



# Afraid?! Who's Afraid?

By Ewandro Magalhães

*Taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear most.*  
— Fyodor Dostoyevsky

**In my early** days as a linguist, consecutive interpreting was all I did and all I was comfortable doing. That all changed one morning.

I showed up for what I thought was going to be business as usual and proceeded to greet the speaker I would be interpreting. We shook hands and engaged in casual chat, slowly drifting toward the back of the auditorium as we spoke. Before I knew it, I was standing by the door of a fully equipped interpreting booth. “We’ll start as soon as you’re ready,” she said, pointing to the chair in the little cubicle. I contemplated it for a second, somewhat puzzled, and tried to clear up the obvious misunderstanding. At the end of a series of indistinct expressions of denial on my part, the speaker cut me short. “You’ll

be fine,” she said, glancing at her watch and looking hurried.

## First Jump

I can still recall the anxiety. The feeling was not new, but the last time I had experienced anything close to it I was being pushed out of an airplane mid-flight with an awkward backpack tied around my torso. I let my body fall into thin air for about five seconds and was relieved when the knapsack unbolted into a huge green umbrella,

letting me glide smoothly over beautiful meadows, trees, and houses.

Once the parachute opens, it is easy to feel empowered. But at the door of a noisy single-engine airplane two thousand feet off the ground, there are no heroes. Not among first-timers, at least. After a month of intensive training, I had learned how to fold meters of cord and fabric and squeeze the bulky lot into a bag that would hardly accommodate a pillow. I was ready for my first jump. And, of course, I was petrified. ➔

As the plane soared, so did my fear. At that point, the only thing you can do is sit there and try your best to look tough and not panic, all along wondering how you are going to respond when it is your turn to jump. Luckily, there is always a “friend” to help you through this fleeting moment of indecision. You do not actually jump off the plane. You are pushed out. But once back on the ground, you feel you are the bravest guy alive.

I wish I could say I felt as brave that first day in the booth, but that would be twisting the truth a little. Before I could voice any further objection, the speaker was gone. Lights went off and the audience plunged into the deepest of silences. The plane was off the ground and the push had come in the form of a clear-cut command: “Get in there and do the best you can.” I sat down and put on the clunky earphones. I had jumped and now felt myself sucked full speed toward the bottom of a vertiginous cliff.

### Free Fall

Fear is a powerful emotion. Within reasonable limits, it is a healthy disposition that protects and preserves us. Yet phobic fear is not only unhealthy but incapacitating. Jack it up a notch and you are in panic mode, fully deprived of your ability to think. That is when the rational mind abandons the boat and leaves at the helm the protobrain we inherited from some distant cousins in the evolutionary trail—an encephalon capable of nothing but the basic instincts of reproduction and life preservation. Under intense fear, we slide back as a species. We revert to mere primates. We fear simply, without the slightest clue as to the origin of our fears, most of which are unfounded. Under extreme circumstances, without the

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counterpoint of reason, a series of overlapping irrational worries start to pile up, eventually triggering a physiological chain reaction in response to actual or imaginary threats. This process may easily escalate to a surge beyond control.

Interpreters are no strangers to fear. Budding interpreters, in particular, are very fear-prone. They harbor unrealistic expectations. They tell themselves not to fail or draw a blank, lest their career might come to an end before it even starts. They panic at the judgment of others and are quick to engage in negative self-talk that may spiral out of control. In their semi-paranoid fantasy, Murphy’s Law becomes as ubiquitous as the law of gravity and equally unforgiving the minute they set foot in the booth.

A beginner’s fears are mostly circumstantial. They stem from the uncertainty surrounding a craft one does not quite yet know. Such fears also tend to be self-centered. Sure, you must get it right and deliver a flawless interpretation, but take an honest, deep look at your fears and you will probably admit that you are not that worried the message may eventually get twisted for those in the audience. As a beginner, your stress level does not yet afford such an ethical sophistication. Having your shortcomings exposed is what scares you.

Now, if you are a novice interpreter and feel like you are not afraid of anything, mind the words of Greek philosopher Thucydides: “Ignorance

is bold.” Worry not. As you progress in your career, your fear of failure will be replaced gradually with genuine sympathy for your audience. At some point the true measure of your responsibility—a different kind of concern—will start to weigh on your shoulders. This apprehension is positive and comes with experience. It breeds, rather than undermines, confidence.

### Cruising

Contrary to popular belief, the greatest limiting factor in conference interpreting is not linguistic. It is emotional. Mastery of the most challenging vocabulary will be of little use in the absence of the fine stress management skills required to talk your way out of trouble. The possibility of failure increases greatly when you are in panic mode. Actions geared at taming your anxiety should therefore be assigned the highest priority.

