

Lessons From The Stage: Telling The Winning Story

Lesson #5: “Be It”

How to transform stage fright into stage presence, and develop your peak performance in the courtroom with confidence and authority.

In this seven part series I am sharing seven Lessons From The Stage that will help you become more powerful in the courtroom and beyond. As a trial lawyer you know you face multiple challenges, or Obstacles as I call them, in your cases as well as in your own personal lives. The first lesson I wrote about (“The Power Of The Obstacle: Embracing The Conflict”) provided a framework to begin to appreciate and powerfully use Obstacles to your benefit both in and out of court. This next lesson from the stage focuses on how to develop your peak performance in the courtroom (transform your stage fright into stage presence) with confidence and authority.

Accessing your power as a storyteller “on your feet” and being more persuasive and confident comes from using and embracing your complete “storytelling instrument,” warts and all.

Great acting is about “using what you got” in the scene. Often the idea of being confident in front of people remains exactly that: an idea. In the acting world, when you’re on stage you can’t “play” an idea. The idea is to become the idea, to embody the idea, to fill the idea with genuine feeling. And that can only come from you. So it’s mission critical to see the value in what’s holding you back *from you*.

In the acting world, approaching a character and giving it life often feels like swimming upstream. In order to make a believable, three-dimensional character on stage, many of the acting exercises I’ve been engaged in will often feel so counter-intuitive to every instinct I have, and yet the best exercises are the ones that are designed to instantly get me from “telling” as an actor to “showing.” “Showing” begins with the recognition and the awareness that the obstacle I’m working with is also my greatest opportunity for true expression and confidence. In other words, fear, doubt, and uncertainty, are as necessary for me to “show up” with confidence, authority, and power.

This is how true presence is born.

The Value Of The Obstacle

Lets take a look at a few people who have overcome their obstacles... and triumphed.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned from the stage boils down to this: what I consider a road-block is actually the key to achieving lasting success in life. But in order to keep this idea from being just an idea, I've got to feel it in my bones. The greatest ideas are the ones that go from the head to the heart simultaneously. They are the ones that stick.

Michael Jordan, inarguably one of the world's greatest all-time basketball players (if not the greatest basketball player of all time) didn't make his high school basket team. Hard to imagine. Jordan. That could have been the deal breaker for him. He could have thrown in the towel, said, "Screw them. I'm better than all of them." That attitude could have been one of his life's greatest regrets. Instead, he made a different choice. He spent an entire summer, every single day, every single moment, perfecting his game, working on his jump shots, free throws. He swallowed his pride. He faced the music. He tried out for the team again. He made it. The rest is history.

From Thomas Edison to Bill Gates to the team at NASA, the obstacles are the opportunities for incredible growth, inspiration, discovery, and change. The following is a passage from Milton Katselas, the great theater instructor, from his inspiring book, "Dreams Into Action."

“From industrialist to artist, at the heart of every success story lies a person trying to solve problems. Tough ones. Real ones. Not personal problems, but creative problems connected to their work. They use their talents to solve these problems for the betterment of the world. W Edwards Deming had a problem: how to bring Japan, an essentially toy manufacturing nation, into the broad, competitive market following World War II. Solution: a whole system for industrial management, including new relationships between management, labor, and consumer that turned Japan into the industrialist force it is today. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque had a problem: They were trying to break the rules of perspective in art that impressionism had upheld. Solution; cubism, a whole new movement in art history that opened the door to modernism in painting. Maya Angelou had a problem: African Americans and the conditions that led to their oppression were not fully understood. Solution: personal, passionate poetry that conveys, without blame, the pain and joy of being an African American, and so gets us all to understand more. Frank Lloyd Wright had a problem: He perceived that architecture was desecrating landscapes for the sake of new buildings. Solution: buildings such as Fallingwater that utilize landscape, weaving nature’s design into the design of man. What makes an industrialist, artist, poet, architect, or person in any field great is the clarity with which he

or she sees a problem in society, and the talent and passion exerted to resolve it.”

Every single one of the men and women who have contributed to the development of this life and our world, have faced a crossroad, the road between choice and change. 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.

In a previous article, I’ve given a crossroad example in the dilemma of Atticus Finch in the classic book and movie, “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. That’s his personal and professional crossroad. 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.”

To be or not to be.

This road or that road.

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.

Recognizing the journey is what helps cultivate presence.

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. He could have easily not made that decision and not put his family at risk. But he couldn't look his family in the eye afterwards if he'd made that call. Above all, he wouldn't have been able to look at himself in the mirror.

Within the character's struggles, and our struggles, toward “the perfect place” we're seeking, 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 if we're willing to listen to it. To use the pain. To embrace the conflict.

This is what gives you your power in delivering "the winning story."

How will you grow from conflict and opposition?

Working With The Obstacle, Your Partner In Crime

Once you've seen the value of the obstacle, then begins the true creative process towards making the change in your entire "storytelling instrument."

"Lessons From The Stage" is about dropping the mask and getting to the truth of who you already are. And it's also about looking at things around us differently. Everything has a mask disguised as something else. Everything.

What obstacles are preventing you from taking center stage in your life? Rather than looking at the obstacle as a defect, a mistake, an embarrassment, a source of shame, the goal is to learn to use the obstacle, and see it, as a gift in disguise. The goal is to learn to listen and collaborate with your obstacle.

Using The 5 Senses

Sight

Sound

Smell

Taste

Touch

Imagine an obstacle in your life (past or present day) as a scene from a movie or a play. You're watching the scene unfold as an audience member--you watching you. How does this obstacle play out? Use your five senses to describe the scene. If your obstacle is fear itself (and it is for most of us), what scene from a movie can you use to paint the picture to create a vivid experience for the audience? Is it a sci-fi scene? Horror movie? Ultra Kubrick realism or Stephen Spielberg sweeping ET-like scene? Go for it. Don't hold back. What's the scene? What's the story of your obstacle?

The Scene. Describe it vividly. What's happening in the scene?

Break it down with your 5 Senses. Be as detailed as you possibly can

be. Write it like you're describing it to someone who has zero knowledge of what you're talking about. Paint a picture. Go to the heart of the experience with each of the 5 Senses.

The Scene

Sight:

Sound:

Smell:

Taste:

Touch:

Now go for your main obstacle (or what you're perceiving as your main obstacle currently)-- the one really holding you back. Put it through the knife of the 5 senses:

Sight:

Sound:

Smell:

Taste:

Touch:

Which of the five senses captures the essence of this obstacle?

What will you use?

You have everything in your life, and the tools within you to re-write your script and embark on a memorable journey that will set you on a new course for creating powerful presence in the courtroom. In this new role you are the storyteller, the actor, the dancer and the dance, all in one.

Hear are some ideas to help you practice and implement “being it” in your own life:

**I can recognize fear as an ally in my ability to tell the winning story.*

**I can apply the line “Fear is like fire... it can either warm your house or destroy it...” not only to my knock out courtroom presentation, but to my entire life.*

**Being persuasive is synonymous with being a human being.*