

How playwright Tetsuro Shigematsu has transformed my homiletics classes

## **His advice: be yourself, be underprepared, be weird.**

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [February 9, 2022](#) issue



**PREACHER'S STAGECRAFT:** Actor and playwright Tetsuro Shigematsu—seen here on stage in his one-man play *One Hour Photo*—has proven to be a remarkable consultant to students of homiletics. (Photo by Ray Shum)

Recent decades in American preaching have attempted several routes to solve the problem of the dull sermon. Fred Craddock suggested we preach narratively. Don't boil a biblical text down to abstract "points," but rather, present the Bible as the Bible presents itself: narratively. The problem is none of Craddock's students could do this as well as Craddock could. Except Barbara Brown Taylor, who did it so well that it was discouraging to us mere mortals.

Tom Long has seen a reaction against such nondoctrinal preaching. His students are not allergic to doctrine and not entertained by stories. They tend to preach, well, three-point doctrinal sermons—of the very sort that Fred Craddock once reacted

against.

Meanwhile, evangelicals influenced by Andy Stanley approach a sermon with one “big idea,” illustrated with a big introductory story meant to hook hearers into listening.

In the midst of all of this, my students have to learn how to preach. They tend not to be purists on where the best ideas come from. They poach from evangelical preachers on the web, usually without telling us, their more liberal professors. They are inspired by Nadia Bolz-Weber’s brash cussing and Steven Furtick’s gigachurch repartee and the Black church’s tradition of celebration. Is there anything for them in academic homiletics of whatever stripe?

In my classroom, I have turned to a unique source, the actor and playwright Tetsuro Shigematsu. Tetsuro’s brother Ken is the senior pastor at Tenth Church in Vancouver, British Columbia, a multisite church in the Alliance tradition, and he introduced me to Tetsuro’s help. I have found much in what I call “the dictionary of Tetsuro” to address the preaching ills of my homiletics students. Ken apparently agrees with me. He frequently sends staff members to study with Tetsuro, and he calls in his brother to evaluate potential candidates for preaching positions at Tenth—even though Tetsuro is not a preacher or a Christian.

Tetsuro uses a unique vocabulary when he talks to my preaching students: he talks about things like the glass tube, the eruption of the real, the secret, the oasis, and the lighthouse. Each term illuminates the preaching vocation in new ways, through the eyes of someone who is a skeptic of the profession.

Let’s start with his idea of the glass tube. Preachers, Tetsuro says, might be physically in the room (or more recently in the Zoom), but they’re not really present. An invisible enclosure separates them from the rest of us, as if made of glass. This is true whether they are world-renowned or are mumbling over their notes for the first time. They’re impervious to their surroundings, nonporous to goings-on in their midst. “It’s like they’ve hit the play button,” Tetsuro says.

He contrasts this with the eruption of the real. Think with me of the layperson you’ve perhaps invited to give a testimony after your exquisitely crafted sermon. Looking at all those faces of friends and strangers may render them speechless. Suddenly everyone leans in. The kid on their phone looks up. The chronic snoozer wakes up. This is one of humanity’s greatest fears, happening in real time: complete forfeiture

of language. Often the dam of silence breaks, and the testifier offers something far more memorable and edifying than your sermon. But that moment was the eruption of the real. We feel what the speaker is feeling. In this case, terror.

Preachers assume the polished, shiny glass tube is better than the eruption of the real, so we over-prepare. Tetsuro advises my students to be brave and under-prepare. We want the eruption of the real, he says. We want to be in the room, to have its energy affect us. Only by under-preparing can we recognize each and every moment behind the pulpit for what it truly is: an utterly unique moment never to be repeated in human history. This assembly of souls at this particular moment has never happened before and can never again. Overly polished preaching misses this particularity. At least the blanked-out person is in the room. Most of us, with our overly precious preparation, are not. “An inarticulate utterance blurted out truthfully in the moment will always be more powerful than our beautifully crafted sentences showing off our overly expensive MDivs,” Tetsuro says.

He gives the example of a defense attorney who has never lost a case. The secret? He has the discipline to under-prepare. Most lawyers have overinvested sunk costs and can't abandon their meticulous planning. The result is that they're so busy looking at their notes, they don't take the time to look into the jurors' eyes. Tetsuro also tells a story from his own experience. On a panel at an event where he'd neglected to prepare, he listened more intently than he ever had to his copanelists. His presentation was the best he'd done: instead of reading a paper, he was actually engaging his colleagues. Think of this as turning the energy of anxiety into a power source for performance. If the risk is freezing up, the fruit is that you get to be in the moment, soak up its energy, and radiate it back.

