

Thank you. First of all, my apologies to those graduates whose giddy happiness at not having to share the Asolo stage this season with Nick Wyman was crushed by the news that I would be speaking at their graduation. My only advice is that if you start drinking heavily at the reception, this whole ceremony will be but a vague, slightly distasteful memory.

Giving advice is a classic part of graduation speeches, and for those of you who manage to stay awake, there may well be some actual advice-giving down the line -- but I warn you, my actual advice is probably less fun than heavy drinking.

The framework for my soporific parade of platitudes about the life ahead of you is something you are all familiar with: Building a Character and Approaching the Scene. Here's the setup: you have been cast as Scott Kuiper or Jillian Courtney or Danielle Renella or, God help you, Nick Wyman in a long-running production of *Your Life as an Actor*. Who is Scott? Who is Jillian? Who is Danielle? What is their background? What is their approach to other people and life in general?

I hope you have the answers to these questions -- because I don't. But I do know a bit about that Nick Wyman guy. Let me tell you a bit about the 24-year-old Nick Wyman who had just finished acting school. He was tall and skinny. He was blond and not conventionally good-looking. He was a product of upscale suburbs and Ivy League schools. He was a know-it-all who had few qualms about letting you know he knew it all. All this combined to create someone who was not the classic leading man, someone who was a character man, someone who was a professional-class, white-collar guy who tended to be a little smug and bossy. He could do funny and he could sing. That is what I had to sell at the time, and (absent the skinny part) I am still hawking the same wares forty-some years later.

So, first of all, ask yourself what you are selling -- who you are and, most particularly, who you appear to be to others. What are your strengths? What do you do better than most? Are you a sweet ingenue? Or a dark villainess? Are you a country bumpkin? Or a city slicker? Are you a song and dance man from "42nd Street"? Or a tragedian from the "Lower Depths"?

I know, I know. You can do everything. You are Meryl Streep -- if Meryl Streep had not been so foolish as to make the poor choice of turning 65. Guess what? The Business doesn't care. The Business is not a rep company. (Only Michael Edwards is crazy enough to be a rep company.) The Business only wants to pigeonhole you, so pick the pigeonhole with your strongest attributes and clearest characteristics. That is where you are going to make your assault on the Fortress of No that is Show Business.

Much of what I have just said is covered in the book I wrote called "Scaling the Mountain: How to Be a Successful Acting Person" -- a book which, if memory serves, I sent you all via e-mail and Dropbox. However, since reading occupies the same place in your generation that blacksmithing did in mine -- i.e., a quaint pastime of one's forebears -- I feel little compunction about chewing my cabbage twice. Although if you have actually read the book and mastered its instructions, you have my permission to spend the rest of this rodomontade scrolling through your Instagram feed and live-tweeting nasty remarks.

So, having done your character work and knowing who the essential Wyatt or Jacob or Jessie is -- not only what you bring to the party but what your best party tricks are -- it is time to figure out how to approach the scene. And what is your scene? It is the opening scene in what I hope is a very long-running play: "Your Life as an Actor."

If I dig deep into the murky past of what I learned in acting school, I remember a number of who-what-where-when-why questions I was supposed to ask myself about the scene: Who am I? What just happened? Where am I coming from? Where do I plan to go? Who am I

talking to?/What is our relationship? When does this scene take place -- in the day, in the year, in my life? Why am I here? What am I seeking? How do I plan to achieve this goal?

What you are seeking you would probably describe as a Successful Career in Theatre/ Entertainment/Show Business. That is a rather large, multi-year goal that would benefit from being broken down into some short term goals. Also, I put it to you that what you are really seeking is a Successful Life. We'll come back to that.

So, back to our questions. Who am I? Well, we just went over that, but it is intricately tied to the next two questions: what just happened and where am I coming from? If someone ran into you tomorrow and asked you what just happened, what would you say?

