



## PROMOTING A CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT TOWARDS ATTUNEMENT THROUGH HUMOR: A STUDY OF ANTON CHEKHOV'S " THE DEATH OF A GOVERNMENT CLERK"

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### Abstract

Relying on the humorous situations portrayed in Anton Chekhov's Short Story " *The Death of a Government Clerk* " this paper presents the need to develop attunement. Attunement is a salient component of social intelligence that aids one to sail through the difficult situations in life. Complex issues can be overcome effortlessly when approached with a light attitude than with all the seriousness. The protagonist of this short story loses his life over a trivial incident because of the unnecessary implications he laid on it. The lack of humor, which resulted from his inclination to be faultless, precipitated the trauma and tragedy. The role of humor in encouraging individuals to blend with the society is detailed in this paper. There is a profusion of information and the present generation is satiated with this surplus but at the same time there is a scantiness of the proximity and intimacy through personal associations. This dearth leads them either to pay no heed to the need of others or to deem oneself as the most important person. The importance of listening to the other person's perspective and to decipher their emotional feelings as well as the need for self-awareness is pointed out. Communication is the lifeline of any society and when it fails people are misunderstood. The emotional trauma of an ineffective communication could have been averted had it been viewed in a lighter angle. It is at this point that the quality of laughing at one's own mistakes ensues.

Attunement is the quality that helps people to understand the other person instead of just presenting one's point of view. According to Daniel Goleman " attunement is attention that goes beyond momentary empathy to a full, sustained presence that facilitates rapport".(86) Emotions are said to align when listening is paramount and as a result there occurs a physiological synchrony too. Listening is at its utmost when the narrative is interesting. " The key role of stories is to connect people and to have people find meaning in their lives and in their work. Great stories that carry meaning

can then spark action"(McKinsey,2008) Listening with complete receptivity is the major trait of person with the quality of attunement. Even when a person is not talking he or she is engaged in sending signals and that should not be overlooked. The emotions of individuals are connected to the social interactions they are associated with. " Social awareness refers to a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another's inner state, to understanding her feelings and thoughts, to " getting" complicates social situations"(Goleman,.84). Effective communication occurs when the skill listening is

actively involved. Some people avoid or fail to deal with social situations because they do not utilize their listening skills suitably. This paper explores the prospects of a particular short story, namely Anton Chekhov's " *Death of a Government Clerk*", in communicating the importance of being attuned to the messages that transmit in social interactions. According to Nathalie Spencer "attunement is the interaction between people that shows a sense of connection and a degree of understanding" (thersa.org).

Humor is defined in the dictionary as the ability to find things funny or the quality of being funny. " Fun is the most conservative element of society and it ought to be cherished and encouraged by all lawful means...laughter is an enemy to malice, a foe to scandal and a friend to every little virtue"( Stanley,77) Kumara Swamy in his thesis " Humor in Mark Twain and Joseph Heller A Comparative Study" projects humor as the quality that helps a person to expel the unwanted rigidity. " It is the most majestic human device of self -defense that repudiates suffering."(35) Laughing at our own mistakes instead of dwelling over them helps in lifting the heavy load of embarrassment off our shoulders. There is an expectation to be perfect in some people and this makes them judge themselves in a harsh manner. The quality of perceiving imperfections in a lighter manner leads to productivity. Spotting humor in our silly mistakes and learning to laugh at one's own mistakes will lead one to the understanding that it is perfectly okay and normal to be imperfect. The positive energy advanced through the feeling that something is not as terrible as you thought help in optimizing the person's abilities. Self- criticism is blocked from going beyond the limits by the action of laughing at our own mistakes.

This paper describes how a short story, specifically Anton Chekhov's " *Death of a Government Clerk*" can be engaged as a tool to further the progress of attunement, a distinctive attribute of social intelligence. Laughter is a great gift to human race that has the power to make this perplexing life more endurable. Anton Chekhov depicts ordinary events in such a way that explores the deeper meaning behind it. The story deals with the lack of understanding and overwrought nature

of the protagonist. Ivan Dmitrievich Cherviakov is a government clerk who panics unnecessarily over a sneeze. Ivan was relaxing in a stall at the opera listening to the beautiful music when he accidentally sneezes at a General. It is not that Ivan was ill mannered but he had covered his face with a handkerchief while sneezing and had managed to catch most of the sneeze with his handkerchief. Unfortunately to his horror Ivan notices General Brizhalov wiping of the sneeze from his neck with his glove. From this moment Ivan is caught in a deadly anxiety that culminates in his death. Till that moment it was a beautiful evening for the government clerk who was relaxing at an opera. Chekhov describes Ivan Tchervyakov's evening at the opera as extraordinary to the extent that describes Ivan "gazed and felt at the acme of bliss". But then as it often happens in life suddenly the sneeze happens and everything changes. Chekhov says that it is not reprehensible for anyone to sneeze anywhere. " Peasants sneeze and so do police superintendents, and sometimes even privy councilors. All men sneeze." The sneeze was such a common incident and should have been ignored. If Ivan had not seen the Gentleman wiping his head and neck with his gloves he would not have been so anxious. The protagonist, Ivan was so overcome with confusion that he could not leave it behind. However, even from the back row Ivan noticed that the gentleman was General serving in the Department of Transport. He also observed that while wiping the spatter caused by the sneeze the General did mutter something too. The posture of Ivan when he bends over to whisper a pardon me in the General's ear directs our attention to the gravity that he has placed on this otherwise insignificant issue. This particular curved posture reveals his low esteem, which might be the result of the status difference he perceived between him and the General.

