

**The GIFTED actor**  
**a Matthew Harrison essay**

During a scene break in a recent class, I was standing at the back of the studio with an auditor who asked me a question. She asked me what I did with actors who can't act.

“What do you do with actors who just don't have...it?”

Now I love passionate discussions about acting. With actors and auditors alike. And, as my students know, this question was going to get me going.

I asked her exactly what she meant by “it” and she proceeded to explain to me that some actors have “it” and that most actors, well, don't. That only a select few actors have “the gift” of acting.

I could feel a wave about to come over me and sweep me into a grand debate. But before I got carried away with a mid-class sermon, I simply stated that I didn't think that was true and that all actors are, in essence, gifted.

But she took the argument even further. She *informed* me that some people just simply have a “light” - a light that shines from them, a “sparkle” and “electricity that is attractive” - and that other people just don't have that light. She preached that some people are special, gifted, and chosen to have an aura of brightness - and that others are simply ordinary, plain, and could never, ever be taught how to be special... let alone be taught how to act.

And that's when it happened. The wave overtook me...and a lecture poured out.

And now I have to thank that auditor because the “gift” she gave me was the realization that I utterly and absolutely believe the opposite of what she argued...

Every one - every single one of the actors who comes across my path, in class and coaching, or on set, or wherever I meet them, actors and auditors, professionals and amateurs - every single one of them is *gifted* and has a *light*. Every single actor I've ever met has “it”.

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The first time I taught in South Africa, I was nervous. I was teaching English South Africans, Dutch Afrikaners, Zulus, and Xhosa. I was worried: *Will my teaching make sense to them? Will what I teach be applicable?* In Kelowna, in British Columbia, I had the honour of teaching Canadian First Nations actors. And again I wondered: *Are they too different from me?*

I teach actors who are English, Latino, French, East Indian, Asian, African, Caribbean...you name it. Whether it's South Africans, First Nation Canadians, or Hollywood actors, everywhere I teach I come across the exact same phenomena: we are all alike.

We all want love. We all want belonging. We all want security and direction and happiness in whatever way we define it. We love our parents - and we hate our parents - and either way we've been affected heavily by them. We are all insecure, at times feel jealous and envious, act petty, hurt others, feel remorse, regret, and compassion. We all get hungry, tired, bored, excited, turned on and needy. We are all human.

Under the bright sun, many of us are gathered together with different languages, different styles of dress, even different faiths. However, all of us are the same in being humans, and we all uniquely have the thought of "I," and we're all the same in wanting happiness and in wanting to avoid suffering. – The Dalai Lama

We are all descendants of the same ancestry. We share the same genetic material. We are alike.

And if so, then shouldn't every single one of us be *equally* gifted?

Yes we are. Because the "gift" isn't handed down prejudicially to some select few, like the lucky ones lined up outside a bar chosen for entry by the omnipotent bouncer. The "gift" isn't some lucky ability, a magical mystery or unknowable entity handed down by a capricious God. Nor is it some inherited genetic quanta of talent serendipitously passed through the blood.

The "gift" is life itself.

Each and every one of us, actor and non-actor alike, is alive. We have been astoundingly fortunate in being born into this world. A world of joy and pain, anxieties and triumphs, passions and fears, insecurities, ambitions, imaginations, experience, creativity, self-destruction, family, friends, loss, loneliness, and love. Life is miraculous. It is the ultimate gift.

And it's brief. Too, too brief.

In case you haven't realized it yet, life is really, really short. Many of us have our lives taken away from us prematurely: the teen boy crushed by his car; the child drowned in the creek; the father succumbed too early to a failed heart; the unexpected and undeserved virus. And for those lucky ones who live long and healthy lives, even for them, it's over before you know it: the eighty year old who, staring in the mirror, still expects to see a young woman and is shocked by the old lady staring back; the career professional who can't quite figure out where

the last twenty years have gone; every parent who sadly marvels at how quickly their babies grow up and are gone.

Like fireworks we burn bright and die quickly. That makes life precious. That makes life sacred. That is what makes each and every one of us “sparkle” like those fireworks. It is the brevity of that gift that has been given to us that is the source of our “light”.

