

## Poor Allen

Curtains withdraw. They reveal a completely dark stage. Then a single spotlight projected onto an oversized college diploma of some sorts. After this, a few seconds later the regular lights are turned on to reveal the setting of a rather modest apartment. In the background as a limiting wall of sorts we have, from stage right to left, the main entrance, a refrigerator, followed by the counter and sink with cupboards above, then finally a set of small doors hiding a closet. Beyond the closet is the forever hidden continuation of the apartment. A hallway that leads to the other rooms and washroom. In front of this back wall, in the center, is a round kitchen table, with only two chairs (probably could seat four). In front of this table, also front and center, is a couch, facing out towards the audience. To stage right of the couch is a cushioned chair, facing perpendicular to the audience, aimed across the stage. To the immediate left of the couch, opposite the chair, is an end table with a small lamp. The diploma is hung high on stage left, perhaps in the wall space between the closet and the hallway.

When the main lights first open, a man is sitting at the kitchen table, facing the audience, positioned perfectly in the center of this little world (the other chair is asymmetrically off to the side somehow). Description of man's attire, his physical appearance: contemporary dress, khakis, tucked in, buttoned-up shirt, with sleeves rolled up. He is mid thirties. He is furiously writing freehand, hunched over his work in bad posture. There is a small pile of books on the table, to one side of him. He goes back and forth from writing to stillness, pondering his next few words, and then writing even more aggressively. Finally a particular pause lasts longer than normal. He gets up quickly out of his chair, then calmly strides with perfect balance stage right, beyond the chair. He goes to a tremendous stack of books, located simply on the floor, in columns that lean up against each other. He stoops down, and with his eyes and minimal head movement, he peruses the literary selection. He finds an appealing book, and carefully and skillfully

stabilizes the whole pile of books with one hand while he removes the chosen item. He opens the book to a page and stands up all in one motion, and, finding the desired page, he paces back to the table with his head down, reading. But he stops short, pauses, and without lifting his head from the page he turns around and heads back. He simply places the book on top of the pile, on an arbitrary column, and then stoops down to repeat the selection process. This time he finds the “right” book and when he gets to the table he sets it down open, opposite the pile of books that have already been retrieved. After more writing, this time without a particular pause for reflection, he stops, and slowly and gradually raises his head and eyes as he discards the pen across the table. He leans back in his chair, and demeditates himself through a series of eye wipes, stretches, head scratches, and finally arrives at a comfortable position (hands behind head?).

After this brief moment of relaxation, the man gets up, and partially returns to his serious state. As he speaks, he wanders around the apartment without addressing anything in particular. It is as if he is speaking to the air. Note: while passing during his soliloquies the MC mostly wanders slowly left to right, then returns to left, quickly, in silence... like a typewriter.

Dr. Allen Richards: What can one really write about? What can one really say about... or first... what can one decide? (pause) Take the simplest subject, I oscillate back and forth incessantly! It could be said that I have eliminated momentary thoughts in the flurry of my constant indecision. It is a special man who can render the present tense static! And oh, how it takes practice. (laughs) I haven't had rest in so long... (pause) But more to the point, I have studied the important minds, and yet one question remains obscure, one question is left unasked: “What can one really write about?” Perhaps it's better stated, “What is it that I want to figure out?” Hmm... yes, “figure out.” I can hardly think of an author that didn't fancy himself as having “figured something out.” Yet all the brilliant ones, before this, certainly shared my motivation. And then, after deciding, hardly two of

them, from this shared foundation, end up at the same place! I don't mean to speak of ends, but once again, they all came to believe in something... No, that's not it... They all wanted to communicate something. Yes, perhaps that's it. But first they had to decide. (pause) What is it that I want to communicate?... not "figure out." Hmm... Well, whatever it is called, all the men that I adore (motions to stack of books... "throughout history") had their contingencies... They all reacted to what came before them, they all considered what might come after. But I want something to challenge them all, in one fell swoop, that's what I want to communicate. To express the general cloud of thought that hovers high above even the tallest of thinkers. (Excitedly) And I found it in honesty! Perhaps, just maybe, rationality and argumentation, which even when done flawlessly hardly ever convince anyone, was not the proper method. Perhaps it was time to shift the "conflict" that arises during communication onto the other. After all, what is the real difference between truth and honesty? (pause) The "new discussion" must be marked by this skepticism. Really ask them to be honest with themselves. (pause) It seemed like it could work. The lies that we tell ourselves cause so much in the world. (Here he pauses, thinks, and now his soliloquy directly addresses the audience. He even looks up at them, as if finding subjects to try this out on and as if they are witnessing him lecture.)

