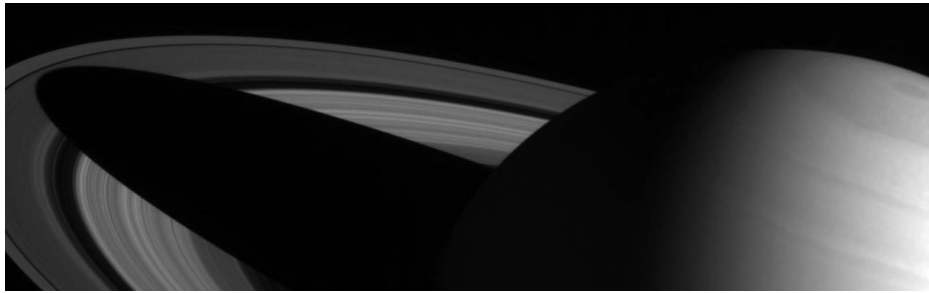


TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

Stephen Carter

HOW TO USE THE TOTAL
PERSPECTIVE VORTEX IN YOUR VERY
OWN SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS

IN HIS BOOK, *Fear and Trembling*, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard writes something that has lodged in my brain with the tenacity of a chorus from any Barry Manilow song. He muses about what it might be like to teach the story of Abraham and Isaac to a congregation. It's a strange story. (How often do we tell stories about attempted infanticide with any degree of sympathy for the guy on the blunt end of the knife?) It involves a man who is commanded by God to plunge a knife into the heart of his son—a son who is supposed to father Abraham's giant future kingdom, no less. But it is also probably one of the most mind-blowing meditations on faith and sacrifice in literature.

Kierkegaard imagines that, in the first place, it would be quite a decision for anyone to choose to tell the story. Because really, who wants to be blamed for a sudden violent decrease in youth program attendance? But imagining that the preacher decides he must tell the story of Abraham, Kierkegaard hypothesizes that he should approach the telling of the story with great care. At every point he should remind his audience of Abraham's overpowering love for his son. He should remind them of how heinous this act

is, and detail every misery, every regret, every broken social contract required to fulfill the commandment God gave to Abraham. Because what if—what *if* someone actually takes the story seriously? What if, the next day, a man decides to take his son out to a mountain to offer him as a gift to God? This would be a catastrophe, and the preacher would be obligated by all that is good to make every attempt to stop this man from carrying out a sacrificial act that the preacher himself had lauded just the day before.

Kierkegaard spends the rest of his book hypothesizing about how Abraham's story works in the larger scheme of things, and I encourage you to read it. But I want to stop here because I am interested, not in Abraham, but in the fellow in the congregation who was so struck by Abraham's story. I'm trying to remember the last time a Sunday school lesson affected me like that. No, not the last time I felt homicidal—I feel that way quite frequently during Church lessons—but the last time I felt as though I had entered a space as spiritually volatile as Kierkegaard's hypothetical sermon. When was the last time a Sunday school lesson took the Rubik's Cube of my soul, mixed it up completely, pasted on new colors here and

there, and threw it back in my lap? In other words, when was the last time a Sunday school lesson *converted* me?

Sadly, not in recent memory.

And this bothers me. I'd like to think that our church meetings can be places of great growth for the souls of people like me. I'm trying to figure out why my Sunday meetings seem so benign and impotent. If I can, maybe I can do something about it. Thus, I offer the following: an analysis of the average Sunday class, undertaken by an amateur rhetorician (whose English and philosophy degrees should be counted as liabilities rather than assets), and some ideas on how to improve things.

TO begin with, it seems I should ask: what is the goal of the two hours we spend in Sunday classes? Are they for instruction? Edification? Enlightenment about the principles of the gospel? Are they for reaffirming our beliefs? To give nourishment to our world-weary souls? To explore the highest heights and the deepest abysses? To learn the mysteries of godliness? Let's say the answer is D—all of the above. So the question now is, how does the average Sunday class go about achieving these objectives?

Observing the setup of my priesthood quorum and Sunday school classes, I've started to draw some conclusions about their pedagogical leanings. At first glance, it looks like learning about the gospel consists of hearing the good word from someone authoritative and then applying it during the course of our normal lives.

