

Improvisation and the Pattern Which Connects

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Without improv, life comes to a halt. Improvising makes explicit the truths of daily life which we always experience but do not always think about: That we live in a world of pattern, relationship, context, interconnectedness. 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 ordinary, everyday mind embodies all we need to know in order to be expressive and creative. All perception and action vibrate in a network of relationship. Gregory Bateson said, “it takes two to know one.” The reality of the pattern-which-connects is often unconscious, but when we do improv it becomes available to us through the simplest of means.

I'd like to begin with a hallucination I had a few days ago. I was walking around London, on the South Bank, enjoying the wonderful miles-long environment of walks, with theaters and public spaces all around. I walked into a bookstore. I was browsing among the shelves when I passed the psychology section. Suddenly I saw a big red book with white lettering on the spine; the book was titled *IMPROVISING*. I did a double-take and turned back to the shelf to the book which had caught my eye. But there was no such book! I thought that maybe there was another book on the shelf containing some of the letters of the word *improvising*, but there was no such book. I had completely hallucinated it. Clearly, in the workings of the unconscious, I must have been anticipating that I'd be coming here in a few days; but I think there was something else at work in that hallucination. We're all playing in this conference with the word *improvisation*, but in my hallucination it had been transformed to the word *improvising*. Not a noun, but a verb or participle, present tense.

My title today borrows the phrase, *the pattern which connects*, from Gregory Bateson. He was referring to the interconnectedness of all life. He was referring to the unity of mind and nature, and to the unity of learning and evolution. He was referring to the fact that not only is all life interconnected, it is interconnected by very specific patterns of interaction.

One of his favorite ideas – an important pathway to understanding the pattern which connects – was coined by the mathematician Anatol Holt, who wanted a bumper sticker saying *Stamp Out Nouns*. *Stamp out nouns* seems a bit revolutionary in terms of Western thought, but it's very ordinary and commonplace in terms of Buddhist thought. That is, there are no independently self-existent things (or persons, places, or ideas). I remember a dinner with Bateson at a Mexican restaurant: he was an enormous,

6'5" Englishman, stooped over and shaggy, smiling, keeling way over me with his beer in his hand, and he said, "you know, there is no substance."

To illuminate this, we turn to a central concept of Buddhism, the emptiness of inherent existence. The key word is *inherent*. It's not that this hard podium in front of me is not here; of course it's here, and of course it's hard, but its hardness is temporary and relative. It really isn't a thing. We think of it as a thing, but the thingness of the podium is a snapshot of infinitely many interconnected events in time. For a period of years, this podium seems to have *thingness*. But it's made of wood and there's some velvet here and some paint here and some screws and nails holding it all together. Each of these constituents is part of a vast network of ongoing processes: physical, biological, social, economic, and so forth. The wood came from the forest and the forest came from an ecologically interconnected environment that existed in relationship to the other trees, to the animals, to the insect vectors of the trees. The tree was cut down by someone, and that person had a past, present and future, a family and friends and other relationships. That someone was employed by a company which had its own past, present and future, and was part of an environment of business and labor relations. The wood was bent around a circular mold to make the shape, and that mold was made by someone. The paint was made by someone else, and the paint came from minerals and organic compounds with their own past, present and future. You see, I could spend all day going through the chemistry, physics, sociology, economics, biology and all the other infinitely interconnected fields of existence implicated in the making of this temporary podium. And if I were an organism of a very different size or with different combinations of senses, the podium would seem quite other than it does here and now.

Some years from now, this temporary podium will be on a trash heap somewhere and will decay and turn into something else. So this podium is full of the trees from which it came, full of the lives of all of the people whose work brought it here, it's full of the lives of all of the people who have stood here and given talks – it's full of all these things. The only thing it is empty of is inherent existence. It does not exist by itself. It exists as a nexus of activity. Bateson urges us to stamp out nouns and see, instead, the pattern which connects. Our languages tend to coalesce around nouns to a great extent, perhaps because we evolved with opposable thumbs and hands that can grab things and it is convenient for us to think that the world consists of things. With language we tend to make things out of processes. And that generates what in Buddhist talk is called *delusion*.

Our language even makes a *thing* out of improvisation. That, I think, is why I hallucinated that red book with white titling that said *Improvising* – as a corrective to the habits of thought that we all share.