Right now, can you describe what you think... (pause) about anything? (pause to let the audience answer rhetorically) Let me show you what I mean. (In 1st person, "mimicking" what they should be thinking)

- Have I ever successfully forgiven someone? (pause)
- Do I trust her, the way I want to be trusted? (pause)
- Do I really think that God loves me, (more solemnly) and if He does, do I deserve it? (longer pause)
- (rubs slightly protruding stomach, runs fingers through thinning hair) Is my vanity reprehensible, or is it just embarrassing? (laughs under his breath)

(continues, after giving enough time to ponder) Whatever your response, it must be reviewed, you must think of it, not about it... (pause) Are you surprised now, by what you have said? Are you so sure? (pause, then seriously) Yes, you probably are, but you continue to lie. (almost optimistically) Think of how you've gotten to this "one" thought. I mean, it's hard to really trust, or forgive... and do your actions illustrate that you have?... do your thoughts?... now does it seem so easy? Consider how many potential lies were used to construct this one, at first seemingly simple and easy thought... Question yourself. Now "knowing" seems harder than ever, as it should! You've begun anew, and yet the hope of arriving anywhere is seriously challenged. But your foundation is finally stable. Every thought now has the potential to be truthful, and in doing so you'll never be without a new, exciting challenge!

But there are the others, you ask? I know that's what you're thinking. I'm thinking it, too. There are others that influence the answers I seek from you, thus the questions I want you to ask rarely occur in a vacuum. Of course, what does it mean to "decide" something independent of everyone else in the world? No, you must take them into account. But... I just feel (struggles to "admit" this) that the precedence should lie with the individual. After all, if you want me to say something to you, you want it to be the truth, don't you... or should I say "honest"? Why else would you be here, listening to me?! (laughs) In any event, I know, I know... our existences create obligations. And our philosophies have consequences. But I still can't shake the feeling that this evolved human race, when asked to be completely honest with itself... can come to a common core... Can I stretch this far enough to call murder or mugging... or maybe even marriage... "dishonest"?? Do you know what I mean?

(He stumbles around with his hands in his pant pockets, head down, as he gravitates towards the diploma) I suppose I ask you these questions out of

the same motivation that led me to pursue that. (he gestures, with his head?, towards the diploma. He reads) "To certify that the Board of Trustees, upon the recommendation of the faculty, hereby confers upon Mr. Richards this degree, with all the honors, rights and privileges thereunto appertaining." (He looks down, then repeats) The "honors, rights and privileges"... (Looks up to the audience) That's one heck of a way to put it, huh? (pause)

(laughs) Yes, but I'm really not that cynical... I can't be. After all, I decided to become one of those "recommending faculty." (pause) I worked so hard, back in my youth. (pause) But eventually, I would argue, I became dissatisfied. I lost motivation... got tired with them, maybe even testy... and I took pleasure in this. Yes, I was dissatisfied. At least, that's one way to put it. Another way is that I was reprimanded! That's the administration's version, though not publicly, of course. It's the easiest thing in the world to critique a superior, and that makes teachers easy targets. Oh, perhaps some of it was warranted. Who knows anymore? I couldn't care less. (pause) Thus, let's call it a, umm, "highly encouraged sabbatical." (laughs) However, to those close to me it's become, "an exciting opportunity"... (He motions towards the table with the pile of books) Whatever it is, I have taken my leave. But not just of teaching. I have relocated here... temporarily left my home and, to a certain extent, my life back on that campus. It would take too long to explain how. Of course, with my "exciting opportunity" it wasn't hard to find justifications to the appropriate people. They all understood. (under his breath) All except for her, maybe.

(regains an audible level) God, when I was studying for my doctorate I had one professor with whom I became especially close. His lectures were fantastic, the kind that had students talking amongst each other days later. They were so inspiring that by their conclusion often the entire class would break into applause! It was an extraordinary experience, to give such deserving adulation. However, when I spent time with him alone I never mentioned these spectacles, though I deeply wanted to. (wistfully) And I confess

to you now that it has always been my secret goal to illicit such a response, if even once, from my own students, though I work at a much smaller school... (soberly) I've long gotten over the failure to do so. (long pause) What is a professor, but the exhaustion of being a student? We teach all that has come before, presumably without bias. Semester after semester, class after class, I expose young minds to ideas that are, for them, ideally, exciting and new. But more importantly these ideas often differ greatly. And the product of all this, year after year, is vexing. Any insightful author that you read is, at that time, incredibly convincing. However, my role is to endlessly bounce from one philosopher to the next, always presenting their case in its most respectful way. What does this mean for me, the exhausted student? Of course I acknowledge the grand interplay between them, the overall "process" in its movements. But in the end I become numb in summation, almost out of sheer over stimulation. And where do I go from there? (arrives at his table, over his work and the books) Here, I guess. It does seem inevitable now, doesn't it? The need to say something new, something that comes from yourself. (pause) But its late, and enough of all this, its time to go out amongst you, the people... hear what you are concerned about... what you want to communicate... and maybe empty a tumbler or two in the process. (he checks his wallet, puts on his jacket, and exits) main lights fade out, and then diploma spotlight fades as well.