But wait. This is preaching, and preaching takes place during our seventy minutes in the chapel, a time and place specifically designed for one-way communication: from pulpit to audience. So maybe our Sunday classroom time is meant for something else. Since we're usually sitting in a small room, perhaps it's meant for a more personable style of communication. Maybe more of a small group discussion. A time where the Saints get together to talk about how the principles of the gospel have (or have not) been applicable to their lives recently.

This scenario sounds about like what I experience each week. And it seems to be effective in some ways. The teacher never seems to have a hard time eliciting comments from the group. People are always willing to hold forth or tell a story. So I suppose the question is, in what ways is this time of personable, two-way communication put to use? And how useful is it?

So far I've identified three basic ap-



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It is paramount to my spiritual survival that I am shown, on a regular basis, that the world is a much larger place than I had originally thought.

proaches to Sunday class lessons. The first I call the Pep Rally. In this setup, the teacher comes with a topic at the ready. At the beginning of the meeting, he tells us what the principle up for cheers is, reads a quotation or two, and everyone happily joins in singing the praises of faith, sacrifice, the Word of Wisdom, whatever.

Second is the Tips 'n' Trix Seminar. In this model, the teacher reveals the topic, acknowledges that following the particular principle is sometimes difficult and enjoins the crowd to cite scriptures and examples to help the theoretical wayfarer keep the commandment in question. When conducting a Tips 'n' Trix seminar, Relief Society sisters usually have the foresight to create a good acronym or list to paste onto refrigerator magnets.

The third strategy is the Whack-a-Moral Game, in which the teacher brings in stories, reads them aloud, and then leads the class in extracting a moral from them, no matter what those stories may be. These lessons are most fun during the Old Testament years.

All of these structures seem to work just fine. But what do these three approaches say about the kind of teaching we, as Latter-day Saints, are content with? As far as I can surmise, these three structures assert that values are essentially black and white. Faith is good; sacrifice is good; the Word of Wisdom is good. The world is bad; disobedient children are bad; drugs are bad. Humans are split into the forces of good and evil, but, lo, a principle has come to us shining from the heights, a principle that can heal ills, answer life's difficult questions, fold your socks, and provide the answer to that all-perplexing question, "What do you say if your wife asks you how she looks in her newly purchased dress, and she looks frumpy?"

Essentially, when a teacher stands up and starts a lesson as a Pep Rally, Tips 'n' Trix seminar, or Whack-a-Moral game, he or she has, consciously or not, limited the playing field. He or she has constructed an atmosphere that accepts only polarities. "Faith is good because of such and such." "We need to work harder." "We need to reject the evils of the world, and here are ways I have done that."



At first, such structures don't look so bad. And I believe there are good times and places for them. However, from time to time, these approaches are taken to absurd extremes. For example, the Sunday school lesson I attended that, by the teacher's innocent oversight, blundered into Judah's seduction by his daughter-in-law (Judah thought he was rattling the bushes with a mere whore: little did he realize. . .). Discovering the moral can of worms she had just opened up, the teacher blithely tied the story shut by saying, "This shows us that we should teach our children the law of chastity." A direct bulls-eye in a Whack-a-Moral game.

Another time, a member of my quorum recounted an experience when a skeptic had told him that although his argument for obeying the Word of Wisdom had been a good one, he was obviously "programmed" to say that. My quorum brother said he was disturbed by this accusation, but after thinking about it had decided that, indeed, he had been programmed. And what good programming it was, too! In fact, he was programming his own children to the same ends. I figured this comment was an anomaly and let it slide, despite its frightening implications about the human soul. But then a second brother took up the ball, grandly stating, "Some people call it brainwashing; I call it indoctrination." The Pep Rally was in full swing, much to the delight of our good-hearted teacher.

As far as I can tell, the unsettling implications of Judah's story were pushed aside so easily because, when in the clutches of these pedagogies, which I have chosen to call the Three Sedating Sins, we feel that we must have answers to quickly put sticky questions to rest. When in the grip of the Pep Rally, Tips 'n' Trix Seminar, or Whack-a-Moral Game, no question can come up that can't be dealt with promptly. The programming inci-

dent is an example of the Pep Rally gone wrong: a bizarre idea was brought up, but since it supported the original premise of the lesson, no one challenged it. If any statement supports the principle *du jour*, it must be on the level.

