THE ART of IS

IMPROVISING AS A WAY OF LIFE

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Author of *Free Play*

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III. ART AND POWER

Sometimes we blur the distinction between art and life; sometimes we try to clarify it. We don't stand on one leg. We stand on both.

— John Cage

It takes two to know one.

— Gregory Bateson

Tell Them About the Dream

On August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, during the climax of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the great gospel singer Mahalia Jackson was sitting on the platform near her friend Martin Luther King. Dr. King had begun reading his prepared address. Seven paragraphs into the speech, Jackson broke in and shouted, "Tell them about the dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!"

King pushed aside his notes and began improvising.

His written text did not mention dreams. As he looked up at the crowd and rolled into the rhythmic majesty of "I have a dream," Dr. King was riffing on part of an earlier speech he had given at Cobo Hall in Detroit but that he felt had not worked very well; he was riffing on bits from the Bible, from Shakespeare, from Lincoln, from the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The ghost of Gandhi was never far. Though we can identify the deep roots

of King's words, the innumerable strands and influences had been collectively digested, absorbed, and integrated. The interbeing of many is expressed in the voice of each of us. We recognize King's courage and brilliance, but he was not some solitary genius spinning "creativity" out of whole cloth. There are no such geniuses. This is what it is to be human: to learn and assimilate the patterns of culture, community, and environment, both conscious and unconscious, and alter them as needed, make them ours, so that the voice spontaneously emerging is our voice, interdependent with the human world in which we live. Thus we breathe life into art and art into life.

Improvising means coming prepared, but not being attached to the preparation. Everything flows into the creative act in progress. Come prepared, but be willing to accept interruptions and invitations. Trust that the product of your preparation is not your papers and plans, but yourself. Know that no solo is solo: even one of the greatest speeches of the twentieth century was helped into existence by a good friend's blurted reminder.

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Introduction

I have been a professional improviser for more than forty years. I've taught workshops from Germany to Argentina to Japan. I've played a black electric violin in a Buddhist temple, and a three-century-old viola d'amore in the Large Hadron Collider. This book is the trace of decades spent traveling around collaborating with, teaching, and learning from ever-widening circles of people. It has grown from playing with music, words, movement, images, and even computer code, learning about the forms and interdependent patterns of play. Such play is a way not only of connecting with people but of discovering the connections that were already present but unsuspected.

Those of us who gravitate toward improvisational music do so because we enjoy relating to other human beings as equals. That is the core of the experience for me. That is the chief relevance of our practice for the world beyond art. Our

work, at its most genuine, can bring us into a living model of social openness through the practice of listening. In a world where people are prone to retreating into academic, aesthetic, and professional cubbyholes, where people are divided by the fault lines of very real racial, gender, and economic inequity, there is an ever-pressing need for this kind of practice.

When asked to define *improvising*, I say I play music that is less than five minutes old. Yet it is ancient, in that the sounds that attract me have an archaic feel. When it is truly *happening* I feel I am lightly touching something deep in culture, deep in genetics, deep in our animal nature — a fundamental connection to others. Making art, whether you do it solo or in a group, derives its patterns from everything around us, in an interdependent network. We learn to work as nature does, with the material of ourselves: our body, our mind, our companions, and the radical possibilities of the present moment.

In my twenties I met another young American, a Zen Buddhist priest. He spoke of doing zazen — sitting meditation — as practice. The word *practice* is consistently used to describe meditative activity; I had heard and read it many times before, but that day, for some reason, it hit me between the eyes. I am a musician, I thought, and now I know what practice is. Music, dance, sports, medicine, sitting still on a cushion in a state of concentrated awareness: all are forms of practice, skilled disciplines of doing and being what you are rather than some preparatory work to get to a goal. So began for me a lifelong exploration of the Buddha dharma, the Tao, and other traditions East and West that link up to artistic practice. And with a Buddhist perspective, I began to link improvising with the other imps: impermanence and

imperfection. I learned to relish these essential qualities of life and art. And above all, I came to see art-making not as a matter of displaying skill but of awakening and realizing altruistic intentions.

When I was even younger, I was sure I was going to be a biologist. Then a psychologist. I was fascinated by living organisms: bodies, minds, social relations, play. The first article I ever published was in the *Journal of Protozoology*. I was enthralled by how a single cell can perform all of life's essential activities, sustain itself in an environment, swim, hunt, interact with others. That protean quality of life is still what guides me as an artist: creating music without dividing into separate functions of composer and performer, doing intermedia art forms such as visual music that speak to several senses at once.

Teachers in universities, conservatories, and high schools regard improvising as a fresh, mysterious item that should be included in the curriculum, if only they can figure out how to do it, earnestly trying to catch up with their students. But it is not an item in a list of skills we might check off in a syllabus. It is not a style or form, not a department or specialty. Improvising is life itself.

What I offer in the following chapters, from different angles and aspects, laced with journeys into music, art, science, politics, business, philosophy, pottery — are glimpses into moments of human contact. These glimpses may take place in the relatively safe and tame environment of a classroom, but later we will meet Herbert Zipper, who was able to cultivate them in the living hell of a Nazi concentration camp. We'll visit John Cage's living room, where we will discuss the merits of noisy refrigerators and discover the resonance between mushrooms and music. We'll learn what we

can from frogs. We'll meet an experimental musician who becomes mayor of a small town and changes it for the better. We'll unearth the connection between Clint Eastwood's hat and Japanese folk pottery. And we'll see how an old koan about a priestess who defends herself from assault with a slip of paper she manifests into a sword speaks to our duty as artists and free human beings.

Throughout these diverse settings, similar themes and lessons crop up and repeat. Improvising cannot be understood as merely a musical or theatrical technique. It must be examined from multiple perspectives, turned over again and again, to reveal their commonality. We examine many types of moments because the crucial lesson of this book is that artistic power is available to anyone, at any moment. It is not a psychological tool, or an artistic tool. It is a way of being.

This book is about what happens in the moments and spaces between people when we create together. Music, movement, image, words are experienced as physiological, as unforced as breathing or the circulation of blood. Such experience is possible not only in the arts but in medicine, in teaching, in civic engagement — anywhere we like. This intimacy doesn't happen all the time; it comes to an end, and mundane pursuits take over. But when it happens, it is a form of magic and bliss. We co-create something that arises out of listening and mutual attentiveness. We discover that the nervous system is bigger than the brain, bigger than the body.

The most ordinary act of creativity is spontaneous conversation — the art of listening and responding, interacting, taking in environmental factors unconsciously but with precision, modifying what we do as a result of what we see and hear, touch and make, a multidimensional feedback. In our daily lives we create and recognize connections all the time.

We don't need extraordinary credentials. There is nothing special about it, but from that nothing arises our opportunity to attain some wisdom and compassion about the world in which we live. And so we can take art off the pedestal and put it where it belongs, in the dynamic center of our lives.

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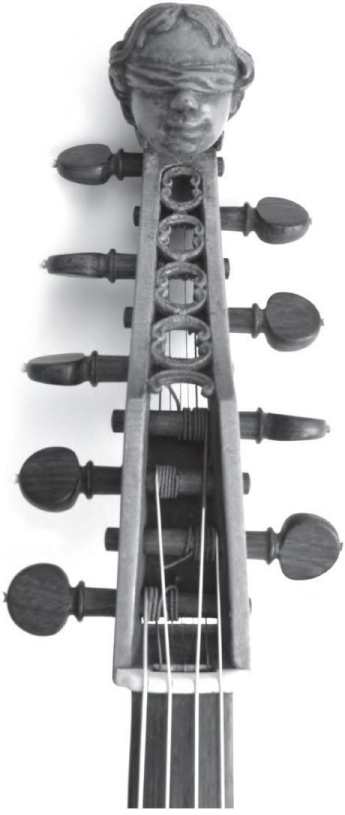

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INTERPLAY

Improvising

I am interested in what happens to people who find the whole of life so rewarding that they are able to move through it with the same kind of delight in which a child moves through a game.
— Margaret Mead

An improvisation by a small group of musicians is a microcosm of evolution. It grows from seemingly nothing, from what appear to be random elements of the environment, and self-organizes into a distinctive event with its own shape, with feeling and relevance. A leaderless ensemble cooperates, exchanging signals of give-and-take, stimulus and response, mutual respect and playfulness. No one is giving directions, yet people find a way to come together in a clear and compelling pattern of action. Paying exquisite attention to each other, they find form and refine its development. They invent a language and culture from the ground up.

