

TNUA SPEECH

*[While the audience enters, show Youtube of Leonard Cohen's Anthem:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDTph7mer3I>]*

Thanks to: Prof. Mingder Chung (taimu), Dean of the College of Theatre Arts.

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And to my wife, Suzanne, who has allowed me feel love for 40 years, and who is
visiting us here tonight.

Often nowadays, at the beginning of a lecture or a performance someone asks us
to turn off our cell phones. But today I'd like to ask you to do the opposite: Please
take out your cell phones, and turn them on, with the volume turned up loud,
and start looking at them, or calling your friends, or watching videos, or playing
games, or whatever you like to do with your cell phones.

Everyone, please. Go ahead.

Good. And now, while you continue to do that, let yourself feel how your body
feels and how your mind feels.

Good. Now please turn the phones off, and put them away.

Thanks. 谢谢

(pause)

At the end of this talk, we will read a poem by the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda,
called, "Being Quiet." But right now, I want to read just the first two lines:
Neruda writes:

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

[pause]

And now that we are quiet, once more, let yourself feel how you feel: how your
body feels, and what is going on in your mind.

Good.

So: What do you think? What is it that our phones do for us? I mean, of course they give us all kinds of useful information when we need it, and they connect us with our friends. Cell phones help us to find our way when we get lost, and they have been vital to the people organizing protests in Hong Kong. But often it seems they serve another kind of need. When we are traveling on the MRT or sitting in the park, we find ourselves turning on our phones rather than just seeing the other people or feeling the sunlight or the rain. Whenever we are alone or bored, it seems that we use our phones to help us avoid being... present.

What, we might wonder, would we be missing if, in those situations, we did not turn on our cell phones so often? What would be so uncomfortable about that? What is the void that our cell phones fill?

In order to examine this question, I want to begin by telling you about a play I worked on twenty years ago with a group of students at New York University. It was a play about addiction – addiction to alcohol, and cigarettes and heroin or cocaine – and it was about advertising. And to create text for that play, we interviewed doctors and sociologists and many drug addicts and ex-addicts.

One of the men we interviewed had been addicted to crack cocaine when he was younger, and then, after he had kicked his cocaine habit, he went to work at an addiction services agency. This is what he said to us:

You know I'm doing the right thing. I'm not getting high... [But now] I have to be careful because my addiction will take other forms. I mean I have to be careful how my addictions work on me today because I didn't have anything when I was growing up as a child, and now that I got a good job I have to be careful. Now, I have like five winter coats, you know what I'm saying? I have I have three closets in this house filled with clothes. You know I don't need any clothes; I don't need these coats, I don't need no shoes, I don't need no boots, but my addiction will take that form... Like I wanna go buy a couple of leather coats right now. But what?- I got like four leather coats, a goose down, a wool trench coat for work, a London Fog wool coat, jeans jacket- I DON'T NEED NO MORE COATS!

Addiction is what Buddhism calls “craving”: the impulse to have or hold or get something – an object, a person, a feeling – that we feel will somehow remove the pain of life. Some drugs – like heroin – achieve that end by dulling our senses, others – like cocaine – remove the pain by giving us a feeling of having power. And nicotine is both an “upper” and a “downer.” It gives you energy at the same time as it calms your mind. So cigarettes can be more addictive than other, stronger drugs. And it's legal. But each drug, in one way or another, protects us from feeling our feelings, and our knowledge that in some sense, as Buddhists

say, life is unsatisfactory. Not that everything about living is painful, but that there is a constant, subtle sense that life is never quite what it should be. So perhaps it is not strange that many people would seek drugs of one kind or another to assuage that discomfort.

But the play we created was not just about drugs. It was also about advertising. Because, as one of the sociologists we interviewed pointed out to us, advertising works by playing upon exactly this same mechanism as addictive drugs: Advertising is a message that tells us that the unsatisfactory feelings we have can be eliminated by buying something.

Advertising, [this sociologist told us], is designed to generate endless self-criticism, to generate all sorts of doubts and then to offer the entire world of consumer goods as salvation. In contrast the one message you will never hear in advertising is, "You're okay. You don't need anything. Just be you."

And like chemical drugs, advertising also has side effects. The central side effect of advertising is a residual increase in our feelings of dissatisfaction with ourselves. Whether or not we not buy the products we are being offered, the cumulative effect of hearing and seeing a constant stream of images of beautiful people and objects is to make us feel worse and worse about ourselves.

