# Personal Stories in Popular TED Talks

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As the ability to make an effective presentation is increasingly in demand, one rhetorical feature that has attracted attention is the use of personal stories. Personal stories offer details and perspectives available only to the speakers, allowing them to connect with the audience on a personal level. Although their positive effects have been frequently discussed, much less is known about actual ways of using personal stories. In this paper I propose 3 guiding components—general flow, narrative schema, and interestingness—from Chafe's (1994) theory of discourse based on consciousness. Then, I analyze 2 TED talks (Bryan Stevenson's "We Need to Talk About an Injustice" and Amy Cuddy's "Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are") in light of the three components. Finally, I discuss the ways in which the three components can be used to help improve language learners' personal storytelling.

発表を効果的に行う能力の重要性が唱われる今日、自らの経験談等を発表に盛り込むという修辞法が注目を集めている。個人的な経験談は、発表者本人にしか伝えることができない詳細や知見に加え、観客との感情的な繋がりが生むことができるため、発表に取り入れられることが多い。しかし、経験談の利点への理解は進む一方、具体的にどのようにして経験談を発表内容の流れに組み込むかについては議論されることが少ない。この論文はChafe（1994）の談話理論を元に3つの観点（「全般的な流れ」「物語構造」そして「興味深さ」）を提示し、それらの有用性を示すために2つのTEDプレゼンテーション（ブライアン・スティーブンソン「司法の不公正について話さなければなりません」、エイミー・カディー「ボディーランゲージが人を作る」）を分析する。また、この３つの観点が、学習者が経験談をよりよく、自信を持って話すために、どのように役立つかについても議論する。

In my teaching at a university in Japan, one thing that I have noticed about my students is that they shy away from speaking about their personal experiences. Even when they are assigned to speak about a personal matter such as their favorite place, item, or person, their talks sound rather impersonal. Their descriptions of their hometowns, for instance, are more like guidebook explanations, and their stories behind their favorite items tend to be vague and unclear and do not present a clear picture as to why those items have become special to them (see, e.g., Figure 1).

> Today, I'd like to talk about my favorite necklace. I made it when I visited Kawagoe Saitama prefecture with my friends. It's made of tonbodama. We choiced it and made necklace. There were many kind of shapes. For example, circle, fruit, animal, snowman, and so on. It took more than one hour to us decided. We enjoyed it. Now it is separated from my friends. So this necklace is seen, the memory is remembered.

*Figure 1.* Sample student writing.

Personal stories have been recognized as an important rhetorical device in public speaking (Donovan, 2014; Gallo, 2014). Personal stories add color to general information, revealing the presenter's daily thoughts and life experiences that relate to the topic at hand. Experts in rhetoric and communication as well as modern great minds promote their use. For instance, the Nobel Laureate Shinya Yamanaka stated that speaking honestly from one's own experience is one of the keys to successful public speaking (Yamanaka & Ito, 2017, p. 67). Jill Bolte Taylor, a neuroanatomist, attributed her success to her ability to speak from personal experiences. She said, "When I was at Harvard, I was the one winning the awards. I wasn't winning the awards because my science was better than anyone else's. I was winning the awards because I could tell a story that was interesting and fascinating and it was mine, down to the detail" (Gallo, 2014, p. 43).

Recounting a personal experience in public speaking, however, can be difficult—especially for novice speakers. Sometimes they lack the necessary knowledge and practice to do so, and as a result, their stories can fall flat, making them feel awkward

about sharing their stories. In this paper, I will first propose three components (i.e., general flow, narrative schema, and interestingness) that can guide their storytelling. To demonstrate the effectiveness of these components, I will next apply them to two TED talks whose personal stories have resonated with people across the world. Finally, I will argue for the use of the three components in the language classroom as an analytic and heuristic tool to assist students' personal storytelling.

