THE ART of IS

IMPROVISING AS A WAY OF LIFE

STEPHEN NACHMANOVITCH

New World Library
Novato, California

Arrested

Any object, intensely regarded, may be a gate of access to the incorruptible eon of the gods.
— James Joyce, *Ulysses*

In my conversations with Herbert Zipper I was struck by his use of the word *interesting*. When he was in the concentration camp at Dachau, surrounded by endless cruelty and desperation, from time to time his eye was caught by something. The momentary flash of sun glinting on a spine of barbed wire. A pencil-ray of light striking a piece of junk paper in the dirt. A birdcall. It would be too romantic, too unrealistic, to call these visionary experiences of hope. Yet something there nourished him; he called it *interesting*. Other people imprisoned in the camps, like the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, reported similar experiences, which they felt made a difference in their ability to stay sane: seeing some ordinary object in the drab hideousness of the camp recontextualized by light and feeling lifted by it. These experiences of momentary beauty were as fleeting as anything in the universe. But they had some effect, like the random kindness of strangers,

like music banged out behind the latrines on improvised instruments, like lines of poetry recited in secret.

In other chapters we have spoken about the importance of the safe space, the sheltered *temenos* in which one is free to work and play, teach and learn, laboratories in which one can experiment without fear of judgment or punishment. But safe spaces do not persist forever. Often they are disrupted by circumstances beyond our control. Then what we need is the capacity to be interested in whatever is around us, even if the context is terrible. The ability to become interested in sensory minutiae even in painful places, to engage the imagination, seems to be a hallmark of those who persist in their creativity.

• • •

That low-key, seemingly bland word, *interesting*, popped up again. When Zipper, in the 1990s, spoke in the present tense of his experience as an elderly man soon to die of lung cancer, my ears pricked up when he said one day how interesting it was to notice the sensations of his cancer. Twenty years earlier, his beloved wife, Trudl, a dancer who had shared his wartime experiences in the Philippines, and everything since, had died of lung cancer. They had both been smokers. He said he found the particular forms and feelings of his suffering *interesting* because they enabled him to understand his wife's experiences more fully. Experiencing a horrible illness, he viewed it as a blessing through which he could become a bit more enlightened.

Zipper used yet another mild-sounding word: *objective*. He said he wanted to be objective about the experience of dying, as he was about his wife's death and the many other

deaths he had witnessed. *Objective* did not, to him, mean being cold or set apart; it meant seeing and feeling experience clearly. Objectivity in this sense is like the evenly hovering attention of mindfulness: empathic, connected, compassionate but able to step back from our own emotional reactions and respond with clarity. The philosopher Gurdjieff spoke of cultivating objective experience — objective art, objective consciousness. So did Carl Jung. There was, for Jung, the objective unconscious, revealed in some dreams, myths, artworks. In our daydreams and conscious fantasies, we tend to recycle our usual desires and aversions, the same images, again and again. But sometimes — a gift from the unconscious — the pattern shifts.

Interesting and *objective* sound detached yet enable a profound involvement — detached in that Herbert was able to observe and be focused on the phenomena of his dying, involved in that he was totally present, emotionally and physically, with his experience. This was the same man who had started clandestine orchestras at Dachau, faced down Japanese interrogators in the Philippines, and, in the 1950s, confronted McCarthyite bullies trying to close down academic programs in the United States. His entire life was one of action and involvement, yet the key to his style of action was equanimity.

• • •

John Cage, a musician about as dissimilar from Herbert Zipper as one could get, also liked to use the word *interesting.* Cage spoke of musical sounds, or of outside noise leaking into a musical setting, as interesting. He explored sounds that arise when we leave ourselves open to surprise, when we reverse our biases of figure and ground, when, for instance,

we put erasers, paper clips, screws, and felt weather stripping inside a grand piano and play. Cage was one of many modern musicians who found ways to bridge the divide between noise and music. He was cooking, with his idiosyncratic brew of Zen ideas, recipes for finding new art forms by standing back and appreciating the surprises. In *4'33"*, Cage's Silent Piece from 1952, the performer sits there and "does" nothing — we have no choice but to take an interest in the breathing of our neighbors, in the bird peeping outside then fluttering away, in the supposedly trivial information all around us, discovering details of the environment and its impact on us that we might not otherwise have suspected. As an older man Cage was interested in continuous and subtle sounds that permeate the environment, sounds of which we are often unaware because we regard them as boring. He said that if you are bored by something, and you allow yourself to continue being bored by it for long enough, then you will eventually find yourself interested. This can be a method for shedding some of our predispositions, finding an entryway into beauty and realization through mundane circumstances.

