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GOOD FOR WHOM?

A CHRONICLE OF STAGE FRIGHT, PEOPLE PLEASING
AND OTHER ANXIOUS MOMENTS

BY ELIZABETH GARREN

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My heart was in my throat as my turn to take the stage approached. I'd been relatively calm during the first five speakers' presentations, staying in control of my usual debilitating fear of public speaking. I was last of seven dancers invited to talk about their dance careers at the prestigious Walker Art Center, a contemporary art museum. Speaker number six was half way through her presentation. I was next. What I planned to say was condensed to a pile of notes clutched in my hand. But what was now unfolding on stage threw me into chaos. The poised and articulate dancer, the one I had to follow, chose to punctuate her talk with a bang up slow motion silhouetted movement sequence, accompanied by a hypnotic tribal beat...the audience was mesmerized. When the music ended, she held her pose for a moment of electric silence, during which I felt the life drain out of me. The audience erupted into whoops and shouts. It should have been the end of the show, but little ol' me was next, with a low-key talk on my cerebral, avant-garde no-music dance experience. I was doomed and I knew it. These people wanted drama, action, passion! I had to get out of there, but couldn't move. I was trapped. I knew in my bones my talk was a disaster ready to happen, in full view of my colleagues, family and friends, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it...or was there? **In a gesture of survival, I reached down deep, not for courage, but for clarity...**

My first instinct, when invited to speak at the Walker was NO WAY! Although honored to be asked, I'd always feared speaking in public. In spite of years

performing with a well-known dance troupe on stages around the world, speaking my mind alone on stage was another story. Did I really have anything to say? Would the audience like me? Would I be good? I knew from experience what these concerns could mean: weeks of anxiety preparing a talk, accompanied by the inevitable fear, dread, and possible near panic during the event itself. I'd be exhausted, even sick, afterwards. Why would anyone say yes to this?

But I did say yes. I wanted to see if I could finally speak in public *without experiencing stage fright*. Over the previous year, I'd radically changed the way I viewed what I had always feared about being onstage: *the possibility of being judged negatively by an audience*. During all the years of my stage fright, I'd operated under the assumption that other people's evaluations of me (or of what I say or do) held the key to how *good* or *right* or *of value* I was. Instead of registering my own responses to the world around me, my sensitive antennae were often tuned to what other people were experiencing as good or right, so I would know what to aim for. The slightest signs of approval/disapproval, agreement/disagreement, or interest/boredom in others would shape my words and actions to better ensure I'd be regarded positively. To be clear, I was not aware of thinking or doing any of this. I was only aware of the anxiety or fear I felt whenever everyone's eyes were on me as I spoke, and there was the possibility of a negative response.

I often had felt this anxiety or fear in my personal life as well. Concern for how I might be perceived has influenced my interactions with other people (often called *people pleasing*), including my ability to make

decisions, to form opinions, to choose what to say or write, and even to know what color to paint my kitchen walls. I can trace nearly every problem in my life, big or small, back to my concern about how my words or actions might be valued or not valued by others. Would I be *good*? Would I be *right*?

I see so many people who suffer from the same *dis-ease* I had, I can almost smell it when I am with them. I see it in my granddaughter already, and she is only seven.

What I didn't see, in the years of my stage fright, was that I was leaving my sense of identity and worth to be decided by the opinions and whims of other people. I didn't see what shaky ground I was on, or that fear might be a logical result. I needed help to uncover the specific misconceptions that were driving my fear, and found it in a remarkable work called *LearningMethods*, founded by gifted teacher David Gorman. During workshop settings with other performers, I learned simple but radical information that shifted the way I view audiences or anyone else who may be evaluating me, positively or negatively. I learned that if and when other people evaluate me, they are defining *themselves*, not *me*. Their assessments of me reveal useful information about who *they are*, what *they value*, and how *they see the world*. In other words, they are learning information about themselves, which they can use to actively navigate their lives toward what has value to them. I realized we can all learn about ourselves this way.