We here are improvising. We don't make improvisations. I can play the violin into a microphone which has its own past, present and future and record it as a sound file on a computer which has its own past, present and future and make a nice little recording which can be presented as a *thing*. And perhaps it has less thingness to it than a score by Beethoven, which we keep recreating as a cultural icon, which is invested with a tremendous amount of thingness. In our society, thingness lends legitimacy, which is why art forms that have less thingness to them seem to have less legitimacy. All of us who

have been in and out of music departments know that when we say we are teaching improvisation, we are immediately regarded as something a little bit sticky on the floor that's not quite right; and even if we play extraordinary music, it's somehow less legitimate than notated music because we don't have *thingness*.

We want to make a *thing* out of improvisation in order to lend legitimacy to the work that we do. There is the noun, *improvisation*. There are the academic presentations that we give in order to be able to go back to our universities and other institutions to say that we've been here and we've done some *thing* – and therefore, we're legitimate. But actually, we're just engaged in this wonderful, on-going process of interaction, communication, commerce, connection, which is what the business of improvising is.

All people are improvising, most of the time. We don't have to be artists. Every one of us who speaks a language and talks to our friends and family in the course of a day, which means everyone on earth, is improvising, because we don't write down what we're going to say before we say it. Except, of course, for politicians. And this is why we tend to have an intuitive sense that politicians are lying even when they happen to be telling the truth. We sense that they're reading their script and that there's something fake about it because we're used to ordinary, interactive, face-to-face communication, i.e., improvisation. This is something that I point out a lot and it's at the beginning of *Free Play*, about improvisation being the everyday activity of ordinary speech. I said this one day to a university audience and a girl raised her hand and said, "Sometimes I write things down before I say them." I asked, "When?" and she answered, "When I'm going to talk to a boy." In a sense that's the same situation as the politician non-improvising a speech and having it combed over by speech writers because you could bumble the wrong words out of your mouth and start a war and the stakes are very high. For this girl, the activity of talking to a boy in whom she was interested was fraught with fear and trepidation. The flip side of that fear, though, is that she had the incredible courage to raise her hand in public and tell that story. Fear and trepidation lead us to *thingify*, to reify our improvisations, to nail them down so that we don't make fools of ourselves. When we are improvising, we always have the possibility of making a fool of ourselves. But when we are non-improvising and saying something prepared, we also have the possibility, at least as great, of making a fool of ourselves. So why not express ourselves in the most direct way possible? Here we are, doing what we do, a roomful of improvisers in music, theater, dance, film and other arts.

Improvisation and the pattern which connects: in Buddhism there is the image of Indra's net, which is a vision of the universe as an interconnected latticework of reflective jewels that goes on forever and where each jewel reflects all of the others. As John Muir, the American explorer and naturalist said, "Every time you pick up anything, you find it hitched to everything else in the universe." Indra's net is our safety net from those trepidations we have as improvisers.

I was reading some of the abstracts for the presentations at this conference, and I noticed in Rea Dennis's abstract the key words: *risk*, *vulnerability* and *revelation*. We go out there on stage or in our daily life to do what we do and we're constantly vulnerable, we're constantly taking risks. But we have the possibility of falling into the safety of Indra's net. Improvisation is a sink-or-swim situation. If you try to swim, you will surely

drown, because the sea is infinite and because your efforts to make deliberate movements and splash around will just drag you down. However, if you have the faith to allow yourself to sink, your natural buoyancy will bring you up and you'll be able to function. What brings you up to the surface is Indra's net, the interconnectivity of the world. We experience this as improvisational musicians or theater people or dancers, when we get out to perform in a space like this, with nothing up your sleeve, no plans or script, no safety net; yet as soon as someone makes a gesture or a sound, that is something to which another person can listen and react. That reaction is going to be non-random, and the third reaction to the second reaction is going to be non-random, and the fourth reaction will be non-random, and as you simply listen to each other, the piece structures itself and becomes more and more perfectly defined – so that at the end of such an improvisation, you may end up producing a piece which no one in the audience could tell was improvised.

