

The Power of Positive Rituals – A perspective on performance, balance and life

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Our daily lives are filled with ritual. We work to earn promotion, provide for our families, maintain a home; pay bills, eat, sleep, diet, worship and labor to keep all of the dishes spinning. Much of our time is spent seeking fulfillment in some dimension of our lives. We desperately seek out the “Golden Bat” in our careers. We search for significance in our jobs or any fleeting opportunity to feel justified in our work, relationships and play. The daily routine of our music career can in time cause us to lose heart and steal our zeal. How is it that so many professional musicians, band directors, faculty and performers lose their “first love?” We must guard our hearts and carve out time for things that really matter. Powerful positive rituals that have been strategically placed in our day help us to stay fixed on the reason we began music in the first place. These concepts of *performance rituals*, *centering down*, *routine* and *balance* are key components to your effectiveness and creativity. We are forgetful creatures by nature - we must actively combat complacency and protect and practice these Positive Rituals. I have built these steps into my personal and professional life from my early career in the “President’s Own” US Marine Band and now as a soloist and professor.

If we take a closer look at the lives of professional athletes like Pete Sampras, Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan, we find models of precision and routine that lead to greatness. Research continues to show that the lack of natural ability is irrelevant to great success. (Colvin, 2) Natural ability or “giftedness” is desirable and in fact touted in our educational programs however it is not the determining factor in achievement. Possessing innate gifts may in fact squelch a student’s success in the long run. Many of my most “gifted” and talented students lack the intrinsic motivation and fire to work through barriers in their playing. The tenacity required sleuthing out error in our conducting, teaching or playing is often lacking in students that have relied on natural ability in their early stages of development. The discipline of practice seems to be fading in our current culture of on-demand entertainment, commerce and discourse.

Many of the world’s top athletes and Olympians reached their pinnacle by pursuing these positive rituals:

- Daily fitness regimes involving weight training cross training, very specific low fat and high complex carbohydrate diets all with a very extensive support group of trainers and coaches.
- Cross-disciplinary training away from their specific skill set (archery, cycling, golf, swimming, ballet, rock climbing)
- Mental training – time spent on focus techniques, visualization, memory skill tests, and sports psychology research.
- Centering down

- Meticulously scheduled routines for both active and passive recovery (Loher/Schwartz,3)

What are positive performance rituals?

A positive ritual is a behavior that becomes automatic over time—fueled by some deeply held value. In contrast to will and discipline, which require pushing yourself to a particular behavior, a ritual pulls at you. Look at any part of your life in which you are consistently effective and you will find that certain habits help make that possible.

- An effective mother has rituals around spending quality time with and without the kids
- A bodybuilder has built into his schedule a regular work out routine
- If you manage others successfully, you likely have a style of giving feedback that leaves people feeling challenged rather than threatened
- An expert rock climber has a strong ritual of visualizing his next move, breathing deliberately and efficiently using only specific muscle groups. (Loher/Schwartz,4)

Great performers and athletes have rituals that optimize their ability to move rhythmically between stress and recovery. We can use these powerful performance rituals in our daily lives to combat stress, help us prepare for the day ahead, during performances, rehearsals and in our teaching. These rituals will soon feel like a close and trusted friend in our moment of stress and daily practice. I regularly teach my students to practice these techniques as they prepare for tests, college auditions and walk on to the concert stage.

Centering Down:

This technique comes directly from Don Greene’s books: Performance Success, Audition Success and Fight Your Fear and Win. I am convinced that the centering technique is the ultimate tool in audition success. I believe the centering down ritual is the most effective tool I have when playing recitals, touring, soloing with orchestras, presenting master classes and performance clinics.

Centering down involves the process of simply doing, rather than not doing. For example, saying, “I will not overeat” is not nearly as effective as eating a piece of fruit instead of desert. This is called “Priming”. Focusing on the behavior you want to introduce rather than the behavior you want to resist. “I will not crack any notes” places me in a defensive and cautionary performance stance. “I will captivate my audience” places me in an expectant, joyous and very confident performance position. Here are the steps and a brief description of how I use the centering down process to command my space and enjoy my performance. I practice this while standing and holding my horn.

1. *Form your Clear Intention* – “I am going to drive this ball straight down the fairway” or “I will keep my phrase spinning” -both of these intentions have one action, one purpose and one goal. Nothing in your “intention phrase” can be negative and never use the word “don’t”. Remember, you are “priming” with

