

voice plus body plus inside-feeling — that's acting



nerves are part
of acting — it's okay!
to normalize

StageForge

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 5 chapter books from the StageForge cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register.

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This is Volume 2 of 2 of the *StageForge — Meet the Cast* series; each volume is a complete standalone book you can read on its own.

For everyone who learns by hearing a story first.

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Introduction

The StageForge cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 5 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing. Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone.
Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Yearn

*OBJECTIVE — *what a character WANTS in a scene, badly enough to drive every line and move. the engine under a performance; the want you play toward.**



Yearn was a whippet-tween, lean and leaning, always tilted forward as though the air ahead of her held something she was about to reach. Her eyes were the give-away — bright and fixed, forever locked onto some invisible thing just out of frame. Around her neck she wore a length of soft cord tied to a small wooden ring, and in scenes she'd hook one finger through the ring and pull, gently, toward whatever her character wanted, so her whole body pointed at the desire like a needle at north.

"Every scene is a want," Yearn would say, tugging lightly at her ring. "A character always *wants* something in the room — to be forgiven, to win, to be believed, to make you leave, to make you stay. That want is the engine. It's why they pick these words and not those, why they move here and not there. If you don't know what your character wants, you're just saying lines in the air. Find the want, aim your whole self at it, and the scene starts to *pull*."



Yearn grew up beside the sea-cliffs, where her family were the tide-readers — the ones who could tell, hours ahead, which way the water meant to go. The secret wasn't reading the surface, which was all confusion and chop. The secret was finding the deep pull underneath: the one strong current that every wave and ripple was secretly obeying. Once you found the deep want of the water, the messy surface made perfect sense.

Little Yearn would lie at the cliff edge for hours, frustrated, seeing only the jumbled chop. "You're watching the splashes," her father said. "Splashes lie. Find the pull underneath — the one direction the whole sea wants to go — and the splashes suddenly all mean something." When she finally felt it, the deep drag of the tide beneath all that noise, the whole restless surface clicked into a single story. She started seeing wants everywhere after that — in people, in arguments, in the way a shopkeeper leaned toward a customer. Everyone, she realized, was a chop of surface behavior secretly obeying one deep pull. She never stopped hunting for the pull.



At twelve, Yearn leaned her way to StageForge, cord and ring around her neck. Curtain met her at the door and asked.

"What is *the objective*?"

Yearn hooked a finger through her ring and, without meaning to, tilted toward the question. "It's what a character wants in a scene," she said, "badly enough that it drives everything they say and do. It's the deep pull under the surface. Find it, aim your whole self at it, and the scene stops being lines in the air and starts to *move*. No want, no scene."

Curtain watched the whippet lean, already reaching. "You are appointed," Curtain said.



Yearn's workshop had a single long window at one end, so there was always somewhere to lean toward. On her table lay the cord and ring, and today the fieldmouse-tween Sumi was there again, script drooping, looking miserable.

"My scene is *dead*," Sumi said. "I know all my lines. I say them right. And it's just... flat. Curtain said it has no engine and I don't even know what that means. And now I'm scared to do it at all because I know it's going to be boring and everyone will watch it be boring."

"Let's find the engine, and I promise the scared part gets smaller too," Yearn said, crouching beside her. "In this scene — what does your character *want* from the other one? Not what happens. What does she *want*?"

Sumi frowned at the script. "She's... asking her friend to come back?"

"Wants her friend to come back," Yearn said, sitting up. "How badly?"

"Really badly. It's the last chance. If the friend leaves, that's it."

"So she wants it *desperately*. Everything's riding on it." Yearn handed Sumi the cord and ring. "Now hook your finger through this, and every line — every single one — pull gently toward your friend, like the words are little tugs trying to reel her back. Don't act 'sad.' Just *want her to stay*, and let the lines be the ways you try." She stepped back. "Run it."

Sumi hooked the ring, fixed her eyes on the empty space where her scene-partner would be, and spoke — and this time the lines *pulled*. Every word leaned toward the friend, trying, reaching, refusing to let go. The scene wasn't flat anymore. It ached.

Sumi stopped, wide-eyed. "I didn't change the lines. It just... came alive."

"Because now there's a want under them," Yearn said. She gave the little mouse the rules, one tug at a time. Before every scene, ask one question: *what does my character want here, right now, from the other person?* Say it as an active verb — to win, to warn, to soften, to keep — not a feeling like "sad." Aim everything at the want; let the lines be the *attempts* to get it. And keep the want simple and strong; a clear small want beats a vague big one.



When the long window darkened, Sumi stayed, hooking and unhooking the ring, feeling how it pulled.

"The dead feeling scared me almost as much as the stage did," she admitted. "Like I'd get up there and just be empty and everyone would see."

Yearn sat beside her, still faintly leaning. "Here's the part nobody tells you: the want is also your anchor when the nerves hit. When you get up there and your mind goes white and you can't remember what comes next — you can always remember what your character *wants*. That never leaves. Hold the want, keep reaching for it, and your body knows what to do even while your head is panicking." She smiled. "I forget lines too. Everyone does. But I never lose the pull. The pull carries me until the words come back."

Sumi held the ring, fixed her eyes on the empty space, and felt the flat, scared emptiness fill with something warm and directed — the steadying relief of finally having somewhere to aim.

"Find the want. Aim your whole self at it," Yearn said quietly, leaning toward the dark window. "Isn't it a good feeling, having something to reach for?"

Undertow

*SUBTEXT — *the real meaning running under the spoken line. what a character truly means or feels beneath the words they actually say.**



Undertow was a seal-tween, sleek and unhurried, with dark calm eyes that always seemed to be seeing something just below the surface of things. She moved smoothly, spoke smoothly, and had a way of saying the most ordinary sentence — "*nice weather*" — so that you somehow heard "*I've missed you terribly*" underneath it, without a single extra word. In her flipper she carried a small clear jar of two-layered water, oil floating gold on top and deep blue beneath, which she'd tilt so the top slid one way while the deep layer pulled the other. "Words on top," she'd murmur, tilting it. "Meaning underneath. They can go opposite ways. That's subtext."