For instance, one study showed that, after reading a "women's magazine" full of pictures of thin models and expensive objects, readers were more depressed than they were before they read the magazine... and yet these magazines sell very well. Advertising, like other drugs, actually makes us suffer, and yet we allow ourselves to ingest this poison all the time, because, for a short moment, it distracts us from the pain of life.

Moreover, our culture teaches us we can and **should** be happy... and our culture also gives us the means to escape. It sells us make-up to cover our real faces, it offers us amusements to distract us from politics and global warming... And one of the best means it offers to us nowadays are cell phones.

Cell phones fill up the moment of loneliness or emptiness we feel when we have no distractions. They offer us a quick relief from the various pains and sorrows of life by distracting us. And, as with cigarettes or other drugs, when we use our cell phone, someone else is making money off of our addiction. Someone is profiting off of our desire to avoid of the pains of life.

Okay. But why am I raising this problem? You came here expecting a talk about theater. Why am I talking to you about addiction and advertising and cell phones?

Because we, here in this room, are artists. And the work of artists is not to protect themselves from the all the pains and dissatisfactions of life, but rather to transform those pains, sorrows, and fears into Art. That's what artists do. We weave our art out of Truth – all kinds of truth, the pleasant and the unpleasant. Sorrow, joy, fear, love all inspire the colors that artists paint with and the notes musicians play on their instruments.

Some people say that artists must suffer. But actually, I don't think that artists suffer more than other people. The difference is that, in order to do their work, artists must develop the strength to actually examine their suffering and work with it ... rather than distracting themselves in one way or another from it. Artists do not turn away from painful or joyful experiences, instead they take it as an inspiration.

That is true of all artists... but being an actor requires a special kind of strength: because the material an actor paints upon is not a canvas, the instrument he plays is not a guitar. His "instrument" is his own heart, his own emotional life. So to do his work, an actor must allow himself to feel Life, with all its beauties and joys, and with all the feelings of pain, sadness, loss, insecurity, failure that human beings feel being alive. If he hides from those emotions or distracts himself when he begins to feel them, he deprives himself of the notes he must play on his "instrument" – himself.

But for a young person who wishes to become an actor, learning to feel and appreciate all his own emotions can be very hard... because it is the opposite of what the world has taught us for many years.

When I studied with the Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski in 1967, much of what M. Grotowski said seemed mysterious and confusing to those of us in his workshop. One thing he said was that training to be an actor is not a matter of "learning," but of "unlearning." He called it a *via negativa* – a road backwards to something natural. A rediscovery of something all of us once knew. Because all of us, when we were small children, knew how to feel – and how to fully express all the joys and all the sorrows of life. No child needs to be taught how to cry, to scream or to smile.

The education of an actor, [Grotowski said], is not a matter of teaching him something; [instead what] we attempt [to do is] to eliminate his organism's resistance to the [natural] psychic process... What we usually call 'developing one's talent' is often nothing more than freeing it from the influences that hamper, occlude and frequently destroy it entirely.

The problem is that, in our ordinary lives, most of us have learned for many years to do the opposite. We have learned to hide our real feelings with

expressions that belie the feelings, and ultimately to suppress the feelings themselves. As a child, we learn not to shout when we are happy, and not to cry when we are sad, and not to stamp our feet or hit when we are angry... and most of all, not to let anyone see when we are frightened.

These true feelings, we are taught, are unacceptable, and expressing them fully will only get us in trouble. So instead of showing what we really feel, we learn to mask those feelings. At first, we do so only with effort. We learn to put on a false smile when our picture is being taken even if we don't feel like smiling. We learn to say "Thank you" when we are given a gift – even if it was a gift we didn't like.

But after a while, these fake smiles and false expressions become "second nature" to us. They become automatic, things we do without thinking. And the actual underlying feelings grow further and further from our reach. In my home, for instance, my parents suppressed their own anger, and they taught me and my brothers never to yell loudly. And by the time I was a young adult, I didn't even know how angry I was. When something bothered me, I just got a stomach ache. I had "masked" my feelings so well, I didn't even know that I was feeling them.

In the theater we put on "masks" on purpose. In some styles of theater, the masks are literal, physical objects. In naturalistic theater, the masks are "characters," ways of moving or speaking that are not "us." They are the permission to be someone other than ourselves. But that permission sometimes is also a license to express some of the parts of ourselves we have worked all our lives to deny.

So, one could say that putting on the "mask" of a character can actually allow the actor to take off some of the masks he wears every day.

