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# Listen Like an Actor: The Key to the Performing Art of Therapy

Mark O'Connell, LCSW-R, MFA

## ABSTRACT

As both a therapist and an actor, O'Connell proposes that: 1) The artforms of acting and psychotherapy share the same core goal: to invite another person to embody a range of their humanity; and 2) Both artforms rely on the same core action to realize that goal – to listen. By listening to clients the way actors listen to their scene partners, O'Connell suggests that clinicians can maximize how we use our most essential instrument for therapeutic engagement: ourselves – particularly in terms of our implicit/nonverbal communication, or “subtext.” He emphasizes that listening like an actor is always the key to performing the art of therapy, no matter what “kind” of therapist we are, and no matter how our “scene work” takes place, (e.g. on “stage” or screen). Anecdotes from both therapy and acting are used to illustrate his ideas.

## KEYWORDS

Listening; implicit communication; use of self; multiplicity of self; improvisation; acting

Freud and Meryl Streep both say that the key to their respective artforms – psychotherapy and acting – is to simply listen (Faires, 2010; Freud, 1912, p. 112). But what does that aphorism actually mean in practice, for a therapist or an actor? To simply not speak to our scene partners? To stare at them with scrutiny? To retreat into an analytic daydream while they speak, and pretend that we're blank, “neutral,” or invisible?

## Listening as dramatic action

As both an actor and a therapist, I've come to appreciate the relational and transformative power of listening. And I propose that when we think of listening as a dramatic action, and attune to how we play that action, moment to moment – even inadvertently – we maximize our potential to realize the core goal of both therapy and of acting: to invite another person (a character, a client, a scene partner) to embody a range of their humanity.

In this paper I want to emphasize that like actors, as therapists our very **presence** makes us dynamic and interactive “scene partners,” whether or not we speak. I believe this is true no matter what “kind” of therapist we are, or where our “scenes” take place – e.g., on “stage” (in an office) or “screen” (between laptops).

People are like pianos. We have multiple keys of potential selves within our *instruments*, but we play only a few of those keys in our everyday lives. “Our everyday self is a narrow construct . . . Our total self is far broader, ultimately infinite,” says acting teacher Richard Hornby (1992). Much like actor Wallace Shawn<sup>1</sup> said, “We are not what we seem. We are *more* than what we seem” (Shawn, 2011); Meryl Streep proclaimed, “We have everyone within us” (Safer, 2012); master theater teacher Kristin Linklater declared, “I am All as well as One” (Linklater, 1997, p. 6); and psychoanalyst Philip Bromberg, invoking Linklater, wrote that when we embody one version of self, our multiple other selves are still within us (Chefetz & Bromberg, 2004), waiting their turn. We awaken to, and learn to

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<sup>1</sup>Wallace Shawn's essay “Why I Call Myself a Socialist,” inadvertently but beautifully illustrates Philip Bromberg's idea of multiplicity of self (Bromberg, 1998) through the lens of acting: “Contrary to the popular misconception, the actor is not necessarily a specialist in imitating or portraying what he knows about other people. On the contrary, the actor may simply be a person who's more willing than others to reveal some truths about himself” (Shawn, 2011).

play (Winnicott, 1968), the various potential or hidden selves (Benjamin, 2018; Khan, 1983) within our *instruments* through the scene work (Ringstrom, 2007), dramatic dialogue (Atlas & Aron, 2019), or as I like to call it, *rehearsal process* (O’Connell, 2019a) that both therapy and acting enable (Milner, 1950/2010). And the quality of that creative engagement depends on *how* we listen to our scene partners, in every moment of every scene, and *how* they listen to us in return.

I love how actor Robin Weigert,<sup>2</sup> who played the therapist on the HBO series *Big Little Lies*, describes the art of listening:

One of the great values of comparing acting to therapy is that in acting there is a name for the mystical (third) element that steps into a scene when invited, this *child* that is born of our listening. We call it a *character*. But, it is not necessarily *your* character that enters the scene when invited, it is *the other actor’s* character. You believe in her character, she has become manifest through your listening, your belief has sparked belief inside your scene partner. And now that your scene partner believes in herself, she is able to listen *your* character into existence as well. (personal communication)

Weigert illustrates how the act of simply but truly listening – both in acting and in therapy – is inevitably relational and transformative. As each scene partner responds authentically (Loewald, 1975) to the other’s presence, various versions of both participants are invited into the scene (self-states, characters, selves, keys on our instruments) with the potential to be enacted (Atlas & Aron, 2019), embodied (van der Kolk, 2015), voiced (Bollas, 1987; Chefetz & Bromberg, 2004), played (Loewald, 1975; Milner, 1950/2010), witnessed (Stern, 2019), mirrored and joined (Beebe, 2004; Kohut, 1977), recognized and acknowledged (Benjamin, 2018), transformed (O’Connell, 2019b), and, most importantly, **lived** (Bromberg, 1998; Corbett, 2021; Loewald, 1975; Winnicott, 1971).

