

# BE PRESENT

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If you were to take the fear that a new improviser feels, tear it from her soul, and condense it into a sentence, it would be this: “What do I say next?”

Next. Later. The ending. New improvisers are constantly looking ahead, trying to see a clear path to a nice, satisfying ending.

You’re going to have to forget that.

An important step of becoming a great improviser is letting go of the future and choosing to BE PRESENT.

And all you need to do in order to be present is to ignore one of the most basic human instincts you have: you need to stop thinking ahead.

If you are a human being who has survived past the age of zero, you are not great at being present. You wake up, and you’re already worried about when you’re going to get to the post office to pick up that package, or what you’re going to get for your friend’s birthday on Thursday, or if you’ll have something cool to say at your 50th high school reunion in 20 years.

Someone walks up to you at work and says hello, and you immediately start scrutinizing her face to guess what's coming next: "What the heck does this person want with me? Is she gonna try to get me to sign a birthday card? Is it too late for me to pretend to not see her? Also, what am I gonna say at my 50th high school reunion in 20 years?"

As soon as you start watching a movie, you're trying to guess the ending. When the TV goes out for one second, you're picking which relative you're going to rescue if it turns out that a zombie uprising has started.

As soon as you've decided that you are going to ask someone out, you start wondering what kind of couple you'd be, how long you might last, how many children you'd have.

You won't be fooled, your instincts assure you. You will be ahead of it, way ahead.

But the present moment is huge in improv because improv happens on a **stage**. The audience are people who are in the same room as you. They can hear your breathing. They can see every little change on your face. They can pick up on every little piece of nonverbal information you're putting out there. If you hear your ex-girlfriend in the audience sigh, your eyebrows will perk just slightly higher, and the whole audience will know that something is up.

There is always a lot going on in the current moment if you're practiced at paying attention to it, but new improv students are always worried about the future. A new improv student looks at their scene partner and thinks: *Maybe my character is going to fall in love with this other character.* They make that choice. *I'll start planting seeds now that we will someday be in love.* And they say out loud, warmly, "Nice day, isn't it?"

Meaning: nothing is happening now, and the scene is dying. The student is setting up a moment that isn't here yet. In fact, it won't ever get here.

Instead, you must see what is already happening and report it. Like this:

- You're sitting down at a table, so you decide you must be at a restaurant, and begin miming that you're eating. That's happening now.

- Roughly at the same time, you see your partner is smiling at you, so you feel that you must be on a date and you smile back. *Ooh, something is afoot.*
- You notice that in doing this you feel kindly to the other character, so you think, *maybe I'm in love with this person.* And out loud you say “I love you,” to let your scene partner know what you’re thinking. You just get right to it, so that it’s happening in front of the audience’s eyes.
- And because your scene partner was watching your eyes, he/she knows how your character feels, looks down and takes the moment in, and then looks up and says, “I wish I felt the same way.”

When you are present, you report what is happening. You are always in the middle of the moment. You feel it and make an assumption about what must already be happening, which also means, by the way, that you always assume something is happening. When someone says “hi,” it’s never just “hi.”

You shrink your scope down. Instead of thinking ahead 22 minutes, or even two minutes, you look around you at the current moment.

“Now” gets bigger and slower and richer and more evident.

You turn into a Sherlock Holmes of observing the present instant. From a snapshot of a moment, you can make decisions about what you feel, what the other person must be feeling, and what must have happened to get us here.

It’s not where you’re driving, but what the car ride feels like now, what you feel about the passenger, the song on the radio, and the landscape you can see right at that moment.

You’re constantly waking up into worlds that already exist and trying to fake it. There’s no point in planning ahead, because everything is constantly changing.

You observe and react—honestly and directly—and wait for your partner to do the same, and then you’ll have something else to observe and react to.

The future vanishes! It’s weird and cool and oddly soothing.

## BECOME THE MOST RIVETING PERSON ON THE STAGE

You will know that you are truly being present when this happens: you become the most riveting person on stage.

They say you can't teach charisma. But you can, and I just taught it to you.

Be fully present, and the audience will watch you like a hawk.

It doesn't matter how good an actor you are. Or how "naturally charismatic" you are. If you are honestly communicating how the current moment feels, in an authentic way—no matter how clumsily or awkwardly—the audience will pay attention to you. People will magically give you space. Yes. It happens.

I saw a show a million years ago with a nervous, bulldogging man and a quiet, confident woman. He started the scene as a husband on a fishing trip with his wife. He was complaining about the weather and demanding a beer and asking her why she picked this day to go fishing, all the while not giving her time to answer. She had time only to peep things like no and yes and "Boy, it sure is rainy!"

In his defense, the guy was more nervous than actually bullying, but the effect was that his scene partner couldn't get a word out.

But she was so much more confident as an actor! She did everything physically. Her eyebrows popped up when he revealed that the weather was bad. She looked a bit sad when he said the fish weren't gonna bite. When he asked for a beer, she leaned over into a cooler and plucked a beer up in sharp, funny movements. I remember she clutched the can just at the top with her fingertips, letting the imaginary can dangle as if it were a gross thing she didn't want to touch. And when she handed it over to him, and he absent-mindedly took it as he rambled, she gave a quick nod of satisfaction to herself, and at that the audience laughed.

