

Getting out of your own way – A.B. Neuheimer

When we're faced with a challenge, we have two jobs. First: prepare - prepare smart, start early but not exhaustively, and ask for clarification often. You've done/are doing this, so on to job #2: **get out of your own way**. This job requires more persistence. It's not particularly hard (though it may seem that way from the outside) but requires repeated mind-adjustments before and during the challenge. And it gets easier with practice (like making a body memory – the more you practice, the easier it is to get out of your own way in the moment). Some things that may help with getting out of your own way:

- 1) Normalize the situation: It is stressful and it is supposed to be stressful. No matter how long/much you prepare, that's not going to go away. You're challenging yourself and that requires vulnerability, which is uncomfortable, but required of anything that's really worth doing. It's ok to be anxious. You're right where you should be. The anxiety just means your body is preparing itself to meet a challenge (<http://goo.gl/QIRa5I>). You need to "feel the fear and do it anyway" but that's very hard to do unless you:
- 2) Understand what is actually being tested: This is not a test of your worth or value as a person. This is not a test of your ability to be perfect (no one's ever passed that test). In the words of Prof. Hope Jahren: "What I am is separate from what I know and how I perform". So, you have the choice to take the challenge as if you're slacklining either a (i) highline across a canyon ("I need to prove my worth" or "I need to get this to be ok/safe/etc."), or (ii) between two trees a short distance from the ground ("I need to give a thoughtful answer to the question asked"). You will get better results framing it as the latter. Maybe running from a bear is helped by the idea that your life is in danger but your ability to think thoughtfully and critically is not.



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- 3) Remember you're here for a reason: You already jumped through a lot of hoops to get here, and you have the skills and abilities that got you through to this place. We know you do. Alternatively, you may just be really good at faking it and you've fooled all of us - but I doubt you're that good of an actor. Seriously: count up all the advisors, committee members, profs, etc. etc. you would've had to fool to have arrived at this place without merit. You are exactly where you should be.
- 4) Understand you don't need to (can't) know it all: Just because you deserve to be here doesn't mean you know everything. And that's ok. We are testing your ability to think through an issue. That's why there's a Ph in PhD - the process teaches you how to think critically, how to attack a question, any question. And this is a switch from undergrad learning where memorization is sometimes the end goal. Let's get something clear: we're going to ask you questions for which you haven't prepared. You could prep for the next 30 years, and we'd still ask you questions for which you haven't prepared. Being surprised by a question about an obscure paper that you haven't read isn't important. What we want to see is how you think through the question, e.g. if that paper looks at a process, would I imagine that process to be relevant to my system? At what time or space scales? If I have no idea, how might I design an experiment to find out?
- 5) Take the space and time you need: On the day, you need to give yourself mental space to think about the questions. You always have time and space available to you, but it's often hard to feel it/remember that in an examination setting. It may help you to think "How would I answer that question if a peer was asking at a poster session? How would I answer it if we were just talking science for science's sake?". When I was first starting out, it also helped me to have a blank sheet of paper in front of me where I could jot down notes while a question was being asked; it reminded me to make and take the mental space I needed.
- 6) Remember that people ask questions poorly: sometimes because they begin asking when their idea is only half-formed, sometimes because they're just not great communicators... Either way, know that you can ask for clarification. If a question makes no sense to you, 90% of the time it's due to how it was communicated.

- 7) Remember that people bring their own demons with them: You likely have decent people examining you, but we're all human and so we all have personal baggage. You can see this when an examiner is hyper-focused on their own research niche, or are irrationally persistent with a question. You can also see this when an *examinee* is overly defensive about a line of questioning (we ALL have personal baggage). Remember that we all have our personal demons, and other people's demons are no reflection on you. That doesn't mean you can outright dismiss a question that appears self-serving, but you can choose whether or not to take someone's manner personally.
- 8) Moderate over-attachment to your preparations: Sometimes we've spent a lot of time preparing on Topic A and none of the questions are going there. It's tempting to blurt out Topic-A-type answers to Topic-B-, or H- or M-type questions to prove we've done the work. This ends up coming across as a desperate scrambling for approval and, in my experience, fevered shouting of irrelevant information at the examiners. (Sometimes you think of something to add to a previous question - that's different). If you find yourself going off on a tangent, bring yourself back to the current question asked, which brings me to:
- 9) Remember the reset button: "Getting out of your own way" is a lot like meditating - it's a process and a practice. We all have moments when we're more or less successful at getting out of our own way, and when we're less successful, it's easy to get stuck or flustered. But you can always press the mental reset button. Whatever your feelings about the last question, the last moment, you can ALWAYS bring it back to this (new) moment. You can always ask for clarification, you can always take a breath (you can even ask for a break) - you can always hit the mental reset button.

Finally, remember that this process builds resilience. When we challenge ourselves in healthy ways, we "increase our tolerance for vulnerable feelings" (Philippa Perry) and that makes future challenges, especially unexpected challenges, easier. This is an exercise worth doing.

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