I finally could bear it no longer and objected to the programming model on grounds of free agency. But no one in the quorum responded to my objection. They just went on to the next comment. There is no contradiction so blatant, no claim so outlandish, that it can't be swept under the rug in seconds by a class under the influence of one of the Three Sedating Sins. All it takes is a "Well, yes, sometimes life is difficult, but the gospel is true, and that's what really matters."

And that's probably true, but I'm not sure that maxim should let us ignore the huge paradoxes of life. This is where my own peculiarities come into play. This is where the essay throws off its veil of objectivity (like I've been fooling anyone) and shows you what I value.

I'M a strict adherent to the Thirteenth Article of Faith, especially the part that says, "if there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things." I don't follow this rule because I'm righteous. I follow it purely out of a survival instinct. It is paramount to my spiritual survival that I am shown, on a regular basis, that the world is a much larger place than I had originally thought. I need periodic inoculations in the Total Perspective Vortex as described in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.¹ In case you haven't read this series of science fiction novels, which I consider to be some of the greatest contemporary works of philosophy we have, the Total Perspective Vortex can extrapolate the entirety of reality from something as insignificant as a piece of fairy cake. The Vortex is used to execute especially dangerous criminals by showing them precisely how small they are in comparison to the rest of the universe. The effects of this "reality check" annihilate the victim.

Being human, I naturally tend to interpret the world as being smaller than myself, as a

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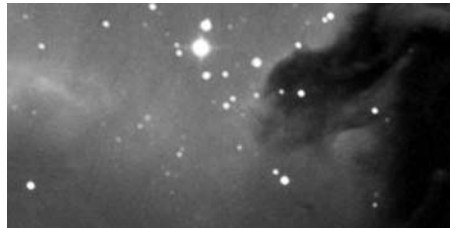
place I have some measure of control over. And being a lower breed of academic, I'm especially prone to thinking that I'm smarter than everyone else. When I suddenly realize that the world is larger than I had once thought, my small mind is horrified but also, strangely, comforted. As the playwright David Mamet writes in *Three Uses of the Knife*, "Myth, religion, and tragedy . . . awaken awe. They do not deny our powerlessness, but through its avowal they free us of the burden of its repression."²

For example, in the movie *Seven*, Brad Pitt's character, a homicide investigator who has contemptuously treated his quarry (a man who kills serially according to the seven deadly sins, played by Kevin Spacey), is caught in a position where he must either help fulfill the killer's plan or acknowledge the killer's superior intelligence. The killer literally has Pitt's wife's head delivered by courier. Pitt has a gun, and the killer is in chains. He knows that Pitt has an explosive temper and will most likely give way to wrath, the last deadly sin, for which there has not yet been a murder committed. It is an ending that never fails to open my soul to the core. To me, Pitt is everyman. At some point each of us will find ourselves in Pitt's shoes: the world will be too big for us, and it will demand an answer. What is really inside of us? No tips or trix will suffice.

As the screen fades, Morgan Freeman (Pitt's partner) says, "Ernest Hemingway once wrote, 'The world is a fine place, and worth fighting for.' I agree with the second part."

Other works of art have done the same thing for me: Levi Petersen's *The Backslider*, Graham Greene's *Heart of the Matter*, Sharon Olds's *The Gold Cell*, the movies *Monster* (another serial-killer flick) and *My Dinner with Andre*, and Gustav Mahler's *Symphony of a Thousand*.

What these pieces of art offer me are trips into the depths and heights of life, to places where the paradoxes become almost unbearable. I say "almost" because, while experiencing a piece of art, I am not actually in the situations, only by proxy. It's a strange kind of temple work: fictional characters performing initiations and endowments for living, breathing people. From time to time,



the scriptures do the same thing for me, especially the Old Testament and the sayings of Jesus. The juxtaposition of God with the horrors of Joshua's war tactics never fails to blow my mind, nor does Jesus' contention, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matthew 6:28–29).