As I work with groups in this ancient art, no matter how often I have seen it, I continue to be stunned by how easy it is, and how high the quality of the result. The music composes itself. Sound and movement, gesture and word, story and color, pattern and structure emerge through the ordinary

means of communication and feedback at which we are all unconsciously adept.

In a workshop in Canada, four young drama students perform a brief piece, surrounded by twenty-five others in a circle of support. The quartet plays together in vocal sounding and movement. Bodies interweave through space as dynamic sculpture. Nothing is discussed beforehand, but a long conversation ensues afterward. The students discuss the imagery that came up, their communication with each other, how they spontaneously partnered in developing metaphor and complete expression of body and mind in the confines of this big, open studio. One person says he imagined the performers' bodies as earth and water, feeling the piece connected them not only to those of us in the room but also to nature as seen out the big windows and beyond, to the news of war and political insanity, of which they were acutely aware. From there they discuss their interdependence within the studio as a way into the interdependence of all human beings with each other and with our natural and social environment, cutting through racial, national, professional, and age barriers. The discussion, which began as an exchange of observations about what happened in the piece, has jumped to issues of global survival. I stand in amazement watching this conversation evolve. Another participant says, "Out of animosity comes collaboration." In the play-space of that room, they are modeling something foundational for the world.

Don't let *anyone* tell you the arts are just a frill — some sideshow to the main events of life.

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I drive through the intersection of two busy freeways, connected by a weave lane — a single lane on the right-hand side for both incoming and exiting traffic. The entering and exiting cars weave across each other's paths — always dangerous, calling for hyperalertness. However, there are very few accidents — most people negotiate the merging of incoming and outgoing traffic safely. One day I was trying to veer off the freeway just as a large yellow truck was merging on. We were communicating with each other in split seconds, responding to ever-changing conditions. The driver of the yellow truck and I were performing a duo improvisation. When musicians or actors play together, when people converse in daily life, we are cueing each other through subtle channels of facial expression, posture, gesture, rhythm of movement, tone of voice, a tiny nod of the head. In freeway traffic we mostly communicate through changes in the velocity and momentum of large, fast-moving, blunt objects. Yet it works; we are able to perform this dance many times a day. Constrained by the architecture of the road, by the rules of traffic, people need to pay exquisitely close attention to each other. Traffic is strangely like jazz — people doing as they please but within culturally determined norms and rules. The balancing of the rules with spontaneous response, as in music, theater, dance, and sport, is mediated by instantaneous awareness of context.

Some years ago I heard that my writings about improvisation were being used in an Argentinean aviation school. This seemed surprising — one thinks of flying an airliner as a highly structured activity, in which the skills need to flow in a predictable way. Yet to get the plane to the predetermined place at the predetermined time, following the flight plan

and protocols, the pilot has to absorb and react to constant interruption by the unexpected — flocks of birds, abrupt fluctuations of weather, behavior of other aircraft. He or she has to be comfortable being surprised by unforeseen events and folding that surprise into the flow of smooth activity. Interruption means having your concentration spoiled: but nothing can spoil your concentration if every change that comes into your sensorium is part of the game.

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Listening to political or corporate spokespeople, we often have an intuitive sense that they are lying, even when they happen to be telling the truth. As they read their manicured scripts we sense the stilted and contrived tone, because we are used to spontaneous, interactive, face-to-face communication.

Every day we have conversations that are reasonably lucid and interesting, without needing to rehearse them. I wrote about this decades ago and have repeated the idea many times since. Each time I repeat it, I am blurring my own line between the spontaneous and the rehearsed, so I was ripe for a surprise. One day I was speaking at the University of Virginia and said, "We don't write down our conversations before we have them." Most of the students nodded in agreement, and I expected to go on with my talk. But a young woman raised her hand to interrupt. She said, "Sometimes *I* write things down before I say them." That stopped me. I asked, "Really? When?" She answered, "When I'm going to talk to a boy." For her, talking to a boy she liked was fraught with trepidation. The stakes were high. I found it fascinating because while she was admitting to her fear, at the same time she was brave enough to stand up and say this in front of two hundred people.

Perhaps the person to whom we're speaking might think we're a fool, or perhaps we're being graded or assessed. We want to nail things down so that we appear to be in control. Improvising, we might make fools of ourselves; but when we speak from a script, we also have the possibility, at least as great, of making fools of ourselves.

Blurting out the truth can be a high-risk action. Often big stakes and legitimate fears are involved. Diplomats learn to speak with circumspection because misunderstood words, especially across diverse cultures, can spark an international dispute. Who among us doesn't sometimes avoid speaking out, from politeness, from fear of failure, or simply because we forget to pay attention to our own minds? Who among us has not lied to avoid making a cruel remark?

But blurting out the truth can also result in unexpected professions of love or friendship. Blurting out the truth may lead to unexpected commitments to a life project. Blurting out the truth may lead someone to quit a job in which he or she is required to do something dishonorable — causing short-term havoc in the person's life but perhaps improving just a little bit the lives of others. Often playing a musical instrument or dancing allows us to make such statements more directly, getting to even deeper truths and patterns than we can reach with speech. The language of body and action may teach us a simpler way to do things and reveal knowledge we had within us but had not suspected. Dreams, the royal road to the unconscious, are sometimes a way of blurting out the truth, in images, metaphors, and connections that give rise to creative breakthroughs in our life and work.

Art is the act of balancing: knowing what to prepare, what to leave to the moment, and the wisdom to know the difference.

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Composer Phillip Bimstein moved from Chicago to a small town, Springdale, Utah, to live in the beauty of nature and concentrate on his work. But somehow he found himself drawn into local affairs and was elected to two terms as mayor of Springdale. This town was so rife with conflict that the previous mayor found dead chickens thrown on his front lawn by irate citizens. Bimstein discovered that he could use his experience as an improviser and composer to facilitate communication in town, and he dramatically changed local politics for the better. Certain principles of listening and mutual respect pervade music making, whether in small groups or symphony orchestras. If you can't hear what your fellow musicians are playing, you are playing too loud. People become attuned through practice to listening to each other, listening to the environment. In music, contrasting themes and emotions blend — not necessarily harmonizing or agreeing, but weaving together in exposition and development. "When musicians improvise together the interaction between them is as collaborative and communicative as it gets. Improvisation brings out not only individual expressions, but collective efforts to build something together." Bimstein found himself facilitating, and bearing witness to, a small community "composing and performing a new democracy." He describes the development of a new collaborative tone in town meetings, used in resolving disputes over real estate and city services. He learned how to be a conductor, allowing consonant and dissonant combinations of voices to move together without squelching individual voices. In a 1997 article, *Parade* magazine called Bimstein "The Man Who Brought Civility Back to Town." Living is art, and living together with

people who are not just like us is *really* art, perhaps the most important art.

