



PODCAST #63

**Interview with Dr. Edgar Weinsberg – “Rabbi Ed” (RE)
by Carma Spence (CS)**

This transcript has been edited for readability.

CS: Hello and welcome to *Public Speaking Super Powers*. This is your host, Carma Spence. Today I'm speaking with Rabbi Dr. Edgar Weinsberg. Rabbi Ed is an ordained Rabbi, gerontologist and health care educator. He is the co-author of *Conquer Prostate Cancer: How Medicine, Faith, Love and Sex Can Renew Your Life*. Rabbi Ed has appeared on XM Satellite Radio, ABC News, and *Good Morning America*. And while serving a Boston area congregation for 21 years, frequently appeared on public access radio and television. He currently lives in Sarasota, Florida, and is a member of the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists, and the International Association of Writers, Speakers and Experts. Welcome to *Public Speaking Super Powers*, Rabbi Ed.

RE: Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here, Carma.

CS: Wonderful. Just so listeners can get a feel for your unique expertise, could you tell us a little about your journey to success in public speaking?

RE: I certainly can. I have to tell you, as I reflect back in time, the whole question of when did I become a public speaker is really kind of a curious thing with me. I think a person like myself, becomes a public speaker when he begins to face the public. Not just having conversations one on one, or even within a small group. Although that's the beginning. I was once a boy scout patrol leader. I had to talk to a group of eight youngsters my age, all 13 years old and 14 years old, and I think in some ways articulating to them what our plans for the day might be was the beginning of my public speaking career. And I went on, still in high school, to do some things along religious lines where I was asked to participate in leading a Friday night religious service or Saturday morning service and even asked to sing.

And while singing and speaking are somewhat apart, you got to say words when you sing most of the time, and there too I developed a consciousness, awareness and a degree of comfort with doing something verbally, communicating, before a larger audience. In that case, easily a 100 people were present from time to time. And that, by the way, is something I encourage parents to think about when they want their

kids to become more verbal and more at ease in the public arena. They ought to start young in those smaller ways. And that's something that occurred to me.

I went on, by the way, to take singing lessons, because I come from a musical family, I played violin and did many recitals, again, in front of audiences large and small. And this too was, I think, looking back in retrospect, the beginning of my public speaking career. These things are all connected. In going on to a seminary, in my case, because I was to become a rabbi, we had ample opportunity to take student pulpits, already the summer or fall before I first entered the seminary. For six straight years, I was a student rabbi and if rabbis do nothing else, they talk. They talk in public. Right?

CS: Yes.

RE: In fact, I realized somewhere down the line there, call this an original Weinsbergian statement, that rabbis are like gun slingers, except that we shoot from the lip.

And that's our strength. Whether we are in the eye of the public, which we are all the time. They say that clergy live in glass houses. There's a reason for that. It starts on the pulpit but it's also in the community. And I was kind of a congregational and a community rabbi. I used to lead Passover Seders for anywhere from 50 to 500 people. All of these things were part of my personal journey to success in public speaking. Each step reinforced the next. The feasibility of being more and more comfortable and more and more articulate as I went along. Ultimately, I also taught in a college, three years in one college in Israel, where my family and I spent three years. A teacher's college. And while it's true that some people say those who can't, teach, that's a George Bernard Shaw, I got to a new Weinsbergian statement, that those who can't teach, teach teachers. Well I like teaching teachers.

And obviously, you got to be very verbal and explicit with teachers because they tend to know at all. Especially Israeli teachers. I saw a bit of that when I was teaching, and I was actually then doing public speaking in a foreign language. Which I had only been able to do partially until I got to Israel. Then I had to learn how to speak in a language that wasn't quite day-to-day conversation, because I was dealing in my field of doctoral work, gerontology and psychology. And I had to be able to use terminology correctly. And I did something very clever, I thought, but it wasn't my idea in this case. A friend of mine who had also gone Israel went up to Haifa, became the chairman of the Sociology department. He told me that when he started out leaving the states and going to Israel, he too knew rudimentary and conversational Hebrew, but not lecture style Hebrew in public. And what he did is simply assigned one person in a class of 30 to spot any mistakes he had, so everybody else would pay attention to his content, not necessarily to his specific

language or language skills that were faltering. In three months he did fine. Now I ended up doing exactly that. I followed his pattern and three months later, I never needed anybody. And that's who enabled me to become a public speaker not only in my native language of English, but in Hebrew, as well.

