

even movie stars have to deal with anxiety

Came across [this piece](#) recently in the *Hollywood Reporter*, in which the remarkable Chloe Grace Moretz is profiled. She's had a big year: she starred in [The Miseducation of Cameron Post](#), which won the Grand Jury prize at Sundance, and also in the much anticipated [remake of Suspiria](#). She is a truly gifted actor; if you've never seen [Let Me In](#), the British remake of [Let the Right One In](#), do yourself a favor.

Anyway, one of the things I liked in the profile was her discussion of coping with anxiety:

Do you still struggle with anxiety?

Meditation has really, really helped me, and just getting on a workout schedule. Working out is something that really helps with my anxiety. But I know that the minute I fall off of that, for sure.

But I think as a woman, it's very difficult to deal with the hormonal fluxes that we deal with monthly. I deal with so much anxiety hormonally from my cycle. Your cycle doesn't know when you are going to be on the red carpet for a gala. So partner that with a lack of sleep and jet lag, and it's like a total spiral.

So for me, I just make an effort to make sure that I give myself 30 minutes a day to walk away. That just means shutting a bathroom door and just standing there for a second and focusing on my breathing, and focusing on my brain, and reconnecting to my heart and understanding who I am. That gets rid of the anxiety for me. But I think that, yeah, as an adult, it's never not going to be a struggle. There's so much societal influx around you, and there are so many people who need something from you.

Performing is a kind of test: we want to be found to be a good actor when we're done. In that sense, our identity as an actor is at stake every time we do it. This produced anxiety in many of us, and we each have to go on our own journey in learning to contend with that anxiety. A former student and working actor I know created a whole regimen that she does before every audition to help her with her anxiety, a regimen that involves yoga, eating bananas (for the tryptophan), and even medication.

What I liked about Moretz's comments is that they remind us that success doesn't mean the end of anxiety. In fact, it can often exacerbate it: if I screw up now, everything I've worked so hard to achieve will be taken away. So finding out how to face down the demon of anxiety is something that most of us performers will have to contend with our whole lives long. It's not something that we graduate from. I remember hearing a story about Josh Brolin and George Clooney making plans to get together at Clooney's house to work on the Coen Brothers movie *Hail, Caesar!* together. Brolin, so the story goes, drove to Clooney's house, parked in his car, and then sat in the car for an hour trying to muster the courage to go in. When he finally did, he confessed his anxiety to Clooney, saying "I'm scared to work with you. You're George Clooney." To which Clooney replied, "I'm scared to work with you. You're Josh Brolin."

Moretz's open discussion of her struggles with anxiety is generous in that it makes room for the rest of us to feel ok about having similar struggles. If someone with her talent and skill still feels scared, then it's no wonder that we sometimes do as well.

Super Bowl MVP Nick Foles on the importance of failure

In a [press conference](#), Most Valuable Player Nick Foles of the Philadelphia Eagles had the following to say about failure, when asked what inspiration he wanted people to take from his journey :

Don't be afraid to fail. I'm not Superman. We all have daily struggles in our life. Embrace the struggles and grow.

Instagram, Twitter- it's all a highlight reel. Failure is part of life. It's part of building character and growing. I wouldn't be up here if I hadn't fallen thousands of times, made mistakes. We all are human, we all have weaknesses. Without failure, I wouldn't be up here.

Such a profound message. Actors get told that they need to have the courage to fail, and they might think “Yeah, I get that”, but actually doing it, actually failing, sucks. But it's through that painful, disappointing process of failing that we are invited to confront our limitations and transcend them.

Being in a class in which everyone is patted on the head and told that they did good work will not afford you the opportunity to experience this kind of productive failure. This is not to say that acting teachers need to administer feedback in a harsh or cruel way. Not at all. But teachers do need to hold students to a high standard, a standard that is high enough that they will not always be able to meet it. It's only in this kind of environment that people really grow.