What a truly liberating thought this was! And how obvious it appears to me now. How could I not have known this? Alas, I had to inch my way incrementally toward the *obvious*. For me, the path to freedom was in the details.

I am using my story to share what I have learned in a non-abstract way. Not all individuals who experience stage fright or *people pleasing* will find their paths to freedom in the exact way I did. Nevertheless, the simple information that has transformed my life should be available to all. Half of my story describes the information itself and how it was laid out for me. The other half describes how I turned that information into the practical clarity I reached for the night I spoke at the Walker.

It all began one day when I brought my stage fright to a *LearningMethods* workshop, and encountered a simple, clarifying question...

Good for Whom?

In a *LearningMethods* workshop, people learn tools of inquiry to bring to bear on whatever problems they want to solve in their lives. On day two of the workshop I attended, I brought up a recent stage fright experience, so we could search it for possible clues as to why it was happening. I began by recalling the moment-to-moment sequence of thoughts and perceptions that led up to my first anxious moments. Could we find anything in the way I was *seeing* the situation, rather than the situation itself, that was *fear-making*? At one point, when I mentioned my concern about how good a speaker I'd be, the teacher asked me a pointed question:

“Good for whom?”

I remember it sounding like a strange question. I'd never thought to pin the word *good* onto anyone in particular. It felt more like a free floating kind of *good* that I aspired to, as evidenced by the audience enjoying my performance. I responded:

“Good for the audience.”

At this point, so early in the discussion, I had no idea how penetrating and pivotal this simple question, and my response to it, would turn out to be. From where I stood then, trying to be a good performer was something I valued, and it had a lot to do with pleasing and satisfying the audience.

We looked closer at my idea of *being good for the audience*, since it occurred at the same time I was feeling fear. Several interesting observations emerged from this reality check. First, although I was trying to be *good* for the audience, I had no actual information about what precisely would elicit a *good* response from their point of view. At any given moment, only *they* had access to that information. Hmm...

Also, I thought of the audience as if it were a single entity with a single response to my performance. In fact, an audience is composed of a number of separate real individuals, each of whom might have quite different and conflicting ideas about what is *good*.

Not only that, even if I knew in advance what would be *good* for each person, how would I go about fulfilling all these different expectations of *good* at once? What if someone's notion of *good* changed halfway through my talk? Let's say a member of the audience was feeling sleepy after eating lunch, in which case *good* for that person might mean leaving the room to take a

nap. Of course I would have taken this as a negative statement about me.

With all of this out on the table, my desire to be *good for the audience* suddenly seemed a lot like trying to hit a moving target with blinders on, all to ensure a certain response. Impossible. Yet that's what I was assuming I should be doing, scoring a bull's eye on each and every person's *good* target with every word I spoke, so I could avoid a negative response from even one person.

But how could the thought of being criticized by even one person hold such power over me? One look of disinterest, one scowling face could suck the life out of me. Real or imagined, the way I saw it in that moment I was not *good* at all. I would feel defined and written off as boring, wrong, off the mark, and left with no way to recover. Not a good feeling to someone whose goal was to be a *good* speaker. Given the way I was seeing it, no wonder I feared getting up in front of an audience! There was always the possibility of someone not liking what I was doing, and a certainty that I would take this personally.

But was I seeing the situation accurately? Here was a question I'd never thought to ask myself — about anything!

So at that point in the workshop, we looked more closely at what I feared most: being assessed by someone else as a *bad* speaker. We sorted out four basic elements that appeared to make up such assessments of value. These elements were to become a grid of clarity to sort out my confusions, as well as a key to making sense of my fears.

