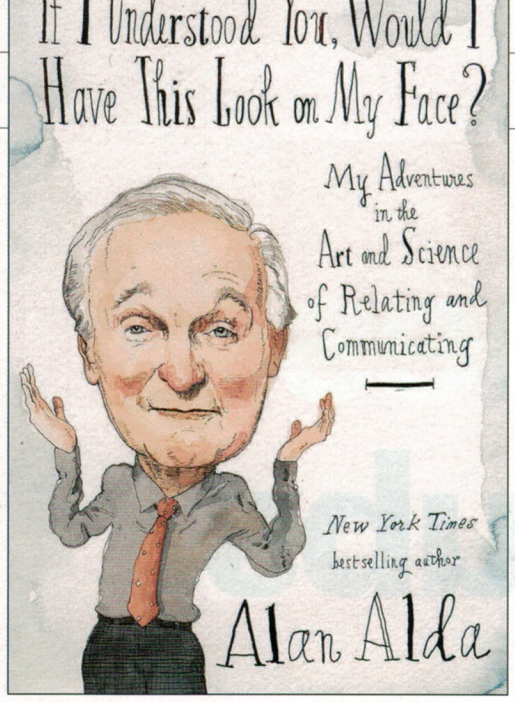

Story by **ADRIANNE MURCHISON**

If there's one thing everyone of a certain age can agree on, it's that life gives us perspective. You know, a deeper understanding of something that didn't resonate for us before.

Actor and best-selling author Alan Alda brings that idea to the forefront in his latest book on empathy, humorously titled "If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face? My Adventures in the Art and Science of Relating and Communicating." In his book, Alda threads the topic of empathy with his comic genius, starting with a story of the unfortunate snipping of his frenum (that thin tissue in your mouth beneath your upper lip) by his dentist, and the lack of communication beforehand.

In the 1990s, Alda founded the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Sciences at Stony Brook University in New York, which focuses on developing a desire to understand and relate to others in professional environments. He says more than 8,000 scientists and doctors have been trained at the center. Empathy training now extends to corporate workshops, from which proceeds go back to funding for the Stony Brook center.

Living Northside had an opportunity to talk with the Hollywood legend before his June book signing at the Marcus Jewish Community Center in Dunwoody. (We also slipped in a question on his snarky role in the streaming series "Horace and Pete.")

LN: Isn't it bizarre that empathy is something that we have to develop as human beings?

Alda: We're sort of constructed to be empathetic. We're social animals and yet we often have to think about [empathy] to put it into play.

Your first chapter, "Relating: It's the Cake," mentions how we have a tendency to think of real communicating as the icing and not the cake. We have a real resistance to the cake, don't we?

Alda: When I listen to someone with the attitude that there is something about what they are saying that could change me for the better, really let it in and I try to hear what it is that is useful and positive, then I'm really listening. ... Even if it's some crazy idea that the aliens have landed, you don't have to agree, but you can agree with the impulse to protect the human race.

Have you always been this evolved when it comes to empathy?

Alda: No. Having worked with scientists to help them communicate better, this book and concentration has made me so aware of those times in my life when I didn't really pay attention to the other person. And it's hard to think back on that because things could've gone so much better in so many cases. With improvement, if there is some failure, you just start over.

Talking to you provides an opportunity to ask about your experience in Louis C.K.'s series "Horace and Pete." It was unusual in many ways and had so much acclaimed talent. What attracted you to your role as Pete?

Alda: I had a wonderful time. It was so unlike me, but it was a challenge. That's what makes me interested in playing a character beforehand. [I think] "How the hell am I going to do this?" Doing that piece was such a satisfying experience. I've turned down everything else [since] because I knew I wouldn't enjoy it as much.

None of us knew if anyone would watch it. I think everybody responded strongly to the material, which I think is brilliant. Louis C.K. is a wonderful actor and a really good director. He's authentic, a real collaborator. He sees what you're coming up with and is frank about what he thinks is going in the wrong direction. He doesn't manipulate it or you. Then you own it, and it's yours. ■

Alan Alda. "If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?" 7:30 p.m. June 27. Marcus Jewish Community Center, 5342 Tilly Mill Road, Dunwoody. 678-812-4000. atlantajcc.org

insider TIP »

Alan Alda's book has several reflections from his days of improv, TV and movie sets that put opportunities for empathy in context. They also can serve as fun ways to break the ice at parties and other gatherings.

Alda portrays unpleasant Pete in Louis C.K.'s series "Horace and Pete" about the owners of a long-held, family-owned bar in Brooklyn. His performance makes it hard to imagine anyone else as the disdainful character, though Louis C.K. originally perceived Alda as too nice of a person to pull off Pete as he was written on the page. Louis C.K. was later convinced Alda was perfect for the part when they met in person, according to an interview on comedian Marc Maron's podcast.