This is the mission of religion for me. To take me to those places, to help me open my soul to the hugeness of the world. To encounter the paradoxes. To contemplate the heights and the depths. To push rationality till it breaks and then to rocket into mystery. Who knows where we'll land? As Kierkegaard put it,

When I have to think of Abraham, I am as though annihilated. I catch sight every moment of that enormous paradox which is the substance of Abraham's life, every moment I am repelled. . . . [W]hen I reach the height I fall down"³

As you can see, I'm not hip on the Pep Rally, the Tips 'n' Trix Seminar, nor the Whack-a-Moral Game. I think they are used far more often than their limited capacities can bear. But I wonder: am I asking too much? I mean, are church classes really meant to rocket us into mystery? If I were founding the Church of Carter, the sign on the door would read: Your soul seared in one hour or your tithing back. But is it fair for me to ask that our class time to be devoted to the deep and paradoxical when so often what some of my brothers and sisters really need is just a little boost to help them face the coming week?

Mamet was writing about drama, but he articulates this kind of dilemma well.

Stanislavsky says there are two

kinds of plays. There are the plays that you leave, and you say to yourself, "By God, I just, I never, gosh, I want to, now I understand! What a masterpiece! Let's go get a cup of coffee." And by the time you get home, you can't remember the name of the play, you can't remember what the play was about.

And there are plays—and books and songs and poems and dances—that you leave unsure, but which you think about perhaps the next day and perhaps for a week, and perhaps for the rest of your life.

Because they aren't clean, they aren't neat, but there's something in them that comes from the heart, and, so, goes to the heart."⁴

As an experiment, I twice tried to create a non-clean, non-neat teaching atmosphere, to construct an environment where something like what Mamet describes could happen. And believe me, it was difficult. The first time I tried it was in an early morning high school seminary class; the second was in an elders quorum meeting.

When I took over the seminary class, the outgoing teacher tearfully bore her testimony to the class members that I was the one the Lord wanted to teach the class now. I knew that she really loved that class. It was a big part of her life. And now she was turning it over to me. Her daughter was in the class and would surely report on my attempts at teaching, which made me kind of nervous.

Looking back, I realize that experimenting on the early morning seminary class was probably ill advised. Brains that have just been roused from sleep are not in the mood to explore ambiguities, much less open their souls to the core. Essentially what I tried to do was take each of the lessons and find a place where things got muddy, where a person actually had to do a little thinking, and where there was actually no answer.

One of my methods was to have my students write letters to a non-member friend of mine, telling him about the gospel. I wanted his influence because he could ask questions that I could not. The students couldn't as-

If I were founding the Church of Carter, the sign on the door would read: Your soul seared in one hour or your tithing back.

sume he had any previous knowledge about the Church or the gospel. They had to start at the beginning, which required examining their beliefs and assumptions. My friend agreed to answer the letters if I would provide Sunday dinner each week. With some prompting from me, he drafted questions about the concepts they had written about in their letters: I bet you think I'm going to hell, huh? Does reason have anything to do with your faith? What if God tells me to kill someone, like he told that Nephi guy?

I brought the questions back and used them as discussion starters. I thought this would be a good idea. I mean, my class members were in communication with a real person whose soul, ostensibly, hadn't been saved. Real mission field stuff. I had other tactics, too, all designed to make the gospel real. Well, "real" as I define it, meaning that it makes a difference in the way you live your life and brings up questions that can turn your head inside out.

It turned out that I garnered more complaints in a month than most teachers get in the normal four-year term. I should have guessed this was going to happen when the previous teacher's daughter (who was also one of the brightest people in the class) said, "I come here to get answers. All you give me is questions." I was about to congratulate myself when I realized that she didn't seem very grateful.

The first official who came through to check me out (they have to perform a personal visit for every complaint) was understanding. He could see what I was trying to do and expressed his support as long as I didn't teach false doctrine. But the next guy who came was firmly of the Pep Rally, Tips 'n' Trix, Whack-a-Moral school, and he was very, very good at his job. The problem was, everyone knew why he was there; they also knew that my teaching methods rely heavily on discussion, and so they boycotted me. Half an hour into class, I had to turn everything over to the official. The students gratefully followed his formulated lesson plan, and I knew then that I wasn't cut out to teach this class.