She worked on every scene where a character said one thing and meant another — which, she insisted, was almost every scene worth playing. "People rarely say exactly what they feel," Undertow explained. "They say 'I'm fine' with a whole storm underneath. They say 'do whatever you want' and mean 'please don't go.' The line is the surface. The real feeling is the deep current running under it. Your job isn't to *announce* the feeling — it's to genuinely feel it underneath, and let the audience sense the pull between what you say and what you mean."



Undertow grew up in the kelp-shallows, where her family were the current-swimmers. The shallows looked calm and friendly on the surface — flat, sunlit, gentle. But underneath ran a strong cold current, and anyone who read only the calm top and jumped in got carried off. The current-swimmers' whole craft was teaching the village to feel the deep pull beneath the pretty surface, so the two truths — calm above, strong below — could both be respected.

Little Undertow used to float face-down for hours, feeling the mismatch: warm still surface, cold strong drag beneath, the two moving differently at once. "Don't trust only the top," her mother taught her. "The top says one thing. The current says another. A wise swimmer feels both, and knows which one is really deciding where you'll end up." Undertow grew up fluent in that double-listening — hearing the calm sentence and the strong feeling under it at the same time. When she started watching people talk, she couldn't stop noticing it: the polite words on top, the real current beneath, so often flowing opposite ways.



At twelve, Undertow swam and walked her way to StageForge, two-layered jar tucked close. Curtain met her and asked.

"What is *subtext*?"

Undertow tilted her jar so the gold slid left and the blue pulled right. "It's the real meaning under the spoken line," she said. "What the character truly means or feels, beneath the words they actually say. The line is the surface. The feeling is the current underneath. You don't say the feeling out loud — you feel it truly, and let it run under the words, even when the words say something else."

Curtain watched the two layers move opposite ways in the jar. "You are appointed," Curtain said.



Undertow's workshop was cool and blue-lit, with that two-layered jar catching the light on her table. Today the fieldmouse-tween Sumi was there, over-acting furiously at a line and getting more frustrated by the second.

"The line is 'I'm happy for you,'" Sumi groaned, "but my character is actually really jealous and hurt. So I keep trying to *show* the jealous part — I make my face all twisted and my voice all bitter — and Curtain says it's too much, it's cartoonish, nobody talks like that. But if I just say 'I'm happy for you' plainly it sounds like I really AM happy! I can't win."

"You're trying to put the current up on the surface," Undertow said gently, lifting the jar. "Watch — if I shake this so the blue splashes up top, it's just muddy. The magic is keeping the layers *separate*." She set it down. "Say the line — 'I'm happy for you' — kindly, like you mean it on the surface. But underneath, don't *show* jealous. *Be* jealous. Actually let yourself feel, quietly, how much it hurts that it wasn't you. Keep the feeling down in the deep layer. Just feel it, and say the kind words on top."

Sumi took a breath. She said, "I'm happy for you" — warmly, smoothly — while genuinely letting the small ache of *it should have been me* sit quiet underneath. And the room went still, because everyone heard it: the kind words on top, the hurt current pulling beneath, both at once. It was heartbreaking. And she hadn't twisted her face at all.

"I barely did anything," Sumi whispered.

"You did the hardest thing — you trusted us to feel it without being told," Undertow said. She gave the little mouse the rules, tilting the jar between each. Let the line stay on the surface — say it simply, don't editorialize it. Truly feel the real thing underneath instead of performing it; feeling is quieter and stronger than showing. Keep the two layers separate — the moment you splash the deep feeling up onto the surface, it turns to cartoon mud. And trust the audience: people are expert current-readers; they feel the pull under the words far better than they hear you announce it.



When the blue light dimmed, Sumi stayed, tilting the jar, watching the layers slide apart.

"I always thought good acting meant showing the feeling really big," she said. "And I get so nervous I'll do it wrong and be flat, so I overdo it to be safe."

Undertow settled beside her, calm-eyed. "Overdoing it is what fear does — it shouts so no one can miss it. But the audience doesn't need you to shout the feeling. They need you to *have* it, quietly, underneath. That's less work, not more — you don't have to manufacture a big face, you just have to let yourself truly feel the real thing and say the plain line on top." She tilted the jar one more time. "And when the nerves come? Fine. Feel those in the deep layer too, and say your line anyway. The audience will just read it as your character's feeling. Nerves under the words are still true feeling under the words."

Sumi held the two-layered jar and felt the frantic need-to-prove-it drain away, replaced by a quiet, trusting calm — the relief of not having to shout to be understood.

"Words on top. Meaning underneath," Undertow murmured, the gold and blue settling into their separate calm. "Isn't it a relief, being felt without having to spell it out?"

Freeze

*TABLEAU — *a frozen stage picture. the whole cast holding a single still image so the audience can read the moment like a painting.**



Freeze was a heron-tween, and stillness was her whole art. She could hold a pose so completely — one leg lifted, neck curved, wing half-raised — that visitors sometimes mistook her for a statue and jumped when she blinked. She wasn't stiff about it; her frozen poses were full of life, caught mid-feeling, like a photograph of a story's most important second. Around one wing she wore a small empty picture-frame on a strap, and she'd hold it up to the cast, squint through it, and call "*Freeze!*" — and everyone would snap into a single still image she could read like a painting.

"A tableau is a frozen picture," Freeze would say, lifting her little frame. "The whole cast holds one still image, all at once, and the audience gets to *read* it — who's reaching for whom, who's turned away, who's high and powerful, who's low and small. A held picture can say more than a minute of running around. Movement rushes past. A tableau *stops time* so the moment can land."



Freeze grew up in the marsh, where her family were the still-hunters — herons who caught their meals not by chasing but by holding utterly, perfectly still until the whole scene arranged itself and the right moment simply arrived. The marsh taught a lesson the fast creatures never learned: that stillness is not nothing. Stillness is a held choice, full of tension and readiness, and it can hold a whole story inside it — the fish, the water, the waiting bird — all balanced in one motionless picture.