- words of clear intent and positive reinforcement. – “I am going to attack this note” or “My breathing will be huge”.
2. *Pick a Focal Point* – find a place low and some distance away. Fix your stare on that small point. Clear your mind of distracting thoughts. Thoughts will rush in as you attempt to be still – gently bring your focus back to this point (you will get better at this in time). Think of a baseball pitcher on the mound – it is much easier to direct your focus and energy down toward your audience rather than up into the lights. When the time comes near the end of this sequence, you will hurl your energy at this point. This will be a point of committal and determination.
 3. *Breathe deliberately* – close your eyes, focus on each breath. Inhale through your nose very slowly and exhale through your mouth. Breath in steady measured counts. Suspend your disbelief and critical mindset. Practice during every set of rests, tacit movements and during your warm up each morning. Band programs can work on this during their stretching and breathing exercises.
 4. *Release Tension* – perform a muscle scan while you are still deep breathing. Keep your eyes closed while gently dismissing negative thoughts as they attempt to crowd your mind. Imagine the tension in your neck and back slowly escaping with each breath. You are venting stress.
 5. *Find your Center* – with your feet shoulder width apart, continue to breath mindfully, eyes close, venting stress and aware of your clear intention, slowly move your hips side to side. Imagine you are rooted, grounded, more powerful, claiming your performance space, stabilized and anchored. I have seen my students begin to stand on their toes, raise their shoulders and few even stand on one leg when a jury or recital begins to go badly. Keep your breath down and your balance grounded. On very loud or high solo passages I will often raise my bell and try to keep my chest forward however I stay grounded.
 6. *Process Cue* - this is one of the most important steps and comes immediately before your performance. This is a scene, a visual picture or sound. I enjoy shooting a compound bow. I imagine drawing my bow in a smooth, controlled, stealthy motion. My chest is full of air and my arms are relaxed and still. I place the pin on my mark. As I gently squeeze my trigger release I feel the power stored in the limbs explode forward, I hear the string slice through the air and I see the arrow hit my mark. My bow is my instrument, the string is the attack of the articulation, squeezing the trigger is the point of the attack; the limbs exploding forward help me let the air go. The arrow hitting my mark is sound on the back wall.
 7. *Direct your Energy* – open your eyes and hurl your energy to the focal point you established earlier. One directed motion - one act of total commitment. Your intent, posture and process cue all working together. You are relaxed and now have an aggressive, powerful and positive stance. (Greene, 5)

Practice this 3 to 7 times a day. Each time I work on this I improve my focus time. Ultimately, I want to be able to do this when I am on stage under 10 seconds.

Musician specific Rituals:

Routine is paramount. I use my daily warm up routine to focus on my tone, breathing and ease of playing. When I am preparing for a major performance, I adopt an inflexible daily routine of devotional time followed by running or weightlifting. My first practice session involves stretching and a very specific warm up process of mouthpiece buzzing, glissandi patterns, flexibility studies, flow studies, scale work, long tones and lyrical etudes. Much of my practice time is spent recording myself on a Dictaphone and listening back at half speed. Alternating between playing and listening gives me time to physically rest and then re-engage. I spend time studying scores and I am always listening to recordings. After teaching several hours I need to recalibrate my ear so time is spent listening to the masters on my instrument. I study every aspect of tone, articulation, phrasing and interpretation. I buzz the mouthpiece to and from work while in the car.

Balance is the key. Balancing my work and practice with family life has become my chief priority. Time away from the horn, completely disengaging from the creative and analytical process is necessary for me to come back empowered and fresh. Turning my attention to others has become a source of strength and renewal and in turn, has infused my teaching and creative abilities like never before. The more energy and time I pour into the lives of my family, church and students, the more energy and strength I seem to have performing and doing creative work. Being totally absorbed in my own career and performance goals leads to quick burn out and irritability. A recent CNN poll shows that 70% of Americans claim that they want to slow down but cannot. The unbalanced life lacks control and power. The most common symptom of an unbalanced life, when our schedules and priorities are dictated to us, is irritability.

Why do we need these Rituals:

- Efficiency during performance – positive energy rituals help us conserve our best moments for the appropriate time. We can learn to toggle up or down our energy level during performance. Each of us has a specific ideal performance state. Think of those times you felt the most energized and confident during a performance. Each musician requires a unique set of conditions and mental processes that lead to the ideal performance. This ideal performance state rarely happens by accident but can be recreated with practice.
- Precise – these rituals do not deviate; they must be practiced and should be considered a skill to be developed. Imagine your favorite athlete or musician right before a performance. The conscious wiping of sweat from the brow, the deliberate breathing, the mental process cues, emptying the water key, bouncing the ball exactly four times before a serve – all serve as physical cues to the mind and help prepare them for the task at hand
- Reduce conscience effort – rituals will help us to get out of the analytical side of our brain and perform more naturally with a quiet, calm and focused mind. Many Olympic gold medal moments have been described as such: *“I felt physically very*

relaxed, but really energized and pumped up. I experienced virtually no anxiety or fear, and the whole experience was totally enjoyable. I experienced a very real sense of calmness and quiet inside, and everything just seemed to flow automatically. I really didn't have to think about what I was supposed to do; it just seemed to happen naturally.

- Consciously acquired – we deliberately practice these techniques of centering, role-playing, process cues, stress and recovery and deep breathing so that during our moment in the spotlight, the program runs automatically and with ease.
- Translates our Core Values – Rituals are powerful tools that help us to translate our most significant value system into our every day lives. We must be fueled by a deep sense of purpose – a transcendent cause. If the only thing that propels us is to be world's greatest musicians, winning honor band, seeking promotion or tenure, winning an audition - our purpose will fail us. We must seek to connect with our heart's desire, our first love. How can we make an impact on the lives of our students, audience and family? What is it about my career that really motivates me and gives me a purpose beyond myself? How do I give back to the community?

Our most creative and insightful moments in life usually do not come when we are exhausted and spent but rather during a long walk or run, or an unforced moment of introspection. This is what is meant when I referred earlier to “spiritual” practice. We must regularly identify with our purpose – our heart's desire. What is it we do that makes an impact on others and do we have a transcendent cause? Think of life as a series of sprints rather than a marathon. We must fully engage in our creative work and then be able to step back and recover our hearts, engage with our families and identify with a cause and purpose greater than ourselves. This is counter to our culture of long hours, careerism and self-promotion. The Power of Positive Rituals will not only transform the way we go about our teaching and performing but will speak into the lives of those around us.

Resources:

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