Tetsuro's suggestion here syncs with some recent work on homiletics that advocates preaching without notes. This does not mean memorizing the sermon—that can be the glass tube all over again, even thicker. Long has often said you don't have to memorize your sermon to break the chain to the manuscript—you just have to understand it. Those who've taken this leap tell me it requires more preparation in the beginning but less as time goes on and you gain confidence. Preachers might envy actors and stand-up comedians—they get to reuse the same material for the duration of their show. For us, Sunday seems to come back around every three days. Some of us can memorize that frequently, but most do not. Tetsuro recommends taking notes into the pulpit that have been reduced to hieroglyphics: symbols, not even bullet points. Those precious sentences you perfected in your manuscript, he

says, are killing your preaching.

This kind of spontaneity, however, only works in conjunction with another entry from the Tetsuro dictionary: the secret. For this entry, Tetsuro takes the position of the hearer. What makes the hearer want to pay attention? He confesses that when he attends worship to hear a preacher he's coaching, he often deliberately arrives late, right at the beginning of the sermon. (He can't stand the singing.) As he comes in, looking for a seat, he's taking stock: he says that he can tell if this person is worth listening to in less than 30 seconds.

He defends this Malcolm Gladwell-like "thin slice" with a story from his spouse, a fierce mama bear for whom no babysitter was good enough. She once saw two siblings walking together and noticed the way the older sister listened to her younger brother. She hired her as a sitter on the spot, despite the girl's protest that she'd never babysat a day. She took a thin slice, but it held all the wisdom she needed. Best babysitter ever, judged only by a moment when she was observed listening to someone younger. Sermon listeners judge preachers just as quickly.

The secret, according to Tetsuro, is the reason that listeners can judge preachers so quickly. It is a subtext that the preacher is communicating as she preaches.

Tetsuro's secret: he believes that he is an interesting person. I would say that he is: he's done lots of cool things; he has a moustache that does circus tricks. But the truth or falsity isn't the point. What matters is that he believes it. If the speaker thinks they're interesting, others will take note and wonder, OK, you're interesting, now, why?

Tetsuro knows preachers will piously demur at this point. "I'm not supposed to be interesting. I am pointing to God, not myself," we say. (I said this very thing to him.) He pushes back: that's a self-serving protective device. Such a stance gives us cover to avoid risking anything, lest we put ourselves out there and fail. People who gather are interested in the person entrusted with their attention, even if just for a moment. And maybe, just for a moment, all critical suspicion aside, they're willing to be interested. Preachers should respond in kind: yes, I'm interesting; your willingness to risk attention to me will be rewarded.

But why does he call this a secret? That is a little harder to grasp. Why not just say, "I'm interesting"?

When Tetsuro's daughter was little and there was a present to give to her mom, he would be sure to show it to her in advance. "Don't tell mummy," he'd say, "it's a secret."

"It was like her heart was filled with helium," he says. "She would walk differently all day. The house would fill with her delight. It would animate all she did." By contrast, imagine if he told her a sad secret. Her day would be filled with dread and anxiety. The secret you carry carries you.

And this is where gospel preachers can riff to our heart's delight. What's our secret? Well, it's the same as the secret to all of Christianity: a resurrected rabbi really rules the cosmos. The new creation really is coming. No, actually, I mean it's already here. God promises to do for creation what happened to Jesus on Easter. You'll see. One day everyone will see. This is not gnosis, a secret available only to the select few. We intend to tell anyone who'll listen and even some who think they won't.

But Tetsuro notes the importance of withholding a little. When he was a journalist at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Tetsuro supervised interns. A natural first assignment would be "gathering a streeter": in other words, the interns would go to a street corner and ask folks about something going on in town. Two hours later they would slink back, defeated, and Tetsuro would say, "Let me guess. No one would talk to you, right?" Since the interns were new to this, they had felt fraudulent asking passersby for information. They would mumble and apologetically ask, "Sir? Ma'am? Can I . . ." and pedestrians would brush right past.

When Tetsuro first gathered streeters, he had come from the worlds of stand-up and television writing. He slouched against a streetlight, mic dangling casually in hand, and people would stop. "What's your deal?"

"Nothing, move along."

"No, seriously, what's up with you?"

"OK, but do you really want to know?"

The secret Tetsuro communicated was that talking to him will be the most interesting thing that happens to you not just today, but all week. You'll dine on this conversation for a month; you might remember it on your deathbed. By withholding his desire just a little, Tetsuro never had trouble gathering streeters.

The difference between what the interns tried and what Tetsuro did? Sheer illusion.

But the other part of the secret is discovering what really makes you, the preacher, who you are. Tetsuro calls this the metastory or the operating system. This is the core story you tell yourself about who you are in the universe. What are the things that are easy for you to do that others find hard? That's part of your metastory. Where were you born and to whom? A good metastory is like a good compliment: it's nontransferable. It only works for you.