Little Freeze was a fidget, always moving, and she hated the holding at first. "Why do we just *stand* there?" she complained, splashing. Her uncle, mid-hold, didn't even twitch. "We're not just standing," he said, barely moving his beak. "We're making a picture the moment can walk into. Look at us — you, me, the reeds, the still water. Anyone passing would read the whole story in one glance. That's what a held stillness *is*. It's a painting you make with your body." Slowly Freeze learned to love it: the way a held pose could brim with meaning, the way stopping could say more than moving. She traded her fidget for a frame and never looked back.



At twelve, Freeze walked — slowly, of course — to StageForge, empty frame on her strap. Curtain met her and asked.

"What is a *tableau*?"

Freeze lifted her frame, squinted through it at Curtain, and held perfectly still for a moment before answering. "It's a frozen stage picture," she said. "The whole cast holds one still image, all together, so the audience can read the moment like a painting — who reaches, who turns away, who stands high, who kneels low. It stops time so the moment can land."

Curtain held still, considering, framed in the little frame. "You are appointed," Curtain said.



Freeze's workshop was hung with paintings and photographs, all frozen moments, and today the fieldmouse-tween Sumi stood in the middle looking near tears.

"Something awful happened at rehearsal," Sumi said. "I got up for the big group scene and my mind just went totally *blank*. I froze. I couldn't move, couldn't remember anything, I just stood there like a statue while everyone waited. It was so embarrassing. I never want to go back."

Freeze tilted her head, gentle and curious. "You stood perfectly still, in the middle of the group, in a big dramatic moment," she said slowly. "Sumi — do you know that's almost exactly what I *teach*?" She lifted her frame and squinted through it at the mouse. "Come here. Show me how you froze. Right where your feet were."

Confused, Sumi took the spot and went still. Freeze arranged the other imaginary cast around her — one reaching toward Sumi, one turned away, Sumi caught in the middle. "Now hold it. Feel it. You, frozen, everyone's focus on you." She stepped back and looked through her frame. "Read that picture. It says: *everyone is waiting on this small one in the middle*. That's not a mistake. That's a tableau. That's *powerful*."

Sumi blinked. "But I froze because I panicked."

"The audience can't tell the difference between a panic-freeze and a chosen freeze," Freeze said kindly, "*if you commit to it*. A blank moment becomes a held picture the instant you decide to own the stillness instead of flailing out of it. Breathe. Hold the pose like you meant it. Let the picture speak. Then, when the line comes back to you — and it will — melt out of the freeze into the next moment." She showed the little mouse the rules, holding a pose between each. Everyone freezes together, sharply, on a shared cue. Make the picture *readable* — clear levels, clear focus, clear reaching-and-turning. Hold it long enough for the audience to actually read it, then release cleanly. And, quietly: if your mind ever goes blank, don't panic-scramble — *freeze on purpose*, breathe, and let it look like a choice until the moment returns.



When the workshop dimmed among its frozen pictures, Sumi lingered, practicing holding still with her chin up.

"I was so sure the freezing meant I wasn't cut out for this," she said quietly. "I felt like such a failure, just standing there."

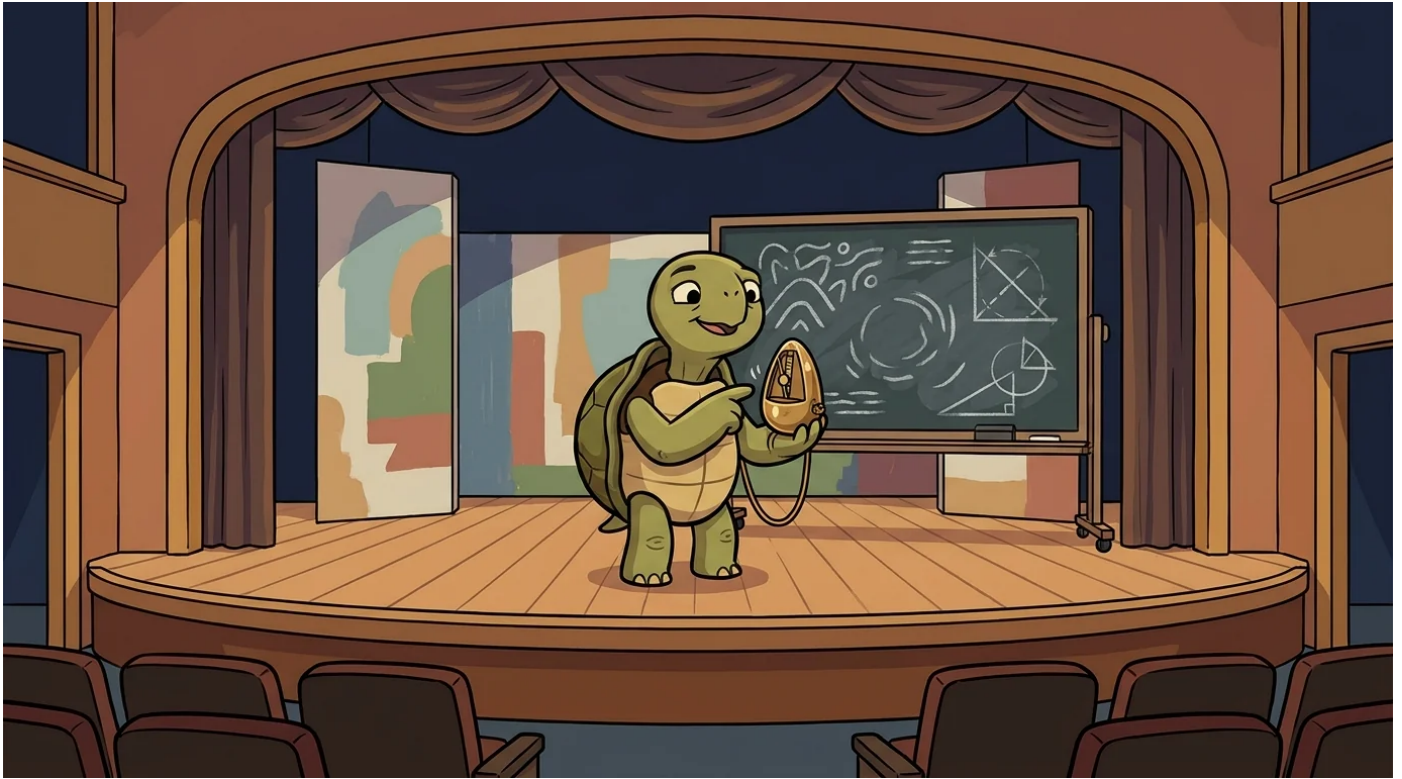
Freeze settled into a slow, graceful stillness beside her. "The freeze isn't the failure. The *shame* about the freeze is the only thing that turns it into one." She lifted her little frame. "Every performer's mind goes blank sometimes — mine still does. The difference between a disaster and a beautiful moment is just this: do you scramble and apologize with your whole body, or do you breathe, hold the picture, and trust the moment to come back? A held stillness is never nothing. It's a painting you're making. Even an accidental one can be lovely, if you own it."