## Merits of Personal Stories

Personal stories have gained their current importance for several reasons. First is their universal appeal. Human experiences such as childhood memories, life-changing incidents, and the joys and sorrows of everyday life are something that we can all understand and relate to. In academia, personal stories were once off-limits under the strong influence of the Cartesian tradition of science for which the only legitimate proofs are verifiable facts. However, with the emergence of New Rhetoric, a contemporary movement to revitalize the rigor of ancient rhetoric, other forms of argumentative proofs have become approved because people are persuaded by various things, not just verifiable facts. In this philosophical shift, personal stories have gained ground as an effective form of proof because of their universal appeal (Perelman & Olbrechs-Tyteca, 1969).

Second, personal stories reveal the speaker's ethos, or character, which according to Aristotle (323 BCE/1991) is "the controlling factor in persuasion" (1. 2. 4). The composition scholar Larry Beason (1991) explained that the speaker's use of self-referential language (i.e., the *I* or *we* perspective) signals "authorial insertions that help define an ethos" (p. 328). This is because "it is difficult for people to talk about themselves without also revealing something about themselves" (p. 328). Shared from the first person perspective, personal stories can convey the speaker's ethos, which is a powerful source of persuasion.

Personal stories also build a connection between the speaker and the audience. From the speaker's side, talking about one's life is a way to reach out to the audience. The vulnerability researcher Brené Brown (2015) said that our sense of belonging is proportional to our willingness to share our personal experiences (pp. 145-146). From the audience's side, witnessing the speaker's willingness to share a part of his or her life allows them to relate to the speaker, or to use Burke's (1969) words, "identify with" him or her (p. 46). The audience tends to feel physical and emotional distance from the speaker on stage, but personal stories have the effect of reducing such distance because they project the speaker as having dilemmas and life struggles that are similar to their own (Brooks, 2017).

Acquiring the know-how of personal storytelling can be beneficial to language learners. Personal stories serve as a rhetorical device to enhance credibility and persuasiveness not only in class presentations but also in writing. They may also improve the quality of students' daily communication with others. If they are able to recount their experiences in a clear and meaningful manner, others can relate to them more easily, which is a step towards connecting with others.

## Three Components of Storytelling

As to the three components of storytelling—general flow, narrative schema, and interestingness—I have borrowed insights from the American linguist Wallace Chafe's theory of discourse based on consciousness. Following Chafe (1994), I argue that we can tell our stories better if we take into account the nature and limitations of human consciousness. Chafe's theory is also important to the current study because it offers additional insights into the existing knowledge of narrative discourse. That is, we can examine narrative discourse not only in terms of the existing narrative schema but also in light of other key aspects such as general flow and interestingness. I will now explain the three components of storytelling as well as their relationship to human consciousness.

### *General Flow*

The first component that I call general flow stems from Chafe's (1994) concepts of "discourse topics" and "topic hierarchy." William James, the father of cognitive psychology, famously compared consciousness to a "flow," "river," or "stream" (1890/1950, p. 239). Chafe explained that this sense of flow stems from the way we focus on one thing after another continuously as time goes on (see the bottom layer of Figure 2). In reality, the flow of our consciousness may not feel as straight and linear as Figure 2 suggests because our attention randomly wanders. However, when we have a conversation with others or make a speech in public, we try to make our utterances coherent by logically connecting one thought to another. In doing so, what gives coherence to our speech is a hierarchical structure of discourse topics in which larger topics (i.e., centers of interest, discourse topics, and supertopic) stay in the back of our minds, guiding the course of our utterances.