Jerzy Grotowski put it this way:

The important thing is to use the role as an instrument with which to study what is hidden behind our **everyday mask** – the innermost core of our personality – in order to sacrifice it, expose it."

So, on the one hand "acting" is false because, as Stanislavski said, the actor lives in "imaginary circumstances." But in another way, while he is acting, the actor may also find that he is able to be more "real" than he is when he is not acting. For instance, the actress playing Lady Macbeth can experience feelings of violent anger that she may have repressed for years in her "real" life. And the actor playing Romeo can fall in love and cry in ways he never would allow himself to do as himself.

So paradoxically, acting is, at one and the same time, an act of putting on and an act of removing a mask. And it is this simultaneous masking and unmasking the

actor does, that allows the audience to experience the depth of true emotion which lies behind the masks, thus putting the audience in touch with their own emotions... including emotions they do not permit themselves to experience. The fact that the actor is wearing a "mask" or playing a "character" gives the audience sufficient distance so that they too can feel safe enough to experience the nakedness of human emotion which the actor portrays. That is one reason that people attend theater: It allows them to experience things that they must hide within their own lives.

But in order for theater to do that effectively, the actors themselves must learn – or rather they must rediscover – all the emotions that they have also learned to avoid during their lives.

But actors, like everyone else, have been conditioned to wear what Grotowski called "everyday masks." It is, in fact, something we have learned so well, that often we no longer even sense the masks we wear. So, the simple act of removing our "everyday masks," can be very difficult.

For many years, I taught at a studio within New York University called the Experimental Theatre Wing which was rumored--among students at more traditional acting studios – to be: "The studio where you take off all your clothes and roll around on the floor." In fact, every once in while students would create performances in which they did take off all their clothes, but that was very rare. The real – and the more difficult – act of "undressing" which took place was the undressing of the heart, which indeed, can be more frightening than taking off your actual clothes. After all, every night, we do take off all our clothes, so we know how to do it – at least in private – but we may have buttoned up our true emotions for years, never daring to give our hearts a good, warm bath... even when no one is watching.

After so many years of avoiding our true emotions, many of us fear that experiencing the fullness of our emotions might be unbearable – more than we could handle. But the fact is that it is not the emotion itself which is unbearable. After all, as I said, small babies are all capable of experiencing enormous feelings of hunger and pain and love and longing with no problem. Experiencing them, and expressing them loudly. What makes our emotional life feel "unbearable" is not the emotion itself but rather our fear of the emotion and the strong energy with which we fight to hold our emotions back.

Often, for instance, when an actor must perform a very angry part of his text, he will find himself whispering, perhaps because at some time, many years ago he learned very well that being that loud was not a good thing. I'm not sure how it is here in Taiwan, but in America many women learn not to express violent anger, and most men learn not to cry... although when they were infants, both boys and

girls were able of both screaming in anger and to crying with no problem at all. It is in this sense that training to be an actor is an act of taking off – rather than putting on – a mask.

But how are we to do that?

[Photo of Hong Kong demonstrators wearing masks.]

Two months ago, Chief Executive Carrie Lam demanded that the demonstrators in Hong Kong remove their masks, but they refused to do so... for two good reasons. Those masks protect them both physically – from the tear gas – and politically – from face recognition software and police reprisals. If people do not feel safe, it doesn't work to demand that they take off their masks. To do so will only make them feel even more threatened. – But in some ways, actors never feel safe.

Grotowski said:

“The work of the actor is in danger; it is submitted to continuous supervision and observation. So, an atmosphere must be created, a working system in which the actor feels that he can do absolutely anything, and will be understood and accepted.”

“Understood and accepted” not only for those qualities we feel proud of: our strength, our beauty, and those emotions we have been taught to value: like love and courage. But understood and accepted also for qualities we feel embarrassed about, for emotions we may feel ashamed of. Anger perhaps, or despair... and most of all: Fear.

The difficulty is that most of us have internalized the “supervision and observation.” Perhaps when we were young, we saw that indeed there were adults in the world who did not “understand or accept” us and could hurt us.

I, for instance, remember quite well the day I learned how *not* to sing. It was in fifth-grade chorus class, and the group was singing some song in two-part harmony. At one point, the teacher stopped us and asked us all to repeat one phrase. As we sang, he scanned the group, listening intently. At the end of the phrase, he pointed at me and said simply, “You... don't sing.” Then he raised his hands for the group to start the song again. As the other kids around me sang, I silently moved my lips. And from that moment on, I felt very insecure when trying to sing.