Exactly. You just graduated from a highly-reputed acting conservatory with 1) an MFA, 2) an Equity card, and 3) zero grad school debt thanks to the couple dozen crazy people scattered throughout this audience -- people so crazy they refuse to limit their financial profligacy to the standard practice of throwing money away only on one's immediate family. I love you crazy people -- and I shall come back to you as well.

So, the "moment before" your opening scene is this graduation. This tells those who interview and/or audition you or who merely read your resume that you have professional training -- and not just classroom scenes and student productions, but roles in full-fledged Equity productions. And you have your Equity card, which confers upon you a sense of legitimacy, an imprimatur of professionalism. More to the point, it enables you to sign up for Equity Principal Auditions and Equity Chorus Calls for various productions. It enables you to pass beyond the main page of the Equity website to the sanctum sanctorum of the "member portal" and read all the casting notices in "Casting Call."

Another spectacular upside to this answer to the question "what just happened?" Is that it just happened. You have a free pass for many months before you begin to look like a non-working actor. When you do not currently have an acting job, the two dreaded questions are "What are you doing?" And "What have you done lately?" Take it from yours very-currently-not-working, it is no fun to be asked what you are doing when you are not doing anything. Indeed, I never ask my actor friends this question because I find it rude. Besides, if an actor is doing something, the odds are extremely good that he or she will work that tidbit of information into the conversation: "As I was telling Patti backstage last night -- oh, yes, I'm doing "War Paint" at the Nederlander with her." If you have at least recently done something -- "Oh, yes, I just closed the pre-Broadway engagement of "Sousatzka" three weeks ago." -- you can pass the working-actor sniff test with aplomb. If your most recent job was nine months ago or, God help you, over a year in the past -- well, your career has taken on the aroma of week-old sushi.

But you lucky dogs have JUST graduated. You won't begin to stink of unhireability for at least the rest of the year. Two of the young actors in "Sousatzka" with me graduated last year. To me (and to anyone else in the industry) they have leapt right from school into a show -- even though they graduated in May and started work in December.

Second question: "Where are you coming from?" The answer is not Sarasota but the Asolo Repertory Theatre. This is a business of connections and recognition. You currently have a recognition factor, in round numbers, of zero; seemingly, nobody knows who you are. But wait, some people in the business know who you are; some people in the business know your work, know you to be a talented actor. Some of those people are here today. Michael Edwards, Greg Leaming, Jonathan Epstein, Andrew Malaev-Babel, Frank Galati, Peter Amster, Nick Wyman are names that are known, known by people who don't know you.

Make a list of all the people you have met/worked with/ interacted with who have some name recognition. What you want to do is leverage those known names to give yourself some recognition. And I don't mean casual, self-aggrandizing name-dropping a la "As I was telling Patti backstage last night." I mean being sure to include on your resume any name that might ring a bell or start a conversation. List all your acting teachers (and include me under "The Business of Acting" or some such.) If you were directed by Frank or Peter, put them down. If you worked with an actor with a recognizable name, put them down.

But let's take "where are you coming from?" a step further. Where were you before you came to the Conservatory? Where'd you go to college? High school? What people did you meet there that have a connection and/or a name recognition factor in show business? Might they be willing to write a note on your behalf -- or allow you to mention them in a note that you write -- to a powerful someone in the business? Find out if there any people who have made a name for themselves in this business who went to your college or high school or who come from your town or the next town over -- you never know when you might encounter these folks and be able to play the Connection Card.

Now, where do you plan to go? Maybe home, but probably eventually New York or Los Angeles. That decision likely has something to do with whether you wish to do Theatre or Television, what your analysis reveals of your skill set and prospects, and whether you have connections in either place. As you have seen from some of the dazzling Chicago actors you have observed and worked with here at the Asolo, there is a thriving Theatre scene in Chicago. Washington, Seattle, Philadelphia, Minneapolis-St. Paul are other cities with hundreds and hundreds of professional actors. You have choices.