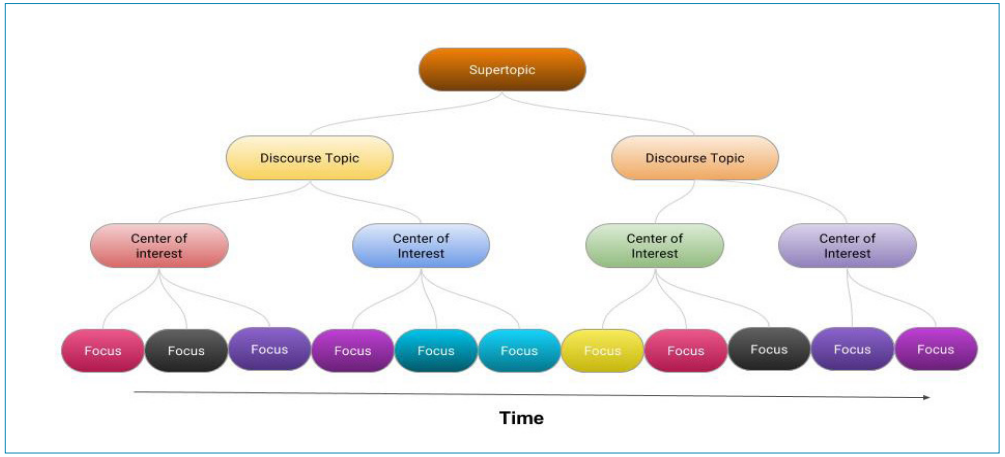


*Figure 2.* Topic hierarchy of discourse.

In my analysis of general flow, I will examine the ways in which the two speakers embed their personal stories in larger, more general topics.

## Narrative Schema

The second component, narrative schema, refers to the internal structure of a personal story. In their study of people's oral narratives, Labov and Waletzky (1967) identified the common narrative structure consisting of five elements: orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda. Chafe (1994) proposed a similar structure with some changes: He added abstract and climax, omitted evaluation, and replaced resolution with denouement. The narrative schema that I propose in this study combines Chafe's schema with that of Labov and Waletzky in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of narrative schema (see Figure 3).

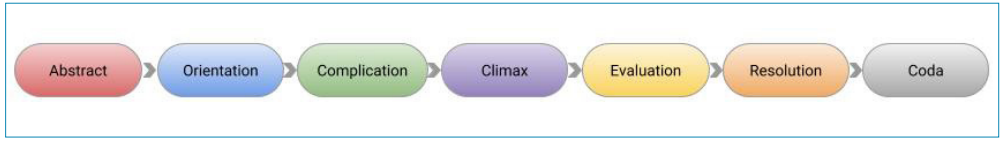


*Figure 3.* Narrative schema.

A story begins with an abstract, offering a general idea of what the story will be about. Next is orientation, which situates the story in a certain setting. Chafe (1994) emphasized the importance of orientation for human consciousness because we "cannot work adequately without knowing our space, time, society, and ongoing activity somewhere in our background consciousness" (p. 30). Then the narrative moves on to complication, signalling that the situation is diverging from the norm. Following that is the climax, which is the revelation of the surprising event. The next stage, evaluation, conveys the significance of the event to the speaker. Labov and Waletzky (1967) emphasized the importance of evaluation in a narrative because without evaluative comments, the story gives an impression of confusion and pointlessness (p. 34). The resolution follows, explaining the result of the event. In the final stage, the coda, the narrator offers his or her current perspective on the event. According to Labov and Waletzky, stories do not always follow this exact schema, but it serves as a useful model for understanding the internal organization of stories (p. 40).

## Interestingness

The final component is interestingness. Chafe (1994) explained that our consciousness can attend not only to the immediate environment but also to future and past events as well as to others' thoughts; what drives us as we choose one focus over another among countless options is defined as interestingness. Public speakers also choose to foreground certain ideas over others according to what they think interesting not only for themselves but also for the audience. In my analyses, I will examine ideas the speakers highlight as they recount their personal stories.

# Analyses

## Bryan Stevenson (2012) "We Need to Talk About an Injustice"

### Overview

In this TED Talk presentation, Bryan Stevenson, a civil rights attorney, talks about the unequal treatment that poor, minority, and young people suffer in the U.S. justice system. His talk moved the audience so much that he received the longest standing ovation in the TED history, and his organization, the Equal Justice Initiatives, received a donation of approximately one million dollars on the same day (Gallo, 2014). The theme that runs through Stevenson's presentation is "the power of identity." He argued that people's view of who they are can have a definitive and lasting impact on their behavior and course of life.

