

Dr Ainslie
The Speaking Mind
Discipline, Curiosity and the Craft of Speaking

Copyright © 2026 The Speaking Mind Publishing

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from the publisher, except for brief quotations used in reviews or scholarly commentary.

The views expressed in this book are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any cruise line, organisation, board or institution with which she is associated.

This book is intended for informational and entertainment purposes. Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy at the time of publication.

First digital edition.

ISBN: 978-0-646-73654-9

Published in Australia by
The Speaking Mind Publishing

Chapter 1

Origin and Impulse

The idea began while I was a passenger listening to another speaker on a cruise. It did not arrive as ambition so much as recognition. My husband and I attended a lecture given by a speaker who was entertaining, engaging and informative. He spoke with ease, the audience listened attentively and the whole experience felt natural and unforced. As we left the theatre my husband said quietly, "You could do that."

This is the sort of remark husbands make from time to time. It is usually intended as encouragement and often delivered without any real expectation that it will lead anywhere. In this case, however, the comment had rather more effect than either of us expected.

I had spoken at conferences and professional gatherings throughout my career, but speaking on a cruise ship had never crossed my mind. The idea felt improbable, though not entirely impossible, and once it took hold it produced an unexpected sense of energy. Curiosity has a habit of doing that.

A few days later I spoke with the lecturer and asked about speaking at sea. Approaching someone whose work you have just watched and asking about their profession is slightly unusual, but he was generous with his time and introduced me to his agent. After that conversation something new began to happen. The possibility of speaking myself no longer felt abstract. I could feel excitement and anticipation already beginning to well up in me.

Before any audience heard me, however, I rehearsed, and I rehearsed a great deal. I went over the material again and again. My first audience consisted of several rows of books arranged carefully across my sofa at home. They were attentive, extremely well read and mercifully silent. I spoke to them as though they were guests, adjusting pacing and refining phrasing while testing whether the structure of the talk felt natural. Books, as it turns out, are very forgiving listeners.

The subjects themselves had interested me for years. I had always been drawn to the private lives of well known figures. Public achievement often presents a polished image, yet behind that image lies the more complicated reality of personality. Churchill, Einstein, Tesla, Agatha Christie, Steve Jobs, Muhammad Ali and even the ancient mathematician Pythagoras had fascinated me for a long time. Their public achievements are well known, but their private habits, eccentricities and small human moments often reveal far more about them.

Preparing those early talks required far more work than I had first imagined. I began by rereading all the material I already had and then searching for additional sources. That meant tracking down more books and articles and gradually building a much larger body of material. Once gathered, everything had to be arranged in a way that would work for an audience rather than simply for my own reading.

Then came the practical challenge of constructing the presentations themselves. I had to relearn the small intricacies of putting together a PowerPoint presentation. In earlier professional roles I had been fortunate enough to have assistance with many of these tasks, but this time I was working alone. I had to navigate again the small but persistent quirks of laptops, screens and presentation software while slowly building the slides one by one.

The process was far more labour intensive than I had anticipated. I spent long hours assembling the presentations and searching for images that might interest or intrigue an audience. A good slide should add something to the story rather than simply decorate it, and finding the right image often takes far longer than expected.

For every presentation my starting point, in terms of the PowerPoint itself, was usually around ten times longer than what I would eventually use. I would build the presentation with far more slides and material than could possibly fit into a forty five minute talk. Only later would the difficult task begin of deciding which slides and stories deserved to remain and which had to be removed. Even now, whenever I begin preparing a new topic, the PowerPoint almost always starts out far too long. The real challenge is not finding material but having the discipline to omit a great deal of it.

Looking back, the path to speaking had begun long before that cruise. As a child in Scotland I recited poetry in national competitions and I loved every minute of it. Preparation, rehearsal and performance were all part of the excitement. My tutor and my mother would drive long distances across the country so that I could compete, and those journeys felt like small expeditions. On the way home we would sometimes stop at roadside milk bars, which in those days felt wonderfully modern places. Ordering a milkshake there was a real treat for me because it was something I never had at home. That small and unexpected stop on the journey back became an added pleasure after the performance, although in truth I would happily have competed anyway. I loved the rehearsing, the travelling and the performing far too much to need additional encouragement.

I won quite a number of those competitions and they became an important part of my childhood. Exactly why I eventually stopped is something I can no longer remember with certainty. My tutor may have retired, or perhaps life simply moved in another direction. What has stayed with me, however, is the memory of enjoying every stage of the process, from rehearsing the lines to standing on the stage and delivering them.

Standing reciting poetry as a child, I could not have imagined that those early competitions might lead to a second chapter decades later.

Chapter 2

The Live Moment

The moments before a presentation begins are usually quieter than people imagine. By the time the audience starts to enter the theatre everything is ready. My computer is on the stage, the presentation is open and the equipment has already been tested. Cruise ships run on precise schedules and the theatre rarely sits idle for long. Musicians rehearse there during the day, entertainers prepare for evening shows and technicians move quickly between events. For that reason I try to ensure that everything is ready well before guests arrive so that once the room fills my attention can be entirely on the audience rather than on the machinery.

I have detailed notes on the PowerPoint screen that only I can see. Those notes are written in my own words and contain the research and phrasing that have developed over time. They allow me to maintain accuracy while still speaking naturally. Dates, quotations and small details are easier to handle when they are quietly waiting on the screen rather than relying entirely on memory.

Once the first sentences are spoken, anticipation gives way to concentration. I tend to speak fairly quickly because I like to include a great deal of information within the time available. Cruise audiences are remarkably attentive and curious, and I have always felt that they appreciate substance rather than oversimplification.

At the same time a presentation cannot be delivered as a continuous stream of information. Attention has its own rhythm. Every ten minutes or so the atmosphere in the room shifts slightly. Guests adjust their posture, glance briefly at the screen or settle again in their seats. Over time I learned to recognise that rhythm and to work with it rather than against it.

Cruise audiences themselves are wonderfully varied. A typical theatre may include retired engineers, doctors, teachers, academics, business owners and travellers who have spent decades observing the world carefully. It is never wise to assume that an audience needs material simplified. In my experience the opposite is usually true. People enjoy learning something new and they appreciate a speaker who respects their intelligence.

After a few lectures another interesting pattern begins to appear. Guests start returning to the theatre and many of them develop a strong attachment to particular seats. Quite quickly those seats become, in their minds at least, their seats. On busy voyages my talks sometimes become very crowded, especially in the smaller theatres, and there are occasions when the room fills to standing capacity. When someone arrives and discovers that another guest is sitting in what they have quietly come to regard as their seat, a small but visible discomfort spreads across their face. They hover uncertainly for a moment, clearly wishing to reclaim the territory but too polite to say so. It is remarkable how quickly a theatre seat can become someone's territory, and I confess that I sometimes observe this behaviour with a certain quiet and discreet amusement.

Speaking at sea also produces moments behind the scenes that are difficult to imagine unless one has seen them. On one voyage a fellow speaker, who was a well-known sports personality in Australia, was enjoying his talk so much that he rather lost track of time. Presentations are normally scheduled for forty five minutes. When he passed the fifty minute mark the stage manager first flashed the small, discreet light that politely signals to a speaker that it is time to conclude. When that signal was ignored it was followed by a flash of the full house lights, which is usually a rather clearer message.

The speaker continued.

At sixty two minutes the microphone was turned off, cut completely. Undeterred, he carried on speaking at full volume without amplification, addressing the audience with the enthusiasm of someone determined to finish his story regardless of technical obstacles.

