and taught them saying, "Blessed are the merciful." Or: Jesus opened his mouth and taught them (pause) saying, "Blessed are the merciful."

2. *Don't be a respecter of commas.* In general, do not let punctuation make your phrasing decisions for you. The speech teachers' old saw that "punctuation directs the eye to meaning and phrasing directs the ear" is especially useful in the reading of Scripture. Punctuation helps the reader make sense of the text, but may or may not give him or her good advice about how to package the message for the ear. Not every period deserves a fat pause. Some are better ignored. Some of the best-placed pauses occur where there is no comma, semicolon, colon, quotation mark, ques-

tion mark, exclamation point, or period in sight. The reader must make phrasing decisions based on what the text wants to say, not the way it is decorated on the page.

3. *Never phrase before a vocative.* Among the most painful phrasing mistakes in oral Scripture reading is the mishandling of a vocative. Examples abound.

Common: "Great is thy faithfulness (pause) O God my maker."

Better: "Great is thy faithfulness O God my maker." (Said without a pause, this makes it clear that the praise for someone's faithfulness is addressed to God.)

Effective: "Great (pause) is thy faithfulness O God my maker." In this case, the pause causes the first word to be emphasized.)

Common: "Lift up your heads (pause) O ye gates."

Better: "Lift up your heads O ye gates" (said without a pause).

Common: "Deliver me (pause) O Lord from evildoers."

Better: "Deliver me O Lord, (pause) from evildoers."

Common: "I beseech you therefore (pause) brothers and sisters (pause) that you present your bodies a living sacrifice."

Better: "I beseech you therefore brothers and sisters (pause) that you present your bodies...."

The rule to remember is that the vocative ("O, Somebody" or a direct address like the "brothers and sisters" above) clings to what comes before it.

4. *Other famous phrasing mistakes:*

- The line "And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in the manger." is often read in such a way as to make it sound as if all three members of the Holy Family were wedged into the feeding trough together. If the reader pauses after "Joseph" but does not pause after "Babe," this problem can be avoided.
- The last line of the Lord's Prayer, when prayed corporately, is

often phrased with a pause after "power," giving the impression that of all God's attributes only "glory" is "forever." If the line is read or the line of the prayer is prayed without pausing, the theology is better.

- The meaning of Ruth's famous line can be nearly inverted with a misplaced pause. "Entreat me (pause) not to leave thee" makes it sound as if Ruth is asking Naomi to beg her to stay. To convey the intended meaning—that is, of Ruth saying to Naomi, "Don't ask me to leave you"—the pause must be placed after "not."

The purpose of paying attention to phrasing is to create the sound of natural speaking patterns. While it would be ideal for readers to be able to rely on their instincts to reproduce the sound of spontaneous speech, these skills do not come to most of us automatically. Think of how difficult it can be to "just be yourself" when somebody holding a video camera tells you to. It can be hard to remember how to "be natural." Something similar happens to many people when they pick up a text to read it out loud. Most people need to practice applying the kind of guidelines offered above to their oral reading.

On the other hand, it is important that the rules offered be taken as heuristic devices. The goal is natural, honest, enlivened speech. Applying rules in a legalistic or over-zealous manner can lead to the very kind of mechanical performance most readers are trying to avoid. What is important is not the preciseness with which the reader applies these principles, but the degree to which they help the reader discover and convey the meaning of the text.

◆◆◆ EMPHASIS: THE ART OF PRIORITIZING ◆◆◆

Of all the techniques that can turn a dead reading into an enlivened performance, perhaps the single most important is the skillful use of emphasis. The great American elocutionist Leland Powers described the goal. "A word is emphasized when it is lifted into prominence in order to arrest attention.... Emphasis is used to discriminate the important from all related ideas."¹

Stanislavski preferred the term "accentuation" for the same

technique and had a somewhat more colorful way of describing its effect. "The accent is a pointing finger. It singles out the key word in a phrase or measure. In the word thus underscored we shall find the soul, the inner essence, the high point of the subtext."²

Other schools of acting refer to this discipline as finding the text's "operative words." There are many possible approaches; but for the purposes of this discussion, it will be helpful to think in terms of prioritizing. The goal for the reader/preacher is the creation of appropriate emphasis patterns that approximate natural speech. Every performer can develop his or her "ear" for emphasis.

