

SHARK-INFESTED WATERS

A SPEECH BY STEVEN A. SOTO

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Francis, or Frank Underwood is the power-hungry, ruthless main character of Netflix's original series, House of Cards. The show chronicles his savage march up the political hierarchy, a promenade that leaves skeletons in every closet. Without remorse, Underwood leverages the tools of deception, backchanneling, empty promises, two-faced politics and even murder to claim victory in his nefarious game. A game that undoubtedly has crowned him the grandmaster.

Shakespearean in its inspiration, yet ultra-modern in its delivery, the show uses a theatrical device that cuts deep below the surface. To the delight of the audience, Frank will from time to time, "break the fourth wall" and deliver a soliloquy to the camera to grant the audience a tour of the pits of his psyche. His dark and introspective soliloquies contextualize his plans, reveal his innermost fears and ultimately, explore the complexities of a difficult character. The following is my soliloquy:

I had to have been around six years old, but I asked my parents to change my name to Shark. Not Shark Soto, not Steven the Shark; simply: Shark. hilariously, they obliged for a few weeks, joking that their son didn't just change his name, he changed his species. It's still a story they tell today at dinner parties, indeed something that always elicits a good laugh. But the anecdote foreshadows something I struggle coming to terms with – something that's come to the forefront ever since I've been consumed by Frank Underwood. We're swimming in shark-infested waters. And my subconscious was beginning to construct a persona that would be able to swim through that harsh reality and survive.

Underwood's hungry awareness, his never-ending hunt, has fans and critics alike making comparisons to the looming shark. Able to smell blood in the water and willing to strike without hesitation, he's an anti-hero as unyielding as Gandolfini's Tony Soprano and Pacino's Scarface. But despite his callous actions, Frank elicits awe in the audience. He competes in a Machiavellian Washington that seeks to strip him of his power, to beat him at his own game. So with every sinister plot that goes his way, viewers express a guilty delight at his success. This sensation of empathy for the anti-hero, for the character who straddles the ethical line, steps over it, then pirouettes right back over it again, is a sensation that not many like to admit, but a feeling I bet you have experienced before. It's a sensation I feel all the time.

The game Frank plays, of savage competition on the stage of Washington's grand theater, is not limited to the halls of Congress. It's a game whose stage ominously travels from

venue to venue, everywhere in the human experience: academics, athletic competition, social influence, artistic endeavors, personal relationships...life. You, me, we're the actors, the players in this game. It would be naive to believe those same predatory politics don't influence the ways in which we interact with each other on a day-to-day basis. Secrets that are kept under wraps from someone as not to alert them to future developments. Calculated relationships formed for mutual benefit. Strategically placed information that will flow to a predetermined destination. Politics extend far beyond the borders of the District. They're a constant. The only thing that changes is the theater they're being performed in.

You see, the ocean we're swimming in is rife with savage competition. I'm convinced we all have varying levels of Underwoodian impulses within us, ready to strike when our backs are against the wall. We all have to decide how far we'll go to get ahead of the competition, how hard we'll bite for self-preservation and how much we're willing to sacrifice to suppress the Underwoodian impulses. The water is only getting deeper and there's no plug at the bottom of the pool we can yank for salvation.

Luckily, we don't have to swim alone. Cultivate a trusted inner circle that hunts with you, not against you. Together your influence is exponentially increased, your reach expanded. The walls that went up to keep things out, hidden, can come down to let others in, provide a sanctuary to love, and let your vulnerabilities become strengths.

I have no prescription for the ugly struggle I have enumerated this evening and I'm aware that it leaves little room for a happy ending. Good, because I'm not sure that would be appropriate. When you come to terms with reality and see the political gears turning at every corner, recognize the anti-hero in yourself. Recognize the shark-infested waters we're swimming in. Recognize the Underwood in all of us.

Thank you.