

Session Thirteen

In Relationship

I want to give you a way to begin the exercises from now on. Both partners will leave “the room” and, as you go out, you will leave the door open. Both of you will go to separate places and take some time to fantasize about, daydream about, free-associate about the reason that you have given yourself. You do this until the reason starts to “do something to you.” When it does, you know that you are ready to begin.

In this way, I want you to start grappling with what you must do to prepare yourself to begin, because you must never begin “cold,” in other words, you must never come from nothing. And that’s as specific as I will get about what you do out there to ready yourself. (I will not be dealing with the next major part of the Meisner process, “Emotional preparation,” in this book. It is something, I believe, I can only work on with you in person.)

So, for the person with the activity, when you are ready, come in, close the door, and get to work. For the other person, whenever you are ready, come to the door and knock. (If the door is still open, you know your partner is not in the room yet, so go away and keep fantasizing. At some point, come back again.)

As we have established, you will have two meetings for the current exercise before moving forward. Don’t rush the work! I believe, at this point, it would be counterproductive

for anyone to prepare and work on two exercises at one meeting.

So, have two good work meetings and then read on for the new elements in the setup of the exercise.

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FOR OUR NEXT SESSION

I am going to give you two new elements for next time. One for the person coming to the door and another for the both of you to create together. Other than these, the setup for next time will contain all of the elements which made up our previous exercise. We are building something here, we're building!

First, and I bet this will be no surprise to you, the person coming to the door will now have a reason that is "in the extreme." At first it was simple and specific, then it was a little more important and now, it must be *extremely meaningful*. A good approach to coming up with this reason is thinking of it in this way: It is something you have *just* found out or that has *just* happened that is extremely meaningful to you. And then you come to the door!

Some pointers:

A) Your reason must have nothing to do with your partner who is in the room. What I mean is, you have just found something out or something has just happened that is extremely meaningful to you and it does not involve your partner.

B) You are not coming to get anything or to do anything, you are coming from this thing just happening or from just

finding something out that is in the extreme—TO YOU! Please do not worry about why you are coming to the door. Work on making the reason as specific and extremely meaningful to you as you can and then come to the door and knock.

C) So this meaningful thing has just happened or you have just found it out. So what do you do about it when you come to the room? *You know it*, right? You *don't do anything*, know it and *see how it does you*. Again, if it is living in you, it will have an impact on you that will be out of your control. That's what you want and that's what you work from. You work from exactly what is happening. You wanna scream, scream! (And work-off your partner.) You wanna cry, cry! (And work-off your partner.) You wanna kick off your shoes and dance around the room, do it! (And work-off your partner.) And, if your reason just didn't do much for you today, what must you do, always? Yes, WORK-OFF YOUR PARTNER!

D) As in the reason for the person with the activity, this reason must also be out of your imagination based on an element of truth, which is its importance to you.

E) Finally, the JUST in “just found out” or “just happened” is crucial. It didn't happen last week and you didn't find out yesterday. It JUST HAPPENED! Or, you JUST FOUND OUT! and that brings you to the door.

Examples:

- Your sister, who is also your best friend in the world and lives in another city, was told by her family doctor that she had breast cancer. She went to a second doctor, a specialist, for tests. You just found out that

SHE IS PERFECTLY FINE. THERE IS NO TRACE OF CANCER! and then you come to the door and knock.

- Your cousin, who is the only remaining family that you have, was coming on an airplane to visit you. Earlier in the day, you heard a radio newsflash that the airplane lost an engine and crashed over the Atlantic Ocean. The airline office said there would be no use in going to the airport and that they would call you with any updates. *The call just came* and you found out that there are no survivors! And then you come to the door and knock.

Second, I am now going to add something that will be new for the two of you. We will now add “relationship.” Up until now, in the exercise, the two of you were exactly who you are to each other. Now, I want the two of you, together, to decide on a simple and specific relationship for yourselves. It can be any relationship as long as, in the relationship, you do not live together. Here are some examples: neighbors, co-workers, sisters, cousins, classmates, you’re on the same bowling team, fiancées, you’re in the church choir together, and so forth.