Ivan musters the courage to approach the General whispers an apology filled with embarrassment. The General's reply " never mind" intensifies Ivan's anxiety. He further tries to explain to the General that he didn't mean to spatter on him but the General who was engrossed in the opera dismisses him. Ivan is no more comfortable and

apologizes to the General several times. During the interval he again musters all the courage he has to meet the general and pleads for forgiveness. The General at this juncture makes it clear enough that Ivan can now stop apologizing and he has already forgotten about the incident. Ivan assumes that the general is not pleased with his apology or not convinced that it was a mistake. He even imagines that there is a fiendish glare in the eyes of the General. Such presumptions on his part lead Ivan to an awkwardly uneasy state. The simple act of a sneeze is by now grown out of proportion. Chekhov uses the phrase "breach of good manners" when Ivan discloses the incident to his wife. Once Ivan is back home he shares the incident with his wife and she surmises that even though the General belongs to a different department it would be better to go and apologize again. The anxiety on the part of Ivan prohibits him from expressing himself clearly. The next day a totally nervous Ivan goes to the General's office and creates chaos by interrupting an interview by the General. The General completely ignores the interruption by Ivan but Ivan thinks that the General is still angry with him. The apprehensive Ivan waits till the interview is over and again apologizes for the sneeze. He tries to express his regret and pleads to the general to believe him. At this instance the General is frustrated and doubts the intention of Ivan. The incessant apologies, by Ivan is considered a mockery by the General. It is mentioned in the story that the general made a lachrymose face and closed the door behind him. Ivan struggles to understand why the General misunderstood his earnest attempts to articulate his regret.

Ivan is still trying different options to convey his regret. . It is seen that Ivan swears in the name of Jupiter the Roman God that he will not meet him personally again to express his regret. Finally he tries to write a letter to the General but did not succeed because of writer's block. As a last attempt Ivan gathers all the strength he could and goes back to the General and meets him in person. By now the General had lost his patience with Ivan's impertinence and orders him to clear the space. Even at this instance Ivan couldn't grasp that the exasperation of the general is caused by his incessant attempts to apologize. The desperate Ivan

somehow drags himself home. Ivan dies the moment he lies down on the couch inside his house.

The story depicts how a trivial incident consumes the life of a person. The strange turn of events is humorously narrated to retain the attention of the reader. The humor in this story will oblige the readers to think about the reasons behind the course of action. The protagonist's nervousness and lack of confidence lead him to embarrassing circumstances. His position as a clerk in contrast to the authoritarian post of the General causes the fear of the consequence of his action. Despite the fact that Brizhalov the General dismisses the mistake Ivan cannot accommodate that fact. The lack of attunement is evident in this incognizant behavior. The General had dismissed the incident even without an apology but Ivan fails to notice this. The connection between two people failed to take place in this communication. Attunement is the quality that facilitates the connection and better communication between individuals. The trauma that emerges from the absence of attunement in this story can highlight the importance of being attuned to people and situations in daily life.

The emotional need of Ivan was to be acknowledged and heard appropriately. In this particular case proper reading and understanding of the action and reaction didn't take place. The failure on the part of both the characters in this story to completely understand the feelings of the other creates the humor as well as the tragic end of the plot. This paper presents the need to be aware of the need to regulate one's own emotion and understand the feelings of the other. Responding accurately and appropriately to a situation depends on the degree of attunement. Each time the General responded Ivan was not listening but it was sort of defensive listening. Attunement focuses on non- defensive listening. Attentiveness and open minded listening causes the confusion. Even when the General brushed off the sneeze as an insignificant incident Ivan was assuming the response to be not favorable. It is evident from the thoughts going on in Ivan's mind that he was looking for a more compassionate treatment from the General. He wanted the General to approach his emotions with more tenderness. Another aspect of attunement missing on the part of

the protagonist is self – soothing and self -respect. To be attuned to others one should have the confidence in oneself and that will lead to self-respect. Instead of placing all the gravity on a trivial sneeze Ivan should have taken it lightly. Being overtly sensitive for one's own problems and not considering the others is the cause for the confusion. The Dalai Lama in his book about the art of happiness enlightens about the disadvantages of being overly sensitive to personal issues. His Holiness ascertains that over reacting to silly things will only add to our pain and suffering. (Lama (2009) P.112)

