

The Joys of Stage-Fright and the Success of Failure
(SETC, Louisville, 2013)

I know that at the Southeast Theatre Conference I'm officially called a "movement" teacher, but actually the Grotowski-based approach to acting that I teach only *appears* to be about movement... the way a meditation class *appears* to be about sitting. In fact, the work that Grotowski taught mostly had to do with questions like: How do actors access their inner life? And, is acting about doing, or about listening? And how can we get out of our own way? And over the years, I've realized that what makes this work remarkable is not just that it offers actors a useful way of integrating body and mind into their acting work, but that it challenges some of our assumptions about deeper issues: Like, how does learning really happen? And like, what is the relationship between what we see around us and what is going on inside us?

Now of course, one could talk about the many reasons why approaching acting through the body is an interesting thing to do. Like how it connects you with parts of yourself that years of sitting in chairs may have cut you off from. Or how working with the body activates the imagination. And maybe, when I end, if people have questions about those sorts of things, I can respond to them.

But the main thing I'd like to get us thinking about today is not about the training itself but about: How does this way of working impact our assumptions about fear and about failure. And how

might it change our opinion that fear is something to be afraid of, and our opinion that failure is a bad thing.

In my classes, we begin with the physical exercises, what Grotowski called: *les exercices plastiques* – the movement exercises, and *les exercices corporels* – the full-body exercises. But after this basic training, we use the physical tools to do text and scene work, rather as one might in any acting class. So, several years ago, when I was teaching the scene-study part of the work, two women in my class were showing a scene most of you probably know: the scene from *The Glass Menagerie* in which Amanda Wingfield, accuses her daughter, Laura, of having lied about attending her typing classes.

Watching their scene, I thought that both of the actresses had done quite well, and at the end of the scene presentation, as I usually do, I began by asking them how they thought the showing had gone.

“Oh,” began the woman who had played Laura, “I don’t know. I feel like I couldn’t do anything right. I kept forgetting the choices I’d made. I just felt so inept and powerless.”

“That’s good,” I said.

“Good?!” she said, “It wasn’t anything like ‘good.’ “What do you mean, ‘good’?”

“I mean,” I said, “That what you’re describing is exactly what Laura feels. ‘Inept and powerless’ is what Williams *wants* you to feel when you’re playing Laura. So if that’s what you were feeling... that’s good.”

Perhaps some of you here have had a similar experience, of how, when your character work is going well, you start to actually think like the character... and how, depending on the character you're playing, that can make for problems.

So nowadays, when I teach character work I make sure to mention to students that, just as they will want to do a warm-up before going on stage, they may also want to "warm-down," after they are done... especially if they've been playing a strong character. I mean, actors work hard to let a role get "under their skin"... but, as with a tattoo, it takes some effort to get what's under your skin, out. I mean, it's easy enough to remove your eyeliner and your costume... but your mental makeup requires more than a makeup remover to take off.

But it seems to me that this *Glass Menagerie* story is not just a story about the problems of character work. It is also a story about judgment, about the ways in which many of us allow our fears of inadequacy to cloud our vision of reality. Why is it that if, at the end of a scene presentation, I ask an acting student, "How did that go?" even when they feel pretty good about a scene, even when some of the beats they played were very strong, often the first thing that will pop into their minds is: The lines they forgot, or how much better the scene went in rehearsal... things like that.

Why is that? How did we learn to be so self-critical? After all, we weren't born that way. Little babies are not self-critical. It is, in

fact, something we've been taught – by teachers and parents and television and advertising. For instance, we've been taught to think that our bodies are too fat or too skinny, that our minds are too lazy, our hair is too straight or too curly, and our acting?... Well, most of us have been schooled to believe that if we're not on Broadway or a walking down the red carpet... then something must be wrong... with us. And it's not just that we've learned how to criticize ourselves, many of us have learned to actually crave negative criticism – as if the whole world were like a gym workout: no pain, no gain. It is a constant, subtle training, this search for negative feedback. For instance, studies show that after reading a women's magazine, most women feel more depressed than before reading the magazine... and yet women's magazines sell really well.