Some pointers:

A) Here’s the old trick question again, now that you have a relationship, what do you do about it? THAT’S RIGHT! YOU KNOW IT! What is there to do about it? Should you both behave like people in that kind of relationship are supposed to behave? Listen, there really is no such thing as “relationship.” Relationships are defined by what is happening “right now,” in the present. Relationships are a living thing. You see, many actors determine that this is “a mother-daughter” play and proceed to act the way “all” mothers and daughters behave. Isn’t that ridiculous? Is

there any one kind of mother-daughter relationship? Is there one kind of any relationship? Of course not! There are mothers and daughters who adore and respect each other and are the best of friends and there are mothers and daughters who are the fiercest, meanest and most back-stabbing rivals. Isn't this true?

B) And so, there is no need to make the relationship more "real" by giving yourselves some kind of "history" together. You work-off each other, moment-to-moment, coming from all the meaning you have built into the reasons for being there, and you will see a real relationship come to life on you! We must stay away from the cliché of relationship—and working with each other, in the present, is how. You know, when you are living in the moment, there are no clichés! Let's get to the example exercise.

Conversation In Preparation For Your Next Exercise

EXERCISE

- One person has an activity that is extremely meaningful, physically difficult, and which has a specific urgency.
- The other person comes to the door from something he or she has just found out or that has just happened that is extremely meaningful.
- The partners have a simple and specific relationship.

1) To the student with the activity:

Larry: OK, wait a minute here, I have to stop the exercise. Let's talk about this. What are you doing? What is the activity?

Student: (*He is out of breath.*) I'm looking for the keys to my car and I can't find them anywhere!

Larry: Well you certainly ran around a lot but you never really looked for the keys.

Student: But I was looking!

Larry: No, you were running around. By the way, in setting this exercise up, how did you make sure the keys would be hard to find?

Student: Well, I left them on my chair in class. I didn't bring them into the exercise so that I'd have a really difficult time finding them in my room.

Larry: You mean, so that you could pretend to have a difficult time finding them.

Student: I don't get that, pretend!

Larry: Well, if you really know that they are on your chair in class and not in your "room," what's there to really look for? Remember, I've said that in the exercise, we never pretend to do anything. Now if you had asked one of your classmates to hide your keys in the room for you, when you went out to get ready, wouldn't you then have something to really look for? As it was, I could name a dozen places in the room that, in the whole ten minutes, you never fully searched.

Student: I'm telling you I really looked! Look, I worked hard on this idea, I worked all damn week! Aren't you going to ask me why I'm looking for the keys?

Larry: Go ahead.

Student: I just found out that my fiancée has decided that she won't marry me and that she is on her way to the airport where she's going to take a plane to Italy. I knew that I had four minutes to find the keys or I could never get to the airport in time to talk her out of backing out of the wedding on me. That's extreme!

Larry: I stopped the exercise after about ten minutes and you were still in the room.

Student: I had to find the keys!

Larry: COME ON NOW, COME ON! WHAT ABOUT THE GIRL! THE WEDDING! THAT PLANE TO ITALY! If that reason had

the meaning you say it has, brother, come four minutes you would have bolted out of here and you'd be *on your way to the airport*—if it meant grabbing a cab, hitchhiking or hijacking a bus! You would have done everything and anything humanly possible to get there before that plane took off!

Student: Look, you don't know what this means to me, you can't read my mind!

Larry: It was all in your behavior.

Student: Look "Mr Zen," you can stuff your behavior!

Larry: It's a lot easier for you to make this about me. You know, I've been very patient with you but I'll tell you something, your overwhelming need to "be right" is what's engulfing you and killing all possibility for you to get anything out of this work. And I won't continue with you in this way.

Student: *(He stands up and screams.)* NO, I WON'T CONTINUE WITH YOU! *(He walks out of the classroom.)*

Larry: *(Turning to the class.)* Now if he could bring some of that to the setup of an exercise, look out!