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In the Theatres Act of 1843, the British Parliament criminalized improvisation. All performances had to pass through the filter of state censorship, and theater managers were required to submit an advance copy of the script to the Lord Chamberlain's Office. Unscripted theater could not be predicted and controlled. This law was eventually overturned — but not until 1968!

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I value what I have learned as an improviser, but improvising in itself has no value. Plenty of amoral demagogues are fluent improvisers. History, right up to this day, presents us with examples of tyrants deft at spinning stories, modulating frames of reference, using imagery and emotional rhetoric to incite fear and hatred in a crowd. Such manipulators, ranging from showmen, salesmen, and petty politicians to brutal, violent dictators, are often skilled at spontaneous speech that, like art, touches the interface between our conscious and unconscious perceptions. Like actors, such people often have more control over their facial expressions, tone, timing, and other communicational qualities than is good for them, or for the rest of the world. We can be fascinated and entranced by the sound of poison pouring into our ears.

Creation has an essential ethical dimension. We often conflate creativity with cleverness, or with superficial innovation. Defining the ethical matrix that separates creativity from destructiveness is notoriously difficult, but it has something to do with recognizing our kinship with each

other and with the natural world we inhabit. We can begin by cultivating the activity of the drama students we encountered at the beginning of this chapter — mutual respect.

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Del Close, one of the gurus of instant theater, said that your job as an improviser is not to come up with clever lines but to make your partner's shitty line sound good. Keith Johnstone describes this principle using the wonderfully old-fashioned word *chivalry*. This is something we seldom see in the public sphere: mutual respect, mutual support, building something together that we might never have dreamt of on our own. Improvising is all about human relationship. It is about listening, responding, connecting, and being generous. When a group of free players gets together and unfolds a coherent and interesting piece without a prior plan or template, it is like watching separate beings become integrated into a single nervous system. It is a partnership, with each other and with the audience, in the deepest sense of the word. I even get this feeling when I am playing or hearing a solo improvisation. Each tone and gesture can be seen as an invitation to deepen the information and feelings that are unfolding. The discipline of improvisation involves sensing invitations, accepting them, and supporting each other. There is not much room to be egotistical or greedy for attention. Leadership might be clearly visible at one moment and subtler at others, but it is fluid and shared; it slides around from person to person, like a fugue. We are able to engage in the give-and-take of communication. Exchange, flow, listening, responding: our improvising can become a mini-economy, a mini-ecology, a template, in fact, for a self-organizing, organic form of democracy.

Artistic creativity won't heal the horrors of the world; it won't save anyone or anything. But it is practice — and through practice we change the self, and the relationship of the self with all things.

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Union organizers have a technique for bringing a factory to a standstill without actually going on strike. It is called an obedience strike, or work-to-rule. Quite simply, the workers follow every rule and regulation to the letter. We're going to do our job exactly as it is stipulated. The problem is that no one can design a formula, job description, or software algorithm for every contingency. Soon everything grinds to a halt. If management wants to frustrate the work-to-rule action, they have to command the workers as follows: you *must* interpret your jobs freely, using personal judgment about each case based on context. What a marvelous double bind! "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" — one of the most practical statements in the Bible.

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The pioneering theater and film director Peter Brook pointed out that in the days of Ibsen and Chekhov, people went to the theater to see well-written plays acted out with the magic of lights, sets, costumes, and so forth. Today, with movies and TV, many of those elements can be realized far better than on the stage. So what now is the function of live theater, whether improvised, composed, or a hybrid between? Brook's answer is that we go to the theater to be personally involved in an event that can only happen in this place, at this time, at this temperature, in these acoustics, with these people. We come for an experience of presence. It is that sense of concrete immediacy and impermanence that theater must provide.

The unmediated presence of players with each other, with spectators, is the true purpose of live art. A young man at one of my university workshops remarked that during the two-hour session of a hundred people playing together, he was not once tempted to take out his phone. He said that every time he was at an event that interested him, he compulsively shared photos or videos. But this time he realized that the essence of the experience was *being there*. The more our society dissolves into a mirror labyrinth of screens and telecommunication, the more vital is the experience of simply being with each other.

There is such a ferment of artistic exploration today, occurring almost entirely below the radar of both mass media and high-culture media. These encounters bring forward the element of music that is more important than sound, of theater that is more important than story, of art that is more important than imagery. That element is people, interacting and present for each other. At each moment we are there to witness an event that has never taken place before and will never take place again. This is true not only of theater but of every instance in life. The key to creativity is other human beings. As we realize this in our day-to-day practice, our art becomes, in the words of the musician and scholar George Lewis, a power stronger than itself.

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There is a word from the South African Bantu language, *ubuntu:* mutual humanity. In the related Zulu/Xhosa language, they say, "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*." "I am a person through your being a person." *Ubuntu* is intimately related to Buddhist ideas of interdependence, and as Archbishop Desmond Tutu explains, it is the opposite of Descartes' *I*

think, therefore I am. It is the opposite of our idea of the solitary genius-creator-intellect who produces masterpieces in a room.

Clarence Jones was the speechwriter and close friend who happily watched as Dr. King pushed aside the text he had helped prepare. Jones reports that King had used the phrase *I have a dream* in a previous speech with little effect on the audience. That day in August of 1963 was different. "The power is not in the words themselves. Nor is it in the speaker. The power was woven into the feedback loop that jumped between the words, the speaker, and his audience."

Ubuntu is that feedback, looping around to weave a network of reciprocity. Doris Lessing called it "substance-of-we-feeling" — awareness and sensation flowing throughout the body and between self and others and environment. We think the body is in the body and the mind is in the head, but actually, down the pathways of communication, through our limbs, and the instruments with which we extend ourselves, through the resonance of a room as sounds return to us, it is all an indissoluble continuum of conversation.

Art activates empathy, and creates the opportunity for it, inviting us to see for a while through someone else's personality and experience. Gregory Bateson said, "It takes two to know one." We know ourselves through each other. That is why, if you stand up and play a solo, as a storyteller, dancer, actor, or musician, you are still operating in this infinite nexus of relationship, listening and responding. We come to see individual and collective experience on a continuum, just as improvisation and composition occur on a continuum. We become stewards of these newly discovered relationships with our partners and our environment. With

practice we can make those relationships richer, more interesting, more generous.

Improvising makes visible some truths of daily life that we experience but seldom think about: that we can navigate our way through complex systems in the simple act and art of listening and responding; that creativity is the property of everyone and not just of a chosen few; that the ordinary, everyday mind is expressive and creative. From this magical interaction the work is born.

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Verbs and Nouns

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me,
he complains of my gab and my loitering.
I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.
— Walt Whitman

I was in London for a few days before traveling to a conference on improvisation in Wales. I walked along the South Bank of the Thames, taking in the sun and puffy clouds reflected on the water, gulls wheeling and yawping overhead, and crowds of mostly happy-looking people strolling up and down the walkways, each involved in his or her personal mixture of business and pleasure. I was supposed to give the keynote talk at the conference, which gathered international improvisers from across the arts, including musicians, theater people, dancers, visual artists, filmmakers, educators, psychologists, and others, for a series of talks and performances. While I was looking forward to this conference, as usual I didn't have the foggiest idea what I was going to say. As a practicing improviser I have grown used to this cloud of unknowing, and to discovering that when the day arrives, the talk will organize itself. But at a certain phase in between, I

dissolve into a panic: *this* time I will have nothing to say, or it will be a confused jumble. I will get up and make a fool of myself.

Last time I was in London, years before, the South Bank was a grungy area of decayed industrial buildings. Now it had been transformed for the new millennium into a miles-long environment of footpaths along the river, with galleries, theaters, and cafés sprouting off to the right. I noticed how architecture is a score for improvisation: the shaped container and guide for a buzzing ecology of individuals, families, small groups, intent business people, tourists, working men and women carrying tools, talking with their friends. The design of the outdoor space that surrounded us lent a particular flavor, a relaxed but energetic style to our collective activity. The walkways, never entirely straight, constantly varying in width and geometry, channeled the stochastic process of people's activity into a kind of dance.

