



Fearless Philosophies: “How much do you want it?”

by Jeff Nelsen

I have been investigating, lecturing and coaching ‘Fearlessness’ in the musical arena for many years. I define fearlessness as a mental state of complete faith in the moment at hand, and any task ahead. There is a lack of awareness of any obstacles, self-imposed or otherwise. In many ways, children embody fearlessness very well. There is a wonderful quote I’ve modified, and use to compliment my definition of ‘Fearlessness’. You’ll find I use quotes as much as I use, ohhh...air! Ambrose Redmoon began his quote with the word “Courage.” For our purposes here, the quote reads:

“Fearlessness may not always be the absence of fear. Sometimes it can be the judgment that something else is more important than fear”

Performing without fear can happen when we’ve filled our minds with constructive goals. As musicians, we realize the ultimate expression of our art through performing. Good performances are strong in ability and creativity. Creativity starts in the mind. I believe ability does as well. Fearless Philosophies is written to bring creative approaches to refining our abilities in our art: Performing!

Why is it that sometimes I can make better music in the practice room than in performance? Why does it often feel so different when people are watching me play? Nothing has changed except for the presence of an audience or audition panel! It’s still my body and my instrument, just like in the practice room.

Well, the fact is, something has changed...and this change has happened in my mind. I think, “This time matters more.” “That person is judging me harshly.” “I’m not prepared.” The bad news is, the responsibility for these mental changes lies completely on me. The good news is, the responsibility for these mental changes lies completely on me! I can learn how to make sure the next mental change is a constructive one.

My first exposure to examining the mental approach was reading Tim Gallwey’s “Inner Game of Tennis”. The “inner game” is our mental process during the pursuit of excellence. I can easily admit that my ‘success’ at the inner game varies, but along the way I have collected many tools with which to play this game in a constructive manner.

When we feel nervous about something, we are

choosing to think about the things that could go wrong, or we aren't well prepared. This keeps us from relaxing, trusting, and simply performing. My three favorite cures for 'nerves' are these:

- 1.) Make sure I have prepared way more than I need.
- 2.) Once I walk on stage, I completely believe in what I've prepared.
- 3.) I completely believe that the audience wants me to play well.

We shouldn't do things during performance that don't benefit our performing abilities. Thinking about being judged doesn't help inspire a better performance. Why not be the naïve fool onstage? Why not believe that our audience is supportive, and they are enjoying the experience? They have paid money to come be touched, and are more than hopeful that this will happen. We can leave our thoughts about “was that good?” and “was I ready?” for after our performance, when we've returned to the practice room. While we are onstage, we are thus free to have performance experiences that are completely optimistic.

Further to the “is this good” self-analysis, when I was offered the Canadian Brass horn position, Marty Hackleman sent me a great quote from the poem “If” by Rudyard Kipling.

“If you can meet with triumph and disaster, and treat those two imposters just the same...”

This alludes beautifully to the possibility that neither success nor failure actually exists. Consider Shakespeare's thought of “It is neither good nor bad, but thinking makes it so.” We can choose to not assign worth to our thoughts and actions. We can simply be here, acting, learning, and planning to

act...oh, and maybe getting a little of what we should get out of our thoughts and actions: some enjoyment! Crazy, I know...but eternally possible.

Thoughts influence actions. I believe we have the ability to choose what and how we think. We can all admit that we are rather borderline insane about choosing our mouthpieces, reeds, bows, and instruments. We should have an equally intense scrutiny of our thinking.

Calling our thinking process an “inner game” is fantastic. Tim Gallwey's reference point was tennis, a game many people ‘play’. We ‘play’ music. My approach to playing this game well with regards to music is simple.

- 1) Study and practice how to make wonderful music
- 2) Make wonderful music
- 3) Note as soon as possible when I am thinking a fearful thought
- 4) Recover as quickly as possible by selecting and using one or two “fearless tools” to get my mind back on a constructive track
- 5) Immediately go back to #1 or #2

By using what I call “fearless tools” I can remain mentally constructive more often. Fearless tools are thoughts that I can call on to help me stay out of my own way. Most of my tools come in the form of succinct inspirational quotes that fill my mind with positive goals for the performing experience.

Because we play much of the inner game with words, words can affect people as magically as music. They can symbolize ideals larger than their literal meaning. In this and upcoming installments of “Fearless Philosophies,” I will share two basic types of affirming quotes. The first type is motivational. It helps me pick up my horn at a time when I'd rather pick up the TV remote and gets me

to wake up at 6 a.m. instead of three hours later. The other, which is more inspirational, reminds me to walk onstage with an optimistic naïve mind full of constructive goals, and to replace fearful thoughts with higher ideals. With each article I’ll alternate between these two types of quotes, and I’ll show you how each quote’s inspirational and motivational magic apply to music making.

We’ve discussed the inner game sufficiently, so now I’d like to introduce our first fearless tool for embracing a Fearless Philosophy. If you’ve read this far, you must be interested in learning. Researching music and practicing our instrument are equally important to learning how to be more fearless in performance. The amount of study and practicing we do in an hour, a day, or a year is ultimately determined by how we answer this one fundamental question.

“How much do you want it?”

In this form, the word ‘it’ stands for anything we don’t have at the present time. In the music world, ‘it’ can be a position in honor-band, a place in your favourite teacher’s studio at your favorite school, a great performing opportunity, or a wonderful job. ‘It’ could also be memorizing a piece or playing something beautifully a semi-tone higher or two metronome markings faster. The time-line length doesn’t matter when choosing ‘it’. All that matters is the fact that we haven’t achieved or attained it yet, and most importantly, that we want it!

