**The Introvert on the Podium**

I was in college when I first learned how awful public speaking could be. Having written an op-ed article for the student newspaper about sweatshops — a big campus controversy in 1999 — I rose from my seat at a debate to say a few words about the subject. I hadn’t prepared anything.

The ease with which I had written my ideas disappeared with the realization that 100 sets of eyes were locked on me. I stumbled through something. People stared blankly. My heart raced and my face flushed. After what seemed like an eternity, I slunk back to my seat, vowing not to repeat the experience.

Jump ahead 15 years. I’m still writing about business and economics topics in articles and books — these days with a focus on time management and productivity. You’d think that book writing would be a solitary endeavor, a perfect career for an introvert like me. But, as it turns out, a big part of book writing is speaking. Blogging isn’t good enough. To sell books, you have to talk to people about your ideas.

At first, I thought this was something to be endured. But a few books in, I can honestly say I enjoy it. Last spring, I got up on stage for an hour in front of 700 women at a private event, and it was a highlight of my year. They seemed to like it, too; in the post-event feedback, 98 percent gave me positive marks for delivery. Backstage, someone even said, “This is easy for you, right?”

Umm, no. Few people are naturals at public speaking. Here’s how I learned to love it anyway.

First, I have realized that being “natural” comes from being practiced. I don’t know why this should be surprising. Maybe it’s because many of us assume that we must project proficiency in all work-related matters. This belies the messy nature of learning new skills. The first time you got on a bicycle, you might well have fallen off; only later did it seem intuitive. Likewise, the more you get up in front of people, the better you are at it. In the last five years, I’ve given so many speeches that it no longer feels nerve-racking. It just feels like Tuesday.

While some people have learned to be eloquent about almost anything at the microphone, most of us are asked about just a few topics. The good news is that after enough practice, you can know those topics cold. You can write speeches about them, do drills on the delivery and hone your ideas into phrases that sound good. Then you can memorize those phrases.

It took me a long time to get there. For a few years, I’d ask for lecterns where I could keep notes. Then a conference organizer pushed me not to rely on this crutch. In my hotel room the night before, I suddenly wondered what would happen if my slides didn’t work, either. I’d be standing in front of hundreds of people with nothing to lean on.

So I tested myself to see whether I could give my basic speech from memory. The answer turned out to be that you can wind me up and drop me into the middle of a corporate retreat, and I’ll give you an hourlong talk on time management.

Once I had my material memorized, I realized that I could focus on the part that’s fun: feeding off the energy that is always in an audience, and that can be harnessed if you try.

Most introverts like myself enjoy one-on-one interactions. For my speeches, I have the organizers put me in touch with a few audience members beforehand. I ask them to keep track of how they spend their time for several days, then have them send me their logs. This exercise shows me the challenges that my audience faces. But a secondary benefit is that I get to know these people. I talk on the phone with them, often multiple times before we meet. When I say hello before the talk, they become friendly faces, nodding and smiling in seats near the front.

Even if a conference doesn’t lend itself to this format, I make sure to get there early enough to introduce myself to enough people so that the audience won’t be all strangers. Someone, at least, will be rooting for me.

Laughter is energizing, too — and, over time, I have experimented to find lines that make people chuckle. Just as stand-up comics try out their material in small clubs, I try a new observation in each speech to see how people react. If they react well, I add it permanently, because there is little that is more thrilling than hearing hundreds of people chortle at something you’ve just said. Laughter is approval; it certainly beats blank faces.

Finally, from watching other speakers, I’ve learned strategies like giving audience members opportunities to talk with one another, since most people come to conferences to network anyway.

I can’t say that all my speeches go perfectly. I still struggle when I draw the post-lunch, nap-inducing time slot. Yet even this can be helpful: It makes me realize that sometimes you connect with other people and sometimes you don’t. It makes any given speech less fraught. I can take it in stride — in contrast to that red-faced walk back to my seat in college. I’ll be trying again with new faces soon.