

Chapter Nine: The Spine Phrase

As I said, we are not yet ready to move on to the "doings." First, we need to grapple a little more with the deeper wish or, the "spine." Let's review our previous discussion:

*"Every well written character has a profound hunger that shapes the things they say, the things they do, how they respond to the people around them and to the environment created by the circumstances of the play. It is vital then that we come to terms with the specific nature of the characters desire. We call this aspect of the character, "the spine." When we have a true connection to the character's "spine" we have something to measure the quality of our life on stage, how near or far we are from fulfilling our "deeper wish" in each moment. There it is, my favorite definition of "spine" – the "**deeper wish**." I love that phrase because first, it has the implication of how utterly private and personal this desire is and second, it is absolutely active and inherently leads to action. This is crucial. The spine is not only the character's specific desires, it is also his or her "**active response**" to that deeper wish."*

Do you remember when I asked you to try and come up with a "spine phrase" for yourself? Now it's time to make one for Wilma. To do this, I want to define, more specifically, the key ingredients of the spine phrase. First, let me list these ingredients:

- *The spine phrase must be the "bottom line" of the deeper wish
- *The spine phrase must be pointed outward towards the world.
- *The spine phrase must be "global" in nature.
- *The spine phrase must always be stated as a positive. never as a negative.
- *The spine phrase must be stated in an active way
- *The spine phrase must be made of words which are *provocative* to you personally.

In order to explain these "key ingredients" to you, I will give you a couple of examples of spine phrases for Wilma. As best you can, use the ingredients above and tell me why these are **not** good spine phrases for Wilma. Here is one example of a spine phrase for Wilma: *"To keep that house for me"*

Let's talk: First of all, in coming up with a spine phrase, where do we go for inspiration? Yes, of course, we go back to the script and, especially, to the key phrases and the provocative statements which we have already extracted from the script. Let us look together at the first sample spine phrase:

The spine phrase must be the "bottom line" of the deeper wish.

Clearly, "To keep that house for me," is not the "bottom line" of Wilma's deeper wish. Certainly, Wilma does not want to lose the house. But we know that the house, as a physical structure, is the outer layer of more deeply seated issues. There is Wilma's remaining connections to her mother and to a time when life was warm and safe, there is Wilma's longing to be close with her father and to be a part of her true family, there are Wilma's hopes for her future as an adult and having a family of her own in the house, and there is the powerful pull of Harrison itself and Wilma's passion to live in her house, in this town, which is the bread and wine of Wilma's soul.

The spine phrase must be pointed outward towards the world.

Do you see how the phrase, "To keep that house for me," rather than being pointed out towards the world, is pointed back at Wilma herself? By making the spine phrase point out to the world, the phrase will help you inhabit a point of view that connects with all of the other people in Wilma's world.

The spine phrase must be "global" in nature.

By "global," I mean that the spine phrase must be stated in such a way that it can include all of the things Wilma is involved in doing in her life, (what she is doing in the play and what we imagine she does when we don't see her in the play,) as well as all of the people she encounters in her life, (not only the people we meet in the play, but all of the people Wilma relates to who are not in the play.) This incites our imagination - how does Wilma go about fulfilling her deeper wish in other situations and circumstances? For instance, how does she behave when she is at school with her other friends and with her teachers? Here is another spine phrase: "*To be mean and rotten to old lady Leighton*"

Why this is not a good spine phrase:

Again, *To be mean and rotten to old lady Leighton*, is not the bottom line of Wilma's deeper wish. And, although this time the phrase is not directed at Wilma herself, it is still too narrow and confined, meaning, it is not "global" in it's scope. If you chose this as a spine phrase, it would result in some behavior towards Mrs. Leighton, but how could it possibly help you, (as Wilma,) relate to Minna, or Arabella, or the shorthand teacher, or Jay Godfrey, or anyone else? It couldn't. The other reason I gave you this phrase as an example, is the following item from our list of ingredients:

The spine phrase must always be stated as a positive, never as a negative.

No character considers the things they do in a negative light. For every character, his or her actions are justified, warranted and rightful. So, it is very important that the deeper wish be stated in a way that helps you feel good about what you are trying to achieve. Two ingredients from our list I haven't mentioned yet are, first:

The spine phrase must be stated in an active way.

Simply, the phrase must help lead you to doing something. So, if you were playing a part and you came up with *"To wonder if my life's going in the right direction"* as a spine phrase, I would have to tell you that you have not made a good choice. How would "to wonder" inject you into taking action? It wouldn't. It would basically, lead you to sitting around and generally, thinking things over. And, the final ingredient I listed:

The spine phrase must be made of words which are provocative to you personally.

This makes sense, doesn't it? I mean, if you are the one who is going to choose the words, why not choose words that are juicy to you, that stimulate you? This isn't just good advice, this is essential. The words must resonate in you, in a way that stirs your soul, arouses your imagination and, when stated in an active way, compels you to take action.

So, what might a good spine phrase for Wilma be? Well, here's an example that has some interesting possibilities. Let's try it on for size:

"To keep the family alive"

First of all, for me, these words are provocative. The words "keep the family alive" do something to me personally. And with Wilma's circumstances brewing in me, from all the work I have been doing with the script, these words really get my insides stirring. Also, these words make me want to take action – "I must not allow any harm to come to the loved ones in my life or to those things in my world which protect them." Aren't these Wilma's fundamental concerns?

There is the devastating loss at a young age of her Mama. Now, Wilma even struggles with the difficulty of holding her Mama's image in her mind. Can't you imagine her sitting in bed at night, looking at her mama's picture and trying to retain every detail? Wouldn't this be an activity necessitated by Wilma's need "to keep the family alive."?

There has been a great chasm in her relationship with her Daddy. Who, after all, was the one who broke her Mama's heart. But Wilma comes to

forgive her Daddy and we hear her confide in Arabella of her powerful love for him. Isn't this forgiveness and love an outcome of Wilma's deep seated desire "To keep the family alive."?

Wilma is now threatened with another kind of "death," the fear of losing her Daddy, which is caused by the impending marriage of her Daddy to Mrs. Leighton. Can you see how Wilma's tough attitudes towards Mrs. Leighton would come from Wilma's determination "To keep the family alive."?

There is, of course, the house and all that it represents for Wilma. Isn't it absolutely clear that Wilma's love for the house, her continual need to go to the house, and her tenaciousness in not allowing it to be taken away from her, is all a result of her hunger "To keep the family alive."

Towards the end of the play, Wilma and Mrs. Leighton make a wonderful, new connection. And because of Mrs. Leighton, Wilma and her Daddy also have a beautiful re-awakening of their love for each other. Out of this event, Wilma experiences a deep-rooted sense of joy and excitement. She is thrilled: to be invited by Mrs. Leighton to call her "Sibyl," to be invited to the wedding, and to be invited to stay with her Daddy and Sybil for the summer in Houston! Doesn't Wilma's core-level jubilation come from her surprising triumph in "keeping the family alive."?

Going back to our list of ingredients for the spine phrase, I would say that , "To keep the family alive" is the bottom line of Wilma's deeper wish. It is a phrase that is also pointed out towards the world and is global in nature. We can see how "keeping the family alive" influences her conversations and activities with Minna, with Aunt Gert, with Arabella (going to the house together, asking if Arabella remembers her Mama...) and we can imagine how it reveals itself in other relationships that are not defined in the play. I would certainly say that the word "family" is one of the most important words in the English language for Wilma. Wouldn't you?

Now it's your turn. Go back to your key phrases and provocative statements and come up with a spine phrase for Wilma with words that do something way down in you. When you have a phrase, write it on the following line:

Spine Phrase: _____