In order to reach our goals, the answer to “How much do you want it?” must be immediately followed by action. I guarantee you the most ‘successful’ people in the world will have, more often than not, answered, “I want it enough to do something in the pursuit of it right now.” Constructive action invariably follows this type of thinking.

“Begin somewhere; you can’t build a reputation on what you intend to do.”

-Liz Smith

Think, hope, act. Most people think and hope, but it’s the ‘act’ part that is frequently missing.

“How much do you want it?” I have these words posted all over my home. Each time I need help focusing on getting something that I want, I write those six words on “Post-it” notes, and stick them up in high-traffic areas as well as high-temptation-to-slack-off places. The first one always goes on my alarm clock. If I roll over in the morning to hit the snooze button and see this self-reminder of why I set the alarm for such a painful time, I get up! The second one goes on the TV. A constructive goal for me is to be smarter than myself. If I know I can be easily distracted, these post-its help preempt the distraction.

These reminders are not there to force abstinence of enjoyable things like snoozing or channel surfing. They are there to inspire and motivate. Without these reminders, our inner dialogue might go something like this. “Hmmm...a TV. I wonder what’s on.” Two hours later, we still haven’t practiced or transcribed or done something constructive in our pursuit of whatever our ‘it’ is. I guess we didn’t want it enough to leave the TV off and go practice. That post-it note on the TV might just give us that tiny little friendly reminder to stay focused and active on the path to our goal.

Why is posting reminders to ourselves worth it? Because these reminders keep us focused on our goal. Our goal as musicians (or athletes, or dancers, or poker players, etc.) is to perform at a very high level.

The beauty of performing is that it is ALWAYS a culmination of one's choices up to the moment of performance. A good example of a high-level performance opportunity is an audition. How we perform at an audition is a reflection of our choices leading up to that moment. Consider for a moment that the winner may simply be the one who played the post-it game the best, and stayed focused the most.

The only 'control' we have over the result of an audition resides in our own choices. We hope our choices will lead to the most fantastic moment of the day. We are all generally free to choose our actions, and we do so hundreds of times a day. For me, if choosing to do something will give me a .0001% improvement, I'll do it.

“Success not only comes for wanting it the most; it comes from wanting it the most often.”

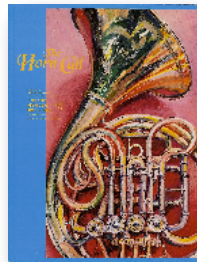
If I frequently ask myself “how much do you want it”, I increase how often I think about what I want. The important thing is to keep a clear idea of what 'it' is, keep investigating all the things we can do to achieve 'it', and act accordingly.

Before I leave you to your post-it notes, I must mention that positive thinking is not a replacement for practicing. All the constructive naiveté in the world is useless without preparation. Positive thinking alone will keep us positive, and this is worthwhile. But only when positive thinking is combined with doing incredibly disciplined long hours of practice will your musician within be able to burst forth onto the world in an embraceable form.

We have to think anyway, so why not think big? While driving the tractors on the pig farm I grew up on in western Canada, I remember wondering what it would be like to be a member of Canadian Brass. I guess I wanted it often enough.

I hope this and upcoming articles inspire you to dream crazy dreams too, and go for it...fearlessly!

Next issue I'll examine a quote from my “Inspirational Sheet” that I keep with me before walking onstage to audition: “Make the decision easy for them.”



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Jeff Nelsen is best known for his time spent as the hornist with the world famous Canadian Brass. Since leaving the group over a year ago, he has been enjoying his time performing solo engagements and presenting recitals and master classes all over the world. Jeff has been invited to be a Visiting Associate Professor of Horn at the prestigious Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University for the 2006-07 school year. Jeff has also been recently freelancing with orchestras including the New York Philharmonic and the National Symphony. Jeff's audition training insight comes from winning many auditions, and being official runner up for positions with the Chicago Symphony and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Visit his website at www.jeffnelsen.com.

Everything But Haiku

Thoughts on Jeff Nelsen’s Thoughts

By Martin Hackleman

How much do you want it?

Enough to surpass the dictums and smooth platitudes?

Enough to not settle for repeating average hoping a thousand “o.k.’s” earn good?

Enough to step back and look at how things are being done as physics and not only Farkas Theory?

Think of the act of playing in the most simple terms. The simpler the problem the closer the truth. Natural can be cultivated. The parameters at the core are few.

How much do you want it?

After you have run all the basics as you sense them, turn around and exaggerate what you are already doing. Then try doing the opposite. It is often a small ironic circle.

Fear: Let it run through you like an ice arrow that misses your heart. Don’t try to always stop it. Be a screen and it water. Use it as firewood for your dedication. It will always be there in large logs or small kindling. Let it inspire. Repetition channels it. Contemplation before raw acts make it a sinew in your performance rather than a cramp in your efforts.

When driving at high speeds small movements – and there are only a few to choose from – make all the difference between executing an exhilarating smooth trip or the alternative. Don’t think ahead. There are few greater joys that just hitting the note on the horn.

Experience it. Cherish it. This momentary brilliance can lead to reams of success.

We easily contemplate with deep severity the trouble days. When we are breathing the heady fresh air of “Good Days” contemplate the balance that is taking place. Balance of effort, energy, and resonance.

Be like a dog rolling in rapture on the grass...

...but thinking.

Martin Hackleman has been the hornist for both Canadian Brass and Empire Brass. He was principle horn for the Vancouver Symphony for twenty years and the Montreal Symphony for one year before assuming his present position as principal horn of the National Symphony in the Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C. in 2000.