

“ How to be a Powerful Performer - even if you’re daunted now”

I once read an anonymous child’s poem that said:

*A kite on the ground
Is just paper and string
But up in the air
It will dance and sing.*

Are you feeling a bit like paper and string stuck on the ground? Do you want to know how to get up in the air and fly? You really can. If you want you can learn how to be a truly inspirational public speaker.

What is it that stops you taking off as a performer now? For most of us there’s just one main thing: **FEAR**.

OK, you might have a gentler word for it, and there may be a number of other factors, and of course technique is important too, but the basis of most performance discomfort is fear. In fact, it’s the biggest single factor preventing us from achieving any of our desires. And we are afraid of a lot of things! When 3,000 Americans were asked, “What are you most afraid of?” they came up with fear of heights, deep water, insects, financial problems, sickness, death and much else besides. But the most common fear of all was speaking before a group. It came out right at the top of list, way above fear of death!

“More good creative ability is wasted due to fear than anything else I can think of” says *Creative Thinking* writer Michael Le Boeuf. “People with good voices are afraid to sing. People with artistic talent hide their paintings rather than risk ridicule. People who love to write are too embarrassed to show their writing to anyone.”

Being nervous does not bear much relation to the amount of talent you have. Many famous people have been famously frightened. The actor, **John Cleese**, confided that before the Frost Show, transmitted live, he could not have been more afraid if he had been in a bull ring with an angry bull. His ample colleague on the show, **Patricia Routledge**, was discovered before one of her slots crouched in terror underneath the row of costumes in the dressing room. Accomplished TV personality **Stephen Fry** gave up fronting the BAFTA awards, confessing that he

suffered extreme stage fright prior to his appearances. **Sir Lawrence Olivier** in one run at London's National Theatre was so struck with nerves he had to have the stage manager push him onstage every night.

The singer **Barbra Streisand**, after forgetting one of her lyrics during a 1967 Central Park concert, stopped performing live for almost three decades, fearing that she'd have the same problem again. The singer, **Bruce Springsteen**, claims to get excited rather than frightened, but admits to being physically sick before performances. The legendary cellist, **Pablo Casals**, suffered so much from clammy hands at his Vienna debut that the cello bow shot out of his hands during a flourish and hit someone in the audience.

We meet the fear everywhere. **George Forman** recounting his famous fight with **Joe Frazier** remembers that his knees were knocking so much he just hoped that Joe wouldn't glance down and notice. "Fear is everything", he said. "It's not the fight you lose, it's yourself." Go back in history, and you discover that the British Prime Minister Gladstone took laudanum (opium) before his important speeches to steady his nerves. **Richard Branson** talks about the terrible fear he felt after taking the risk of backing **Mike Oldfield's** ground breaking 'Tubular Bells'. In the popular television programme we watch ordinary business people arrive in the 'Dragons' Den' and quake visibly before the 'dragon-like' investors.

Fear is widespread. Yet great performers still manage to produce great performances. So the question is not, how do you get rid of fear, but rather, how do you learn to perform in such a way that fear doesn't *inhibit* your performance? Or even, in such a way that it *enhances* your performance?

Easier said than done? Some skills certainly seem easier to learn than others. Overcoming fear clearly does not belong to the same order of activity as learning to surf the net or use a new mobile phone, both of which can be accomplished with *conscious* application. An emotion like fear does not respond readily to your conscious will. If you merely *tell* yourself not to feel nervous your conscious mind doesn't have much control over making it happen. You stand at the podium with determination to be confident, launch into speech, and despite yourself your knees start to shake. Frustrating!

Whistling in the dark, our conscious mind tends to grope around for coping mechanisms. We make conditions, we bargain with the gods. Most of us are affected to a certain extent by circumstance when performing, and our criteria for success can be quite constricting. "I can perform OK as long as I'm wearing my red dress, my best suit." "I'm fine as long as I don't know the audience". I'm no good in auditions: I need to be performing in front of friends." "I can perform to a few people, but I'm hopeless on big occasions." "I'm all right as long as there's no one too important in the audience", "I'm okay if I get

up early enough, learn it off by heart, don't have to wait", "things go well provided I've got my rabbit's paw in my pocket." The beliefs we carry into performing situations can be pretty idiosyncratic.