As another wise man once [said](#):

We learn wisdom from failure much more than from success. We

often discover what will do, by finding out what will not do; and probably he who never made a mistake never made a discovery,

If you're in a class where you're not being told when you're doing strong, fulfilled work and when you're not, and further, what you can do to make work that is lacking better, then it's time to find a new class.

free things you can do for your acting

Everybody goes through times when there isn't a lot of broccoli in the crisper, for whatever reason. But that's no reason to stop doing work to develop yourself as an actor.

Here are some terrific things you can do to feed your creative soul or hone your craft while you're waiting for the financial picture to change.

1. **Read.** Acting is about bringing the word to pulsing, transfixing life. So getting to know said written word better is never a bad idea. Read books about acting, read biographies of actors. read great novels, read pulp novels, read poetry, read the newspaper. There are plenty of options. But in our media-saturated world, spending some time reading is never a bad idea, and if helps you develop your sensitivity to the extraordinary expressive power of language, that's even better.
2. **Study the Alexander Technique.** Wait, what? I thought you said this was a list of free stuff? The Alexander Technique is pricey high-end body-mind integration training. How do I get it for free? Well, it happens

that there is an [Alexander Technique Training Institute](#) in Los Angeles, where people train to become teachers of the Alexander Technique. And such institutes often need people to serve as subjects for the teachers-in-training to practice on. So give them a call, and offer them the use of your body for their pedagogical purposes.

There's a good chance you'll learn invaluable things about said body, for a song.

3. **Meditate.** Practice the fine art of paying attention.

There are all kinds of places to learn to meditate in Los Angeles. [Here](#) is one of my favorites, but there are many others.

4. **Study Pilates.** What does Pilates have to do with my acting? Well, acting as I teach it involves what Pilates people call core awareness. The actor's awareness should rest in the abdominal core, in order to achieve true visceral activation and the radiance that comes with it.

Pilates is a great way to work on that, because Pilates is about learning to use your abdominal core muscles in everything you do. Literally: everything. There are lots of how-to videos on Youtube, such as [this one](#).

5. **Journal.** "It's so funny, you go to acting school thinking you're going to learn how to be other people, but really it taught me how to be myself. Because it's in understanding yourself deeply that you can lend yourself to another person's circumstances and another person's experience."—Lupita Nyong'o

So get going! Writing a journal is a great way to develop intimacy with yourself, an invaluable asset for an actor.

6. **Read aloud.** Pick up some Shakespeare. Pick up some poetry that speaks to you. Read it aloud. Read it to yourself. Read it to your dog. Read it to your roommate. Read it to anyone who will listen. Savor the sounds of the words and the rhythm of the sentences.

7. **Improv.** Look on [Meetup](#) for an Improv group near you, and join in the fun.

8. **Make a game out of being rejected.** Like [this guy](#). There will never be any shortage of people to reject you. If you have the nerve to do this one, your future as an actor looks bright.
9. **Go to the zoo.** Ok, this one isn't quite free. But if you can scrape together \$20, there are worse ways to spend it. Studying and learning to imitate animals is a hallowed form of actor training, and is wonderful for shedding inhibitions and exploring physical possibilities.

I'm sure there are others, and I'll add them as I think of them. But there should be some things here to get you started.

on acting in comedy, according to Michael McKean

Came across this gem in [a Slate interview with Michael McKean](#) of *Better Call Saul*:

I don't think that a comedy performance—You know, it's essentially the same job, no matter what. You find out what your character wants and then you go for it. That's really how to do anything. They're just going to write more jokes for you if it's a comedy.

And he should know:

*Like Odenkirk, McKean is best known for comedy, with a career that stretches from *Laverne & Shirley* through his roles in *This Is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting for Guffman*, and *Clue*. But his dramatic talents are on full view at the moment, both on TV*

and on stage, where he's appearing in the Tony-winning production of The Little Foxes at the Manhattan Theatre Club.

The defense rests.