## General Flow

Stevenson introduces one of his personal stories, a childhood memory involving his grandmother, early in the presentation as a direct testimony to his argument for the power of identity (see Appendix A for the script of this personal story). This story lasts about four and a half minutes, one fifth of his entire presentation time. He begins his presentation by introducing himself and his work. Then, after mentioning the excitement and energy he felt at TED, he reveals his observation that TED has its own identity and how powerful that can be. Next comes his personal story. In introducing this story, Stevenson relates it to his previous comments on his profession as well as the power of identity he felt at TED. By connecting his story to previous points in his introductory remarks, he creates a natural flow to his upcoming story involving his grandmother.

## Narrative Schema

Stevenson closely follows the narrative schema in recounting his story (see Figure 4). That is, he begins with an abstract, explaining that he learned the power of identity firsthand from his grandmother. In the orientation stage, he offers an extensive introduction of his grandmother in terms of her position in the family, her background, and her character. In the complication stage, he explains that one day his grandmother invited young Stevenson to talk with her in person, signalling a diversion from the norm. The story reaches its climax soon afterwards. That is, after telling him that he was "very special," she made him promise three things: He would "always love [his] mom," "always do the right thing," and "never drink alcohol." The sequence of the events ends with his discovery when he was 14 or 15 years old: He found out that she had the same conversation with all her grandchildren (i.e., resolution). Although he jokingly says he was "devastated," he points out that her words guided him all along and even led to his lifelong sobriety, driving home his point about the power of identity (i.e., coda).


*Figure 4.* Narrative schema of Stevenson's personal story about his grandmother.

It is noteworthy that Stevenson diverges from the basic narrative schema at one place. Namely, he places the evaluation before the climax, not afterwards. Evaluation is for highlighting the personal significance of the climatic event for the speaker, so it is usually introduced after the climax (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Stevenson, on the other hand, repeatedly interjects evaluative comments such as "And I remember this just like it happened yesterday" and "I will never forget it" before the climax. The repetition of these statements beforehand effectively enhances the feeling of expectation in the audience, while expressing the lasting impact of the talk with his grandmother.

## Interestingness

Stevenson's storytelling is characteristically detailed and lifelike. The events in the story happened about four decades ago, but what he saw and felt and what others said at those key moments come alive in his descriptions. For instance, when he describes his grandmother, he does not rely on adjectives like *strong* or *loving*. Instead, he conveys such qualities through episodes and dialogs that speak to those adjectives, as in the following example:

> *When I would see her as a little boy, she'd come up to me and she'd give me these hugs. And she'd squeeze me so tight I could barely breathe and then she'd let me go. And an hour or two later, if I saw her, she'd come over to me and she'd say, "Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?" And if I said, "No," she'd assault me again, and if I said, "Yes," she'd leave me alone.*

Whenever he takes the audience to a different place and time, he offers substantial orientation so that they can follow the turn of events. For instance, when he introduces the conversation he had with his grandmother when he was eight or nine, he does not just explain its contents; instead, he meticulously describes the situation in which the conversation occurred. He also does the same when he finds out the surprising aspect of his grandmother's "private" talk with him at the age of 14 or 15. In this manner, Stevenson makes extensive efforts towards orienting the audience as he guides them through the different events in the story.

Stevenson's ways of grabbing the audience's attention are also interesting. The repeated insertion of evaluative comments is one example. Another is when he reveals that he has never had alcohol in his life, which is unusual and intriguing in and of itself, but instead of revealing it outright, he begins with a hesitant, confessionary tone to build up the sense of expectation:

> *And I'm going to admit something to you. I'm going to tell you something I probably shouldn't. I know this might be broadcast broadly. But I'm 52 years old, and I'm going to admit to you that I've never had a drop of alcohol.*

In this manner, Stevenson makes his story interesting through detailed descriptions and an enhanced sense of excitement.

## *Amy Cuddy (2012) "Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are"*

### *Overview*

Amy Cuddy, a social psychologist, introduces her research results in this TED Talk presentation. Namely, 2 minutes of power posing can affect not only our mindset in the face of a challenging situation but also our hormonal levels. The presentation is also well known for her key phrase "Fake it till you become it." As of April 2018, her talk ranked the second in popularity on TED, the total number of views reaching well beyond 45 million.