And if you can do that and carry it off, I believe that you're pretty well solid at that stage, given that long background I've kind of summarized in this brief fashion.

CS: So, given this unique path that you've taken, do you believe that public speaking is a learned skill? Or something you are born being able to do? And why have you come to that conclusion?

RE: I think speaking is a learned skill, not just public speaking. A kid learns to communicate from birth. But in spoken word, that's acquired. Kids communicate by virtue of their cries, which everybody knows a kid cries at a very tender age for basically three or four reasons. Either they're hungry, they're wet or they're sleepy. And that's communication, but it's not verbalization. That's an acquired skill. Kids, you know, when they're very young, learn from their peers. It's called natural language learning. When it comes to public speaking, that's the next step up. You talk to one person first, and then you talk to several at a time, and then you learn that people perhaps don't understand you. Could just say that again? What? Whatever people say you and those correctives, which are very natural, ordinary part of the conversation, get someone to listen to themselves more diligently, as I had to do. I know even from time to time today, I had to give a talk as chairman of a telecommunications committee where I live. And the first thing people said is, "Can't hear you! Speak louder!" And thankfully we had the microphone experts switch mics, because he had given me the wrong one. And I'm pretty tall. And then I spoke too loudly until I put the microphone at a distance from me. So, we're always learning. No matter how long we've spoken, we're always on a learning curve. Now for some it's a slow curve. For others, it's a fast curve.

One of the things that gets in the way of learning to speak publicly is, let's call it, an introverted personality. Someone who's shy may have a harder time getting over that hurdle. And yet I can tell you that while I'm a hardly a shrinking violet, I'm not a shy person as you probably can tell. I have a brother who is very introverted and yet he has been in public radio as a public speaker for years. So, something happens to him, like a switch. When you get him on the radio, he knows he has a job responsibility and he does it all. For seven years, while in Virginia, he was everybody's newscaster, deejay, and everything in between, because that was what the job called for and that was his idea of what he wanted to do. Then as soon as he stepped out of the studio, he went back to his introverted ways, eyes cast downward, not connecting people the way you would hope. A shy guy. OK? I never

was that introverted, but I can tell you that if an introverted person can indeed learn to be a public speaker, pretty much anybody can. But it's always a learning experience and that learning never stops. Why? Lots of times you speak before an audience and you don't get the kind of feedback you need. And so, you have to know, as a speaker, to ask a certain question, make a certain comment, hope for a certain kind of response, if nothing else, non-visual, the way people seem attentive or not, in order to know that you're really communicating well with them. And then you continue accordingly. That's to me, again, is part of that learning curve that all of us as public speakers have to continually monitor.

CS: You know, you touched on an interesting point there, in your story, when you talked about your brother and that there's a psychology to speaking in front of people where you can see them, and speaking in front of people where you can't. I find it much easier to come across as extroverted and outgoing when I'm talking to someone on the phone, or I'm doing a teleseminar, or I'm on the radio. But then I get in front of people and suddenly I'm very shy. And yet there are people who are actually more nervous talking on the radio or over a teleseminar than they are in front of an audience.

RE: I can totally agree with you. I really do. There's one advantage by the way, in terms of speaking when you're not being seen and you basically you can look at notes or you can make notes as you're thinking and keep on track with whatever the person interviewing you might be asking you. I do think though that there's a singular disadvantage, and you sort of implied it, when you're not able to see the other person. I remember being on one national show and it was weird I was hooked up to where he was in New York but I'm here I am in Tampa and I fully expected to be able to see him on the one screen just like he was able to see me on another in New York. But guess what? I was looking at a camera as if he were there and we were looking eye-to-eye, but it was he wasn't. I was like in the darkened in camera. And it threw me off to the extent that had I been able to see some of the non-visual cues, like a smile, a hardened eyes for a moment. I would have known for example that it was time to move on to another issue, maybe to make a shorter comment, so that the pace would keep up and so forth.