I'll tell you a true story. When I was thirteen, we got a call, very early in the morning, from my grandmother. This was in the middle of one of New York's all-time biggest snow storms. My mother had picked up the phone and Grandma told her that my grandfather, my father's father, had just died. I remember, within the next minute, my father had thrown on some clothes and a coat and he shot out of the front door and into the storm! I watched from the dining room window as he trekked past the car, which was totally submerged in the snow, and made his way to the corner. Late in the afternoon, we got a call from my father. He told us that he had walked to the highway and he had finally stopped one of the very few cars that were on the roads—a car which was traveling in the opposite direction!—and that he actually talked the driver into taking him all the way to

my grandparents' home. What was normally an hour drive, was on this day, an almost six-hour drive. I heard that my uncle, who lived farther away, was trying to hire a helicopter!

Well, let's move on...

2) To the student who came to the door:

Larry: I never got to ask your partner, what was your relationship?

Student: We were ex-lovers.

Larry: And what brought you to the door?

Student: It had to do with something I just found out about my father, but it didn't really work for me...

Larry: What did you find out?

Student: I found out that he was very ill.

Larry: Yes?

Student: Well, that's it, that's what I found out.

Larry: At this point, the reason is still general. *(The student is looking down at her lap and she has become very still. After a long pause.)* You're very upset. *(She remains very quiet.)* Would you be willing to talk through this together?

Student: Yes, I want to.

Larry: Tell me more about the reason.

Student: Well, I knew that it was general. I mean, I really wanted to set up a reason about my father and when I was fantasizing, I started to think about him getting sick and then I couldn't go any further.

Larry: It was scary.

Student: Very scary. When I was at home, just thinking about it made me cry and cry. But I was really afraid to let myself get any more specific than that.

Larry: Can you talk more about that fear?

Student: I was afraid to think about him in that way.

Larry: Afraid in the sense of having your thoughts about him come true? Like, you might make something really bad happen to him by thinking it?

Student: Yes, you know, that is exactly what I am afraid of. I may be superstitious but that's why I have only been able to use "happy" type reasons in the exercises so far. But I feel like there's this whole other part of me that I'm cutting off. So this time, I really wanted to explore in a new direction.

Larry: That's great and this is a wonderful awareness. And, I don't think it's as simple as superstition. I think, in one way or another, we all have to deal with feelings that come up when we are putting our closest family members and our best friends into all kinds of extreme circumstances, even though it is in our imagination. For myself, I have found that doing so has always gotten me more deeply in touch with how much I love them. I know for many students, it is the belief that thoughts, put out into the universe, create reality. I wouldn't argue with that *and*, I do believe that it is one's intention that is most important. I think we must get real clear on the answer to this question: "For what purpose am I sitting here in my room, in the dark, having all these terrifying thoughts?"

Everything you are doing here is in the pursuit of learning a craft, growing as an artist, and doing so with the highest integrity. (*As my friend, the playwright Arthur Giron, once told me, "Hold tight to your integrity! You'll be a radiant beacon of light in a very dark world."*) Why bother? So that through your acting, you will heal the planet. Which is what real theatre does. Because a real theatre springs only from love. Coming from that place, I believe you can explore within yourself freely, without fear, because the universe knows and understands your purpose. This may all sound a little too "New Age" or "spiritual" for you, or you may find it very useful. (And,

by the way, in all of my years of working this way as an actor, none of the “bad” things I have fantasized about have ever come true.)

Student: Personally, that all helps me, it helps a lot. I hadn’t thought about it in that way before. Anyway, yes, that helps very much.

Larry: Good, do you want to continue, see if we can take today’s reason a little further, make it more specific together?

Student: Yes, I’d like to do that now.

Larry: So tell me about you and your father.

Student: We live at opposite ends of the country, so we don’t see each other too often. When we talk, he doesn’t always really listen to me and I don’t think that he really knows who I am, which is mostly my fault because it’s hard for me to really tell him how I feel inside. But I do know that, definitely, I mean the world to him. He has always and continually been there for me, really, in quite amazing ways. I mean, everywhere I ever moved in my life, from college dorm’s to apartments to houses all over the place, he’d be there with a borrowed truck and one of those dolly-wheel things. He was like a one-man moving company! Then, one time, I had started my own business and he would work with me in the evenings, after he worked all day at his own job, as my assistant! And he did it for no other reason than to help me get the business off the ground. And he has always been there to help me when I was struggling financially, always. *(There is a quiet pause...)* I have always wished I could repay him in some way, make his life a little easier, more fun. Especially now... *(Another quiet moment...)*

Larry: Especially now?

