Speak for Yourself

"I am at the boiling point! If I do not find some way the use of my tongue... I shall die of an intellectual repression, a woman's rights conviction."

ELIZABETH CADY STANTON, IN A LETTER TO SUSAN B. ANTHONY

H, AND THEN you'll be giving that speech at the Smithsonian Tuesday on the status of American women," my publisher's publicist reminded me as she ruffled off the list of "appearances" for the week. "What?" I choked out. "I thought that was at least another month away." But the speech was distant only in my wishful consciousness, which pushed all such events into a mythical future when I would no longer have the luxury for smelling salts at the mention of public speaking.

For the author of what was widely termed an "am-
gry" and "forceful" book, I exhibit a timorous verbal demeanor that belies my barracuda blunts. My fingers may belt out my views when I'm stationed before the computer, but stick a microphone in front of me and I'm a Victorian lady with the vapors. Like many female writers with strong convictions but weak stomachs for direct confrontation, I write so forcefully precisely because I speak so tentatively. One form of self-expression has overcompensated for the weakness of the other, like a blind person who develops a hypersensitive ear.

"Isn't it wonderful that so many people want to hear what you have to say about women's rights?" the publicist prodded. I grimaced. "About as wonderful as walking down the street with no clothes on." Yes, I wanted people to hear what I had to say. Yes, I wanted women of the backslab to our modest gains. But couldn't they just read what I wrote? Couldn't I just speak softly and carry a big book?

It has taken me a while to realize that my publicist is right. It's not the same — for my audience or for me. Public speech can be a horror for the shy person, but it can also be the ultimate act of liberation. For me, it became the moment where the public and the personal truly met. For many years, I believed the issue became balanced between my incensed writing and my atrrophied vocal cords suited me fine. After a few abysmal auditions for school plays — my one role was Nana the dog in "Peter Pan," not needless to say, a speaking role — I retired my acting aspirations and retreated to the school newspaper, a forum where I could bluster at injustices large and small without public embarrass-

Susan Faludi, a journalist, is the author of "Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women" (Crown Publishers).

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dation reinforced by daily "gendered reminders" — we saw what happened to the girls who argued in class. The boys called them "bitches," and they sat home Saturday nights. Popular girls raised their voices only at pep squad.

While both sexes fear public speaking (pollsters tell us it's the public's greatest fear, rivaling even death), women — particularly women challenging the status quo — seem to be more afraid, and with good reason. We do have more at stake. Men risk a loss of face; women a loss of femininization. Men are chastened if they blunder at the podium; women face humiliation either way. If we come across as commanding, our womanhood is called into question. If we reveal emotion, others see us as overly hormonally driven to be taken seriously.

I had my own taste of this double standard while making the rounds of radio and television, and talk shows for a book tour. When I disputed a point with a man, male listeners would often phone in to say they found my behavior offensive, or even "unattractive." And then there were my own internalized "feminine" voices: Don't interrupt, be agreeable, keep the volume down. "We're going to have to record that again," a weary radio producer said, reworking the tape for the fifth time. "Your words are angry, but it's not coming through in your voice.

In replacing lacerating speech with a literary scalpel, I had adopted a well-worn female strategy, used most famously by Victorian female reformers protesting slavery and women's lowly status. "I want to be doing something with the pen, since no other means of action in politics are in a woman's power," Harriet Martineau, the British journalist, wrote in 1832. But while their literature makes compelling reading, the suffrage movement didn't get under way until women took a public stand from the platform of the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention. And while Betty Friedan in 1963 "The Feminine Mystique" raised the consciousness of millions of women, the contemporary women's movement only began to affect social policy when Friedan and other feminists started addressing the pub-

Public speech is a more powerful stimulus because it is more dangerous for the speaker. An almost physical act, it demands projecting one's voice, hurling it against the public ear. Writing, on the other hand, occurs at one remove. The writer asserts herself from behind the veil of the printed page.

The dreaded evening of the Smithsonian speech finally arrived. I stood knock-kneed and green-gilled before 100 people. Was it too late to plead a severe case of laryngitis? I am Woman, Hear Me Whisper.

I cleared my throat and, to my shock, a hush fell over the room. People were listening with an intensity that strangely enveloped me. It was as if they were trying to establish contact with my own muffled self. I began to speak. A stringing point induced a ripple of agreement. I told a joke and they laughed. My voice got surer, my delivery rising. A charge passed between me and the audience, uniting us both. That internal "boiling point" that Elizabeth Cadby Stanton described was no longer under intellectual repression. And its heat, I discovered, could set many kettles to whistling.

Afterward, it struck me that in some essential way I hadn't really proved myself a feminist until now. Until you translate personal words on a page into public connections with other people, you aren't really part of a political movement. I hadn't declared my independence until I was willing to declare it out loud. I knew public speaking was important to reforming my life — but I hadn't realized the transformative effect it could have on the public herself.

Women need to be heard not just to change the world, but to change themselves.

I can't say that this epiphany has made me any less anxious of the microphone, or of the lectern. But it has made me more determined to speak in spite of the jitters — and more hopeful that other women will do the same. Toward that end, I'd like to make a modest proposal for the next stage of the women's movement. A new method of consciousness-raising — the Feminist Toastmasters.