

# The Inner Game of Preparation

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When an actor walks into a room to audition, there are generally a few constants. There is nervousness. There is wanting of immediate approval and there is pretending not to want it. There is a changing story about power and who has it in the room and there is the material from the script. When I first began to work with business professionals on presentation skills, most especially in groups, I realized how very akin the process of preparing for a presentation can feel like the experience of preparing for an audition. So how do actors continue to show up for auditions when the ratio of rejection to acceptance is at best likely 9:1? The exploration of this from my own personal experience as a stage actor for the last twenty years as well as that of my colleagues proves to be exceptionally useful to those who are seeking to develop their sense of presence in public speaking contexts. Let me share some of these lessons.

For instance, as an actor, I have been taught to look for synchronicity and parallel process. We are mirrors of each other. Parallel process might be the way a difficulty that I am experiencing in the world is actually a mirror of what is happening inwardly. For example, I may think someone is judging me but it will not actually touch me unless it reflects in some way something I do inside myself. Synchronicity is an awareness of how one event, one tiny piece of information, or chance meeting can transform the timing and picture of one's direction or one's perspective. It is true that art mirrors life but in my case life usually mirrors art. I get a role in a production and then realize

a year later it is a forerunner to something I have yet to learn personally and usually the parallel process and synchronicity are far more intelligent in design than anything I could have anticipated. This same phenomenon often happens now with my coaching work with leaders.

I found myself in the last year working with an actor on his audition for Hamlet and subsequently his work on the role at the same time I was coaching a CEO on a presentation for her company where she was asking them to confront some very hard truths. What could they possibly have in common with each other? In short, almost everything and more precisely, Hamlet: Hamlet's wrestling with the question to be or not to be, his struggle to take action, to know who and what to trust, to forsake comfort for truth, not to mention, his little problem with ghosts.

I was asked at a college audition, "What is the first line of Hamlet? Not his first line but the very first line of the play?" Had I known then how brilliant the question was, I might have made a wiser choice and gone to that school. I didn't know the answer but have subsequently learned the lesson.

"Who's there?" Bernardo, a sentinel is on watch with Marcellus asks. They are protecting the castle walls of Denmark where Hamlet is the Prince and on two consecutive nights they have seen a ghost walk before them. This ghost is the exact image of Hamlet's very recently murdered father.

"Who's there?" the play begins.

And that is where we begin as well: the CEO, Leah, who knows she must name and deal directly with problems

that her company is reluctant to hear, and the actor, Don who has lost out on this part three times in the past, but can't live with himself if he doesn't try again. We are desperate, in the beginning, to jump to the end of the story, to skip over the messy process of finding out what we really want to say and to stave off the nervousness. As a response, actors want to memorize the lines. Presenters want to finalize the powerpoint. We tend to avoid the question, "Who's there?"

So when I ask Leah the question she says, "a bunch of people who



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will want to complain and not take responsibility for what's happening? We cannot drown and we are drowning and pretending we didn't choose it. I can't do this alone. Nobody wants to hear this but they have to hear it." When I ask Don, he says "Maybe I am just somebody who thinks he can play Hamlet but maybe I am kidding myself? How many times do I need to do this? I should be more confident if I am going to audition for this, right?" Leah answers from her perspective who is *out* there and Don answers the question of who is *in* here. Both angles are necessary first steps and require time to sort out especially when the stakes are this high.

Many presenters who are faced with the kind of challenge that Leah faces take one of two paths either soften the blow to keep the company feeling safe and her feeling like she is not alone or, distance herself from that emotion, deliver a scolding rebuke to whip everybody into shape at the expense of potential allies and genuine buy-in from her colleagues. This is where the actor's process as well as Hamlet's is going to become very useful to Leah.

I ask her a series of questions about relationship or what I might call the *who*. There is also the *what*, which relates to our intention, the *why* which relates to our greater purpose and the *how*, which comprise the means, the tactics, that we will employ to communicate. I will focus on the *who* and the *what* which together allow the foundation for the speaker or actor to feel grounded. I ask Leah to answer the question who's there from the inner perspective. She feels she either needs to play the forceful task-master or the encouraging mother. I ask her to try on both roles, one at a time and to fully embody what she wants to say and not to worry about the exact

wording for now. The true meaning of rehearsal for an actor is not about getting it right. It's about making a choice, many choices without holding back and seeing what happens. I want Leah to practice making choices without the final result in mind but as

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a way to explore who she wants to be as a leader. It requires one to throw over their self-consciousness for the sake of growing and it is a prerequisite for learning, for art and for great leadership.

