

Field Notes Collection No. 1

Fear and Witnesses

Four observations about public speaking, status, belonging, and the cost of being seen.

This collection follows a simple question:

Why does confidence disappear when certain people enter the room?

<https://matlr.com/>

1. You're Not Afraid of Speaking

“Fear nothing, except public speaking.”

That would be an honest tattoo.

You could get it in cursive, slightly obscuring the last part.

I once had a debilitating [fear](#) of heights. Through conditioning and obstinacy I lowered the original rating for that fear.

These days I am aware of my environment when I get onto the roof to clean the solar panels. I watch my footing. Blind fear, which I once described as standard operating procedure, has made space for deliberate and practiced caution.

Some of the bravest people I ever met will scale bare rock faces, allow spiders to crawl over them, and still experience the worst stomach churn when asked to address a crowd.

So where's the difference? What differentiates the fear you recently had tattooed on your arm from a thousand phobias?

Could the simple answer be, “No people to watch me, judge me, reject me?”

Our ancient counterparts stood up to speak in smoke-filled caves and halls, addressing the others in the tribe.

Screwing up the speech of your life could have meant getting kicked out of the tribe and being ridiculed.

Our nervous systems can't always distinguish between a few dozen bombastic elders in a circle and an auditorium filled with many more observers. Something else — irreversible judgment — also creeps in. We can't control things in real time. When a panic attack hits on the roof, you can sit down, gather your thoughts, and push back. But on the stage, that only increases the imagined ridicule from the audience.

When I prepared pupils for debate competitions I told them they were not scared of speaking in public.

They were scared of being heard and looked at in an exposed and vulnerable setting.

They were not afraid of making noise.

For the rookies, I often concocted weird but fun experiments to prove that making noise or being loud in public was never the problem.

I have never researched whether an actual phobia associated with a mic or stage exists, but the veil lifted when the competitors realized where the root of the fear originated.

“I am afraid of speaking.” Nobody will get that tattoo.

But the following reframed language is worth observing once it lands: “My nervous system is imagining, even simulating, the cost of losing status or belonging in front of witnesses.”

Yeah — witnesses. Unfortunately, thousands of recording devices in an audience do not help here.

This is one of many conversations I want to have about the fears we wear — literally or otherwise — without ever naming them correctly.

We have the same circuitry and wiring the ancients had, even if the world evolved around us.

Which is why ‘Fear nothing, except public speaking’ remains the most honest tattoo you’ll never get.

2. Public Speaking Isn't One Fear. Ask Jackson



Anonymous

May 30, 2026 at 10:21 pm

[\(EDIT\) REPLY](#)

Speaking in public can be a fear that changes depending on what you are speaking about and to whom.

★ Liked by you

I would not be able to stroll casually through some parts of town for fear of getting mugged.

Great comment, Anonymous — I agree. Fear levels change depending on context.

If I walk safely through the rough part of town, the fear I feel later in the boardroom is completely different. Not a mugging, but a smashed ego.

Different dials on the dashboard light up when different situations crawl in, each with its own brand of fear. Context is king. Imagine the absurdity of being scared of polar bears when entering a tiger sanctuary.

I was teaching advanced ESL to seasoned factory workers. One woman said, "I would rather speak to an army of savages than talk to Jackson." Jackson was that senior lady's direct boss, and all confrontations with him nuked her confidence. He had the power to make her life hell. Speaking to Jackson made her freeze up. On the shop floor she commanded great respect. Same person, same voice, different audience, different witnesses.

It's no easy task to find the actual light that blinks on the dashboard when you have to speak to any audience. For some, the fear of potential job loss becomes the blinking warning light. It could be the fear of ridicule or of losing status.

yesterday Anonymous commented: **Speaking in public can be a fear that changes depending on what you are speaking about and to whom.**

Being specific can be a tool to transcend the idea of one basic level of fear. A monster with a name can be addressed, or punched in the face.

The man afraid of mugging doesn't avoid boardrooms. He avoids dark streets. Name the monster correctly, and you stop running from everything.

3. Fear changes when the CFO walks in

The guy from the warehouse turned pale.

He didn't need a psychologist to diagnose him. The guy was falling apart in real time. He was doing okay, on a roll, until the CFO entered the room. Instantly, his speech disintegrated.

I've seen those scenarios unfold many times. Mr. Warehouse faltered not because a general fear of speaking had appeared, but because the CFO walked in and the cost of making a mistake went up.

I've been that guy — sweating through a shirt in front of a boss who barely looked up.

Warehouse dude was also that person. Later, he started paying attention to the pattern.

The fear wasn't showing up everywhere. It showed up around certain people. Different people produced different reactions.

Sometimes the fear weakened. Sometimes it vanished. Sometimes it stayed exactly where it was.

“Just breathe” never helped me much. And repeating “Just be confident” is equally useless.

Those standard self-help rituals rarely moved me to a better space. Fear isn't always a malfunction. Sometimes it's reporting a change in conditions. Sometimes it's telling you that the cost, real or imagined, has gone up.

In a previous post I mentioned the fear of getting mugged.

The same person who walks into a boardroom without hesitation might avoid a dark alley at midnight.

But the fear doesn't disappear. It just moves to another room and waits.

4. Name It Before It Names You

The warehouse guy went home and wrote four names on a cash receipt from the office canteen.

The CFO. His father-in-law. Two others he didn't want to sit with for long.

His breathing changed while the names were written. Not later — while the pen dragged on the paper he noticed signals from his body.

He clenched his jaw; he swallowed a lot. His breath became shallow.

Neck tension rose as each name appeared.

He didn't write explanations. He took note of what the body did around the words.

The list looked small. His body informed him otherwise.

The warehouse guy returned to the list a few hours later.

Next to each name he wrote one thing only: the cost of engagement he was bracing for without saying it directly.

Job. Status. Belonging. Ridicule.

No fixing. No analysis. He stopped after naming the fractures cleanly enough before they infected everything else.

You know those moments when something similar shows up in ordinary conversation: a throwaway line at the local grocer, a cousin's disposable joke at dinner.

The sentence lands; the body reacts before thought catches up — you tighten, you frown, you mutter something you don't mean. The reaction is the first signal.

The warehouse guy didn't feel braver.

He just stopped reacting to everyone the same way.

And that was enough to notice a difference.

End of Collection No. 1

The fear never turned out to be public speaking.

It kept changing shape depending on who was watching.