She was in the scene. She was a specific character. She was cool and calm and confident and specific. She was having fun. She was funnier.

And all the while he was talking, we were just watching her.

That woman? MERYL STREEP. No, I'm kidding. I don't know who she was. But I remember thinking that's the way to play with a stage hog: you ride the wave in front of you, instead of looking ahead for a different one.

## SEE IT LAND, LET IT LAND

A good note for being present is *see it land, let it land*.

You make a move—verbal or non-verbal—and wait to see it land in your partner’s face before you keep going. That’s “see it land.”

And when your partner makes a move, you feel it and show your feelings. Just a bit. A little smile, a little nod. That’s “let it land.”

Improv often feels like a series of couplets. You move, they move back. They move, you react. You both provoke reactions in each other, like two poles of a battery.

## BE COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE

Another obstacle to being present: people talk too much. New improvisers routinely talk until they are interrupted. They think talking equals confidence.

Stop talking. Let there be silence after you speak. That’s when your words are absorbed.

Stop talking, maintain eye contact, and let stuff sink in.

## REPS

Students in my classes will often ask for “hard notes.” They want the hard truth on what they need to do to get better. I generally do not oblige.

The hard truth is often simply: learn to act like a normal person.

Ever see what happens to a person when you point a camera at them? Their face goes into a fake frozen smile. Their spine stiffens. I’ve seen people unconsciously bend their arms so they look like robots, and also inexplicably tilt their heads far to the side. And these are the changes that happen just for a still photograph, something we all actually have a decent amount of practice doing.

In improv we’re asking you to move around, talk, and make things up, all while being watched. This is all before we even worry about being interesting, surprising, or funny. Just the basics of existing like a natural human being are incredibly difficult at first.

But these basics are essential if you want to be funny on stage. You have to look comfortable and natural in the unnatural world of an improvised scene.

Another challenge: people, in general, are bad at words. You have a feeling, and then your brain has to do some amount of work to miraculously translate that feeling into words. And then the recipient has to take those words and complete the even harder task of translating them back into feelings.

Recently in class I saw someone forget his own name. Remembering other people's names is very hard, I know, but I had assumed retrieving your own name from your brain would be simple. Still, during a names warm-up, one student, when he was supposed to say his own name, went, "Dave. Wait! No, I mean Sean."

He was flustered. It's the start of class, and he feels the weight of everyone watching him. Everyone is like that when they're learning. Even veterans are like that on certain days. Words are hard.

Another time I saw a scene that went like this:

**Player 1:** Could you keep it down? Your drums are really loud.

**Player 2:** I'm sorry. I just... it's that I have a gig tomorrow.

**Player 1:** You're keeping up my wife and infant son. What's your problem?

**Player 2:** Nothing! I mean, I love infants.

No one says, "I love infants." Maybe you say, "I love babies!" or "Babies are so cute." But no one in the course of a normal conversation says, "I love infants." For that matter, no one says, "You're keeping up my wife *and infant son*."

Now, on one hand, that kind of awkward phrasing is part of the fun of improv. You word things slightly "wrong," and it's a gift you use to have fun on stage. But when you're starting out, almost every single thing you say is peppered with awkwardness. The unintentional game of every scene, when you are learning, is "these people sound insane."

It's normal. Your chords aren't wrong, you're just looking at the frets and taking a long time to get your fingers into place. You're heading down the court in the right direction, but you're looking at the ball while you dribble. The music starts, but you don't start dancing for several measures, and when you do you're behind the beat.

That's okay! You're learning.

But there's no hard note that gives you comfort on stage. No teacher, exercise, or book. It's just reps. Repeat, repeat, repeat. It is the most reliable method for getting better. More and more of your real self will become available to you as you keep at it.

# BE PRESENT EXERCISES

## EXERCISE:

### 60 SECONDS OF SILENCE

Think of your brain as an excited puppy, trying to race ahead to the future. Here's an exercise to get it back to the present.

Two people up. They get a suggestion and then assume a starting position. Something not too big is best—a hip cocked to one side is better than a big crouch while screaming. The people should be able to see each other. No stepping downstage and gazing out over the audience.

Then they wait 60 seconds. No object work. The scene isn't starting. They just wait 60 seconds and regard each other. After 60 seconds, the teacher says "start," and they do.

60 seconds on stage is a hugely long time. At first your brain is racing: you're thinking of ideas of how you might start the scene. You pick one. Then you don't like that idea and you change it. Then you're trying to guess what the other person is thinking, and you change your mind again. You become self-conscious about your posture and adjust it.

Then you start to settle. You're still thinking things, but it's less frantic. You start to settle on a vague, not-quite-locked-down notion of who you are and how you are feeling as a character. The self-consciousness and panic boils away. You relax.

Then, you're calm. You have a general sense of the dynamic—*I'm nervous; she's stern or I'm excited; he's also excited*. Ideas float into your brain, but now they're like pieces of paper gently floating on a breeze, not gunshots at your feet commanding you to dance.

And then the scene starts. You will be listening well for the first time.

Don't worry if the scenes begin a bit slowly. They will quickly become very compelling and good.