

# the power of grievance (for the actor)

There is a saying attributed to the Buddha about resentment. Sometimes it is stated that harboring resentment is like taking poison and hoping someone else dies, or that it is like holding onto a hot coal with the intent to throw it another at the right time: the one holding the coal burns herself.

Knowing what we know about human beings, these are wise words, but very challenging ones. Our sense of grievance is very powerful, in some cases overwhelming. It doesn't even really matter, in the end, whether we perceive the grievance to be righteous or not: nursing it, holding onto it, harboring it: these are bound to have a corrosive action on our souls, our psyches, our being. We may take action and get a wrong righted, a grievance redressed, but that doesn't necessarily make up for the time spent being gnawed at by the resentment involved.

So learning to forgive, which is what letting go of resentments entails, is difficult, but necessary if we are to move through life with any measure of openness and ease. For most of us, that's a pretty daunting piece of insight.

But this is not a blog about living well, it's a blog about acting well. And while acting and life have something to do with each other, it would be a mistake to assume they mirror each other perfectly.

So while in life, we might need to strive to let go of grievances, for the sake of our well-being, in acting, we need to work to uncover them, when they are not obvious, and embrace them as skeleton keys that will allow us to unlock many scenes that we encounter.

What do I mean by this? Well, the reason that people like the Buddha focused on the need to forego resentment is that they knew that most human beings are defined by their resentments. Most people walk around feeling that their intelligence, generosity, courage, hard work, family feeling, or whatever, goes largely unacknowledged, and that we are often treated to insults where such acknowledgments would be appropriate. This is what Hamlet talks about in his famous "To be or not to be" speech:

*For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes...*

Human beings have to put up with a lot, mostly from each other, but biology and freak accident play a role as well. And because of all we put up with, most of us walk around with gaping, gnawing, honking resentments, which amount to a sense that we are owed something by our world.

Ok, you might be thinking, we all have resentments, and find it hard to release them, but why are they so special, why are they so helpful to actors, since they only represent one element of the range of emotions a person might feel? The simplest answer is: grievance is borne out of having sustained a wound of some kind, so an aggrieved person is a wounded person. And a wounded person arouses our empathy and compassion. If you doubt that, think about why it's sometimes difficult to be happy for a friend who experiences some extraordinary good fortune. Other people's good luck doesn't cause us to identify with them, in fact, it may well give rise to, you guessed it, a resentment (why did THEY get what should have come to ME!!!!??). But we have all been wounded, we have all suffered loss, and our fears about scarcity are not triggered by someone else's bad luck in the way that they can

be by good luck, and so our capacity to identify with them, to see ourselves in them, to [become one with them](#), seems to increase. I am sure there is neuroscience that bears this out. [This study](#) suggests something closely related: that those who experience themselves as powerless, the aggrieved, for example, empathize much more readily than those who experience themselves as powerful.

So approaching a scene by considering: how has the other person failed me here? What do I want to hear them apologize for? can be a very powerful thing for an actor to do. Unfortunately, in many situations, the grievance is not obvious, and the text and the nature of the relationship in question have to be considered carefully in order to discern it. It's usually hiding in plain sight, but hidden nonetheless.

Let's consider a simple example: suppose you are playing a scene in which the dialogue has you asking for a promotion from your boss, or a bonus of some kind. What the text of the scene doesn't mention is all the ways, recent and older, in which this boss has failed to appreciate all that you do, and unfairly reprimanded you for falling short, when the falling short happened due to factors that were quite beyond your control. Now, you could come into the scene with the thought "I want to get a promotion!" or you could come into the scene with the thought "This @\$@#\$\$@#! He owes me some acknowledgement for all that I do for him, AND a promotion to boot." Which do you think is going to be the more interesting, that is to say, a more dramatically compelling, scene to watch?

And it may be true that the CHARACTER you are playing does not have such a thought in her mind. She may unconsciously wish for an apology of some kind, and even speak towards getting it, without even acknowledging that that is what she wants to hear. That's ok. One of my teachers at Yale spoke of the need to sometimes make choices 'on behalf of a character', meaning

that a character may not cop to having a certain goal, but they pursue it nonetheless, and we need to be clear about what we are pursuing as them, even if they are in denial or otherwise unclear for themselves.

Another reason why grievance is powerful and important for actors is that it instantly and palpably brings a sense of a real past into the scene. Our traumas, our wounds, which give rise to grievances, imprint themselves on us, and when we walk into a situation and act out of them, we have brought our past into that room with us. A great critic once spoke of our desire, when we watch an enacted narrative, to sense "the great spaces of life and experience that stand behind" the actors as they represent their roles. Nothing evokes that sense of great spaces of life like the grievances that people carry with them. In life, we may seek to let go of the past and live in the moment, but in recreating life as actors, we must clutch the wounds of the past, and the desire to have them redressed, to our breasts like mementoes of lost loved ones, as they are the key to truly animating the words of the writer, and bringing dead symbols to compelling dramatic life.