Eventually the stage manager and his crew had to come onto the stage to persuade him that the talk really did need to end. What followed was a brief negotiation conducted in full view of the audience. The speaker clearly wished to continue. The stage manager, who happened to be a very large man, was equally clear that the lecture had finished. In the end the stage manager prevailed, although not before the audience had enjoyed several very amusing moments watching the exchange.

When everything runs smoothly, however, the atmosphere in the theatre becomes something quite special. The room grows very still and the audience leans collectively toward the subject. In those moments the presentation feels less like a performance and more like a shared act of curiosity.

Applause at the end is always pleasant, but what matters far more is the quality of attention in the room while the talk is taking place. When several hundred people sit quietly engaged with an idea, the effect is almost tangible.

For me, those moments are what make the whole enterprise worthwhile.

Chapter 3

Panic Is Usually a Planning Problem

People often assume that speakers feel nervous before standing in front of an audience. Public speaking regularly appears near the top of surveys about common fears, sometimes ranking even above flying or heights. When people hear that someone speaks regularly to large audiences they often ask whether it becomes easier with time or whether the nerves eventually disappear.

In my own case I have rarely felt panic before a lecture. That is not because I possess unusual courage or a particularly calm temperament. It is much more closely related to preparation. Over time I have come to realise that most anxiety about speaking arises from uncertainty rather than from the audience itself.

When a speaker is unsure about the structure of a talk, the sequence of ideas or the timing of a presentation, tension naturally begins to build. The mind starts to race ahead, wondering whether an important point might be forgotten or whether the talk might end too soon or run too long. Uncertainty has a remarkable ability to generate anxiety. Preparation has the opposite effect. When a talk has been carefully constructed, rehearsed and timed, much of that uncertainty disappears. The speaker knows where the talk is going and how the ideas connect with one another. Instead of worrying about what might happen next, attention can remain on the audience and on the subject itself.

Preparation does not mean that everything will always unfold exactly as planned. Ships are complex environments and occasionally events occur that no speaker can control. One example is when the captain needs to make an announcement. The captain's microphone overrides every other microphone on the ship. If the captain begins to speak, the microphone of anyone else using the system immediately falls silent. When that happens during a lecture the speaker simply pauses and waits.

After the announcement ends, we then have a small decision to make. We can continue with the talk exactly as planned and possibly run a little beyond the scheduled time, or we can quietly adjust the material and omit a section or two in order to finish on time. The choice usually depends on the circumstances and on how much of the talk remains.

This situation always reminds me of an amusing moment during a trivia game on board a ship. Our team was playing one afternoon when the quizmaster asked a simple question. What is the captain's name? The difficulty was that the captain's name was rather foreign and none of the teams managed to remember it.

When the papers were being marked we were informed that no one had the correct answer. However one team was being awarded a bonus point. Everyone in the room immediately became curious. Had the team somehow guessed part of the captain's name correctly? Did someone on the team happen to speak the language?

The explanation was much better than that. The team had written *Captain speaking*.

The moment the quizmaster read it out the entire room erupted in laughter. Anyone who has spent time on ships immediately recognised the phrase. Whenever the captain interrupts a broadcast or makes an announcement over the ship's speakers, it almost always begins with those familiar words, *Captain speaking*.

It was one of those small moments that perfectly captures the shared experiences of life at sea.

So interruptions occasionally occur in ways no speaker can control. However the real work of speaking happens long before anyone enters the theatre. It happens during the hours spent researching, structuring the material, rehearsing the talk and refining the slides. Once that preparation has been completed, the lecture itself becomes a much more relaxed experience.

For me the stage has never felt like a place of danger. It has always felt more like the natural conclusion of a long process of preparation.

Chapter 4

The Ten Minute Rule

Audiences are wonderfully attentive, but attention has its own rhythm. Over time I have come to notice that even the most interested audience naturally shifts its concentration at regular intervals. Cruise audiences bring an enormous range of life experience into the theatre. They are curious people who enjoy learning something new.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that listening attentively on a cruise ship can occasionally be quite a challenge. Ships move gently through the water and the steady rhythm of that motion can be surprisingly soothing. At times the rocking of the ship feels almost reminiscent of the womb and it can quietly send even the most determined listener toward sleep.

There are other factors as well. Many guests may have enjoyed lunch and perhaps a glass of wine or two. After all they are on holiday and there is absolutely no reason why they should not. By the time the afternoon lecture begins the combination of food, relaxation and the gentle motion of the ship can make remaining fully alert something of an achievement.

For that reason I sometimes begin my first talk on a voyage by acknowledging the situation directly.

Now as well as giving a large amount of information, and I do give a lot of information, I also like to have a bit of fun in my presentations.

It has been shown that the average adult attention span is somewhere between ten and twenty minutes, and audiences often begin to lose interest after about ten minutes. Sometimes even less if the presentation becomes what is occasionally called Death by PowerPoint.

And I am using PowerPoint.

The odds are not exactly in my favour.

So today for some light relief, and to ease the burden of concentration, I have sprinkled into the presentation some interesting slides and videos. Today's slides depict amusing and unusual moments drawn from real life.

After saying this I include a few slides or short video clips roughly every ten minutes or so. I call these my *Concentration Relief* slides. They are there simply to entertain and amuse the audience for a moment before we return to the subject. I choose the slides and videos because I personally find them funny. My reasoning is quite simple. If I find something amusing there is a reasonable chance the audience might as well. I am including examples from the *Concentration Relief* slides at the end of some of the chapters in this book.

I approach the content of my presentations in much the same way. When preparing a talk I often ask myself a simple question. What would I want to know about this subject if I were sitting in the audience? That question usually provides a good starting point.

When the rhythm works well the theatre gradually settles into a shared concentration that can last far longer than many people expect. The lecture begins to feel less like a formal presentation and more like a conversation carried out across several hundred people. It becomes an informative and entertaining conversation.

Concentration Relief example:

One group of *Concentration Relief* slides are what I call *Lost in Translation*, for obvious reasons. Here are a couple that audiences enjoy:



Chapter 5

Curiosity and Noticing Things

Many people assume that speaking begins with standing on a stage and addressing an audience. In reality it begins much earlier, often in moments that appear quite ordinary at the time. Most of the ideas that eventually become lectures start with curiosity.

Curiosity is a quiet but persistent habit of mind. It begins with noticing something slightly unusual and wondering why it occurred. A small detail in a historical account, an unexpected remark in a biography or a curious coincidence between events can all spark the beginning of a story worth exploring.

Over the years I have discovered that the most interesting presentations often begin with the simplest questions. Why did someone behave in a particular way? What motivated a decision that later changed the course of events? What private circumstances might have influenced a public moment in history?

These questions rarely have simple answers. That is part of what makes them interesting.

When preparing a talk I often begin with the same question I mentioned earlier. If I were sitting in the audience, what would I genuinely want to know about this subject? That question immediately changes the direction of research. Instead of gathering facts simply for the sake of completeness, the aim becomes discovering details that illuminate the human story behind them.

Biographies are particularly rich sources of these moments. Famous figures often appear distant when viewed only through their achievements. Yet when we look more closely we begin to see something far more interesting. Small details often reveal far more about a person than the large achievements for which they are remembered.

For example, many people know Albert Einstein as the quiet and thoughtful physicist whose theories changed the way we understand the universe. What is less widely known is that his personal life was far more complicated. Einstein had a number of romantic relationships, and one of the most intriguing involved a woman who was later believed to have been a Russian spy sent by Stalin in the hope that she might obtain scientific information from him. In the end she obtained nothing of value, but the story itself reveals a fascinating glimpse of the world surrounding Einstein at the time.