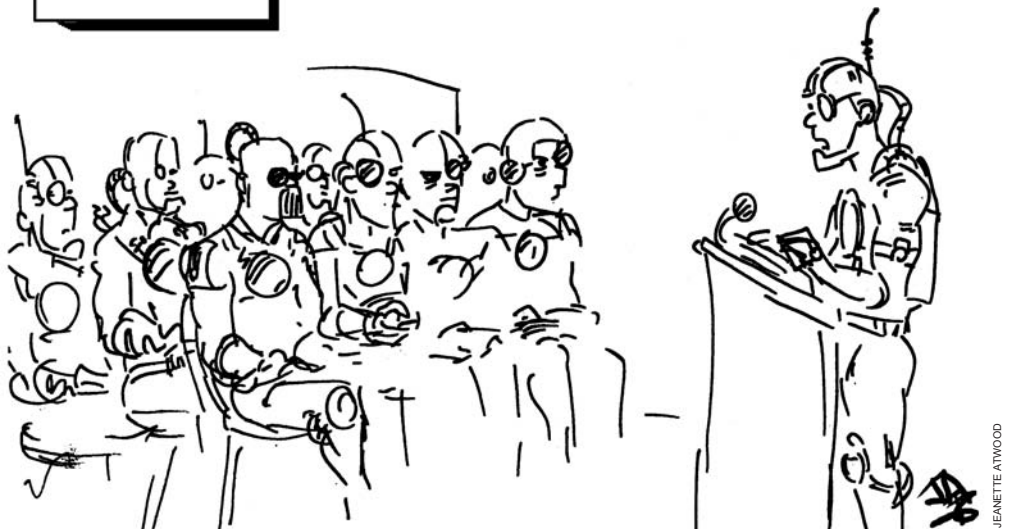
Strangely, there was one girl who had attended seminary only sporadically before I became the teacher, but she attended almost every class during the month I taught. She sat next to me (I formed my class in a circle), mysterious and silent. I wondered why she came at all. The last day of class before Christmas break, she gave me a letter that I still treasure. It turned out that my neuroses were her neuroses, too, and she was grateful to have company for a month. She said she was leaving to go on a work-study program and wouldn't be back to seminary. Thanks to this letter, I figured that maybe the previous teacher had actually known what she was talking about. God really *had* called me there. But it was for this one person, and she was leaving now. For that reason, and some other good ones having to do with my wife's

health, I gave the job up to a husband-wife team. They give the kids what they expect and do it very well.

The elders quorum experience was better. After all, I only had half an hour to mess up instead of a whole month. As I prepared for the lesson (which took all week), I found myself contending with all the temptations of the Three Sedating Sins. I realized how engrained they are in my own psyche, that everyone would subconsciously expect at least one of these models, and that I was completely unwilling to give it to them. I also realized that at every point, I would have to be vigilant lest we succumb to the gravitational pull of one of the Sins. This was no easy task.

Throughout the week, I constructed practice classes in my mind, posing questions and imagining various responses. It took me all week—hours of conversation with my wife, plus actually reading the lesson materials—to come up with some questions I thought I could pose constructively. I thought the questions could work because they drew on values that have equal weight within a Mormon worldview but contra-

BORG SUNDAY
SCHOOL...



"Today's lesson is on unity . . ."

I tried to take each lesson and find a place where things got muddy, where a person actually had to do a little thinking, where there was actually no answer.

dicted each other at the same time.

The lesson topic was work. So I decided to see if the elders would be willing to assert that there is some hierarchy of values when it comes to work—that certain kinds of work are more valuable than others. This was easily done. We also came to an agreement that self-reliance was a good thing. Once these two values were established, I asked them, “So what about Jesus? He was always living off other people. He wasn’t self-reliant.” The answer came back, “Well, yeah, but he was doing the most important work.”

“Which is?”

“The work of God.”

“Which we defined as the most valuable work?”

“Right.”