Student: Well, the last few years have been very tough on him and my mom, I guess it started with the death of my grandma who had lived with us for many years. She was a special part of our lives, she was like our anchor, you

know? Anyway, since then, my dad has had real bad problems with his eyes. Finally he had surgery on one eye, the operation was really botched up, and he lost all vision in that eye. Now, he has a cataract on his other eye, which was always his weaker eye. It's all just so awful...

Larry: You're very concerned about him.

Student: Yes, I am. He came to visit me and my family recently. One day he was sitting in my living room and I saw him from the hallway. He was reading the newspaper, but to read it he had his glasses sitting on top of his head and he had the paper about a half inch from his one eye that can see. I stood and watched as he moved the paper back and forth, back and forth in front of his one weak eye and it killed me. I thought about him having to look at the world that way and it just tore me apart inside. *(She covers her eyes and cries.)* I don't want him to be totally blind. I mean, the blindness would be horrendous enough but I'm really scared about what that would do to him emotionally. *(She is weeping now. The class is silent except for two others who are also crying. No words are spoken for a while)*

Larry: You're very worried about him.

Student: Yes, I am. I think, I don't know, I realized when I saw him like that, although he should be retiring by now, I mean... I know that he still drives to work everyday and at night and my mother told me that every week there's a new little dent on the car and I started to think about him driving off the road one night and killing himself! And there's nothing I can do! I mean the whole thing really stinks...

Larry: You love your father very much.

Student: Yes, I do and, well, DAMN IT! JUST DAMN IT! *(She remains quiet for a while.)*

Larry: Would you like to go and wash the mascara off of your face and blow your nose a little? *(She laughs and the*

class joins her.)

Student: Yes, I would love to. *(She goes out to the bathroom. After a few minutes, she comes back in and sits again.)*

Larry: Anything great happen out in the bathroom?
(Everyone laughs again.)

Student: Well actually, yes, I came up with two really extreme and terrible things I could think about for next time!

Larry: Great! And listen, thank you, thank you so much. I want you to look around the room for a moment. Take a good look at your partners. *(To the class.)* Raise your hand if you want to go home right now and hug somebody or call someone and tell them how much they mean to you. *(The entire group raises their hands.)* Me too!

Listen, you allowed yourself to have a very personal experience here, which we witnessed and which opened us up to our own pain, to our own feelings of brokenness, to our deep desire to have real connection, and also, to how very precious life is. Out of your authentic experience, you enabled us to become more of a true community for each other. And, we are all in this together! You helped us all realize that this is a safe space, that we can be ourselves here, that we can take risks and when we do, all that we get back, is love. And that's theatre, when it's done for real. You know, I could easily tell you how to take what you shared with us today to its most extreme conclusions, but as you said, you handled that in the bathroom!

Student: *(She laughs.)* Yes I did!

Larry: Great. *(He turns back to the class.)* I don't know what will happen with her Partner. He may be gone for good. He's been working up to that anyway. Listen, I do know that this work is not for everyone. It just isn't. As I've said before, there is a high cost, a great personal price to pay. It is now and will always be uncomfortable. And,

ultimately, this work leads to JOY! It all becomes JOYOUS!
Watch out, living in the present is addictive! GET TO
WORK AND SEE YOU ALL NEXT TIME!

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HOMEWORK

I know you know but let's review one more time, the exercise for next time:

- One person has an activity that is extremely meaningful, physically difficult, and which has a specific urgency.
- The other person comes to the door from something he or she has just found out or that has just happened that is extremely meaningful.
- The partners have a simple and specific relationship.

Have fun!

The actor must recreate his work, each time he repeats his part, with sincerity, truth and directness. It is only on that condition that he will be able to free his art from mechanical and stereotyped acting, from "tricks" and all forms of artificiality. If he accomplishes this he will have real people and real life all around him on the stage, and living art which has been purified from all debasing elements.

—Constantin Stanislavski
from *An Actor Prepares*