

THE UN-COMFORT ZONE

With Robert Wilson

KA-BOOM! The Explosive Pain of Shame



Twelve years ago, I phoned a prospective client that I'd been courting for months. The last time we'd spoken, only a few weeks earlier, she expressed interest in my conducting a seminar for her company. This time she said, "I was in the audience at the Fox theatre last week; we won't be needing your services."

My face burned red with shame, as her words forced me to recall the most challenging experience I've ever had as a humorist.

It was my second year working as a presenter when I was hired to serve as the Master of Ceremonies for a landscape design association's award dinner. The job was easy enough, just read a description of what the recipient did to win the award, call them up to the stage, and give them a trophy. Grateful for the opportunity, and wanting to provide additional value to my service, I offered to open the program with a ten minute comedy routine. My client graciously accepted.

On the morning of the program, I woke up with the flu. I had a sore throat, congestion, 103 degree fever, chills and aches. I was miserable. Recalling the adage, "the show must go on," I dosed myself with the maximum allowed quantities of several over-the-counter medications. Throughout the day, I pumped myself up with chicken soup and hot tea. By show time, I was feeling pretty good.

I stepped onto the stage and told my first joke. To my shock no one laughed. So, I moved right onto my next one. Again, no one laughed. I'd never experienced this before and I started to feel a sense of panic. Nevertheless, I forged ahead and told joke number three. Silence! I couldn't understand it, I'd told these jokes dozens of times to dozens of audiences and they always laughed.

Joke number four fell flat. I was now in full panic, and at one point I couldn't even remember my next joke. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to recover. I plodded on hoping they would laugh at the next one. They never did. My throat became parched, and I had nothing to drink. With each unlaughed at joke, my throat became dryer and more constricted until I could barely speak. I skipped to the end, and delivered my very best jokes... still nothing.

I finally finished, and received no applause - not that I expected any at that point. The whole thing lasted only five minutes - the longest five minutes of my life.

Remarkably the rest of the program went without a hitch. I read the descriptions, gave out the awards and completed the evening. Needless to say, I never wanted to experience the humiliation of bombing so badly again. On the other hand, I didn't want to give up delivering humorous presentations - the joy of making people laugh is wonderful. I was determined to discover what went wrong, and how I could fix it.

In hindsight, I could see that my timing was off. I could easily blame that on being sick, but the real problem was that I didn't have the experience or know-how to turn it around. The first thing I did was make sure I always had a glass of water. The second thing I did was talk to several comedians and humorists to learn what they did when a joke bombed. Before long I had the answers I needed.

Now, when a joke tanks I make fun of it. First by making a whistling sound of a bomb dropping followed by the sound of explosion, then I say, "Whew, that joke didn't just bomb - it stunk!" I, then, wave the air where I was standing as if to blow away the smell, while stepping away from that spot dramatically as if the area, itself, was contaminated by nuclear fallout. That almost always gets a laugh. It also humanizes me in the eyes of the audience; I'm fallible and can make light of it. Usually the very next joke I tell will get a laugh, if only out of sympathy. I've learned many other techniques and as a result I haven't bombed since.

I was motivated by shame, one of the worst feelings an individual can have. I never wanted to feel that again.

People confuse shame, guilt and embarrassment because they are very similar feelings, but the roots of these feelings are very different. We experience embarrassment,

when we accidentally make a mistake such as spilling a drink down the front of our shirts. We suffer guilt, when we do something we know is wrong. Shame, however, is born of ignorance or of not having mastered a concept - such as social behavior - that we think we have mastered.

We feel shame when we are unexpectedly condemned or criticized for something we didn't know is incorrect. The shame comes when we recognize the obviousness of our error. It makes us feel stupid. If we know in advance that it is incorrect, the feeling we experience instead is guilt or embarrassment.

I recall being shamed by my classmates in elementary school when I shared a belief that women get pregnant by kissing. Hey, I came by it honestly! Remember that little song, "Johnny and Suzy sitting in tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Johnny with a baby carriage."

So, if shame was such an effective motivator for me, would I recommend using it to motivate others? ABSOLUTELY NOT! Shame is extremely motivating when it comes to eliminating unwanted behavior, but at the same time it is also a de-motivator. Shame is so powerful, it can make someone feel worthless and completely shut them down. Shame hits like a fist, and when it comes during childhood, some people spend the rest of their lives trying to recover from it.

Motivate instead with understanding and kind explanation.

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