### *General Flow*

Like Stevenson, Cuddy also tells her personal story as a direct testimony to her main idea: Power posing or pretending that you are powerful can have a positive impact on the outcome (see Appendix B for the script of this personal story). The story is introduced toward the end of her presentation and lasts about four minutes, one fifth of her presentation time. Specifically, Cuddy first mentions some people's discomfort about the idea of achieving their goals by power posing (i.e., pretending) because they feel that they are being false and deceitful. While recognizing their discomfort, she introduces the subsequent story as a counterexample. That is, she also felt like an impostor for a long time as a young woman, but the struggle enabled her to achieve an unexpected level of success, allowing her to "become" the person she wanted to be. In this manner, Cuddy weaves her personal story into the flow of her talk by relating it to her prior points as well as the audience's concerns.

### *Narrative Schema*

The internal organization of Cuddy's story takes a different form compared to the common narrative schema (see Figure 5). Cuddy begins her personal story with an abstract which refers to the story's connection with the general idea. However, in the middle of her story, she introduces three substories (i.e., a car accident in college, her struggle in grad school, and her student's struggle), each of which has its own narrative schema. Specifically, the first story is about a car accident that caused her to have severe brain damage and delayed her college study. The second is about her struggle as a graduate student at Princeton. She shared that she would have quit school if it hadn't been for her advisor's advice to pretend and persevere. The third story is about one of her students who struggled with the same feeling of being an impostor and how she eventually overcame her complex by following Cuddy's advice—the same advice that she once received from her advisor. All these stories address the theme of feeling like an impostor, while suggesting how each stage led to a new level of success and growth. Finally, at the end of the story, she offers a coda, driving home her point "fake it till you become it."

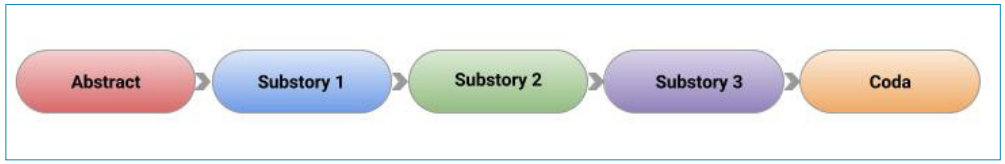


*Figure 5.* Narrative schema of Cuddy's personal story of feeling like an impostor.

### *Interestingness*

Because Cuddy's purpose in sharing her personal story is to show her struggle over the years, she frequently refers to her feelings, introspections, and analyses as she explains the challenging situations. For instance, in the first substory when she describes the aftermath of the car accident, she emphasizes the feeling of "powerlessness" because her identity was closely intertwined with being smart:

> *So I really struggled with this, and I have to say, having your identity taken from you, your core identity, and for me it was being smart, having that taken from you, there's nothing that leaves you feeling more powerless than that. So I felt entirely powerless.*

A car accident and subsequent painful recovery is a familiar theme for many, but by painstakingly recounting her feeling of loss at that time, she emphasizes the significance of the event for her life.

Likewise, in the third substory, she talks about her encounter with a student who was going through the same difficulty as Cuddy had when she was young. In doing so, she offers another introspection on her own personal evolution as well as her renewed understanding and sympathy toward the student as a teacher:

> *She came in totally defeated, and she said, "I'm not supposed to be here." And that was the moment for me. Because two things happened. One was that I realized, oh my gosh, I don't feel like that anymore. I don't feel that anymore, but she does, and I get the feeling. And the second was, she is supposed to be here! Like, she can fake it, she can become it.*

A troubled student's consulting with a teacher is a familiar theme, but this common scenario has more complex meanings because of her own struggle over the years. In this manner, Cuddy foregrounds her feelings, introspections, and analyses as she recounts the story.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that Cuddy offers much less orientation compared to Stevenson in telling this sequence of stories. They took place in different places and times, but the amount of orientation is kept minimal. For instance, when she talks about her first substory of being in a car accident, she briefly says, "When I was 19, I was in a really bad car accident. I was thrown out of a car, rolled several times." Stevenson uses far more words just to describe his grandmother. This may be because of their differences in purpose. Both of their stories are testimonies to their arguments, but Stevenson's story is event driven—the purpose is to explain the story vividly—and Cuddy's story is introspection driven and conveys her inner struggle over the years, so extensive contextualizing is not as important.