Cage tended to use that word *interesting* in a precise way — trying to get us away from the hierarchy of values that we as a culture have set up for ourselves in terms of good music, great music, popular music, classical music, philosophy, art, whatever it might be. It is vital to find ways to hear and talk about sound, to make interesting sound, without getting caught in the dead-end question of whether or not we are as good as Beethoven. *Interesting* is neutral, rather cool to the touch, compared with the superlatives we often attach to art, yet in another sense it is open to unsuspected possibilities. "A very interesting sound might occur, but the

ego wouldn't even hear it because it didn't fit its notion of likes and dislikes, ideas and feelings."

If we allow ourselves to be attracted by small sounds, they will build into bigger structures. Find one action that is appealing and let that action develop. Let perception expand from that point. Do we want to get caught in the question of whether our music is as good as Bach or Coltrane? Words as good as Shakespeare or Dickinson? Do we see a gnarly old tree and disregard it on the basis of comparison to larger, younger, more supple trees we've seen in the past? Better to enjoy an interesting experience than stop it short with our judgments and expectations.

Music and art are often encumbered by these highly laden words that we like to bandy about. *Beautiful*, *great*, *innovative*, *original*, *profound*, *enlightening*. If we allow ourselves to be intimidated by the prodigious technique of the artists we most admire, we get tied up into knots, a kind of self-strangulation. Then we can't even appreciate those past masters any more, except as markers of status. To locate our own genuine interest makes it possible to proceed, to learn, evolve, and keep on moving.

Interesting is a relational word. It doesn't refer to abstract formulations like *quality* or judgments about a work of art as an independent thing to be evaluated. It refers to the relationship between you or me and a piece of music, a sight on the street, an experience. Likewise, *irritation*, *fright*, *boredom* are not inherent in the experience but a sign of our relationship to the experience. We have the dynamic power to alter our relationship to what we are experiencing at any given moment.

Can we now see *interesting* as a state to cultivate in the more ordinary world of making things, not just in the world

of great suffering as Zipper did? Getting out of the concentration camp alive was a matter of luck; getting out alive and sane was something more. Rather than distance ourselves from masters, past or present, by saying, "That's so brilliant; I could never measure up," it is more fruitful to focus on the low-wattage experience of *interesting*. Examine a sensation, a pattern that brings some momentary enjoyment. These simple fascinations open the door to many possibilities. We don't need to make something flawless or even brilliant, just interesting — arousing curiosity, worthy of exploration.

• • •

The midwife Ina May Gaskin said in *Spiritual Midwifery* that a woman in labor can regard her pain as unbearable suffering or she can regard it as interesting. "This is not pain, this is an interesting sensation that requires all of my attention." Pain is sense experience. Suffering is one way we frame experience. We often manufacture extra suffering on top of the pain. We let it make us suffer twice.

To load extra layers of expectation onto things, to find the vicissitudes of life as occasions for suffering, for self-congratulation, for worry or pride, to see one's story as important, is normal — but it doesn't help us. To see them as merely interesting is, paradoxically, to tap into the extraordinary space between attachment and detachment.

• • •

The shadow of the pencil drifts across the desk. The constellation Orion or the lights of the town lie mirrored in a puddle. The wrinkled photo invites our eyes to sink deeper. Spatters of mud multiply the moonlight: mere photons interacting with mind. Leaves blow in tall, whirling spirals in the sunlight.

Eyes widen to allow in more light. Extraordinary experiences of everyday sights liberate our imaginations to discover the unexpected within ourselves. Focused on details, we vibrate in resonance between ordinary and extraordinary: loving the glint of sunlight, feeling a pain, hearing a far-off music, giving birth to a baby, remembering a prison camp, finding the next stage in the mystery of creation.

new new maze
the organ of sense
reorganized rules
veiny folded mind prowling the big ring of fluid around the heart.