An example will serve to launch the discussion. Read the line "I never said she stole my purse" putting the emphasis on the first word. Control the reading of all the other words in the sentence so only the word *I* is stressed. Now read the same line a second time, reserving the emphasis for only the second word. Make sure only the word *never* is lifted into prominence. Continue the exercise by repeating the line, each time emphasizing a different word, subduing the inflection of all other words except the single word that is emphasized. You see how the meaning conveyed is different in each instance.

"I never said she stole my purse."
(Maybe someone else said it.)

"I *never* said she stole my purse."
(I didn't say it before, I'm not saying it now.)

"I never *said* she stole my purse."
(I may have implied it.)

"I never said *she* stole my purse."
(It was someone else altogether.)

"I never said she *stole* my purse."
(Now that I think about it, she might have just borrowed it.)

"I never said she stole *my* purse."
(But someone else might have been victimized.)

"I never said she stole my *purse*."
(It was my wallet I was complaining about.)

The rule-of-thumb for deciding which word deserves the priority, in any given instance, is this: *the word that carries the meaning of the sentence forward is emphasized*. There are two common ways that meaning is carried forward: by the introduction of something new and by the introduction of something being contrasted. For example, the Old Testament text,

"Then Elijah said to all the people, 'Come near to me.'
And all the people came near to him." (I Kings 18:30)

is often read with the emphasis on *near* in the first line and *near* in the second line. But notice how much more easily the picture of Elijah and the Israelites enters the ear and comes up on the listener's mental motion-picture screen when *came* is emphasized in the second line.

"Then Elijah said to all the people, 'Come near to me.'
And all the people *came* near to him."

How do we know it will work better this way? Because, according to the rule of thumb being advanced here, new ideas are emphasized and old ideas are subdued. *Near*, by the time it occurs in the second line, is an old idea; the fact that the people of Israel actually did what he asked them to do (a fact that is communicated by the word *came*) is the new idea.

Similarly, when Jesus says,

"Peace I leave with you.
My peace give I unto you.
Not as the world gives, give I unto you." (John 14:27)

See how much more quickly the listener absorbs the meaning when *peace* is emphasized in the first line, *my* in the second and *world/I* in the third. In this example, both guidelines are operative: the emphasized words are introducing not only something that is new but something that is being contrasted.

"Peace I leave with you
My peace I give unto you
Not as the *world* gives, give I unto you."

In the reading of Scripture and preaching, there are certain words that seldom deserve emphasis. General words that indicate place or time—*here, there, that place, now, then*—often get a priority that they don't deserve. Unless they are being contrasted (i.e., with another place or another time) or are the point of the sentence, they do not carry the meaning forward. Certain common adverbs and adjectives—*very, really, big, all*—tempt us to fall into the kind of over-inflected speech patterns we relied upon to keep our three-year-old's interest through a long fairy tale.

Similarly, prepositions, though they are quite widely emphasized in common practice, seldom further the meaning of a sentence. Look again at Jesus' benediction in John 14:27. The first line gets the most important notion of all on the table: *peace*. It will be enough just to stress that word. Though it may be tempting to also emphasize either *leave* or *you*, a review of the immediate literary context will show that neither one is nearly as important as the priority on communicating *peace*: "*Peace I leave with you*."

As has been said, prioritizing in the second line is determined by the guideline which directs that contrasted words be emphasized. Although *my* is the most important word to stress in line two, many readers are tempted to emphasize *unto* as well. However, the line is better interpreted: "My peace I give unto you."