Sumi lifted her chin, held perfectly still, and felt the hot shame of the blank moment cool into something calm and even a little proud — the quiet strength of a stillness chosen on purpose.

"Hold the picture. Let the moment land," Freeze said softly, motionless as a statue. "Doesn't it feel steadying — knowing even a freeze can be yours?"

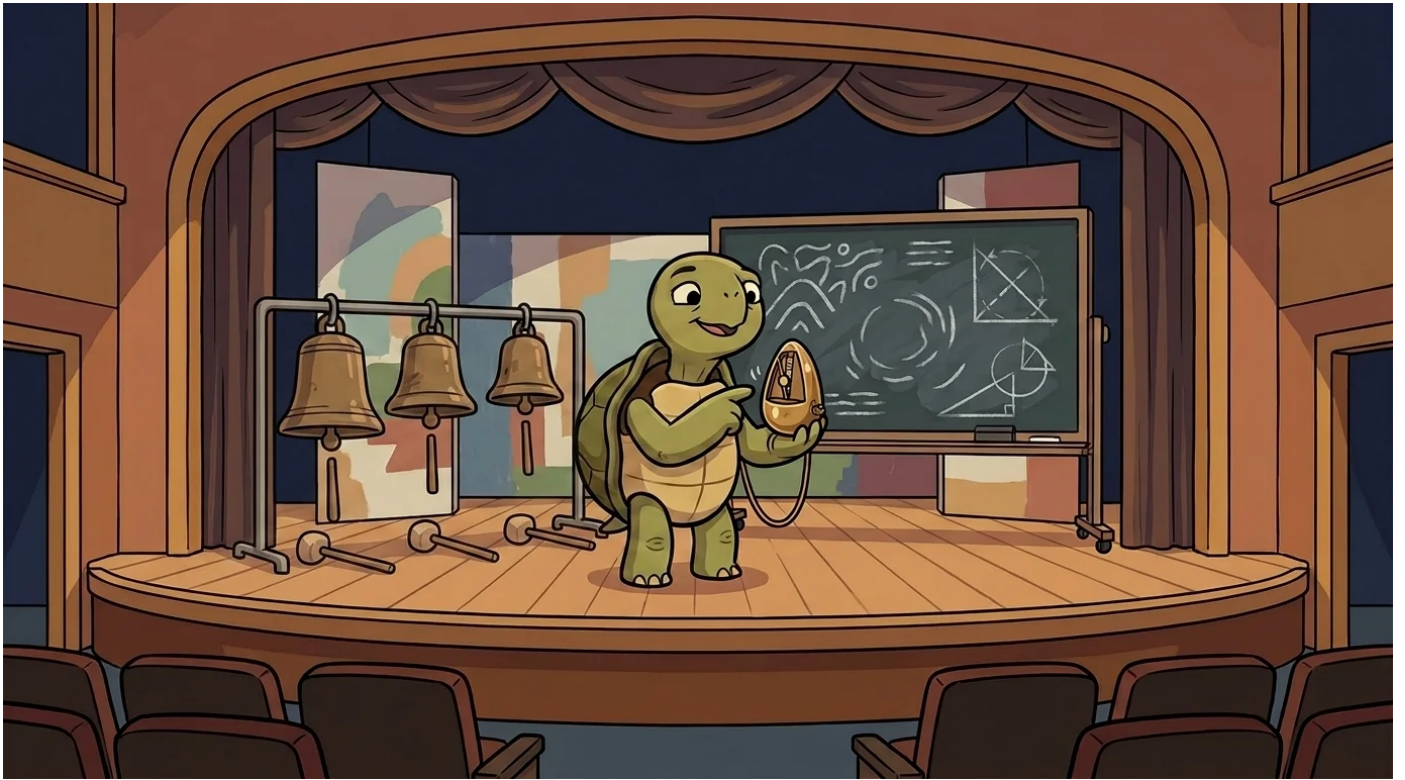
Hitch

*PACING & TIMING — *the rhythm of a scene: when to rush, when to slow, and the deliberate pause that makes a line land. the held beat before the joke or the truth.**