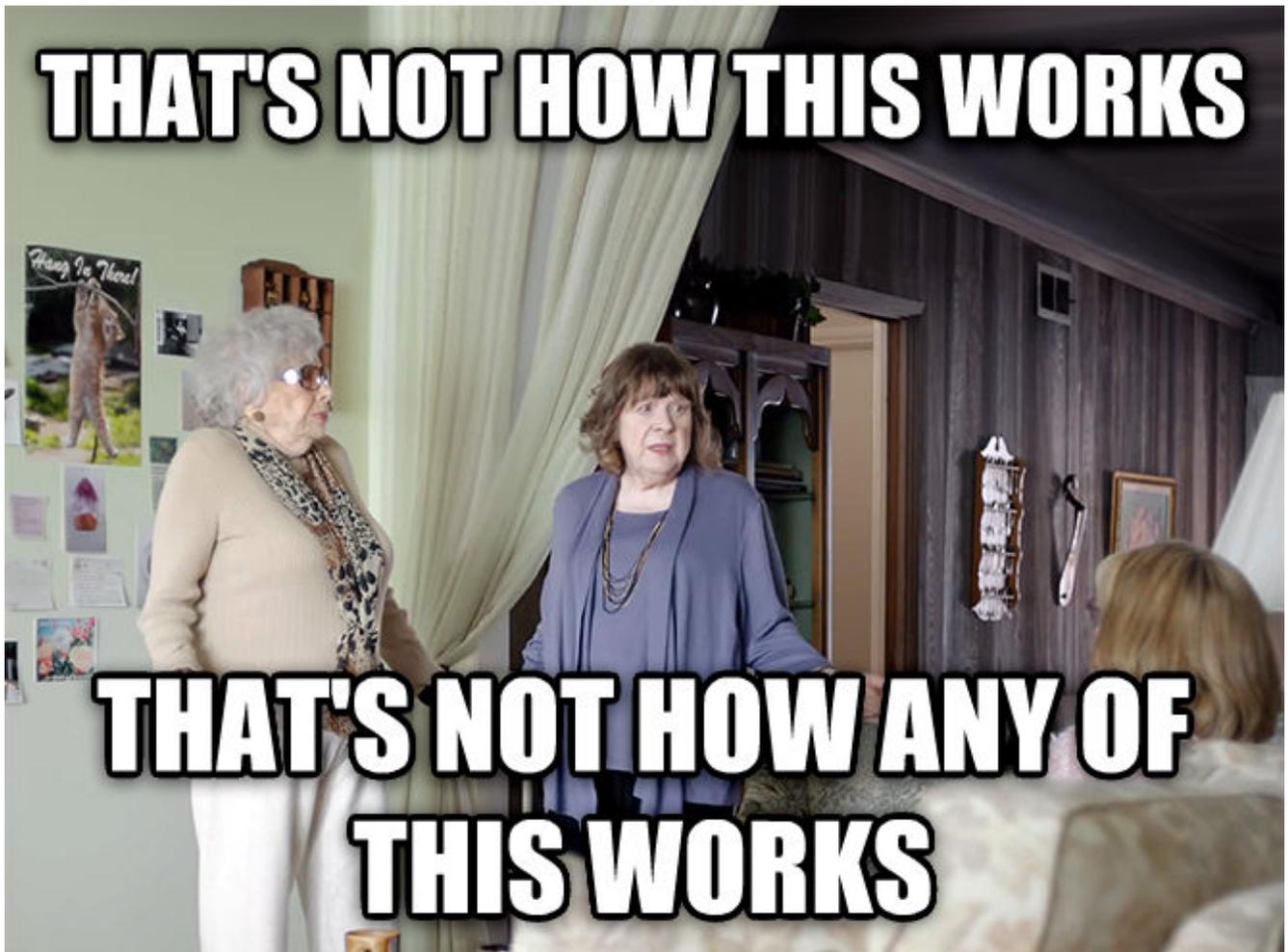
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“I don’t think that a comedy performance —You know, it’s essentially the same job, no matter what. You find out what your character wants and then you go for it. That’s really how to do anything. They’re just going to write more jokes for you if it’s a comedy.”