Escaping the stronghold of your fears involves confrontation and exposure. To progress beyond fear you must face it. You must project outward and put yourself to the test until you can draw the line that will allow you to choose consciously between flight and fight every time. Pressing through and beyond your fears takes determination and resolve. It is a *yang* approach, the disciplined way. As Michel de Montaigne, one of the most influential writers of the French Renaissance, once wrote, “It takes courage to be afraid.”

Courage is the disposition to face our demons at a time when we feel weakest, without a clue as to our true chances of success. Courage is the deliberate decision to run some serious risks and bear the consequences, and comes from the realization that not doing so may eventually harm us more. Yet, confrontation alone does not free us from fear. Courage should not be just a call to war. It should also be an invitation to reconcile, rather than subjugate, our ego. In our quest to conquer fear, a softer, *yin* approach is equally important and far more effective.

Adjusting your expectations is a good first step. Next time you feel anxious, try challenging some of your beliefs and altering your perspective. First off, imagining that the audience is attending the meeting simply to appreciate or critique your performance as an interpreter is an unnecessary exercise in vanity. Nobody is there for you, believe me. Interpreters play a vital role, but a supporting one. For the most part, people will be oblivious of the interpreter. And whatever fleeting thought they might spare for that poor soul in the booth will certainly be a reassuring one. They are not out to get you and they do not *impose* their expectations on you. They genuinely *want* you to succeed and will forge an alliance with you early on, if you let them. This should help abate your fear a bit.

Next, train yourself to go beyond fighting or resisting your anxiety. Remind yourself of the true reason you are there and gently shift the focus away from you. Put the audience first and silently reiterate your commitment to serve them in the best possible way. Ultimately, the antidote to fear is not brute force, but love.

Learn to love, rather than dread, your professional insecurities. Despite your shortcomings, honor your courage in stepping up to the plate for the benefit of others. Then sit back, relax, and get out of everybody's way, including yours. Problems and accidents can happen to anyone, but between possibility and probability there is an immense field. This is where you want to be. Admit the possibility, but live in the probability. There are no assurances in life, but you are free to choose that in which you *prefer* to believe.

The use of interpreters dates back time immemorial and will probably linger for many centuries more, until mankind speaks a single language (or Apple comes up with an iPhone app for instant interpreting—whatever happens first). Until that day comes, however, we need to discharge our professional functions conscientiously and responsibly.

Do not underestimate the circumstances. Do not overestimate your gear or skills. Gently fold and verify every cord and square inch of your parachute before a jump. Rehearse your actions and be sure to carry a reserve canopy. Never underestimate the importance or complexity of a speech. Be diligent in your search for information on the talk and the speaker. Prepare your glossaries. Anticipate pitfalls. Have a Plan B. Get the right training and sharpen your tools constantly. Then, and only then, practice the desensitizing drills suggested here. Only then board a plane or enter a booth, with or without fear. You may survive your first couple of experiences out of sheer luck, as I did, but to do it consistently, you will need to get serious about your passion or profession. A newly acquired ability to control your emotions is no excuse not to prepare.

## Safe Landing

The first three jumps I had logged in my promising career as a skydiver did a lot to bolster my self-confidence, but a frustrated, nearly tragic fourth dive buried my dreams of Icarus forever. The dual-engine Navajo darted through the dirt runway of the battered airfield on the outskirts of Brasilia. It had barely taken off the ground when it bumped across and struck and killed a stray horse. In true rodeo style, the captain managed to jolt the aircraft down to a firm landing and slowly taxied us back to safety, despite the serious fuel leak we could see and smell through the plane's open door.

Back at the impromptu terminal, we deplaned quickly on very shaky legs and sick stomachs. I laid my gear on the ground one last time, walked away from the aircraft, and never turned back. It was about 7:00 p.m. and darkness had fallen. We knew we had exceeded the takeoff deadline by at least one hour. My recently acquired confidence was fast turning into dis-plicence. The experience I had just survived was a benign wake-up call.

May the near-disastrous end of my flying career be an equally gentle reminder to you as well. An unexpected or early failure in the interpreting booth may prove equally off-putting. Shoot happens. When it does, you will want to be ready.

Expect the best, but be ready for the worst. Keep cool but vigilant, and remember the skydiving adage: "There are old jumpers and there are bold jumpers, but there are no old, bold jumpers." All it takes for things to go south is one entangled cord, a minute tear on your gear, or a stray horse crossing your way.

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