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## "Where is My Attention?"

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## "Where is My Attention?"

### Cover Page Footnote

Stanislavsky, Constantin, AN ACTOR PREPARES, Published by Geoffrey Bles, London (1936)

ATTENTION is the key to all learning. Indeed, it is what will save our lives on a daily basis. In all my Communication courses, it is one of the first things I put forward as a question that students may ask of themselves as a check on their “internal considering.”

Philosopher/practitioner George Gurdjieff (1866-1949)<sup>1</sup> called the constant rumble in our minds of random condemnations and re-imaginings of past events as “internal considering.” He felt it was detrimental to ourselves and our relationships with others; it is, I maintain, a constant “self considering” that takes us away from the present and “being *here* now.” So recognizing that we are often not paying attention to what is happening in the space we are in now, with the people we are with now, is the first step in correcting this distracting state of affairs.

Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938)<sup>2</sup> came up with the idea of the “Four Circles of Attention” to help actors to identify what their characters were doing in any particular circumstance.

The **First Circle** is when we are concentrating only on ourselves, where our attention is limited to a circumspect area just surrounding our bodies, and where our focus is only physically on something on our bodies, or an object with us, only within our personal physical space.

The **Second Circle** opens us up to our surroundings, the objects and people within our sight and beyond our own bodies. In this circle we may concentrate on others and the space we are physically in at this very moment. It includes all we can see and hear in our surroundings.

The **Third Circle** is when our attention is taken away from the space we are physically in, and focused on something in our minds that is bothering, exciting, memorable or in any way forcing us to *internally* focus on the past or future events. This is Gurdjieff’s “internal considering.” It may happen when we are hungry, sad, happy or preoccupied in any way with something that is not in the space we physically inhabit at the present moment. As humans, we often live in this Third Circle when we are “day-dreaming,” “imagining” or “thinking.”

The **Fourth Circle** is—as Stanislavsky thought of it—a spiritual space our minds may be in when meditating, praying or in some way out of this world. One Moscow Art Theatre director I worked with

called it being “with God.” This Circle is rarer, and does not happen in the classroom, but is important to consider psychologically, as a 4<sup>th</sup> possible place we may inhabit in our minds.

**Activity: Where is My Attention?**

- 1) Explain & demonstrate the four Circles of Attention
- 2) Get into partners; if there is an uneven number, one group of 3 is possible. Decide who is “A” and who is “B” (and “C,” if necessary).
- 3) Pass out “open” dialogues. (These can be simple stichomythia scenes that students create or the Leader may put on the board, or hand out.)

EXAMPLE 1: A: Hi, how are you?

B: Not so well.

A: Why not?

B: It’s over.

A: Oh no.

B: Yeah, I knew it would happen.

A: How come?

B: She’s a creep.

A: She’s your best friend.

B: I’ll never trust her again.

EXAMPLE 2: A: I’m going!

B: Where?

C: It’s over there.

B: Have you ever been there?

A: I know it from before.

C: That sucks.

B: Why?

A: It’s important.

C: No it's not.

B: What are you talking about?

A: I have to make sure he's okay.

C: Just leave him alone.

B: Is he in trouble?

C: It's not important.

A: We'll never know unless I go to find out.

4) Ask students to a) Do the scene in the First Circle.

b) Do the scene in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Circle.

c) Do the scene in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Circle.

5) Now a) ask students to have A be in the 1<sup>st</sup> Circle, while B is in 3<sup>rd</sup>.

b) ask students to have A be in 2<sup>nd</sup> Circle, while B is in First (or C be in a different Circle).

c) ask students to switch Circles of Attn. *while doing the scene*.

d) ask students for A & B (& C) to be in the SAME Circle of Attn. in the scene.

e) finally, ask students to play scene with BOTH partners in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Circle.

6) Play individual scenes for the class to watch. DISCUSS.

7) ASK the class: How did the relationships change in each Circle? Which scenes had the best (most effective) communication between respondents? What can we do to stay connected to a Partner?

What does this have to do with interpersonal communication? With public speaking? With intercultural communication? How does nonverbal communication affect the relationships in the scenes? etc.

This exercise can be played in numerous ways. It is engaging if each pair has a different scene, or there are at least 2 or more different scenes given to pairs in the class.

The goal is to achieve effective communication, effective listening, and to learn/practice clear observation of self and others. It also addresses issues of uses of Language vs. Non-Verbal Comm. We

often see how Paralanguage is the key to effective communication, even more than the “meanings” of words; *how* we speak is as important as *what* we say.

This activity may be done as an Icebreaker after they know each other’s names, or in mid- or late-semester, when students are familiar with doing exercises in groups and have begun their individual or group performance work. Typical results are fun-is-had-by-all; the “Circles” become confusing, and students must practice to remain focused on what they’re doing; we discover the import of the Body and Voice (Non-Verbal Comm.) on Interpersonal Comm. Students may see how we all live in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Circle more than expected. Finally, listening is shown to be something we do with our hearts as well as our ears.

This is a good activity for Speech 101, Public Speaking, Intercultural Comm., Interpersonal Comm., and even Business Comm. Students are asked to notice these “Circles” played out in their own lives.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Born in the 1870’s in the Caucasus region of Russia, George Gurdjieff, known as a mystic, devoted his life to discovering the secrets of the great religions (Sufis, Hindus and Buddhists) and translating them into practical exercises and ideas that could be assimilated by the likes of writers Katherine Mansfield, A.R. Orage, J.B. Priestly, Albert Camus, Peter Brook (who directed the film of Gurdjieff’s Meetings with Remarkable Men) and many other explorer/followers of “the Work,” as Gurdjieff’s practices are called.

<sup>2</sup>Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) was the famed acting teacher and co-founder and director of the Moscow Art Theatre. His well-known works, recently re-translated, are *My Life in Art*, *An Actor's Work*, and *An Actor's Work on a Role*. His "system" has been explored and used by actors for almost 100 years, and is the basis for much controversy among American acting teachers who disagree profoundly with each other about Stanislavsky's tenets. My teacher, Stella Adler, is the only American to have actually worked with Stanislavsky himself in 1934 in Paris.