--Michael McKean



the scene partner experience



I read a nonsensical post on an industry website telling actors they should be afraid of classes that make them work with scene partners (the HORROR!), because their scene partner will flake on them, and also because partnering people to work on scenes is a scam acting teachers use to double their class sizes and profits. I'm not going to link to this disquisition, for reasons which I hope are obvious. But I was provoked by it into articulating what is valuable about working with a scene partner. Valuable, and often deeply satisfying. So, let's get to it!

- Learning to act is learning to get your attention off of yourself, and *onto another person* (a scene partner!). This was Stanislavsky's fundamental insight, and it is crucially important to this day. People enter acting classes thinking that what they will be doing in their

work is *showing emotion*, and, not surprisingly, that's how they go about the work. A good teacher, regardless of the technique taught, will challenge this misconception at every turn, and help students understand that they must learn to put their attention *on their* partner, and keep it there. This is not easy, because it means giving up the ability to manage your own self-presentation. You can't pay attention to your partner and watch yourself at the same time. It's an act of surrender, and requires courage and faith. And guess what? Having a partner to focus on helps with this process. That's why every acting class I was in at the Yale School of Drama taught acting using two-person scenes, not monologues! And this is why I think it's pedagogically suspect to teach acting using monologues.

It's not that it can't be done, but it's a very tricky business, since with monologues you're trying to get someone to put their attention on someone who isn't even there! A scene, any scene, is about [a relationship](#).

Having a partner is helpful in exploring having a relationship. Capiche?

- Film, television and theater are [collaborative art forms](#). In rehearsing with a scene partner, you are practicing your skill at collaborating. We all need to learn to balance our own needs and impulses with those of others. This is a lifelong learning process that we all have to continually practice and refine. Having a scene partner allows us to work on that.
- With a partner, you have accountability. As creative people, we all face resistance at various points. "The price an artist pays for doing what he wants is that he has to do it", the writer William Burroughs said. We don't always feel like doing it. We don't always want to do it. We procrastinate. We forget. We avoid. And all of this keeps us from moving forward, in our craft and in our career. Having a partner, for whom we have to show up each week, and to whom we have to respond,

helps us to keep ourselves honest. A class where everyone works on monologues? I am guessing there will be a whole lot of procrastination going on. Why work by yourself, when you can wait for the teacher to spoon-feed you instructions about how to do the monologue?

- A scene partner can be a sounding board. You don't want a partner who is bossy or overbearing, but someone who you can bounce ideas off of or ask for feedback when you feel like you want it is a good thing.
- When you work together with someone on a scene in a committed way, chances are good you come out of it having made a friend. We can all use another friend. Maybe you don't feel you need to go to acting class to find that, but it doesn't hurt. And you never know when that friend is going to say to their new agent or manager: hey, I have a friend you should meet! I imagine that such friendships in a class centered on monologues are a bit more...rare.

Like any partnership, scene partnership has its challenges, and can go south if both parties allow it to. As a teacher, I make it very clear that I want the partnerships in the class to work, and I want to know as soon as problems arise. I won't necessarily get involved immediately; I think it's best when partners can solve problems between them, but I can coach the partner experiencing the difficulty on how it might be productively addressed. If that doesn't work, then I am more than willing to intervene to help partners get things on track. But mostly, people are able to work things out between them. It's when one person is falling short, and the other stays silent about it, that the partnership ends up not working. But in most cases, people work together successfully, learn from each other and support each other, and perhaps complete the experience with a solid new friend.

So what's so awful about that?

Should I Stay or Should I Go?, or, acting an inner conflict

One of the central insights of Stanislavsky is that by focusing on the goal(s) of the character in a particular situation, an actor can go a long way towards entering the role and embodying the character's experience. The term of art for such a goal is an *objective*. In the approach I teach at AWAS, we think in two types of objectives: we can call these two types of objectives *needs* and *plans*. Basically, a character has a need, and from that need, forms a plan about how to get that need met. In my approach, the game is to keep the need primary, and not allow it to be eclipsed by the plan, which is usually easier to spot and simpler to pursue. Pursuing the plan always has to be seen as a means of getting the need met.