I also want her to become conscious not only of the role but of the "play" she is about to enter into with her company. She doesn't realize she has a huge amount of power despite the fact that the company is in crisis. Yes, Leah is delivering a speech but she is also beginning a conversation that will likely require months of time, rolling out new initiatives, trust and a great deal of teamwork. If she thinks of this as only a speech, she will miss the opportunity to engage her company in a very different kind of story and create a very different kind of script. Leah's tendency, when under pressure, was to default to either playing the encouraging mother or the bullying task-master with little in between. This was the beginning of her developing her range.

Upon further questioning, we

also realize together that Leah has already cast her company in the role of complainers, shirkers of responsibility, and people who will avoid crisis because its uncomfortable with a few exceptions. The next question becomes obvious to her. "Who might they be at their best in this situation?" This exploration for Leah was the beginning of her developing her depth and her creativity as a presenter and a leader.

As I work with Don on his audition, his challenge speaks to the heart of the question of confidence and vulnerability. People like Leah who are extremely confident presenters often want to find more range by bringing more dimensions to their strengths and finding new ones. For many people, including actors, a sense of confidence regardless of how skilled one is seems to fly out the window when they have to walk into an audition or for the business professional who is asked to present.

Don's answer to the question of who's there was "Maybe I am just somebody who thinks he can play Hamlet but maybe I am kidding myself?" I ask him. "Do you think Hamlet is confident?" And he says, "Hamlet is all over the place. He is confident one moment and then absolutely mired in self-doubt the next." "So would it be possible for you to put that awareness into the role instead of making the self-doubt about you? Is it possible you are already Hamlet?" I ask.

One of the finest plays in the history of the English language is about a soon to be leader who has a mess on his hands. He both lacks the confidence and capacity to fix things. The play is about the journey that Hamlet embarks upon inwardly and outwardly in thought, action and deed in order to come to some sense

of his own truth and readiness to act. He makes a lot of mistakes and false starts a long the way. Leah and Don are not in the life and death situation that Hamlet is in, but their nervous systems are already in a fight/flight/freeze response all the same. Why? For some, public speaking feels more frightening than the thought of death. For others, the fear feels more like adrenalin, excitement and there is a large continuum in between. One reason for this is attributable to the kinds of *thoughts* that are triggered by the possibility of public failure or public success. Knowing your material, creating a strong presentation is only part of the game. Knowing yourself is the other.

Hamlet can help us here. Not long after the start of the play, Hamlet actually sees the ghost of his father and the ghost tells him to avenge his untimely murder. Hamlet has never seen a ghost before. This despite the fact that they show up as regularly in Shakespeare plays as vampires appear on television shows these days. He is still a man who has just seen a ghost and it really messes with his head. First, he believes the ghost and starts to take action, then wonders if he is being tricked into something evil, then he starts to wonder if he is, in fact, crazy. In short, he doesn't know what to trust. This is a metaphor in the presence and presentation work for what happens to people often before they walk into a major presentation or an important audition. Their ghosts show up.

"The Ghost" is usually the voice inside ourselves that brings up self-doubt or fear. Ghosts also might push us to a challenge that feels overwhelming. It haunts us. I have worked with CEO's who cannot get the negative voice of their mothers

or fathers out of their heads. It may not ruin them when they are asked to present but they become contracted, simply less of what they can be when that ghost is not hanging around. Actors often have a version of some critic that has skewered them in the press and though they may not be conscious of it, sure enough, the image of that critic is in their head on opening night when the actual critics are out in the audience. In Don's case, his ghost was a version of himself as a bitter old man looking back on

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his life with regret that he had never fully expressed his gifts. This is a legitimate fear but the problem with either indulging the ghost by giving into the fears or trying to push it out of the room is that it keeps coming back. These ghosts, in truth, often want to protect us or challenge us to go further but they have a funny way of showing it. When the ghosts show up, it is a sign that an excellent opportunity is waiting in the wings to move to one's greater potential.

Don's ghost sees Don as already defeated before he starts. "Why Both-er? How many times do you need to do this? What if you fail again?" This is a common refrain for the ghosts of business professionals as well. Hamlet, like Don, does not know how to deal with his ghost but he spends the play figuring it out. When I bring this to Don's attention, something starts to open up. He realizes that he has an opportunity to bring this into the audition rather than be at the whim of it. His wanting to succeed is the same as Hamlet's own desires. His feeling of wanting to run and hide and wish the potential failure would

be over is also what Hamlet experiences. Rather than pushing away his vulnerability, Don makes it an asset. He finds confidence and excitement in bringing this aspect of humanity, vulnerability and volatility into the room through the material, through the speech, through Hamlet.