## Where am I?

Listening with presence and possibility requires therapists to begin each session with Winnicott’s battle cry: “I AM, I am alive, I am myself” (Winnicott, 1971). This includes emphasizing self-awareness, self-care, and opportunities for self-expansion through our scene work. The more connected we are to *ourselves* and our own possibilities, the more we can invite our clients to embody *themselves* and all they can be – just by exchanging attention. With that objective in mind, I continuously ask myself:

Where am I in my mind and body? What do I need, physically, mentally, and emotionally, to listen to my scene partner with a sense of possibility? Do I feel safe enough to surrender (Benjamin, 2018; Ghent, 1990) to our rehearsal process, to stay in the paradox (Corbett, 2022; Winnicott, 1971), to play with them responsively (Gray, 2015; Loewald, 1975; Ringstrom, 2018), and progressively (Corbett, 2021), and to “get lost in our play” (Milner, 1950/2010, pp. 191–192)? What conditions are necessary for me to accept my scene partner’s invitation to embody *characters* within myself, especially those that are unwanted, or decidedly *not me* (Chefetz & Bromberg, 2004; Sullivan, 1950/1964). How do I listen to my scene partner with attunement, generosity, and creativity in the face of technical and emotional obstacles that may distract or overwhelm my capacity to breathe, feel, think, receive and respond (O’Connell, 2019a)?

## Clinical narrative: Listening the characters to life

When Zack – a White, straight, uber-masculine male teen – began therapy with me, I found it hard to just listen to him. I reflexively *butched it up* (affected “masculine” qualities), hoping to be palatable to him.

As a gay male who has always naturally defied gender norms, I had a primal fear of Zack’s disapproval and rejection of me, a visceral recall from growing up with three brothers in

<sup>2</sup>Of note: Robin Weigert is the descendant of prominent psychoanalysts, including her father, Wolfgang Weigert and her grandmother, Edith Weigert, who wrote about psychotherapy as a creative art (Weigert, 1964).

a homophobic, effeminophobic world. Much as I did in high school, or when playing the part of a straight “dude” as a young actor, I tried (and was sometimes encouraged) to project *butchness* in order to shield both myself and my scene partner from my *queerness*.

This is, of course, the opposite of listening with presence; how could I invite Zack to freely explore his total self while I modeled the opposite (“I am Not. I’m not alive. I’m not me.”)? Rather than seeking possibilities between us, I was preoccupied with producing a quality, a result (to seem “masculine”) which, as any acting teacher will tell you, is a dead end. This made my breathing shallow, my face and body tense, and killed my inner creative life, which in turn discouraged Zack from playing with me. Here’s a taste of what I mean:

\*

**Zack:** (*Looking at me searchingly, gesturing with big open-palmed hands that demand answers*). Like, I get down on myself. Then everyone just tells me to “think positive.” My dad. My coach ...

**Me:** (*Rather than follow my instinct to inhale and make space for us both to reflect on Zack’s bid for recognition, I respond to him hastily, nodding with false self-assurance, and speaking with a forced attempt to convey authority, aka vocal tension, plagued by my inner demons of self-doubt, which warn me to accommodate him so he doesn’t call me a “fagot” or tell me I “suck” at my job*). What do they suggest you do with your negative thoughts?

**Zack:** (*Receiving my response like a direction from his coach*). Journal about them. I guess I should probably just do that.

\*

My line wasn’t necessarily unhelpful, but as Zack’s response indicated, my overdetermined delivery of it foreclosed the possibility for vulnerability and play between us. Instead I inadvertently encouraged Zack to seek a hasty result. This is an example of what actors call **subtext** – the thoughts and feelings implicit in our eyes, faces, and bodies (O’Connell, 2019a; Stern, 2017) – being more evocative than the lines we speak (Beebe, 2004; O’Connell, 2019a; Wallin, 2007, p. 259). In other words, while my text seemed to offer Zack permission to express a range of emotions, my subtext (in this case, my efforts to mask myself vocally and physically with “masculinity”) conveyed a message like, “Keep your garbage feelings off the court.”