## Teaching Implications

I have discussed different ways in which the two TED speakers weave their personal stories into their talks. As for the general flow, both Stevenson and Cuddy begin with introductory remarks emphasizing their stories' relevance to the discussion at hand. Their stories take a different course afterwards: Stevenson's story mostly follows the standard schema, but Cuddy's story consists of three substories, each of which leads to the next to reach the story's conclusion. The discussion of interestingness has revealed their difference in emphasis. Namely, Stevenson's narrative is highly descriptive, allowing the audience to clearly see the characters and their ongoing activities like a movie. On the other hand, Cuddy's narrative is introspective in that she describes her thoughts and feelings at those hard times. Although in different ways, both speakers successfully induce their audiences' emotional involvement in their stories.

In the language classroom, teachers can make use of the three components of storytelling to teach students how to recount their personal stories. Namely, the discussion of general flow can underscore the importance of the abstract, or introductory remarks, which connect the story with previous points, thus functioning as a lead to the subsequent story. The discussion of the narrative schema, on the other hand, can teach students the basic structure of a personal story. One way to introduce the narrative schema is to use a diagram (see Figure 6). With this kind of diagram, students can have a visual image of how the story builds up to a climax-evaluation and returns to the starting point with the coda.

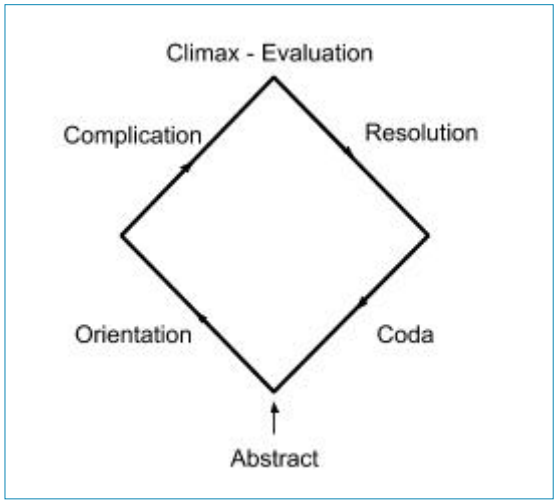


*Figure 6.* Narrative schema adapted from Labov and Waletzky (1967), with the addition of Chafe's (1994) "climax."

Finally, the discussion of interestingness can raise students' awareness as to what aspects of the story they want to emphasize. For instance, the student writing sample in Figure 1 does not have particular points that the writer seems to emphasize, resulting in a rather monotonous, impersonal account of the experience. The component of interestingness, in this sense, can encourage students to consider "highlights" of their story so that they can develop and expand those points.

## Concluding Thoughts

A personal story reveals only a fraction of the speaker's life, but it can be one of the most memorable parts of the speech, connecting the audience with the speaker and the message for years to come. Growing up in a cultural environment where privacy is daily reinforced, students in Japan tend to feel reluctant to speak about themselves.

Modern communication culture does not help their situation. In pursuit of speed and convenience, it makes them feel increasingly inept at reflecting on their experiences and conveying them to others. This trend is undesirable both for students and the society at large as human relationships can become tenuous if people are withdrawn and unwilling to speak about themselves. The three components discussed in this study present a partial picture of the complex activity of storytelling. Further research is also needed to verify their use in the language classroom. Nevertheless, I believe they provide students with a practical tool that can guide their efforts to share their experiences and connect with others.