Writers provide equally interesting examples. Agatha Christie, whose novels are built on mysterious disappearances and puzzling investigations, once found herself at the centre of a mystery of her own. She disappeared for several days and the entire police force of England began searching for her. Newspapers reported the disappearance widely and the story captured the public imagination. For a time it seemed as though the author of so many fictional mysteries had become the subject of one herself.

Sporting figures also reveal surprising details when we look more closely. Muhammad Ali, one of the greatest boxers in history, had a fear of flying. When he was selected at the age of eighteen to represent the United States at the Olympic Games in Rome he discovered that he would have to travel there by aeroplane. His first reaction was to ask if he could go by boat instead. When he was told that was not possible he initially refused to go at all. Eventually his coach persuaded him to make the journey, but Ali travelled all the way to Rome wearing a parachute, and he wore that parachute on the return journey as well.

Scientists and inventors can display equally intriguing personal habits. Nikola Tesla, for example, was known for a number of unusual routines. One of the most curious was that he would not enter a building until he had walked around it three times. Before stepping through the door he felt compelled to circle the entire building three times, a ritual that he followed with remarkable consistency. Only then would he enter.

Entrepreneurs sometimes reveal similar quirks when they are young. Steve Jobs, long before he became widely known, worked for the video game company Atari. At the time he was very young and somewhat unconventional in his habits. He liked to walk around barefoot and he was not particularly attentive to matters such as regular showers. His supervisor moved him to the night shift, explaining that it was simply better for everyone if Jobs worked when fewer people were around. Later in life Jobs became known for his carefully controlled public image, but the early stories are often very revealing.

Even subjects that appear entirely academic sometimes contain unexpected stories. When discussing Pythagoras, many people are surprised to learn that the famous theorem attributed to him was not actually invented by Pythagoras at all. The relationship between the sides of a right angled triangle had been used by Babylonian mathematicians centuries earlier. Pythagoras may have been the person who introduced the idea to Greek thinkers, but the mathematical insight itself was far older.

Political figures also reveal intriguing personal habits. Winston Churchill, for example, found great relaxation in laying bricks. At his home in Chartwell he built many small structures himself and often spent long hours working with mortar and bricks simply because he enjoyed the process.

Churchill was also known for his remarkable wit. One story I particularly enjoy involves Lady Astor, the first woman to sit in the British Parliament. Lady Astor was American and a strong supporter of women's rights, and she frequently challenged Churchill's views on the subject. During one dinner she became so frustrated with him that she finally declared, "Winston, if you were my husband, I would put poison in your coffee."

Churchill replied immediately, "Lady Astor, if you were my wife, I would drink it."

Stories like these bring historical figures back into the realm of human experience. They remind us that even the most celebrated individuals lived lives filled with humour, contradiction and occasional absurdity.

Observation plays an important role in that process. Small details that might escape notice often become sources of quiet humour or reflection.

While travelling I occasionally encounter unusual translations on signs or menus that reveal the curious results of language moving between cultures. Once, in a Vietnamese shopping centre, I saw a sign placed outside a restroom during cleaning. Instead of reassuring visitors it announced quite confidently *Execution in progress*.



The translation was incorrect, but I found it very funny. In fact, I use a photograph of that sign in one of my *Concentration Relief* slides that appears in my presentations every ten minutes or so. It gives the audience a quick laugh and helps ease the burden of concentration for a moment before we return to the subject.

Moments like this are not the substance of a lecture, yet they can provide brief moments of relief that refresh the audience's attention. Curiosity allows those details to be noticed in the first place.

When speaking about destinations I also try to include stories from the places being discussed rather than simply describing the events that occurred there. For example, instead of saying that a particular region experienced a devastating tsunami in 2004, I will often tell the story of someone who survived that tsunami and describe what happened to them, sometimes using their own words. Hearing the experience through the voice of someone who lived through it brings the reality of the event home far more powerfully than simply stating that a tsunami occurred.

Over the years I have collected many such stories from different parts of the world and I use them carefully within my presentations. They are often deeply moving and audiences tend to respond to them very strongly. I think people appreciate hearing about history and events through the experiences of individuals, because it reminds us that behind every major event there are human lives and personal stories.

Curiosity therefore becomes the engine that drives both research and storytelling. It encourages us to look beyond the obvious facts and search for the details that reveal something deeper.

When that curiosity is shared with an audience, the presentation becomes more than a transfer of information. It becomes an invitation to see familiar subjects in a slightly different way.

Chapter 6

Reading Without Apology

I read from my notes, and I do so quite deliberately. The notes are written in my own words and developed through research, refinement and repeated revision. They contain details that I consider important: dates, phrasing, quotations and the subtle transitions that maintain coherence between ideas. Precision matters.

When delivering destination lectures or cultural insights into places I only occasionally talk about, I read more closely because accuracy becomes particularly important when discussing places, events and cultures that deserve to be represented carefully. When delivering my Quirky Private Life series, which I have presented many times, I glance down more lightly because the material has become deeply familiar over time. Even then, however, the notes remain present because they anchor the density of the material and preserve the structure that holds the talk together.

Cruise talks are normally limited to three quarters of an hour, and within that time I try to include a considerable amount of information. Notes make that possible. They allow the material to remain detailed without becoming disorganised and help maintain the pacing required to deliver a substantial subject within a relatively short time.

Reading allows accuracy and helps preserve nuance. It permits information-rich delivery without dilution and prevents the gradual erosion of detail that can occur when a talk is delivered repeatedly from memory alone. Over time even well-intentioned speakers can unintentionally simplify material, losing the precise phrasing or subtle distinctions that originally gave the subject its clarity. Notes protect against that quiet drift.

That said, even when using notes, mistakes can still happen. We are human, after all. The other day I managed to make one that caused me some embarrassment. I was advising an audience where we were and outlining the places we were about to visit in New Zealand. We were going to Dunedin, then Christchurch and then Wellington. However, instead of saying Christchurch, which I was reading from the map on the screen, I said Churchill.

I did not even realise that I had said it until the end of the lecture when my husband carefully pointed it out to me. I felt rather embarrassed, although these things do happen from time to time. I suspect I made the mistake because the following day I was due to give a presentation about Winston Churchill and he must already have been somewhere in the back of my mind.

The audience, I should add, were far too polite to say anything. No one mentioned it to me at all. My husband, however, was quite happy to point it out afterwards. It is rare that I make mistakes during a talk and he seems to take a certain quiet pleasure in informing me when one occurs. I actually ask him to point my mistakes out if he hears any so that I will take care not to repeat the same mistake twice. We usually end up laughing about it together, although I suspect he enjoys those rare moments slightly more than I do and we have a lot

of fun together during and after my talks. I quite often introduce him to the audience and he never knows quite how I will do that. I usually introduce him in a funny and friendly way. He also doesn't mind at all when he is the butt of some of my jokes and throw away lines. I am very lucky that we share an unconventional sense of humour.

Some people regard reading notes as a weakness in public speaking, but I do not share that view. There is a common assumption that memorisation equals mastery, whereas I believe mastery lies far more in clarity and control than in the ability to recite material from memory.

Audience perception of authority is shaped less by whether a speaker glances at notes and more by whether the content feels thoughtful and well structured. If a talk is coherent, carefully paced and clearly presented, the presence of notes does not diminish it. In many cases it strengthens it because the material has been prepared with care.

Cruise audiences are curious people who enjoy learning something new, and they deserve accuracy. Many guests have travelled widely, observed the world closely and accumulated a lifetime of knowledge and experience. When speaking to such audiences it is important to respect their intelligence by presenting material that is both engaging and reliable.