And because we've learned that lesson over and over for years, unlearning it can be difficult.

When I studied with Jerzy Grotowski in 1967, as part of the physical training, he had the actor Ryszard Cieslak demonstrate headstands for us: tripod headstands, and elbow headstands, and back-of-the-hand headstands, and ear-stands. Cieslak was quite amazing, he could slip from one kind of headstand into another, seamlessly and seemingly effortlessly. And we young American acting and directing students were awestruck.

After Cieslak would demonstrate a headstand, Grotowski say to us, "*Faites le meme!*" ("Do the same!") But when we tried to "do

the same,” instead of balancing effortlessly upside down, most of us wobbled left and right and front and back, and often, we fell down. Which made us feel inept, and frustrated. So one day, one of the actors in the group said, “Why are we trying to do these impossible things?” And Grotowski answered:

“The real value [of the exercises] lies in [y]our *not* being able to do them.” But what did he mean by that? To us Americans who had been taught from an early age that the whole purpose of attempting something difficult is to get it “right,” the idea that we should spend time trying to do something “impossible” sounded absurd.

It took me many years to understand that when Grotowski said things like that he was not simply trying to sound deep and mysterious – though I do think he enjoyed sounding deep and mysterious. He was also suggesting that what happens to you *while you try* to do an impossible headstand is interesting, very interesting. In fact, it is actually *more* interesting – and, this was the point, more useful to our acting training – than getting the headstand “right.” If, on the other hand, you try to avoid the wobbling, or try to pretend it’s not happening, you may end up getting the headstand “perfect” ... perfect and boring. It may be a terrific internal yoga or meditation experience... but it won’t be exciting theater.

Have you ever watched a high-wire act in the circus? And have you ever noticed that, although it is wonderful to see a tight-rope walker cross the wire without a wobble, it is even more exciting

to see the acrobat get to the middle, wobble for a moment fifty feet above the floor, and then recover and finish the walk? Too much perfection is boring. But to see a performer working right at the edge of the impossible, working *towards* perfection... that's exciting. I mean, watching an Olympic diver do a simple swan dive that she can do perfectly is not nearly as thrilling as watching her attempt a complicated twist that she can just barely pull off.

And actually, every play you read or perform teaches that. No one would want to see a play in which the young lovers met, fell in love and lived happily ever after. The living-happily-ever-after part is satisfying only after all the wobbles along the way.

And this business of how exciting it can be to work at the edge of the possible is true in all forms of art. There is a story about the composer Igor Stravinsky who had written a new orchestral piece which contained a very difficult violin passage. And after the ensemble had been in rehearsal for several days the solo violinist came to Stravinsky and said he was sorry, he had tried his best, the passage was too difficult; no violinist could play it. And Stravinsky said, "I understand that. What I am after is the sound of someone *trying* to play it."

So the lesson Grotowski was trying to teach – in his esoteric fashion – was a lesson about the interesting, workable, playable things that are happening all the time just below our awareness, things that we may think of as "problems." I mean when I start to

wobble in a headstand, there is a moment of pure disequilibrium: my body senses the unbalance, and then there is a physical push back accompanied by an emotion of fear and maybe by a bit of anger and a judgment that I'm a terrible head-stander. And maybe if I overcorrect the wobble, there is an awareness that things are out of hand, and a sad realization that I'm about to fall... etcetera. And all of this goes on in a couple of seconds, and any of these trains of thought are trains I could ride... if I didn't just try to pretend they're not happening.

Most of us, however, are terrified of allowing our audiences, our teachers – and ourselves – experience our struggle and our wobbling.

