

# **Death, Taxes, and Public Speaking**

We would like to start by telling you what this part of the book will *not* do. These five chapters will not teach you the art of public speaking. I couldn't do that if we were in the same room together—to suggest that the pages of a book could do it would be pulp fiction. There are some who believe that outstanding public speakers were born with their talents and that all the training in the world couldn't equal that. We won't participate in that debate, because we're not interested in whether you were preordained to be a great speaker—we care only about making you better than you are right now. And on that score, there is only good news: there are real, tangible, physical behaviors that you can undertake to make you a more effective presenter. And that is our focus here.



# Fighting Nerves

I remember the first time I came face-to-face with paralyzing nervousness, and all I was doing was sitting on a couch. It was 1978 and I was just a kid. This wasn't too long after I stood up in front of 200 people and chanted in Hebrew for my bar mitzvah. But that was nothing compared to this scene.

It was the ninth inning of Game Two of the World Series between the Dodgers and Yankees, and L.A. rookie Bob Welch struck out Reggie Jackson to win the game. I was sweating vicariously for Welch, who looked like he was about to walk into a gas chamber. He faced Mr. October, and he struck him out.

I've never seen anyone so nervous and I've never been so nervous for someone else. What I didn't consider, however, is whether Jackson was nervous. Years later, he told us. "If I'm not nervous," he said, "then there is something wrong. If I don't feel those butterflies, it means maybe I don't care as much as I should."

I always feel better about my own anxiety when I think of that quote, and so should you. It is neither realistic nor helpful to believe that you can quell your nerves; it would be better to learn to live with them. If the greatest World Series performer in history was nervous, it's okay for you to be. Here are a few strategies to help you become one with your nervous half.

## The Lowdown on Laughing

This might be the oldest advice on record: start with a joke. Laughter relaxes you, it makes you feel more comfortable, and it allows you to loosen up. It is the classic icebreaker.

Well, what if you're not funny? What if your joke bombs? As Jerry Seinfeld said to George Costanza one afternoon, that's a pretty big matzah ball hanging out there.

Unless you have a joke that is guaranteed to be funny and is relevant to the topic of your presentation, the risk is too great. Besides, I have a better idea than trying to make your audience laugh:

### **Make yourself laugh.**

I'm very serious about this, pun intended. If the audience laughs at your joke, it might make you feel better. If you laugh, it is virtually guaranteed to make you feel better. And the stakes are much lower.

Laughing uses good muscles, not bad ones (more on this soon) and it's easier to make yourself laugh than it is to make a roomful of strangers laugh. So all around it's a better strategy to employ.

*This talk today on warehouse efficiency, it seems kind of funny that I should be the one leading it... [chuckle]... and if you ask my sisters about this, they'll agree... [snicker]... because you've never seen a kid growing up with a messier room than mine. How I got to this point where I am expected to act as an authority on this subject is... [laugh]... well, that's just beyond me.*

Audience members might laugh along with you or they might not, but it doesn't matter either way. You're not trying to be comically funny, and so this isn't a joke that can bomb. It's funny to you in a reminiscent way and therefore it is appropriate for you to see the humor in it.

*You know that story about "If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium?" I now know what they mean. This is my fourth city in four days, and yesterday I woke up and literally forgot where I was... I [laugh], I thought I was already here in Austin, about to speak to all of you. I left the hotel and immediately got lost, until I realized that I was still in San Antonio. So... [laugh] to say that it's good to be here takes on a whole new meaning.*

This anecdote might not be funny to your audience but anyone can see why it might be funny to you, so again, it doesn't seem like forced humor. It almost doesn't matter what kind of story you share—*make it up if you have to.*

## How Slow Can You Go?

It's been over 100 pages since we introduced one of our universal axioms, so here goes—Universal Axiom No. 4:

**However quickly you think you're speaking, it will seem even quicker to your audience.**

And Universal Axiom No. 5:

**However slowly you are speaking, you can always slow down even more.**

When you speak quickly, you do more than just make yourself nervous; you make your audience nervous. The quicker you go, the more fidgety you get. You don't give yourself any time to make large gestures, so all of your gestures are small ones involving small body parts. Small, fast, fidgety little gestures. And out comes the dreaded "flashing fig leaf." That's when a speaker speaks so quickly, the hands can't keep up. They remain cupped in front of the private parts, except for the occasional flip of the wrists.

The whole thing spirals, as your fidgety gestures make you speak even quicker, which in turn makes your body try to keep up, and so your gestures become even more halting and spastic, because that's all you have time for, and the quicker you speak, the higher your voice gets, and that raises the frequency of the entire room, and through it all, *you drive your audience nuts!*

But if you slooowww down your speech...

...you'll slow down your entire body...

...and that will calm everyone down.

No matter how nervous you are, no matter how fast your heart is beating, the speed at which you speak is the one thing over which you do have control. The world can be a light-speed blur but you do still have control over your own vocal pace.

So why do we do speak so quickly? It's not enough to just say we're nervous and that's why we speed up. What is making us speed up?

