



## OVERCOMING THE FEAR OF SERVICE

BY STEVE KOKKER

I could likely count on one hand the times I raised my hands to speak in class throughout the entire eleven years of my elementary and high school education, and on two the times I volunteered an answer to a question. In elementary school, when the teacher would go through a list of questions to be answered by each student in turn, I'd frantically count the kids ahead of me, and try to establish the answer to my question before the heavy focus fell onto me. I was a very shy kid and had a major dread of having to speak spontaneously in front of others—what if I got the answer wrong, what if I sounded stupid? My stomach would turn instantly into twisted knots whenever I thought about having to speak in class. I would get nervous already days ahead of an approaching presentation. Public speaking and fear were fused in my brain for the decades to come.

In high school, we were made to practice public speaking and when I needed to recite a speech, I would prepare with the devotion and skill of a stage actor, memorizing each word, each vocal inflection. No way could I forget even a string of words, for if I needed to be spontaneous, that's it, I would sound idiotic and surely would have nothing of interest to say. My only survival mechanism was intense, detailed preparation in which no room could be left for spontaneity.

Though I slowly lost my shyness and plunged headlong into being sociable from university onwards, I still feared any form of public speaking (even making a toast at a party) and developed other coping mechanisms: continued preparation and memorization, learning to disconnect from the present by switching my brain off, or just learning to act the part. (I needed to be part actor as the real me would certainly screw up.)

Such feelings/beliefs rarely go away entirely, and I still hear their voices on a daily basis, telling me to keep quiet or keep my head low. And yet to my great surprise, over the past years I am also able to make public presentations (sometimes in front of 75 or more people) and now am hosting regular tea demonstrations, tastings and meditative evenings which require presence, reflection—and *words!* What has happened over the years to allow me to relax into being comfortably spontaneous in front of more than one human at a time, and what indeed are these silly fears which stop us from interacting fully with the outside world?

I've been thinking of this topic a lot recently as we as a team here in Estonia are hosting more and more

tea drinking events, and I have noticed—in myself and others—many unspoken, sometimes unrealized personal fears which are blocking some from offering this gift to others, to avoid stepping up or to construct very comfortable, safe, limited ways of doing so. All of which just put barriers on our paths of self-development and of course prevent others from having a potentially beneficial, enjoyable experience.

So many of the fears which rule our lives and dictate our behavior (and most of them rule in complete stealth and impunity, unknown to the person being ruled) are not even our own. They are either part of lives we no longer live (we are no longer seven years old) or, more often, part of other people's lives, which we inherited through direct experience (or DNA telomere encoding!). What a dastardly clever mechanism! We pick up our parents' fears (of dogs, poverty, intimacy, saving face, abandonment, heights, etc.), adopt them as our own, and let them disrupt our lives in the process—and the lives of all those we touch. I often liken it to having been handed a heavy suitcase during early life by a friendly stranger who asks, "Would you pretty please carry this for a while?" Of course we oblige. And only 25 years later do we notice that we are still carrying it, and that it has made us a hunchback in the process. Once we realize we are carrying other people's limitations, isn't it time to set them down?

Of course, the first, massive step is realizing that this is the case. Our own fears and limitations are often impossible to see without keen, sober self-examination or simple clear sightedness, neither of which comes naturally to humans. We must work at it. In doing so, we can also see our own reluctance to give up these companions. As limiting as our fears are, they are also comfortable and familiar, and who has the time or bravery to step into the unknown when the familiar, even if it brings with it negative consequences, is so... easy? Like the necklace we've been wearing for years, we won't even notice it's there. And like the backpack we carry on hikes for endless hours, we stop feeling how it is making our journey slower, more laborious.

Once our limiting fears are at least partly visible to us, even if obscured by a fog of attachment, magical thinking or self-delusion, there are all sorts of things we can do to address them and experience the 'incredible lightness of being', which follows from their eventual disappearance. For example, we can step out of our comfort zones, give ourselves small, minimal-risk challenges as often as possible, be it to talk to strangers, tell someone

something intimate, sing or dance in front of someone, go up and pet that doggie—whatever. Jump into life! It won't bite! At least, it won't always bite. As difficult as it might seem at the time, the rewards are big-time and unexpected.