(And let me say, this can be even harder for teachers than it is for students. I mean when you're teaching, you feel like you've *got* to do everything right; you've got to be a good example for your students. And it's hard to remember that one of the main lessons you want to teach your students is that when you "fail" at something, the main thing is to treat yourself kindly and try again. We teachers often try to teach that lesson, but we have a hard time doing it ourselves.)

So most of us try, instead, to hide our struggles. We're afraid of making mistakes; moreover, and we feel ashamed of that fear and so we constantly pretend we are not frightened. Well, maybe not "constantly." Maybe we allow ourselves to experience the excitement of struggling during our rehearsals.

The actress and teacher Uta Hagen said that she preferred the German word for rehearsal: “*die Probe*,” she wrote, “which sounds like what a rehearsal ought to be: the probe! I want to probe, to test, to try ... to adventure!” I remember seeing Uta Hagen playing in *Mrs. Klein*, and she was perfect. Each gesture, each tone of voice, each look was so precise. She was quite amazing... though I also remember coming away from that performance feeling somehow shut out, as if the fourth wall really was a wall.

And I think Grotowski would have asked Ms. Hagen: Why must the adventure end when you are in front of an audience? Why should the probing end when the performance begins? What he said to us was: “Having a question and not an answer to express is why many actors are better in rehearsal than in performance. They search in rehearsal, find answers, and then perform their answers. This is not creative.”

But most of us Americans have learned for most of our lives, on test after test, in game after game, and in performance after performance that we should not make “mistakes.” No, “mistakes” are to be avoided – at all costs. It does not occur to us that sometimes the costs of avoiding “mistakes” are higher than we know.

Like Sticky Notes. Sticky Notes were actually a “mistake” created by someone who was *trying* – and failing – to invent a better, stronger glue. But the glue he invented didn’t hold, it was easy to peel off. His failure was his success.

Thomas Alva Edison, you know, is famous for having invented the light bulb and the phonograph, among hundreds of other useful and not-so-useful things. He is also reported to have responded to a *New York Times* reporter who had asked him how it felt to have failed 700 times in his attempts to invent a light bulb: "I have not failed 700 times. I have not failed once. I have succeeded in proving that those 700 ways will not work. When I have eliminated the ways that will not work, I will find the way that will work."

None of this is to say you need to give up on trying to accomplish anything. Not at all. What I'm talking about is a matter of your **attitude toward the "mistakes"** you encounter along the way. Do you experience your mistakes as an "adventure" or simply as a frustrating series of "failures?"

When you wobble in your headstand, or hear your voice cracking in the middle of a song, for instance, do you immediately try to "correct" your mistake, or do you take a moment to investigate the information that "mistake" may contain?

For instance, one time when I was working on a song with a singing teacher, my voice kept getting weak and breaking at one point in the song. And at first I thought it just had to do with the note, but when I eased up on trying to get the note "right," and instead really allowed myself to feel what was going on, I could feel a great sadness rising within me, an emotion that had been trying to make itself known at that particular moment in the song. And if, at such moments, you just curse yourself for making a "mistake," you not

only deprive yourself of the new information of which the “mistake” is only a sign, you also end up carrying the extra weight of the negative judgment. “Oh, I’m so bad at this. I’ll never be able to sing” –And believe me, I know that judgment real well.

So for Grotowski, the physical work that he called “*les exercices corporels*,” were not just explorations of balance and full-body connectedness – though they were that. The headstands and tiger leaps were also *paradigms* for how we approach any acting task. So when we would wobble in a headstand, Grotowski would say: “When you fall,[you must] think of the ground as someone or something that loves you and will not reject you.” And again, when he would say things like that, I just figured he was just too deep for me to understand.

But a few years after that workshop with Grotowski, I was watching a one-year-old child as she learned to stand up. She would pull herself up to standing, take a step, wobble, fall down, pull herself up again, fall, cry, up, stand, laugh, fall... and watching her I realized that, when Grotowski had said, “When you fall,[you must] think of the ground as someone or something that loves you and will not reject you” – he wasn’t just being mystical. There *had* actually been a time when the floor had “loved” me, when the floor had actually been my home base, always there to return to, a home that would receive me, though sometimes with a bump, when I

would fall. It was only in later years that I had started classifying the “bump” as an insult, something I should avoid or be frightened of, a painful proof of having failed.