I wandered into a bookstore. I randomly browsed among the shelves, not looking for anything in particular, passing the psychology section on my right. Suddenly out of the corner of my eye, I saw a book. The spine was fire-engine red, with bold white lettering that said IMPROVISING. Needless to say, I did a double take and turned back to the shelf to find the book that had caught my eye. I was eager to learn who wrote it and what he or she had to say. I scanned the shelves from top to bottom. Nothing. I searched again, thinking that perhaps I had scrambled the letters of another title. But there was no red book. I had hallucinated it. Clearly, in the workings of the unconscious, I was anticipating the improv conference; but something else was at work in that hallucination. *Improvisation* had been transformed to *improvising*. Not a noun, but a verb, in the active present.

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This little hallucination encapsulated patterns and ideas that had preoccupied me for decades. Like many such experiences, it was the fast, synaptic summation of information that had always been available, hiding in plain sight. That swift connecting of patterns, flowing through time, is itself what we often mean by improvising. The gift was that I now had a focal point for the talk I was about to give.

It took me a few years more to realize that the book I had imagined in the store was *this* book.

As the vision of the book and the word *improvising* came to me, I recognized that I was stepping onto a well-trodden path. My mentor, the anthropologist and philosopher Gregory Bateson, was fond of repeating the slogan STAMP OUT NOUNS, coined by his friend and student Anatol Holt. "Language," Gregory told me, "can be a wonderful servant but a terrible master." Nouns break the world and our experience apart, into *things*. Naming, and manipulating names and symbols, has enabled the lion's share of our advanced civilization. But in our love of and reliance on language, we tend to confuse the name with the thing named. Bateson often quoted the mathematician and philosopher Alfred Korzybski, who famously said, "The map is not the territory." The menu is not the meal.

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The general and president Ulysses S. Grant was not the sort of person we would expect to find in an exploration of art, improvisation, and philosophy. But as he was dying of throat cancer in 1885, he spoke of the relationship between consciousness and his diminishing body functions. He said,

"The fact is, I think I am a verb instead of a personal pronoun. A verb is anything that signifies to be; to do; or to suffer. I signify all three." He came to see his body and mind as more of a process than a thing. Grant's was a view of death, a time of obvious transition, but the rest of day-to-day life is like this too; we're simply not as conscious of it. R. Buckminster Fuller, riffing on Grant's statement, said, "I live on Earth at present, and I don't know what I am. I know that I am not a category. I am not a thing — a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process — an integral function of Universe."

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Christopher Small, a musicologist strongly influenced by Bateson, suggested that people fundamentally distort music by treating it as a thing; he wanted to get rid of the noun *music* and replace it with the verb *to music*, or *musicking*. Musicking is the real-time activity of grabbing instruments and playing, singing, writing, hearing, tapping on kitchen utensils, dancing. At the moment of listening to a concert, recording, or broadcast, people are linked in participation with others near and far, including the performers. Musicking reframes song as an activity taking place in a particular time and context; it is a process.

Music (or art, literature, theater, science, technology) is often treated as a collection of works arranged on a historical timeline. The scores are regarded as having not only an independent existence but a higher existence than the performances. In the classical music world, history stretches out like a clothesline, with sheets of music notation hanging from it. We sometimes call sheet music *the music*, whereas it is just a symbolic representation, a helpful aid to communication. The noun *music* also implies an abstract Platonic

entity somewhere up in the ether, where the perfect interpretation exists. We treat the notation or the abstraction as more real than reality. Beethoven's *music* becomes a mental deity. But in reality Beethoven's *music*, represented on paper, is the archaeological relic of Beethoven's *musicking*, a warm human creating, writing, playing, singing, raging in frustration, scratching out notations he didn't like and writing more, exploding in joy. The editing of a composition, a book, or an architectural drawing is similarly the interactivity of a warm human body in space and time, though the end result may look like a solid object.

Small reminds us that the worlds of popular music likewise turn experiences into objects, and into interchangeable commodities. And so it is in many areas of life. Teaching becomes a curriculum validated by standardized testing, another *thing* to be *attained*. Anything we might do can be reified as a thing or lived as a process. Thus, we need to engage those present-tense, active verbs as antidotes to thingness: *improvising*, *musicking*, *teaching*, *playing*, *creating*, *being*.

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In the 1970s Augusto Boal (the first professional improviser to be nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize) taught a round of theater workshops in Northern Ireland, which at that time was still violently torn apart by sectarian strife. Participants played scenes drawn from their daily lives. Ethnic politics, distinctions between who's in and who's out, seemed inescapable, even though these were people who had volunteered for this type of open and shared experience. Boal described how he could virtually see *Protestant* or *Catholic* stamped on each person's forehead. Yet each side could *play*, as drama or comedy, *with* the common concerns of family and survival in

a tough society, the personal problems that everyone shares. "We should not stamp the name of people's religions on their foreheads, instead we must try to see the person. To see people without captions!"

How wide the Gulf & Unpassable! between Simplicity & Insipidity.

— William Blake

The phrase "thinking outside the box" arose from a famous problem in cognitive psychology, in which you are shown nine dots arranged in a grid and asked to draw four lines that connect all nine dots, without lifting your pencil. There are a number of solutions, all of which require drawing lines that stick out beyond the imaginary boundary of the square pattern. Quite often we restrict ourselves by seeing the square-that-is-not-there and don't even think of allowing our pencil to venture into the space around it. "Thinking outside the box" came to refer to thinking, behaving, or perceiving that is not conventional, that is not hackneyed, stereotyped, or robotic. But after being used for years, it has become a hackneyed, stereotyped, robotic cliché. It is a self-canceling message.

Creativity. Innovation. Vision. A generation ago these words were charged with meaning. Now they have become rancid, insipid, and banal. Overuse, and deliberate misuse as marketing buzzwords, have rendered them into cheap commodities with a limited shelf life. When something is described as "cutting-edge," you just know it's going to be dull.

Christopher Small's verb *musicking*, a freshener of our ideas, attitudes, and enjoyment as participants and listeners, has been adopted to an increasing degree by scholars. But there is always the danger that, like any name of an idea, it can turn into yet another dead buzzword, joining our collection of prefigured responses.

Creativity, innovation, improvisation, the very substance of life and learning, devolve into commodities, whether through the trendy marketing lingo of corporations and political actors or the hegemonic obscurity of academic critical theory. Whole industries have sprung up around the idea of creativity, selling it in seminars. Even an activity as ephemeral as improvisation can be commodified and packaged. We invent words like "performativity" and then study them as though they were substances.

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The wonderful word *gobbledygook* was coined in 1944 by the Texas businessman and politician Maury Maverick. In a memo to his employees, he banned "gobbledygook language." "Anyone using the words *activation* or *implementation* will be shot." His reference was to the turkey, "always gobbledy gobbling and strutting with ludicrous pomposity. At the end of his gobble, there was a sort of gook."

Sometimes I feel that habits of language and thought would benefit from going onto an underground conveyor belt, to return to daylight after a century. That is why I love Keith Johnstone's use of an archaic word, *chivalry*, to describe how improvisers at their best accept, build on, nourish, and amplify the ideas and imagery developed by their partners. A similar approach is often described as "*yes, and*…" — perhaps the most generative rule of improvisational theater. But

human life. We can make the jump into thinking systemically, to realizing that we are verbs, not things.