The key distinction lies in ownership. I do not read because I am uncertain about the subject. I read because the notes represent the work that has gone into preparing the lecture. They reflect my research, my interpretation of the material and the way I believe the ideas are best communicated.

Substance, in my view, outweighs performance ego. If reading ensures accuracy and depth, then reading serves the audience. For me, that is reason enough.

Concentration Relief example: One group of *Concentration Relief* slides are related to people who had only one job to do. Here are a couple of cases where they didn't do it too well.



Chapter 7

The Architecture of a Talk

A presentation has shape. It is not simply a sequence of interesting facts placed side by side but a structure designed to carry attention from opening to conclusion without strain.

Before I begin building slides, I consider the arc of the talk itself. What is the central question? Where does it begin and where should it end? What feeling or reflection should remain with the audience as they leave the theatre? These questions determine the structure long before the first slide appears on the screen.

Even talks that appear conversational are carefully constructed. An introduction must establish direction without exhausting the subject. The middle section should deepen the material and add complexity without becoming dense beyond comfort. The final section must gather the threads together and bring the talk to a deliberate close.

Endings deserve particular care. A presentation should not simply fade away as the clock approaches the deadline time. The closing moments need to feel intentional. I rarely aim for a dramatic flourish. Instead, I prefer clarity — a final thought or observation that resolves the argument and allows the audience to leave with a sense of completion. A good ending feels less like an abrupt stop and more like a controlled landing.

Visual restraint supports that structure. I generally prefer a single image on each slide because crowded screens fracture attention. When an audience is reading paragraphs projected on a screen, they are no longer listening to the speaker. Slides should support the spoken word rather than compete with it.

The notes visible to me allow the spoken material to remain detailed without burdening the screen. The audience sees clarity while I retain the depth of the material in front of me. This balance allows the lecture to remain both informative and visually calm.

Stories play a particularly important role within this structure. They are not decorative additions inserted simply to entertain. A well placed story can illuminate culture, geography or history far more effectively than several paragraphs of explanation because narrative allows complex ideas to become human and memorable. When positioned carefully within a talk, a story refreshes attention and allows an audience to absorb ideas that might otherwise feel abstract.

For example, when I speak about Australia I often use stories to illustrate the extraordinary distances involved in living on that continent. One of the stories I frequently tell is the true story of a nine-year-old boy named Lennie Gwyther and his pony, Ginger Mick.

It was 1932 and Australia was in the grip of the Great Depression. One in three workers was unemployed and hardship was widespread across the country. In rural areas a rabbit caught in a trap could feed a family for a week, and country roads were often filled with men walking from farmhouse to farmhouse in search of work or food.

On the outskirts of the South Gippsland town of Leongatha lived the Gwyther family. Lennie's father, Captain Leo Tennyson Gwyther, had been a decorated hero of the First World War, but at this time he was lying in hospital with a broken leg and was unable to manage the family farm. There was real concern that the property might fall into ruin.

At that point Lennie, who was only nine years old, stepped forward. With the help of his pony, Ginger Mick, the boy ploughed the farm's twenty-four paddocks and kept the property operating until his father was able to return to work. His parents were deeply grateful and asked how they might reward him.

For several years Lennie had been fascinated by one of the greatest engineering achievements of the era — the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The entire nation had been following its progress and Lennie longed to see the opening ceremony. His parents could not leave the farm to accompany him, and at first they refused to allow him to travel alone. But Lennie pleaded persistently and eventually, with considerable reluctance, they agreed.

The boy saddled his pony, packed a toothbrush, pyjamas, spare clothes and a water bottle into a sack and began the thousand-kilometre journey from southern Victoria to Sydney.

Along the way he asked farmers if he could sleep in their barns in exchange for doing small chores. Families along the route took pity on him and made sure he had food for the next stage of the journey. He endured rain, cold winds and bushfires, and at one point he was even attacked by a wandering vagrant.

There was no social media in those days and no mobile phones, but word slowly began to spread about the small boy travelling across the country with his pony. Newspapers reported the story and soon entire towns gathered on their outskirts to greet him as he arrived. People fed him, sheltered him and cheered him onward as he continued north.

When Lennie reached Canberra he was welcomed by the Prime Minister of Australia, Joseph Lyons, who invited the young traveller into Parliament House for tea.

By the time he reached Sydney he had become something of a national figure. More than ten thousand people lined the streets to greet him and he became part of the celebrations surrounding the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

When he eventually left Sydney for the long journey home a month later he had become one of the most famous boys in the country. Crowds gathered to wave him farewell and, according to The Sun newspaper, Lennie simply swung into the saddle and called out a cheerful "Toodleloo!" before beginning the thousand-kilometre ride home.

Today a bronze statue in Leongatha commemorates Lennie Gwyther and his pony Ginger Mick, a reminder of a journey that captured the imagination of an entire nation.

Stories like this help audiences understand something that statistics alone rarely convey, the sheer scale of distance that has always shaped life in Australia.

Another story I often tell illustrates how those distances shaped Australian ingenuity. It begins with the real and tragic story of a Kimberley stockman named Jimmy Darcy.

On 29 July 1917 Darcy suffered massive internal injuries when his horse fell during a cattle stampede. An eighty-kilometre journey by dray over rough tracks eventually brought him to the tiny settlement of Halls Creek in the far north of Western Australia. There was no doctor there. The only person available to assist him was the local postmaster, a man named Tuckett.

Using telegraph communication, Tuckett contacted Dr Joe Holland in Perth, thousands of kilometres away. Holland quickly realised that Darcy would die unless surgery was performed immediately. Tuckett was terrified of making a fatal mistake, but Holland told him plainly that if he did nothing the young stockman would certainly die.

Following instructions sent by telegraph, Tuckett performed the operation himself. Using a pocketknife he made an incision above the pubic bone while Darcy's brothers tried to ease his agony and keep the flies away from the wound. The postmaster worked for hours, cutting and stitching, stopping frequently to check the doctor's telegrams for further instructions. Against all expectations the operation itself succeeded. Sadly, however, Jimmy Darcy then contracted malaria.

Dr Holland immediately began the long journey from Perth to reach the injured man. He travelled first by cattle ship to Derby, a voyage that took a week, and then set off across the desert in a Model T Ford held together with leather straps. For six days he battled the outback, crossing river beds, climbing sandy banks and coping with punctures, radiator leaks and failing engine parts. At one point he even used the rubber tubing from his stethoscope to siphon the last drops of petrol from a can.

Eventually the car failed completely forty kilometres from Halls Creek. Holland walked to a nearby cattle station and then rode through the night on horseback, finally reaching the settlement at daybreak.

Jimmy Darcy had died only hours earlier.

The tragedy of that story helped inspire the development of what later became the Royal Flying Doctor Service, one of the most remarkable medical systems in the world and one born largely from the vast distances of the Australian interior. It is also a story that allows me to introduce the remarkable man who later created the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the Reverend John Flynn.

Stories such as these do more than entertain. They allow audiences to visualise the realities behind simple statements and they anchor complex ideas in human experience. Structure protects the respect I have for an intelligent audience. Without it, even excellent material begins to wander. With it, complex ideas become navigable and the presentation unfolds with a sense of direction.

A talk, after all, is not built for the speaker's convenience. It is built for the audience's understanding.

Chapter 8

The Audience

No two audiences are identical. The ship may be the same, the theatre may be the same and even the lecture itself may be the same, but the room is never quite the same twice.

An audience reveals itself very quickly. Sometimes the energy is immediate. Laughter arrives early, eye contact is sustained and the room seems to lean forward almost collectively. At other times the first few minutes are quieter. Attention is present, but reserved, and the atmosphere takes a little longer to warm. Neither situation is better than the other. They are simply different expressions of engagement.