I mean, think about it: what would it be like for a child growing up, if every time she fell down, her caretaker said to her: “Oh no, you’ve failed again. You’ll never make it. Why don’t you just stick with crawling?”

And yet, by the time we are ten years old, most of us have become used to being treated that way.

But Grotowski was not just talking about falling down when you’re trying to do a headstand. As I said, for him, the physical exercises he taught were *paradigms*, physical examples of the many kinds of difficult tasks that actors face, like the problems of finding, enduring, exploring and expressing deep human emotions. He was using the physical exercises to help us to rediscover that sense we once had had: that whatever we did – including the “mistakes” – it was all part of the adventure, all interesting useful energy. And using the body and balance to teach this simply makes the lesson it very clear: I mean, if, in the middle of an acting beat, you suddenly have a strange, unplanned thought or impulse, it can be very automatic to simply “correct” or ignore the impulse because, if you followed it, it might undermine your well-planned “intention” or

“super-objective.” So it can be hard to notice this corrective mechanism in the middle of your acting. But working on a simple headstand allows you to practice the ability to perceive the rich possibilities within a wobble, allows you to play with a very simple task – in order to discover the joys of strange, unplanned events, events that we’ve been treating as though they were “failures.”

The thing is: This exciting way of facing the unknown and the unplanned as something interesting rather than as a minefield of potential mistakes, this way of treating each surprise as something useful... is a way we all once knew... but we have actually **learned** not avoid.

A *The New York Times* article about the work of Carol S. Dweck, a psychology professor at Stanford University reported:

Studies with children and adults, show that a large percentage cannot tolerate mistakes or setbacks.... In particular, those who believe that intelligence is fixed and cannot change tend to avoid taking chances that may lead to errors.

Often parents and teachers unwittingly encourage this mind-set by praising children for being smart rather than for trying hard or struggling with the process.

Professor Dweck and her researchers worked with 400 fifth graders. Half of the fifth graders were praised as being 'really smart' after doing well on a test; the other half were praised for their effort.

Then they were given two tasks to choose from: an easy one that they would learn little from but do well, or a more challenging one that might be more interesting but induce more mistakes.

The majority of those praised for being smart chose the simple task, while 90 percent of those commended for trying hard selected the more difficult one.... Then the kids were then given another test, above their grade level, on which many performed poorly. Afterward, they were asked to write anonymously about their experience to another school and report their scores. Thirty-seven percent of those who were told they were smart lied about their scores, while only 13 percent of the other group did.

"One thing," Professor Dweck said, "that I've learned is that kids are exquisitely attuned to the real message, and the real message is, 'Be smart.' It's not, 'We love it when you struggle, or when you learn and make mistakes.'"

So it is not strange that, over the years, most of us have learned to be so focused on accomplishment, that we've lost touch with the

once-joyful process of falling down and trying again, that we've forgotten that the floor really once was "someone who loved us." We've become so focused on aiming at the right answer, playing the "right" intention, figuring out the "right" super-objective, that we've forgotten how to enjoy the wobbling and the falling down. In fact, many of us have come to fear it.

And fear... well, every actor knows what fear can do to you.

Many years ago, a young actor named David in one of my classes was working on a monologue from Macbeth, you know, the speech in which he says, "Is this a dagger I see before me, the handle toward my hand?"

And partway through the speech he started trembling, and then he just quit.

"I don't know," he said. "I can't do this. I feel like a fraud up here, trying to do Shakespeare, and everyone is looking at me like, "Who does he think he is, playing Macbeth?"

"Are you saying you've got stage fright?" I asked.

"I guess."

"Good," I said. "That's good, because at this point, Macbeth is feeling pretty afraid too."