This is where I've found myself pushing back the most on Tetsuro's master class. I'm a middle-class, paunched, balding, White, southern, cisgender male. What could possibly be interesting about me? Before I can dive into "Jesus is interesting, I'm not," Tetsuro calls my bluff. I'm a southerner in Canada. Lean into that, he advises. Play it up. Wear a belt buckle. Lean into the accent.

Tetsuro performs autobiographical theater in which he highlights his otherness. He wears outlandishly "Japanese" outfits that no Japanese person actually wears now or ever did. He does it to compel the audience's attention.

In churches, though, playing up your otherness doesn't always work. Some congregations find it positively threatening—especially if you differ from what they consider normative. And just so, the theater world's renowned openness and the church's fragile anxiety make them seem two very different worlds.

I hesitate, I say to Tetsuro, to turn myself into a caricature. Fine, he says. Just be willing to be a little more southern, and a little more up-front about what makes you interesting.

I immediately think of the legion of speakers I have heard in my life who think they're interesting but are no such thing. They come off as smug, not captivating. Or I think of the legion of secrets out there about which I have no interest at all. (Fraternity initiation practices come to mind.) A secret requires a combination of interest and hiddenness; some initial knowledge but greater knowledge defrayed.

Here I think Tetsuro and the theater are simply correct: lean into your weird. It's what God gave you to reach others. Don't shed it, like a provincial accent. It's part of your metastory. Call it your giftedness by the Holy Spirit if you like.

I often teach preaching students to accentuate the weird in a biblical text. I borrow this from the great Eugene Lowry, more in the homiletical tradition of Craddock's storyteller—dive for the weird. Lean into the unusual. It's there in the text. Bring it to life in your sermon. Again this is contrary to our received strategy for some generations now, where we gloss over the weird, file it down to size, render it as innocuous as possible. Evangelicals call this apologetics; we mainliners often simply avoid the morally questionable texts. Narrative homiletics may be better at this, but I'm not convinced. How many sermons do you hear on the prophet Ezekiel objecting to God's command to eat his food cooked over human dung and winning the reprieve to use animal dung instead? What's edifying in that? No idea. But it's in the Bible for some reason. Go find it. Or the women at the tomb in Mark who are the first to hear of the resurrection—the apostles to the apostles, as the Orthodox call them. What do they do? Refuse the first command to tell of the resurrection (Mark 16:8). How odd, as Will Willimon would say. And the beginning of an interesting sermon.

If we can dive for the weird in a biblical text, as some homileticians are starting to say, why wouldn't we do the same with our own story? This is not the overwrought cliché about individuality. Monty Python's retort to the proclamation "You're all individuals!" is pitch-perfect: one guy shouts back, "I'm not." It's more a reflection on the *imago Dei*. (While I'm at it: Tetsuro says never use fancy languages in the pulpit. That's a power move, he says, born of insecurity.) God makes us each unique reflections of divine glory. That's true whether you and I believe it or not. God doesn't bypass your personhood to get to the people in your church or neighborhood. God goes right through you, for a reason. The secret is finding that reason.

The term in Tetsuro's dictionary that might be the most important for me is the oasis. Tetsuro notices that lots of Andy Stanley-informed sermons start great. The big opening vignette, the story that hooks hearers. It's personal, it's gripping, it's worth hearing. It's an oasis. Then, he says, the desert. All that exegesis. All that history. The stuff Bible nerds care about, that preaching classes insist they major in, that church people tolerate but honestly don't love. That's the desert. The oasis is when you tell a story. The sort of story you tell at a dinner party. You don't refer to your notes. These are unique, delightful, worth listening to. Oases. Then, more desert.

The trick, of course, is not to make the whole sermon into a dinner party escapade. That's the worst of the narrative preaching experiment. None of us has enough

stories for that. The trick is to speak of the Bible and theology in the same easy, conversational, delightful, surprising manner. Now that's hard. It takes massive preparation and study and learning from the best commentators, theologians, and even comedians. But it's homiletical gold. All oasis, no desert.

Finally this: find your lighthouse. We've shifted from the eremitical to the nautical, you've noticed. Find the listener who's filling you with energy, nodding, laughing at the jokes. And feed that person! Unashamedly. I've long done the opposite. Find the hater, the antagonist, whether a sleeper or a hostile glarer. I try to drill right into their skull. They're on my mind anyway, and there they are, helpless: let 'em have it! Tetsuro points out this is more than a little misanthropic on my part. Why do that to yourself? Find the light out there, the one beckoning you home. Preach to them. You'll never win the hater, but that lighthouse houses a big mirror and can illumine others too.

Tetsuro Shigematsu is not the first to see the overlap between preaching and other sorts of performance. There's a reason the best preachers you know devour stand-up comedy: the timing, the pacing, the eruption of the real instead of the glass tube, the willingness to be their weird selves, the metastory, the oasis, the lighthouse.

Now, let that secret fill your heart with helium and bring radiance to the room as you stand up, under-prepared, to speak.

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