

On Giving Readings

Anxiety and Depression:

Most writers seems to get their butts handed to them by one or both. Nerves and a reading go together. If you are okay with being nervous, that helps. You won't actually have a heart-attack or shame yourself for generations. Probably.

Part of anxiety is global not about the reading. I had the habit of living in the yellow band of warning too much anxiety. I had to bring that all down so it would take less to push me into the red. That's a life pattern. Part of that is unfamiliarity with speaking in public. Which is odd given that I taught classes for a decade. But talking to a group from someone else's book is a different risk than talking from one's own book.

With a person, can you talk? Each reading at the neural level happens one head at a time. Speak to one person.

With a class or with an audience, I'm more comfortable the larger the group. I think that comes from the same cause. Talking to 6-8 students, they act as individuals. They vie to have individual agendas met. Talk to a class of 30 and they understand intuitively that it's a different social contract. For anything to get done, they have to act more as a unit. They recognize teacher-fronted and click into mental mode of being receptive or leaving.

For a small group, it feels like an awkward conversation. Once a certain number of people convene, it becomes more natural to use other modes of talking, speeches, formal thought structures that aren't personally aimed. That social distance is part of the way we respond to ratios of ears. Is it a public voice to so few? Shouldn't be just talk in pairs or in small groups in a natural way? Poetry seems unnecessarily circuitous. But they came for poetry. There's no reason to throw over a reading because there are few.

Anxiety! 3 to 4 years ago I used to go blind and deaf with anxiety for the 2 or 3 readers before me in an open mic, or most the the entire reading before me in a 2 or 3 person reading.

A couple years ago that reversed in that I got jitters when it no longer mattered, afterwards, when I could afford the time. That made me able to be more present when I was up front.

Now, on a good night, I'm likely to not hear half of whoever comes next in open mic (2–3 minutes). If I'm sick, or tired or running towards the red line for stress from whatever accumulated reasons, I can't hear the next 2 or 3 people.

How I used to be afterwards? Dead for a week on both sides of doing a 20 minute reading and 2–3 days for reading for 2–3 minutes. I'd be re-alphabetizing the books shelves and cleaning the grout with a toothbrush, cleaning stove with toothpicks. Paul Dutton counseled me that life is too short to do what you don't enjoy. If giving readings upset you that much, there are other things you can do with poetry. You don't have to give readings. But if you just aren't skilled, then there's no reason why you should stop before you learn to do it well enough to enjoy doing it.

It's not as if writing itself is always comforting or is easy. It and editing throws one off balance but not as much as not writing does. At least by writing and performing more, I get better. By pushing boundaries out, I prevent them from pushing in like Indiana Jones' walls.

Ways to focus during a night of the reading:

You may have an open mic or co-readers. Taking photos or notes helps because it forces me to be on top of the moments as they cascade, as the picture or words approach, come into being, and I catch it or don't. It gives me a focus to stay present. Even still, for a few minutes my arms shake so badly that I can't get a good shot even propping the lens on a makeshift tripod. That's still easier than making legible handwriting at that point. Sometimes taking photos impedes hearing or being present. When I realize I can't do both, I'm either going to put the tool away or make sure I get a shot and hope the person is still talking when I'm done.

Defining Success. What is a good night?

Low bar: Did I faint on or vomit on anybody?

High bar: When a reading works, once I'm on stage I'm clearer-headed than at any other time except during sustained days of editing. I'm in a flow state. Time slows down. I can take in and parse much more than normal. I can improv, banter, edit poems on the fly as I read. I can see

what's flying and what's not and change the set list based on how it's going.

When a reading works...

- I can take in the mood in the room, the collective body language, the breathing, the non-verbal, the finger clicks, whether it is attentive silence or disinterested polite silence.
- I can open up my chest.
- I don't feel nailed to the floor.
- I can get a full breath.
- I stay in the words.
- My voice is deeper. I can project it more easily.
- I'm my best self.
- I'm funnier and I gesture more, and less, than the paralysis alternating with flapping of a worse night.

When it doesn't work,

- I can't see anyone.
- I'm less likely to be audible even with a mic.
- When a reading isn't working, I'm dampened down.
- It doesn't become an energy rotating between myself and those present.
- I can't read the audience, or I'm in such a funk that I don't care what they think.
- I can't stay within the words.
- I don't care about outcomes.
- I may be still able to draw on what I've learned and read on autopilot, remembering to breathe, to not race thru words, to give intonation, and have backup notes (printed large in case I go blind) to add thanks and connections between readers, and poems

But I know I've failed my own aim, even if it gets compliments afterwards.