## Bio Data

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## Appendix A

### *Excerpt From Bryan Stevenson's (2012) "We Need to Talk About an Injustice"*

Well this is a really extraordinary honor for me. I spend most of my time in jails, in prisons, on death row. I spend most of my time in very low-income communities in the projects and places where there's a great deal of hopelessness. And being here at TED and seeing the stimulation, hearing it, has been very, very energizing to me. And one of the things that's emerged in my short time here is that TED has an identity. And you can actually say things here that have impacts around the world. And sometimes when it comes through TED, it has meaning and power that it doesn't have when it doesn't.

And I mention that because I think identity is really important. And we've had some fantastic presentations. And I think what we've learned is that, if you're a teacher your words can be meaningful, but if you're a compassionate teacher, they can be especially meaningful. If you're a doctor you can do some good things, but if you're a caring doctor you can do some other things. And so I want to talk about the power of identity. And I didn't learn about this actually practicing law and doing the work that I do. I actually learned about this from my grandmother.

I grew up in a house that was the traditional African-American home that was dominated by a matriarch, and that matriarch was my grandmother. She was tough, she was strong, she was powerful. She was the end of every argument in our family. She was the beginning of a lot of arguments in our family. She was the daughter of people who were actually enslaved. Her parents were born in slavery in Virginia in the 1840's. She was born in the 1880's and the experience of slavery very much shaped the way she saw the world.

And my grandmother was tough, but she was also loving. When I would see her as a little boy, she'd come up to me and she'd give me these hugs. And she'd squeeze me so tight I could barely breathe and then she'd let me go. And an hour or two later, if I saw her, she'd come over to me and she'd say, "Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?" And if I said, "No," she'd assault me again, and if I said, "Yes," she'd leave me alone. And she just had this quality that you always wanted to be near her. And the only challenge was that she had 10 children. My mom was the youngest of her 10 kids. And sometimes when I would go and spend time with her, it would be difficult to get her time and attention. My cousins would be running around everywhere.

And I remember, when I was about eight or nine years old, waking up one morning, going into the living room, and all of my cousins were running around. And my grandmother was sitting across the room staring at me. And at first I thought we were playing a game. And I would look at her and I'd smile, but she was very serious. And after about 15 or 20 minutes of this, she got up and she came across the room and she took me by the hand and she said, "Come on, Bryan. You and I are going to have a talk." And I remember this just like it happened yesterday. I never will forget it.

She took me out back and she said, "Bryan, I'm going to tell you something, but you don't tell anybody what I tell you." I said, "Okay, Mama." She said, "Now you make sure you don't do that." I said, "Sure." Then she sat me down and she looked at me and she said, "I want you to know I've been watching you." And she said, "I think you're special." She said, "I think you can do anything you want to do." I will never forget it.

And then she said, "I just need you to promise me three things, Bryan." I said, "Okay, Mama." She said, "The first thing I want you to promise me is that you'll always love your mom." She said, "That's my baby girl, and you have to promise me now you'll always take care of her." Well I adored my mom, so I said, "Yes, Mama. I'll do that." Then she said, "The second thing I want you to promise me is that you'll always do the right thing even when the right thing is the hard thing." And I thought about it and I said, "Yes, Mama. I'll do that." Then finally she said, "The third thing I want you to promise me is that you'll never drink alcohol." (Laughter) Well I was nine years old, so I said, "Yes, Mama. I'll do that."

I grew up in the country in the rural South, and I have a brother a year older than me and a sister a year younger. When I was about 14 or 15, one day my brother came home and he had this six-pack of beer—I don't know where he got it—and he grabbed me and my sister and we went out in the woods. And we were kind of just out there doing the stuff we crazily did. And he had a sip of this beer and he gave some to my sister and she had some, and they offered it to me. I said, "No, no, no. That's okay. You all go ahead. I'm not going to have any beer." My brother said, "Come on. We're doing this today; you always do what we do. I had some, your sister had some. Have some beer." I said, "No, I don't feel right about that. Y'all go ahead. Y'all go ahead." And then my brother started staring at me. He said, "What's wrong with you? Have some beer." Then he looked at me real hard and he said, "Oh, I hope you're not still hung up on that conversation Mama had with you." (Laughter) I said, "Well, what are you talking about?" He said, "Oh, Mama tells all the grandkids that they're special." (Laughter) I was devastated.