Some readers even succumb to the preposition when it occurs again in the third line. Again, the preposition *unto* should be subdued and the line read: "Not as the *world* gives, give I unto you."

The temptation to emphasize prepositions like the ones above, which do nothing to carry the meaning of the sentence forward, may be based on a desire to appear neutral or unemotional—or to distance oneself from the import of the text. It may also be the result of a habit absorbed from listening to other speakers in public and private settings. Giving prepositions more than their due has become quite commonplace. On a recent flight, the attendant's voice came over the intercom during the descent, announcing that we would "be landing *in* Phoenix." ("As opposed to *under* Phoenix?" I thought.) Any day of the week, one might hear a television commentator with a bright, lively style signing off his segment of the evening program with something like, "See you tomorrow."

row with more *from* the news desk." In a tense boardroom debate, a junior partner might be heard saying, "This is an important plan, *in* the long run."

Whatever the reason that Scripture readers and preachers emphasize prepositions and other underserving words, it is clear that such decisions are not made consciously. A conscious refocusing of attention to what furthers the sense of the sentence will help the reader/preacher make more effective choices. Better yet, a seasoned performer will develop his or her ability to "internalize" the text—to think the author's thoughts along with the words, as the words come out of the reader's mouth. This ability to "be present in the words," or to be absorbed in the "what" of what one is reading, is largely a function of desire and concentration. More will be said about this key discipline later.

◆◆◆ PAINTING THE PICTURE: THE NONVERBAL ARTS ◆◆◆

It is one thing to decide where to put the emphasis in a given sentence and another to know how to create that emphasis. Stress, pitch, vowel extension, and pause all may be used to lift a word into prominence. In Western cultures, each of these ways of creating emphasis is associated with a particular mode or style of speech. A theory describing the correspondence between three literary genres and the nonverbal techniques that are most effective in bringing each type of literature to life was formulated nearly a century ago by the ingenious elocutionist Leland Powers. He referred to the schemata he developed as "The Trinity of Expression."³

Powers theorized that any piece of literature could be categorized as one of three genres, based on the text's rhetorical appeal. In the Bible, for example, a given passage may be seen to appeal to either the rational, emotional, or kinesthetic faculties of readers. Powers acknowledged that two or even all three appeals might be found in a single pericopae, but argued that one would always be dominant. Knowing which appeal is dominant is crucial for the oral interpreter, Powers believed, since each genre of literature is most effectively interpreted by different speech techniques.

What Powers believed to be true about texts—that each may be

noted to have a dominant mode or style of communication—may be seen to apply as well to the people who read the texts. Most readers have a dominant mode that may be said to be the home base from which they read the Scripture. The readers who are most comfortable with snappy arguments tend also to have a natural ability to use the delivery techniques that are most effective in conveying snappy arguments. The vocal and nonverbal devices they use most easily tend to be the very ones that are consonant with argumentation. This would be true as well of the readers who are more comfortable with images that call up emotions and with the ones who seem to prefer the swashbuckling stories that set the muscles twitching. Readers tend to have a home base and to use the techniques of that home base instinctively, naturally. The problem occurs when a reader transports the techniques that work so well in his or her home base to one of the other two modes.

For those whose job it is to prepare and perform the public reading of Scripture (and their own sermon manuscripts), Powers' theory and the corollary suggested above can provide valuable guidelines. Of course, Powers' schemata should never be used as a substitute for the kind of rehearsal disciplines that have already been presented; however, when his approach is used as a heuristic tool to open up the reader's experience of the text, it can be quite effective. Not only can these guidelines help prime the performer's pump, they can provide a valuable safeguard or check against the unconscious mixing of nonverbal messages.

1. HEAD-ORIENTED PEOPLE

People who are dominantly reflective by nature—who may feel more comfortable with the Apostle Paul's contributions to the canon, for example—are also likely to be people who create emphasis with pitch. Preferring, as they tend to do, literature that moves from thought to thought or idea to idea, they themselves move from thought to thought by way of linear thinking. For them the use of pitch (or inflection patterns) is an elegant and supremely effective way to highlight what is important in the text without hindering the flow of ideas.