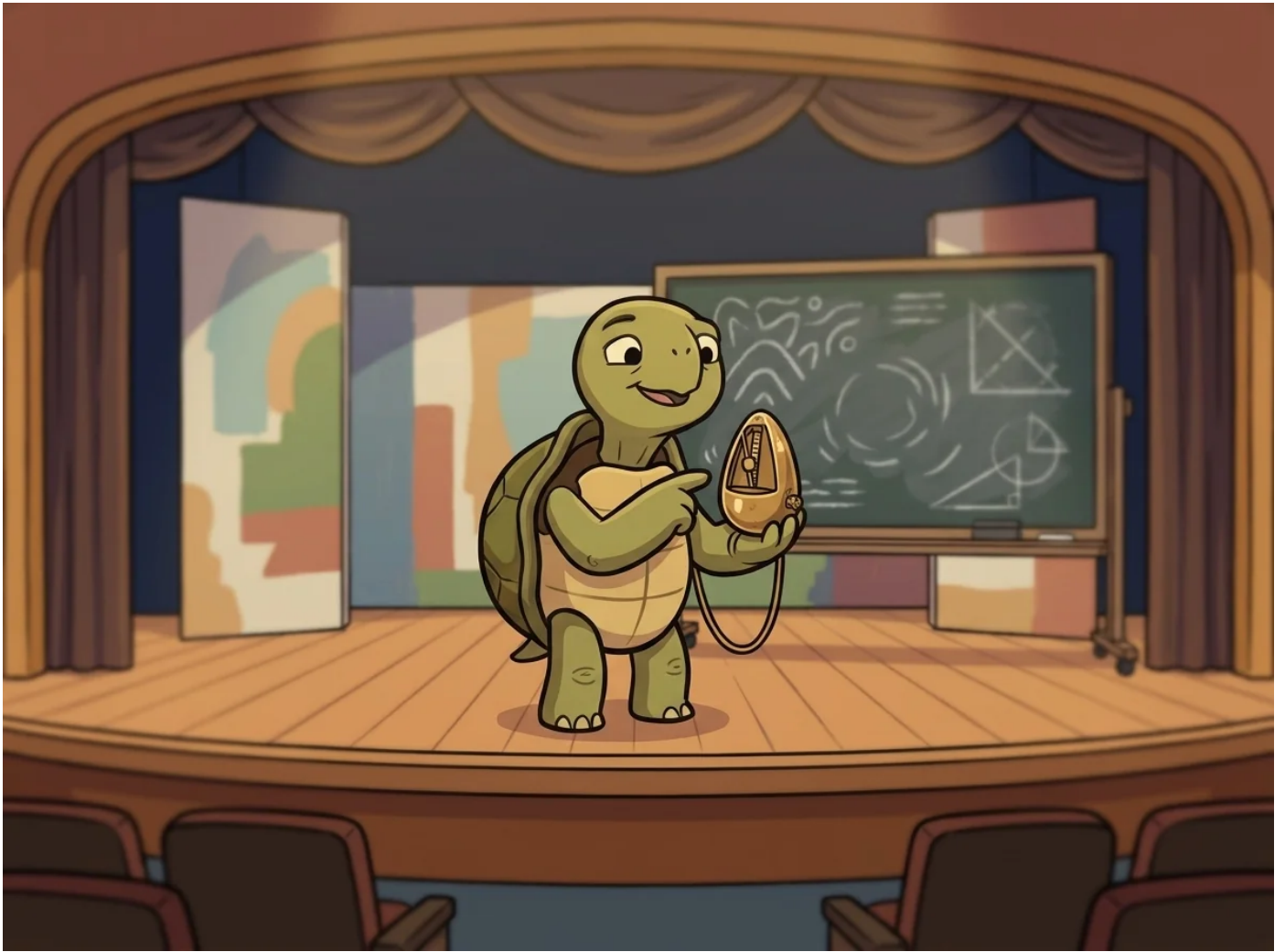
Hitch was a tortoise-tween, unhurried to his bones, and he had turned slowness into an art. He spoke in a rhythm all his own — a phrase, then a small, deliberate silence, then the next phrase — and somehow those little silences made everything he said land twice as hard. On a cord at his side he carried a slow brass metronome-egg that ticked at a walking pace, and he'd set it going during scenes, not to speed anyone up, but to teach them where the *rests* went. "The music of a scene isn't only the notes," he'd say, tapping the egg. "It's the rests between them."

He worked on the timing of everything — when a scene should race, when it should crawl, and above all where the *pauses* went. "Pacing is the rhythm of a scene," Hitch explained, "and the most powerful thing in that rhythm is often the silence. A tiny pause before a line makes the audience lean in. A held beat after a joke lets the laugh arrive. Rush everything and it all blurs together into noise. The pause is where the meaning lands. Silence isn't empty — it's the frame around the important thing."



Hitch grew up in the bell-tower village, where his family were the bell-timers. A carillon of bells isn't beautiful because of the notes alone — anyone can ring them. It's beautiful because of the *spacing*: the exact rest between one bell and the next, the held silence that lets a note ring out fully before the next begins. Ring them too close and it's clanging chaos. Ring them with the right rests and it's music that makes the whole valley stop and listen.

Little Hitch was impatient once, believe it or not — he wanted to ring all the bells fast, to get to the end. "You're rushing the rests," his grandmother said, staying his eager paw. "The bell needs room to finish ringing. The silence after it *is* part of the song." She made him wait, count, breathe, let each note bloom and fade before the next. And slowly he heard it: the silences weren't gaps to hurry past. They were where the music actually lived. He grew up in love with the rest between the notes, and he carried the slow brass egg from the day he could walk, learning that the one who controls the pauses controls the whole feeling of a thing.



At twelve, Hitch made his slow way to StageForge, metronome-egg ticking at his side. Curtain met him and asked — and Hitch, of course, paused before answering.

"What is *pacing and timing*?"

A beat of silence. Then: "It's the rhythm of a scene," Hitch said. "When to rush, when to slow — and the pause that makes a line land. The silence before a truth, the held beat after a joke. Rush it all and it blurs. Space it right and the meaning lands. Silence isn't empty. It's the frame around the important thing."

Curtain waited a full beat — honoring the lesson — before saying, "You are appointed."



Hitch's workshop ticked softly with slow rhythms, and today the fieldmouse-tween Sumi was there, talking a mile a minute.