I've gone to chamber music conferences where I'll take a quartet of people who have never improvised before but have some skill on their instruments, and by the third day they're getting up and performing a piece sandwiched on a concert in between Beethoven and Stravinsky and Poulenc, and as far as the audience is concerned it's another piece of contemporary chamber music, with a beginning, a middle and an end. We are able to do this by the magic of listening, because as we listen, we're able to perform innumerable, infinitely complex computations in real time on what we're hearing. And so what comes out is pattern. What comes out has structure. What comes out gives us an opportunity to find meaning in the same way that a pre-composed piece does. When people begin to do this, we discover how very easy it is – there's nothing to it. All of us who are experienced in teaching improv have seen students at the doorstep, about to walk into the room – they are experiencing an emotion of fear, saying to themselves, 'I am not creative, I won't think of enough ideas, I don't have anything ...' Then we start playing with sound. After we've been playing with sound for a while we can become comfortable enough to listen back to what we're doing and think about it. Then 95% of the comments that people come up with are: let's hold back a little bit and let's play a little less. Every time they play less, there's more content and more structure. The moment arrives when I can feed this comment back upon them, that you've just discovered that the key to improvising is to do less and less and less all the time. Coming up with ideas or being creative is utterly a non-issue, because everybody has walked into the room infinitely creative with infinitely many ideas. The problem of improvisation is not coming up with ideas, but to learn to let your ideas out of the starting gate at a slow enough rate that the people out there can understand them.

Quite often the more silence and the less content there is, the more interesting the improvisations tend to be, and the more structured they tend to be. Creativity, conceived as generating ideas, doesn't even enter into the equation because we are all part of Indra's net and we are all complex systems – the mind-body-conscious-unconscious is so immense and complex that it contains all of the ideas that we ever need.

Memory seems so evanescent, but at a deep level, everything is remembered and somehow connects itself into the nexus of material that is walking around as our mind-body-conscious-unconscious. As musicians, we unconsciously remember every piece

of music we ever heard. We remember all the radio commercials we heard, we remember all the music we have liked, or hated, and all that goes into our conception of what is music to us. As theater people, we remember every scene we've seen, every movie, the commercials, the postures, the stances and inter-relationships, and dominance-submission, games that happen in real life and all this stuff is within us. We have so much to draw upon that it is impossible to quantify it. It is infinite. That is the Indra's net of memory right within us that we draw upon as improvisers all the time. That's what we walk in with, with the fear and trepidation that says, "I'm not creative, I don't have any ideas."

Seng-Tsan, one of the old Zen masters in T'ang Dynasty China said, "Your ordinary mind is the Tao." Your everyday mind is the Tao. There's nothing to it. There is nothing to obtain, nothing to be obtained, it's simply being able to be where you are. Laid upon that nexus of interactivity, knowledge, and understating are the fears and insecurities which we carry around with us. We are constantly in a dance of breaking through those walls of insecurity, so that we can reconnect with our vast creative abilities.

The complexity of every moment and every movement is immense. Tomorrow you'll hear from my old friend Al Wunder. I've been deeply influenced by Al's teaching practice, which he describes in an article called "Positive Feedback." He points us to an experience that most of us have had: being in the room with a one-year-old baby who is walking for the very first time. We watch the baby fall-down-get-up, fall-down-get-up, staggering across the room, and we enthusiastically clap and support the baby. We do not say, "that was really good Johnny, now if next time you hold your back up straighter and lift your knees a little bit higher, you could walk even better!" In conventional education we don't treat our students with the dignity with which we treat and encourage babies. I can tell you that I, as a parent, fall into this trap all the time. I go around the world trying to practice and preach supportive ways of teaching musical improvisation, but as a parent, a thousand times a day I fall into the trap of criticism which is well-intended but experienced as derogatory. We see things people do, we wish things were better, we want to correct something, we want to change things. For example, I was doing a workshop with a theater company in Seattle a couple of years ago, and I was having them create pieces. A couple of them played musical instruments but most of them were doing sound pieces with gibberish and body noise etc. One person raised his hand at one point and said, "You know that piece we did about two or three pieces ago, just after lunch? It was really horrible. It was sour and out of key and we didn't connect with each other very well. Why didn't you say anything, or stop us?" I said, "How was the next piece?" "It was much better. We were listening to each other." The fact is that I knew the piece was horrible and they knew the piece was horrible, so they didn't need me to tell them the piece was horrible, they already knew it. It was there in front of everybody's eyes and ears and mind, and that's it. Your next activity is a feedback on the prior activity. And because of the patent horribleness of that piece, everybody thoroughly listened to each other in the next piece and did something that was beautiful and stunning. And then the following piece was even more stunning. In the classical music world, we're used to rehearsals in which the conductor is constantly gesturing the musicians to stop playing and then corrects them. We're all ingrained with that

process. Indeed, you can empathize with position of the conductor there, because when you have a hundred piece ensemble rather than a five piece ensemble, the possibilities for chaos multiply and it becomes more difficult to do the crowd control. It becomes a more delicate matter to manage the flow of people's creativity. But the fact is that you don't need someone to tell you that there was a problem. You hear the problem, you feel the problem. And the problem is also usually not a single thing. It's usually many things interacting.