So, by the time we are adults, most of us have become our own critics. In our minds, we often hear the many negative judgments even when those judgments do not actually exist in the world. That is why, training to be an actor begins with

an act of kindness towards oneself, an act of acceptance of our whole selves, and an examination of the ways in which we, ourselves, may denigrate or undermine our own work.

Doing that requires daring to look especially at those parts of ourselves we've been taught are "bad." Whatever parts of ourselves we have rejected, we must allow ourselves to see them: Our imperfections, our failures and our fears – and also our loves, our longings, or our power – because many of us have learned to hide those things too. Our work is to accept them and to recognize them as valuable elements of our beings.

But how do we train to do that?

As many of you are aware, the acting training that Jerzy Grotowski taught was very physical. But unlike mime or other physical disciplines, it was not really **about** the physicality at all.

When I studied with Grotowski in 1967, one of the students in that workshop asked M. Grotowski why we were approaching acting beginning with the body instead of using sense memory exercises for instance. Grotowski, said there were many reasons. One important reason, he said, was that emotions and memories were actually held within the muscles themselves. So, by exploring all the parts of our bodies, we could actually gain access to feelings we have hidden for years. In that way, the physical training acts as a doorway into our inner beings. And in that sense, the physical exercises can serve the same purpose that a sense memory or emotional memory exercise might.

But another reason for employing our bodies like this, M. Grotowski suggested, is that physical actions serve as clear, obvious *paradigms* for mental and emotional conditions. In other words, how we work with our bodies reveals in clear, obvious ways, how we handle our emotions. And by learning to work differently with our bodies, we can also change how we work with other parts of ourselves.

For instance: Grotowski asked us to do a number of difficult headstands and handstands, many of which we struggled accomplish. We would strain and wobble and again and again we would fall. But when we did, M. Grotowski said to us:

“When you fall, you must think of the ground as someone or something that loves you and will not reject you.”

But what did he mean? “The floor is someone who loves you”? Was he just trying to be mysterious?

It was only several years later, when I was watching a one-year-old child learning to walk, that I realized that actually, there had been a time when the ground had “loved” me. Because when a child who is learning to walk falls down, the floor is not an insult, not a sign of failure. It is a return to home – a revisit of the safe place where he has been crawling for several months. Even if that return home arrives with a bump, it carries no judgment or fear of failure. When he falls down, his parents don’t say: “Ah, poor child, that’s not good! You’ve failed at walking! Better just stick with crawling.” No, they smile and encourage him to try again.

So, slowly, as I began to teach this work, I came to understand that Grotowski had not been being mysterious when said things like “the floor is someone who loves you” He was simply trying to reawaken our understanding of learning as a process of experimentation – rather than as an attempt to find the “right answers.” And he was teaching us a lesson about acceptance.

Another day, after falling again and again from a headstand, a student protested, “I just can’t keep my balance. Why are you asking us to do these impossible things?” M. Grotowski replied:

“The real value [of the exercises] lies in [y]our not being able to do them.”

Again, this was totally mysterious to us. But as I began to teach this work, I came to understand that what Grotowski was suggesting was that the interesting lesson for the actor in attempting to do a difficult or even an impossible headstand lay not in getting it “right” but in learning how to enjoy the wobbling.

He was trying to help us perceive that the apparent task – the headstand – was not something we must “accomplish.” It was an opportunity to “play” with our balance, to play with the fear of falling, and to examine our judgments about our bodies, and the cascade of emotions that arose as we struggled with the “impossible” form. So, physical form – the headstand – was actually a clear opportunity to notice how we might “play” with other moments in our work when judgments, fears and imperfections arose – moments we tended to shy away from because we thought of them as “failures.”

Grotowski’s view was that what we thought of as “failure” was often a sign that we were working well. He said:

“In order to create one must, each time, take all the risks of failure.”

What interested Grotowski in this process was the idea that the exploration, the “playing” with the wobble of a headstand or with the fear that arises when we face the audience, is more interesting – both for the actor and for the audience –

than hitting the perfect headstand or pretending to be comfortable when we are not.

Grotowski called this work: Questioning.

He said to us:

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 if we are to live with such constant questioning, we must be able to bear the condition of **not knowing**. In fact, “not knowing” is actually a condition that actors must cultivate. For instance, the actors playing Romeo and Juliet must “not know” how the story ends. If they did know, they wouldn’t be able to fall in love in Act I. We may “know” that love often leads to sorrow, but if we use that knowledge to deprive ourselves of the chance of falling in love once more, it is like protecting oneself from falling down by never daring to climb a tree.

