A Dream Come True

Ashish was both thrilled and terrified.

He held a senior position at a global law firm because he had expertise in an arcane field of economic analysis.

The prior year, a corporation represented by the firm had been sued over a very odd, very narrow, stakeholder complaint. If Ashish's firm didn't win the case, the corporation would be at risk for billions of dollars for decades.

Ashish came up with a theory that would defend the corporation's position. His theory had become the heart of the defense. Soon, as part of the case, he would have to testify before a judge and explain his analysis.

He smiled and said, "I like when people pay attention to my ideas. I love my ideas. I wish more people wanted to know about them! And now they will. If...!" He raised a finger dramatically.

He went on, holding up his finger. "If I can explain my theory to the judge. Well, no, I certainly can explain it. The question is whether I can explain it in a way the judge will understand."
“Why wouldn’t the judge understand?” I asked.

He blew out a breath and shook his head. “My nerves. I used to get very nervous. I would babble. The worst word salad you’ve ever heard. If that happens in front of this judge, that would put the case at risk.”

“Is that a possibility?” I asked. “That you would babble in front of the judge?”

**Blackout Freakout**

“Most likely not. I haven’t had an attack in a long time now, but I remember how it felt when I did. I watched nonsense come out of my mouth. I couldn’t stop it. I knew it was happening. Well, except this once. Oh, I’ve never forgotten this. Ha! I haven’t told this story in a long time.”

I was all ears.

“It was a heartstopper, Tom,” he said. “I was making my first presentation to the board of directors at a company where I’d been barely a year. I’m standing at the end of the conference table. My slides are on the screen next to me. I go through my spiel. And when I finish, I see a sticky note on the table next to my computer. And I think, ‘That wasn’t there before.’ It’s in my admin’s handwriting. I read it. It’s fine. No big deal. But I cannot figure out how it got there.

“So after the meeting, I ask her, ‘Where did this note come from?’ And she looks at me like maybe I’m not well, and she says, ‘I handed it to you.’ And I say, ‘You did? In there? In front of the board?’ And she says, ‘Yes, in front of the board.’

“Tom, I had no memory of her ever being there. She told me she walked in from the back of the room and walked the whole length of the table! And I never saw her! Whenever I think about it, it’s hard to believe your mind can do that to you. How frightened must I have been to not even see her?”

“Like you blacked out,” I said.

“But kept talking, evidently. I asked around afterward. Nobody noticed anything. I must’ve gone into some kind of autopilot. I don’t know what happened. And that’s scary, too. What if that happened again?”

I asked, “Is there reason to worry? You said you hadn’t had an attack in a long time. I understand why it would be on your mind, but it seems you’re managing it. But maybe not.”
Write a Happy Ending

“No, I think I am. I remind myself of something I said to one of my daughters when she was young. I think I made it up. Maybe I read it somewhere. In any case, she used to get so nervous she’d vomit. And one day I said to her, ‘Look, whatever is going to happen is going to happen. And once it happens, then you’ll deal with it. But right now, all your worries about what’s going to happen are just stories. It’s all made up. It’s not real. And it seems your stories have pretty unhappy endings. I wonder if you could write yourself a happy ending.’

“That is how I coach myself against my nerves. ‘Write a happy ending. Create a positive outcome.’ Think, ‘People are going to like this.’ Which is not that hard because I really do like talking about my ideas. It’s why I still lecture at two universities. I love talking about my ideas. It’s not hard to create a happy ending. ‘They’re going to love this lecture,’ or ‘They’re going to support my position,’ or whatever. I can picture a good outcome.”

“I nodded, agreeing, saying, “When I talk with people about nervousness, I ask what outcome are they imagining? If it’s a bad outcome, focused on their weaknesses and what might go wrong, it makes sense they’d feel nervous. But if they’re imagining their strengths and where they’re confident, there’s no room for nerves. So I say, choose your focus. You have control over your thoughts. What ending are you imagining?”