Let's return to Wunder's example of the child walking. Supporting the flow of evolutionary learning is not just a good pedagogical idea. Walking is a complex system. All of you who are dancers know this. When you make even the simplest movement, innumerable systems are involved. Walking is the interaction between self and gravity, the floor and environment and all of our joints. We've got 52 bones in the feet, you can then start multiplying the combinations and permutations of all the joints, tendons, muscles and nerves that are interacting. All of those subsystems are learning by experience to feed back upon one another and come out with a fluid, flowing activity of walking, which is symptomatic of the individual person – the unique person whose walk is unlike any other person's walk. That is a very complex system. You all know that if you are riding a bicycle, or trying to teach a kid to ride one, and try to break the process down into steps 'well first you do this and then you do this and then you do this...' they will fall down immediately. It's simply impossible to bring something like that into a linear sequence. So walking is a complex system.

The more we understand the complexity of our everyday systems of activity we begin to see the sense of the Batesonian principle of stamping out nouns. Bateson liked to tell a parable of a blind person and the stick. We have this notion that I'm a noun – person, place thing or idea – all of which are completely non-existent, as we know from our perspectives of emptiness and Indra's net and Bateson. But we have this idea that I'm a person with a name and I'm bounded by this skin here and what's inside this skin is me and what's outside this skin is environment. Or we think of a species that's evolving and what's inside the genome is the species, while the trees and the weather and all that are the environment. In the case of the blind person walking around here on stage, his stick detecting these three wires that are down here on the stage floor, and being capable of not tripping on them – where does the blind person end? Does he end at the skin of the hand? Does he end at the tip of the stick? Does the person end halfway down the stick? Is it the system of the blind person plus the stick plus the floor plus the three wires, plus the environment? It's a meaningless question. There is no boundary. There is interaction and it's all a lot of verbs. If the blind person then sits down and eats a sandwich and puts the stick down on the floor and doesn't use it for a while, where does the person end? All our concepts of *thingness*, of the beginning and ending of a person, his boundaries, what is the organism and what is the environment, are clearly, completely fluid. They are real in the sense that this wooden podium in front of me is hard, but they are in the same sense temporary.

Shunryu Suzuki-Roshi, who was the Japanese founder of San Francisco Zen Center, was asked a question by one of his students, David Chadwick. Suzuki was adamant about never making a *thing* of anything; he kept telling his students, don't make a thing

out of Buddhism. Don't make a thing out of your meditation practice. Be there with the complexity the difficulties and with your problems. David raised his hand in a cocky way, thinking he would be slapped down, and asked him if he could summarize all of Buddhism in one sentence. Suzuki, without a hesitation, said, "Everything changes."

So the boundary of the blind person in Bateson's parable is constantly changing, in the stick, out of the stick. Those of us who play musical instruments discover that the violin and the bow and the electronics and the room are all contiguous with our skin and with our nervous system and there is no inside and no outside. This is why it's so interesting that this event in Cardiff is called the "Improvisation *Continuums* Conference." The continuum is Indra's net. We're familiar with the word *continuum* from Einstein and the general theory of relativity, the continuum of spacetime. All spacetime is a single continuum of interacting, interrelating process. There's no stopping place. Here we are, interacting in this room, which is different from the way we might be with each other in another room.

We think of architecture as one of the most un-improvised art forms, but there's more here than meets the eye. The other day when I was having my stroll down the South Bank in London, and having the hallucination about the book called *Improvising*, I was passing these miles and miles of mostly happy people scampering around, having fun, walking, talking, being their individual selves within this long architected space. Sometimes we do hybrid improvised forums for larger numbers of participants, improvising within a framework, as Rob Smith just did here in *Sacred Sites* at the conference opening; he created a rough template that had a couple of guideposts to come back to at beginning, middle and end. Many of our art forms, like this, are half-improvised, like jazz, like raga playing, in which there is a set of guideposts and templates that are rough and approximate, but they form the score for the improvisation. In that sense, architecture is the score for our improvisation of daily life. You can go into different rooms and feel completely different, go into different public spaces and feel completely different in each one, and the improvisation is simply all of the population of earth going about their daily lives in an unscripted way which is still is guided by habits and guided by cultural conditioning and moving in and out of the score of space. For me as a violinist, when I'm playing either by myself or with partners, I do completely free improvisation. Just because of the way my personality is, I don't enjoy dealing with an explicit agreement, like let's start in D or something like that. I just cannot do it. Other people can do it just fine. But nevertheless, when I do an improvisation, somebody can tell that's it's me, and there are parameters there and for me the parameters come from the architecture of the instrument and the architecture of the bow and the way the reverberations come back in the space and how the people feel.

