

# the fun part

Have you seen Casy Affleck's incredible work in *Manchester-by-the Sea*? If not, GO!

And how does he do such great work? It might have a little to do with [this](#):

*"The fun part for me is endlessly talking about why does he do this, or why does he do that, or why doesn't he? I really get into that." – Casey Affleck on Rehearsing*

People who tell you that understanding motivation and objectives isn't worth it are, quite simply, full of it.

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## advice from Phillip Seymour Hoffman

**"Study, find all the good teachers and study with them, get involved in acting to act, not to be famous or for the money. Do plays. It's not worth it if you are just in it for the money. You have to love it."–Phillip Seymour Hoffman**

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# a day at the museum

I went to the Getty Center yesterday to see the [London Calling exhibit](#), an exhibition of works by painters in London in the post-WWII period.

While I was there, I tried to make use of my understanding of the [Alexander Technique](#) as I moved through the exhibition.

The Alexander Technique is not an acting technique in itself, although it is very relevant to acting, and actors in the MFA acting program at the [Yale School of Drama](#) are required to study it for the entire three years of the curriculum there.

My “elevator pitch” on the Alexander Technique is that it helps us to become aware of, and address, habits of what I call “micro-scrunching”, subtle contractions of muscles that we make unconsciously that interfere with our ability to move through our lives with ease, poise, and presence. For actors, this “micro-scrunching” interference causes a host of problems. One of these problems is it obstructs the actor’s process of exposing his or her vulnerability. The great psychologist [Wilhelm Reich](#) talked about the way in which our muscles often function as “armor” against the psychic blows we inevitably encounter in life. This armoring undermines the actor’s ability to make palpable his or her own vulnerability, his or her own need for meaningful connections with the world.

The Alexander Technique is wonderful in terms of counteracting that physical armoring process.

Another benefit of the Alexander Technique is that it can have a subtle but undeniable effect on our perception of our environment. By eliminating unnecessary muscular effort involved in perception (such as the process of fixing our gaze on something), we are free to have a closer encounter with our world. At the museum, I found that when I invoked the

Alexander Technique reminders, my experience of the paintings I was regarding changed significantly. For one thing, I became more conscious of the physical surface of the painting; the textures presented themselves more strongly. At the same time, to the extent that the paintings in question depicted a scene in three-dimensional space, I found that I had a greater experience of depth-of-field in the images. This, in turn, asked me to look at what I was seeing not merely as painted figures, but as figures in three-dimensional space, which in turn asked me to regard them *as people*. On the whole, I found that when I remembered to invoke the Alexander Technique, my physical and emotional experience of the painting was enriched, and I had a more vivid, sensuous experience, and as a less guarded, intellectual one.

A richer sensory experience *can not help* but enrich and strengthen an actor's work. The experience at the museum re-affirmed my conviction about the value of the Alexander Technique all over again.

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## **the camera and the gut**

The idea of acting being "physical" is a popular one. Actors live in fear of being "in their heads", and hope that their acting is physical and not intellectual.

Well and good. But riddle me this: if acting is or should be physical, in what physical part of the body does it happen? In the face? In the chest, in close proximity to the heart?

If you like the idea of acting being not only physical but "visceral", then you want acting to take place in the actor's gut, in the pit of his stomach. That's what visceral means: gut-level.

But so much of acting and film and television happens in close-up. So what of the gut, in that case? The face, the neck, perhaps the chest: that's where the action is. Acting has to happen there, or not at all, if it is to show up on camera, right?

No. Not right.

What is happening viscerally, at the gut level, shows up in the face and in the eyes. And if nothing is happening viscerally, that shows up too.

Sometimes actors fall into thinking they have to "act" only with what is visible in the camera frame, and while they know better than to mug and indicate, they still end up with overactive faces, because they feel like the face has to do all the work.

When the acting is good, we see *through* your face. We see *into you*. Acting is an exercise in laying yourself bare. This means that *generally speaking*, the face should not be too active. This allows whatever is happening *viscerally*, at the gut level, to be visible. But if the face is too active, then what is happening viscerally is *masked*. Again, this is a rule of thumb, not a recommendation to keep a blank facial expression at all times. There are times when an active face is appropriate and called for.

The gut is where it's at.

