

CONTEXT *by Bob Tippee*

GENRE: Drama

SYNOPSIS: During a formal customer-service telephone call, a hint of sympathy by the otherwise impatient customer, George Merrill, evokes a personal explanation for stubbornness by the service representative, Mary. Grateful that she has provided context, George slowly exposes the grief underlying his impatience.

TIME: 5 minutes

CAST BREAKDOWN: 1M, 1F

THEME: Communication; Relationships; Compassion

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: John 4:4-19

CHURCH YEAR SEASON: Any

SUGGESTED USE: To show how uncovering the emotional context of alienating behavior can bring strangers together.

CHARACTERS:

GEORGE—middle-aged or senior (birth date in script can be adjusted to fit player)

MARY—middle-aged customer-service representative struggling behind formal professionalism to deal with divorce

PROPS: Desk with a computer monitor and keyboard, swivel chair, telephone headset, stool, sheet of paper

COSTUMES: Casual office attire

SOUND: Two wireless microphones

LIGHTING: Separate spots if possible; otherwise, general stage

SETTING: George is anywhere with a mobile phone; Mary is at a station in a telephone bank

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DIRECTOR'S TIPS: Stage is split to suggest the characters are in different locations. Separate spots, if available, can achieve the effect but are not essential. GEORGE sits on stool at right, MARY at left on a swivel chair behind a desk, the back of which faces left and atop which sit a computer screen and keyboard. This is a telephone conversation between distressed strangers who ease toward a relationship by revealing the contexts of their behavior. Changes in their seating positions hint at stages of development in that relationship – not romantic, just human. At the beginning of their conversation (after GEORGE survives the automated voice catalog), they seem to face directly away from each other, GEORGE right and MARY left, both only enough downstage to enable their expressions to be seen. At points where their psychological shields begin to come down and their interest in each other's humanity rises, they pivot slightly toward each other (GEORGE toward left, MARY toward right). When formality intrudes, they snap back to their original, nearly back-to-back positions. It is not until the end that they face each other to suggest a genuine connection.

At lights up, GEORGE is tapping numbers into his mobile phone, holding a sheet of paper in his non-phone hand. MARY will start as a recorded message, so she is offstage, unlighted, or simply upstage from her desk, facing upstage. Sound of phone ringing.

MARY: *(With no inflection, speaking slowly like a recorded message)* Thank you for calling Riverbank Pathology Associates.

GEORGE: *(Grimaces)* I knew it. A recording.

MARY: If you're a patient, please press one. If you're—

GEORGE: *(Shakes his head and presses phone. Impatiently.)* Patient. Close enough.

MARY: Thank you. If you're calling about a bill, please press one. If you're—

GEORGE: *(Presses phone again)* I wonder if any real people work at this place.

MARY: Thank you. Please select from the following eight options.

GEORGE: *(Losing what little patience he started with)* Give me strength! Maybe zero's the magic number — *(Presses phone).*

MARY: Thank you. To help us help you, please enter your account number.

GEORGE: Aha! I was ready for you. *(Sets paper on his lap and, reading from it, presses his phone eight times)*