All right, who are you talking to and what is your relationship? The short answer? Talk to everybody. If you can be charming and funny, by all means be charming and funny. If charm and humor are not your long suits, be kind, be generous, be appreciative, be interested. Being interesting is sometimes a good strategy; being interested is always a good strategy. So listen. Acting teachers may have told you that listening is the key to good acting. This, of course, is hogwash. NEVER listen to other actors onstage or look at them: it just throws off your performance.

Seriously, listen to people -- even boring old farts who give you speeches. Be interested. Be gracious. Acknowledge and praise them for anything praiseworthy. (People love to be praised and complimented.) Treat people well. And not just the famous or well-connected people who can actually do something for you right now. Treat receptionists and assistants and go-fers and flak-catchers with courtesy and appreciation. Some of those people will rise in the business to become powerful producers, directors and casting people. They will remember your kindness -- or your lack thereof.

Courtesy and appreciation -- that's the relationship you want. Treat others the way you would like to be treated. The Golden Rule of "Do unto others, etc." seems like rather sappy altruism, but I have found it to be remarkably self-serving. First of all, generosity and kindness are self-affirming: it feels good to be nice to people, to give them things. (That's probably part of the explanation for the philanthropy of the crazy people who have sponsored you these past three years.) Secondly, an attitude of generosity and kindness creates a sense of abundance, of optimism and possibility. In a profession that is famously difficult, this is the place where you want to live -- in a world of abundance, in a world of gratitude, in a world of confidence that you will be provided for. One of my greatest gifts -- and it is truly a gift, nothing I have achieved or earned -- is a Pollyanna-ish optimism, a sunny confidence that things will turn out all right. I encourage you to develop this attribute if you possibly can and until you do -- well, fake it: act "as if."

Keep in touch with your classmates. They know you well, and if a role shows up on their radar that is right for you, you want them to think of you. And you should think of them. Be their champion. If you hear about a role that is right for you and that is also right for a pal of yours, let your pal know. If they want you, they don't want your pal and you will get the job. If they want your pal, they don't want you and they will hire your pal and you will have done her or him a solid. Life is not a zero sum game. It is not necessary for someone else to lose for you to win.

The Charlie Sheen/Donald Trump style obsession with Winning, with being seen as a Winner, can lead to a particular show business form of schadenfreude. (Schadenfreude, for those of you who have wasted your education studying acting, is a wonderful German word meaning "joy at another's misfortune." To paraphrase Gore Vidal paraphrasing Somerset Maugham paraphrasing La Rochefoucauld: "It is not enough that one succeed; one must also have the failure of one's friends.") I put it to you that in order to succeed, you don't need your friends to fail, you don't need anyone to fail.

In this flat world of near-instant social media mass communication, people rush to be the first to put the word out, to be seen as being in the know. Sadly, the urge to be the first to trash somebody's stage or screen efforts seems to be stronger than the urge to be the first to champion someone. Do not give in to this. Building on my maxim of always waiting until you are two blocks away (or in your own car) before you say anything critical about someone's production, I encourage you to refrain from saying anything mean about other people's work, period. Instead, find what is praiseworthy. (I draw your attention to Jay Handelman's reviews in the Sarasota paper as opposed to Ben Brantley's reviews in The NY Times. Jay almost always finds something praiseworthy. If he is not thrilled with a show, you get the idea but he never batters people or trashes their work.)

I used to dichotomize people as either Nice or Smart. Nice people were generally not that smart, and Smart people were frequently less than nice. I wanted to be seen as Smart. For fear of looking like a sap and in an effort to demonstrate my refined sensibility and critical faculties, I often joined in the fault-finding and head-shaking condescension and focused on the defects I had so cleverly found with some stage show. I encourage you to be a better person than I. Putting someone else down is a lousy and rather ineffective way of lifting yourself up -- partially because, as I said, Life is not a Zero Sum Game.

Viewing Life as a zero sum game, as a world of scarcity leads to fearfulness and playing not to lose as opposed to playing to win. Your life gets small, and if you're an actor, probably your acting gets small. Small acting is ineffective acting. I prefer bold choices. Screen acting can be subtle, but it shouldn't be small. Be bold, not small. As the record-holder for the world's least-small Freddy Eynsford-Hill, I can tell you "Faint heart never won my fair lady."

