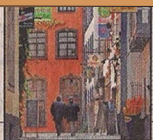


Journal Article on Fear of Public Speaking

Bernadette Vadurro 3 part series

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SPOTLIGHT ON FEAR

Public speaking is the stuff of nightmares for many people. But experts say a little anxiety can be a good thing for those addressing a crowd

By **MATT ANDAZOLA**
Journal Staff Writer

Sometimes in her dreams, Bernadette Vadurro is giving a speech to hundreds of strangers, but she's in her pajamas. Sometimes, she's sprinting between two roomfuls of listeners, giving simultaneous presentations to both, or scrambling to keep the attention of 200 people who have only 20 chairs.

Even Vadurro, who has been a Santa Fe-based professional speaker for decades, hasn't totally lost her fear of the podium, and some experts say that's a good thing: As frightful and overwhelming as it can be to stand in front of a crowd, it's possible to turn the right amount of anxiety into motivation and even comfort.

Having butterflies can be great for a speaker, Vadurro says, but "you wanna get those butterflies united and moving in the same direction."

Of course, herding those butterflies is a problem for a lot of people. According to a 2001 report from the Gallup Poll, the only thing Americans fear more than



VADURRO:
Butterflies are normal

That deathly silence

Carol Olmstead, a feng shui practitioner in Albuquerque, relishes the opportunity to speak publicly now, but she can empathize with the fear.

In the late '80s she was asked to premiere a Red Cross AIDS educational video to a large audience at the Kennedy Center, sharing the stage with then-Surgeon General C. Everett Koop and speaking to a crowd of Washington, D.C., power players, including U.S. senators.

A prominent AIDS activist screamed when someone jostled her in her wheelchair just as Olmstead began speaking. "The place went dead silent," she says.

Olmstead says she froze onstage for what seemed like an eternity, staring out at hundreds of eyes staring back, then saw her boss scrambling her on to continue.

She finished her presentation without further problems, and she laughs about it now, though she still seems to shiver slightly when she tells the tale.

Matt Rix, a professional speaker in Albuquerque, says he believes that the fear of public speaking comes from three main sources: insecurity, lack of creativity and stage fright.

Insecurity is common even among the most successful of business leaders, Rix says, and being in front of a group exacerbates — but doesn't create — the problem.



OLMSTEAD:
Empathizes with fear



RIX: Losing fear makes bad speakers

Fear of speaking good, bad

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"You'll never be more vulnerable than when you're in front of a group of people," Vadurro says. "It's like you're raw up there."

A lot of people are afraid of the presentation itself, Rix says. People generally are born storytellers, he says, but schooling tends to snuff out the skill. Students are left capable of creating lectures and lists, but not knowing how to be creative or entertaining, which a good presentation should be.

The last thing that causes the fear, Rix says, is the stage. Specifically, people are made nervous by the size of an audience.

In one-on-one conversations, he says, people are able to understand and respond to subliminal clues — the other person looking away, changing his or her body language — that give instant feedback and subconsciously inform the speaker how to adjust his or her speech.

But in front of an audience, a speaker can't see and respond to those clues.

"Suddenly you're on your own, and that's a very uncomfortable feeling for most people," Rix says. Dr. Bradford C.

Richards, a psychologist in Albuquerque, says there are a lot of theories about the psychological — possibly genetic — causes of this fear. One of the most intriguing is that, early in human evolution, encounters between an individual and a group of strangers were often lethal, so natural selection favored the anxious.

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Good case of nerves

Anxiety has its usefulness, Richards says, and one of the biggest mistakes is to try conquering it completely, because great speakers retain a bit of it forever, even if they appear not to.

Need help?

Matt Rix of Albuquerque and Bernadette Vadurro of Santa Fe work with people on public speaking. Find out more about Rix at mattrix.com, or e-mail Vadurro at Berna@speakerslive.com. You may also find out more at Toastmasters.org.

"If you see somebody at the podium and they look calm, it doesn't mean anything," says Katie Snapp, an expert who has been presenting leadership techniques to businesses and government agencies for more than 20 years.

Richards says anxiety can be an obstacle in any area of life, and rather than let it constrain our actions, we can intellectually transform it to our advantage, and may even learn to depend on it.

That's because a little bit of anxiety prompted by insecurity — that is, a speaker's fears of not being knowledgeable enough to speak on a given topic — can become motivation to prepare and become informed.

"If I don't have a little bit of anxiety, I don't have the tension — creative tension or otherwise — to be prepared," says Snapp, founder of better-lead.com.

In addition, Vadurro says good speakers can make anxiety useful by analyzing their fears about possible mishaps during a speech.

Vadurro remembers meeting a woman who wore a white suit to a conference, spilled salsa on herself and didn't stop obsessing about the stain on her jacket for the rest of the day.

By contrast, Vadurro says she had long ago worried what she would do if she ever spilled something on herself. She decided that the worst possible

outcome would be a slightly distracting stain (not a world-ending catastrophe), and the best way to respond would be to remove the jacket and acknowledge it in a joke. Then she stopped worrying.

Had Vadurro spilled salsa on herself, then, she would be calmer because she would have already mapped out an effective emotional and practical response to the situation.

Finding a balance

It is possible to have too much or too little anxiety around speaking in public.

Too much can be paralyzing or self-defeating, Snapp says.

"If you're visualizing, 'Oh my God, I'm going to screw this up,' it happens," she says.

With practice, novice speakers can learn how to keep the fear notched down, and how best to turn it around on itself, Richards says.

But speakers with too little or no fear are just as bad, Vadurro says, adding that being too comfortable in front of an audience can make for mistakes.

One time, Vadurro says she was answering a question from someone in her audience when she absent-mindedly scratched her underarm. She saw the mistake later while watching a video of her speech — something she encourages everyone to do. "I was horrified when I saw that," she says, laughing.

But more of a risk than getting sloppy, she says, is being flat, and Rix agrees. "The people who lose their fear of public speaking end up being the worst speakers of all," he says.



SNAPP: Uses creative tension to prepare