Four Elements of any Value Assessment

1. The valuer (the person doing the assessing or evaluation)
2. The valued (the someone or something being valued)
3. The evaluation itself (good/bad, etc.)
4. The criteria being used for making the evaluation

Let's say I am onstage. Someone in the audience ("Jane") is checking her watch, thinking my presentation is too long (low value), and we'd sort it out like this:

Who is doing the evaluation? *Jane*
 What is being valued? *My presentation*
 What is the evaluation? *Too long, bad*
 According to what criteria? *????*

Hmm... Good question. We don't know what criteria Jane is using for what constitutes *bad*. Only Jane knows that! She may prefer facts to personal stories and thus dismisses my story-filled presentation. She may be at my presentation through no desire of her own. Meanwhile I presume her clock-watching to mean I am boring her, that my presentation is *bad*, that I am a *bad* speaker. One thing is sure, *I am not factoring in that Jane is judging my presentation according to the particular criteria she brought with her that day.*

Here is another example:

Picture two friends (Jack and Jill) walking out of a movie. They each have strong opinions about the movie.

To Jack, it was a *bad* movie, boring, at two hours lasting way too long.

To Jill, it was a *good* movie, much better than the one she saw the night before, and even at two hours, not long enough.

Was the movie *good* or *bad*? If you answer BOTH, think it through. In a factual sense, can the same movie be *good* AND *bad*? If it's *good*, how can it be *bad*? The only way to make sense of a movie being both *good* and *bad* is to realize that the goodness and badness does not exist IN the movie, but IN Jack and IN Jill *as a reflection of how the movie matches their individual criteria.*

Since Jack loves action and speed, he was bored.... Thus it was a *bad* movie.

Since Jill is comparing it to the lousy one she saw last night, the movie was *good*.

But you can bet Jack and Jill don't realize this. They argue about whether it was a *good* movie or a *bad* movie, not factoring in they are each judging the movie using different criteria! Meanwhile the movie just sits there being itself in all its *movie-ness*, not taking the conversation personally.

That day of the workshop I didn't fully understand that every value judgment was inextricably linked to the criteria the *valuer* was using; it was not a factual statement about the person or thing being valued. True understanding would come later. What I did sense was a shift of focus away from me and how *good* or *bad* I was and onto something called *criteria* — something that was way over in the other person's court.

Or was it? If ensuring a good time for the audience was an impossible endeavor, and their judgments of me did not define my worth, the ball was actually back in MY court. What did *I value*? What would be *good* from *my viewpoint*? Where would I find the answer to such unfamiliar questions?

I had never heard the term *personal value register*. But it seems we all have one built into us so we can answer such questions. The term *value register* refers to an aspect of our being that seems so normal that we take it for granted, or never think to name it. It explains the personal nature of our likes and dislikes. It would be the compass that would guide me out of stage fright.

A Personal Value Register

If someone tries a new flavor of ice cream, they usually don't have to think before they know whether they like it or not.

Each of us has the ability to register our own personal responses to what we encounter in life, be it ice cream, a performer, a movie, an idea, our current physical state, the weather... you name it. These responses can be experienced as positive, negative or just plain neutral, reflecting the amount of worth or value something has for us. If we like something, find it attractive, pleasant, or interesting, we register a thumbs up kind of response, i.e., high value. If we dislike something, find it unappealing, unpleasant, or boring, we register a thumbs down response, i.e., low value. This inner registering of value or worth can be used to navigate each of us through the many choices we are presented with every day. What to eat for breakfast? What section to read first in the paper... what to wear, what to do, how to do it, for how long, with whom... and, contrarily, what to avoid. Imagine a sliding scale of *value responses*, from high value to low value, with neutral (no particular value being registered) as the steady center.

What most captured my attention about these *value registers* was the notion that they are absolutely personal to each of us. That is, only *I* can feel *mine*, only *you* can feel *yours*. Given how my *sensitive antennae* were usually tuned to what other people were valuing, this was intriguing information. *I had been tuning into something I had no direct access to, and as a result I was missing out on what I did have access to... the information from my own inbuilt value register!* This would explain why I wasn't at all sure what was *good for me* (except trying to be *good for others*,

which my fear was letting me know was not so *good for me* after all)... oh, the convolution of it all!