I welcome, therefore, having face to face or an audience before me, so I can kind of monitor these things. That way, at all times, know where I'm at. I gotta say the only way, though, to compensate for facing an audience and speaking effectively, is have extremely diligent preparation of your content. So really know cold what you want to say, and even figure out in advance how you want to say it. That's the art of communicating in public, even though you might be a little self-conscious.

- CS:** Yeah. I have to admit that when I'm speaking in front of an audience, you get those visual cues so you can adjust your content. Whereas when you're doing it virtually over the radio or a teleseminar, not only do you not get those cues, but it's easier to get distracted by other things going on in the room that the people who are listening to you have no clue. So, it almost takes more focus to do public speaking when it's a virtual, than when you're actually live in front of an audience.
- RE:** Absolutely right. I agree 100 percent. Again, the only way to counter that is to have a piece of paper in front of you, could be totally blank, and as a question's asked, you start writing a word or two, so you know what direction you want to go in, but to be responsive to that question. And that helps you focus better.
- CS:** Yes definitely. Now imagine that you are a public speaking super hero. What do you believe would be your main superpowers?
- RE:** My main superpower ... if I were a public speaking superhero, which I would love to be, and some people do consider me, but they're in my corner already, like my wife. They would say, "God, he really knows how to engage an audience no matter what the subject. And more importantly he knows how to move people to action." I mean the kind of action, such as by the time he's finished they're going to buy the product he's talking about. They're going to give to a worthy cause, if that's what I want them to think about. Or they're going to revise their attitudes about certain people whom they might have looked down upon, and I as their rabbi or as their moral mentor, would like them to rethink their values and their attitudes. And if I can get them to do that, then I am, indeed, exercising some speaking super power.
- CS:** Definitely. So, you touched on two. One was engaging the audience and the other with changing the audience's behavior in some way. What advice would you give someone if they wanted to develop one or both of those in super powers, as well?
- RE:** Let me touch on maybe four points to answer your question. First, I believe very strongly in speaking one-on-one to people no matter how large the audience. Now the average listener to that, Carma, will say, "Huh? What's he talking about?" If he got an audience by definition that means at least five, 10, 15, 20. I mean I have a gig now in Canada at the end of October that there might be a thousand people. And people will tell me, "Aren't nervous when you do that? Anyhow, how does speak one-on-one when there are a thousand people?" The answer is you look at each one, one at a time. You speak to one person at a time. And that does several things. One, it makes you more conversational. You don't end up speaking *at*, but rather *with* each person. And yet everybody's receiving the communication. And then, in looking around the room, you're not simply selecting one part of the auditorium, as opposed to another, which will subconsciously make people feel you're talking to

somebody besides them. This way this is a way to connect and really develop that power of communication to engage people in a way that's very personal, one-on-one meaningful. That's the first thing I wanted to mention. So, speaking one-on-one to people.

Incidentally it's also helpful to do that, because whether there's one person in the room, a thousand or 10,000, it doesn't matter to me. I'm only speaking to one person at a time, so it puts me at greater ease. And gets me away from feeling a little overwhelmed in trying to convey a message. Useful in both directions.

The second thing, if you really want to develop a super power, is to remember to be yourself. And by that, I mean you have to have congruency between what you're saying, the content, and how you're expressing it. So, for example, if I'm trying to say, "I am really excited," and I don't let my tone of voice express that. Instead, I say, "I'm really excited to be with you today." That's not congruency. You want your content and your emotions to be on the same page. And one of the ways to express emotion, if you really want to be a superhero who keeps people's attention, keeps them focused on you, and what you're saying, it's remember that emotions come from motion. That's why you see a lot of people deliberately speaking with their hands.

I know, as an aside, there are a lot of people say the people who speak with their hands the most are either Jews or Italians. And if you're an Italian Jew, watch out! You know? Mama mia! You know, you can just picture someone with their hands.

But the reality is that you do express your emotions through the motions of your hand, your head. Whether your head is looking up, around, looking quickly around, or slowly gravitating from left to right, as you look at your audience, and maybe pause after making a point, so something you just said with emotion and intensity, can sink in. That's a kind of congruency you want. You surely don't want to sound like a robot who has a prepared speech. And God forbid you've got it all in front of you, reading every word and never look up.