In working with Leah and Don, alternately, I see that Leah is struggling with how to work with her vulnerability as she prepares to face her company. She discovered from the role playing that she didn't want to come across as too weak or too harsh. Neither felt truthful. Neither was satisfying. Instead of focusing on how *she* might come

across to her audience, I ask her to focus on where *the company* is vulnerable and where the *company* is strong. In Don's case, we are looking for the parallels in Hamlet. In Leah's case, we are looking for the parallels in her company. Don's job is to illuminate Hamlet's problems and the myriad ways he struggles with it. Leah's job is to shine a light on the problems of her company and begin to find new ways to collaborate. Through the reframing of the "who" question, Leah starts to see herself in the role of ally. She sees herself not only as an ally to a failing company but an ally and guide to the people who are resistant to looking at the issues. She comes to see that their resistance is their ghost. This reframing and shift inside allows Leah to integrate her strength with compassion in her presentation.

They have both answered the question of "who's there" thoroughly. They are experiencing more ease. They have their attention off of themselves and how they appear to others and on something about which they feel passionately. The next question

follows fast: *WHAT* is needed here?

For every public presentation it is different, but another way of asking the question is what perspective or inspiration or intelligence can I bring into the conversation? Where can I add value? What do I want these people to know, feel or do differently when they leave this room? For Leah, these questions help her determine what she wants to say, what points need to be made, what stories will illustrate those points. What visuals if any will assist her? Now that we have more sense of the relationship, I ask Leah to specify her intention. Often, when I ask a new client this question before we work through the question of “who’s there”, people will say “To get my point across, to make sure everyone has the same information.” This is not a strong intention because that could be accomplished through an email or memo. It greatly diminishes the possibility for rich exchange in the room and in short, it gives no pleasure to the speaker or audience. When the intention is not clearly defined or not bold enough, it leaves the speaker only with words on a page but rudderless in every other way. The beauty of public speaking is that it is *YOUR* intention that shapes the material. Hamlet has been played by thousands of actors, perhaps millions at this point. The plot is not spectacular. The language is well-known. It is how each new actor brings his or her special interpretation to the material that makes us want to see the play over and over again. It is the specificity of the intention and the fire that it sparks in the speaker that will bring nuance and inspiration to a play and to a public presentation.

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intellectual, emotional, spiritual, strategic, technical, artistic, relational and visionary to name a few. A strong *WHAT* or intention is the key to making a presentation come alive. As Leah leans into the questions, she realizes that her intention is to have her company wake up the challenges ahead, to know that they have the inner resources to deal with the issues ahead of them and to feel that she is with them 100%. Now her creative leadership mind takes over. Instead of entering into the presentation defended and blaming or hiding behind niceness, her intention be-

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comes about empowering the whole company. This allows her to bring up the facts as well as roll out several ideas for short, intermediate and long range goals.

There are many other aspects to good auditioning and good presenting, not the least of which is knowing your material, honing one's speech down to its essential points, including stories and anecdotes to illuminate points, finding physical and vocal ease and power. The bigger game has to do with this illusive word, presence. I am often hired to help someone develop “executive presence.” The mistake is in believing it is an image which one can attain with a few tricks around eye contact and how to read notes and so forth. The mistake is in believing it can be put on like a suit. We know the difference inside ourselves so though we may be doing all the tricks that we were taught to look executive, the inner foundation isn't there. The ghosts show up. I am often asked to help someone be “more authentic” in their public presentations. There is a look of authenticity which might

resemble sincerity but it doesn't feel authentic and it is not free and it is definitely not powerful. We can feel that difference. Children can feel the difference. We are that sensitive even if we talk ourselves out of it.

The theatre is an empathic rather than sympathetic art. When the writing, acting, directing and design are working in harmony, the audience experiences the story rather than just thinks about it. When we say we are moved by some performance or someone's speech, that's literal. There is a psycho-physical connection which goes deeper than thought

or emotion and all the way into

our nervous system. When I work with clients for public presentation, I always ask them how they experience presence because presence only lives in the experiential realm. Our ideas or images of it don't matter. Generally, they respond by speaking of how someone's presence influences and affects them rather than an analytical definition of it. They have been touched, felt their minds expanded, awakened, stirred, lifted, blown away, set straight or impelled to take action. Public speaking is also a temporal and empathic art at its best regardless of how technical or complex the material. The inner preparation game is about bridging what is alive within the speaker through language, through empathy and imagination for the sake of liberating a deeper and more wholistic intelligence that is seeking to be mirrored in everyone of us.

*We defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all.*

Hamlet, Act V, Scene ii ■