(Only later would I remember being 19 when I similarly stifled creative play with faux *butchness*. While rehearsing the role of Lysander in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the director awakened me to how my guardedness affected my relationship with Hermia, saying, “Find the love. You look like you want to kill her ...”)<sup>3</sup>

Before I knew it, I became Zack’s dad, his coach, and every other person who dismissed him by saying, “Just think positive.” We could describe these characters in Zack’s life as his *repeated relationships* (Stern, 2017), objects projected from the “trailing edge” of his transference (Atlas & Aron, 2019; Miller, 1985, p. 19). As opposed to his *needed relationship* (Stern, 2017), a role in which the “leading edge” of his transference (Atlas & Aron, 2019; Miller, 1985, p. 19) was trying to cast me (Loewald, 1975); someone who could hold his insecurities and invite him to embody more of himself.

<sup>3</sup>In contrast, a few years later I was told to “butch it up,” by a gay director no less, while rehearsing a production of *Romeo & Juliet* in which I played Romeo. Fortunately, rather than submit to this director’s anxiety about me “seeming gay,” by trying to force a “masculine” exterior – which would have undermined my function in the play (to be driven by genuine, unadulterated love) – I trusted that in order to stay present with my scene partners, and to organically discover and embody the heightened emotions necessary for the role, I would need to *start* from exactly where I *was*, even if my mannerisms defied normative expectations for a man who is in love with a woman (O’Connell, 2019b).

Philip Ringstrom might say that my *butch defense* kept my scene work with Zack in a “dramatic repetition” (Ringstrom, 2018) and that I needed to free myself from this pattern in order to allow for “improvisational theater” (Ringstrom, 2018) to take place, which could allow us both to imagine new ways of relating. In other words, by simply claiming the freedom to *be* in my own body and self, with the capacity to breathe, think, feel, and play, I might similarly invite Zack to transcend the limitations of *his* everyday self, and to find relational possibilities through our rehearsals. Just by listening to him.

We could also think of my implicit “performance” of Zack’s *repeated* objects, as what Galit Atlas and Lewis Aron describe as generative enactment – a repetition of the past that has the potential to be rehearsed, worked through, and transformed (Atlas & Aron, 2019). That is, as long as I could reflect on our *rehearsals*, and make adjustments/repairs with my instrument next time that would allow me to play Zack’s *needed* object.

The following week, as Zack and I “got into place,” (as actors say) I felt the energy in my feet ground into the floor, my shoulders release, and a mixture of vulnerability and self-possession fire up in my belly. I thought, “Here I am Zack. I’m a gay man with effeminate expressions, and I’m a lot more than that too. I’m *me*. And I’m ready to listen to *you*. So tell me, what’s new?”

\*

**Zack:** (*Accepting my nonverbal invitation*). Today was ok. Before I left for school my dad said, “You’ll be fine.” And I was. (*He nods with forced vigor as though he wants me to join him*).

**Me:** (*Instead of accommodating his subliminal request for me to validate him by nodding, which would mean relinquishing my physical groundedness and therefore my full capacity to listen, I instead grant myself a nourishing and expansive inhale, enlivening the disavowed vulnerability lingering in my lower ribs. And as I do, I absorb both Zack’s text and his subtext from exactly where I am, allowing a natural range of feelings to be present within me, from my heels to my eyes – insecurity and confidence, dread along with hope (Mitchell, 1993). Your dad sounds really validating.*

(*As I speak, I’m aware that my genuine, compassionate curiosity about how Zack’s day really went, is registering in my eyes – along with the other contrasting feelings swimming around inside me. My intention is that Zack will receive my attention and the unadulterated way I offer it to him, as an invitation to stop nodding defensively and to openly describe his multiple layers of experience with a similar self-possession*).

**Zack:** (*Chuckling*). He doesn’t like conflict. He knows how to keep the peace. (*He smiles with earnest eyes, as if to say, “I guess my emotions can make him uncomfortable.”*)

\*

And there it was: an opening for us to explore more versions of Zack, beyond his everyday role of *tough athlete*. By grounding myself where I *was* in that moment, I was able to listen to Zack with presence, compassion, and curiosity. And through this action, which was beyond words, I seemed to become the character he’d asked me to play for him with *his* subtext – a yearning he expressed mainly through his eyes.