Part of speaking well involves listening while speaking. I pay attention to posture, to stillness and to the quality of silence in the room. Silence has texture. It can signal concentration, confusion, agreement or scepticism, and although the difference between those reactions is subtle it becomes perceptible with experience.

Because the structure of the presentation is secure, I can adjust within it. If a room responds warmly to a lighter moment, I may allow that moment to breathe slightly longer. If the atmosphere feels more contemplative, I may move more quickly into substance. The architecture of the presentation remains intact, but the emphasis shifts gently in response to the audience.

There is also something else that happens during a lecture which is difficult to describe but very real. I draw energy from the audience. The more responsive they are, the more energy I feel and the better I perform. When a room is engaged the atmosphere becomes almost collaborative, as though the audience and the speaker are building the experience together. That exchange of energy is one of the pleasures of speaking and one of the reasons that no two talks ever feel exactly the same.

One principle guides everything I do on stage. When preparing and delivering a presentation I think of myself as a member of the audience. I deliver what I would want to know and I present it in a way that I would find engaging if I were sitting in the theatre myself. I do not simplify material that I would find interesting, nor do I remove nuance that I would appreciate. I also do not slow the pace beyond what I would personally find stimulating. That discipline keeps the standard high.

Many people assume that because I am called *Doctor Ainslie* I must have spent my life as an academic or a professor. That is not my background at all. I have spent my career in business. For many years I worked as a management consultant, often in what might be described as a troubleshooting role. My work frequently involved stepping into situations where complex projects were going badly wrong.

Sometimes this meant working with small businesses that needed strategic guidance. At other times the work involved large development projects funded by international aid

agencies. In those cases I was often sent into developing countries to investigate projects that had begun to fail. My role was to determine whether the project should continue and, if so, how it might be corrected, or alternatively whether it should be closed down and how that closure should be managed. Closing a project was often the more complicated task because such decisions could carry significant political implications. The work required careful analysis, diplomacy and a clear understanding of leadership and organizational behavior.

My work in developing countries led to some unusual moments in my life. For example, I was based in the Solomon Islands in 1986. It was such a fascinating time. I had to travel all over the archipelago as well as travelling to many other Pacific island countries. I have had the privilege of visiting remote islands where I was the first white woman that many local people had seen. They were fascinated with my clothes and particularly my shoes. Many had never seen ladies' sandals before as they tended to walk barefoot.

My personal mission outside of work in those places was to find out where I could go to the toilet. It sometimes proved to be a little tricky. Some villages had a house with a toilet, many others did not. If they did not, I had to find out where the designated place was. Sometimes it was just the ocean, but there would always be designated spots for men and women. With the language barriers it was very interesting and it could be a little adventure almost daily. I often used to just approach a young woman, hold her HAND and try to indicate my need using sign language.

I became very good at non-verbal communication as a result.

Another interesting moment in my life also relates to my time in those islands. After Pearl Harbour America entered the second world war. There were huge battles in the Pacific none more bloody than the battles on Guadalcanal. I used to live on Guadalcanal. I had an interesting experience there not long after I arrived.

One Saturday we had a very heavy rainstorm. At the time I had two children aged about 7 and 8. I had a house with quite large grounds and after the storm was over the children ran outside to play. They were really enjoying themselves. After a while I heard them shouting excitedly. They were running towards the house shouting *Mum! Mum! see what we've got.*

I was smiling as I greeted them but my emotions changed as I realised what it was that they were clutching in their hands. They had unexploded hand grenades and shells. Yes, they were clutching live ammunition. It had risen from the mud after the very heavy rains. I tried to remain calm as I carefully took the ammunition from them then took it to a safe place outside our house.

I subsequently realised that this was not an uncommon occurrence. We lived on a ridge which had been the place where many battles had taken place during World War Two. After heavy rains it was not unusual for ammunition to rise to the surface 45 years after the war. Neighbours who lived on nearby ridges experienced this too. Sometimes we

occasionally unearthed dog-tags which was very sad and we took those to the local US Embassy.

I took the ammunition to the local Australian army who had a small base on the island. IT was then that I realized what I had been hearing every Monday at noon. There was always a very loud BOOM at that time. I then realised that it must have been the Australian army exploding the ammunition that the residents had found in their gardens over the past week.

My doctorate is not in history, as many people assume. That assumption is understandable because I speak so frequently about history and culture, but my doctorate is in Business and Management, with a particular focus on leadership. Perhaps that explains why I find myself drawn to the personalities and decision making of historical leaders.

The cultural perspective in my lectures comes less from formal academic study and more from experience. Over the years I have worked and lived in a number of different countries, and those experiences have shaped the way I view history, politics and human behaviour.

I do not list all of my degrees after my name. As a self-confessed nerd and lifelong learner there are rather too many to include comfortably, and a long line of letters after a name can feel slightly excessive. However, I do list two fellowships that mean a great deal to me.

The letters FAIM and FAICD often appear after my name and people frequently ask what they stand for. They represent Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management and Fellow of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. Those fellowships were conferred rather than earned through study, and I am extremely proud to have received them.

All of this experience shapes the way I approach an audience. Cruise audiences are not passive recipients of information. Some have travelled extensively and some may have lived in the very places I am describing. I respect that reality and I never speak down to an audience. At the same time I do not attempt to impress it. The aim is alignment.

When I prepare a presentation, I assume that the room contains people who have spent decades observing the world carefully. If I would question a superficial explanation, I assume someone in the audience would question it as well. If I would appreciate an unexpected detail, I make sure it is included.

Thinking of myself as part of the room prevents complacency.

When a talk is working well there is a subtle synchronisation between speaker and audience. Laughter arrives naturally, silence deepens where reflection is needed and the rhythm of the presentation settles into place. The audience feels neither rushed nor stalled and the allotted time passes almost unnoticed.

Not all engagement is visible. Some audiences process quietly and that does not concern me. Concentration does not always announce itself. Often I only discover what resonated afterwards when people approach to talk individually. Sometimes it is a major historical

idea that captured their imagination. Sometimes it is a small anecdote. Occasionally it is a line I had almost forgotten.

An audience is not something to manage. It is something to respect. When speaker and audience are fully aligned the theatre feels less like a room and more like a shared moment of attention. That alignment is never assumed. It is earned.

Chapter 9

Energy and Presence

Energy is often misunderstood in public speaking. Many people assume it means speaking loudly, moving constantly or filling the stage with theatrical gestures. That is not how I understand it. For me, energy is simply focus made visible.

In the earlier chapters I have described the foundations that support a lecture: the discipline of preparation, the architecture of a talk and the importance of understanding the audience. Energy sits on top of all of these things. It is what happens when preparation, structure and audience awareness come together successfully in a theatre.

Energy does not come from the speaker alone. It emerges from the relationship between speaker and audience. When that relationship is working well the atmosphere in the theatre becomes noticeably different, and the presentation takes on a life of its own.

A theatre does not respond to noise. It responds to concentration. When a speaker is fully attentive to both the material and the audience, that attention becomes perceptible. The room senses it long before anything dramatic happens.

Presence actually begins before the first word is spoken. It is conveyed in stillness, in the way a speaker stands and in the absence of unnecessary movement. It is reinforced by steady eye contact rather than restless scanning of the room. It is supported by a voice that is clear and modulated rather than harried or forced.

I tend to speak quite quickly because the material in my presentations is dense and I like to include a considerable amount of information within the time available. Speed alone, however, is not the issue. What matters is control. The important moments in talks are never rushed. When a particular line carries weight it is given space. When a detail requires emphasis the tone shifts slightly. Pauses are not accidental; they are placed deliberately.

