**Lecture/presentation Timisoara 29.05.2023**

As a soloist at the Norwegian National Opera, I was involved in a collaboration with the Norwegian Olympic Committee within the theme of performing under pressure. This collaboration led me to take a PhD in Performance Psychology. During my PhD, I developed a method that combine the depth of the art with the demands for results within elite sport. The method has been well-received in various performance environments, and today I´m professor at the University of Agder and research leader at Oslo National Academy of the Arts. I also work with leadership for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Performance psychology focuses on mental and psychological mechanisms that can help us be at our best when it matters the most, and within elite sports and other high-performance fields, performance psychology has been an important focus for several years. Unfortunately, this is not the fact within the field of art, and that´s a pity because we see that we have only just begun to scratch the surface of these matters. Today, many top athletes train 50% physically AND 50 % mentally.

I have learned a great deal from working with top athletes. For example, in archery, you know the sport when they shoot with bow and arrow, they have a term called "Target Panic." The most important moment in this sport is the moment when the arrow leaves the string, the so-called release point, and this micro-second is what determines the shot. The archer is aware of this and therefor try very hard to take control over this specific moment. But this effort often makes the performer so hyper-conscious and over-focused that it all ends up in a total freeze, mentally and physically. The problem arises because the performer is trying to control the outcome, but the outcome is beyond their control because it lies in the future. What happens at the target, the result over there, is only a consequence of what is been doing here, and therefor the focus should always be here and not over there.

In chess they talk about "the judgement trap." It occurs when the chess player is too focused on the consequences, and starts to overthink. When the Norwegian world chess champion, Magnus Carlsen, loses a game – well, it HAPPENS you know - you often hear him say, "It went bad; I was thinking too much." An extreme version of the judgement trap is called "analysis paralysis,". I think we all have experienced that, it happens when our need for control become so intense that we almost paralyze our self completely.

Some time ago I was going to withdraw money from an ATM. I was standing in line and the man in front of me had forgotten his code. And then I of course started to worry: Do I actually remember MY code? In pure panic I start to memorize the numbers, and when it was my turn, my fingers didn't work. For four years my fingers had found their way to the right numbers, but now I had gotten in the way of myself.

  This is what often happened to me when I did main roles at the opera stage. I was so eager to control the situation that I got in the way of myself. I was thinking so much ABOUT the situation that I no longer managed to stay IN the situation. You can´t think ABOUT and at the same time be IN what you are doing. When much was on stake, I was thinking myself out of the situation and my own presence.

My interest in the connection between performance and mental strength was awakened when I did my first leading role at The Norwegian Opera. The stage director was the actor Toralv Maurstad, a legend within Norwegian theater. Minutes ahead of the premiere I stood behind the stage curtain, dizzy out of fear and anxiety. Maurstad approached me, trying to calm me down, but it didn’t help much so I asked him: - Do YOU sometimes get afraid, Maurstad?

  He smiled and said: - All stage artists are afraid. But after many years on stage, you know what works and what doesn't. What you are doing now, he told me, is NOT the way to go, standing here memorizing lines in pure panic or trying to anticipate what will happen out there on the stage. You have to find another approach. And then he gave me a piece of advice I've never forgotten:

  - When you are nervous, he said, the most important thing to remember is that you need energy. You can´t perform without energy. Without energy, nothing works. And the only place you can energize yourself is in the moment, The only thing that can give you energy is to find in the living reality just in front of you here and now. In the factual, material world. If you want to energize yourself you have to connect to what is REAL, he told me, as opposed to what is thought of or fantasized about. You can´t relate to the reality through thinking, ONLY by using your body-senses. Everything we feel and sense through our body, happens here and now, in real-time, and therefore the body is always stuck in the moment, it is always connected to the living moment.

 And this was Maurstads main point: When I enter the stage, he said, I focus only on my senses. I concentrate on the heat from the spotlights, the smell from my colleagues - which can be very interesting at an opening night - the sounds and colors in the room and so on. My senses take me into the living moment where I let myself be energized.

All top athletes are trained in this, to not leave reality, the living moment here and now, no matter the pressure. Because they all have realized that being present is by far the most important quality when it comes to all forms of achievement and performances, perhaps also the most important factor in life in general. That is why the word *Present* in English can mean both being present and it can mean a gift.