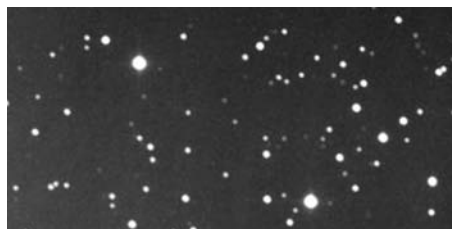
“That could be true—after all, ‘seek ye first the kingdom of heaven.’ But wait. Aren’t we supposed to be like Jesus? Who here is willing to forsake all right now and teach the gospel on the streets and in the wilderness of Alaska?”

“But that was Jesus’s mission. Not ours.”

“Really? Well then, what about *my* mission? I just got a master’s degree in creative writing. I spent two hours a day for a year writing a screenplay. That’s more than seven hundred hours. It’s very likely that no one will ever produce my screenplay. It’s possible that it’s not even worth reading. And even if it does get produced, it’s only a romantic comedy with no socially redeeming value. Where on the hierarchy of values should we put my seven hundred hours?”

That one took us a while to work through. Some quorum members thought it was good work because it went toward my (currently nonexistent) career. But career-related work had ranked fourth on the hierarchy of values we had come up with earlier. Shouldn’t I have been using that time to teach the gospel or work at a soup kitchen—first-tier values?

Interestingly, they started talking about personal desires and personal missions and started to wonder if fulfilling one’s personal mission, no matter how ludicrous and socially unconstructive, didn’t rank up there with doing God’s work. “Even if my personal mission is to write bad screenplays that no



one will ever read?” I wondered aloud.

This seemed a bit far-fetched, even to me. But some of them grunted their consent. One guy even said that President Hinckley had counseled the Saints to follow the Spirit in setting their priorities. He even admitted, after being reminded of a few odd stories from the scriptures, that the Spirit could be quite unpredictable in the establishment of values, as illustrated by Nephi’s offing of Laban. Then one of the quorum members started arguing against a hierarchy of values, saying that he thought values should be more fluid.

My type of guy.

When I ended the lesson, our elder’s quorum president, a good man, whipped out the manual and read a passage he thought was important. It told us that work was a good thing. The Pep Rally had reared its head—but only after I had sat down.

At one point in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide*, Zaphod Beeblebrox, a politician and (ironically) criminal, is brought to the Total Perspective Vortex and forced to submit to its machinations. The governor’s pardon fails to arrive, and the switch is thrown. The machine hums to life and performs its dread task. When the attendant opens the door, expecting to find but a vapor where Zaphod once stood, he is shocked to find Zaphod grinning hugely. “Just as I thought,” Zaphod says, “I really am the center of the universe.”

The thing Zaphod didn’t know was that at the moment, he was actually inside an artificial universe that fit in an attaché case. He had stepped into a fake Total Perspective Vortex machine designed especially for him in order to smuggle him past the murderous Frogstar Fighters. Had Zaphod been in the real Total Perspective Vortex, he would have become a whiff of ionized air.

This story is important in two ways

(Whack-a-Moral advisory now in effect): First, it illustrates the narrow attitude I see underlying overuse of the Three Sedating Sins. Second, and more important, the story calls into question everything I have written in this essay. It is entirely possible that I have been speaking to you from my own little attaché case universe, of which I am the center. In which case, my exhortations have little to recommend themselves. The only reason your time spent reading this may not have been wasted is if my neuroses are also yours.

Finally, Zaphod’s story helps me ride out a sting of irony as I present to you some Tips ‘n’ Trix for joining me in the fight against full-blown Pep Rallies, Tips ‘n’ Trix Seminars, and Whack-a-Moral lesson structures, which you are welcome to cut out and adhere to your refrigerator.

1. Find the paradoxes in the lesson material and draw them out.

2. Find scriptures to support all sides of the paradoxes. (This is very important.)

3. Argue constructively about them with your spouse/roommate, and then give him/her a really nice back rub.

4. Imagine yourself posing these paradoxes to your class members. How might you do it? How might they react?

5. Be entirely willing to leave the class without an answer.

6. In fact, be entirely willing to leave the class with more existential questions than you came in with.

7. If there does happen to be an answer, let this insight cut you to the core and then email me about it. I’m always in need of another session with the Total Perspective Vortex. ☺

NOTES

1. Douglas Adams, *Ultimate Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (New York: Random House, 2002).

2. David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 15.

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/The Book on Adler* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 24.

4. Mamet, 21.