

## EUDORA WELTY'S ADVICE FOR PUBLIC SPEAKING

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



The great Southern writer Eudora Welty was famously humble about her achievements, and it was difficult for

interviewers to nudge her to say something even remotely flattering about her stature in American letters.

When one visitor remarked on Welty's popularity on the lecture circuit, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author had a ready reply. "Colleges keep inviting me," Welty observed, "because I'm so well-behaved, I'm always on time, and I don't get drunk or hole up in a motel with my lover."

In this as in so many matters, Miss Welty was modest to a fault. People loved her public appearances primarily because she was wise, witty, and had a flair in her readings for making her stories come to life.

Even so, her quiet nod toward the virtue of sobriety on the podium is something that everyone should keep in mind.

In my more modest life as a public speaker, I've found staying sober to be

a key requirement. Public speaking can bring so many surprises, after all, that it's best to arrive with a clear head.

As for the surprises, they can be as memorable as anything a speaker might say. I rather doubt, for example, that anyone would remember the remarks I offered in keynoting an honors convocation some two decades ago. I, for one, have no recollection of any particular pearls of wisdom that fell from my lips.

What I do recall is clearing my throat for some preliminary acknowledgements, then watching the auditorium go completely dark from a power outage. Our master of ceremonies tried to save the day by illuminating the lectern with a cigarette lighter, which allowed me to slowly parse each sentence of my speech like a monk working a manuscript beneath a candle.

But after I'd muddled through a few minutes, it occurred to a faculty member that a convocation in a coal mine just wouldn't do. That's when we embraced Plan B, which involved moving to an amphitheater next door.

The sunny spring day was perfect for our outdoor venue, and I felt confident as I reclaimed my place at the center of the ceremony to give my oration another go. I'd finished two pages when the campus lawn sprinklers, timed to activate at midafternoon, began dousing the audience.

With that, we all surrendered and scattered for the parking lot.

I had remembered Welty's advice to show up sober. But the afternoon had reminded me why public speakers are sometimes driven to drink.

*Surprises on the podium can be as memorable as the speaker.*

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