As Shakespeare’s most famous character, Hamlet, points out: Not knowing can be terrifying. As he contemplates suicide, Hamlet realizes that what makes death so frightening is that we don’t know what lies on the other side:

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause...

Hamlet lists the things that make life burdensome, and he concludes:

Who would [these] fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?

In other words, when we are faced with the unknown, we tend to fill that void with imagined terrors. This is true in many circumstances: Certainly, when we are facing death, but also when we are falling in love or applying for a job... or when we stand in front of the audience, we may fear that the audience is criticizing us. And faced with the terrors of the unknown, we would rather “rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of.”

The problem is that, if we stick with what we know, if in our fear of making a “mistake” we try to always get things “right,” we cut off a great source of

creative energy: the energy which exists within the fear, because even fear itself is something we can learn to play with and enjoy.

[Teach the “slap hands” exercise. Comments on the exercise?]

And one of the greatest fears we must learn to face is the fear of failure. When we start to fall from a headstand or forget our line, the question is not “how do I “fix” or “cover” or “mask” this mistake, but rather, “How can I make this “mistake” part of the work? The secret lies not in avoiding “mistakes” or “failures” but in learning to see such things as opportunities, rather than as problems:

“The actor,” Grotowski said, “Must have the presence of mind rapidly to insert into the structure of the role any mistakes (in diction or movement) involuntarily committed during the performance.”

So, maybe the hardest thing for us to learn as actors is that failure is not a problem. In this sense, the acting training that I teach is not simply a learning about how to act, it is also a rediscovery of an approach to life and learning that values everything we encounter: every sadness as much as every joy, and every “failure” as something “interesting,” something to play with.

One could liken this process to the Japanese Zen concept of Kin-tsugi

[SLIDE of Kintsugi bowl]

In Kintsugi, a broken bowl is mended with gold or silver lacquer, revealing the beauty of imperfection and the poignant truth of impermanence.

The Canadian poet Leonard Cohen put it this way:

*[SLIDE of translated lyrics, and AUDIO of Leonard Cohen singing:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDTph7mer3I>]*

The birds they sang
At the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what
Has passed away
Or what is yet to be

Ah the wars they will
Be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again

Bought and sold
And bought again
The dove is never free

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

[Turn off the Leonard Cohen at this point]

The Zen master Suzuki Roshi said something similar:

Whatever we see is changing, losing its balance. The reason everything looks beautiful is because it is out of balance, but its background is always in perfect harmony... if you see things without realizing the background of Buddha nature, everything appears to be in the form of suffering. But if you understand the background of existence, you realize that suffering itself is how we live... So in Zen, sometimes we emphasize the imbalance and disorder of life.

Thus, the artist does not shy away from the imperfections in our world, he does not seek to make the Truth simpler than it is or more comfortable. His task is rather to help the audience see that he – and they – can bear the complexities, the imperfections, the contradictions in life. To do that, he must, himself, learn to bear unpleasant truths.

He must allow himself to fully embody characters he admires and characters he hates, for all of us are as jealous as Othello, as unhappy as Hamlet, as violent as Medea and as vulnerable as Juliet and as sexy as Cleopatra.

The actor's job is not one of covering the "flaws" of his character, but of allowing the humanity of these imperfections to shine. And acting training is a process of practicing this, beginning by noticing the parts of ourselves we tend to hide, and step-by-step, seeing, accepting and transforming those very parts into our art. To do that requires great self-love, and patience: **space**: space for what we are used to calling "failure," space, and the willingness to try again.

So, I think, the real problem with our cell phones is that they often fill up this space. At the first signs of discomfort or imperfection or worry or boredom, they offer us an easy exit and they "mask" whatever is bothersome in our minds. In so doing so, they can fill up the cracks which allow the "light" in.

Our job as artists is to notice our tendencies: our desires to fill up the empty spaces, our habits of masking what we are feeling, our methods of distracting

ourselves from the many wonderful and uncomfortable truths we carry within us. Noticing how we are feeling just before we reach for the phone.

And our next task is to make safe space in which we can begin to remove our masks and let the light come in. We must have the patience to bear the unfolding process without further criticizing ourselves, to keep still while we bear our joys and fears.

Here is the entire poem by Pablo Neruda that I mentioned at the beginning of my talk:

[Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=surA6VDTK_0]

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth,
let's not speak in any language;
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victories with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death.

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,

and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go.