And I'm going to admit something to you. I'm going to tell you something I probably shouldn't. I know this might be broadcast broadly. But I'm 52 years old, and I'm going to admit to you that I've never had a drop of alcohol. (Applause) I don't say that because I think that's virtuous; I say that because there is power in identity. When we create the right kind of identity, we can say things to the world around us that they don't actually believe makes sense. We can get them to do things that they don't think they can do. When I thought about my grandmother, of course she would think all her grandkids were special. My grandfather was in prison during prohibition. My male uncles died of alcohol-related diseases. And these were the things she thought we needed to commit to.

## Appendix B

### *Excerpt From Amy Cuddy's (2012) "Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are"*

So when I tell people about this, that our bodies change our minds and our minds can change our behavior, and our behavior can change our outcomes, they say to me, "It feels fake." Right? So I said, fake it till you make it. It's not me. I don't want to get there and then still feel like a fraud. I don't want to feel like an impostor. I don't want to get there only to feel like I'm not supposed to be here. And that really resonated with me, because I want to tell you a little story about being an impostor and feeling like I'm not supposed to be here.

When I was 19, I was in a really bad car accident. I was thrown out of a car, rolled several times. I was thrown from the car. And I woke up in a head injury rehab ward, and I had been withdrawn from college, and I learned that my IQ had dropped by two standard deviations, which was very traumatic. I knew my IQ because I had identified with being smart, and I had been called gifted as a child. So I'm taken out of college, I keep trying to go back. They say, "You're not going to finish college. Just, you know, there are other things for you to do, but that's not going to work out for you."

So I really struggled with this, and I have to say, having your identity taken from you,

your core identity, and for me it was being smart, having that taken from you, there's nothing that leaves you feeling more powerless than that. So I felt entirely powerless. I worked and worked, and I got lucky, and worked, and got lucky, and worked.

Eventually I graduated from college. It took me four years longer than my peers, and I convinced someone, my angel advisor, Susan Fiske, to take me on, and so I ended up at Princeton, and I was like, I am not supposed to be here. I am an impostor. And the night before my first-year talk, and the first-year talk at Princeton is a 20-minute talk to 20 people. That's it. I was so afraid of being found out the next day that I called her and said, "I'm quitting." She was like, "You are not quitting, because I took a gamble on you, and you're staying. You're going to stay, and this is what you're going to do. You are going to fake it. You're going to do every talk that you ever get asked to do. You're just going to do it and do it and do it, even if you're terrified and just paralyzed and having an out-of-body experience, until you have this moment where you say, 'Oh my gosh, I'm doing it. Like, I have become this. I am actually doing this.'" So that's what I did. Five years in grad school, a few years, you know, I'm at Northwestern, I moved to Harvard, I'm at Harvard, I'm not really thinking about it anymore, but for a long time I had been thinking, "Not supposed to be here."

So at the end of my first year at Harvard, a student who had not talked in class the entire semester, who I had said, "Look, you've gotta participate or else you're going to fail," came into my office. I really didn't know her at all. She came in totally defeated, and she said, "I'm not supposed to be here." And that was the moment for me. Because two things happened. One was that I realized, oh my gosh, I don't feel like that anymore. I don't feel that anymore, but she does, and I get that feeling. And the second was, she is supposed to be here! Like, she can fake it, she can become it.

So I was like, "Yes, you are! You are supposed to be here! And tomorrow you're going to fake it, you're going to make yourself powerful, and, you know—. And you're going to go into the classroom, and you are going to give the best comment ever." You know? And she gave the best comment ever, and people turned around and were like, oh my God, I didn't even notice her sitting there. (Laughter)

She comes back to me months later, and I realized that she had not just faked it till she made it, she had actually faked it till she became it. So she had changed. And so I want to say to you, don't fake it till you make it. Fake it till you become it. Do it enough until you actually become it and internalize.