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My auditor might have countered that even if all people are the same - if we are all gifted and all have a light - many people don't *act* that way.

Yes. She would be right. Unfortunately. Many of us don't realize the gift we've been given. Or else we can't accept that we've been given a gift at all. We don't see the value of our short lives, and so we have had our light extinguished.

That's what happens when we're hurt. Others can smother the light inside us abuse, attack, betrayal, violation, cruelty, and other forms of terror. Many of us are instilled with fear because of whatever pain was shoved on top of us. We fear growing up. We fear relationships. We fear connection. We fear success, responsibility, or standing up for ourselves.

How many times do we see in acting class actors who hide from connecting with their scene partners, or hide from the emotionality of the scene, or hide from themselves physically? How many times do we see in life, people afraid to be themselves, to step out, to feel fully and be?

Some people have had their light smothered. They *seem* ungifted.

It's my job as an acting teacher to re-ignite the light inside an actor. To re-spark the electricity.

And it's our jobs as artists to de-fibrillate our insides and re-discover our light.

And it's our jobs as actors to then do the same for others - to spark people - people in theatres, movie theatres, or in their homes in front of the TV - to shock them through drama or comedy into a realization of their own emotional lives. What is art but a reminder of our own existence?

If you know all that - if you cherish the gift of life given to you, are aware of how short it is, and have let that ignite the light inside you despite the temptation to let it be shut down - if you've done all that...then you have “it”.

Some people are nurtured, loved, and carried into having “it” from early on. They are surrounded by inspiration and safety and are encouraged to be whatever they want to be. Their

talent is fostered and nourished. That's wonderful. And relieving. I'm fighting to ensure that my son be one of those people.

Others are knocked down and need to be given the encouragement and compassion to help them get themselves back up again and re-discover "it". Both are valid. Both are marvellous.

We can all have "it".

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My auditor, however, would have written off on first sight most of the actors I meet because they didn't have "it", because they would have come to acting with a *desire* to discover the light within but an inability to get there...yet.

She would have prematurely dismissed those of us who fight heroically and work ceaselessly at jump-starting our lives. This is elitism, an *us-and-them* self-righteousness, that would only accept those people who had already freed themselves of the fear, or never had it imposed on them in the first place.

She used me as her example of someone who has "it". "When you walked through the door to teach," she told me, "you had that natural electricity, that special light."

This may sound like a complement...but it's really an insult.

That "natural" electricity and "special" light... is the result of YEARS of hard work, introspection, personal psychology, self-research, education, failures, fall-downs, and a butt-headed desire to figure myself out. To be full. To re-light my sense of life.

Had she met me when I was highly depressive and self-destructive in my early twenties, she would have written me off as being un-noticeable and not having "it". Certainly of not being "gifted". I was, in fact, crushed when told in those days that I had "very little talent".

Never use the word *talent*. It's a synonym for *gifted*. In two syllables, it robs from the artist all the work that went into making the artist. And it automatically sets up the *us-and-them* world which robs the speaker of any hope of achieving that artistry. By saying "Sean Penn is talented" you deny the years of intensive work Sean Penn has invested in himself...let alone in his craft. And by saying "Sean Penn is talented" you insult yourself by implicitly and sub textually saying: "I can never be like Sean Penn"...and so give yourself an out: "So why bother trying?"

Instead say: "Sean Penn works hard to be as good as he is. So could I".

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Of course my auditor must have assumed that *she* had "it".

And therein lies the need that some people have for this concept of "gift" and "having it". To say that some have it and some don't is only designed as a way of making oneself feel better. It's ego appeasement. It's a feeling special...at other people's expense.

Do you see the irony at work in that?

If a person needs to feel more important, better, or more special than others...something in that person must not feel that way. That need is born of insecurity. That insecurity is most probably blocking the purity of the person. And so that person's light...is probably smothered.

In other words: my auditor, who needs to feel that she has "it" when others don't, by definition, probably doesn't have "it".

Yet.

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Love all people's light. Fight to help spark the light of those who have forgotten they have it. Treat all people as gifts equal to your own. Teach the world that we all have talent, beauty, and light. It will make a better world. It's a good way to live.

And *that's* good acting.

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