With regards to tea service, for any one of us who decides to listen to their inner voice telling them that the Universe would like them to serve tea to others now, pretty please, there are a few things we can do to help navigate our fears of serving.

**Just Do It.** Plain and simple. Set a date for a tea drinking session, invite people and simply do it, no matter what comes. Only by jumping in can you realize that the water is not as cold and deep and dangerous as your fears made you think.

**Make the sessions your own.** There need be no strict formula in serving tea. You are the magician of the session, so feel free to choose your own music (or lack of it), the tea, the setting, the incense, the structure of the session. Invite a friend over to play an instrument or recite poetry. Have everyone try a meditation or breathing technique you saw on YouTube. I don't mean that you must stuff your sessions with activities—ideally there would be the tea and nothing more—but my point is that for a time, you may occasionally, in order to become more comfortable, use certain ways of 'tricking' the self out of one comfort zone and into another.

**Stop feeling we need to be Wu De.** For any of us who have had the pleasure of assisting at a Wu De workshop, feeling that we need to follow up on that can be daunting. After Wu De left Estonia last year, I thought, "No point in me doing any tea events, as there's no way I can ever speak like that!" Well, as banal as it sounds, we all have our gifts to offer, and these need not be just like other people's gifts. Don't worry about not being anyone else, and focus on more fully being yourself. What is it that you have to offer others that is more uniquely yours? And please don't whimper that you have nothing to offer—that's not your voice, it's someone else's!

If it's the speaking part of the sessions that worries you most, simply arrange to do a minimum of speaking! Not too complicated. Make it a more meditative session. Set up a relaxing atmosphere, put on some beautiful music, and explain that you'd like to have a quieter session today. Doing this a few times will make your organism comfortable with the process and then, whenever words do come out of you, you're likely to experience them arising naturally, comfortably.

Alternately, if speaking spontaneously freaks you out, then read! When it comes time for words, read out passages of your favorite book (hopefully not *The Happy Hooker* or *Auto Repair For Dummies*). Reading a Zen koan, or from an Aaron Fisher or Eckhart Tolle book will take the onus off of you and still be meaningful for people. Do this until you feel more comfy in dropping your own pearls of wisdom.

Or, if it's the silence that scares you, make your first sessions more chatty and informative; that might

break through some of your fears and you can approach the more meditative aspects in future sessions.

No matter what the whimpering, scared child's voice inside you might try to tell you, the rewards of facing the world in this way and shedding past fears are massive. I am convinced of this not only from my own history, and not only from the testimony of a number of stellar TED Talks speakers or famous actors who also shared their stories of having once been stage shy. There are a number of people in my own entourage here, I am so deeply proud to say (so deeply there are tears welling up as I write), who have courageously pushed themselves beyond their fears and are now serving tea regularly to others, improving lives along the way. I can recall shaking hands pouring tea into cups, and thin voices questioning whether they are at all capable of handling public tea service. One friend who now makes a career out of public speaking would spend 15 minutes in a toilet talking to himself to still his beating heart before stepping onto a stage. Now he changes lives when he does. No one's life would be touched if he had stayed in the toilet, or stayed at home, or only drank tea alone.

One person I know enables the sneaky side of their fears to convince them that such public service need not be for every person on the planet, and therefore why should they do it? Why should a bumblebee become a lizard, or a carpenter an airline pilot? Why should people be forced against their will to do that which is not in the least bit their own? My answer is that this issue is not about an orchid being forced to become a potato; it's about an orchid becoming an orchid. Not just half of one.

Perhaps the only thing we're meant to do on this planet, in these bodies, is to dance the dance we're meant to dance—not other people's dances, our own. How many of us do this as fully, completely and as elegantly as we can? The Universe has likely led us along this tea path far enough for us to know that something is there for us; it's knocking at the door. Will we answer? Tea is calling to us. How long will we turn away? We have aspects of ourselves to share with others. How long will we keep them hidden?

Of course, there are many more sources of fear and possibilities to overcome than the ones I've mentioned here. Feel free to fill in your own blanks. Psychology books are filled with suggestion on how to master limiting fears. Yet if you are already reading this, chances are there is something in you which desires to reach out and share with others via the medium of tea. Thing is, it's not so scary to do so, after all.