The bond developed through humor plays an important role in the cognitive, social, emotional and moral development of humans (Martin, 2007). A two year investigation about the learning and teaching of children's literature in Europe by the University of West England, University of Akureyi in Iceland, Gazi University in Turkey and the University of Marcis in Spain under the sponsorship of the European commission for lifelong learning program, among the elementary students revealed that most children do like to read books that make them laugh (Adalsteinsdottir,2011). This study revealed that children are more interested in humorous and ecstasy books. " Children often say that they like books that make them laugh " (Adalstendottir p.43). Understanding the children's reading preference is decisive in facilitating their reading development. Initiating an appetite for reading is the first step towards this goal. The habit of reading that has formed for pleasure also has its social benefits. The humor and excitement that sets motion the love for books will later promote educational and social benefits. The Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development conducted an assessment that establishes the idea that even though social background is an important factor influencing the performance of students, the students who read regularly are better achievers than the one's who read less and are from economically and socially well off backgrounds (Kirsch et al,2000). Reading Anton Chekhov's *The Death of a Government Clerk* opens a window of perspectives regarding the purview of how a situation is handled and the significance of attunement in our lives. Howard Gardner in his

masterpiece book on multiple intelligences titled *Frames of Mind* elucidates that human beings are inclined to perform effectively when a considerable amount of requisite resources and prompt involvement takes place. "We have seen, however, that except perhaps in the case of certain exceptional

Individuals, these intellectual competencies never develop in vacuum"(Gardner p.390). To conclude it can be said that attunement to social situations can be nurtured or initiated through short stories that can hold the attention of the readers. Chekhov's "The Death of a Government Clerk" stresses the magnitude of the tragedy of not comprehending the messages in a communication both verbal and non-verbal. The protagonist Ivan fails to assert his emotions and communicate his true feelings. He was misunderstood due to his overtly anxious nature and failure to infer the attitude of the General. In crucial situations a person's success depends on his ability to read the non- verbal signals in communication.

The present generation involves less in face - to face communication and occupies more in exchanging messages over the phone or social media. The text messages fail to transmit the hand gestures, movement of the eyes and posture. Reading of the body language and facial expressions is of utmost importance in understanding the mood and nature of the message communicated. Even if a person attempts to learn the language of the country he plans to visit a certain extent of acculturation is required for a complete assimilation of the conversations taking place there. In such circumstances the knowledge and information regarding the gestures and ways of discussions. In his book *The Silent Language*, Edward T Hall an American Anthropologist talks about his own experience of unsuccessful communication with people from the same culture and language. He describes that during those exchange of ideas he felt that there is a gulf between them. Clear communication takes place when the thoughts and suggestions are unambiguously passed on. Hall mentions the various components of the silent language like: time handling, spatial relationships, attitude towards play, work and learning. "In

addition to what we say with our verbal language we are constantly communicating our real feelings in our silent language- the language of behavior. (Hall 15) Because of the lack of attunement resulting from ineffective communication great efforts are wasted and people suffer emotional trauma from personal misunderstandings. When two people communicate or interact there takes place a subconscious mimicry between them. Attunement between the people who interact is the requirement for this subconscious dance of attention and gesture to take place. This sense of connection and understanding is exactly what was missing between the characters in the short story "The Death of a Government Clerk". This story provides an environment for the readers to be more aware of the importance of attunement. The relationships that we build and maintain in our lives are the outcome of the attunement we array in our daily interactions. Good listening and attunement go hand in hand. Disconnect between two people in an interaction that lasted only for a few hours culminated in a tragedy. In this era of information overload the feeling of being unappreciated and unwanted is on the rise. Similar to the feelings of the government clerk who expected a warm acknowledgement from the General for his efforts to apologize there are many who suffer for attention. The yearning to be perfect exceeds the limits and consequentially it affects the emotional and physical wellness of the protagonist. All he had to do was to laugh at his own act of accidental sneeze and shrug off the incident. On the other hand Ivan is spending every waking hour of his life after that incident in guilt. The expectation of perfection he has projected on himself created the mess. The heavy load of being always right leads to overthinking of the mistakes and the burden of guilt. This situation can be rectified, by looking at the entire episode in a lighter angle. Sanity of the human mind and longevity of the existence depends on peace of mind, which in turn is an offspring of humor. It is this lack of humor and overthinking that resulted in the harrowing experience, which culminated in death. Reading such humorous stories gives one a glimpse of the many benefits of humor. Success is when one can revel in both the achievements and defeat. Stories that deal with the

need of attunement in a humorous manner provide the scope of enrichment in the character of the readers.

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