*"You must realize that the center of the universe is in the pit of your stomach."*—[Zen Master Harada-roshi](#)

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# drawing the bow



I was meeting a prospective student for coffee the other day, like I do, and I was describing how the scene study portion of the class works. I was explaining that the first time a pair puts a scene up, I ask each actor a lot of questions, to prompt them to

speak from the character's point of view about the character's situation in the scene. I do this to hear the actor talk about how she has framed the scene for herself, so that I can help them see how framing the scene in another way could be a stronger way of approaching it. It's an absolutely vital part of the process. In the course of this dialogue, things like [judgments about the character](#) that the actor may be harboring come to light, judgments which interfere with the actor's ability to fully enter the character's situation and fight her fight for keeps.

The prospective student was nodding his head, and then he said something.

"Drawing the bow."

I looked at him blankly. I hadn't even understood the words that he had uttered, let alone what they could mean.

"What?"

"It's like drawing the bow."

I stared at him blankly. What on earth could he be saying?

Then he made a gesture like he was pulling back the string of a bow, preparing to fire an arrow. In a flash, I knew what he meant. And I knew that he knew what I meant.

Getting a clear understanding of the circumstances that brought a character to a certain situation (the scene), and what the character wants to see happen in the scene, are integral to being able to play the scene effectively. In the questioning process I described in class, it often is revealed that the actor has only a superficial grasp of these things.

But even beyond the circumstances themselves, there is the question of whether the actor has found a way to view those circumstances in a way that is urgent or “hot”, as we say in the class. This urgency is vital for going all in on fighting the character’s fight, and getting his visceral need met. If you see the situation as a ho-hum, everyday situation, you’re not going to be bringing much passion, or much core vulnerability, to his fight.

In the [Essentials Workshop](#), I teach a framework called the **Five Questions** that is invaluable in focusing this process of extracting information about a character from the script and framing it so that the fight seems like one that urgently needs to be fought.

This whole process is about getting calibrated appropriately, so that your acting energies are aiming at the right things, and you’re not wasting your mojo and spinning your wheels.

And since it’s about aiming at the right things, “drawing the bow” is a perfect metaphor for this process. It’s the action of pulling the bow back that makes the momentum and the flight of the arrow possible. So while this process of working through the circumstances and arriving at clear, compelling framing takes a lot of challenging thinking, and can feel laborious at times, it’s work that is well worth the effort, so that you’re not giving away your shot.

This prospective student ended up signing up. It's wonderful to have such insightful students.

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## the things you can learn from clickbait

This is total clickbait:

[29 Formerly Huge Stars Who Are Basically Nothing Now](#)

What's amazing is how many of these people WON OSCARS.

I think this says something about [the importance of craft](#). Focusing on craft, on always getting better, means you're less likely to be a flash in the pan or the flavor of the month. It also keeps it interesting FOR YOU. I think people probably lose momentum in their careers because they lose interest. It can become a job like any other, and without the interest in how to do it better, it can grow stale.

Maybe some of these people were seriously interested in craft but lost their way anyway. Or maybe they decided they wanted to do something else. There's no way to know.

But it is sobering.

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## House of Cards writer Beau

# Willimon on the centrality of the underlying need of the character

In [this podcast episode](#) of the BAFTA's Screenwriters' Lecture Series, screenwriter Beau Willimon of the series *House of Cards* talks about the distinction between plot goals and the character's fundamental need, which is a central distinction in class at Andrew Wood. His discussion starts at about 58:30, in response of to a questions posed by the audience.

From the [transcript](#):

*The one thing I always go to, and I mentioned it before is, what does the character need more than anything in the world? Because I believe characters' behaviour, that's it. You can talk to death what they're thinking about, what their psychology is, what their motivations are, but ultimately all the character is is what they do, because that's all we see. And if you know what they need, and they don't have to know what they need necessarily, but **if you know what they need then all their behaviour will be dictated by that.** And then their needs will conflict with other people's needs, and that's where you get the conflict of drama. **And the honesty of that conflict is completely determined by the brutal honesty you have about these characters' needs.** And these needs tend to be things, they're not plot driven. It's not like this person needs to get a new job, that's plot. A need is, this person needs respect, this person needs love, this person needs validation, this person needs warmth. And all of the sort of tertiary needs that derive from that usually go back to that same core need, and I guess that's as much as I can say about it.*

H/T Jared Canfield

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# a casting director on what to look for from an acting class, and what NOT to look for

Alyson Horn, of [Alyson Horn Casting](#), in [Backstage](#):

*If I was an actor, I would be wary of classes where the hook is about getting your tape in front of casting directors—that's not why you take a class. **You take a class to get better at your craft.** The way to get in is to be good. A casting director will call you in over and over and over again if you do a great job.*

True dat.