— Jack Nachmanovitch

Wonder leads us on, reminds us that there is more and yet more to investigate. We rekindle our desire to persist in learning. We do not shut the door on these investigations by labeling experiences as pleasure or pain, as for us or against us. Opportunities to shift perspective pop out in front of our eyes from time to time, so easy to miss because they seem small, but they can change everything if we have the dexterity to pick them up. Atoms of possibility. These are subjective flashes of mental experience, but as *information* they can have a real effect on our lives.

The improviser's adventure is learning how to get arrested. The world stops for the tiny pulsation of contact. Or rather *we* stop the world, with our arrested attention, our capacity to be interrupted and to find learning in the interruption. People have designed elaborate schemes for how to get arrested. Meditations, rituals, wild dances, a meticulously shot photograph that stops a hummingbird's wings. The first

time you hear Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* live. To allow ourselves to be arrested is of course the root of the scientific method: eyes open to possibility, erasing as much presupposition as possible. One interesting perception leads to the next, through the pathways of an open mind. Then we can test the vision, modulate and refine it. We must be willing to be wrong, to be mistaken, open to revision.

• • •

Artistically, we get unstuck by cultivating small sensations. To a paralyzed stroke patient, a small gesture, a finger twitching in tandem with a conscious desire where before there was no movement, is a big deal. I say *big deal* both in the colloquial sense of a matter of importance and in the sense of a bargain. Paralysis in both the creative and social spheres carries with it some conceptual burden, from the factors that say, "We can't do anything, the problems are too big." The enormous stakes that we think of in connection with artistic greatness, or with social change and liberation, can be paralyzing, yet there might be nothing more paralyzing than total freedom. Prisoners in a concentration camp might see a piece of blank paper in the sunny dirt as their one shred of hope, the paralysis victim might view renewed motion in their little finger as a great victory, yet too often those of us who are healthy and free are bored, angry, frozen. Whatever we can accomplish, whatever we can salvage, we owe it to ourselves and to our friends to do it. When everything else has been taken away, we take whatever we have and use it. We must try to attain this mind-set while we still have everything. We shouldn't wait until we are trapped — in prison, in our own bodies — to treat the details of life with value and wonder. We are not as powerless as we'd like to believe. We can learn to value every

moment of our free and healthy lives with the same interest and importance with which the prisoner regards sunlight on barbed wire.

• • •

Virginia Woolf wrote of Jane Austen and Shakespeare as two artists who arrested her attention because their work came out pure and unalloyed. Whatever their life history, whatever suffering and resentment they had might have informed their work but was fully absorbed. Austen never had the opportunity to marry for love, as her heroines did; she had to hide the manuscript of *Pride and Prejudice* behind a shelf or cover it with a sheet of blotting paper when the door opened so visitors wouldn't catch her in the taboo act of a woman writing a novel. But the humor, the brightness, the clarity and directness of her portrayals of human nature were never marred by bitterness. Her wit was sharpened by disappointment, but there was no nasty edge, no ax to grind. That is the difference between being consumed by your bitter experiences and being interested in them.

• • •

Sixto Rodriguez, a Mexican American singer-songwriter, recorded two albums in 1970–1971. While the few who heard his music found it extraordinary, his albums didn't sell; his musical career fizzled and he returned to Detroit and spent the next quarter century doing demolition, excavation, and other hard labor. Unbeknownst to him, bootleg cassette tapes had made their way to South Africa and Australia, were copied and republished. He became one of the most famous musicians in South Africa. His songs became anthems of the underground,

especially for anti-Apartheid whites. Rumored to have been long dead, in South Africa he was considered a bigger star than Elvis or the Rolling Stones. In 1998 South African fans discovered that he was actually alive and brought him to tour. Overnight he went from doing hard labor in Detroit to stepping onstage in Cape Town and playing stadium concerts for thousands of people. Coming home from the tour, he returned to his day job in downtown Detroit. What is astonishing is not just his story but the equanimity with which he stepped from obscurity to celebrity and back to obscurity. Now he has become a celebrity again, but it seems to be all the same to him. When he stepped out onto the stage of his first mass concert in Cape Town, he did not seem a man who needed to adjust to the spotlights; he simply was *there*, as naturally as though it had happened all his life. When he returned home to Detroit, it was as though none of his stardom had ever happened.