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David Chadwick, one of the priests at San Francisco Zen Center, asked Shunryū Suzuki, the master who founded the center, if he could summarize Buddhism in one sentence. This was a cocky, tongue-in-cheek question because Suzuki-roshi had many times urged his students not to make a *thing* out of Buddhism. So David expected that Suzuki would refuse to answer his question. But Suzuki did answer. He said, "Everything changes."

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I remember driving in the mountains above Los Angeles with my son Greg when he was one and a half. He was at the stage when language was flooding in, ceaselessly making connections. We had a long view of the winding road heading up the hillsides and open chaparral. Every time a driver passed us on the road, Greg, sitting behind me, strapped into his car seat, pointed and shouted, "Car! Car! Car!" Then to my alarm he began to wiggle out of his restraints like Houdini, the better to stand up in the back seat and shout, "Car! Car! Car!" with a musical, rising tone, speaking with his whole body, from the feet up. Babies are like this. Beyond the obvious usefulness of language, there is the joy of naming, the power of crying out, the excitement that seems to jump from the pointing finger, the dance of light between eye and object.

That beautiful act of naming is what eventually undoes — for many of us — the freshness of our baby perceptions. We learn the labels: that's a Ford, that's Malibu Canyon, that's a chair, that's a symphony, that's money. That's a person of a certain ethnic group or religion. Having

the power to name and categorize, we forget the fascination of those individual experiences, and the newness of each perception, the newness of each face that confronts us. We stop looking deeply at what is in front of us. We adopt the jaded, all-knowing view of the professional and dismiss what is in front of us because we already know what it is — I've seen it all, I know it all. Often we see people's creative urges stopped in their tracks by gatekeepers so sure of what they know that there is no room for what they don't. Every profession — musician, publisher, professor, police detective, physician, builder — has built up expertise, necessary for functioning in the world. Yet every form of expertise produces a counter-condition in which we become limited by the filters. We know what's right; we know what works; we know. And therefore we sometimes cannot see what is right in front of our noses.

Keeping that balance between expertise and freshness is the practice of a lifetime. Each of us can be the baby fascinated by the new things in the world, ready to receive. If you have learned to play the violin very well, your technique can become a jail. But if you retain your childhood capacity to use the instrument as a toy, and couple that with your expertise, your technique can become anything you want it to. The baby who shouted, "Car!" was not the same baby the next day, and the day after that. The baby is a continuous transformation of moment-to-moment action: growth, evolution, change, destruction, renewal. We passed a stream of shiny cars in the canyon one minute, and moments later passed a junk heap of rusted relics.

And so the famous words of Suzuki-roshi: "If your mind is empty, it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few."

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One evening, over a Mexican dinner in Santa Cruz, California, Gregory Bateson told me for the first time of Anatol Holt's idea for a bumper sticker that said STAMP OUT NOUNS. I was twenty-two and he was sixty-nine. We spoke of how difficult it is to change our way of thinking, to see the world as context and process rather than a set of fixed entities. By way of conclusion, he said, "You know, there is no substance," grinning with the irony of saying this while he, an enormous shaggy old Englishman at six foot five, was looming over me with a beer in his hand. A lot of substance, yet teaching me that substance was only the current appearance of an impermanent, ever-changing, interactive life. Stamping out nouns is not a call for an exotic restructuring of language; it is an invitation to see and speak about the world as active process. We can use the terms and procedures of daily life without getting stuck in them. Then we can use language with pleasure and integrity. The reduction of anything, including activities we most love, into commodities and objects, the tendency for the lava of life to be frozen into stone by language and thought, means that we need to stamp out nouns as a continuous practice. To be a verb is a full-time occupation, like breathing.

Maury Maverick's grandfather was Samuel Maverick, after whom the word *maverick* was coined. Samuel Maverick, unlike other Texas cattlemen, did not brand his cattle. Thus, a maverick was an unbranded cow or steer. The unbranded, the unlabeled, is a significant concept for us today, when business interests are relentlessly trying to impose branding on us. Branding actually refers to the cruel procedure of using a hot iron to burn a logo into the skin of an animal —

or in the days of slavery, a human being. Our right as free human beings is not to be branded. That is where improvisation in life and art meets our daily experience. Improvising means freedom from branding. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, not having thoughts planted in us by entities not of our choosing. Part of an improviser's work is negative: stomping on nouns, stomping on dreams of polished perfection, stomping on preconceptions of how things are supposed to be. To what extent can that stomping be a dance, with its own shape, its own wild grace, its own life-giving awareness of what and who is around us? Stamp, stomp, squish. It is great exercise for the legs, the whole body, and puts a spring in your step. With twenty-six bones in each foot, twenty muscles, and more than eighty tendons and ligaments, the combinations and permutations, the fresh, invigorating styles of stomping, are nearly infinite.

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Knobs and Dials

JULIET: *You kiss by the book.*
— Shakespeare

I went to the hospital for an echocardiogram. I told the technician administering it that I wanted a copy of the video files. If there was nothing wrong with my heart, then I at least wanted to be able to edit the video and make a visual music piece from it. She said, "I'm an artist too." I asked her what her art form was. I thought she was going to say that in addition to her medical job she was a painter or songwriter. Instead she patted the machine and said, "This."

Giving an echocardiogram is one of those innumerable tasks that on the surface seem objective and by the book, but in fact there is an enormous range of personal style in how the images are taken. With dozens of knobs and switches on the machine controlling contrast and many other variables in the resulting images, with variations in the placement and pressure of the sonogram sensor on the patient's body, how it is handled and moved, the possibilities for individual style are enormous, all in the attempt to produce an "objectively"

Stuck or Sticky

I once heard the Zen master Dainin Katagiri speak of the importance of not being too sticky. I never knew if Katagiri was deliberately playing with language to give us a fresh perspective, or if it was just the way his Japanese-flavored English came out. Either way, this was a fruitful poetic inversion of our usual idea of *being stuck*. Moment by moment, each of us is attracted to certain things and repelled by others; we have fears and hopes, we entertain our ideas and the ideas prevalent in our society — and we find ourselves clinging to those ideas, following our attractions and repulsions. Concepts and passions can trap us like flypaper, or rather we ourselves are the flypaper. It is easy to see ourselves as stuck in a rut at work, stuck in a way of relating to friends or loved ones. Stuck in an addiction. Stuck in an artistic habit, writer's block, speaker's block, blocked friendship, a block in the stiff muscles of one's back. A darting mind, or a mind sticking to

repetitive thoughts, blocks us from sleeping or from acting. We speak of other people as stuck in prejudice, stuck in the past.

A musician I know said, "I was so stuck in my improvisations, rattling on and on in the same way, I could hardly play sometimes, I was getting so bored with it." We have practiced a craft for years — *this* is the way to do it. We may want to try it another way, but we are stuck in *this.* We have dug a groove with all our sincere practice.

Then we feel like victims of circumstance; we are *in* a situation. But invert the relationship implied in the word, and we see ourselves as actively *sticking* rather than *stuck*. *Stuck* is a passive construction, not only of language but of a person's entire reality. *Sticky* reveals that it is we who are doing the sticking, we who choose, whether consciously or unconsciously, to cling to the objects of our attractions and repulsions. Therefore we have the power to dissolve some of this glue.

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There is an old story about two monks crossing a river. They meet a beautiful young woman who wants to get across but is afraid of the rushing water. One of the monks picks her up and carries her. When they reach the far shore, he puts her down, and she goes her separate way. A bit farther along the muddy road, his companion berates him for violating his monkish vows by holding a girl in his arms. The first monk replies, "I put her down at the riverbank. Are you still carrying her?"