He asked, “What else do you talk about when you talk with people about nervousness?”

I smiled and said, “Well, there’s a tool I talk about all the time. And it comes from a story of my own that I tell.”

“Can I hear it?” he asked.

Frightened to Deaf

“Sure.” I took a breath. “One of my first professional acting jobs right out of school was at an enormous theatre here in Los Angeles called The Ahmanson. It seats three thousand people. When you put on theatre for three thousand people, it has to be big.

“Well, I had a tiny little part in a gigantic extravaganza. My big moment was a two-line exchange with the big star. And, oh, this woman. I was in awe of her. She was amazing. I felt so lucky to have watched her in rehearsals.

“Anyway, one night I said my first line and I saw her reply, but I couldn’t hear her reply. It was like she was on mute. I said my second line, and she does what she always does so I leave like I
usually leave. But I could not hear her. I had gone deaf.”

He said, “Like I had gone blind.”

“Amazing, right? My nerves shut down my hearing like your nerves shut down your vision.”

“And out of this came a tool?” he asked.

“Yes, because I needed something fast. I was thinking if this happened again the next night, my career’s over. I was freaking out.

“So, I asked myself, ‘Okay, you couldn’t hear her. What could you hear?’ I knew the answer right away. I was hearing my self-critical voice. I called that voice Nasty. Nasty said all the things I was afraid were true. ‘She doesn’t think you’re much of an actor.’ And, ‘You’re really over your head, buster.’ And, ‘You are making no impression at all here, sweetheart.’ Nasty was scary.

The Sock Puppet Solution

“But what I did was make up a sock puppet. I really soft, goofy, harmless little thing that I could make talk by quacking my hand, and I put Nasty in the sock puppet. So it still said everything that scared me, but it was a sock puppet! And it was outside me.

“That became important for me. Having the sock puppet separate from me meant Nasty wasn’t inside me anymore. It wasn’t part of me. It was out there. I suddenly had two voices I could choose between. I could listen to whatever was happening in front of me and be present, or I could listen to my sock puppet and feel hijacked. I had choice.”

He nodded. “Hijacked. Like I was in that board room.”

I said, “You said something else earlier that I think is helpful. You said, ‘Focus on what’s in front of you. Do your job.’ One idea I’ve turned into a saying is, ‘You can be nervous and still do your job.’”

I went on, “A lot of people think their nerves mean something. If they feel nervous, it must mean bad things are going to happen. But that’s not what nerves mean at all. You can be nervous and still do just great. Nervousness is just a condition in the body. Like hunger. Like thirst. You can be hungry and thirsty and still do your job, right? Well, you can be nervous and still do your job.”

Ashish said, “That makes me think of something my wife has been saying to me for
years. ‘It’s not your car.’ She first said it because we used to live near a neighbor whose car alarm went off all the time. And it used to infuriate me. And she’d say, ‘But it’s not your car.’ She was saying, let it go. Let it be. Get on with your life. Do the task at hand, whatever that is. Never mind the alarm. It’s not your car. Just like you can be nervous and still do your job. Do both. It’s okay.”

I said, “I like ‘it’s not my car.’ That’s helpful.”

He said, “And I like your sock puppet.”

Ashish enjoyed the experience of giving testimony in front of the judge. To him, the experience was an exciting intellectual jousting match. Mastering his nerves allowed him to focus and show up with *The Look & Sound of Leadership.*

---

**Core Concepts**

- Nerves affect your body in all sorts of ways.
- Your nerves have a voice that is uniquely yours.
- Find that voice. Externalize it. Minimize it.
- No need to silence the voice. ‘It’s not your car.’
- Before the event, picture a positive outcome.
Related Library Categories

Managing Yourself
Nervousness
Self-Talk

Related Episodes

# 71  Act “As If”
# 62  Choosing Persistence
# 147 Conquering Fear
# 176 The Executive Impostor
# 12  Managing Nervousness