Interviewing, Part 2
Winning the Hearts and Minds with Face Time

When you go in for a job interview, I think a good thing to ask is if they ever press charges.

—Jack Handy

Good God, how I miss “Deep Thoughts by Jack Handy,” from Saturday Night Live. ¹ Anybody remember those?

I’ll bet the above quote is funny to many of you, while at the same time revealing the wonderfully painful experience known as the in-person job interview. The one where your mouth is dry, your forehead and hands are slick with sweat, and you say and do quite inappropriate things.

And the interviewee hasn’t even entered the room yet. (Rim shot, please.)

Years and years (and years) ago, when I worked for San Jose State University, I was out to lunch with my boss one day. While this wasn’t an interview for a new position per se, it was an informal interview for a promotion within the program in which I worked. He had asked the week before if I wanted to go to a well-known Japanese restaurant in the heart of San Jose’s Japan Town. I joked that I didn’t eat sushi (at the time, anyway), and he half-smiled and told me that there was more to Japanese food than sushi.

What I didn’t tell him is that I had never eaten at a Japanese restaurant, so I really had no context other that what I had seen in movies and on TV, and from my friends who ate sushi.

Chapter 15 | Interviewing, Part 2

So there we were, at first keeping it casual and talking about life and college, of which I was still in at the time, when our food order came. I had ordered a bento box with tempura shrimp and vegetables, and he ordered sushi, of course.

We moved the conversation along to the business at hand, with him asking me pointed questions about why I wanted the promotion. He asked, “How are you going to balance the role with your classes?”

Before I answered, which was my first mistake, I stared curiously at the dollop of green paste nestled in the far corner of my bento box, which was my second mistake. He noticed and threw out another question. “You’ve had wasabi before, right?”

Now, what do you think I answered? C’mon. I had never been to a Japanese restaurant before, so why would I?

“Absolutely,” I said.

And he just sat there and watched while I took a spoonful of wasabi and plopped it into my mouth, as if this were exactly how you were supposed to eat it. He burst into laughter, and had to cover his mouth from projecting ice water all over the table.

I chewed and swallowed, and within 2 seconds, every taste bud in my mouth imploded and every blood vessel in my nose exploded. Rivers of tears flowed freely down my face. I couldn’t breathe.

“Are you all right? I thought you said you’d eaten it before,” he blurted between weighty guffaws.

I must have drank 15 glasses of ice water; our waiter just left two pitchers on our table. My boss kept laughing and I stopped eating, and we never got beyond the wasabi incident.

And, no, I didn’t get the promotion, but that’s not the point. (My boss was forced from his position a week later and everything changed in our department. Isn’t that the way it always is?)

Of course, the moral of this story, as it is with many similar stories, including incidents you may have experienced in interview situations, is that you should not try to be something you’re not. I don’t care how great an actor you are, or how much a smarty pants, do not try to be something you’re not. Doing so will bite you in the ass; and at this stage in your job search, just getting face time with your potential employer means that you want nothing to bite you in the ass except for, maybe, the uncomfortable seat you are invited to sit in.