Those of you who have performed in scripted plays know that you can perform in the same house for different audiences on different nights, and what comes out of you is different and individual each time, even though you stick to the script. So we're all playing on that continuum between structure and freedom. The continuum also exists between those of us who habitually hang out in rooms like this and perform and produce artworks and ordinary people who are doing the artwork of being human beings

in daily life, which is quite complicated enough. When you observe the body language of people who are walking around in daily life, you can see again that the shell or the brick wall that prevents improvisation is fear. You can see more fear in this person, less in that one. You can see how the different kinds of fears operate to shape or constrict behavior.

The phrase *free play* says a lot to us who are professional players. But free play is also an engineering term, and it simply refers to degrees of freedom of mobility. A joint such as my wrist or shoulder can move so many degrees forwards and backwards. I can get some bodywork and allow it to move a few more degrees. That's a quantifiable amount of what engineers call free play. The sensitivity of this microphone and the lower and higher frequencies that it can respond to, the limits of its response, is a definition in engineering of free play. Fear is what restricts free play. In life there is the continual dance between fear and play. We talk about the semi-structured or semi-scored improvisations, or when we talk about how my free improvisations are tilted and structured by the way the instrument is and by the way the room is and by the way my emotions are, we're just dealing in that eternal dance of form vs. freedom, which is the oldest dance there is. Probably, every single one of us in our particular form of work, likes to talk about that particular tension and it becomes in a way the number one fact in our lives as artists: how do we manage that tension and that dance from one place to another and from one time to another? We recognize that it's the oldest game in the book. And we're all playing it just as we're all playing the game of the interconnectedness of life, which goes back 4.5 billion years. Those 4.5 billion years of organic evolution are the learning and the knowledge and the structure and the pattern that well up from within us, in order to give our free improvisations the form which they have.

This dance of form and freedom is the Law and the Prophets in the ancient Jewish tradition – structure and freedom, structure and craziness, the Law's structure and the prophets crying out Reality as they saw it in spite of their fear.

A related key to improvising is *wabi-sabi*. Here in Wales, the countryside is dotted with decayed mediaeval castles, which are quite beautiful, and the beauty comes partly from the decay and from the way nature has overgrown and softened and changed the lines of the stones. In Japan, they have highly developed art forms of *wabi-sabi*, like making a pot which gives us the feeling that it wasn't deliberately made by a person, but was in a sense the product of decades or centuries of evolution and decay and crumbling. An important way of playing across that form-and-freedom tension is to get up there on stage, deliberately making something which feels as though it had evolved through a natural force.

Art works upon us through empathy, through inviting you to see things for a while through my particular personality, my structure, my own quirks and my own background. As Rea told us earlier, we say this was my father, this was my family, this is where I came from, this is me; and yet this *me* which comes from a particular place and time is able to create empathy or be able to detect the feelings in another human being and resonate with them. This is how art works. We're able to flow through that series of infinite feedbacks. Bateson said, "It takes two to know one." We know ourselves

through our relationships, and through our way of affecting each other. That is why, if you stand up and give a solo improvisation, as a dancer, an actor, a musician, you're still operating in this infinite nexus of relationship and listening and responding. There's a South African word, *ubuntu*, which means I have my being through your having your being. That is Indra's net. We work in our improvisation through *ubuntu*, through empathy, through connecting with each other. We have this exosomatic brain. We think the body is in the body and the mind is in the head, but actually, down the pathways of communication, down the blind person's stick, down the instrument, down the resonance of this room as the sounds come back to us, it is all an indissoluble continuum. This is our reality, usually unconscious, in all of our daily lives, but as improvisers we are able to work with this consciously. An improviser is simply a person who gets up and does what everybody else does in their daily lives, but does it consciously, knowing that you are listening and knowing that you are responding and doing it mindfully, and some magical things happen as the work comes out of you.