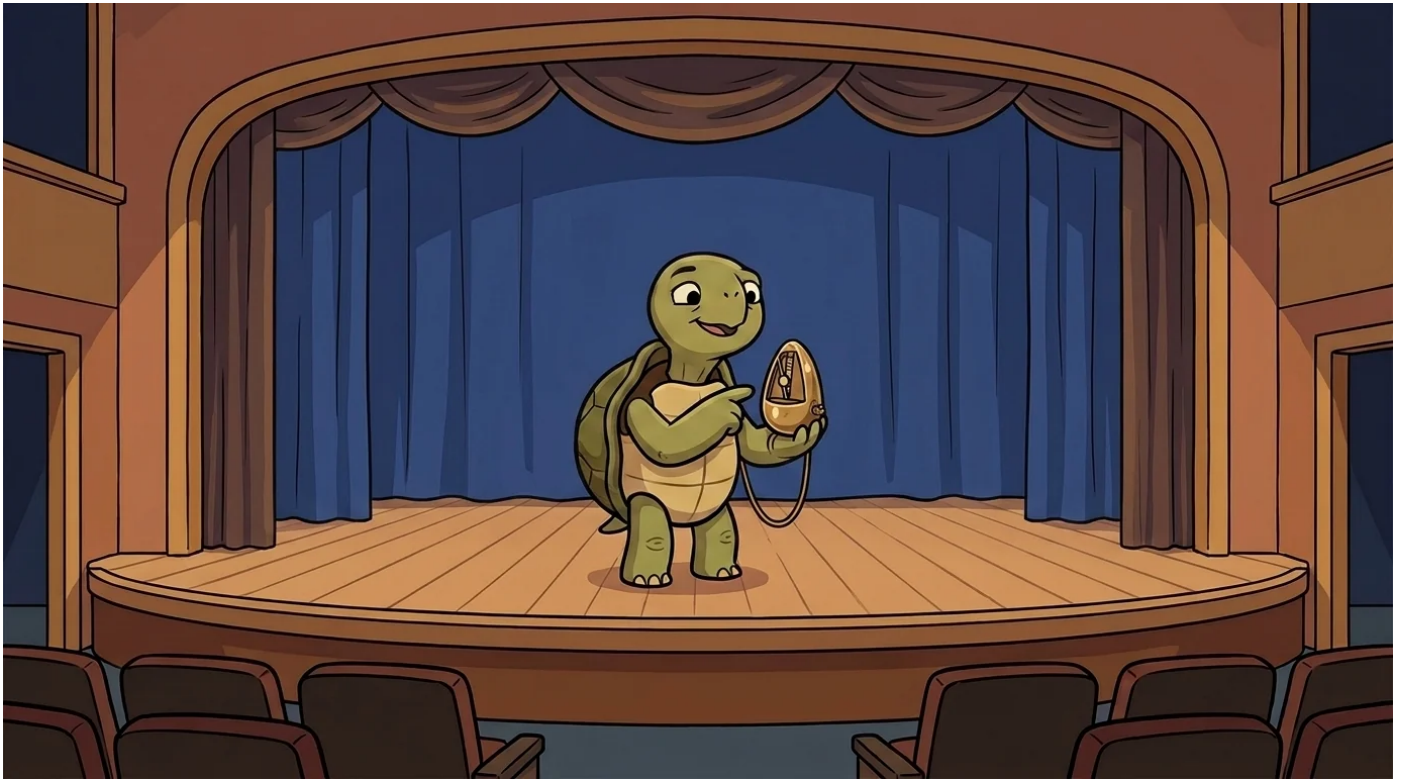
"My funny line isn't funny," she said in a rush, "and my sad line isn't sad, and Curtain says I'm 'steamrolling' and I don't even know what that means, I'm just trying to get all my words out before I mess them up because I'm so nervous I just want it to be over—" She ran out of breath.

"Ah," Hitch said, slow and warm. "You just showed me the whole problem in one sentence. You said all of that with no rests." He set the brass egg ticking, calm and even. "Nerves make everyone do exactly that — rush, swallow the pauses, sprint for the exit. But the pause is where your line lives. Let's find it. Say your funny line — but this time, put one small silence *right before the funny word*, and then hold still one beat *after* it. Don't fill the silence. Trust it."

Sumi took a breath. She said the setup, paused — a real, held, slightly-scary silence — landed the funny word, and then *waited* one beat in the quiet. And the workshop laughed. The line that had been flat was suddenly funny, and nothing had changed but the placement of two small silences.

"The words were the same!" Sumi said, amazed.

"The words are always the same," Hitch said. "The *timing* is the joke. Now your sad line — but slow it down, and leave a long pause before the last few words, so the audience arrives at the feeling with you." She tried it; the pause opened a space, and the sad line dropped into it and ached. He gave her the rules, one tick at a time. Vary the pace — race the small talk, slow the big moments; a scene at one speed is a scene asleep. Put a pause *before* the thing you want them to hear, to make them lean in. Hold a beat *after* a joke or a shock, to let it land. And never fear the silence: a held pause feels like forever to the nervous performer and like exactly right to the audience.



When the slow ticking wound down for the evening, Sumi stayed, listening to the brass egg mark its unhurried time.

"I rush because I'm scared," she admitted. "A silence up there feels terrifying — like if I stop even for a second, everyone will think I forgot, and I'll die of embarrassment."

Hitch nodded slowly, letting a pause sit between them before he answered — and the pause itself was the lesson. "That terror of the silence is exactly why rushing feels safe and slowing down feels brave. But here's the secret the bell-tower taught me: the pause that feels like forever to *you* feels like *just right* to *them*. Your scared inner clock runs fast. Trust the slow egg, not the fear. Leave the silence. Breathe in it. It's not a hole you're falling into — it's the frame around what you're about to say." He tapped the egg. "And if you ever do forget? A calm pause looks exactly like a dramatic one. The audience waits with you. Slowness buys you room to remember."

Sumi breathed in the quiet, let a full slow beat pass without filling it, and felt the frantic rush inside her settle into a calm, spacious steadiness — the relief of being allowed to take her time.