So, who are you talking to and what is your relationship? You are talking to those above you and below you on the food chain of show biz and you are talking to those on your level. Be upbeat with all of them; be encouraging to those below, complimentary and acknowledging of those at and above your level. Your relationship is not that of a dismissive critic or a snarky frenemy; you are an appreciative colleague.

When does this scene take place -- in the day, in the year, in your life? Well, forget the day part. It is, in the year, the beginning of May: the tail end of the theatrical season with summer theatre just about to begin. I would hazard that most summer theatres have completed their casting, but there are probably a few jobs out there that might suit you. Theatres are auditioning now for fall productions. I trust you are all familiar with Casting Call on the Equity website -- if not, please go online and check it out this afternoon. Make it a point to check out Casting Call at least once a week, searching for theatres doing roles that are in your

wheelhouse, that you are dead-solid perfect for. When you find such a theatre and role, jot down the names of the artistic director and the creative team and then reach out to your better-connected friends and mentors to see if they have any sort of a personal relationship with someone on that production. If so, ask them if they would be willing to write an email to that someone touting you as a possible casting choice for the role you covet. If they are reluctant to do that, ask them if you might be allowed to write the team member yourself and simply reference your mentor, saying she or he had suggested you get in touch with them and mention the mentor's name.

Rinse, repeat.

When in your life does this scene take place? Pretty early on. I know you are all jaded, sophisticated veterans of three years of cutthroat competition, stabbing your classmates in the back and batting your eyes and twitching your bum at Jonny and Gregg and Michael in an effort to get the roles you want, but put that aside. That has all taken place offstage as an eye-blink of preparation for what we hope will be a fifty-year career. I saw a play two weeks ago, a play that I wager half of you will actually perform for money in the next three years, a play called "Significant Other." In it, the grandmother, played by the wonderful actress Barbara Barrie, refers to Life several times as "a long book." Barbara Barrie's life and career has indeed been a long book. I hope yours is just as long.

Right now, unlike certain long-winded hams, you do not have a wife and three children and a mortgage. You probably have some student debt -- but less than you might. (Thank you, crazy people!) You don't have to make six figures a year acting. I mean, hey, you're not going to turn down that TV series, but you don't need to get a TV pilot to avoid losing your house. You don't have a quote that employers have to match; you don't have a certain size and importance of role that, in order to maintain your career stature and momentum, you cannot sink below. You just want a paying acting job, pretty much any paying acting job, which brings us to our penultimate questions, Why am I here? What am I seeking?

"Why am I here?" has a certain philosophical, somewhat existential, practically spiritual aspect to it -- and that's a good thing for my purposes. Yes, you want a job, yes, you want money, yes, you want applause and recognition, but I have a suspicion you may ultimately want something else more. I think you want to be useful, to make a difference in the world, to be of service and to be part of a loving connection with others. Now, of course, this is what I want, so perhaps I am projecting. Perhaps.

Acting can meet these needs. When we are acting in a play that is hitting on all cylinders, we feel useful to the enterprise, of service to the director and our fellow actors, that we are making a difference in the world and we absolutely feel part of a loving connection with others. When we are acting in a turkey, we can still feel that we are useful and of service and we often still feel part of a loving connection with others; making a difference in the world -- well, that may be too much to hope for.

Part of a loving connection with others. I think we want that more than money, more than applause. We want to have a loving relationship with an individual who loves us completely despite our myriad flaws. We want to have a family. That might be our family of origin, though most actors I know (indeed most people I know) are looking to improve upon or replace a fairly dysfunctional family of origin. It might be a family we create with a spouse and children. It might be a family of like-minded souls who do Theatre together -- or fly-fishing or knitting or a 12-Step Program. We are social creatures who crave connection, and Theatre is a wonderful way to create that. Each show creates a family. Theatre has enabled me to experience being a part of dozens and dozens of families. I started out as the kid and rapidly morphed into the dad. I have had a few surrogate parents, several surrogate brothers, several surrogate wives

and lots and lots of surrogate children. I didn't start out looking for new families or even a new family, but looking back I think that's why I am here and what I was seeking.