Beliefs of this kind put the cause for the fear on the outside, on the environment, circumstance, place and time. If the cause is on the outside, it is largely out of our control. If we are to be masters of our fate, we clearly need to look at the possibilities of change within ourselves rather than on the outside. So how can we learn to change on the inside?

Those of us who have studied any particular art or sport usually have experience of learning that takes place at the level of behaviour. Many of us have spent years with teachers being told *what* to do in order to perform well. "Do this!" "Do that!" "Breathe like this!" "Hold your racquet, club, like that!" "This is what you have to do!" If only instructions alone were sufficient!

If we are lucky, we have been shown through teaching *how* to do what we are asked to do. We have been given techniques that we can use and adopt in different situations. Even so, some performers who are exceedingly proficient at the 'how to' still fail to perform well, because knowing how to do something is not sufficient on its own to produce great results. Our nerves may certainly be diminished through having a sound technique, but it takes more than that to ride above them. Knowing how to do something well doesn't guarantee that it will happen if we have internal blocks, or limiting beliefs. We may know what to do *and* how to do it, and still not feel *able* to do it. Our lack of self-belief holds us back.

"If you think you can and you think you can't you're right", said **Henry Ford**. We tend to make reality fit our beliefs and not vice versa. For example, if we go through the world believing it to be a hostile place, we act as if we are ready to defend ourselves against an enemy. Other people react to our aggressive stance by acting in a less than friendly manner, and thus we prove to ourselves that other people are indeed hostile. On the other hand, if we think people are friendly, our positive thoughts affect the way we act, which affects the way that they respond, and we find them friendly. So our thoughts about ourselves, our capabilities, our audience, our performance, affect our success or lack of it.

In one way, this particular thought is reassuring, because changing ourselves might seem more within our gift than changing many aspects of the larger environment. But changing our beliefs can mean changing our very identity, and identity has a built in resistance to change. What I believe is an important aspect of me; if I am different, will I still be me? Maybe it's better to carry on doing things in a way that doesn't work because at least in this way I remain me. Crisis of identity!

Yet, over time, beliefs do change. Do you still believe in Father Christmas? Beliefs can be changed at any period of your life. It does

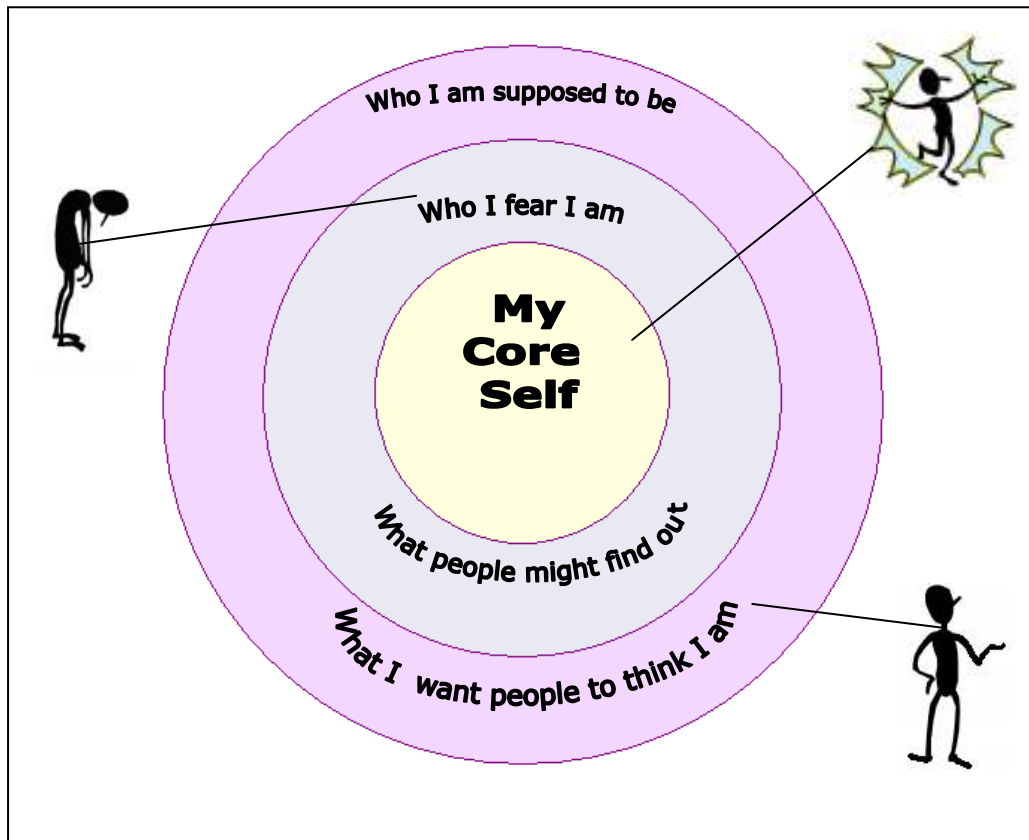
not matter how many years you have perceived yourself and your own possibilities in a particular way. As **Albert Einstein** said, "Knowledge of what is and what has been doesn't tell us what's got to be." Our beliefs don't tend to make a lot of noise; they even change while our attention is elsewhere. If we intend to change them we need to tread gently and in the right way. Our beliefs are part of our unique map of reality; we inhabit our own idea of what reality is. What has to change is this 'idea', our personal map of reality. Change at this level can in fact be remarkable easy when we are ready. And when it happens, our whole internal world changes and becomes a more comfortable place to be, as well as full of new possibilities.