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# on not judging the character, Tom Hiddleston as Loki edition

I've been indulging myself with the relentlessly posh miniseries *The Night Manager*, and as a consequence I have read a bit about the star, Tom Hiddleston. I came across [this](#):

*Is Loki a villain or an antihero?*

*“Ha ha. Well, every villain is a hero in his own mind. The key thing about any character I play is I have to start from **a place of compassion**, my stepping into the silhouette comes from a place of attempting to understand his point of view, so even though he is and has been regarded as villain, antagonist, antihero, **in my mind as I play him I have to fight in his corner...** Having said that, from an objective intellectual standpoint, he is a deeply mixed-up cat*

*[laughs].”*

Sound [familiar](#)?

*Hiddleston clearly feels very strongly that compassion is at the center of his work as an actor, as is evidenced by this video:*

*and more on approaching Loki with compassion:*

*At the end of that last interview, Chris Hemsworth asks him how he knows so much about this. Maybe he learned it during his training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA), one of the world’s great drama schools?*

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## ***on playing to win***

*I saw a link to [this incredible story](#) on Twitter this morning.*

*A compassionate judge sentences a veteran to 24 hours in jail, then joins him behind bars*

*The veteran in question, Sgt. Joseph Serna, had been through several horrific ordeals in Iraq:*

*Serna was almost killed three times: once, by a roadside bomb, then again by a suicide bomber.*

*During a tour in 2008, Serna and three other soldiers were driving down a narrow dirt road in Kandahar when their armored truck toppled into a canal, the Associated Press reported. As water filled the vehicle, Serna struggled to escape.*

*It was his fellow soldier, Sgt. James Treber, who saved him.*

*“I felt a hand come down and unfasten my seat belt and release my body armor,” Serna recalled to the AP. “Sgt. Treber picked me up and moved me to a small pocket of air. He knew there was not enough room for both of us to breathe so he went under water to find another pocket of air.”*

*Treber died from the accident, but Serna survived. He was the only one who did.*

*His tours of duties had left him with PTSD, and in the time since his tours of duty, and he incurred a DUI. He had struggled to stay sober, and had had to submit to regular urine tests as part of his treatment program. When he confessed to lying about failing a test to his supervising Judge, Lou Olivera, Olivera sentenced him to 24 hours in jail, but then, Olivera did something extraordinary:*

*As Serna sat down on the cot in his cell, WRAL reported, he heard the door rattle open again and saw Olivera standing before him. Olivera sat down beside him. Someone came and locked the door.*

*“This was a one-man cell so we sat on the bunk and I said, ‘You are here for the entire time with me?’” Serna told*

WTVD. "He said, 'Yeah that's what I am doing.'"

A Gulf War veteran himself, Olivera was concerned that leaving Serna in isolation for a night would trigger his PTSD.

The two passed the time trading stories of their experiences in the military. Serna told WRAL: "It was more of a father-son conversation. It was personal."

"They have worn the uniform and we know they can be contributing members of society," Olivera said. "We just want to get them back there."

Olivera's action illustrates an important principle in acting: what I (and my mentors at Yale) referred to as playing to win. The judge felt so strongly about the well-being of his charge that he did what was necessary to guarantee that the soldier came through his imprisonment sound in mind and body. Playing to win means that the actor needs to treat the needs and goals of the character as urgent priorities that must be pursued passionately, relentlessly, and without compromise. It's tempting for the actor to treat the unfolding of the story as something fore-ordained by the writer, thus relieving the actor of the need to pursue the goals of the character with tenacity, and fully experience the ecstasy of victory and the agony of defeat, as they are incurred. Of course, the actor doesn't usually have the option to change the choices that the character makes and to decide to pursue the needs and goals in a way other than the ones prescribed by the script. But the fact that these choices have been made by the writer does not mean that the actor's task is to simply stroll through the character's journey; the actor has to fight, tooth and nail, for the character's priorities. He or she needs to be willing to break the proverbial eggs necessary to make an omelette in the pursuit of the character's priorities, even though the

*character's fate is a foregone conclusion.*

*Earle Gister liked to quote Nietzsche: "A man's maturity: to have regained the seriousness that he had as a child at play." Treating the character's priorities with utmost seriousness is one mark of an actor's maturity.*