All sorts of *what ifs* came to mind. What if I have *my own value register* that lets me know when something nourishes, delights, or enlightens *me*? What if I used this information to steer my life as I would use a compass in the wilderness? What if I did all this in the presence of other people? Finally, what if I stopped trying to get other people's compasses to register *yes* when they encountered me, onstage or off? Where would that leave me? Would I be better off? Would I still have stage fright?

All this was almost too much to imagine. I walked out of this workshop session dizzy from the rigor of sorting through and examining my own ideas, like breathing pure oxygen. I knew I had some very basic homework to do. Nothing could be taken for granted. First, I needed to find out for myself, on the most elementary level, how *value assessments* actually worked.. Second, I needed to find out if I really had my own *value register*. My everyday life was going to be my laboratory. But I knew deep down that something profound had already been set in motion.

HOMEWORK SESSIONS...

Stacked Dishes

That night I caught my first *value assessment* in the act. My husband was washing the dinner dishes and stacking them to dry in the WRONG WAY. Heavy things on top of light things, silverware akimbo. I'd have to sort them out like pick-up sticks to put them away without breaking something. Normally my judgment would have registered as a *fact* about his way of stacking. But I was primed to run a background check on the assessment I'd just made... WRONG WAY... *for whom, according to what criteria?* I sorted the four elements, counting on my fingers:

Who's doing the assessing? *Me*

What's being assessed? *The way the dishes were stacked*

The assessment? *Wrong, bad*

According to what criteria? *Hard to put away, they might break*

So there! Once I'd clarified the four elements of my value assessment, the tables turned instantly. My focus changed from my husband and the badly stacked dishes to me and my criteria! My judgment had just clarified something about myself (I like unbroken dishes and less work). What an entirely new way to

experience passing judgment. It made me wonder what my husband's criteria were for the right way to stack dishes. I sensed all this may apply to more than stage fright.

Miserable Weather

Next I observed other people making value assessments... about food, books, weather, etc. I heard someone say, after three days of rain, "What miserable weather!" Again I sorted out the basic elements: miserable for whom, according to what criteria? When I asked, this person told me he preferred sunny weather so he could play golf without an umbrella.

Was *miserable* a property of the weather? Or was it a property of this person's criteria? Put another way, where was the misery being experienced, in the weather or in the person? It was clear to me that *miserable* was not a fact about the weather, but a description of the low value experience this person was having, because rain did not match his criteria for *good* weather.

I sorted through many more such value assessments. The way they were phrased made them sound like statements of *fact* when they were actually descriptions of personal preference. Being clear about this helped me in the moment I felt I was being judged by someone. I could see the judgment contained information about that person. When I became clearer about that, I felt curiosity about the person instead of fear.

But still something was missing. Even as I was letting go of my concern about being judged and my hypersensitivity to what other people thought was *good* or *right*, there was still the question: how would I know what was *good* or *right* for me without peeking over someone else's shoulder? Did I actually have a *value register* of my own? Could I discern my responses to the world around me from those of others?

Prairie Grass

I started quietly, walking by myself through a neighborhood, past homes and gardens, along sidewalks and streets. I wanted to see if anything caught my eye, if there were any little bump of interest, curiosity, attraction, repulsion, maybe a house that I particularly liked, or didn't like. What surprised me was how *neutral* most everything seemed. But just as I was thinking that, my eyes focused on a clump of wild

prairie grass on a manicured lawn. And there, it had already happened...I had indeed *registered* (that word seemed exactly right) a subtle but palpable stirring within me. It wasn't *neutral*, it got my attention...a definite thumbs up response. The prairie grass was beautiful, *to me*.

Chimayo Red

I didn't know what color to paint the kitchen wall. As I picked out and tested each new possibility, I was never sure what worked, or if a certain color was *right* or not. I had never trusted my sense of color before. Now I realized why. As I looked at each new color, any registering of my own response was overshadowed by what I imagined my sister would think, or my daughter, or my niece... all people I thought *knew color*. They weren't even in the room, but their *voices* threw me into doubt. I just couldn't tell what I liked on my own. No wonder. My criteria for *right* were based on what Joanne, Sara, or Gen might think. I was seeing through everyone's eyes except my own.