From that point on, Zack and I have been able to openly discuss his relational dilemma with his father. He talks about the obligation he feels to accept his dad’s attempts to validate him, and how these efforts exacerbate his fears of inadequacy by inadvertently suggesting he should simply “get over it” when he’s down. We’ve also begun to explore the specific complexity inherent in his fear of not being “tough enough”: namely an attachment trauma related to his mother, which he’d

previously only referred to glancingly. Zack's mother has a long history of self-harm, and for most of his life he has feared he would replicate these behaviors if he wasn't disciplined and at the top of his game – like his dad and coach always encouraged him to be. As it turns out, Zack needed me to **embody the unguarded – yet grounded – version of myself** that I dreaded being in his presence, and to **listen to him from that position**. This invitation – which I offered him mostly by simply connecting authentically to my instrument – emboldened him to imagine various ways to *live* beyond the constricting trappings of his everyday self.

## Prepare to be present

I couldn't have known how to *be* with Zack effectively before showing up and exchanging attention with him. Like Oscar winner Nicole Kidman says, "It's together that you create a scene" (Rose, 2003). Having spent weeks alone preparing to play Virginia Woolf in the movie *The Hours*, for example, Kidman says it wasn't until she stepped on set with the actor playing her husband that the most meaningful work began: "[We] just looked at each other," she recalls, "and from that point on we were Virginia and Leonard" (Caro, 2003). Zack and I required a comparable meeting "on set" to find our roles. Even so, I believe the actorly, mind/body exercises I practice on my own, primed me to be present with Zack, and to discover *how* he needed me to listen to him. Two of those practices were particularly salient: 1) Observing myself on video, from the **outside in**, and 2) Breathing and embodying myself, from the **inside out**.

## Observe: Utilizing video

"Never act in front of a mirror," asserts Helen Mirren. "You are doing the exact opposite of what acting is about. Acting is all about what's happening within you. It doesn't matter what's happening on your face" (Mirren, 2020). I both agree and disagree with her.

Mirren refers to the stultifying ego trap of **self-consciousness** in which we can easily get stuck when we stare at our own reflection, not unlike how psychoanalyst Michael Eigen explains Lacan's view of self-recognition: "The mirror or visual me, the actor for an audience, is used as a defense against authentic body feelings, especially one's vulnerability and insufficiency" (Eigen, 1981; Lacan, 1977). Point taken: connecting to our vulnerability is necessary to be fully alive (Levine, 2008), to create "interesting characters" (Mirren, 2020), and for inviting our scene partners to embody more of themselves (as I was ultimately able to do for Zack), and therefore we don't want to "rise above it," as my grad school acting teachers would say when I focused more on the appearance of my performance than on dropping into my (character's) emotional stakes.

That being said, when I see myself on screen, particularly during tele-sessions, I can observe how my thoughts and feelings naturally register in my eyes and face in response to my scene partner, and this tends to awaken my **self-awareness**, not necessarily self-consciousness. By seeing what my client sees, I can recognize how my inner life – including my vulnerability – naturally affects my outward appearance, even when I'm just listening. It shows me where I *am*, in the here-and-now, (e.g., frozen in self-conscious anxiety, manifesting in a tense jaw and furrowed brow, as I attempt to accommodate a scene partner like Zack), and allows me to consider creative possibilities for how I *can be* (e.g., grounded and welcoming, as expressed by a relaxed jaw and warm, curious eyes). In contrast to the warnings of Lacan and Mirren, I think of my video exercise along the lines of how Eigen elucidates Winnicott's take on **self-reflection**; that it **can both confirm our sense of self, and help it to evolve** (Eigen, 1981; Winnicott, 1965).

Beatrice Beebe similarly observes that "video provides a unique opportunity to learn about the therapist's collaborative participation outside the verbal narrative" (Sandberg & Beebe, 2020). And though her perspective on implicit communication between scene partners is not informed by acting like mine is, we've come to many of the same ideas through different routes. As both a psychoanalyst and an infant researcher – particularly with her groundbreaking work utilizing video to study facial

mirroring and vocal rhythm coordination in parent – infant face-to-face exchanges (Beebe, 2004; Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Jaffe et al., 2001) – Dr. Beebe has also effectively used video with adult clients, as a way to study the nonverbal communication of therapists (Beebe, 2004; Sandberg & Beebe, 2020). Her discovery that video can be a “crucial” tool (Sandberg & Beebe, 2020) for both therapist and client to recognize, expand, and be intentional about our use of self, supports my suggestion for therapists to use video as an aid to our clinical development.<sup>4</sup>