In the United States, Rodriguez finally became well-known at age seventy through the film *Searching for Sugar Man*. He was asked by a reporter how it felt to suddenly discover that he was famous. He said it felt good that "they picked up on my stuff." The reporter exploded: "Picked up on your stuff!" — incredulous that a person could be so calm and low-key in the face of going from a nobody to a pop star. There has got to be more to it than that! Rodriguez took to his changes of circumstance with utter equanimity. In our society, whatever our profession, we are conditioned to the difference between being a somebody or being a nobody. Shakespeare's Richard II, the king of England, was arrested and thrown in a dungeon. He agonizes over his imprisonment and humiliating loss of status:

But what e'er I be,
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd
With being nothing.

Here Richard advocates for the acceptance of an impermanent world, without really being able to do so himself. Zipper in Dachau was not worried by his anonymity — he was concerned with what must be done in the moment, for himself and for others. For Rodriquez what mattered was not fame, not money. The simple fact that people "picked up on his stuff" was enough — and even then, he didn't quit his day job. Rodriguez regarded his meteoric rise with the same objectivity with which Zipper endeavored to experience his cancer.

• • •

My favorite Tibetan painting is from late-eighteenth-century Buryatia, in Central Asia. It depicts the Buddha the night before his awakening, attacked by the forces of greed, hate, and delusion. Armies swarm him from all directions, swords and lances drawn. He sits there and smiles back at them. Fearless. Ah, what interesting weapons! As spears and arrows fly toward him, they turn into flowers. Yes, this is a fairy tale, and in the real world weapons don't turn into flowers. The Nazis didn't close Dachau for a song. But what of Nelson Mandela in the horrific prison of Robben Island? There is such a thing as prodigious kindness, which arises from taking an interest in other human beings. In 1990 everyone thought Mandela would get out of prison and the civil war would start, or he would die in prison and the war would start — but instead he sat there making friends with his jailers. And the world turned.

CREATIVITY

$16.95 U.S.

A MASTERFUL BOOK ABOUT
Breathing Life into Art and Art into Life

"*The Art of Is* is a philosophical meditation on living, living fully, living in the present. To the author, an improvisation is a co-creation that arises out of listening and mutual attentiveness, out of a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. It is a product of the nervous system, bigger than the brain and bigger than the body; it is a once-in-a-lifetime encounter, unprecedented and unrepeatable. Drawing from the wisdom of the ages, *The Art of Is* not only gives the reader an inside view of the states of mind that give rise to improvisation, it is also a celebration of the power of the human spirit, which — when exercised with love, immense patience, and discipline — is an antidote to hate."

— **YO-YO MA,** CELLIST

"So lucid, grand, kind, easygoing, and deeply helpful, I could not stop reading it, even in time I did not 'have'! It is full of surprises, gems, and open-ended inspirations."

— **ROBERT THURMAN,** COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, CO-FOUNDER OF TIBET HOUSE

"Like musicians who improvise together, human beings can break barriers: teaching, playing, creating, and being present to one another. In clear prose, Nachmanovitch effortlessly shows how people discover — in themselves — the sheer power to relate and endlessly adapt."

— **JERRY BROWN,** FORMER GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA

"A beautiful book, full of power, full of life, written from the deep experience of an artist and a wise person."

— **JOAN HALIFAX,** ABBOT, UPAYA ZEN CENTER

An improvisational violinist and the author of the classic work *Free Play*, **STEPHEN NACHMANOVITCH, PHD,** performs and teaches internationally at the intersections of multimedia, performing arts, ecology, and philosophy. www.freeplay.com

Cover design by *the*BookDesigners
Printed on 100% postconsumer-waste recycled paper

New World Library
www.newworldlibrary.com

ISBN 978-1-60868-615-5