"Right. But Macbeth is afraid of seeing a ghostly knife in the air. I'm just afraid of ... making a fool of myself up here."

“David,” I said, “we out here watching, we don’t know what you’re afraid of. We don’t know what imagery you’re working with; that’s your business. We can see that you’re afraid, and if you just say the line that Mr. Shakespeare has given you, if you tell us that what you’re afraid of is “a dagger” hanging in midair... then we’ll believe that. In fact, we will fill in Macbeth’s terror with our own fears. That’s what audiences do. That’s our job. Your job is just to allow yourself to feel what you’re feeling – including the fear – and to say the lines. If you think ‘I shouldn’t have stage-fright’ you will be blocking a great source of energy for the scene.”

But many of us have come to be afraid of our fear.

Now I know that actors have a great reputation for being self-centered assholes who have an overweening need to be looked at. That’s why they need to be told not to “upstage” their scene partners by moving upstage and thus forcing everyone else on stage to give the audiences their backs. And every once in a while I’ve run into an actor who fits that description. But in my experience, the reason most actors move upstage is not to hog the attention, but in order to get a little further away from the audience.

It happens all the time in acting classes too. Have you ever noticed that during an open warm-up, wherever the teacher sits, there is more space on that side of the room? Because nobody wants to be front-and-center near those – supposedly critical – eyes. For that reason, when I’m teaching a class, I will sometimes move from

one side of the room to the other so that people can feel the energy they've been avoiding. Feel it, and therefore put it into play.

And in scene work, when the text gives an actor a "private moment," a memory perhaps or a thought about something or someone who is not on stage, a moment of glancing out the window or into a mirror perhaps, many actors will try to take such a moment upstage or toward the side, anywhere but straight out toward the audience. And on one level that makes sense, why would one take a "private moment" where one feels the least privacy? But whenever I see that happening, I encourage the actor to move her window or mirror downstage, where the energy she is feeling from the audience — her underlying stage-fright — can mingle with the energy she is receiving from the image to which she is speaking. And when she does, a strange thing happens, the fear simply adds pure energy to the emotion of the private moment. And the actor can sense that fear is really just energy.

The fact is, stage fright is one of the most dependable sources for actors. It is the one acting source you can always depend on. If you're ever on stage and you suddenly think, "Shit, nothing is happening," just try looking right out at the audience, and I promise you *something* will be happening. The problem is that what is happening is something we think that we *shouldn't* be happening. We think that we *should* be feeling something else. Love, or anger or whatever the script calls for. But, in fact, feelings are fungible — they are like Euros that can be converted into Dollars or Yuan or Shekels.

But if you look down at the Euros in our hand and think: hmmm, this does not look like money... then you're stuck. But if, for just a moment, you acknowledge to yourself that what is happening is fear, and if, for that moment, you let that fear really enter your body, then, in fact, you will find that the fear energy can be processed and transformed into whatever kind of emotional currency you need.

This works because, actually, the fear you are feeling is never the only emotion you're having. At every moment on stage you are also feeling lots of other things: you may be feeling excited to be on stage, and maybe you are feeling angry that you just forgot your line, or feeling sad that acting is so much work, and maybe you are falling in love with your scene partner... not to mention all the things your character is feeling... It is just that the fear seems so much larger or closer it is able to block out those other things.

But the fear gains its size and its energy from your negative attitude: I mean, if you stub your toe just before you go on stage, the pain in your toe is there, but you don't pay any particular attention to it. It doesn't seem more important than what's happening in the play. But fear! Oh, fear is a bad-feeling-I'm-not-supposed-to-be having, and therefore you may try to deny it or hide it. And in trying to hide your fear, you use up extra energy trying *not* to feel what you are feeling, and so you have even less energy available for your work. Whereas if you allow the fear to pass through you, you will find that as enters your full body, it actually becomes workable.