Art works upon us through interruption. Sometimes I've worked with classes of small kids and have tried to do meditation with them. Now of course, asking a bunch of kids to be quiet for one minute is not going to be very successful. But if you ask them instead to listen for the noises going on outside the room, then the children become amazingly concentrated. The noises which normally feel like interruptions or irrelevant disturbances serve to focus us. I did a talk at a medical school on improvisation and medicine. That doesn't mean making up crazy and wild drug formulations. It means listening to the patient and responding to the person who is *there* as opposed to some abstract diagnosis. The disease is a description, a summary; in reality there are human beings, each with their own particular situation. A couple of doctors had done a study measuring how long, on average, once they begin talking, does the doctor listen to the patient before interrupting. What do you think the answer is? 18 seconds. I wanted to cite this paper; it was published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 1984, before research papers were routinely digitized on the Web. I kept searching the Web to find a pdf copy of this paper somewhere. I finally found one on a website with the strange name of *interruptions.net*. It turns out to be an academic website devoted to the study of interruptions in human-computer interaction. A strange topic for research, but when I read their site, it was pretty interesting. Think about airline pilots, whose job seems like a skilled but very cut and dry affair. You've got to take off from the London Heathrow airport and land in New York and you have people's lives in your care, and you have to land in the correct lane and safely and so forth. Your behavior is governed by an immense number of rules, but if you cannot be constantly responding to interruptions and constantly responding to divergences from your plan, those people are not going to make it. It turns out that the study of interruptions is a very rich field, and a key to everyday creativity. How grateful I was to be interrupted by the synaptic summation of my unconscious desires for this talk when I found myself randomly walking around that bookstore in London, and saw the non-book: *Improvising*.

That brings us back to the universality of improvisation. In the labor movement, which as you know has been in decline for many years but I think is going to come back, there is a technique called working to rule. It is possible to strike, walk off the job

and create an immediately overt conflict. Or the workers in the institution can decide, we're going to come to work exactly on time, leave exactly on time, we're going to do our job exactly as it is stipulated on paper, we're going to follow every single rule and regulation, exactly as stipulated. In this way one can bring an organization completely to its knees and nothing will function. By following the rules and doing exactly what one is supposed to do, nothing happens. For any kind of work to be effective, the rules and prescriptions need to be constantly adapted and re-improvised to fit ever-changing circumstances.

So improvisation is absolutely necessary to daily life no matter what you do. You do not have to be an artist, but an ordinary human being, and no matter what you do, you're always improvising. And here we are.

I'd like to welcome questions, comments, and discussion, whatever you'd like to throw in here please.

QUESTION: I'm very interested in your use of an Eastern structure to discuss your work. You had Bateson there but you threw in Zen Buddhism quite a lot. Could you give me some idea about why you're there, as a non-Eastern looking person?

S.N.: I'm a non-Eastern looking person, but I'm from California! California is the place where Europe and Asia meet halfway. I was Bateson's student. I was with him when he died in San Francisco Zen Center. He was in the hospital for three weeks and then it was clear that he wasn't going to make it. He was not a Buddhist, but he hung out with a lot of Buddhists and he had many friends in that world. San Francisco Zen Center invited him to die there. He was there for about a week. I was 29 and I was there with all these black robed guys who were incredibly calm in the presence of this death and incredibly responsive to all the practical things that needed to be done and just very, very impressive. I had read things about Buddhism and Taoism before, but here I was seeing it in action. That was very interesting to me. And then one day he wasn't there and I was there with these black robed guys and I decided to hang with them and did. In my life, that's where that comes from.

Sometime before that, there was a Zen priest who gave a talk and he used the word "practice" to refer to zazen. It's always called practice but somehow I hadn't thought about it in that way, and suddenly when he used the word practice, I realized, well, I'm a violinist, I know what that is. Suddenly it was like the jump between thinking about things and doing them, which is what happens to all of us as artists, because art is about doing things. Bateson's ideas have a theoretical resonance and a truth to them but then the question is, how do we actualize them in daily life. His fundamental message was that if we don't transform the way our minds work and interact with the world of which we're a part, we're screwed as a species. In 2007, we can see all around us that that is happening. And so the question is: how do we transform mind? Having good ideas is wonderful but then you need a practice. Buddhism, meditation in all its various forms, is practice, art in all its various forms is practice. Stamping out nouns sounds like a great idea, once you understand it, it's quite interesting, but then we're all talking language in this room. I'm using sentences that are full of nouns. How do we

realize the transformation? Improvisation is one way or *improvising*, rather. Again, there's that wonderful hallucination that I had at the beginning, the shift between thinking about improvisation and thinking about *improvising* and living as a verb. We improvisers in this room are stamping out nouns, that's how you do it.