"The pause is where the meaning lands," Hitch said, and then — of course — paused. "Doesn't the silence feel less scary already, once it's yours?"

The Opening-Night Company

*PUTTING ON A SCENE — *the five performance crafts working at once. a scene comes alive only when character, want, hidden meaning, held picture, and timing all pull together.**



It was three days before opening night, and Sumi's scene was a disaster.

She stood alone in the middle of the big StageForge rehearsal hall, script trembling in her paws, while six pairs of eyes watched kindly from the shadows. Curtain, the dance— no, the *theater* leader, sat at the very back where every voice had to reach. And ranged along the front row sat the five of them: Face with her mirror, Yearn leaning forward on her cord-and-ring, Undertow calm behind her two-layered jar, Freeze holding utterly still with her empty frame, and Hitch, unhurried, his slow brass metronome-egg ticking softly at his side.

"I've tried *everything*," Sumi said, near tears. "I said the lines louder. I made my face bigger. I moved around more. And it's still flat, and it's still confusing, and opening night is in *three days*, and I'm going to get up there and freeze and everyone will see me fail." Her whiskers shook. "It's broken all over. I don't even know where to start."

Curtain's voice floated gently from the back of the hall. "Nothing is broken all over. It only feels that way because you're trying to fix five things at once." A pause. "You have five friends here, and each of them mends one thing. Take it one craft at a time. Face — you first."

Face rose, mirror in paw, and came to stand beside the little mouse. "Before anything else — *who are you* in this scene?" she asked. "Not the lines. The person. What's her voice like? How does she move? What's she feeling underneath?"

"She's... asking her friend not to leave," Sumi said. "She's scared. And sad."

"Then let's build her," said Face. She shifted her own voice lower, her own body softer and more hunched, letting a real ache into her eyes — *becoming* the frightened friend for a moment — then handed the feeling back. "Voice plus body plus inside-feeling. Don't *show* me scared-and-sad with a big face. *Become* her. Let her voice be small because she's frightened, her body lean in because she can't bear the distance." Sumi tried it, and at once she stopped looking like a mouse reciting and started looking like a girl who was afraid.



But Yearn was already leaning so far forward on her cord-and-ring that she nearly tipped off the front row. "Good — but *what does she WANT?*" she called. "Being scared and sad isn't enough. Feelings just sit there. A want *moves*."

"She wants her friend to stay," Sumi said. "Really badly. It's the last chance."

"*Desperately*," Yearn said, hooking Sumi's finger through the little ring. "Everything's riding on it. Now — every line, pull toward your friend, like the words are trying to reel her back." Face stood close on one side, holding the *who*; Yearn on the other, holding the *want*. Character and Want, working as a pair. And when Sumi ran the lines again — small frightened voice, whole body reaching, every word a tug — the scene stopped being flat. It *ached*.

"Oh," Sumi breathed. "It's not flat anymore."

"One craft at a time," Curtain murmured from the dark. "Undertow?"

Undertow rose without hurry and set her two-layered jar on the floor where Sumi could see the gold oil and the deep blue water sliding opposite ways.

"It aches now," she agreed, in her slow deep voice, "but you're putting all of it on the *surface*. Watch the jar. Words on top — feeling underneath. They can flow different ways." She tilted it. "Your big line is 'please, just go, I'll be fine.' On the surface, she's letting her friend off the hook — being brave, being kind. But *underneath?*"

"Underneath she's begging her to stay," Sumi said slowly. "The opposite."



"The opposite," Undertow said, pleased. "So don't say 'I'll be fine' all trembling and desperate — that splashes the deep feeling up onto the surface and turns it to mud. Say it *almost* steady. Kind. Brave on top. And underneath — genuinely feel how much it's costing her to say it. Don't show the cost. Just *have* it, quietly, in the deep layer. Trust us to feel the pull."

Sumi said the line — "please, just go, I'll be fine" — gentle and almost-steady on top, while letting the real desperation sit unspoken underneath. And the whole hall went quiet, because everyone heard both at once: the brave words, and the breaking heart beneath them. She hadn't twisted her face at all.

"That's the truest thing you've done yet," Undertow said. "And you did it by feeling more and showing less."

But Freeze was already on her feet, empty frame lifted to one eye, squinting at the scene. "It sounds right," she said, "but it doesn't *look* like anything yet. It's just a mouse standing in the middle of the floor talking. Where's the *picture*?"

She began arranging them. "When you say the big line, don't wander. *Hold*. You, Sumi, reaching toward your friend — freeze there, on that word, like a held photograph. Everyone in the hall should be able to read the whole story in that one still image: the small one reaching, the other already turned to go." She stepped back, framed it, nodded. "*That's* a tableau. A held picture says more than a minute of moving around."

And Hitch — of course — took his slow time standing, his metronome-egg ticking. "And *when* she holds it," he said, "is everything." He set the egg going, calm and even. "Right now you rush the big line — you're nervous, so you sprint through it to get it over with. But the power is in the *pause*. Leave a silence *before* 'please, just go' — so the audience leans in. Then say it. Then *hold* Freeze's picture one full beat in the quiet, and let it land. Don't fill the silence. The pause is the frame around the important thing."

Picture and Timing, working as a pair: Freeze shaping the held image, Hitch deciding exactly how long it breathed. Sumi tried it — a held silence, the brave-sad line, the frozen reaching picture, one long beat of quiet — and it was, suddenly, *devastating*. Beautiful. Alive.

They ran the whole scene once, top to bottom, all five crafts pulling together at last.



Sumi became the frightened friend — voice small, body reaching (*Face*). Every line tugged toward the friend she couldn't bear to lose (*Yearn*). The brave words rode on a hidden, unspoken ache (*Undertow*). And at the peak she paused — a held, scary silence (*Hitch*) — then spoke, then froze into a single reaching picture the whole hall could read (*Freeze*) — and held it, breathing, one full beat, before she melted out of it and the scene closed.

For a moment nobody in the rehearsal hall said anything at all. Then Curtain's voice came soft from the very back, carried clear all the way to the front.

