

Lessons from the Stage: Lesson 1

The Power Of The Obstacle

Can you recognize your own personal struggles as assets in order to recognize the “pain points” in your clients and reach the heart of the jury?

Can you access the power of vulnerability, and turn your vulnerability into credibility in the courtroom?

The answer begins... and ends, with The Obstacle. There's an incredible power lurking behind the obstacle, if we're able to develop the tools to recognize and use its power.

It's an inside job.

Each of us has, or will, come to the crossroad where fear and love cross. That crossroad in our life is where rich drama resides. We may not recognize it as such, but this crossroad is where Academy Award quality drama resides.

An example is the dilemma Atticus Finch faces in “To Kill a Mockingbird.” Atticus Finch stands at the crossroads when Tom Robinson, charged with rape of a white woman, enters his life. One road puts him with the white townsfolk who oppose his representation and eliminates the coming threats to Atticus and his family. The other road is to take an unpopular client with no money who is charged with committing a heinous crime. Atticus can 1) defend Tom Robinson and risk everything, or 2) walk away and drop the case. Atticus makes the choice that puts him all in. There is a loud voice inside Atticus saying, “You must tell the truth. Tom Robinson is innocent. That truth is worth everything.”

Conflict, whether Atticus', or our professional or personal conflicts, puts us in the forge and either makes us or breaks us. The conflict presents a great opportunity. We can strive to eliminate it, or embrace it and let it fashion our character.

We may never reach the “place” we desire in the “road less traveled.” But the journey is infinitely more important than the destination. Atticus Finch lost the case, but he gained the steadfast love and respect of his children, and taught them a lesson of personal integrity that they will carry on for a lifetime.

Within the character's struggles, and our struggles toward “the perfect place,” we may realize that in our searching and digging to reach “the other road,” there is something vastly greater waiting inside us, another story, a greater story that makes life so much more compelling.

The question is the same question posed to Neo in the Matrix, “How far down the rabbit hole are you willing to go?” How deep inside yourself will you look to understand what you stand for? How will you grow from conflict and opposition?

Character Is Contradiction

Let’s take a look at what makes, in movie director Elia Kazan's definition, a great character. “Contradiction.” “Look for the contradictions in every character, especially in your heroes and villains. No one should be what they first seem to be. Surprise the audience.” Elia Kazan, *Kazan on Directing*. Walt Whitman, the great American poet of “Leaves of Grass” wrote, “Do I contradict myself? Very well! For I am large, I contain multitudes.”

What are your contradictions? Keep in mind that it's impossible for any human being to be “the same” all the time. We wouldn't be “interesting human beings” if we were the same all the time. Can you allow your contradiction/s to tell the winning story? Doing this will allow your “character” (you) to go from a one-dimensional story to a three-dimensional story. Individually, we are filled with an enormous treasure trove of contradictions. Think about the bully at school who pushes everyone, yet has an enormous capacity to express genuine feeling with classical music. What's the softness under the rough exterior? It is these moments that help define our identities, our character. Character is contradiction.

Defining your juicy contradictions will pave the road for you to take a look at the crossroads in your life. And help tell the winning story.

What are your crossroads?

"Two roads diverged into a wood... and I? I took the one less traveled by. And that has made all the difference."

Robert Frost's famous poem, "The Road Not Taken," is simple and powerful. And pretty much sums up the human drama, the eternal universal drama of Choice and Change. I believe that *everyone* is at a crossroads in their lives, whether they realize it or not. I believe that the best characters in the best dramas are entrenched in a heart rending, palm-sweating, hair-raising inner battle between this road or that road... "The road I couldn't possibly go down, could I?" "The road nobody thinks I could go down." "The road I once thought I could go down, and now..." Areas that pull that

character radically a part, choices presented that could triumphantly transform or destroy, that allow that character to be immersed in darkness and disillusion or flooded with the light of awareness and profound inspiration and life purpose. We are those characters in our own movies, our own life dramas, and we are on our own stages as Shakespeare affirmed, constantly given choices and the space to choose.

The work that I share with people from “Lessons On The Stage” begins with the role of the "storyteller" exploring the “two roads” in their life: the place you were, the place you're moving towards now... and in that process, allowing that “stretch,” or “greater story” to emerge. “The stretch” can be looked at as the internal growth or transformation that the obstacle provides.

Here are some examples of the crossroads themes explored, discovered, embraced, interpreted, and shared in the lens of theatre:

- Judgment/Trust**
- Fear/Love**
- Authentic/Dishonest**
- Conditional Love/Unconditional Love**
- Co-Dependent/Self-Reliant**
- Anger/Forgiveness**
- Despair/Hope**
- Arrogance/Humility**
- Self-Delusion/Awakening**
- Perfect/Perfectly Imperfect**

What are your crossroads? What is your “road less traveled?” Combing through the canvas of your life, are you able to define what is your crossroads right now? Give it a shot.

My “crossroads” are _____ and _____.

Bravo! You've taken a major step forward. That's the beginning of a great story. One that will lead to a new doorway to freedom.

Now... here are

6 Questions For You To Consider

What would you like to change in your life?

What is your greatest obstacle?

On a scale of 1-5, are you able to see anything useful about this obstacle?

Are you able to see or recognize any lessons that this obstacle can reveal in your life?

If this obstacle were the key to achieving a major life change, how could it possibly serve you?

How willing, or able, are you to see your obstacle(s) as a gift in your life?

An essential lesson in the theater professional actors learn is that *the obstacle is the opportunity*... For the obstacle becomes the foundation for the richest character and the most powerful play. Where would Hamlet be without his great obstacle? What kind of movie would “Jaws” be without the shark? In life, though, most of us have a tendency to run away from the difficulties, the stopgaps on our path to success. We see pain instead of value.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned from the stage boils down to this: what I consider a roadblock is actually the KEY to achieving lasting success in life.

My hope is that in this series of upcoming articles, you will gain the value of seeing your obstacle as an opportunity for making a major change... not just in the courtroom in telling the winning story, but in your own personal life. Rather than looking at the obstacle as a defect, a mistake, an embarrassment, a source of shame, hopefully, no matter how painful it may be, you will learn to use the obstacle as a gift in your life and career. You will learn to listen and collaborate with your obstacle... not just to tell the winning story but to *live* the winning life!

Helpful Tips

*If I can't find a way to turn my obstacles into an asset, I am not digging deep enough.

*Revealing my own vulnerability creates great credibility in a persuasive argument.

*To fully communicate empathy for someone else's pain, I have to dig deep and fully understand the nature of my own pain.

** This is Lesson 1 of 7 Lessons developed by Julliard Theatre Graduate Jesse Wilson that show how the skills he learned as an actor can be incorporated into the preparation and development of your case. He will instruct you in finding and developing the story of the case and being a better advocate for that story. Over the next six issues of the Newsletter, we will present the additional Lessons that will help you be a better trial lawyer.*

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