Then I tried *Chimayo Red*. Surely too dark (for my sister), surely would make the kitchen appear small (to my daughter), surely not exciting enough (for my niece). I'd be thrown into doubt about the color, was it *right*, *not right*, etc., etc. *Chimayo Red* would be the fourth layer of paint on my test wall. When I woke up the next morning to get a first-thing-in-the-morning spontaneous impression... I LIKED IT! I felt it clearly; it was rich, soothing, dramatic, and it brought the whole room together... for ME! There was no mistaking the palpable *high value* bump in my register. This was *good*. This was fun. I knew I liked *Chimayo Red* even if no one else did! I finally understood what creativity was based on, and what I'd been missing out on. I was making it complicated when it's so simple... letting my own responses, rather than everyone else's, guide me! I went out and bought two more gallons of *Chimayo Red*.

Jazz

I worked with several jazz musicians early in my dance career and became *someone who liked jazz*. Thus it was disconcerting to realize, from the privacy of my own register, that in fact I DON'T like jazz. I'd always WANTED to like jazz, felt I SHOULD like jazz, even made myself turn to 88.5 FM in the car. But one day, listening to the car radio, it became clear that I always secretly wanted to change the channel. I felt a moment of shame, like I was now a simpleton or an easy-listener. But it was so freeing to lift that dishonesty off

of me that I accepted it. I was a non-jazz lover, plain and simple. Ironically, once I stopped trying to like jazz, I found myself being truly curious about jazz; what were those sounds, and why are some people so in love with it? I was free now to really experience jazz for itself, and like it or not.

By now I was pretty clear what it felt like to experience my own *value register* right in the moment, within myself, by myself. And to recognize when other people's *voices* were hogging the spotlight from my real responses. I wondered what would happen in the presence of an actual other person who had views of their own?

Amy

One day, on a supposedly relaxing walk with my friend Amy, I recognized a feeling of tension in me that felt something like stage fright on a smaller scale.

Amy, who comes across to me as deeply committed to her political views, was talking about *xyx*. Suddenly I noticed a knot of tension in the center of me. My face was jutting out toward Amy, nodding yes, yes, in agreement with what she was saying. I felt like I was straining to find and agree with what the *right* opinion was, since I didn't seem to have one of my own. I remember thinking, *Oh, I'm all caught up in Amy's value register...* and then thinking, *if hers is over there in her, where's mine?* The clarity of my question (and my previous experiences with prairie grass, chimayo red, and jazz) was all it took to reorder my experience. The knot of tension in the center of me changed to ease and to a sense of heft and intactness, as if a paperweight was keeping me from fluttering back over to Amy. There had been no effort involved in the shift back to my own register... just the clarity that *my* register was *in me*, and *Amy's* was *in her*.

I was still walking with Amy, listening to her, but from what felt like an unfamiliar distance. It struck me that even though Amy and I were side by side together, she was looking out from *her* eyes, and I from *mine*. We each brought our own backlog of life experiences, mood of the day, and personal *value register* to how we viewed *xyx*, or anything else. There was no need to reach out and grab Amy's point of view of things, because I had my own point of view, which was a good four-feet of airspace away from hers!

I now felt much more connected and comfortable with Amy as we walked side by side, partly because I didn't have all that tension and strain, partly because I didn't

have to agree or disagree with her. I still didn't know my exact opinion on *xyx*, but now I sensed where those opinions would come from, and it was not from abandoning my own register to match someone else's. The thought of living my life with other people in this separate but together way felt like an adventure waiting to happen.

This walk with Amy reminded me that ideas are tested by how they perform in actual lived moments, because that's where reality speaks. My experience had shown me the strain and tension of being caught up in someone else's value system; the relative ease and freedom of operating out of my own. To me, the message was clear: I have no business trying to read someone else's register! If I really want to know what's going on for them, I can ask.

