



I had not set foot in a classroom since I was 16 = their age. A school classroom. And here I was, preparing to deliver a 'speech' of sorts ... to speak to 40 unruly teenagers about a trip I had made to East Africa, which involved climbing Kilimanjaro and visiting schools in the slums of Nairobi.

The memories of my school days came flooding back ... the anxiety .... the apprehension ,... the fear .. the terror ... the dry mouth ... the palpitations .....the panic ..... yet, here I was, calm and relaxed ... excited.... and here!

I hadn't run away!! That was the miracle!

Although I had sat in many classrooms since I left school – going straight to college to study for 7 years involved sitting in countless classes in countless lecture halls - I was always in the 'stands' – so to speak, never on the stage! One of my least proud moments came just at the end of my training. It was to be a group presentation in the main auditorium of the Mater Hospital in Dublin. There were five of us in the group and we each had an aspect of diabetes to present as part of our assessments. I had worked really hard on the presentation. There was no aspect of Diabetes I was not an 'expert' in! I had read everything I could find. I had studied it, learnt it, practiced it, memorized it. We were due on at 12.15pm. It was Friday afternoon.

At 11.50am I was walking towards the hospital auditorium. At 12.15pm I was looking at my reflection in a shop window on Grafton Street!!

I just couldn't bring myself to do it. It was like I had no option but to run away.

I thought I could make myself do it, but I couldn't.



All the “positive self talk’ - I must do it; there’s too much riding on the presentation, there would be consequences both for myself and my group if I didn’t, .... I MUST do it ... but all that made no difference. The fear got the better of me. I ran ...

So, I could hardly believe that this was me, Eileen Forrestal, standing here, now, 20 years later, ready, willing and able to deliver a talk.

What got me here this time was a new power in my life, the power of truly honouring my word - my integrity to myself !!

This opportunity to speak was the result of me saying ‘Yes’ to the invitation, and actually honouring that word, not giving in to some other ‘reason’ or excuse that would allow me to escape. This was me being reliable for delivering on a promise I had made to my cousin many months earlier, when asked would I be willing to do this. It would have been so easy to chicken out -- I had spent a lifetime doing that - doing ‘my usual’, say Yes, but find some acceptable reason or excuse as to why I couldn’t actually do what I had agreed to. I was really good at that. Lying was too easy, especially when I didn’t call it lying. I just called it being reasonable. I had a really good ‘reason’ as to why I wouldn’t / couldn’t do it ...despite what I said .... and I certainly wasn’t going to tell anyone the truth about that!

But here I was, feeling the fear – excitement - and doing it anyway.

And I was calm. That was the miracle. Now what to say?

Now I had their attention, what would interest them?

I would need to be interesting.



Anybody can be interesting. To be an interesting person we have to do or say interesting things, so people are interested in us, in what we do, or in what we say. People's attention span is short. If I stood here and didn't say anything interesting, what would they do? Leave if they could, or stay and simply not listen, or daydream, or do something to make it more interesting like interrupt or mock or joke... and they would be right. We owe it to people to value their time. And If I'm not interesting to you, maybe you could be interesting to me, so I should stop talking and listen to you...

They were listening to me now ...

My intention was to keep them listening, and hopefully with my new found courage and confidence in my own self expression I could engage and inspire them. I believed I had done a hugely interesting thing which is why I was speaking to them. I had climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. Yes, it was a huge adventure for me, but how to make it interesting for them? What if I shared how speaking here, to them, in this classroom, was a massive 'breakthrough' for me, and so far outside my old comfort zone they could not imagine. What if I could relate to the shy, awkward, teenager who didn't think life would ever turn out this way? And I was speaking to them simply because I had promised, I had given my word and I had kept my word.

I had discovered that my word mattered.

The outcome of that promise was beyond my dreams.

There were many parts to the adventure – the fundraising here at home, the trip to Africa, the 5 day climb itself, visiting the schools, meeting the students in the slums, now telling people about it, and, most importantly, the small but significant detail of what it took to become the person who would climb that mountain.



Each aspect of the adventure highlighted a different challenge for me and hopefully a different opportunity for conversation. Their listening was important – it would now be critical for my self-expression. I really wanted to tell them the whole story in a way that they could get real value, so I had to create that this was going to be the most interesting and inspiring class they had ever sat through!

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