I for one find observing my face on video to resemble a drama school exercise called “mask work.” The actor looks in a mirror while wearing a distinctive mask, which frees them from self-consciousness, and inspires them to imagine various authentic ways to *be* and relate, beyond their everyday selves. Similarly, whenever I see myself in tele-sessions, for example, I think of my face as a mask, an instrument I can use to reveal various versions of *me*, as opposed to a trap that confines me to only one mode of expression. Depending on what transpires between me and my scene partner, I may adjust the way I’m listening. If my face is tense with criticism, for instance, I can relax it by listening with curiosity, which effectively changes my authentic subtext from “What are you talking about? . . .” to, “Tell me more.”<sup>5</sup>

Of note: My scenes with Zack took place live in my office, (pre-Covid), so I obviously couldn’t see how my subtext manifested in my face in real time. But having become familiar with my presence on screen, I could imagine how my instrument appeared to him, which helped me to make informed adjustments internally, and therefore externally,<sup>6</sup> without having to objectively see my own face.

To be clear, much like Stanislavsky’s instruction to actors to “love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art” (Hagen, 1973), Helen Mirren’s reminder that visual navel-gazing can stifle one’s creative imagination and openness to collaboration, is important for every performing artist to consider (especially in the age of the airbrushed selfie). But at the same time, in order to listen to our scene partners with presence, we must acknowledge what we bring to each scene just by showing up. And more than actors, therapists need a reminder that we *always* contribute to our scenes nonverbally, whether we realize it or not.<sup>7</sup> Many of us would rather *not* realize that fact, which is perhaps why we became therapists; we prefer to give the spotlight to our scene partners. But in order to effectively invite them to take space, we must own all the ways in which *we* take it, even by default.

“Take space to make space!,” says stage and screen director Liesl Tommy, which I believe should be every therapist’s mantra. Tommy, who was trained as an actor, uses her presence as a director to empower her actors to *show up* in their own creative way, listening to each of them like a scene partner. “She approaches you like an actor.” says Oscar-winner Jennifer Hudson, whom Tommy directed as Aretha Franklin in the biopic, *Respect*, “Which allows you to breathe.” (Hudson, 2021).

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<sup>4</sup>I demonstrate and explore the concept of actorly subtext in my workshops for therapists. And I highly recommend video feedback as a tool for psychotherapy training programs, similar to how video is used in screen acting classes – which is to help each performing artist to become aware of their instrument and its possibilities. Relatedly, Romanelli, Moran, and Tishby’s research (Romanelli et al., 2019) shows how theatrical improvisational training in particular, can help therapists to be aware of self and other, and make use of our instruments. They specifically note that improv training can help us to “heighten awareness of Beebe and Lachmann’s (2002) three organizing principles of interaction: vocal rhythm, facial mirroring and distress regulation.”

<sup>5</sup>The “therapy wars,” as it were (Burkman, 2016), could come to an end if psychotherapists of all stripes acknowledged our shared understanding that **the therapist’s implicit communication is of primary clinical importance in session**. Consider CBT icon Judith Beck’s emphasis on the empathic listening of the therapist – as conveyed through their “tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language” (Beck, 2011, p. 239), a.k.a subtext (Beck, 2011, p. 83) – and how similar it is to the observations of psychodynamically informed clinicians (on the opposite side of the therapy aisle from Beck), such as Beebe’s focus on the use of the therapist’s face (Beebe, 2004), and Jonathan Shedler’s studies which reveal that the individual interactions between each unique pair of *scene partners* are what most determine the effectiveness of any therapy treatment, regardless of the methods and techniques that are used (Shedler, 2015).

<sup>6</sup>Psychoanalyst Sheldon Bach might describe this practice as oscillating back and forth between states of *subjective awareness* and *objective self-reflection* (Bach, 2016, p. 56; O’Connell, 2019a).

<sup>7</sup>I’ve written elsewhere about how I first learned this lesson, as a child in a production of *The Music Man*. While believing I was invisible as I “just listened” to the two leads rehearsing the *Marion the Librarian* scene, the director called out to me, “Mark, don’t look at them! Pretend to read a book or something . . .” I learned in that moment that I’m actively and obviously part of the scene no matter what I do or don’t do (O’Connell, 2019a, 2019b).

## Embodiment: Utilizing breath

In order to truly recognize and embody our presence, we must make use of an “essential tool” (van der Kolk, 2015) that actors spend years in drama school learning to utilize: breath.