In addition, the nonverbal behavior of this group tends to have several predictable characteristics: eye-movement is used to show thinking, gestures that feature fingertips are preferred and vocalics tend toward the short, quick, and clipped. Head-oriented readers often catch on quickly to the art of emphasis, feeling at home as they do with the world of analysis and abstract reasoning.

2. HEART-ORIENTED PEOPLE

People who are dominantly emotion-oriented, whose taste in Scripture runs, perhaps, to the Psalms and laments, are likely to create emphasis through vowel extension or use of pause. "What a sweet baaaby," they say when they meet you and Junior on the sidewalk, and similarly, "I will dweeell in the houuse of the Looord forever." Alternatively, the heart-oriented reader may use more and fatter pauses, usually locating them after the word they wish to emphasize and providing the listener the "space" they need to absorb the emotional impact of what is being read.

Pericopaes that may be categorized as dominantly heart-oriented (the Psalms, for example) move not from idea to idea, but from image to image. It is word-pictures, not ideas, that express and evoke emotion. A heart-oriented text moves from one image and the emotion it elicits to the next. The nonverbal behaviors that are associated with heart-oriented people and texts focus on the reader's cheeks and palms. The heart-oriented make themselves more vulnerable than others. Politicians, for example, often favor a more "protected" gesture—like the soft fist gesture used by JFK and Bill Clinton, or the slicing palm (finger tips forward, palm facing to the side) used by Mario Cuomo. The displaying of an open palm—extended toward the audience as a gospel singer might, or raised in benediction—signals an emotional openness. Similarly, it is easy to see that a speaker who keeps the cheeks of his or her face impassive is not likely to be a heart-oriented reader. This group is full of readers who find it necessary to wrinkle, lift, moue, and dimple their countenances in order to convey every nuance of emotion they feel.

3. GUT-ORIENTED PEOPLE

People who are dominantly action-oriented—often the same people who prefer the sweeping Cecil B. De Mille type stories of the Old Testament—are likely to create emphasis by putting stress or force on the prioritized word. Since stories unfold scene by scene, not primarily by the movement of thought or poetic imagery, they rely on a kind of rhythm to achieve their goal. It makes a certain kind of sense that the reader would use a "downbeat" stress or force to work in concert with the text's rhythms.

It is said that the action-oriented reader connects with the story on a gut level because such readers are able to establish a kinesthetic tie to the text. They see it unfold in their mind's eye and experience it in "muscle memory" as they narrate the tale. In particular, it is the trunk of the reader's body and the back of the arm that are set tingling by these Big Stories. Movement of the upper body and large, sweeping gestures featuring full arm extension are characteristic of this group's nonverbal communication. The athlete's classic gesture of triumph, which consists of a bent-arm suddenly jerked downward and backward, is a hallmark of this group's style.

◆◆◆ INTERNALIZATION ◆◆◆

More than a half century ago, the preacher's theologian H. H. Farmer summed up the difference between preaching and "mere reading":

Merely to read the sermon is fatal. It is worse than fatal; it is the culpable repudiation of one's task and calling.... The alternative to reading is not dispensing entirely with notes or manuscript in the pulpit. The alternative to reading is *preaching* and you *can* preach from notes and even from a full manuscript if you have taken the trouble to.... absorb it.⁴

The same may be said about the difference between the performed word (whether of Scripture or sermon) and the word that is merely read. The ability to be absorbed in the "what" of what

one is reading or preaching is a function of one's ability to internalize the text. When a head-oriented text is internalized, it is run through the reader's cerebral circuits as—or a split second before—it comes out of the reader's mouth. A Psalm is circulated through the reader's own emotional center as it comes out of his or her mouth. Similarly, when a gut-oriented reader interprets an epic story, the story is recreated on the reader's mental screen and the reader's muscles resonate with the words as they leave his or her lips.

