Conversational Pouncing: How we stopped listening

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

When I type the period at the end of this string of words, I will have completed my first sentence of the day. And it's late afternoon.

The prior sentences I attempted to finish, all spoken, were thwarted early in their formation. Most didn't make it past the first five or six words before the listener pounced. My last effort started with, "Maybe then we can…" That was enough to trigger an expansive and detailed response, delivered in a tone usually reserved for communicating with an intellectually limited miscreant. Of course, nothing within that torrent of sentences included a single element of what I had intended to suggest.

I'll usually wait out the other person's soliloquy and give it another go. My effort will start with something like, "That's all good, but what I was trying to explain is that…" Occasionally I'll make it to the end of that sentence and perhaps a few more, if I don't stop to take a breath. The chances are, though, that another interruption will come my way, and I'll let it go.

Occasionally I'll try to barrel my way through like a running back who lowers his head and churns his legs as he hits the line. My persistence is rarely rewarded. I often get so distracted by the other person's unwillingness to listen that I back off. If they don't want to hear what I have to say, I figure it's their business (and to be fair, they may be justified in sacking my verbal output, much of which can be well worth ignoring).

For the most part, I've come to terms with my forced freedom from expression. Sure, I could take it all personally and resent being cut off. But I don't think most of the preemptive verbal strikes are borne of hostile intent. It's just humans being human. Some need to show off their knowledge and erudition, others want to stop you before you say something they might find anxiety-provoking or objectionable, still others are simply better at "send" than "receive." It takes patience to hear someone out, a quality that many (yours truly very much included) can have in short supply. That's why cross talking is more common than rare.

What I see more nowadays than earlier in my life is that most interruptions are motivated by the overpowering human aversion to being wrong. We all despise even the mere suggestion that opinions we've formed, the political stances we've adopted, the theories we've embraced, the predictions we've made, the religious paths we've followed, the stands we've taken, the explanations we've relied upon to make sense of the world, the advice we've offered — all might rest on shaky ground.

Especially in discussions involving politics or ideology, the act of interrupting often serves as a sort of preemptive strike. It's as if, by letting someone else's idea take shape, we risk being confronted with a perspective that might challenge or even destabilize our own. We cut them off because allowing them to complete a thought could expose us to the intolerable possibility of having to rethink our own.

Being wrong feels to many of us less like an opportunity for growth and understanding, and more like being set adrift. It threatens not just our principles but our sense of identity. In today's increasingly polarized climate, being "right" isn't just a matter of pride, it's a form of tribal belonging. We interrupt, not because we're rude or combative (though sometimes we are), but because it feels safer to shut down a counterpoint before it can bloom into something uncomfortably persuasive and intimidating.

So do me and perhaps yourself a favor next time you're in a discussion with someone: try to stop yourself from conversational pouncing by taking a beat and listening until the other person finishes. For the practice, try it again the next time around.

Now ask yourself, "Was that so terrible?" and "Did I better understand what the other person had to say?" and "Might I have learned something that makes sense?" and "Did the other person seem to appreciate being heard rather than dismissed?" and "Have I been meaningfully diminished because I acknowledged the value of another's point of view by hearing them out?" It might be a worthwhile exercise that allows for a more productive outcome.

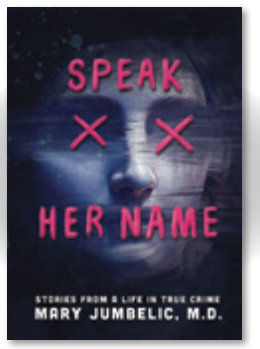
Given that you made it to the end of this article, thanks for letting me express myself fully. It's a joy being heard (and read).

"I speak for the dead." *Mary Jumbelic's New Book*

Mary Jumbelic, M.D. is an expert forensic pathologist, author, educator, and former Chief Medical Examiner of Onondaga County, the first woman to hold that position. In her 25-year career as a forensic pathologist, Mary performed thousands of autopsies both in the United States and abroad as part of special assignments to aid in world disaster management.

In the course of her career, she worked with hundreds of victims of violence and abuse. A proponent of women's rights, she also helped create visibility as a woman in government, science, and business. She has received awards for her work from the National Transportation Safety Board and the New York State Senate and was recognized as a Trailblazer in Forensic Medicine by the National Organization of Women.

As an author of memoir and creative nonfiction, Mary shares stories of life both in and out of the morgue. In 2023, she published her first book, *Here, Where Death Delights: A Literary Memoir,* which explored her life and work as a forensic pathologist, demystifying death for herself and others. The memoir gained international readership, receiving a First Place Award from The BookFest, Gold Award from Colorado Independent Book Publishers, and Silver Awards from the Nonfiction Authors Association and Reader's Favorite.



Her latest book, published in June, is titled *Speak Her Name.* Mary explains that "In the course of my work past and present, I aim to uncover the truth beneath the surface, providing answers to family and friends, while giving a voice to those departed. In my 25-year career in pathology, I have seen female bodies sexually violated, battered, stabbed, and shot. Their corpses dismembered. Some buried in shallow graves, others meticulously hidden. A majority of these deaths were caused by someone the women knew. *Speak Her Name* gives these women a voice. I share their stories to bear witness to their pain, and to educate those still with us. I am stronger and wiser because of them, and I hope my growth as a woman will inspire and uplift you, too. Each woman has something to say. Witness her. Hear her. Speak her name."

On September 4th at 7pm at Temple Concord, 450 Kimber Road, join Mary Jumbelic for a book reading and signing of *Speak Her Name*, sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Central New York.