As babies, we breathe fully and freely, if we’re raised in safe and loving homes. But as we grow, we **self-consciously** contort our breath to protect ourselves from shame, rejection, and emotional or physical harm. We allow ourselves just enough air to *survive*, but not enough to *live* – to express ourselves openly, and expansively. It’s as if by denying ourselves breath we won’t feel, and if we can’t feel, we can’t be harmed – or at least we won’t be **aware** of the harm; out of breath, out of mind (O’Connell, 2019a). In my work with Zack, for example, I reflexively tensed my body, and squashed my capacity to breathe, as a result of my internal self-direction to “Butch it up!”

As adults we must re-learn to breathe (like babies) not just to *survive*, but to *live*, fully and freely (O’Connell, 2019a). For instance, finding a way to breathe in Zack’s presence was perhaps the most pivotal clinical intervention I performed with him, as that action alone invited us both to listen to one another with aliveness. (Like a client of mine, who is also an actor, once said, “It feels depressing sometimes to breathe. But at the same time, breathing reminds me that I’m not dead yet.”<sup>8</sup>) And that’s where drama school comes in, training artists to rediscover our capacity to breathe, to *live* and to embody a range of feelings and perspectives. Hopefully one day psychotherapy institutes will do the same.<sup>9</sup>

Every day before sessions I practice breathing, which prepares me to listen with presence. Whether I do an exercise from drama school,<sup>10</sup> yoga, or if I go for a run, my first task is always to unlock tension in specific areas of my body (particularly my neck, shoulders, and lower ribs), which I habitually and reflexively use as a shield against vulnerability. This allows my breath to gradually expand. A range of raw sensations then inevitably flood my body and mind, particularly feelings of inadequacy and fear, along with thoughts like, “Why am I wasting time with this silly exercise? I could be writing a paper! . . .” I observe my temptation to disavow my vulnerability and rush to the finish line, not unlike the way therapists hastily impose treatment plans on clients, to quell our anxiety about not doing enough; or actors contort themselves to satisfy the expectations of producers, directors, or audiences.<sup>11</sup> But instead, I will myself to “stay in there,” as my acting teachers would say, and I continue to expand my breath moment-to-moment, which allows me to both think and feel at the same time. With each new breath I discover not only that my vulnerability does not swallow me, as I initially feared (Levine, 2008), but it empowers me to be aware of my mind and body in the present, and to engage with the person in front of me as I *am*, not as I think I *should be*.<sup>12</sup> From this experience of centeredness, I can then breathe in my scene partner as well, without the fear of submitting (Benjamin, 2018; Ghent, 1990) to their perspective entirely, or expecting them to submit to mine. The more we allow ourselves to breathe, the more room we make for both of us to exist and expand in each other’s presence.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Similarly, Galit Atlas writes: “The freedom to think and to feel even the most disturbing thoughts and painful emotions brings with it the experience of being alive” (Atlas, 2022).

<sup>9</sup>This work has already begun: For instance, Alexander Technique teacher Betsy Polatin (Polatin, 2013), who works extensively with performing artists – actors in particular – also collaborates with the founder of Somatic Experiencing, Levine (2008) to **train therapists in the art of breathing, in order to authentically embody and take ownership of our instruments**.

<sup>10</sup>In my book *The Performing Art of Therapy* (O’Connell, 2019a), and my workshops for therapists, I share actorly exercises and meditations that help us to find a natural impulse to breathe, to use breath to stay present, and to experience a full range of feelings, while having the capacity to engage others at the same time.

<sup>11</sup>This phenomenon is what director Peter Brook refers to as the *deadly theater* (Brook, 1968). As therapists, we can easily find ourselves practicing *deadly therapy* (O’Connell, 2021), when we emphasize results over rehearsal, product over process.

<sup>12</sup>At these moments, I draw inspiration from great actors who deeply understand that it is through vulnerability that we find our greatest strength: e.g., Viola Davis in the film adaptation of August Wilson’s *Fences*, for example, who in the character of Rose, allows desperate tears of heartbreak to flood her face as she mightily emancipates herself from the submissive role she has always played with her husband.

<sup>13</sup>This is not unlike Beebe’s advice for parents in her face-to-face infant studies, to “wait” when they reflexively “loom” over their babies who turn away from them – and who are likely seeking a regulating breath of their own before continuing to play (Dougherty et al., 2016). I’m also reminded here of Corbett’s description of “privacy” as a necessary part of relational presence (Corbett, 2014), which is not necessarily the same thing as disengaging, ending the “scene,” or saying, “No!” to your scene partner. We all need a moment once in a while, don’t we?



