

Transformational Teaching as Songwriting

Who's your favorite songwriter? That usually depends on your musical taste—it could be anyone from the Beatles to Bono to Billy Joel. All great songwriters have the ability to move us deeply through their work, engaging our hearts and minds about both the trivial and the philosophical. A great song is a snapshot of life, of reality, that leaves you somehow clearer and lighter.

Your goal for every message, for every teaching moment, should be to challenge, expose, and transform people's underlying beliefs about reality—their core beliefs—not just to communicate information. **Transformational teaching must connect with the heart and the soul, not just the head.** Isn't that what great songs do? This leads me to believe that we can learn a few things from great songwriters that will make our times of teaching more effective and more transformational if we can learn to master them.

1. Think arc, not outline.

“What do I want people to feel?” This is the question that will help you craft your message in terms of arc, not outline. For decades, most teachers have leaned far to the left-brain when preparing messages, focusing all of the attention on precise theological language and a systematic presentation. This is great for academic lectures and communicating information, but does it produce transformation?

Great songwriters think about the arc of the song. What do I want people to feel at the different stages of the song? What will it take to move people there? This is a more right-brain approach to message development, but it's imperative for transformational teaching.

Recently, I attended a service where the message was about prejudice. I don't remember the key passage for the day or the three points of the pastor's outline (maybe it would have helped if they all started with “p” or something), but I do remember how I felt at the end of the message. He told a memorable story that connected with me on an emotional level—that's what hit me that day. The powerful combination of theological truth communicated in a way that connected emotionally is what made the difference.

So when you start thinking about your next message, don't just think about what you want people to know, think about what you want them to feel.

2. What's the refrain?

Almost every great song has a memorable chorus, a repeated section with a melody and lyrical combination that sticks in your brain.

So what's the refrain in your next message? What will people remember? One of the best examples of a refrain in speaking is “I Have a Dream” in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous speech.

If you're thinking arc and refrain instead of outline and main idea, you may find it helpful to use a standard song form for your next message: verse, refrain, verse 2, refrain, bridge, and finally, refrain with a twist.

In the first verse, you introduce the idea enough that the refrain will make sense when people hear it for the first time. In the second verse, you expand on the idea, giving more depth and detail before returning to the refrain, reinforcing the emotional impact of it. The bridge is usually a short section that changes the timbre or focus of the song in an interesting or unexpected way, building an emotional tension that releases in the final refrain. But most times, the final refrain has a twist that sets it apart—maybe the instruments drop out or the melody shifts slightly—but it's still the refrain, still reinforcing the memorable and powerful hook that resonates after the song is over.

Great songwriters know how to take the elements of verse, refrain, and bridge and weave them together in ways that capture and keep the listener's attention and moves them along an emotional arc. And it's the refrain that holds it all together. Sounds like a great approach to message prep, too.

3. Passion is key.

This one almost goes without saying, but when I think of great songs, passion is a key element. If the songwriter doesn't feel something deeply about the subject matter, it's not going to be a great song. The same is true of a great message.

If you've chosen a passage or a topic that doesn't excite you or make you angry or incite hope or something, don't speak on it! Or, find someone who is passionate about it and listen to them for a while. (Passion is contagious.) Or, think about the topic or passage from another angle until you get passionate about it.

We all express ourselves in different ways, so I'm not saying that passion is going to come out of all of us the same. But it's easy to see if the person who's speaking cares about what they're saying or not. By the time you reach the moment you begin to speak, you should feel like you're going to explode if you don't get a chance to say what you came to say.

If you're not passionate about it, change it—talk about anything else. Or, call your worship leader and tell him or her that you've decided to have an extended worship time on Sunday. I'm sure your congregation wouldn't mind if you stood up and talked for 5 or 10 minutes about something you feel passionate about rather than ramble on for 40 minutes just because "you're supposed to" or because "it's what's next in the series." I'm all for message planning and calendars (I was a worship leader for 13 years), but I'd rather listen to someone who's passionate about something than just someone who planned to speak on something. Give us passion, please!

4. Rhythm, tempo, and volume matter.

As I've said before, we all have different styles and ways of communicating. I'm not advocating

for a certain style here, just reminding you that if you want to connect with people emotionally, keep them engaged, and move them to a place where their core beliefs are exposed and challenged, rhythm, tempo, and volume matter.

I've spoken in public hundreds of times, but I still rehearse (at least the key sections). I'll tweak and practice my phrasing and wording over and over to get the rhythm right. It might be making sure that I leave enough space between statements or that a powerful section builds quickly enough or that I've found just the right word to complete a section. Obviously, all of this is done in submission to God's Spirit, but the way you deliver the message God has put on your heart is a skill and an art that He can use to bring real change. I've seen it happen...and I've experienced it myself.

And in your delivery, it's not about finding the one thing that works. It's about using all these tools to communicate the idea at hand. Great songwriters can compose a hopeful, driving tune one day and crank out a gentle, heartfelt ballad the next. Don't lock yourself in to one method or style. Experiment with how quickly you speak and how loud or soft you are throughout each message. The right tone, the right rhythm, can be the difference between holding and losing the attention of your listeners.

All of these ideas—**arc, refrain, passion, delivery**—are ways to think about crafting a message. In all of it, remember that you're just a vessel, a carrier of God's Spirit. People are going to feel what you communicate during a message more than they are going to remember what you say. So please, please don't settle for an alliterated outline when you could move people emotionally, challenge and expose their assumptions and beliefs, and watch as God transforms them through the power of His Spirit and His Word.