It is rather like the old business of not thinking about an elephant. The harder you try, the more often the elephant appears. The same is true with fear.

Of course this fear business can be quite complicated. Sometimes the fear an actor feels is not just the fear of being seen. For instance, a few years ago I was working with a woman who had been a stand-up comic for years, and in many ways she seemed to enjoy having all the attention, but working on her Shakespeare monologue from *Julius Caesar*, Portia's plea to her husband, Brutus, the stronger the emotion in the text became, the more quietly she spoke. And when I asked her afterwards what she thought was going on, she said, "I'm just afraid ... of being really bad."

But what I had noticed in the monologue was that not only had she become very quiet, but her body had stopped moving and, at the point in the text where Brutus says "Kneel not, gentle Portia," not only had she cut Brutus' line, in order to turn the conversation into a monologue, she had also cut the gesture. She didn't kneel. So I simply suggested that at that point in the text she allow herself to fall to her knees and reach out towards the image of her husband – downstage, and after a minute of hemming and hawing, and protesting that falling to her knees would seem silly and melodramatic, she allowed herself to give it a try.

As soon as she did, her voice became much stronger and tears filled her eyes, and when she ended, the other students applauded. It

was a good lesson in how the Grotowski physical work activates emotion.

But that is not all it was. A day later she came up to me in the hallway, smiling a little sheepishly.

“I want to tell you something,” she said. “You remember when you asked me yesterday when I told you I was afraid of being really bad in that monologue. Well, I lied. I realized later that what I was most afraid of – but was too afraid to say out loud – was that I was afraid of being good, really good.”

So again: fear is real, but it is energy. It is a source, and if you are able to really let yourself feel it, it will almost always give you energy you can use in the work. The problem is not the fear; the problem is with thinking “this fear I’m feeling is a bad thing,” and you try to deny it.

As the great American director David Belasco once said “I wouldn’t give a nickel for an actor who isn’t nervous.”

So again, the problem – like the problem the actress playing Laura had – is in our *calling* what is going on a “problem.” **When we call something a problem... then we’ve got a problem.** If any of you have studied clowning, you have probably discovered that it is your own “problems” that make the best clowns. Your own stupidity, your own fear, your own belligerence. So, what would it be like if instead of calling all your problems “problems” you called them...

“interesting judgments,” or “sources of energy?” I mean think for a moment about some habit you have – onstage or off – some personal habit that you’ve taken to thinking of as a “problem” and think: What would it be like if, the next time you encountered this mental event or thought or feeling, you just called it “interesting,” or “worth exploring” instead.

Perhaps this lesson is really just another version of the great first rule in improv: The rule that, whatever your partner does or says, you must say, “Yes.” You know, in an improv, if you walk on stage and your partner yells, “Watch out, you’re stepping on the crocodile!” and you respond, “Don’t be unpleasant, John, it’s just my leather trench-coat,” then you are “blocking” the gift you’ve been handed. Afraid that working with a crocodile will be a “problem,” you’ve tried to “fix” the problem. And the result is you end up with a rather boring scene about people who leave their clothes lying on the floor. But if, instead, you accept the crocodile your partner has thrown your way, and rather than “fixing” this unwieldy image, you suddenly start to wrestle with – or make love with? – the monster, then you’re probably in for a really interesting tragi-comic scene. And the difference is all in how you look at the “difficulty” you’ve been presented with: Do you experience it as a problem or an opportunity?

When I was an undergraduate, one summer I went to France, and at one point I was trying to hitchhike on a French freeway for several hours in the hot sun and nobody picked me up, and I had to walk for a mile carrying a heavy suitcase, and then climb over a fence and hitch a ride on a motor scooter and catch a train in which I had to stand up all the way to Paris.... It was a horrible day, a really horrible day, so the next day, when I'd recovered a little I wrote a letter home about what had happened, and immediately it became clear to me: that day had been terrible, but the letter was the most exciting letter I'd ever written. And I began to get an inkling that it might be possible to experience terrible events as creative sources... and that there were two benefits to this: One was that in the midst of misery it was possible to notice that the experience of misery is not monolithic, it actually contains other mind-moments, like the mind-moment of noticing that I'm having a lot of misery. And the second one was that such moments are the wellsprings of art-making. The worst events make the best stories, and artists are people who are able to experience the bothness of such events.