If changing the way you perform or present is to be achieved at the level of your beliefs, you need to focus on the identity that holds particular beliefs. And that can feel quite a scary thing to do. Actors are often highly successful because they operate within a role rather than the much more scary (to them) world of their own identity. Quite frequently, an actor gives a fine performance within a role, when acting as himself would be an agonising experience. Stepping into a part means stepping into a different set of clothes and a different state of being. Public speakers too often adopt this means of performing: they step into the role, be it Chief Executive, Group Chairman, Subject Specialist or Expert.

I remember, from my childhood, the exciting experience of playing the part of a witch in Purcell's opera, "Dido and Aeneas". I had no trouble in absorbing the role and taking on the energy and spitefulness of the character. A few weeks later, I had the opportunity to sing a solo at a Christmas Concert, and this time my knees shook and my voice trembled. Stepping into the role of the witch I could perform with ease, but I didn't have an equivalent resourceful state for 'being myself'.

The role is absolutely appropriate when you are acting a part in a play; it is no substitute in arenas where it is appropriate to be yourself. The role can be a suit of armour that protects you from your vulnerability. It keeps you at one remove from exposure to the audience. At the same time, it divides you from your audience. In 'The Courage to Teach', Parker J. Palmer describes this process in his own field:

" To reduce our own vulnerability, we disconnect from students, from subjects and even from ourselves. We build a wall between inner truth and outer performance, and we play-act the teacher's part. Our words, spoken at remove from our hearts, become 'the balloon speech in cartoons' and we become caricatures of ourselves. We distance ourselves from students and subject to minimize the danger - forgetting that distance makes life more dangerous still by isolating the self."



So who is the real me? Various versions of 'me' emerge when I ask this question. There is the 'me' that I think I am supposed to be, which is affected by all my ideas of how I think performers and presenters ought to be. There is what I want people to think I am, which involves an attempt to hide bits of myself that I don't want other people to see, and to persuade others that I possess qualities I don't really believe I have. There is the 'me' I pretend to be, which means stepping into the role of 'Performer' or 'Presenter'. Putting on this 'performance armour' enables me to feel less vulnerable, but has its downside. Its rigidity can rob me of my authentic humanity, and of the possibility of making a real connection with the audience. Someone in armour cannot hold hands with any sensitivity!

The 'me' that I think I am supposed to be uses the language of necessity. I 'ought' to be a particular way, I 'should' do this, I 'must' do that, I 'have to' do the other. These 'shoulds' and 'musts' take me away from my core to worry about the response of other people. All my thoughts are of outside issues, the effect I am making, other people's expectations and their anticipated judgement. I hand over all my power to my audience. And this produces self-consciousness. Being self-conscious is exceedingly tiring and saps the energy that might go into an inspiring performance. The 'shoulds' and 'musts' at their worst create an ideal of perfection that I cannot possibly ever aspire to, and

this consistent inability to match up to the ideal causes shame at not being good enough. The audience, for its part, is always aware at some level of self-consciousness, and finds it anything from slightly uncomfortable to downright irritating.