And I think it goes without saying: If I am going to balance on a tight line, I have to be present here and now. If I am three miters ahead of myself or think about the quarrel with my wife yesterday, things go sideways.

I guess most of us would agree that presence is crucial when it comes to all kinds of performances. The problem is that today everyone talks about living in the present, grab the moment, carpe diem – you name it, but the paradox is that no matter how much we talk about the moment, very few have fully understood what presence actually entails, what it means. Therefor we don’t know HOW to stay in the moment, especially not when we have to perform under pressure.

The brain is moldable, we shape it through praxis which means it becomes good at what we train it for, and today we train our brain in everything BUT presence. When we go to bed tonight, on average, we had been thinking between 20,000 and 30,000 thoughts. That's a lot, and it indicates that we have spent much more time in our thoughts ABOUT reality than in the actual reality. And we are still surprised when we find ourselves depressed and without energy?

So, how do we practice presence?

The first thing to know about presence is that it is never about FINDING the moment; we ARE always in the moment, whether we want it or not. The problem is that we are constantly moving out of the moment through thinking. If we didn't think, we would always be in the moment.

Thinking has the ability to move in time, and it happens all the time. Thinking send us into the future, causing anxiety, worry, and fear, or take us back to the past, bringing sorrow, shame, guilt, and anger which make us leak energy. That’s why top athletes say: you can´t be in a reflection mode while performing.

This is where the body and the mind are very different. As I said, the body is always stuck to the present moment because everything we perceive and feel through and in the body happens here and now, in real-time. That is why Maurstad focuses on his senses at stage, and that’s why the Norwegian world champion athlete Carsten Warholm hit his chest before a race and why the boxer Cecilia Brækhus punches herself in the face before a match. They do this to get out of their head, down in the body and into the moment. And that's why opera singers often say, "I get nervous if I'm not nervous." It sounds strange, but the idea is that fear is something that can be felt in the body and therefor can be used as a tool to anchor oneself to the present moment. Top athletes are trained to do this, to use their fear as a tool to connect to the moment. According to Olympic winner Axel Lund Svindal it's all about transforming the fear in the stomach into energy in the chest.

Of course thinking have a function to fill, but reflection belongs to the preparation phase. When the pressure is on, it is all about surrendering to the moment.

Anyone seeking extraordinary performances, know that they need an X-factor, and that can only happen when we dare to let go of control and surrender to the moment. Leonel Messi says: "I never try to control the moment, I let the moment control me." Jazz musicians put it this way, "If you don't surrender to the moment, you're not telling the truth." The same principle applies to visual artists and painters. In my PhD I interviewed several painters, and they all tell the same story: When they approach the canvas, they often have a clear idea of how the painting should turn out. But after a while they always meet resistance in their work, as if the painting refuses to be manipulated. And if they then try to FORCE their decisions and ideas through, it never become great art. They must enter into a dialogue with the image itself, and this is one of the great secret connected to making art: Will-power isn´t enough. You need to let go of control and trust something that exceed will-power and mentally control. You need to trust the moment itself. AND, as all top athletes say: we need to trust our training, and this is another crucial point, whether we are top athletes or artist. When we are under pressure and feel the need for control, we have to trust our training. We have no choice but to trust our practice.

When we practice, we store things on our hard drive, in our nerves and reaction patterns, in our muscle memories. We are building a bank of skills in our body. In technical terms this is called tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is everything we know and can, but may not always KNOW that we can because it lies beneath the threshold of our consciousness. An example is riding a bicycle: once we have learned to ride it, we do this automatically without needing to think of it. When we are good at something we allow the activity to guide itself and we don’t have to make it happen through conscious thoughts. We LET it happens, we don’t MAKE it happen. It is said that what separates a genius from us ordinary people is that the genius have learned to trust the tacit knowledge, learned to release it, let it flow and let it find it´s expression without trying to control it mentally. Mozart's original written scores show that nothing is deleted, nothing is added. The scores are almost entirely without corrections. It's as if he just copy-peist something already written. He himself said, "I don't understand why they call me a genius: I only write what I hear inside me."