I mean: think for a moment of any disastrous event in your life that you've taken to telling as a good story. And think: what would it be like if you could actually experience the "interestingness" of disastrous events even while they are taking place.

But this is just an example of the fact that at every moment, there are actually many ways to experience what is going on. The

only “problem” when “bad” things happen, is that we allow our negative, fear-based judgments to loom so large in our minds that they block out our perception of all the other things that are going on concurrently.

And of course, the same thing is true in teaching. I mean growing up I was always a rather over-sensitive person and terribly aware of what other people were thinking and feeling. And I thought of this as a big personal problem. But after I’d been teaching for while, I realized that my over-sensitivity actually made me a good acting teacher. I mean for forty years, I’ve made a living out of being oversensitive and neurotic.

But in spite of my having become a little wiser about myself, I’ve had to learn and re-learn this lesson about seeing things as a problem over and over. For instance when I teach, sometimes a student will say, “I hate this exercise,” and my first impulse would be to think, “Oh, dear, I’ve got to fix this. I need to find some way to make this student enjoy the work... and like me.” In this situation, the student was thinking *he* had a problem, and I was thinking *I* had a problem.

But over time, I began to appreciate that sometimes – not always, but often enough – when student said, “I hate this exercise,” it was a sign that the exercise was actually working, and that the anger that the student was experiencing was exciting and useful, and that it was not a matter of me having to fix something, but rather an

opportunity to help the student experience his anger – and the “problem” he was having with the exercise – as useful energy.

So, in such moments, both the student and I needed to get beyond our habit of calling such moments “problems,” and discovering instead what else was going on.

One final point: Fear arises when we face the unknown. How could it not? So at such moments, in addition to the “problem” of calling fear a “problem,” there is another “problem” that can crop up: The thought: “I should know what’s going on here. If I were a good student – or a good teacher – I would know. So I better not let anyone know I don’t. It would be terribly embarrassing to admit that I’m lost.”

But if what’s happening is something new, how could you possibly know? So again, the problem is not that our ignorance or the feeling we are lost is a problem, the problem is in our thinking that not-knowing is a problem.

And of course, it is not just acting students who have this “problem – problem.” I can remember my father driving the car miles out of the way rather than stopping to ask directions. And I can remember many times when someone would mention an author or an artist I’d never heard of, but there I was, nodding my head rather than saying, “Who?”

Of course it may be unsettling to face a moment when you realize you don’t know something you think you should know. The

question is: What is wrong with “unsettling?” I mean, what would it be like to learn to appreciate the condition of being unsettled? That is, in Grotowski’s terms, what would it be like to actually enjoy falling out of a headstand as much as “accomplishing” the headstand? Because with a little practice you can get better and better at perceiving that the wobbling, the unsettledness, the not knowing what to do, is playable, workable energy, not something you need to deny.

The evidence that we all really understand that *falling* – or failing, or not-knowing – can be as exciting – or more exciting – than *accomplishing*, is that “falling” is the word we use when we talk about love. When we meet someone who penetrates our heart, we call it “falling” in love. We call it “falling” because it is not something we can control; it is something that is happening *to* us. And it is a most wonderful thing, and if it were something we could control, it would not be so wonderful.

So, let me address one final question about this. How do you practice failing? You can’t *try* to fail; that’s not the same thing. Grotowski’s answer was: try something impossible... a headstand for instance, and then, when you start to wobble, investigate: what is there in this wobble for me to enjoy? When you’ve figured out how to do that with a simple physical activity like a headstand, then you can apply the same technique to an acting moment... or to your life.