

I Don't Even Know What This Discussion Is About

The art of talking to yourself and speaking to the public, as contemplated by brain cancer blogger Adam Hayden.

August 9, 2024 By [Adam Hayden](#)

My thoughts don't fit so well inside my head.

Sometimes, well, quite a lot, I have to stare at them outside my brain to bring them into view. They are in the steam rolling off the pavement in summer rain and in the jet streams left behind by the commercial jets leaving IND, some 14 or 15 miles west, their vapor trail the only evidence they flew overhead. Like an electron in a cloud chamber. We're often very confident attributing existence to things we don't see.

Whitney walked into the house while I was showering.

"Hello?!"

"Who are you talking to?"

I heard none of this.

After I stare at my thoughts outside my brain for a while, I need to discuss them with someone. I don't have very many someones around who have the interest, schedule flexibility, or, frankly, my trust, to join as a conversation partner, and so my someone is me. Or, a version of me. We [covered](#) the two Adams about a week and a half ago, so it's probably one of them.

Myself, my interlocutor, sounds either strange or you've figured out that all I mean with these fancy words is that I talk to myself. A lot. I don't know when I started talking to myself, but it's always been around, as far as I can tell. When I was giving a lot of talks across the country, say, four or five years ago, in the couple of years leading up to the pandemic, I practiced giving talks all the time. I'd set my timer for whatever length of time I was asked to speak, and I'd start working out the talk while pacing in my living room; garage; or kitchen.

Peak behind the curtain, I rarely write out a talk. I hate to speak from manuscripts. I find it undermines my intimacy with the listeners. We're in this together! I hate slides even more. If it's fewer than a dozen slides, including Title and Thank You, then I can figure it out, but there's this

expectation that when you hire someone for a keynote, they'll have notes and a slide deck. I've found a million creative ways to tell conference organizers that I'm more comfortable wandering around in a hoodie and Sambas than if you required a manuscript and slides in advance, and it'll be 100x better.

How much better would these ASCO, AACR, SNO, whatever talks be if the speakers had a mic and a stool with a glass of water, like a stand-up, and did 15 minutes of material on the key findings from their latest paper?

Stand-up is the model I've used for most of my public speaking. What I'm calling talks here, I should call material. I know what material works and what doesn't. The thing about a good stand-up is that with trust and a few yuck yucks, you'll find yourself listening to some challenging takes. I think this is right. I've probably told you this story before, but one time my opening slide—and you know how I feel about slides—for an auditorium full of doctors was an MRI image of my resection cavity.

"I needed brain cancer like a hole in the head."

To this date, my best first line of a talk.

You can tell that one came from the garage, late one night. I imagine, create, and practice my talks by doing them, trying to make my main point just as the iPhone timer sounds. In this way, I guess I've never really done the same talk twice. Often there's a great line that I'll blurt out at home, but more often than not, that line doesn't make it into the main event. Here's to a thousand unspoken lines; missed opportunities. I'm a worse public speaker for it, but for me and my own someone, I'm glad we had those powerful deliveries at home. That's the thing about doing things you're good at. If it's the thing you should be doing, it doesn't much matter if anyone is around to see you do it.

It was something like this that had me talking in the shower that day, when Whitney came home.

"I don't even know what this discussion is about?"

That's the line that Whitney heard me say when she walked into our bedroom.

"What discussion?!" She exclaimed, and I jolted with a sharp inhale. "You scared me!"

In the steam and the vapor trails and the imagined stages and the missed lines and the shower conversations, a lot of our lives go on unseen to others. I'm happy to pop up every so often to let you know I'm here; to give you some evidence that I flew overhead.

One day, trace evidence is all we'll have for any of us. That's not a bummer, I mean, it does sort of suck, but maybe this gives us a chance to consider the evidence we leave.

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