One good thing about this approach is that it allows a character (and actor) to adapt to circumstances which change as the script proceeds to change her plan, but to still have a single need which she pursues. It's perhaps hard to explain why having a single need is valuable, but suffice to say it has tremendous organizing power, ultimately simplifying what an actor needs to focus on in her performance. With this setup, we get to have our cake and eat it too: the ability to change plans affords us flexibility, and the single need grants our work *continuity* and ultimately *integrity*.

The question arises, though: what about a situation where a character is conflicted or ambivalent? He wants to have his cake and eat it too, but unhappily for him, in his case, there

is no way to have both. How should the actor approach this?

The danger here is that the actor becomes focused on his conflicting *feelings*. In the approach I teach, the only thing approaching a feeling that the actor should focus on is his *need*. He can *have* feelings, such as sadness or joy or regret or anger, but he always directs his attention to his need and his plan, and the feelings come and go as they come and go. They are never the appropriate object of his attention.

But in a situation where a character is ambivalent, the temptation can become very strong for an actor to focus on her conflicting feelings. This would be a mistake, and would enmire the actor in a morass of self-consciousness (as focusing on her emotional experience always will). What is the way out of this impasse?

The answer is to take the so-called inner conflict and translate it into an outer one. If someone is conflicted, he is conflicted, ultimately, about *what to do*. Should I open door number one, or do number two? Should I stay here with you and make the best of it, or go home and lick my wounds over how you have rejected and betrayed me? There is usually some way of seeing an emotional conflict in spatial terms, such as what I have described.

But to give this solution legs, as it were, we need another couple of concepts. One is Uta Hagen's concept of *destination*. "The reason for movement is destination!" is her refrain in the chapter of *A Challenge for the Actor* entitled "Animation". What she means by this, on first encounter, seems to be the familiar admonition that when an actor moves in a scene, the movement needs to be coupled with an intention to go *somewhere in particular*, it can't be an arbitrary movement utterly devoid of purpose. An important insight that helps actors overcome the tendency to wander around the space aimlessly, often as a way of alleviating the discomfort of encounter with the partner or of being watched.

But this is only the beginning of the usefulness of Hagen's concept of *destination*. We can talk about destinations "heating up": as the prospect of physically moving towards a destination becomes more appealing, we say that the destination "heats up". The actor should start to imagine it as exerting a well-nigh magnetic influence on her physical being, drawing her to the destination in question like the tractor beam from Star Wars.

(Skip to about 1:30)

Now, back to the actor attempting to act a character's ambivalence or inner conflict. One side of this conflict is typically: there is something I want from my partner. The other side of this conflict is: nah, this is never going to work with this person (the partner), time to cut my losses and go somewhere else to get my need met. During the scene, as the prospect of going elsewhere begins to look like a better choice, the destination in question "heats up." The destination in question is often outside the space in which the scene is taking place; in other words, deciding to go towards that destination often involves exiting. Even as that destination heats up, though, the prospect of getting the need met from the current partner remains, so the actor/character finds himself "caught": he is being pulled, tractor-beam like, toward the destination that is elsewhere, but at the same time, there is still some hope of getting his need met from his partner. So typically, he continues to press the partner to do what would be necessary to meet his need, but as the external destination seems more and more like the better prospect, the "tractor beam" grows stronger and stronger. In this situation, the actor is using Stanislavsky's notion of the *circle of attention*, described in the "Concentration of Attention" chapter of *An Actor Prepares*. The actor's *primary focus* will typically be the partner, but the actor has to keep the destination (usually outside the space of the scene) in his awareness, in his *circle of awareness*. Keeping the

destination in the actor's circle of awareness will start to produce subtle physical changes in the body of the actor: the body will instinctively begin to prepare to move: he will shift his weight, and perhaps eventually, start to orient his feet towards going towards the external destination. These changes should not be consciously and deliberately enacted by the actor; rather, they come about instinctively or unconsciously as the negotiation with the partner unfolds and the prospect of going towards the offstage exit becomes more and more appealing.

