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Fear of Public Speaking

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Some studies have shown that fear of public speaking ranks up there with the fear of death. That doesn't surprise me. Although I am now about as comfortable with a microphone and an audience as I am in my own living room, that wasn't always true. To be honest, until only a few years ago, I was petrified to talk in front of any sized group.

My first job after college was as the legislative aide to our community's maverick City Council Member. My job was to research potential new approaches to problems our city was facing. I loved the work - loved finding innovative solutions to old problems. And one of those issues was the issue of comparable worth in women's pay scales.

I knew this issue top to bottom and back again. So it made sense when a local feminist group wanted information about the issue, that my boss sent me to tell them what I had learned.

The group was 5 women. That's it. We were all seated around a table. No podium, no huge audience. A table of 5 women. I didn't even have to stand up.

And I was so nervous I couldn't talk - not a word. My voice shook and my hands shook and I was barely able to apologize. I was paralyzed. After about 5 minutes, they let me leave. Still to this day, I am embarrassed when I think about it. A group of 5 women sitting around a table, a topic I knew inside and out, and I was struck dumb.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Although I have always been an outspoken person, that was when I knew everyone in the room. These were all strangers! For years I had had the same problem if I had to stand up and say my name at a workshop or breakfast meeting. I would get so nervous, just saying my name and the name of my organization, that I would intentionally not eat anything until after the introductions, knowing I would feel nauseous.

For those who know me now, this has always been tough to believe. But fear of public speaking isn't about one's personality (mine does tend to be pretty "out there."). It has to do with our perceptions about ourselves, and our perceptions of "public speaking."

These days, I relish giving keynote speeches to rooms with 500 people. I love to teach workshops, love to talk to Rotary groups about the work I do or the organizations I've formed.

So what changed? Did I learn to envision the audience without clothes (perish the thought!)? Did I take medication before heading out to speak?

The Turning Point

When my daughter was in the 3rd grade, I was frustrated that no one was teaching the kids to write. This was supposedly a gifted and talented class, and no one was teaching them to express themselves creatively in writing. So I spoke with Lizzie's teacher, offering to teach an hour of creative writing every week for the school year.

I never thought twice about this as "public speaking." When Lizzie was in preschool, I had always taught her class to garden, digging alongside them, planting tomatoes and putting up netting to keep the birds away. There was no great leap from teaching gardening to teaching writing. And besides, these were all 8 year olds - what was there to be afraid of? I was a mom, after all. I could certainly handle a room full of 8 year olds!

The following year, her teacher was already teaching writing (thank goodness!). But since I speak Spanish, she asked if I would consider teaching the language.

I knew from Lizzie that the kids hated Spanish. Ironic, in a school system only an hour from the Mexican border, that the only Spanish language education they were receiving was occasional videos that talked down to them. "Please don't do this," my daughter begged. "The kids really like you. If you teach Spanish, they will hate you!" I knew if I were to take this on, my most important job would be to ensure they stop hating Spanish. Anything over and above that goal would be a bonus.

I taught Spanish for an hour every week during her 4th and 5th grade years. The kids learned to say whatever they wanted. They acted in plays. They learned to conjugate verbs. I wore funny wigs and taught them to say "My brother never washes the dishes." Heck, they were just kids, and this was like a big birthday party every week.

Public Speaking is Just Teaching

During this time, the demands of our business began to change. I found myself doing more teaching and facilitating, and less on-the-job work with small groups. And it was a while before I realized that hey - I wasn't nervous speaking to groups anymore!

I had made the switch in my mind. No longer did I consider these tasks "Public Speaking." I was just teaching - and I'd been doing that for years!

Whether I was teaching how to make charitable organizations stronger (in conjunction with my Help 4 NonProfits & Tribes role), or teaching about the effects of poverty on families (in conjunction with the organization my partner and I founded), I was telling audiences something they needed to know. And that's teaching!

The transformation was amazing. I was no longer a performer worried about messing up. I was a teacher, worried about what would happen if the group didn't receive that knowledge.

The Difference Between Teaching and Public Speaking

Here's what I realized. When I was afraid to do Public Speaking, the fear was all about ME. What if I choke, what if I mess up, what if I don't remember. Me me me.

But when I was teaching, it wasn't about me at all. It was about the students (i.e. the audience) and the content.

The students needed to learn the content, and someone had to teach it to them. I could be boring or funny-looking or have my dress rip across the back (that really happened once - don't ask!) and still what would matter was that I shared this critical information with as many people as possible ***otherwise they would never learn it!***

And miraculously, I was never nervous again.

When we are nervous, it is because we are worried about ourselves. I will mess up. I will lose my train of thought. I will look like a moron. I will be boring. Me me me.

The minute it stops being about “me” and starts being about the content and the audience - your students - the better you will feel. That’s what teachers do - they know they have a lesson to give their students, and they know that if the students don’t get it from them, they likely won’t get it at all. They aren’t there for themselves; they are there for their students. They are there out of love of the subject they want to convey.

Teachers refer often to their notes; they don’t perform. Teachers make certain the group understands one concept before moving on to the next one. They ask for feedback as they’re going along. Teachers answer questions to be sure the group is following the subject matter.

So go ahead - become a teacher. Tell your “students” - the audience - about the horrors of child abuse. Talk with them about the joys of disabled kids doing art. Show them the riparian area that is about to die just down the road. If you don’t tell them, they won’t know! They must learn this stuff, and you have all the ammunition you need to teach them - your extensive day-to-day knowledge of the subject.

Your audience is there to learn. They are not looking for a comedy routine or a one-woman-show. Whether it is a Kiwanis club or the Chamber of Commerce or the PTA of your local school - they want to learn what you have to teach them. That’s why they’ve asked you there!

One Last Thought:

As you venture out in your new role as teacher, remember: audiences are incredibly forgiving. They really and truly don’t care if you mess up. They don’t care if you lose your place. They don’t care if you look at your notes. And they don’t expect you to start with a joke. They know it could just as easily be them up there, and they are rooting for you.

So make **what the audience learns** more important than how you appear when you are providing that information. Your nerves will quiet down when you know you must teach your class what they need to know about the critical issues your organization is addressing for your community.



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