How to Not Get Nervous Before a Speech

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I'm told public speaking is among the top seven biggest fears people have. And I certainly remember quaking before presentations in my high school speech class, but that's a whole other story.

Now, presenting genealogy classes isn't a fear-based experience for me. I don't get nervous. I'm not typically afraid of what may happen. So, I wondered what made the difference. Why am I more like an "eager-beaver" than a "nervous Nellie" before I go on stage?

I've discovered a few insights about myself that make presenting less fearful and more fun.

1. **Know Your Stuff.** I'll admit this may seem obvious, but there is more to it than having a working knowledge of your subject. To me feeling confident of the material—and that's key to not being nervous—means being able to speak extemporaneously about each slide. I don't read from a script. That would be nerve racking. I use the material (text and images) on the slides as prompts. Then I simply draw on my own knowledge to tell about the resources, the method, the anecdote, or piece of history related to that slide. The presentation becomes a well-organized parade of stories I'm eager to tell and not facts I've memorized to recite. That's far more fun and less nerve racking.
2. **Focus on the Action/Reaction.** I'm not an actor, but I know a lot of them, as they say. One of the techniques professional actors use to bring honesty to their performance is to either create a reaction or respond to an action on stage. They don't recite lines in a vacuum any more than you or I say or do anything in real life without a purpose. You don't say "pass the salt, please" without expecting a reaction. You don't have a drink spilled on you without reacting. All of this is to say that when I'm presenting, I'm 100% focused on the message I'm communicating and the reaction I'm engendering in the audience. I get so engaged in the stories I'm telling, the details about a process, the facts hidden in a record and how I want to share that with the listeners, that I don't think about myself. To focus on the message and the receipt of the idea (the action/reaction) completely takes me out of myself and eliminates all nerves. The minute I start thinking about myself—"I'm getting hot," "I screwed up that point," "That guy doesn't like me"—I start quaking in my sneakers. When I've changed the focus back to myself, I've literally become self-conscious, and that makes me nervous. Focus on the others; not yourself.
3. **Be Willing to Be Vulnerable.** I remember when I first started presenting genealogy lectures my biggest fear was the question I didn't know how to answer. I felt that if I was "passing myself off as an *expert*" I should know everything. Even though I knew I could always say, "that's a great question, I'll get back to you" or "I'm sorry I just don't know," the fear was still palpable that I would look stupid. What I've learned is that I don't need to know everything. Even the most seasoned and expert genealogists don't know everything. It's not possible. Do I do my best to be prepared? You bet. But I'm okay with the occasional stumper question. I'm okay to be vulnerable to the possibility of not knowing. Further, knowing that I can handle the awkward question is in and of itself reassuring. Arriving at that place of confidence makes the unknown experience far less intimidating.

I wouldn't be fully honest with you if I didn't concede that new places, new faces, and new presentations didn't raise my level of anxiety just a bit. But it is in those circumstances of uncertainty, that I double down on what I've shared with you here. The lesson it seems is that the key to being confident in a public speaking situation is the knowledge that you have the tools inside you to succeed.

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