Stillness carries authority. Excess movement often suggests uncertainty, whereas controlled movement suggests intention. A speaker who moves only when necessary appears calm and confident, and that calmness helps an audience settle into the subject.

Occasionally I also introduce small physical objects into a talk. They are not theatrical props in the conventional sense, but objects that people might enjoy seeing or handling. For example, when I speak about the Royal Flying Doctor Service I talk about the Reverend John Flynn, the man who helped establish it. His portrait appears on the current Australian twenty-dollar note. During the talk I show an image of the note on the screen, but I also take a real one with me and place it on the stage.

Australian banknotes are quite distinctive because they are made from coloured polymer rather than paper, and many international guests enjoy seeing them more closely. After the presentation I invite people to come forward and examine it if they wish.

When I place the note at the front of the stage I usually add a small warning to the audience not to steal it. The warning is delivered with humour, although it is only half a joke. On one occasion, while speaking on a six-star cruise ship, the note did in fact disappear. At the end of the lecture, I walked to the front of the stage to retrieve it and discovered that it had completely vanished. It had simply gone, disappeared, vamoosed!

I could only conclude that someone in that very prosperous audience must have needed the twenty dollars after all.

Moments like that also serve another purpose within a presentation. The act of placing the note on the stage briefly interrupts the flow of the talk in a deliberate way. That interruption creates a small shift of energy in the room, and the moment is positioned carefully within the structure of the presentation so that the audience relaxes, laughs and then returns to the subject with renewed attention.

My Scottish accent has never disappeared and I have never attempted to soften it for international audiences. It is simply part of my cadence. In some ways it is an advantage because the rhythm of that accent naturally encourages articulation and projection.

As I mentioned earlier, as a young girl in Scotland I competed in national poetry recitation competitions, and those early experiences taught me a great deal about projection, rhythm and the placement of pauses. Later professional speaking refined those instincts into something more controlled. Together those experiences shaped the way I now deliver talks.

Occasionally there are moments in a theatre when the alignment between speaker and audience becomes almost physical. The room grows very still and there is a sense that attention has converged on the same idea. It feels as though the entire audience is thinking together for a brief moment.

Those moments are difficult to describe, but they produce a subtle lift in the body. The speaker recognises that the room is fully present and the audience senses that the speaker is equally attentive to them. When that convergence occurs the lecture begins to feel less like a performance and more like a shared act of concentration.

Applause at the end is always pleasant, but it is not the real measure of a presentation. The true measure is focus. When an audience leans forward rather than glancing at watches or shifting impatiently in their seats, presence has done its work.

In reality these elements are not separate. Precision, structure, respect for the audience and presence on the stage all support one another. Remove any one of them and the presentation weakens. When they work together the experience becomes far more than a transfer of information. It becomes a shared act of attention.

Preparation is what allows that presence to appear natural. Without preparation, attempts at energy quickly become strain. With preparation, energy becomes ease.

Concentration Relief example:

One group of *Concentration Relief* slides are related to situations where foods on foreign supermarket shelves have been given strange names. Here are a couple:



Chapter 10

After the Lecture

When the lecture ends, the conversation often continues elsewhere on the ship. Questions are usually invited outside the theatre, and the exchanges that follow are no longer part of a performance. They become relaxed conversations in corridors, on open decks or sometimes over dinner.

On one voyage, several days after I had delivered a talk about Einstein, a guest stopped me while I was walking on deck and quoted a small detail from the talk that I had almost overlooked myself. It was not one of the major historical moments but a minor human observation. The fact that it had remained with him was quietly gratifying and it reminded me that the impact of a presentation is not always where one expects it to be.

Guests also frequently tell me about their own experiences connected with the places or people I mention in my talks. Some have travelled to the destinations I describe and enjoy sharing their impressions of them. Others recall meeting individuals connected to the historical figures I discuss, or they recount stories they have heard through family or professional circles. Over the years these conversations have occasionally led me to amend my presentations slightly. A personal recollection from a guest can sometimes illuminate a story in a way that enriches the material, and if I believe other audiences would appreciate it I may ask the guest for permission to include their experience in a future talk. I would never include such a story without first asking.

From time to time guests also offer interesting anecdotes about the historical figures themselves. These suggestions can be fascinating, but they require careful handling because many well-known stories about famous individuals turn out to be urban myths rather than established fact. Accuracy matters to me, so whenever a story is offered, I make a point of checking it carefully before considering whether it belongs in one of my talks. If I already suspect that a particular tale may be apocryphal, I simply thank the guest for mentioning it and explain that I will verify it later. That approach allows the conversation to remain friendly while preserving the discipline of fact-checking that good historical storytelling requires.

Occasionally guests also share very personal connections with the people I discuss. Some are related to individuals who appear in my talks and are able to add small human details that rarely appear in books. In those moments the lectures begin to feel less like distant history and more like living memory.

Of course I have never met a guest who had a personal encounter with Pythagoras. However, I have met several guests who had direct interactions with Steve Jobs, and their recollections have been quite enlightening. Interestingly, the stories I have heard tend to confirm the overall impression that many people already have of him. Jobs was a visionary and a remarkable innovator, but he was also known for being a very demanding leader, and at one time he was even voted one of the world's worst bosses. Hearing personal accounts

from people who worked with him has not altered that general impression, although the stories do add nuance and texture to the picture.

The stories guests share about Muhammad Ali are often very different in tone. Many people tell me about witnessing his warmth, generosity and genuine interest in others. Those recollections can be quite moving, and they reinforce the sense that the public figure we remember as a champion boxer was also widely admired for his kindness and humanity.

Guest stories therefore provide an additional layer to the material I present. When they are genuine and carefully verified they enrich the narrative, adding human perspective to figures who might otherwise remain distant historical personalities.

Guests sometimes contribute humour as well. I am quite often given amusing images, memes or photographs that people think might work well as slides in future presentations. Occasionally I do incorporate them. On one long voyage of over a month, I even turned this into a small informal competition. Guests were invited to share their stories, photographs or humorous slides with me during the voyage, and I said that in my final presentation I would include the best of them.

During that final talk I showed a selection of the contributions that had been sent to me. Each time one appeared on the screen the audience member would shout out with great delight if the image had been theirs. It created a wonderful moment of shared amusement and a sense that the audience itself had helped shape the talk.

Not every suggestion, however, is suitable for a cruise ship audience. Some of the humorous images I receive are extremely funny but are a little too close to the boundary of what might be considered polite in a public lecture. While some people might grin at such humour, others could easily be offended by it, particularly if it borders on the rude. Those images I simply keep for my own private amusement and never show in public.

Once the theatre has cleared and the final conversations conclude, I usually conduct a brief mental review of the talk. I replay sections quickly in my mind and, if a small adjustment seems necessary, I make a note of it. These reflections are rarely dramatic. Preparation has already resolved most issues long before the audience arrives, so the review tends to focus on small refinements rather than major changes.

After that, I switch off.

Cruise schedules can move quickly from one day to the next. A cultural presentation one afternoon may be followed by a historical figure the next day, and each subject requires its own focus and attention. I move deliberately from one topic to another so that each talk receives the concentration it deserves.

At the same time I genuinely enjoy the cruise itself. I do not treat speaking at sea purely as work. While preparation and delivery are meticulous, one of the pleasures of lecturing on

ships is the opportunity to experience the voyage. I walk the decks, attend dinners, enjoy local excursions, observe the rhythm of life on board, read and occasionally rest.