The alternatives to internalization are several and deadly. Many readers/preachers pick the print up off the page with their eyes and run it out their mouths and are satisfied that they have done their job. They are reading machines, not preachers. The words never come anywhere near the center of life, and it shows. The text emerges from the mouths of such readers sterile, misshapen, dead.

Other preachers settle for slathering the reading of the Scripture or sermon with a layer of emotional mayonnaise. One deep dip in the jar, one pass of the knife, and the result is an obscured text and a monotonous texture. The common holy-drone and predictable inflection pattern that is characteristic of much mainline preaching is enough to make anyone gag. Hollywood stereotypes it, Generation Xers mock it, Boomers avoid it. And they are right. This kind of "attitudinizing" has done as much as anything to give preaching a bad name and to cause the faithful to worry about sermons that are "merely performances." The irony is that the very preachers who cause the words "performance" and "acting" to be stigmatized are themselves, at most, *bad* actors, *bad* performers. Some would say they do not deserve to be called actors or performers at all.

There are still others who read Scripture and preach whose *modus operandi* is to search out what they judge to be key words in the text and pantomime them. "Our Father," they read pretending to bow their heads, "Who art in heaven" (up-pointed finger accompanies the raising of the head). "Hallowed be" (hands folded) "thy name" (head bowed again). "Thy kingdom come" (head raised expectantly), "thy will be done on earth" (arm sweeps out horizontally) "as it is in" (up-pointed finger) "heaven." Of all the substitutions for internalization this one may frustrate the listener

most. It represents a singular lack of imagination on the part of the interpreter and reduces the embodiment of the text to an embarrassing kind of verbal diagram. It reminds one of the kind of silly sign-language desperate tourists fall into when they are unable to speak the language of the country in which they are traveling. It is difficult to imagine what such interpreters hope to add to the text. Do they think that the listener's experience of the text will be enhanced by hand-signals pointing out the direction of the heavens? Do they imagine that the listener's receiving of the text will be enlarged by gestures that are every bit as verbal as the words they are meant to . . . illustrate?! To add insult to injury the listener/viewer of this melange of verbal messages is often subjected not only to corny, mechanical, literalistic movement but to *mouvement* that comes a *beat late*—movement that *follows* instead of accompanies the thought impulse that gives rise to it. How much better (simpler, cleaner, more natural) it is to actually think the thought and feel the impulse and to let the arms and hands express those impulses. Not only will it feel more natural to the interpreter, but it will look more natural to its audience and will avoid reducing the text to the level of a Sunday school ditty with hand motions.

◆◆◆ COMMON PROBLEMS WITH THE PERFORMED WORD ◆◆◆

For those whose job it is to bring arrested texts to life on Sunday morning, there are several pitfalls that bear mentioning. All of these are quite common. All are distracting; some are deadly. All deserve to be red flagged.

1. *Slow and steady does not win the race.* Often when listeners react to a reader or speaker with distaste, they mislabel the speaker as a "monotone." In fact, there are far fewer true monotones than there are mono-rates. Reading at a too-steady rate is a nearly ubiquitous problem. It may well be that a slow and steady rate is the most common oral interpretative problem of all.

Natural speech is downright erratic compared to the way many people read. Full of explosive starts, sudden stops, side trips, spurts, jogs, and even foot dragging, natural speech moves forward

unevenly. Its rhythms are endlessly interesting, and they do the crucial job of packaging content into hearable bits. Pauses of varying length, sometimes in surprising places, keep listeners' attention and give them time to digest what is being communicated. In addition, the average listener can listen much more quickly than most speakers can speak. As long as a speaker's diction is crisp enough to support a fast rate, she or he should have no concern about its judicious use.

