



Get Fearless—Your Onstage Pass: **What to do!**

by Jeff Nelsen

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We've all asked this question. "Oh, what to do, what to do?" This is, of course, the most important question we ever ask, and we ask it a hundred times a day. "Am I hungry? What should I eat? Where should I eat? What bite do I take next? Do I swallow now, or chew a few more times first?" Every choice we make plays a part in where our life takes us next.

"Do I watch TV, or do I go practice?" To watch TV, or not to watch? That is the question. If we're trying to improve on our instruments or get better at shooting three-point-shots, it's how often we choose to work on improving these things rather than watching TV that corresponds with our level of success in life. If you disagree with me, please review your own list of famous TV watchers that you know of. ☺

We are confronted with not just hundreds of choices a day, but thousands! You chose to read this article, and with every moment you are choosing to keep reading. When we see how much choice we have in our lives, we can take more responsibility for where we end up at the end of each day, each month, and each year. Are we in the band or basketball team we want to be on? Are we playing in the principal chair like we want, or on the starting line-up of this week's basketball game? If not, maybe we should choose to work toward our goals more often.

People that do not see how much choice we can wield in our lives are the people that continually talk about how things just "happen to them!" When I started being proactive with my moments of choice, I began to notice how much I really was able to influence different components of my horn playing. My experiences are proof enough for me that the amount of success that one can achieve by taking more initiative in life is truly awesome!

Now that we've explored the importance of the question of "what to do?" let's look at the title of this article: It's not, "what to do?" but it's, "what *TO* do!" The best teachers I've had rarely pointed out what I shouldn't do. Their instruction usually came in the form of, "that's great, now do this..." or "yes, more of that!" Very often, their instruction automatically moved me away from what I shouldn't be doing, and thus filled my mind with what I should *be* doing. This approach is considered "positive" teaching.

I will now explain the opposite approach, but after I do this, please stricken this approach from your mind, ok? (We only want "what *to* do" in our minds.)

How I explain the opposite approach is, "It's never about what not to do!" To illustrate it, I ask people to not think of the colour green. "Don't think green. Think about anything but green. Don't think green! NOT green! Anything but

GREEN!” Everyone realizes that they must think of green in order to move away from it. The very thing they are told not to think of remains in the forefront of their mind, no matter how hard they try to not think it, and the stronger they try, the more it is in their minds.

Next I tell them, “OK, now think of the colour yellow.” I point out that they are immediately not thinking the colour green, but they don’t need to know what they’re not thinking about; they’re actually *not* thinking an infinite amount of things, ranging from their third grade teacher’s name to the make of their favourite car.

Here’s one musical link to the above concept. I’ve missed every note I’ve told myself not to miss, whereas I most often nail the notes I tell myself to make beautiful. It’s all in the approach.

The next time you’re choosing what to eat, try thinking only of what healthy foods you should eat. The next time you’re practicing something, try thinking only about what constructive things you should be thinking and doing. Making my choice of thoughts and actions be about “what *to* do” furthers me along a path toward excellence by reducing the “not green” mental gymnastics my mind could waste time decoding into “yellow” thoughts. Just like that unneeded step of changing “don’t miss” into “make this entrance beautiful.”

I had a student today ask, “So you’re saying I shouldn’t play boring?” My response was, “Well, that’s always a good idea, but what happens when you succeed at not playing boring? You’ve essentially focused on what not to do, and created a lack of boring music. You’ve reached an interesting end by doing so, but what about another idea? Do you think Yo Yo Ma is trying not to be boring, or is he trying to be magical, sublime, grand, and exquisitely romantic? Isn’t it much more enjoyable for you and your audience if you’re focused on those aspects, instead of what not to create?”

When we make our choices based on what to do, we should also bear in mind the saying, “Life is a journey, not a destination.” We might want to be careful to not accomplish things just in order to get done what there is *to* do. Instead, try to focus on the journey of life. “What to do” living fills my days with endless enjoyable choices of what to do! Which came first, the choosing or the choice? You decide...and enjoy doing so!

Internationally acclaimed Yamaha performing artist and clinician Jeff Nelsen is Associate Professor of Horn at the prestigious Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University. As a performer, Jeff is best known for his time spent as the hornist with the world famous Canadian Brass. Since leaving the group, he has been dividing his time between being both musician and mentor, performing solo engagements and presenting recitals and master classes all over the world. Jeff has also been recently freelancing with orchestras including the New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony and the National Symphony.

Visit his website at www.jeffnelson.com.

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