The willingness and capacity actors have to breathe into where they *are*, in order to imagine where they *can be*, is why trauma psychologist Bessel van Der Kolk calls acting one of his favorite therapeutic interventions. “[Actors] have a very powerful treatment,” he says, “They can help someone change their identity into being something other than what they’ve gotten stuck to become. . . And if you’re a person who models comfort in your body it’s much easier to get another person to follow” (van der Kolk, 2015). The comfort to which van der Kolk refers, comes from our courage to **breathe and stay in there** with our scene partners, with a sense of possibility; to say, “Yes and . . .,” as opposed to “No.”<sup>14</sup> The willingness to breathe into the moment we’re in, invites us both to discover all that we can be. In clinical terms, breathing freely and fully not only increases my capacity to stand in the spaces (Bromberg, 1998) between my various selves, but it allows me to *play* in those spaces with my scene partners as well (O’Connell, 2014, 2019b), and to encourage them to join me.

On occasion, clients have even acknowledged the effectiveness of me simply being present with them. For instance, a member of a same-sex male couple who were on the verge of separation after decades together, and who were ashamed of this identity change, said to me at our second session, “I don’t know what it is. I think it’s your demeanor as you listen, but I feel braver about moving out than I did before . . . to find out who I am.” And a client I’ve worked with for years, who teaches theater, recently offered:

I can tell you’re here with me, even when you don’t speak. It’s brave. You must have a practice you do, to stay present, to trust yourself to follow me wherever I go. . . I want to borrow some of that when I’m with students. I don’t trust myself; I don’t allow myself to stop and **breathe**. I always feel the pressure to DO something.

## Stay in there

As good as it feels to receive validation from my scene partners for my efforts, like the harmonious end to a Shakespearean comedy, my use of breath serves me most of all as a performing artist when I have no idea how to *be* with them, when I find myself flummoxing through (Ringstrom, 2018) *rehearsal*, and getting lost (Milner, 1950/2010, pp. 191–192) in unconscious enactments (Atlas & Aron, 2019). Which is more often than I’d like to admit. But thinking like an actor, gives me faith (Eigen, 1981) to *not know* (Corbett, 2021) what I’m doing in session, and to trust that breathing, listening, and *staying in there* – especially when I’m humbled by self-doubt (Nissen-Lie et al., 2017)<sup>15</sup> – will invite both me and my scene partners to find life beyond the limits of our everyday selves; which I believe is the definition of mental health. With each new breath, in each new scene, I’m guided by something legendary actor Cicely Tyson stated, late in her long career: it’s only when we think we know what we’re doing that we’re truly lost, because we “stop searching,” we “stop trying to get to the essence of what a . . . person really is” (American Theatre Wing, 2018).<sup>16</sup>

## Clinical illustration: Listening in the face of doubt

For years I’ve had a conspicuously good rapport with my client Tara, an actress who is Black; I am White. I’ve often reflected on our work, wondering why our scenes rarely had conflict (actors know that *every scene* has conflict). “If everything is always so nice,” I thought, “what are we missing?” More specifically, why did the topic of race rarely if ever enter the scene?

<sup>14</sup>Saying “Yes, and . . .” or “Yes, but . . .” as opposed to “No,” is the first rule of improvisation (Gray, 2015; O’Connell, 2019a; Ringstrom, 2018).

<sup>15</sup>Psychologist Helen Nissen Lie’s research shows that the “most effective” way to engage clients is with “professional self-doubt” (Nissen-Lie et al., 2017), as opposed to certainty. And breathing like an actor, helps us to embrace our self-doubt, so that we can find unforeseen possibilities.

<sup>16</sup>This quote reminds me of theater director Peter Brook’s statement that the “greatest aid” for an actor or a therapist is “naivete” (Brook, 1994).

On one occasion I found an opportunity to address this notable absence, to which Tara replied, “I guess I try not to rock the boat. I’m afraid people will be too fragile to hear what I have to say.” I’m sure I responded with a well-intentioned line that, at least on the surface, assured her I’m not too fragile to hear whatever she has to say, and which no doubt made me feel woke and responsible – not unlike a *white savior* character from *The Help* or *Hidden Figures* or countless other movies that make White people feel good about being “good.” We then processed some of the relational dynamics that contribute to her ambivalence about being open with others, including her lifetime experience of systemic racism. But our *rehearsals* remained comfortably in a dramatic repetition. That is until we met via video, after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, when Tara invited us both to expand the depth of our play space.

