

## The Only One

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I attended a "webinar" recently. It was one of those conferences that play both over your computer screen and your speaker phone.

I registered a few weeks before. It was sponsored by a well known legal vendor and I suspected it came with subtle or not-so-subtle sales pitches.

An email alert arrived fifteen minutes before the time scheduled. I had just finished a task, and nothing appeared to be pressing. So, I logged into the seminar about two minutes before 2 PM start time on the computer screen. A phone number popped up and I dialed it.

An automated voice asked the access code. I pushed the phone buttons. Then it asked for an id number. I logged.

The leader was an out-of-state attorney.

"Selina, can you try to call in?" he asked. Then, "Is Mr. Nelson on the line?"

That startled me. I usually hover anonymously in conferences, and most other participants stay anonymous to the listeners at large unless someone identifies him or herself before launching into some question.

I unmuted the phone.

"Yes," I said. "That's me."

"Great," he said, a bit too brightly.

Then, "Welcome. You're the first one to arrive."

"Oh?"

"You're the only one," he said. "We got a couple of minutes here. We'll give the other folks a chance to sign on."

I gaped at my computer screen. We waited in silence for awhile, then he began asking the usual questions: what state I was in, what type of practice, how's the weather, who do you think will win the Heisman? We spoke about Colt McCoy and Ndamukong Suh for a bit.

I heard a click, then the leader say, "Hello, somebody just joined us?"

I felt relief for only a moment.

"This is Selina."

"This is Selina?"

"Yes."

"Well. Hello. Everything seems to be working fine. I appreciate you joining us."

"Yes, uhhh," Selina hesitated.

"We have Mr. Nelson on the line, so ... so I think we're good to go."

"Okay."

"Kay."

"Thanks," Selina said.

"Thank you," the leader said.

"Bye," Selina said and hung up.

"Just had to run a little test there when no one was showing up, Mr. Nelson," the leader said. "I thought well maybe I'm doing something wrong."

I made vague sounds of acknowledgment.

"Where are you from?" he asked, forgetting he'd already asked.

"Texas."

"Oh. Yes." An awkward noise emitted. He swore softly before remembering that I could hear.

"Ok," he said. "We've got a lot of ground to cover. Let's forge ahead."

He began his presentation. I watched on the screen and listened. I listened more carefully than I've listened at a conference in a long time. There was no crowd of others to cloak oneself. I could be held accountable. I didn't enjoy the personal one-on-one attention. I regretted signing in to this thing that required absolute concentration. The tone was professorial, not conversational. And the speaker's tone was tinged with embarrassment. With his credentials, he sounded unfamiliar with an empty room. It was not business as usual.

About ten minutes into his presentation, he hesitated.

"Now Mr. Nelson," he said, "don't be bashful if you got a question, just interrupt."

"I won't," I said. I didn't interrupt. Bashful was not the correct word.

About fifteen minutes into his presentation, I felt my eyes getting heavy. Just as I lost my grasp, he asked a question. Jolted wide awake, my eyes felt too big for their sockets. I realized he wondered if I had walked away from the phone.

However, I answered well enough to soothe his suspicion that he was speaking to empty air.

Twenty-three minutes into his presentation, he halted in midsentence. "Mr. Nelson," he said, a bit enthused, "it looks like some others are trying to log in. No, just one. She'll be coming in pretty soon, I gather."

"Hello," he suddenly interrupted himself. "Is so-and-so on the line?"

"Yes, I'm here," she said. She sounded as surprised as I felt earlier.

He asked her where she was from.

"I'm from Dallas."

"Oh, I have Mr. Nelson on the line as well and he's from Texas too."

"Okay?" she said.

"Well," he said. "Well. Several people signed up, and the Texans have shown up. What kind of law do you practice?"

She said she was a paralegal.

After a quick recap of all he'd previously spoken on, the speaker lectured for about for about five minutes more, and then asked if there was any questions.

The paralegal then asked a question not germane to the topic. It had to do with networking computers between two attorneys in her office. "I just don't want to reinput all of our client information each time," she said.

He guttered and gasped for a moment. I felt my face grow warm. I blushed out for the speaker. Then he made a valiant attempt to answer that question. In fact, he knew something about networking computers, and finished after quizzing her what software programs she used, on how to Google the technical support numbers to walk her through networking the computers.

There was a pause. The speaker valiantly launched back into his presentation. A faint memory about an audience of one flitted across my mind, and I tried to pull it. But all I could pull was Alfred Hitchcock's "make the audience suffer as much as possible." This was Hitchcock in reverse, I thought.

Thirty-three minutes into his presentation, music started to flood out of the phone speaker. With a jolt, I realized what happened.

"It's not me that put you on hold," I blurted.

"Let me just mute her line," he said. The music stopped suddenly. He began again. I could hear the weary humiliation in his voice.

His lecture finally ended. I'd picked up a few pointers more than usual, I think, because of the awkwardness of being an audience of one.

"Mr. Nelson. I want to give you my number. I want you to feel free to call me at anytime." He gave his number. "I want you to call me at anytime, he said again. "If you get a voicemail, that means I'm not there or talking on the phone, or busy."

I swear I heard waves of embarrassment crashing across him as he realized he just explained what a voicemail was.

"I certainly will," I said way too enthusiastically. "I learned a lot."

"Thank you," he squawked in much too grateful a tone.

Then a pause.

"Thank you," he said in a normal tone. "You're very kind."

For a moment, I felt that to be true.