The talks are important to me, but so too is the experience of the voyage itself. Balance matters. Speaking is something I do, but it is not the entirety of who I am.

Chapter 11

Why I Speak

From time to time the question arises, though not always aloud: why continue?

Speaking at sea was never planned as a second career. It emerged unexpectedly and could easily have remained a brief experiment. Instead, it gradually expanded.

The answer is not applause. Nor is it merely travel, although travel is certainly a privilege and sometimes part of the attraction. It is not even the satisfaction of delivering a well-constructed lecture, though that too has its rewards. The deeper reason lies in shared discovery.

There is a particular pleasure in exploring a subject in depth and then shaping that exploration so that others can enter it easily. Research brings its own quiet satisfaction. Reading widely, refining ideas and distilling complex material into a coherent narrative is intellectually absorbing. Yet when that work meets a room of attentive minds something subtle changes. What began as private study becomes a shared act of curiosity.

When an audience laughs together at an unexpected detail from Churchill's domestic life, or leans forward during an account of Tesla's later years, the material is no longer confined to my study or to the books from which it came. It becomes collective inquiry.

There is also the simple matter of intellectual growth. Retirement does not require stillness of mind. On the contrary, it can offer space for deliberate expansion. Preparing presentations across multiple subjects demands continual reading, updating and reassessment. New perspectives emerge and older assumptions occasionally require reconsideration.

Alongside speaking I continue to serve on several boards in Australia. These roles engage my mind in a very different way. Governance demands structure, scrutiny and clarity of judgement. Because cruise ships move through different time zones, I sometimes attend board meetings remotely from a suite at sea, occasionally in the middle of the night depending on the ship's location.

The contrast between the theatre and the boardroom can be striking, yet the disciplines are not entirely different. Both require preparation. Both demand respect for time. Both depend on clarity and precision of thought. Moving between these two environments keeps my mind active.

There are occasions in the theatre when I feel a distinct shift in the room. The audience becomes very still and there is a quiet sense that attention has converged. I can feel it physically, a subtle lift that occurs when the audience is thinking with me rather than simply listening. Laughter arrives at precisely the right moment, not because it is expected but because something has genuinely amused an intelligent room. At other moments the theatre becomes completely silent in a way that signals concentration rather than

uncertainty. Those experiences remain deeply satisfying and they continue to draw me back to the stage.

Curiosity is what sustains that process. It encourages me to read one more article, revisit another source and refine one more paragraph. It does not dominate my life, but it persists quietly and prevents complacency.

I am often asked practical questions about this unusual role at sea. Guests sometimes ask whether I am a member of the crew. The answer is no. I am not crew. I occupy a slightly unusual position on board. I am part of the entertainment programme, but I am invited as a guest rather than employed as a crew member.

Another question I am frequently asked is whether I work exclusively for the cruise line on which I happen to be sailing at the time. The answer is also no. I speak on a number of different five and six star cruise lines. I enjoy these ships because they offer a high level of comfort and because I enjoy the company of the people who tend to travel on them.

People also ask how I decide which cruises to accept. In truth, it depends on what is offered and which ships and itineraries appeal to us at the time. Over the years we have developed our own preferences. There are certain ships we particularly enjoy, sometimes because of their layout, sometimes because of their spa facilities and sometimes simply because the atmosphere suits us well. Reliable internet service has also become very important to me, as it allows me to connect remotely to board meetings in Australia while I am at sea in my suite.

The itineraries themselves matter a great deal. We are especially attracted to voyages that explore places we have not visited before. If we are offered an itinerary that we have recently sailed several times, we are more likely to decline it and wait for something new, or an itinerary we have not cruised for a few years.

The truth is that we simply love cruising. We spend many weeks of each year at sea, and friends sometimes ask whether we ever tire of it. Our answer is simple: no. I enjoy speaking and engaging with guests, and we both genuinely enjoy the experience of cruising itself. My husband and I have a simple pact. If either of us ever stops enjoying life at sea, we will stop cruising. So far that day seems very distant.

So why speak?

Because it keeps thought in motion. Because it transforms solitary reading into shared exploration. And because it reminds me that retirement need not be retreat.

Concentration Relief example:

One group of *Concentration Relief* slides are related to genuine holiday complaints received by a British travel agency. Here are a couple of the complaints that audiences enjoy:

"When we were in Spain, there were too many Spanish people there. The receptionist spoke Spanish, the food was Spanish. No one told us that there would be so many foreigners."

"My fiancée and I requested twin-beds when we booked, but instead we were placed in a room with a king bed. We now hold you responsible and want to be re-reimbursed for the fact that I became pregnant. This would not have happened if you had put us in the room that we booked."

Chapter 12

Entertaining Without Trivialising

Substance and entertainment are often presented as opposites, as though a speaker must choose between being informative and being engaging. I have never accepted that framing. Information delivered without engagement can become heavy and difficult to absorb, while entertainment delivered without substance quickly becomes hollow. In the theatre I aim deliberately for both, because audiences deserve material that informs them while also holding their attention.

Humour therefore plays a role in my talks, but it is never decorative. It is carefully integrated into the structure of the lecture. A well-timed moment of humour allows the audience to breathe between denser sections of information and refreshes concentration before the next idea unfolds. A humorous remark must not undermine the subject, a personal anecdote must not overshadow the central argument and a lighter slide must not replace analysis. Each element has its place within the architecture of the talk.

There have been occasions when a line has drawn more laughter than I anticipated. Once, while describing one of Winston Churchill's domestic eccentricities, the room reacted with sustained amusement. It would have been easy to linger there and extend the moment with another light remark. Instead I allowed the laughter to settle and then returned deliberately to the larger context of his wartime leadership. Humour must never become the destination of a presentation. At its best it acts as a doorway, inviting the audience into the subject before the discussion deepens again.

Audiences are perceptive in this respect. They recognise when humour serves understanding and when it begins to dominate the material. In my experience they appreciate a speaker who entertains them but who also respects the subject enough to return quickly to substance.

Stories play an equally important role in maintaining this balance. A well placed narrative can illuminate culture, history or personality far more effectively than extended explanation because stories allow the audience to see the human dimension behind the facts. Yet stories must still carry weight. They must deepen insight rather than distract from it. When used carefully they transform information into something memorable, allowing the audience not only to understand the material but also to feel its significance.

Maintaining this balance requires discipline. It is always tempting to extend a light moment when the room responds warmly, yet the purpose of a talk is not simply to entertain but to illuminate the subject. Cruise audiences in particular are thoughtful and intellectually curious. They appreciate humour, but they also appreciate seriousness when it is delivered with warmth and clarity. Engagement does not require simplification. Complex ideas can be made accessible without being diluted, cultural nuance can be explained without being flattened and historical figures can be humanised without being reduced to caricature.

Respect for the audience lies at the centre of this approach, because people recognise when a speaker trusts their intelligence.

When I first stood in front of a small audience of books on my settee, rehearsing a talk that no one had yet agreed to hear, I did not know where it would lead. From being a passenger listening to another speaker at sea, the idea quickly formed and the excitement followed almost immediately. It felt improbable, but not impossible.

Years later the improbability has become routine. The theatres are larger, the subjects more refined, the timing more exact and the discipline more ingrained. Yet the essential element has not altered. Curiosity remains. It is curiosity that drives the reading, curiosity that refines the phrasing and curiosity that notices the detail others might overlook. Curiosity asks what else might be understood about a person, a place or a moment in history. Speaking has simply become one expression of that habit. It gives shape to research, structure to thought and destination to inquiry.

