

How To Attend A Conference As Yourself by Peter Bregman

□ I often feel awkward when I go to a conference. Reluctant to sidle up to a stranger and introduce myself, I roam, like I did at college parties, self-conscious, seltzer water in hand, not fitting in. In the midst of a sea of people chatting away enthusiastically, I am uncomfortable and alone.

□ But when my plane from New York landed in Austin, Texas for South By Southwest, the music, film, and interactive conference, I was excited. I was speaking on a panel and, since everyone told me SXSW is a blast, I had given myself an extra day to explore the conference.

□ But it didn't play out like I had hoped. I arrived just in time for my panel, then I did a book signing for 18 Minutes and then, well, then I was at a conference. I went to a conference party and just stood there, shy, embarrassed, and reluctant to reach out and meet people.

□ I was annoyed with myself. What's my deal?

□ I was about to leave when I thought, instead of judging myself, why not take this as an opportunity to explore an uncomfortable emotion? So I stood there and felt what awkward felt like.

□ It felt awkward. But, soon, I recognized something deeper behind my shyness, something more pernicious.

□ Once I finished the panel, I had no role and no purpose. I realized that when I'm not accomplishing something, I'm not sure who I am. I was having a conference-generated identity crisis.

□ My sense of self is dangerously close to my sense of role. I'm a writer, a speaker, a consultant, a father, a husband, a skier, etc. But who am I when I'm not actively being those things? Who am I without my accomplishments — past, present, or future?

□ Just me. Which, it turns out, was unsettling.

□ I don't think I'm alone. It's why, within a minute of meeting someone, we begin to define ourselves by our roles, our status, and our relationships to others. We think it's because other people need that information to know us.

□ But standing alone at that party I realized I'd been fooling myself. Other people

don't need that information to know me. I need that information to know myself.

□Once I understood the source of my discomfort, I resisted the urge to drop a name or tell people I had just given a talk or written a book or something else to identify a solid role for myself that would make me look and feel good.

□Instead, I paid attention to what it felt like to be without any identity other than my presence. I noticed my desire to be noticed and my feelings of insecurity. But I also noticed my feeling of strength, and of trust in my observations and in myself. I began to relax and, once I did, I didn't feel nearly as insecure.

□Then something funny happened. People started to approach me.

□Out of the blue, a woman walked over and introduced herself to me and we started talking. Then she waved a colleague over. They didn't know me and weren't looking for anything from me, nor I from them. We were just three people connecting. As soon as we parted, a man came over. Again, I introduced myself by name but not by role. Again, we had a great conversation and a nice, human connection.

□I didn't tell people that I'm a writer or that I run a consulting company or any other role-defining facts. I just met them as Peter. And they met me as themselves.

□It took some getting used to, especially at a conference where we tend to define ourselves by our roles and people talk to each other while looking around to see if there's someone more useful to talk to.

□But it's a mistake to launch in to your business plan when you meet someone new — even at a conference where the point is to peddle your business plan. People invest in you first, then your plan. So show them you first, then your plan.

□That's precisely why shedding our roles — at least initially — even at a conference and even if there is something we want from others, is such a good idea.

□People will trust you if you trust yourself. And to trust yourself you have to step out from behind the curtain. You have to expose yourself, free of titles and status. When you allow people to see you — as impressive and vulnerable as you are — then they will trust you. Because they will know you.

□So how, at a conference when you don't know anyone, can you engage in a conversation without identifying your role? It's not easy. You'll be fighting against the tide. But try asking open-ended questions and try getting personal. Eventually you'll find out more about your fellow conference-goers and they'll find out more about you.

□A conference is just a bunch of human beings bumping into other human beings. Most of whom feel awkward about it. Most of whom, more than anything, would love to be seen for who they are, not just the roles they represent. We can give that to each other.

□It might be awkward at first. But I think it's our best shot at having a meaningful experience in a situation that often leaves us feeling shallow. That's clearly good for us. And it might just be good for business too.