"*There it is.*"

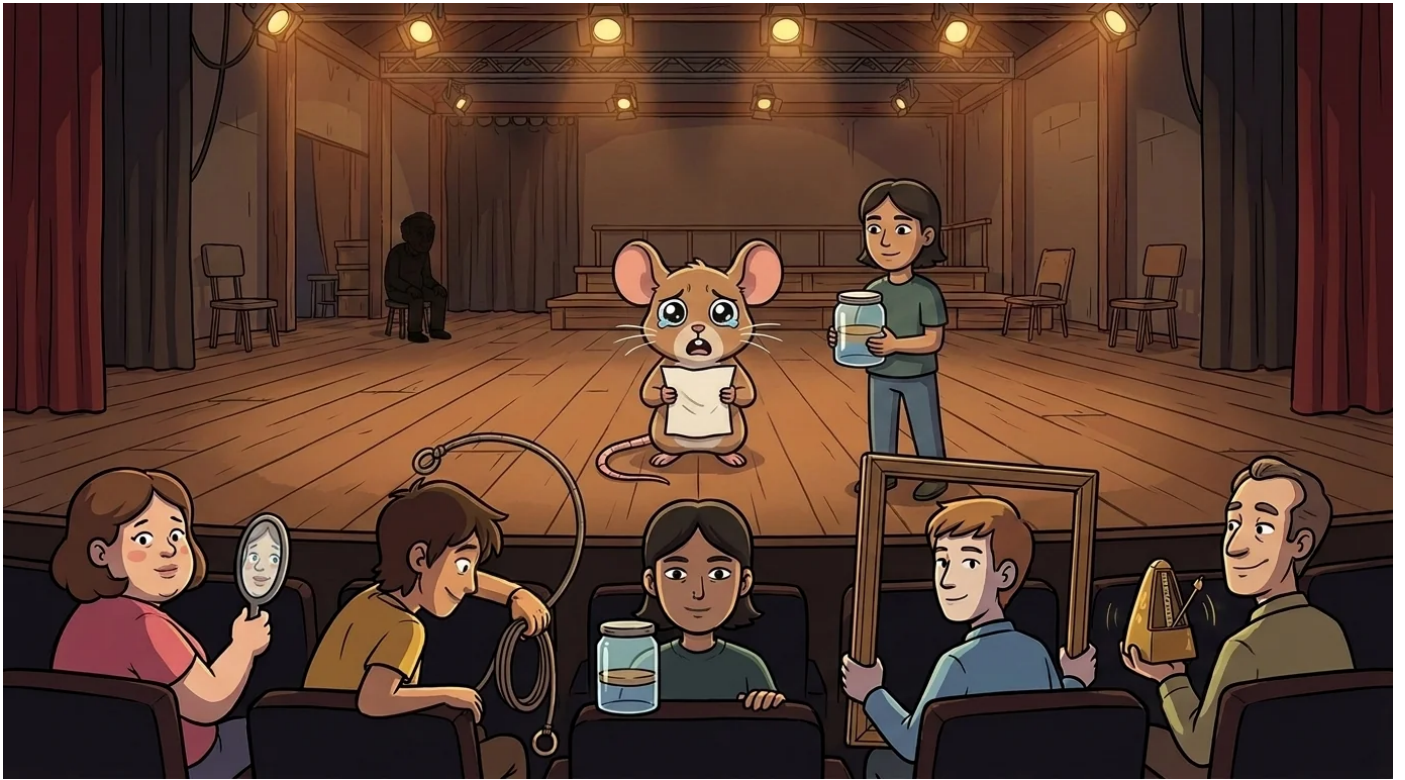
Sumi blinked, half-laughing, half-crying. "It came *alive*. But — I didn't do anything huge. Each of you only fixed one small thing."

"That's the whole secret of putting on a scene," Face said, and the five of them gathered close around the little mouse. "No one craft carries it. Character without a want is flat. A want without subtext is obvious. Subtext without a picture is invisible. A picture without timing is dead. Each of us holds one piece — and *trusts* the others to hold theirs. The scene comes alive in the place where all five pull together."

That night, before the others left, Sumi lingered by the front row where Hitch's brass egg still ticked its patient time.

"It's opening night in three days," she admitted quietly, "and I'm still scared. What if I get up there and my mind goes blank in front of everyone?"

And here, gently, all five of them answered — because every one of their crafts had a hand to hold out to a frightened performer.



"If your voice goes thin, breathe low and let it carry anyway," said Face and, from the back, Rafter's lesson echoed in her. "Nerves squeeze everyone's breath. Go on anyway."

"If your mind goes white," said Yearn, "you'll still know what your character *wants*. Hold the want. Your body will follow it while your head catches up."

"If the fear rises," said Undertow, "let it sit in the deep layer with the rest of the feeling. The audience will just read it as your character's. Nerves under the words are still true feeling under the words."

"If you truly freeze," said Freeze, lifting her frame, "then *freeze on purpose*. Breathe. Hold the picture. Nobody can tell a chosen stillness from a scared one, if you own it. Let it look like a held moment until the line comes back."

"And if you forget entirely," said Hitch, with a slow, warm pause, "a calm silence looks exactly like a dramatic one. Take the pause. The audience will wait with you. Slowness buys you room to remember."

Curtain's voice reached them one last time from the dark hall. "Every performer who ever lived has felt what you feel now. The trick was never *not being scared*. It's being scared — and stepping into the light anyway, with your five crafts and your friends around you. That's not fearlessness. That's courage. That's the whole art."

Sumi looked around at the five of them — character, want, hidden feeling, held picture, and timing — and felt the three-days-away terror settle into something warm and steady and almost eager: the calm of knowing she wouldn't be up there alone, that each craft was a friend she could reach for, and that a scene — like a fear — is easier to hold when you take it one piece at a time, together.

"One craft at a time," she said softly. "All of them, together."

"*There it is*," said Curtain.

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Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

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