\*

**Me:** Tara, I . . . don’t know what to say. (*I’m too self-conscious to see what my face looks like in the screen, but as I **breathe** into this moment, I can feel my face betraying a genuine mix of deep sadness, inadequacy, guilt, a strong will to listen and be supportive, but also an awareness of the futility of my efforts, and anxiety about making the “wrong” moves; aka, “white fragility”* (D’Angelo, 2018).

**Tara:** (*Revealing a raw exasperation and pain in her eyes and voice that I hadn’t witnessed in her before*). There’s nothing to say. But . . . I want you to *do* something. Along with every White person. I want you to put *your* body on the line. To show up to protests and be willing to get arrested. To put *your* money on the line, to donate to the Equal Justice Initiative and other advocacy groups. To call politicians and scream until the right to vote is guaranteed to everyone, and until every Black and Brown person can walk down the street safely. And I want you to do all of that without asking for a pat on the back. I want you to use your voice, in person and on social media to call out racism in all forms, even on days when there are no headlines about the murder of a Black person. And when it feels like you’re being too much, when your friends say, “Ok, now you’re virtue signaling,” I want you to say, “Maybe.” And then carry on without expecting any reward for yourself.

\*

As I listened to and with Tara, I found myself wriggling in discomfort, trying to find the “right” position from which to receive her. After all, this brazenly vulnerable version of herself was exactly what I’d invited her to share, and I wanted to *come through* for her in kind. But I discovered, painfully, in real time that the “good,” “understanding,” “validating,” “healer” character I anxiously tried to embody, was really a one-dimensional mask intended to conceal my guilt and insufficiency (Eigen, 1981), to “rise above it,” and offer Tara an impossibly happy end. Even as I just “waited” (Beebe, 2004) and listened silently, I was **aware** that Tara could see me attempting to hide the fragile ego she suspected I had all along. I felt weak and ashamed. But as she spoke, with raw vulnerability and confident passion, I realized that despite my palpable imperfections, Tara hadn’t given up on me.

Her objective wasn’t “to shut me down,” but rather “to wake me up,” “to challenge me,” and most of all, “to permit herself to be heard.” She was actively making use of our relationship. And, as she explained to me later on: “Of course I wanted more from you. But at the very least, I needed you to **stay in there** with me.”

Looking back, I realize now that what allowed me to *stay in there* with Tara, was the willingness to *stay in there* with myself; to **breathe** into the unresolved and unresolvable trauma between us, without shutting down. **Just by listening** from a position of doubt, despair, guilt, and hopelessness, **I unwittingly played a pivotal role** in Tara’s process of healing and self-expansion. “People usually

defend themselves when I share things like that,” she said. “They answer quickly, as if I want solutions from them. But I don’t. I just don’t want to struggle with the problems alone.”<sup>17</sup>

Upon further reflection, I recognize that much of the faith I found to stay present with Tara in that pivotal scene, with all of my insufficiencies (Eigen, 1981) hanging out, was inspired by Tara herself. A few years ago she shared the following humbling yet revelatory experience with me regarding her life and art, which emboldens me to this day. Having just learned her dear aunt had entered hospice minutes before Tara had to enter a Broadway stage for a big musical number, she stood in the wings, doubtful. In her own words:

“How am I gonna do this?,” I thought. I was so defeated, sad, useless. But I had no choice but to step into the lights, to face them as I was. And as I did, I thought about my aunt, what she was feeling, how she was choosing to live in that moment, with no solutions, no hope. And I did something I never do: I looked into the eyes of one specific person in the crowd, a tween, whose face said he was not impressed. Maybe he was dragged there against his will. Maybe he secretly loved musicals but was too embarrassed to show his excitement. Whatever the reason for his grumpy face, I felt like he doubted me as much as I doubted myself. But rather than force him to have a good time, I thought, “Here we are. Ambivalent. Sad. But alive. Together.” Then I found the will to **breathe** and dance. Not perfectly. In fact, clumsily. But as I bungled about, I found flickers of real joy. The kid never cracked a smile, but we **stayed in** each other’s attention. I’ll never know what he took away with him. But I was grateful for that opportunity to **be** with him, to be humbled by him, and to offer him my raw **presence**, and my will to connect. Before that, I didn’t appreciate the true gift of acting: it invites us to be fully **alive**.

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## Notes on contributor

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<sup>17</sup>This reminds me of both Loewald, Ringstrom, and Gray’s thinking on dramatic repetition in therapy, and how it can introduce openings for healing and new possibilities if something “novel” enters the dynamic, through the improvisation between scene partners (Gray, 2015; Loewald, 1975; Ringstrom, 2018).

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