What continues to surprise me is not the applause, nor the schedule, nor even the travel. It is the alignment that occasionally appears in a theatre: the moment when a room settles into shared attention, when laughter arrives in unison, when silence deepens without discomfort and a historical figure suddenly feels human or a cultural insight becomes clear. That alignment never feels automatic. It must be earned each time, and perhaps that is what keeps the experience alive.

Across the years I have come to understand that speaking is not about display. It is about exchange. It is not about authority but about clarity, and it is certainly not about filling time but about using it well. Forty five minutes can hold a great deal when curiosity, preparation and attention meet in the same room.

I do not know how long I will continue to speak at sea. But as long as curiosity remains active, as long as preparation continues to sharpen rather than fatigue and as long as a theatre can still produce that quiet lift of collective attention, I suspect I will continue. Not because it is easy or expected, but because it keeps the mind in motion. And that, for me, is reason enough.

The wee Scottish lassie who loved standing on a stage reciting poetry is still here. Loving every moment of sharing ideas, telling stories and enjoying the company of amazing audiences.

PART I

Thematic Guide to Principles

The chapters in this book explore recurring ideas about preparation, presence, structure and curiosity. Many of these principles appear in more than one place, viewed from different angles. The following thematic guide gathers those principles under broader headings. References are to chapter numbers rather than page numbers, allowing the reader to revisit ideas in their fuller context.

The Discipline of Curiosity

- Curiosity as origin (Ch. 1)
- Curiosity as observation (Ch. 5)
- Curiosity as sustained intellectual motion (Ch. 11, 12)
- Curiosity as protection against complacency (Ch. 11)

Engineered Calm

- Preparation before permission (Ch. 1)
- Rehearsal as internal authority (Ch. 1, 3)
- Meticulous timing (Ch. 3, 10)
- Adaptability within structure (Ch. 3)

The Architecture of Attention

- Lectures have shape (Ch. 7)
- Emotional arc (Ch. 7)
- The ten-minute rhythm (Ch. 4)
- Engineered endings (Ch. 7)
- Time discipline (Ch. 3, 10)

Lightness With Weight

- Humour as structure (Ch. 4)
- Observation as source of humour (Ch. 5)
- Personal stories with proportion (Ch. 4)
- Entertainment without dilution (Ch. 12)

Authority Without Display

- Reading without apology (Ch. 6)
- Precision over performance ego (Ch. 6, 12)
- Ownership of material (Ch. 6)
- Substance over memory (Ch. 6)

Respecting the Room

Assuming intelligence (Ch. 8)
Delivering what one would wish to hear (Ch. 7, 8)
Tone adjusts, substance does not (Ch. 8)
Alignment must be earned (Ch. 8, 12)
Shared discovery (Ch. 11)

Presence as Focus

Energy as visible concentration (Ch. 9)
Stillness as authority (Ch. 9)
Voice and modulation (Ch. 2, 9)
The physical lift of alignment (Ch. 2, 11, 12)

Professional Discipline

Never exceeding allotted time (Ch. 3, 10)
Respect for theatre logistics (Ch. 3, 10)
Efficient post-lecture review (Ch. 10)
Switching off deliberately (Ch. 10)

Balance and Continuity

Passenger and professional (Ch. 10)
Cruising as enjoyment (Ch. 10)
Retirement as continued growth (Ch. 11)
Intellectual motion as sustaining force (Ch. 11, 12)

PART II

Alphabetical Index

The index that follows lists key themes, concepts and practices discussed throughout the book. All references are to chapter numbers rather than pages. The intention is not to fragment ideas into isolated quotations, but to direct the reader back to the chapter in which each concept is developed more fully.

Alignment — 2, 8, 9, 11, 12
Applause — 10, 12
Architecture of a talk — 7
Attention, rhythm of — 4, 7
Audience intelligence — 7, 8
Authority — 6, 12
Balance — 10, 11, 12
Board work — 11
Calm, engineered — 3
Captain interruptions — 3
Childhood poetry recitals — 1, 2
Closing a lecture — 7, 10
Cruise audiences — 2, 4, 8, 12
Curiosity — 1, 5, 11, 12
Density of content — 2, 6
Discipline — 3, 10, 12
Endings — 7
Energy — 9
Enjoyment of cruising — 10
Humour — 4, 5, 12
Introversion — 5
Notes, reading from — 2, 6
Observation — 5
Performance versus personality — 5
Preparation — 1, 3, 7, 9
Presence — 9
Professionalism — 3, 10
Questions after lectures — 3, 10
Retirement and growth — 11
Shared discovery — 8, 11
Stillness — 9
Storytelling — 7, 12
Structure — 4, 7
Theatre logistics — 3, 10
Time discipline — 3, 10

Timing, meticulous — 3

Tone — 8, 9

PART III

Selected Academic Foundations

The following references correspond to the thematic principles outlined in the Thematic Guide. Each source reflects established research in psychology, communication, education or performance studies. They are not exhaustive, but they provide scholarly grounding for the ideas explored throughout the book.

The Discipline of Curiosity

Research consistently links curiosity to sustained cognitive engagement, well-being and lifelong intellectual vitality.

Kashdan, T. B., & Steger, M. F. (2007).
Curiosity and pathways to well-being and meaning in life.
Journal of Research in Personality.

Engineered Calm

Preparation and perceived readiness significantly reduce performance anxiety in public speaking contexts.

Behnke, R. R., & Sawyer, C. R. (2000).
Anticipatory anxiety patterns for male and female public speakers.
Communication Education.

The Architecture of Attention

Managing cognitive load through structured presentation improves clarity, retention and comprehension.

Sweller, J. (1988).
Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning.
Cognitive Science.

Lightness With Weight

Appropriately integrated humour enhances engagement and learning outcomes without diminishing content seriousness.

Banas, J. A., Dunbar, N., Rodriguez, D., & Liu, S. J. (2011).
A review of humor in educational settings: Four decades of research.
Communication Education.

Authority Without Display

Speaker credibility is influenced more by perceived competence and clarity than by stylistic performance markers.

McCroskey, J. C., & Teven, J. J. (1999).
Goodwill: A reexamination of the construct and its measurement.
Communication Monographs.

Respecting the Room

Audience perception and persuasion are strongly influenced by identification, engagement and narrative transportation.

Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000).
The role of transportation in narrative persuasion.
Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

Presence as Focus

Nonverbal immediacy and controlled vocal modulation increase audience engagement and perceived speaker effectiveness.

Mehrabian, A. (1971).
Silent Messages.
Wadsworth.

Professional Discipline

Temporal structure and respect for time boundaries are central to perceptions of professionalism and organisational functioning.

Bluedorn, A. C. (2002).
The Human Organization of Time.
Stanford University Press.

Balance and Continuity

Sustained intellectual engagement in later life supports cognitive resilience and ongoing development.

Park, D. C., et al. (2014).
The impact of sustained engagement on cognitive function in older adults.
Psychological Science.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Ainslie FAIM FAICD is an enrichment speaker on five and six star cruise lines, known for her lectures on the private lives of historical figures, cultural insight and destinations around the world. She consistently receives the highest audience ratings for her engaging and information-rich talks.

Before beginning her speaking career at sea, she worked internationally in governance, consultancy and development. She has advised major international aid agencies on multi-million-dollar programmes requiring restructuring, acted as a troubleshooter when complex projects faltered, and worked with small businesses seeking to improve performance. She has also led customer service functions within organisations and taught governance obligations to company directors.

She continues to serve on several boards in Australia and often attends meetings remotely while travelling.

Speaking at sea has become an unexpected and rewarding chapter in her retirement years, allowing lifelong curiosity to remain active and shared.



Still Curious