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Did I fail or did I learn something?

It happened the day before yesterday at a big party with some 80 guests. The host and hostess, old close friends of mine, gave the party to celebrate their birthdays. I had prepared a speech of 5 minutes and was extremely satisfied with the contents as it was funny with lots of really humorous twists. I was about to present a blending performance with good audience response. Nothing of this came true.

During the first course I suddenly became aware that I had learnt my speech by heart, word by word, and this started to worry me. I teach that one should never do that with this type of speech. One should have a concept and then talk as it comes. But it was too late to change! I knew the words but had lost the concept. One missed word could now cause brain drain. The well known threat "what if ..." popped up and turned my enthusiasm into worry and that is not a good beginning. A quick visit to the loo to check my manuscript helped and I calmed down. Let's get it over and done with it. I put away the manuscript and knocked my glass.

It went well for a short while, until I started to miss part of the speech which I suddenly could not remember. In stead of calmly taking out my manuscript (I should have put it on the table from the beginning), I developed a complicated, and neither funny nor necessary, part of the speech, the words stumbling over each other. I desperately fought to get out of a labyrinth of verbal paths. Yes, I did come to a few funny points but they were not embedded in the right context and were therefore met with puzzled faces. While this was going on I felt as having a second brain that was wondering what I was doing, why I was standing there and where all the funny stuff was, the stuff that was supposed to unleash bursts of laughter.

How then did I manage? Well, I delivered my message but without sting. It was not supported by the sea wave that was supposed to sweep through the guests with my message. And now a remarkable thing happened. The moment I sat down, accompanied by polite and dutiful applause, my brain came to attention and I recalled exactly everything that I had forgotten. Every word, sentence and section appeared like a completed Christmas puzzle. I wanted to stand up again and repeat it all with my heart and soul but, in stead, I put on an expression as if everything had worked out as planned. In the public speaking organization www.toastmasters.org (or .se) we learn never to show concern about failure. The audience may, after all, possibly think differently. But have I actually failed or have I learnt something?

Once again I can only quote Thomas Edison – "I have not failed 10 000 times. I have succeeded in finding 10 000 ways which didn't work!"

Hence, failing is succeeding to learn something.

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