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Robert Pirsig, in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, tells of being stuck by the roadside in the wilderness, his

vehicle disabled because of a screw that has rusted in place. The screw was no longer a small, cheap, generic object like hundreds of others in the machine. This particular screw was an individual phenomenon that was worth exactly everything. The whole trip narrowed down to the problem of getting that screw out. As he investigated the machine, Pirsig realized he needed to face the mental stuckness that so often accompanies the physical. "Stuckness shouldn't be avoided. It's the psychic predecessor of all real understanding." To abide in and be able to tolerate such stuckness is one of the fruits of mindfulness practice.

A century earlier, Sigmund Freud arrived at his own method of mindfulness. In 1912 he wrote a paper of practical instructions for therapists. How does a doctor do psychoanalysis without getting caught up in his or her own predispositions? If the job is attending empathetically to the pain of many people, how does one attend to each patient without getting one's own emotions stuck in their problems? And above all, how does one understand another human being without jumping to premature conclusions? Freud wrote, "One has simply to listen." He goes on to say,

> The technique is a very simple one. It disclaims the use of any special aids, even of note-taking, and simply consists in making no effort to concentrate the attention on anything in particular, and in maintaining in regard to all that one hears the same measure of calm, quiet attentiveness — of "evenly-hovering attention." For as soon as attention is deliberately concentrated, one begins to select from the material before one. . . . This is just what must not be done. If

> one's expectations are followed in this selection there is the danger of never finding anything but what is already known.

Our contemporary practice of mindfulness is exactly this evenly hovering attention: deliberate alertness, being in the present moment without judgment, allowing the experience to unfold without critical interference, not holding on to only what we already know.

In 1817 John Keats spoke of Negative Capability: "The ability to remain within Mysteries, Uncertainties & Doubt without the irritable reaching after fact and reason." Negative Capability is the poetics of listening. It is a skill that can be cultivated through practice, and like many skills, lost again and found again.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published at the dawn of 1900, Freud contrasted this open state of mind with self-clinging, critical reflection: "The whole frame of mind of a man who is reflecting is totally different from that of a man who is observing his own psychical processes." Freud used *reflecting* to mean self-critical, discursive thinking and *observing* to mean evenly hovering attention. "In reflection, there is one more psychical activity at work than the most attentive self-observation, and this is shown amongst other things by the tense looks and wrinkled forehead of a person pursuing his reflections as compared with the restful expression of a self-observer." If we wish to visualize Freud's *reflecting*, look at Rodin's famous sculpture *The Thinker*, with his gnarled, uncomfortable posture and tight brow. Rodin was inspired by Blake's illustration of a brooding bird-headed man, looking pained and unbalanced, muscles strained. For a very different view, that of *observing*, look at images of

buddhas and bodhisattvas, smiling, happy, and balanced, their backs relaxed and stable: breathing.

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In 1996 my wife and I attended a week of teachings by the Dalai Lama in the Pasadena Civic Auditorium. On this occasion His Holiness was under protection by the United States Secret Service. Normally Secret Service agents are guarding a visiting foreign president giving an hour-long talk on trade, military policy, or cultural exchange, and then they are off traveling to the next engagement. But here the Dalai Lama was taking five full days to explore the Indian philosophers Nagarjuna and Shantideva, whose writings in the first millennium remain the foundation of our modern ideas of mindfulness.

The Pasadena Civic is an ornate Art Deco building from 1930, gilded patterns festooning the tall walls of the proscenium. The Dalai Lama was surrounded by dozens of sitting lamas and monks in bright saffron and maroon Tibetan

fit the case but does not encompass a deeper investigation into all the phenomena and all the patient might have to say. As institutional pressures mount up on doctors to see more patients per hour ("productivity" is one of the most unfortunate buzzwords of our age), premature closure is implicitly encouraged. The physician too eager to fill in the chart from a set list of diagnostic codes will be less likely to *see* the patient.

How often do our well-intended efforts to fix things end up making them worse? How many of us have tried to fix a mechanical item with repeated, frustrated force and ended up breaking it instead? To remain present long enough without knowing the answer, to take the time to closely examine how the parts of the machine are connected, to respect its complexity, to perceive details and relationships that are not immediately apparent, can itself be a lubricant. To remain open-eyed and open-minded, while still retaining access to the technical information we have accumulated through our years of learning, is one of those balancing acts that comes under the heading of "wisdom." Cherish peripheral vision. The activity of our nervous system, conscious and unconscious, is constantly parsing the signal-to-noise ratio. Yet signal and noise, figure and ground, need to change places from time to time. The ignored detail that seems to be nonsense or unimportant might be the crucial thing that pops up as danger, opportunity, or inspiration — playful, off-the-wall, improbable.

Psychoanalysts will tell you that the great practitioners don't interpret. This is a funny statement coming from a discipline whose most famous book is *The Interpretation of Dreams.* To pause and allow *listening* to flower is an art that

takes discipline and gives material a chance to develop in surprising ways.

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The practice of intent *listening*, which we will encounter in a later chapter — paying attention to birds, to water, to industrial sounds, to the human sounds around us, to our partners in conversation — seems like the easiest thing in the world. But it is amazing how much we miss. Something else is always going on amid the endless tape-loops of consciousness. Remembering, repeating, and rehearsing clog up our ability to listen. We retell our inventory of hope, fear, anger, triumph, resentment, and jokes. Once I was taking the two-hour drive from my home in Virginia up to Washington, DC, listening, or trying to listen, to an audiobook. The CDs were divided into three-minute tracks. There was a segment early on, with an especially elegant sentence that I had vaguely remembered from reading the book long ago. I wanted to catch it and taste the words. But I kept missing it. I was thinking instead about a hurtful interaction that I had had with a close friend and colleague. While the recording was playing in my car, the tape-loop of my ruptured friendship was playing in my head, the same few rueful thoughts in different combinations and permutations. Everyone gets caught playing those old tapes about mother, father, ex-lover, ex-employer. In playing these tapes we bind ourselves up in resentment or regret. I decided to try listening to the novel as a simple mindfulness exercise: just get through a three-minute segment with total attention. But I could barely make it through a minute before my inner tape snuck in and captured my consciousness. Half an hour later I was still hitting the rewind button. After an hour

I finally succeeded in getting through the three minutes of storytelling, but just barely.

In many schools of meditation, we first learn to steady ourselves by counting our breaths. Just breathe regularly, and count each exhalation, from one to ten, then start over again. If you lose count, restart from one. It seems simple to do this for a few minutes. But it can be quite challenging to get past the number three. Consciousness is often touted as the glory of the human race. Actually, it's not so hot.

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Cross your arms over your chest. Simple. Now uncross them and cross them in the opposite direction. Perhaps nervous giggles break out: we feel clumsy and discover that we have formed a lifetime habit of crossing right over left or left over right. To do it the other way around feels funny, strange, uncomfortable. We get comfortable with a certain way of doing or seeing, and that becomes the universe of possibility. Now think back to how many times in the past you've lit up with the realization that life could be so much better if you changed one habit — and then discovered just how disconcerting such change can be. To create something new, you have to unmake yourself to some extent. And that can be tremendously difficult.

Freedom to act in the moment — the capacity to improvise — can liberate us, but it also terrifies us. We are often afraid of our own ability to change, our own agility. A friend who had gotten divorced said, "It's easier to keep complaining about my mother, my ex-husband. Then I can avoid taking the risk of asking that man over there to dance with me."

In artistic production, we become comfortable in our habitual styles and methods. We can stick to these patterns

forever and stay assured that we know what we're doing or that we are producing a product people approve of. This is how we can become pigeonholed by our own success. As Rilke wrote,

> *we're left with yesterday's*
> *walk and the pampered loyalty of an old habit*
> *that liked us so much it decided to stay, and never left.*

For the monk who won't let go of the image of his partner carrying the girl across the stream, learning the rules and sticking to them provides stability and clarity in this confusing life. *This* is how one should behave. *This* is how music is played. *This* is how sentences are written. "*This*," quoting the mantra of many organizations, "*is how we do it here*." The *this* is comfortable. We know what we are going to find there. Thus, we get stuck in conservatism and in doing as we're told.