The traditions and the practices for changing mind/body, conscious/unconscious to be living with more of a direct, visceral feeling for the continuums is present in every world tradition. Every culture has it. Jung was responsible in the early 20th Century for introducing a lot of Western culture to Eastern culture and to ideas of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, a lot of things like that. But he himself was the son of a minister and he came from a very conservative Swiss background, and he said, I have to devote my life to the forms within Christianity and within European culture that reflect these practices as well. That was pretty much his work for the second half of his life, finding that for himself. The marvelous thing about globalization, we may see the same Starbucks everywhere, and that's kind of annoying, but on the other hand, we can all come from the four corners of the earth to a conference like this and meet each other and participate in the interchange of practices, so that those practices that happen to resonate with you and with your personality and your upbringing are much more likely to come in contact with you now than they would have been a couple of generations ago. And that is important – to find some way to respond to the noises outside the room, to find some way to respond to the ticking of the clock, to each other's breath, to each other's thoughts and feelings is tremendously important. Whether we do it by sitting on a cushion meditating, or any other of a thousand ways, that's not important. What's important is that we practice in some way.

QUESTION: I was wondering if John Cage has influenced you?

S.N.: Oh yes! I knew John Cage and he was a wonderful person. He was someone who embodied in his carrying on in daily life the premises of his art. He said something very interesting to me. It's something I understand better now that I'm older. He lived in a very noisy neighborhood in the teens of New York City where there's a lot of traffic and siren noises going on all the time. He said, "when I was younger I used to be very interested in all those noises and the traffic and the ambulances and the people shouting on the street, and that all seemed part of the music of the overall city environment to me ... but now that I'm older, I'm more interested in subtler sounds, like the sound of the refrigerator going on and off in the middle of the night." When I heard him say this, I was younger and I was rather less inclined to regard traffic noise as interesting or as musical. Though I do remember that on the very same trip to New York that I heard him say this, I went to Staten Island out in the New York harbor. It a quiet residential neighborhood there, near the top of the hill, there was no industry nearby, but I kept hearing this huge, absolutely rhythmic sound, cresting about once per seconds. It sounded like an industrial machine or a pile driver (a stately *vrooooooom! Vrooooooom! vrooooooom!*) and it just went on and on and it was this driving, relentless rhythm that was impossible to identify. I suddenly realized that I was hearing the synaptic summation of all the sounds of Manhattan Island, carrying across the water,

somehow intersecting with each other in such a way that it became a polyrhythm that resolved into a rhythm.

Now that I'm older, I'm a parent, and I don't live my days in a nice, quiet, peaceful, meditative environment with art music and interesting, delicate subtle forms. I live in an environment with a lot of screaming and yelling and poking and chasing and running around. As I get older, I learn more and more about the music of daily life, and I thank John Cage for that.

QUESTION: Is there a line between improvisation as pure response and improvisation as creativity?

S.N.: My shortest answer would be no. I think creativity is pure response. Earlier I described the improv music students who would walk in the door full of trepidation, "I'm not creative, I can't think of ideas, I have nothing inside me." We have this notion that it's as though you have a vat full of ideas that you use up somehow, and when you are creative, the ideas come out. It doesn't work that way because this is a circuit. And the vat "in here" is stuff that's been cooking from everything that you've ever seen, everything that you've ever learned, and everything that you've ever not learned. I think there are certain responses that we may make to what comes in that may produce something that seems more focused or more delineated or clear, or capable of being temporarily imbued with thingness, and so we may call that creativity. But I don't think there's a sharp line between the two. There's a quotation from Anthony Hopkins on the board behind me that says, "Creativity comes from awakening and directing our higher nature," and I think that's true, but I'm not sure that I would use the word "higher" – because it's higher, it's lower, all around. Our whole notion of high or low, pure or impure – there simply is no such thing. We become a node on Indra's net where everything that we've ever experienced passes through, like the information about the reverse flaws on those bricks. I think the older we get, we do tend to be able to become more practiced or more comfortable allowing those things to flow out in some way that seems like it has a shape and a pattern, but that's entirely a temporary shape and a temporary pattern.

QUESTION: When you're working with fellow improvisers, do your personal dynamics fall into the rut of doing the same old things that you are all comfortable with?