Much of the time, it's a fear of the unknown: you don't remember what's next or you're just not confident about your next transition. You have stopped living in the moment as you fret about what you are to say next.

When you know what your next idea is, it's uncanny how much easier it is to discuss your current idea. Absent of panic or dread, you can practically luxuriate in your words. And then, you can indulge in the holiest of all moments before an audience:

You can pause.

No, I mean a long pause.

Longer.

Longer still, and look at people while you pause.

This is not an awkward pause; it's a commanding pause. You have complete control of the room and everyone knows it. And how have you won the

room? Why have you become so confident? Because you know where you're going. You know what you want to say next, so you can live in the moment, without panic, fear, or fig leaves.

- ▶ See the discussion in Chapter 14 (Page 142) about displaying all bullets at once vs. having them appear one by one. We are staunch advocates of the all-at-once practice, precisely for the reasons discussed here: it gives you context, makes it easier to focus on the current topic, and reduces the risk of your forgetting what you are to say next.

This is one of the most wonderful feelings when speaking before an audience—when I know my material so well that I can completely control the pace. I can linger on points, make extended eye contact, take questions, invite debate. Once I have established this level of control, no reasonable pause feels uncomfortable. Even if I am 30 feet away from my notes and I completely forget what I want to say next. If I control the room, nobody will think it odd if I silently walk the 30 feet back to the lectern, spend five seconds looking at my notes, and then five more collecting my thoughts.

Anyone who has ever gone to Toastmasters or taken a course in public speaking has had to perform the exercise where you must make three seconds of eye contact with an audience member before shifting your gaze. I would argue that five seconds of silence is a better drill.

It's all made possible by nailing your transitions. In my opinion, practicing them is more important than rehearsing the flow of a particular idea.

## Air Under the Pits

The symbiosis between the voice, the body, and the nervous system makes for a fascinating study. Unless it's *your* body we're talking about, whose byproduct of this relationship is usually profuse perspiration. Then it's not fascinating; it's frustrating. Each one of these parts of the system is responsible for changes in the other:

- If you are nervous, it will show in how you move your body and how you speak.
- Changes to your vocal pattern create a change in body motion, which affects pulse and heart rate.
- Command over your body can create command over your speech and your nerves.

We have already discussed the syndrome whereby a nervous speaker accelerates his or her speaking pattern, which in turn causes the entire body to speed up. Whether fidgets are the cause or the byproduct of your nerves, they are not your friend, as they perpetuate the cycle and they affect your audience.

So think big.

Think about making big gestures, not little ones. Create a reason to raise both arms above your head or out to the sides. Get some air under your armpits!

Working gross motor skills is equivalent to slowing down your vocal pattern. Your body responds more positively to a big action than to a little one. A big gesture can actually help relax you. At a minimum, it takes longer to make a big gesture than a fidget, and that creates a better, slower pace for you. Our advice about making yourself laugh has relevance here: laughing uses your diaphragm, a big muscle.

I've found that raising both arms over my head, can be interpreted many ways and audience members are generally willing to view the gesture in context.

CONTEXT: Question from an audience member about a situation that troubles her.

ME: That frustrates me too [gesture]. It's like whatever you do, it comes back to bite you. Try doing this...

CONTEXT: We solved a problem or addressed a difficult issue.

ME: [gesture] Thank the heavens, you figured it out!

CONTEXT: I ask an intricate question and an audience member answers it correctly, showing that she understands its nuance.

ME: [gesture] (Nothing needs to be said—the gesture serves as a “Eureka!”)

Now if you feel like an idiot doing this, don't do it. The gesture has to be a part of you, but it's worth the effort to find one you are comfortable with. One colleague likes to cup his hand to the side of his head and then move it away, as if he has just had an epiphany and all this amazing stuff is flowing out of his brain. He uses that to great effect in many scenarios.

I know a woman who likes to hold one finger up, but she really goes for it, raising it well above her head. She uses it to mean “Listen up,” “wait a minute,” or “here's the thing.”

Another uses her hands very effectively to create relationships in time, distance, or some other set of variables. “Over here, you have the question of cost,” she might say with her left palm outstretched all the way out to one side, “and over here is the issue of resources,” as she stretches out her right hand. Having created those two spaces, now anytime during that conversation, she can stretch out her left palm and the audience knows she is talking about the cost factors. She has created a terrific spacial and cerebral connection with her audience. And she gets to put air under her pits.

Find your own big gestures and use them to engage your audience, to improve your pace and vocal pattern, and to help quiet your nerves.



As I look back on this chapter, I have to laugh. It seems as if we are advising you to become a phony:

- Fabricate a story to laugh about.
- Conjure up situations in which you can make long pauses.
- Make up a gesture and fake your way into using it.

But let’s face it, speaking in public might always feel like an artificial situation to you, so it makes sense that a few artificial devices can help you with it. Anything that helps get you to a place where you can speak naturally and share ideas freely is a good thing.

Natural speaking through fabrication—what a concept.