Behind the structure of how I ought to be lurks another part of myself that I don't like to acknowledge to others: the 'me' that I fear I probably am. I put great energy into hiding it from my audience. It consists of all the things I don't want the audience to find out about me. Here reside the nameless fears about what people might discover if they did see my naked self. It's the place for all those negative thoughts of inadequacy that run through my mind such as "They'll find me out", "Who do I think I am" and "If people knew what I was really like...". These limiting thoughts about my own worth and value also cause self-consciousness. We need only remember some of the unnecessary phrases arising from this thinking that we hear in presentations: "Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking", "I expect you will have heard this before" and "Of course, I'm no expert". In performance, this fear of failure diminishes us, and reduces our impact.

These two causes of self-consciousness are responsible for many of our inner conflicts, between what we believe people are expecting and what we dread they are going to get. Such conflict keeps us stuck, and prevents us from producing the performance we want to give. It also saps our energy enormously.

We make earnest attempts to be the person we think the situation demands and to hide the self we don't want people to see because we think that hidden self is our real self. But we are wrong. This self is itself a shell hiding the real self at our core. The real self is creative, spontaneous and magnificent. It is an expression of how I am now. It is as it is. "A rose is a rose is a rose". It is openness, flow, breathing and joy.

Being myself, being the real me, is to be a free-spinning top, the colours blending with balance and harmony. When we add the weight of expectation to one side of the top, it lurches from side to side and is impossible to spin. When we add the weight of our attempts to hide our vulnerable self on the other side, again imbalance is created, and inconsistency is the result. When I *accept my vulnerability* and allow the inner me the space to be, all manner of spontaneous connections come into play, and I perform with subtle magic that I could not possibly plan or predict, in my full magnificence. There is no room for fear, for there is nothing left to hide.

We all possessed this magic once upon a time, for a time. When we were very young, we had no self-consciousness. If you watch a baby or a toddler, they are absolutely captivating because they just are. We are delighted by their concentration and lack of reference to us, as it is something we have lost, and will gain back only through much self-

knowledge. By 5 years of age, a child has learned to blush, and has lost that state of innocence.

Your real self is unlike anybody else's real self. It is as far as can be imagined from 'how you ought to be' because it delights in its uniqueness. If you think about an artists and performers that you admire, they are all very different from each other. Each great performing artist has a unique sound. This is certainly true of vocalists and speakers. A fascinating study completed recently by James Beaumont on the Stradivarius and other prized violins revealed that even with instruments differences in sound depended more on the player than on the instrument. In his experiment, different violinists played a Stradivarius and other violins behind a screen, and expert listeners attempted to identify the expensive violin. When a talented violinist played the instruments the listeners failed to spot the Stradivarius as he made all the violins sound wonderful, and wonderfully his own.

Great artists are unique because they listen to their own demons. They tune into their own feelings and emotions and listen to the voice of the heart. They allow body, emotions, mind and spirit to be in harmony.

This is the great paradox. When you perform as yourself, you are more vulnerable. You risk the ultimate risk – that you yourself, the real you might be rejected. But in your very vulnerability you hold your power. In being authentic you are more powerful than anyone playing a role.

Then the gift that you are offering in your performance becomes both more precious and more fragile. You perform from your inner being: "If we are transparent, with nothing to hide, the gap between language and Being disappears. Then the Muse can speak" says the master of musical improvisation, **Stephen Nachmanovitch**." At the same time, you lay yourself open. "I have spread my dreams under your feet," says **W B Yeats**. "Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

When you are authentic, you no longer say about your gift, "I know it's not much," "It's all I could get," "I didn't know what you wanted," "You can change it if you like," because the gift is yourself. The voice of spontaneity says, "this gift is for me and I want you to share it." Or, "this is for you. It's a gift from me." There is no grander gift we can give, it's an immeasurably powerful tool, but there is no way we can any longer escape the responsibility of its being our own.

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Visit her website at www.voiceofinfluence.co.uk to learn more about how she can help you find your voice and perform with confidence and impact, and get her FREE e-courses – "The 10 Secrets for Overcoming Performance Anxiety" and "How to Perform with Authority".