Ultimately, the character will decide to stay or go, depending on how the exchange with the partner goes, and, ultimately, what the script dictates. But what has been accomplished here is the reframing of an "inner conflict" as an outer one, thus getting the actor's attention off of herself and her emotional life, and *onto* the appropriate objects of her concern in the physical world.

See what I did there?

the visceral difference

In the much-read first chapter from Richard Boleslavsky's *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, Boleslavsky says that audiences watching an actor exercising her capacity for concentration correctly should "know and feel immediately" that what that audience is witnessing is more important than whatever concerns that audience members brought into the event with them. The importance of what the actor is undergoing must somehow be made evident by the actor's engagement in her craft. No small order.

The teachers I encountered at the Yale School of Drama asserted that what makes this effect possible, this immediate recognition on the part of the audience, independent of plot or story elements, is the *visceral* activation of the actor.

If you look up the word “visceral” in the dictionary, you will likely see something like this “pertaining to primitive or elemental emotion”, and indeed, that is what the word means in contemporary usage. But the etymology tells the tale: the word originates with the Latin word *viscera*, which refers to the digestive tract, the intestines, or, more colloquially, the gut.

Visceral activation means that in some way, the actor’s gut is involved in what he or she is doing. In our approach, this is achieved through working with the notion of objective in a particular way: objective has to be understood as visceral need. I have discussed this distinction at length on this blog, for example, [here](#). But I’d like to say a bit about what the visceral difference looks like and sounds like, that is, what are the signs that such activation has been achieved?

Actors do two things more than anything else: they talk and they listen. When a viscerally activated actor talks, they seem to be speaking from the gut, from the heart, from the core. Perhaps the most evident example of what this is like in the current moment is the current occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Whatever you think of Donald Trump, he has a reputation for saying what is on his mind and in his heart in a tell-it-like-it-is way. There is an immediacy to the way he speaks, and this is part of what accounts for his appeal. When a viscerally activated actor speaks, he is making use of his abdominal core muscles, most importantly, the transverse abdominis, also known as the “skinny jeans” muscles, the muscles you need to tighten in order to squeeze into skinny jeans. These muscles are deep in the layers of musculature, and they help to stabilize the spine and also interact with the diaphragm. When these muscles are activated

as part of the process of verbalizing, the actor appears to be speaking with the intention of impacting the partner: there is a palpable determination to be heard and understood. An audience understands this immediately. And it has nothing to do with projecting or being loud: these muscles can be used when speaking quietly, but the effect is the same: the actor who is activated in this way wants her words to *land* on her partner, and make something happen.

So much for the talking. The listening of a viscerally-activated actor is a bit more difficult to describe. In the process that I teach, we attempt to articulate a visceral need that the actor can embrace and pursue as a character in a given situation. This need is understood as living in the gut. This means that the actor needs to ground her attention in her gut, right behind the navel. It's like the actor has an eye or an ear there, right behind the navel, and all of the listening needs to happen from there. This is "listening with the need". Everything that the partner does is immediately evaluated as either meeting the actor's visceral need, or refusing to meet it, and this evaluation affects the actor's next utterance, in the next moment. This is challenging to do, because when an actor does this, she gives up the ability to monitor herself and how she is being perceived by her audience. She can't watch herself with her awareness placed in her belly, behind her navel. This requires courage, but it is so satisfying for audiences because an actor engaging in this seems utterly sincere and honest.

If you consider all of this in relationship to [mirror neurons](#) we can begin to see why a viscerally engaged actor is so rewarding for audiences to watch: when the actor is viscerally activated, then through the mirror neurons of the audience, they feel themselves touched or moved in a very deep place.

Achieving visceral activation, even one time, is quite challenging. Becoming an actor who habitually and instinctively works from the gut is more challenging by orders

of magnitude, but is a very worthy goal, as such an actor can bring interest and life to virtually any script. An awesome power, to be sure. Like any awesome power, it comes with great responsibility.

the fun part

Have you seen Casey 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.

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.

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](#)