S.N.: I think everyone in this room has probably experienced that to some extent. I have certainly given performances where people liked it and applauded and so forth, but I didn't feel that I'd accomplished anything because I was recycling material similar to improv that I'd done before. When we work with partners this can happen. The greatest potentiator of creativity is other people. But it's also true that once we have assimilated ourselves into a relationship with partners with whom we do a great job of improvising together, we can get stuck in certain kinds of pattern. Certain things we know simply work well, and then we start repeating them. It then becomes important to find ways to break up the pattern, because it isn't as satisfying when that happens.

It is important to have people be able to switch roles. I was once working with about 150 wind players at a university, and this issue came up in a question. I said something

about how good it is to cross-train with your friends. I was there with my violin, and a friend of mine was there on the faculty, a very eminent tuba player. He said, “Have you ever played one of these?” and held up this enormous tuba. “No.” “Well, I’ve never played one of those.” And so we switched instruments, and made complete fools of ourselves in front of 150 people. I’m someone who couldn’t get a sound out of a wind instrument if my life depended on it. I did get to get some interesting burbling, farty, oceanic sounds out of the tuba, and we had fun. It’s important to be willing to make a fool of yourself in order to break those boundaries. And switching roles, switching specialties, allowing yourself to get thrown around, allowing yourself to get out of control (back to Rea’s key words of risk and vulnerability) is the way to bust out of those blocks.

Other ways to bust out of those blocks: Kristin [Norderval] and I were talking last night about playing on electric instruments vs. playing on acoustic instruments. I love to play electric violin through all kinds of phase shifters and delays and burbling filters and all the kinds of cool electronic gear that’s available to us, but still, there’s a kind of richness and density and complexity of information, which is present in an acoustic violin or viola that so far, is not quite matched by electric instruments. I usually love the acoustic instruments best. But what I find is that with the acoustic instruments, I often can get stuck in those patterns because the acoustic instrument is so fast and so responsive, and so you can just get into patterns that you know how to do. However if you play an electric instrument with digital delays and sounds are thumping along for 10 seconds after you make a gesture and then you make another gesture and sounds thump along for another 10 seconds, then it slows me down. It helps me to get slowed down because the more silence, the better (just as I tell my students – play less, do less, pull back, and you’ll be more responsive to your partners). And so whatever you can interpose that causes you to slow down is good, then you begin to respond to little quirks in what your partners are doing that you didn’t even notice before because you were generating too much information. And that’s the way out of that quandary.

We have time for just one more question:

QUESTION: I just wonder since you’ve talked about the transient nature of your performance, and how important that is, do you ever record performances? And how do you deal with them? Are they ever more than simply a snapshot of something?

S.N.: Oh, yes, I record them, edit them, play with them, put out CDs of them. I have my gang of different partners that I play with at different times in different places. We record every rehearsal we do, and then we listen back. In part, improvisation came to me as just an easier way of producing a good product, because I’m just too stupid to write black dots on white paper and have it take less than six months for a minute of music. But in improv, I can create 10 minutes of music in 10 minutes. The products of the moment become temporary products on vinyl or CD or computer discs or whatever it is. The editing of recordings, tinkering with sound, is another place for improvisatory process. Editing – this is true in writing also – is a process where you’re constantly playing between stone and lava, or form and freedom. I see something that I’ve written and it’s such a piece of crap and I can’t see my way out of it. Two weeks

from now it's got to be something that another person can understand, but now it's just so horrible and I avert my eyes from it and go away. Then the next day I might come back to it and for some reason it starts to flow and I can see that all I have to do is take out 60% of the words and the rest of it is okay. So in editing the process of improvisation continues.

We live in this wonderful time of electronics where we can do so much in the way of documenting and archiving ephemeral work. If our cultural evolution had proceeded somewhat differently, so that the technology of recording had preceded the technology of writing, things would have been very different. We wouldn't necessarily have had the enshrined written work, of course we might have the enshrined records and CDs instead. We have things like the recordings of Keith Jarrett's piano improvisations that are so wonderful. And true, by having been recorded and been played over and over again in our homes, they do acquire a certain thingness just like composed works of music, and that thingness has to be sloughed off on a regular basis. But we do live in this wonderful world where we can produce things in a variety of media and inter-media. Record them, play with them. The electronics become a medium of play just as your body does, just as an acoustic instrument does – improvising, editing, processing our work, bringing it out to people, letting it dissolve to make room for more, it's all a continuum.

Books to look for:

Wunder, Al, *The Wonder of Improvisation*, WP, Ascot Victoria, Australia, 2006.

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