2. *Don't make the crooked straight.* Many preachers seem to approach oral reading with a kind of a John the Baptist mentality. It is as if they are searching out all the precious peaks, hills, ridges, mounds, dunes, and mesas of the text in order to mow them down. Gullies and canyons are filled in. Turns and twists are smoothed out. The problem is that in the process of making all the text's rough places into plains, these prophets manage to bulldoze the life right out of the text.

Peaks and valleys are indispensable to the ear. Varied levels of intensity are so important in expressing the sense and animus of a text that they should be sought out, cherished, and rejoiced over. If they didn't exist, the reader would have to invent them. It's unthinkable that a skilled reader would throw away the text's own perfectly good levels. Effective oral interpreters lean into a text's intensity levels, going with the flow of life when it wants to build, and sliding back when it wants to rest.

3. *Avoid the stained-glass-window voice.* There is a very funny joke about a pastor who intones a long and overly personal story in the same voice that he uses for preaching. Of course the joke cannot be told here. Intonation patterns do not translate easily into print. If they did, some speech teacher would have published something by now that would effectively wipe out the classic intonation pattern that plagues American and British pulpits.

No one who has been to church more than twice in his or her life can be in the dark about what intoning sounds like. Imagine six syllables spoken quickly at a slightly higher than average pitch and a seventh dropped to a slightly lower than average pitch and sus-

tained for three beats. This is one of the more common intonation patterns. When this kind of a pattern is imposed onto a religious text, a modern classic results: the stained-glass-window voice.

The preacher is striving, often unconsciously, for a holy sound and for a voice that is different from her or his everyday voice. But intoning is a cheap out for an interpreter. And what is cheap in terms of the investment of the interpreter is expensive in terms of the text's effectiveness. This kind of arbitrary imposition of pitch and rhythm patterns works not *with* the sense of the text to enliven it, but *against* the sense of the text, killing it.

◆◆◆ THE UNSELFISH PERFORMER ◆◆◆

The difference between a faithful performer and a schlocky performer has something to do with the performer's willingness to practice certain disciplines. A commitment to rehearsal, the careful application of such oral interpretation guidelines as are outlined above and the honest desire to connect with a text through the process of internalization go a long way toward predicting the effectiveness of an oral performance—whether it is Scripture or sermon text that is being interpreted. However, there is another difference between faithful preachers and schlocky preachers that is as important as the techniques they practice. Faithful preachers, as faithful actors, handle the texts they interpret with respect, even reverence.

Where preaching is an art and not merely entertainment or propaganda, the difference may often be traced to a difference of attitude toward (or commitment to) the biblical text. The artist-preacher is one who is willing to enter into a profound partnership with the text. The faithful preacher strives for a process of dialogue, discovery, and synthesis with the text; mastery, dominance, and penetration of the text are eschewed. The resulting sermons are as full of the voice and life of the text as they are full of the voice and personality of the preacher. Sermons preached by selfish preachers will always look and sound different from sermons preached by preachers who deal faithfully with the text. It is true in theatre, as well.

In the classic *How's Your Second Act?* Arthur Hopkins observes that an actor or playwright cannot hide an egotistical approach to his or her work—the truth will out. As Hopkins shows, the attitude that is necessary to both good theatre and good preaching is an attitude of self-giving.

Author, director, scene designer, and actor must become completely the servants of the play. . . . Each must make himself a free, transparent medium through which the whole flows freely. . . . It requires a complete surrender of selfishness.⁵

This kind of self-giving, as actors know, is first of all a function of love. In the first place, I would have him [critic, author, actor, artist, director] love the theatre, and in the second place, I would have him liberated from any desire to be personally effective in connection with it.⁶

Also associated with this approach is a kind of self-forgetting. The actor/performer/preacher is so absorbed in the “what” of what she or he is saying, that the “what” takes up all available space within the performer. The “how,” “why,” and “who” recede. This may be what the great Constantin Stanislavski himself envisioned when he gave his famous advice, “Love the art in your self, not yourself in the art.”⁷