Stickiness is not only a matter of stasis or conservatism. We can be sticky to the need to innovate or to appear to be innovating. At a music festival I attended, a fine avant-garde percussionist produced virtuosic sounds from his snare drum, reveling in extended techniques, rubbing the drumhead with jeweler's rouge, kitchen utensils, rubber balls, and plastic tubing. He got wonderfully elongated moaning sounds from the drum. Then his fingertip flicked out and hit the drumhead, making a classic snare drum stroke. It was clear from his face that he felt he had made a mistake. He had made a conventional snare drum sound and therefore wasn't being original. He quickly covered this over with more activity, in the way musicians learn to distract attention from accidents. Was it uncreative to play a recognizable, traditional sound?

Bruce Lee, the great martial artist, developed what he

called "the style of no style." He was the first to do mixed martial arts, taking the best from all styles but not adhering to any particular school. Knowing about many disciplines, he would not be confined to any of them but do what was needed according to circumstance. Following the *Tao Te Ching*, he urged his students to be like water, yielding, shifting in form, able to penetrate everywhere.

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Around 1660 Pascal said that the root of human unhappiness was our inability to sit still in a room. A recent series of studies showed that some people would rather give themselves electric shocks than spend a few minutes sitting quietly alone. Men are more likely than women to prefer electric shock to stillness. People feel impelled to skitter around, searching for entertainment or conflict. From this discomfort we generate quarrels, wars, dramas domestic and political. If we are afraid to be alone with stillness and uncertainty, life will be an endless quest for in-flight entertainment. Suffering or feeling wounded can be a mighty entertaining distraction.

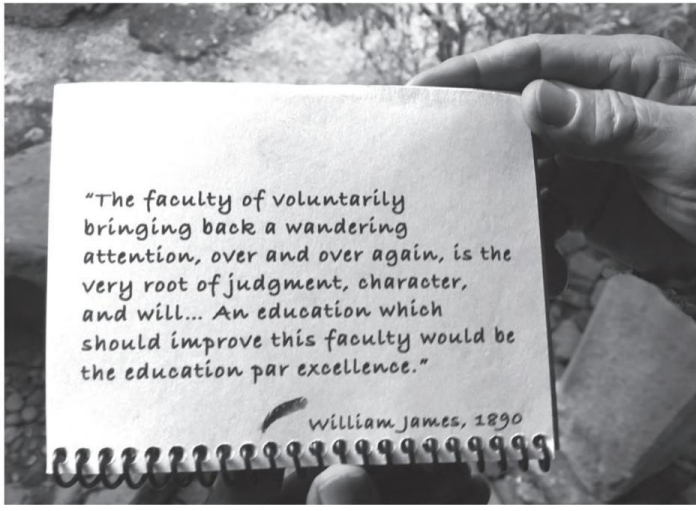
The neurologist Charles Limb recorded functional MRIs of the brains of musicians while they were improvising, then again while they were playing set compositions, and compared the two. The improvising brains showed a suppression of areas involved in critical judgment and fight-flight responses. People are afraid to be patient with their own creativity, to tolerate (and enjoy!) the ambiguity of exploration. Our impulse is to drown it out with criticism. We learn this habit early. I was in the hardware store looking for a tool.

response needs time to work. When we do that silent work, our capabilities expand. The natural activity of muscles is variation — holding, moving, keeping still, letting go; alternating rhythms of contract, relax, sustain, release.

Every practice incorporates this component: warming up, tuning up, stretching out, being patient while mind and body quiet down a bit and make room for concerted action and response. Musical practice often begins with playing long, slow tones, simple things, finding and saying hello to your fingertips, hands, shoulders, arms, back, legs, feet, saying hello to sound. Even in everyday conversation, we have these warm-ups: the polite introductions and recitations of formulaic dialogue — hello, how are you, fine — which seem so silly and repetitive to children. Yet people need a period of time to become present to each other through those little rituals.

Thus, some form of meditation, however we conceive of it, is profoundly useful in the practice of any art. Allow that perturbed pendulum to arrive back at the center. Take ordinary, everyday perceptions. Dial their intensity up and down. Visualize a knob, as on an electronic device, at whatever location your right hand currently occupies. Turn the dial up and down on intensity, contrast, tone, color, compression, or expansion of the difference between loud and subtle. Increase and decrease the range of sensitivity. Dial up the spectrum between fine focus and broad view. Dial in sounds or smells, the details of rooms or landscapes, and then dial out again to a larger context. Dial into touch and proprioception. Close your eyes and know where your hand is, and how it is moving. You know how much something weighs by holding

it. Dial down the internal dialogue and superfluous brain buzz, like an engineer dialing down the gain, until attention floats lightly. Allow the agitated pendulum to come to rest; then set it gently swinging once more.



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Finger-Kissing

To me, "good" is not how skillfully you do something you were taught, but rather discovering something within you in a way that is totally new, unexpected, surprising, and satisfyingly right.
— Rachel Rosenthal

The musician Johann van Beethoven had a talented little boy. A career in the arts was a bit dubious in the 1770s, as it always has been. There were a few superstars, but for most people music was a risky business. The elder Beethoven had in mind the recent successes of another talented child, Mozart, who traveled with his father and sister to dazzle the crowned heads of Europe. Little Ludwig van Beethoven was going to be the goose that laid the golden egg. So the father (in keeping with the pedagogical principles of the time) stood over the boy with a stick as he practiced, and whacked him on the fingers every time he made a mistake. Lest we think this abusive discipline is what made Beethoven a great musician, remember the thousands of just-average musicians who were taught in the same way. Or the thousands who might have enjoyed playing music but quit.

Nowadays we regard it as barbaric to use corporal

punishment as a teaching method. But the shadow of that stick, whacking the child on his or her fingers, remains in other forms. We are taught to fear mistakes and to hide them.

I gave a series of workshops at the Juilliard School in New York, where the students were far more skilled musicians than I will ever be. One afternoon a group of students, who had never previously improvised, progressed from singing some amusing gibberish pieces to picking up their instruments and playing full-on spontaneous music. They played two exquisite improvisations — beautifully organized, emotional pieces. They were connecting with, listening to, and supporting each other. The other musicians, listening in the circle of support, could not believe that these pieces had not been composed. Then the group played a third piece, in which they were a bit out of sync and out of tune with each other. During the discussion following that third piece, the students' faces were drawn with guilt, feeling that they had screwed up. "Mistakes" in improvisation are hard to define, but people recognize when something works and when it doesn't.

The ghost of Beethoven's father was stalking us with his stick, whacking those students on the fingertips for making a mistake. So I thought of prescribing an antidote. I asked them to put their instruments down and do some finger-kissing exercises. They simply walked around the room kissing their own fingers, contemplating and appreciating all ten of them. Finger-kissing is easy. Anyone can do it. In fact, I suggest you try it right now.

A student asked me why I didn't stop the "bad" piece and say something right then. We all have the built-in expectation that a conductor or teacher will wave a baton to offer corrections. Rehearsals and lessons are usually a matter of

constant starting and stopping to point out errors. With a large orchestra rehearsing an hour-long Mahler symphony, it's hard to avoid this, though conductors vary widely in the emotional tone of their interjections. But these students, playing brief improvisations in a small group, knew quite well what they liked and didn't like about their piece. It was there in front of everybody's eyes, ears, and minds.