Step by step, I was recognizing long held confusions and replacing them with new clarities. I was feeling more pleasure and fun, less anxiety, as I learned what worked for me. Still, I had a ways to go. All of my research had occurred in the relative safety of my personal life. It was time for a new test. Sure enough, one came knocking when I was invited to speak at the Walker Art Center. Feeling confident that I could bring what I had learned into a more public situation, I accepted the invitation. Alas, after an initial few hours of calm excitement, I awoke in the night with a gripping sense of dread inside me. Why had I said yes? What did I possibly have to say, especially compared to all the other speakers, who of course would be more in touch with what was *right* and *good*. Fortunately, I was determined to find out how my new insights would work during my pre-performance stage fright. The next day I began to prepare my talk.

Preparing the Talk / What to Say?

Talk about a flip-flop. One moment, with my notes spread all around me on the floor, I recalled a funny story to tell about my dance experience and a glimmer of enjoyment passed through me. The next moment, seemingly out of nowhere, I was flooded with dread and scrambling for reasons to back out of my commitment. What had been a funny story now seemed embarrassing and silly, not funny at all. What was I thinking? How could it change so quickly?

I knew from my experiences so far that such a jolt of feeling most likely did not come out of nowhere, but was a reaction to something. But what?

I searched the moments right before the change happened, as I'd learned to do in the *LearningMethods* workshop: I'd been cruising along just fine, sitting on my living room floor, enjoying writing out my funny story idea. Suddenly, out of nowhere it seemed, the fun had changed to dread. I sat quietly now, waiting to remember... did *anything* happen in those *out of nowhere* moments between *having fun* and *dread*?

"Having fun"... "dread"...

(The dotted line represents those few moments I was trying to recall.)

"Having fun"... "dread"...

And then it clearly came to me... a split-second image had flashed across my mind... of people in the audience judging my story! I hadn't even registered it. The sense of dread had hit me at that exact moment. Wow!

I sat back in wonder at the power of a fleeting image to set off such a huge reaction in me. Not even a real audience! I looked around at all my papers on the floor. The dread had vanished. Suddenly my situation felt sadly poignant. Inadvertently flipping from my own *value register*, where my story was funny, to the value registers of the *audience* where it might not be, had literally stopped me in my tracks. A great barrier had come down. From this place I would never create a story to tell, never share what gifts I might have to give, never have fun being who I really am, except in the privacy of my own living room. And now, not even there! It wasn't just my Walker Art Center talk that was at stake. It was my whole life.

I calmly took stock of what I knew. When I was enjoying my funny story, it told me everything about the kind of things *I* found funny (corny, off beat, simple, personal), not whether my story would be considered funny or not to anyone else. More importantly, when I was using my own criteria for funny I actually had fun planning my talk. The more I went toward what was fun for me, the more I could imagine having fun being in front of an audience, even if no one liked my funny story! It was that simple.

It occurred to me later that if I could bring the clarity I'd just applied to preparing my talk into an actual performance situation, the audience would be experiencing a wholly different person speaking to them. Instead of listening to someone who was scared, tense, and rushing to get offstage, they'd be hearing

someone speaking freely from her own passion and interests, curious about but not defined by how *good* she was *for the audience*.

I realized also that a person sitting in the audience would have a wholly different experience if that person understood that the *value* they usually ascribe to the speaker was actually information about *themselves*. Audience members could then discern what was *good* for them and move toward what delights them, inspires them, or piques their curiosity as they move through their lives.

I continued shaping my dance experiences into stories and movement for the upcoming performance. My trusty stage fright alerted me whenever I became so concerned about whether the audience would *like* my stories or not that I'd lose touch with how *I* felt about them.