Or maybe a dark mood means I can't see how it worked.

It is what it is. Doing what you do and not being attached to outcomes can be good. Only so much is in your control. One person may tell you you did excellently or failed and they may represent most of the audience, or they may not.

You give it your best shot, the old college try of where you're at, the best that you can do of who you are, where you are, what you have to work with for skills, material, physical space, audience and energy. But detaching too soon and it's not going to be a good reading.

The after is different from how it used to be. Instead of exhausted, I may get a boost of energy. I may be wound-up with energy, positive or negative. I may carry clear-mindedness forward for a few days or walk away with an exhaustion from doing a poor show that negates benefit. And that's at a point where I no longer flog myself in the post-mortem.

There's an obvious advantage to getting a better outcome.

Part of that improvement is confidence in material and simply doing it again and again at open mics, at dozens of readings until it doesn't hurt. What are the variables?

The venue:

Part of that success or less is in the structure of the room.

- Can you see what you need to?
- Is the shape of the room and the background sound such that you can hear the audience?
- If there's a sound system and is it set right?
- Can you use the mic properly?
- Is the room warm or cold so far as attention?

The vibe:

It's frustrating reading in a space where there's every person for themselves. Especially if the person reads and then leaves without being part of the community. In some rooms on some nights when the majority is there to read not listen, there can be an anxiety as palpable as if you opened a room full of teenage hormone smell. It sets other people on edge to have one person on edge.

On the other hand, it only takes one person to defuse that and relax other people. One person can present a model of calm. We're odd lemmings that way, and our empathy can go either way.

Each person is adding something to the mix. The audience may be mixed, or arm-crossed skeptics or with fidgety people who don't want to be there but refuse to bail and let others enjoy, or if the room is able to

convert to open body languages all change the experience for everyone else in the room. Some readings are a love-in. Some not so much.

And that's before we consider the effect of everyone else who reads or what anyone actually says. Or the social side of chatting with others, before or after. In a rare reading the room comes to the point of breathing as if with one lung. I've only experienced it a few times but it strikes me as the ultimate example of hope, community, like massed choral song. Cooperative vision.

Physically reading:

Part of the response is to how it is presented. As Jennifer Pederson was describing in her voice workshop, a good reading can make a mediocre poem seem great or kill a very strong poem by a flubbed reading. Memorize a bit if you can to allow more connection of gaze with the audience.

Prep:

- Time out your reading to how long you have
- Include any patter of thanks or preface in your time
- Bookmark with stickies what you'll read and number them.
- Make an index card of the playlist because stickies fall out

Stand:

- Put feet shoulder width apart.
- Shoulders back opens the airways to allow more control of voice.
- Lift your chin. Don't talk at the page. The page already knows what it says.
- Take your time. Read slower than you think you should. If your voice thins, pause for breath.
- At first, mechanically if necessary, every poem or stanza if you can keep your place, look from right, middle, left, front of room to back and rotate your gaze. Look at your supportive plant audience member or scan for whoever seems receptive and make home base of eye contact when you look up.

Being an Entertaining Show:

For those who just want the poem, the skills of not standing in front of the words, like speaking clearly, thinking and writing to be seen, mean that that part of the audience gets served well.

Part of the presentation is the entertainment factor, not just the poem as some word-object, but a piece of a relationship with the person, part of the thick information about the person, part of getting to know a person. When other body language bleeds into the unscripted bits, its okay for those who are seeking an experience at a poetry event. “This is the function of poetry. To make people experience.” — [May Sarton](#)

Giving a reading, you can hunch around a poem so the poem isn't visible, just your nervous ticks. Or giving a reading you can project confidence, and play the way a seal might bounce a poem off its chest. That can be a nervous affection as well.

Either way that is not setting the poem in the best context to be heard. It's obscuring it. Some people are adept at hearing around the noise of how a poem is presented and hear the poem. Some aren't. Both types of listeners will be in any given audience.

Why do readings?

- I do not readings to achieve that rare sublime thing of flow state (or maybe I do).
- a reading gives a real feedback on what I've composed. People can't prepare their answers the way a workshop or email response can. It adds up to a response of real time.
- I share to be shared with. It's part of progression within a community to not just listen but speak.