The group went on to play more pieces, which were increasingly strong, varied, and interesting. The more pieces they played, the further away they got from ideas of good and bad. Each piece became its own little world of relationship, information, and feeling. Listening to each other, stepping back from attempting to be individually excellent and pass some imaginary exam, was the key. What they needed at that moment was not assessment; it was mindfulness.

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Finger-kissing is simple, but it rakes up all kinds of wounds. In our own lives, we often betray ourselves by allowing a fixed identity to be attached to us. I have run into many people who were told in the fourth grade that they couldn't carry a tune or who tried to play the piano and were told they were making too many mistakes. They were scolded about these mistakes in a way that stuck to them, that made them want never to touch another instrument again, never to sing again. Or they may wish to sing again, but they believe that they can't, that they lack the fixed, identifiable "quality" of musicality. Some teacher has laid a container around them, laid an identity on them as somebody who isn't musical. Many of us carry similar stories with us, a semipermanent part of our life baggage. The entertainment industries, by pushing highly produced media before our eyes, by emphasizing the

Fine musicians and artists teaching master classes, with the best of intentions, often fall into the trap of making helpful suggestions. It is much more challenging to allow the mistakes to hang silently in the air and instead have the students speak about what they enjoyed in each other's performances. Reinforce what was interesting, and it will be stronger next time. Once a nurturing environment has been established, it is possible to give and receive criticism without wounding. Even then, it is better to use our discernment to find the good, the interesting elements in the work, the edge of exploration that leads to the next work.

What if the dignity and encouragement we show to babies were a model for all our educational systems?

"Positive feedback only," as Wunder describes it, does not mean pretending that everything is uniformly good or that our critical faculty is to be disabled. It means that by searching out the aspects of a performance that we enjoy, we are strengthening them. We can only identify these aspects and figure out how to reinforce them if our brains and perceptions are fully engaged.

In the face of institutional mania for evaluation and the accompanying threats of failure, more positive approaches have also arisen, from the practice of appreciative inquiry in the world of business and organizational consulting, which has spread widely from its origins in the Cleveland School of Business, to some of the methods of legendary basketball coach Phil Jackson (who introduced his players to Zen meditation and mindfulness techniques as part of his training regime) and his Positive Coaching Alliance, an antidote to the popular conception of sports coaches as militaristic, punishing martinets.

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At this moment you might be sitting, standing, lying down, or walking. Wherever you are, try gently shifting from side to side. If you're sitting, notice that as your torso keels a bit to the right, the muscles on your left side *know* to pull you back to the left to return upright. Every time you veer over to the left, your muscles adjust you back to the right. We do this every moment of the day; otherwise, we wouldn't be sitting up in chairs, we'd be flopped onto the floor like corpses. Our proprioceptive senses and core muscles are in a constant dance of dynamic equilibrium. We perceive where our bodies are, we perceive our relationships with the people and objects around us, and we adjust accordingly.

In the same way, we are able to walk, bicycle, drive a car, dance. This is the wisdom of the self-adjusting body. Steering a car, we continually guide it right and left in order to go straight. We do not castigate ourselves for making a mistake each time we wiggle the wheel. We simply notice the error and adjust for it. Inevitably we will lose our balance, fall over, make mistakes, and get into accidents. How do we respond? With guilt and self-punishment? Or with self-acceptance, which encourages another attempt and more practice, allowing us to respond to emergencies smoothly and realistically? Self-correction is a lot easier without the added burden of guilt.

Wunder reminds us that when toddlers fall, they don't need to be told that they fell. We trust that they know what is happening as it happens, that they receive feedback as the experience unfolds. Our bodies and minds, our partnerships with others, are self-organizing systems. The

mechanisms of feedback, communication, self-correction, self-organization, by which toddling evolves into graceful interaction, are fundamental to life, as revealed in the sciences of systems theory.

Every person reading this is an ex-toddler. We retain (consciously or unconsciously) an immense amount of experience from this life stage of falldown-getup, falldown-getup, falldown-getup. Nelson Mandela once said that he wanted to be judged not by what he accomplished but by how many times he fell down and got up again.

Improvising is trial and error smoothly flowing. For that to work, error has to be free from clenching or regret, so that our learning process can swing easily from each step to the next. The more we accept mistakes as part of the natural flow of our activity, the more we will be able to incorporate them, use them to build stronger and more interesting structures. In the flow of music, the "bad" note can be deliberately repeated, now as a bridge to something new, building a new modulation around it. Our partners can pick it up and toss it around in a freshly expanded game.

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Shunryū Suzuki, following the thirteenth-century Zen master Dōgen, said that life is "one continuous mistake." Miles Davis said, "Do not fear mistakes, there are none." They were both saying the same thing. One continuous mistake means continuous evolution. We never stop toddling.

Suzuki-roshi also proposed that the best way to control a horse is to give it a large pasture and simply observe it. Mindfulness is the key, not control in the sense of grabbing someone and making them do something.

I like the French meaning of the word for *control*, the verb

controller, which isn't about forcing people to do as you wish but rather investigating the status of things. A conductor on a train is said to *controller les billets* — check to see that people have tickets. Yes, he can throw you off the train if you don't have a ticket, but *controller* in this context primarily means to pay attention to, to take account of.

Controller might be translated not as "controlling" but as "noticing." Notice without guilt or judgment that a muscle is unnecessarily tense, that our breath is unnecessarily constricted, that a thought is unnecessarily obsessive. Notice that our way of sliding up the instrument's fingerboard involves unnecessary gripping that might result in a jagged sound. Notice that we can deliberately make that jagged sound if we want to. Notice habits in our professional lives or relationships that are the equivalent of these unnecessary body tensions. With heightened attention, we can let go of these tensions as they arise — but without punishing ourselves.

B.F. Skinner, the influential learning theorist, said that the purpose of psychology was "the prediction and control of behavior." This unfortunate worldview was the perfect extension into mid-twentieth-century thought of *both* materialistic, reductionist science *and* controlling, judgmental religion, in which life is shaped by reward and punishment. Think of William Blake's Nobodaddy, the domineering, patriarchal sky-god laying out the rules of the universe with his compasses and punishing his creatures for crossing those boundaries. The idea of reward and punishment is deeply ingrained in our culture, as it is in many others. It is bound up with ideas of power, and the frustration that we cannot control others "for their own good."

To return to Wunder's story of the first-time toddler: the

Even when the context is standing up and giving a talk onstage, some of the talks that have given me the most satisfaction (and some of the most satisfying talks I have heard others give), are those in a foreign environment where a translator is needed. If the talk lasts an hour, you simply can't talk for more than half an hour. If I say half as many words, they are often twice as good.

This type of minimalist teaching is not quite the same as Socratic teaching, but the two are closely related. Socratic teaching is also called maieutics (spiritual midwifery) — leading the students down a path with open-ended questions, allowing space for them to come to conclusions on their own. This is not a matter (as in Plato's *Meno* dialogue) of letting students come on their own to a conclusion that we could have told them, but rather leading to a conclusion that we could *not* have told them, that only *they* could have arrived at.

My job as a teacher is not to lead, but to nurture, and to encourage students to have the gumption to do what is theirs to do. Maintaining a nurturing environment in which people feel safe to explore and experiment: that is the essence of education. We try to fill up empty space and time, afraid to let them stay empty. This is partly because of our own natural nervousness. Also, if one is a public speaker, a teacher, a consultant, a counselor, a performer, or any number of other professions, one feels that one has to give people their money's worth. That puts pressure on us to fill our time with activity rather than standing back and allowing things to mature. Sometimes it takes a colossal output of energy to remain calmly quiet and not intervene.

Stepping back and creating space is the very marrow of this work: it's not just about how to teach improv in a class