

## Our Greatest Treasure

*Winner, Toastmasters District 10, NE Ohio: This speech was my first serious effort at competing in Toastmasters so, as a relative newcomer to the US, I spoke of my admiration for the treasure that America protected on the world's behalf.*

A speech by Brian Woolf (May 1978)

There is one priceless gift in the American inheritance. There is one jewel which most other nations lack. There is one unique characteristic that, to me, a newcomer to your land, is greater than all the others. That gift, that jewel, that characteristic is America's greatest treasure - it is our freedom of speech.

Mr. Toastmaster and friends, nothing impresses me so deeply as the freedom Americans have to speak their minds openly and honestly - and your desire for others to share the same freedom. A lump comes to my throat when one of your citizens speaks out in response to the groans of simple human beings in other lands who are persecuted simply for expressing their thoughts out loud; for exercising a right which we take for granted.

My heart races when one of your organizations seeks justice for those who live under the millstone of surveillance and mistrust; voices who dared sound a note which their tone-deaf government considered verboten. I shiver with pride when your government seeks justice for those dissenters who have heard the gut-tightening heavy tramp of boots, or the chilling "knock-knock" in the night's quietest hour, and have been whisked away to the archipelago of work-camps; or to a psychiatric ward; or who have been imprisoned without trial - but often with brutality.

The American concern from those who exercise what is considered a fundamental right in this country is admired by all who cherish freedom.

This greatest of living treasures is best expressed in John Stuart Mill's ringing assertion ... *If all mankind, minus one, were of one opinion, and that one person were of a contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than if he, having the power, would be in silencing mankind.*

Freedom of expression is the fertile soil from which truth grows. All ideas are freely tested in the marketplace of evaluation - in the purifying crucible of criticism and, like cream, the purest idea ultimately surfaces. Freedom of speech leads to truth. And truth leads to freedom. Your freedom. My freedom.

Freedom of speech is the dye that colors the whole complex and delicate fabric of this society for, axiomatically, it implies:

- Freedom of the press
- Freedom of religion
- Freedom of scientific investigation
- Freedom of thought
- Freedom to doubt, and, most importantly, freedom to be wrong.

Let us never forget that the freedom of expression of someone's wrong opinion secures for us the free expression of our right opinion. Error is essential to establish truth. What we know depends equally on knowing what is, and what is not, the case.

What a priceless treasure we have. But, how fragile - even in this country. We saw it crack under the *guilt by innuendo* smear campaign of Senator McCarthy in the 1950s. Fortunately, we saw it heal in the 60s and 70s when the youth of America voiced their protest against an agonizing Vietnam War, forcing our leaders to extricate us from the quagmire. Think - just think - what that period of America would have been like if Americans had not - or had not been permitted to - speak out freely on both sides of that tragic issue.

Freedom of speech, as those vociferous protesters demonstrated, is life pulsating through the sinews, veins, and arteries of society. We, too, must breathe life into

freedom of speech. With two actions. Two deceptively simple actions. First, we must speak our minds freely and fearlessly. Second, we must allow others to speak freely, even though we may abhor the ideas expressed.

To reap the benefit of freedom of speech we must undergo the fatigue of supporting it. Either America will continue to be a society based on freedom of thought and speech - or we will have an insidious tyranny where today's truth is tomorrow's falsehood; where the official dogma changes with the officials.

Ladies and gentlemen, I pray that this living tissue, freedom of speech, will never shrivel and wither like an unused muscle through lack of exercise. I pray that this sparkling living treasure will send its warm light throughout our dark cold world, thawing the frozen hearts of myopic governments and freeing men and women walled-up alive.

For freedom of speech, America's greatest treasure, will never be irrelevant; freedom of speech will never be obsolete; as long as two people, you and you, you and I, can look at the same problem and see different answers.

*761 words*

*Brian Woolf's comment: A friend, Jock Elliott, Toastmaster's 2011 World Champion of Public Speaking, created an e-book several years later comprising 30 speeches taken from his 35-year journey between joining Toastmasters to winning its ultimate speaking trophy. Jock entered the contest at club level almost every year. On six occasions, including 2011, he was one of the 10 Finalists. Reading those 30 speeches reminds us of the journey each of us must make if we want to keep getting better, if we want to excel in connecting and communicating. Jock is a great inspiration to all speakers, not just Toastmasters. If you ever read his book, you'll discover a mind's journey, a speech enrichment journey I didn't know Jock at the time, but I also started keeping copies of many of speeches beginning with this.*

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## About the author...

Besides a full business life in retailing, and later, loyalty marketing, the other part of Brian Woolf's life has been filled with diverse interests: particularly speaking (including Toastmasters), travel (including all seven continents), and reading (including history). And he has written seven books sharing what he has learned along the journey. Ask him, two favorite trips? Antarctica and the Nile. Ask him, two favorite books? *The Lessons of History* (Will & Ariel Durant) and *Over the Edge of the World* (Laurence Bergreen).  
He loves learning and sharing.

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