◆◆◆ A HERMENEUTIC FOR THE PERFORMED WORD ◆◆◆

If we say that African American preaching is often shaped by a “hermeneutic of the cross” and that it is common for feminist preachers to use a “hermeneutic of the resurrection,” we might also say that the interpretive principle that underlies this incarnational approach to preaching employs a “hermeneutic of annunciation.” Such a hermeneutic would require of the performer the kind of unselfish attitude outlined above and certain additional commitments:

1. a respect for the text.
2. an openness to the voice of the text.
3. a willingness to subordinate his or her will—not to the text—but to the will of the text to become itself.⁸

The historical model for such an approach is obvious.

Performing the Text

The Word became flesh through a human act of receptivity, availability, and profound cooperation. When the human person Mary of Nazareth responded to the possibility of Incarnation, she said, in the old language, “Be it done unto me according to thy word.” By her own affirmative words she allowed the Word to take upon itself the flesh of her flesh. The holy interpreter is like Mary in allowing the word to be born.⁹

In the case of the reader and preacher of Scripture, the incarnational process begins with “respecting” the text. Prayer, translation work, and textual criticism might accompany the reader’s experimentation with embodying the text, for example. Some preachers might also “reverence the text” with incense or elevation or the sign of the cross. For others, standing or kneeling during their initial reading of the text makes sense, body posture reminding the reader of the holiness of the task. Others find that large-muscle repetitive movement such as pacing keeps them focused on the voice of the text.

Lectio divina, currently enjoying a resurgence of popular interest, has a long track record of helping Christian preachers open themselves to the voice of the text. When practiced in concert with exegetical efforts and the application of various critical tools, it can lead a preacher to new discoveries—even in texts that have become quite familiar. Minimally, opening oneself to the voice of the text, involves an inquiring spirit and a willingness to, at least momentarily, set aside one’s own agenda. While it is not possible for a reader to still his or her own internal voice(s) entirely, the motivated preacher will find ways to let the text’s voice emerge out of the melee.

Subordinating oneself to the text is a technique that is not recommended in this approach. Self-giving has its place in the process of annunciation, but its role is limited. Self-giving follows a period of listening and pondering, and it stops when it means loss of self. Self-sacrifice stops when it means sacrificing identity. The limit of subordination is reached when the reader’s integrity is threatened. After all, the goal of this annunciation is incarnation: the combination of two separate entities that produces a third, which embodies them both and *in which the integrity of each is still preserved*.

Annunciation requires respect, openness, and subordination, but what the interpreter subordinates himself or herself to is not the text but the will of the text to become itself. In addition, the subordinating is temporary and chosen. This kind of inviting the text to take the stage enables the interpreter to enter into a partnership with the life of the text. If the reader is seen as one who releases the life of the text, then “subordination” may be seen as a simple, graceful act of stepping back—of making room—of getting oneself out of Gabriel’s way.

Chapter Five

What Actors Know

In the legitimate theatre there are good actors and bad actors, great artists and schlocky performers. There are actors who hold a cynical view of their craft and those who see in their art a high calling. Just as is the case for preachers, some actors are more talented, creative, and well trained than others. What actors know varies from person to person and school to school. But all effective actors know some things. In this chapter I claim that some of what actors know could do preachers a world of good.

The following discussion focuses on the disciplines and values of theatrical artists that preachers may find useful in the practice of their own art. It is not my purpose here to reprise what has already been said about the mechanics of the craft, i.e., about vocal projection and the judicious use of emphasis in oral interpretation. In this chapter I will attempt to show that there are many things in the actor’s bag of tricks that the preacher might like to have in hers or his. Some of the items in that bag have to do with the particular disciplines that undergird the creative process, and some have to do with a certain ethos, a set of norms and values that are widely held in the theatre and that suggest a course for preachers and worshipers.

This chapter will recap some of the body of knowledge that is shared by artistic actors, that is, by those who hold