Within the field of psychology, it is said that in order to realize one's potential, one must be able to free oneself from one's own stream of thoughts. And this also applies to mental and psychological well-being in general. Anxiety and depression can almost always be traced back to too much thinking and to little presence. However, gaining control over our stream of thoughts IS challenging. We have all experienced that. When we are under pressure or are afraid or depressed, we only think MORE and we can't find the off button, the off switch. How do we deal with overthinking? Well, evolution has provided us with an excellent tool in that respect, and that is called attention.

We can sit on a bicycle absorbed in our own thoughts, but if we suddenly are about to fall, we are fully present in the situation to avoid being hurt. And when we are 100% aware and attentive, we are out of our stream of thoughts. Thinking and attention are mutually exclusive. If we fill the mind with attention, thinking is automatically reduced. It's like listening to the radio; you cannot listen to two channels at the same time. That is why it often helps to go for a walk when we are depressed, because we then become aware of things around us, such as nature, people and events. This awakens our senses and attention, takes us out of our head and gives us more presence.

That is why top athletes practice what is called attention training; they train to strengthen their own attention so they can break free from overthinking.

In this world, we have much less control than we like to admit. However, what we CAN learn to control, with a little practice, is our own focus, that is to say: what we choose to direct our attention towards. We often hear, "Don't lose focus," but it's impossible to lose focus. Our focus is always switched on unless we are asleep or unconscious. The question is whether we focus on the living moment here and now or if our focus is tied to thoughts related to the past and future, and this is where attention training can help us: to sharpen our focus.

But attention training can also be used when we feel stuck in our own emotions and negative thoughts. The problem with fear, anxiety and mental and psychological pain is often that we get LOST in our thoughts and feelings. It's like going to the movies. When I sit in a movie theater, a cinema, eating popcorn, I quickly forget that I'm in a theater eating popcorn, if the film is exciting. I become absorbed, I lose myself in what's happening on the screen. In the same way, it's not our thoughts in themselves that are the problem, but rather that we constantly get lost in them. And that we can learn to avoid.

If we turn our attention 180 degrees and direct it inward, we can learn to take more control over what´s happening inside us. If we manage to be as attentive as the cat guarding the mouse hole and meet all thoughts and emotions within us with pure awareness, something happens. We will quickly realize that a distance arises between us and our thoughts and between us and our feeling: Here am I and over there are my thoughts or my emotions. Suddenly there is space between me and my inner objects, a space of freedom. For me this was a turning point when I for the first time experienced this. It was a tremendous release, because for the first time I found rest within myself. My inner self became a home where I could retreat and find rest. I felt like the snail who carries its home on the back, and any time can withdraw into it and find shelter there.

There is much to gain by directing our attention inward because, in addition to helping us gain control over our inner objects, it helps us to become AWARE of ourselves, our personal core. We develop self-awareness, which is something entirely different from self-centeredness. Self-awareness is crucial for artists. When I stood on stage, I could be aware of everything BUT myself. I was aware of the audience, my bosses, their reactions, all my focus was on the outside. But then the external world became more real to me than myself. It was like the world out there was everything; and I was nothing. I stood there, emptied of myself, placing all the weight out there, making myself weightless. And in a state like this, it is almost impossible to be an artist and express oneself.

Every day I meet young art students who have so much focus on the outside world that they are completely emptied of themselves. They suffer from what is called white grief, emptiness depression, or empty heart disease. Young people today are so adaptable, so future-disciplined, that they lose themselves in the world. And because they constantly have their focus directed outwardly, the world out there appears much more real than themselves, and that is a very vulnerable position. And as artist we can´t allow that.

For artists, it should always be more important to express themselves than to conform. All great artists have this courage to leave their personal fingerprint on their work. You don't need to be an art connoisseur to recognize the paintings of Van Gogh, Picasso, and Munch because they have such a strong personal signature in what they do. As artist they are like a spinning top, which stands straight only when it is spinning around its own axis. And this is what we should strive for. Therefor I will conclude this lecture with a short poem:

*Every day we slaughter our finest impulses. That is why we get a heartache when we read the lines and hear the music created by the hand of a master. Because we recognize it as our own, as the tender voice within us which froze and stiffened because we lacked the faith to believe in our own powers, our own truth, and beauty. We all derive from the same source. There is no mystery about the origin of things. We are all part of creation; we are all kings, poets, masters; we only need to open up and discover what is* already *there. Discover what we already* are*.*