Lynchpin

In spite of steady progress leading up to the Walker talk, my daily interactions with people made it clear that something still had its hooks in me. I wasn't free yet. Right at the moment when I'd be about to express myself in a way that might get a negative reaction from someone, I'd pull back, not prepared to accept the possible consequence of someone not valuing me. What if they walked away from me in favor of someone more interesting, more supportive, more compatible, better *for them*? The reality of someone being better without ME in their life seemed too stark to deal with, illustrating just how self-centered a *people pleaser* can be!

Who would I be in their absence, as they walked away?

I had to accept that, like everybody else, I'd be an ordinary person, to whom some people were drawn and others were not. But this was no longer such a bad thought. I had found a replacement buddy in my own personal *value register*. Waking up to *Chimayo Red* that morning and really liking it, then covering my whole wall with it, was such a simple act of happiness. I knew I had something I'd never lose, no matter who walked away. I undid the final lynchpin.

I finally had my speaking notes in order and practiced the phrase of choreography I planned to perform. Now I just had to show up.

Back To The Walker

Every inch of me yearned to flee the auditorium as the audience broke into whoops and shouts for the

mesmerizing speaker who preceded me. But I didn't flee; I reached for the clarity I knew was in me somewhere. Suddenly all the awfulness of my situation sparked a flash of recognition. I didn't want to live another minute like this. If I were going to have any fun at all in the rest of my life, I had to sort out what I was in the middle of NOW. It was clear to me I'd gotten lost in the dark void of the audience and its applause, and how I wouldn't meet the audience's high expectations of drama and passion. I knew I needed to get back to the only thing that would save me. ***What did I value about my talk?***

That's all it took. I felt the life flow back into me, the ease and heft in the center of me. I was home. From here *my* connection to my stories came alive. From here *I* could feel the pleasure I'd had dancing the most fascinating delicious choreography... yes, *in silence*, unaccompanied by any musical score... in the midst of a provocative avant garde dance scene for small and passionate audiences around the world. I truly had something to say!

My mouth was dry as sand, but I was ready. The applause died down, and I with my notes in hand walked toward the podium. Amazingly, a silly joke occurred to me as I crossed the stage, something about being the last of seven presenters. I sensed no one might get this joke, but I told it anyway. No one got it. IT DIDN'T MATTER. *My* connection to the joke catapulted me to the next moment. I recognized some people in the first few rows. I said hi to someone. My

stories flowed out, I improvised, I danced. My mouth was still dry, but it didn't matter. Something quite unusual was happening. I was being myself in front of an audience, knowing that all those in the audience were having whatever experiences they were having, and I was having mine, together with them. Then it was over. Afterward, as people came up to me saying this or saying that, clearly I was hearing about their experiences, not about mine. I'd shared who I am; now I was learning about them. Boy, was I exhausted. Time to go home.

Summing Up

Looking at my situation from the outside, even though I knew I was liked and respected, I nevertheless walked on shaky ground. No amount of praise from others could fill in what I needed first and foremost, the navigational system within myself, the capability to know and value my own responses as a foundation for being with other people. Understanding when I assess others for *value*, I am learning about myself. When others judge me for *value*, I'm learning about them. This is simply how it works. I have all the proof I need, at least for now. In this sense my stage fright was my true ally. It kept knocking at my door until I finally invited it in, sat it down, and listened to what it had to tell me. *LearningMethods* helped to translate. Now that I use what I learned that day in the workshop along with what I learned from all my investigations afterwards, I live my life from a different perch. I'm not afraid anymore. I look forward to sharing what I've learned with my granddaughter.

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### About the Author



**Elizabeth Garren** is a former member of the Trisha Brown Dance Company. She is one of four Certified LearningMethods Teachers in the United States as well as being a Certified Teacher of the Alexander Technique. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she helps people to use the tools of LearningMethods to understand and solve their problems.

If you are interested in working on similar issues in your life, contact Elizabeth, or another LearningMethods Teacher (see below), to discuss how you can get help to change. You can arrange in-person sessions, to attend a workshop, or if you do not live near a teacher, you can also work very effectively in phone sessions.

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