And that's why I am right here right now: to be part of a loving connection with others -- because you are my family. I have loved my time at the Asolo and I want to give back -- not for money, not for applause, not for the thrill of a night at the airport Hyatt, but to be useful, to be of service. That brings me back to the crazy people, those generous local souls who have sponsored you for the past three years. They have made that investment to be useful, to be of service, to make a difference in the world. They certainly didn't do it to make money and they didn't do it for applause, but I would like each person here who has participated in sponsoring these eleven graduates to stand up. Please take a look at these people. They are very smart; they have figured out why they are here and what they are seeking. And even though this isn't what they were seeking, I ask you please to give them a round of applause.

The last question was How do I plan to achieve this goal? Since I have bifurcated your goals into the other-oriented idea of service and the more self-seeking pursuit of acting work, let me give you two answers.

To succeed as an actor, keep studying, keep challenging yourself with the jobs you take or the scenes you choose in class. Stay connected with people. Use the connections you have. With delicacy and appreciative acknowledgement, leverage those connections to get job opportunities. Make new connections. With all your connections, give more than you get.

Give more than you get. It works in life; it works onstage. Listening, focus, attention are great tools onstage: they seem like something you do for the other actor, but it actually benefits you just as much. I like to think of myself as being great with text -- give me that endlessly pontificating Shavian role -- and I love to be the center of attention, the star -- thank you, LBJ -- but I have generally been better when my character has little to say and a strong need to listen to and focus on others.

Bring that listening, focus and attention on others into your daily life. It will win you more friends and influence more people than any anecdotes or life-of-the-party antics. As I said before, be interested not interesting. We actors, despite our dazzling good looks, effortless charm and displays of confidence, are riven by the thought that we are not okay, that we are not enough. We are needy, insecure people, and sadly, success will not cure that disease. The answer to that neediness and insecurity is not bigger, more important roles or more money: it is feeling useful, feeling a loving connection to others, being of service. So as you launch yourself into the pursuit of acting work, know that your self-worth and self-esteem do not depend on your success or lack thereof. It depends more on your contribution to the world, on your being useful, on your being of service.

Find opportunities for service. You don't need to have piles of discretionary cash. You probably have Time to contribute, and as those of us in the latter third of our lives can tell you, Time is far more valuable than money. Frequently, people tell themselves that they will contribute to a charitable organization at some future time when they have more money; sometimes that day of perceived financial sufficiency never comes -- not because the money doesn't come but because the people still fear they don't have enough. Sometimes people don't participate in service or contribute to others because they feel that they don't have enough time, that they need to work on themselves, that they are not sufficiently okay. Don't buy into this. I am here to tell you, my fellow needy, insecure actors, that you are okay and you are enough. I am giving you a new Latin motto for your new coat of arms: "Salveo et satis." You are okay and enough to do service, and you are okay and enough to have a successful career as an actor.

Whether or not you have a successful career, I hope you have a successful life. My advice for achieving both, some of which I have just glazed your eyes with, is contained in my "Scaling the Mountain" book on how to be a successful acting person. If you have not had a superfluity of the Wyman philosophy and you would like a fresh draft of the book, drop me an e-mail. Even if you have no wish to hear more Wyman wisdom, I ask that the eleven of you drop me an e-mail regularly to let me know what you are doing. Let me know when you move to New York. Or Chicago or LA. Let me know when you get a job - even if it's not an acting job. Let me know when you get an audition for "Significant Other." (Seriously, pick up a copy -- you will be auditioning for it.) Stay connected. I hope to be part of that loving connection for many years to come because I consider you my family. And as the newest and second-tallest (thank you, Greg Leaming) member of your family, may I be the first to congratulate you as brand new graduates of the FSU/Asolo Conservatory of Acting. Bravo! Brava! Bravi! And places, please. Places for the opening scene of "Your Life as an Actor."