I would tell you, though, this may surprise you, that when you're speaking in public, you can still create a powerful impact, even if you're looking at what you've got in your hands or below the line of people's vision 50 percent of the time. You don't have to be looking up 80 percent, 90 percent of the time, if you know how to glance down quickly and without being obvious about it. For example, you can glance down with your eyes only; your chin doesn't have to go down each time. People won't even be conscious that you're speaking from a script.

CS: There's an art to it.

RE: There is an art. And frankly it took me about 15 years to develop that and that goes back to the question of is it learned or not. I was a congregation rabbi for 30 years, so I had plenty of time to practice this. And also, I had the advantage of being on a dais, which is always higher than the audience. And when you're above the audience, it's just less noticeable. As far as you're concerned, you're looking at them all the time, even when your eyes glance down for a moment. Also, it helps to wear glasses. They can't see where your eyes really are.

CS: This is true.

RE: What can I tell you? Now, the third thing I want to mention is that it's really important to use the power of storytelling. And you notice I've given you a little bit of narrative as I'm talking about general principles. Just in our brief conversation, and it comes naturally to me. I guess, because I like to tell stories. Although some people might say I like to talk a lot, but that's neither here nor there.

I'll give you an example. I do a lot of article publishing and I've just written an article for *Coping with Cancer* magazine, it has about a half million readers, but I've published for *Cure* and all kinds of others, because my primary interest is prostate cancer, more exactly coping with prostate cancer before, during and after treatment. And there are plenty of complications that people have a hard time with, e.g. incontinence, and so forth. And women also have a problem when their love is in trouble that way. And, I wrote some general concept of how sad it is that after prostate cancer treatment many men who experience E.D., basically shut down and they literally turn their backs on their wives. And many wives are beside themselves because of communication is cut off. Why does it appear the deadliest? Because a man no longer feels like he is the man he used to be. You know, without that kind of general functioning that was so easy.

CS: Yeah. There's an analogy in breast cancer after a woman has a mastectomy, a lot of women will do the same thing.

RE: Exactly. I'm glad you mentioned that because I also put that in my article as a parallel. Absolutely. And then it occurred to me after I had completed the article and wrote that as an opening sentence how sad it is when, etc. I said no I need a concrete example. And I, having dealt with people, brought to mind, which is Lisa, and I only gave a fictionalized first name, was extremely upset when her husband, John, came home after his hospitalization for prostate cancer surgery. Words to that effect. He stopped talking to her. She was distraught. Not only because he turned his back on her and wouldn't convey what was on his mind, what was troubling him, but he also stopped doing or didn't even begin doing what his doctor told him to do

for purposes of penile rehabilitation. She was very worried about his health, let alone their relationship.

I didn't use those exact words. That's how I started and then I generalized in the next paragraph and the next statement about how sad it is when these kinds of things happen. I think it's very important to be a super speaker, to constantly use narrative, but not to have people lose the point. Don't let the story guide the point, let the point guide the story. And use the power of storytelling so that it drives your point home. The fourth and last thing I'll mention for the moment, is that one of the speaking superpowers that I would recommend to people is use laughter wherever it's appropriate. And believe it or not when it comes to speaking about cancer, it's always appropriate, with some rare exceptions, as I can mention, to use the power of humor.

I'll give you a quick example. I talk a lot about what kind of aids will help people rehabilitate themselves in terms of getting back into the game regarding sexual intimacy. One point I made recently in my blog column at ConquerorProstateCancer.com, is whether you've had prostate cancer treatment or not, Viagra is a kind of birthday gift that might excite your interest, whether you're a man or woman. And this is illustrated in the following anecdote.

Two older gentleman were having an animated conversation. One said to the other, "My birthday was yesterday. My wife gave me an SUV." His friend replied, "Wow that's amazing. Imagine! An SUV! What a great gift." And the first guy explained, "Yup. Socks, Underwear and Viagra." There you have your SUV.

CS: Right.

