

## Lesson #4

### Make “The Personal Connection”

In this seven part series I am sharing seven Lessons From The Stage designed to help you become a better communicator both in and out of the courtroom. As a trial lawyer you face multiple challenges, or “Obstacles” as I prefer to call them, in your cases as well as in your own personal lives. The first lesson (“The Power Of The Obstacle: Embracing The Conflict”) provided a framework to begin to appreciate and powerfully use Obstacles to your benefit both inside and outside of court. In this next lesson, we’ll be focusing on the value of making the “personal connection.”

“The Personal Connection” is one of the greatest tools actors utilize to effectively embody the role of a “character,” and it’s also an invaluable tool to transform your greatest and most authentic

“you” in the courtroom.

I'd like to share with you a story about an experience I had while attending the Juilliard School in New York City. It is, perhaps, one of the best examples of how to “make the personal connection,” and a demonstration of how to utilize this important tool in my work with trial lawyers in telling “the winning story.”

In a scene I'd been working on with another fellow student, our teacher (I'll refer to him, respectfully, as Masters) practically destroyed me in front of the class. Masters would go back and forth to scene work every other month. My scene partner, Ben, asked if we could go up there on stage and do our scene, and I wished to God Ben hadn't of done that; I wished we'd discussed it first if we were planning on sharing. But you never turned down a scene once you had an opportunity to perform in front of Masters, that would have been a cardinal sin, a true mark of an amateur, and so I went up there in front of the class and performed the scene from the play “Becket or The Honor of God” in which I played King Henry II and Ben played Thomas Becket, The King's former

friend. Coughing away, Masters made Ben and I do the scene again. And then a third time. And then a fourth. Halfway into the fifth time we did the scene, I stopped and said, "I can't."

Coughing, Masters said, "Hallelujah. He's arrived! So do you think you can stop 'phoning in' and be willing to try something different?"

("Phoning In" is another actor expression for "faking it" on stage.)

"I don't know why it isn't working, you know?" I said. "I've bled dry my 'objective!' I keep asking myself, what do you want? I mean, what do I want from Ben, and how am I going to get it, and what's my obstacle, so I don't know, I just don't have a clue why this scene isn't working!"

Masters responded, through his ragged voice-- the old teacher loved it when actors got to this place where they were willing to try new ideas through sheer and utter desperation-- "Good. Now you're ready to play the scene."

I just lifted my hands up in the air, helplessly. "Great! How?"

“Where are you?” Masters asked me.

“Here,” I said. “I’m here. In class. It’s a Friday.”

“No, in the scene,” Master said. “Your circumstances.”

“Oh. In a field. A huge field,” I answered.

“What time of year is it?” he asked me.

“It’s winter.”

“Is it cold?”

“Yes.”

“How cold?”

“Very. Very cold.”

“Very cold? Cold enough for a cashmere sweater or a ski jacket?”

“Freezing. I’m freezing.”

“Freezing’s definitely different than cold, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Keep painting the picture.”

“Snow’s everywhere. Up to my knees.”

“Good. Stay with that cold.”

“Wind is whipping at me from all sides.”

“Excellent.”

“I'd rather be in a warm castle having this conversation with Beckett. But we're out here. And it sucks.”

“Good. Play the cold.”

In front of the class, I went through the motions of shivering up there, hugging my arms, stomping my feet on the ground... playing the cold... until the cold became very real for me. I believed it. Just like I were in a big field. Already, the scene felt better, even before I uttered a line.

“Now...” Masters said, “Play the scene.”

The scene flew, of course. The words were perfectly placed. I let it rip. My character dropped into me, or I dropped into the character like butter. My objective soared with the lines from the play beautifully, smoothly. I forgot everything I was trying to accomplish-- everything I was trying to control in that scene-- all because I played that cold... until I wasn't focusing on anything else *but* that cold. Afterwards, through his coughing, too difficult

to speak, Masters gave me the thumbs up.

Whenever I've been in places in my life where my emotion (whether I'm happy or sad) is a freight train hurtling far away from me and I can't seem to catch up to it, I will literally say to myself, "Play the cold..." Beyond the work on stage, the value of these words allow me to stay in the moment. In a way, they're very spiritual to me, offering themselves as the road to perfect acceptance no matter how ugly or unacceptable the present circumstances may appear. They tell me that this moment, this situation is good enough and what can I do with it.

Among many other examples I could provide, I share this story to you to show you how you can make the personal connection, too, when it comes to telling "the winning story." What would it be like if you were in a huge field freezing? How would you respond to the conditions you were in?

Play the cold.

## The Magic “If”

Konstantin Sergeievich Stanislavski (born January 5<sup>th</sup> 1863 and died August 7<sup>th</sup> 1938) was a Russian actor and theatre director. The Stanislavski System has had an enormous influence on the American Theater and many actors’ approach to being “believable” on stage. Stanislavski wrote several works, including *An Actor Prepares*, *An Actor's Work on a Role*, and his autobiography, *My Life In Art*. While attending Juilliard, Stanislavski was a highly revered name amongst the students and faculty. He was The Man. One of Stanislavski's methods for achieving the truthful pursuit of a character's emotion was his "magic if." Actors were required to ask many questions of their characters and themselves in order to find “the truth” on stage. The “magic if” got you out of the dreaded “over-thinking place” that puts *all* actors in a bog where nothing is communicated to the audience. The “magic if” gets you out of your head. Through the “magic if,” actors were able to ground themselves within their imaginations and breath fire into whatever

role they were playing. The “magic if” allowed the actor to use himself entirely in the role. It was the doorway into the realm of the personal connection.

One of the first questions actors had to ask themselves was, "If I were in the same situation as my character how would I behave?" Another variation on this is "What would I do if I found myself in this (the character's) circumstance?" The "magic if" allowed actors to transcend the confinements of realism by asking themselves what would or could occur "if" the scene the “given circumstances,” were different, or "if" the circumstances were to happen to them. By answering these questions as the character, on stage, the actions of the actors would be believable and therefore “truthful” to the audience, because it was truthful to the actor. In this sense, the actor does not so much become someone else as *he becomes himself*. This connection is critical in telling the winning story in the courtroom. You’re playing a role entirely using your greatest storytelling instrument. You.

You’re in front of the jury. Your “inner voice” would say to

you, “If I were in this accident, how would I feel? Speak? Move?”

Or, “If I were stalking this person, how would this make me

behave around my co-workers?” Or “What would *I* dream of, if I

went through that kind of trauma?” O, “If I were my client caught

in the crossroad of the greatest decision of my life... what if?”

What “if?”

Play the cold.

Hear are some ideas and reminders to help you practice and implement the power of the personal connection in telling your next “winning story.”

*\*I can apply the “personal connection” to anything that does not resonate with me emotionally to supercharge my winning story.*

*\*My entire life thus far is the greatest data base to draw from to*

*help me tell the winning story.*

*\*When I commit to the personal connection, whether it's with my client or the jury, it's impossible for them not to.*