

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.