RE: I guess the funny thing about that is, you laugh because you see, we're talking about and as you get older sometimes it's more difficult to do your sexercise, if I can use that phrase. And you cannot take things for granted. So, you have to look around and see what can help you maintain a lifestyle that will give mutual pleasure to yourself and your partner. I always like to give gifts of socks and underwear. Viagra has become so commonplace that why not throw that in as well, where it's needed and where the doctor recommends it.

Now, I could have said, instead of telling the story, well, as you get older, sexual frequency isn't as much as it is when you are younger. Although desire is often there, sometimes even that's affected. Viagra can go a long way to helping.

But that doesn't say the same thing without the prior story, which kind of brings it on a personalized basis and lets people understand this is no dull subject. This is a

matter of urgency and yet can be a source of mirth, if I can use that phrase, that you can joke around a bit.

When people tell stories that have humor and they provoke laughter, at least two things happen. One, the audience is more likely to stay awake. It actually causes a rush of adrenaline when people laugh. It's good for their breathing. And, a lot of times, when you're talking to people. Essentially, they could become quite passive, because you're the only ones speaking. And they're trying to listen to you. And some of them will fade away, there's no question.

I had one guy who for many years, in the fourth row in front of me, in a congregational setting. And as soon as I announced I'm now going to proceed to the sermon, the first thing that would happen, he would close his eyes and that was it for the entire time that I would give a sermon. And then he would wake up as soon as I was done. That's not what you want to do. I will I will say, in my defense, he was the only guy in the whole room who did that. But there is always one in the crowd and no speaker should be discouraged when that occurs. Fact is an old line that says, one rabbi saw this happen in his congregation, he got so perturbed that he finally had the nerve to go up to this fellow after services were over and he said, "I don't get it. Every time I'm about to speak you fall asleep, and as soon as I'm done, you wake up." And the response of this gentleman was, "Listen, rabbi, that just simply shows you that I have absolute confidence in what you're going to say. I don't need to be fully awake to know you're going to do a great job." Well, you know, that's neither here nor there. The point is, humor does get the blood flowing, and gets people to pay attention more, and even look forward to maybe hearing another funny line that will come down the line in the course of a talk. And the longer the talk, the more important it is to intersperse it with both narrative and humor.

CS: Right. Well, there's a few things going on there. For one, humans, in general, are hard wired to pay attention to stories. We've been communicating in stories since we were living in caves. And second, a story, because of that, it helps engage the audience so that they are ready and primed to hear what your message actually is. And then humor, just helps release any tension. So, especially with a very serious topic, if you can lighten it up – appropriately, in the right context – then it just helps that whole engagement process.

RE: It did. But again, I raised a cautionary note, and I said it in passing, it's usually appropriate no matter what the subject, to use humor. There is one exception when it comes to, at least, my topic which is talking about coping with cancer, when you know there are a number of people in the room who just were given word that or diagnosis that they have cancer. Humor is usually not appropriate. They still need to process what they've just been told.

But by and large the audiences I face are those who are survivors, people who the diagnosis passed their treatment and want to learn how to cope better. And this includes women who are trying to deal with their husbands and interact in a way that's more normalized. So, these kinds of stories might, as you well put it, make them feel more at ease, not only in the presence of the speaker, but in terms of addressing the topic once the speech is over and they got to go home and face this, their partner, they can say, "Hey, you know, that story about whatever, that was pretty funny."

By the way, so often they'll only remember the jokes and forget the main points. But, that's important because then I've done something that I said was one of my goals. I've not only engaged the audience, but I got them to revise their attitudes in a way that allows them, maybe, to address a topic they wouldn't even talk about ordinarily in a frank manner with their spouse. Now because I opened it up, I gave them permission as it were, to address these issues frontally, but in a calm way, I've really accomplished the minimal of what I set out to do when I began that speech.

CS: Wonderful. Well, thank you so much Rabbi Ed, for sharing your unique perspective and tips and advice with us today on *Public Speaking Super Powers*.

RE: My pleasure and I hope to hear from you again, Carma. It's been a delight.

CS: Wonderful. This is the end of today's episode of *Public Speaking Super Powers*. This is your host, Carma Spence, signing off.

If you would like to learn more about Rabbi Ed, visit his profile page at:
<http://publicspeakingpowers.com/featuredspeakers/rabbi-edgar-weinsberg/>