

Improvisation as a Healing Art: An Unfamiliar Resource

About four years ago, while looking to find a new approach to facilitating personal development workshops, I discovered the healing potential of improvisation. More particularly, I discovered the work of Augusto Boal, a Brazilian activist who promoted a special kind of improvisational street theatre called Forum Theatre that enables audience members to participate directly and spontaneously in a problematic scene.

Soon after discovering Boal, I studied the works of other improvisation teachers, including, among many others, Spolin, Johnstone, Johnston, Zaporin, Book, Weiner, Goldberg, Close, Alexander, Reubenfeld, and Olsen, the latter three associated with the improvisation of physical movement. It was not long before I saw connections between improvisation and other interactive modalities, including, but not limited to, storytelling, narrative therapy, psychodrama, Playback Theatre, and drama therapy. I saw links also between improvisation and chaos and complexity theories, the power of play, Jungian psychology and other psychologies of the self viewed as a composite of many, often emergent dimensions.

Despite correlations with all these other personal growth modalities, improvisation has only peripherally been viewed as a healing art, as a technique of personal transformation. It has mostly been seen as a venue for wonderful comedy and witty display, as evidenced in *Whose Line is It Anyway?* the Comedy Central TV show, and some of the sketches in *Saturday Night Live*. It is true that there have been some applications of improv not focused primarily on the production of humor. For instance, some forms of improv have been regularly used by acting teachers, like Stanislavsky, Strasberg, Meisner and Book, to enable actors to learn more about their stage characters. Various public and private schools have often helped children assimilate more easily educational content of various kinds through improvised scenes. Michael Rohd's organization, Hope is Vital, has focused on helping youth become more socially conscious through a "dialogic" theatre based on Augusto's Boal's work. Moreover, improvisation as practiced by the Annoyance Theatre, The Free Associates, and Oui be Negroes in the late 80s and 90s showed a strong socio-political focus. And certain professional practitioners have expressed their feeling of being transported into a realm beyond the ordinary and the merely comedic when doing improv. Nevertheless, the focus has remained on using improvisation to create virtuoso comedy.

While improv has its roots in the *commedia dell'arte* of the sixteenth century, significant aspects of what we know of improv today began with Viola Spolin (spolin.com) and the intuition-tapping games she created as a settlement worker in the 40s to enhance poor children's self expression. In the mid-fifties, her son, Paul Sills, adapted these games to performance art and co-founded the Compass Players and later the renowned Second City in 1959. While Second

City originally used improv to create fully-scripted comedy revues, Charna Halpern, with help later from Del Close, developed ImprovOlympic in the early eighties and focused on improv for its own sake. Many other improv companies developed from these roots, including Comedysportz, which, like Second City (secondcity.com) and ImprovOlympic (improvolympic.com) continues to this day. In the Washington Metropolitan area, improv is taught in various venues, such as the Studio Theatre (studiotheatre.org), Comedysportz (comedysportz.com), Washington Improv Theatre (dcwit.com), and Round House Theatre (round-house.org), as well as various universities.

To repeat, while practicing improvisation in these and other venues inevitably supports personal growth, the emphasis is usually not primarily on that outcome. However, in my own improvisation work with myself and with others, I see that personal growth can easily become a prime, if not *the* prime focus of the art.

Improvisation, simply stated, is spontaneous making do with what is available. Given that interpretation, improvisation is something each of us does very often every day, though mostly unconsciously. No matter how much some of us want to pre-plan most of our lives, we are all constantly called upon to give impromptu responses to our environments. To tap the healing potential of improvisation, however, we must more deliberately engage this natural, human capacity. One can do so by participating in improvisational games. These involve engaging in unusual movements and/or in spontaneous verbal exchanges with one or more persons in a short or long dramatic scene whose basic elements are set, but whose flow and direction are not pre-determined. These games range from improvising a scene at a bus-stop between two people, one of whom chats far too much; to “sculpting” bodies to reflect different versions of the same feeling; to one participant’s trying out being in turn several different characters dealing with a nervous department store clerk; to a participant’s accepting and improvising a monologue from audience cues about a character they want him or her to play; to the whole group’s playing a competitive game with various *imaginary* balls, making all the gestures and sounds that accompany such play.

Participation in the NOW:

These kinds of games offer several basic, healing benefits. One of these healing benefits is the individual’s therapeutic participation in the NOW. As is the case in the work of Edward Tolle, many healing traditions emphasize attention to the present moment as a way to become free of constrictions and negative patterns as the individual becomes grounded and settled in his essential Self and thus peaceful and open to whatever emerges in the moment. But most of these traditions depend on silence and stillness (meditation) as the ultimate way to achieve these results. These traditions also emphasize individual work, even if the person is in a room full of people. In contrast, improvisation is always

impromptu verbal and/or physical action, which nevertheless enables the participant to achieve the benefits of experiencing the NOW. Moreover, the improviser is almost always entering the NOW by working spontaneously with one or more other improvisers or with the audience.

In doing an improv exercise skillfully, the individual cannot depend on remembering the past or anticipating the future because he or she cannot know what will emerge in the next moment, since the improvisation is virtually unscripted. Sometimes, when a person new to improv becomes anxious, he or she might at first rely on stereotypical, clichéd responses to the prompts (called “offers”) from the audience or fellow improvisers; but if the person practices pushing through the encrustation of habitual patterns, he or she will, in Ruth Zaporin’s words, engage in the “improvisation of presence.” He will act and react freshly in every moment. One of the two essential rules of improvisational work is “Accept all offers.” In accepting every offer, the improviser ultimately is freed from his or her usual response patterns, physical and/or verbal. As a result, she will have trouble deflecting from what is right before her and thus, with practice, will become more open to what the NOW presents to her. As Seth, the entity channeled by Jane Roberts, repeatedly said, “The point of power is in the now,” in the immediate present, the “in-between” place where all old patterns, trances, rigid mental maps, and one-sided perspectives can be changed.

The Restoration of Emotional Truth and the Power to Choose

With the power of the NOW comes the healing benefit of the restoration of the power to choose. In one of the many paradoxes associated with improvisation, the rule to accept all offers actually frees the improviser from rigid, locked-in conceptions of what is appropriate in interactions. If the improviser is prohibited from blocking offers, he or she opens to considering possible options that would otherwise be sidelined or not even imagined. With a larger array of options now available, the individual can truly choose what to say or do in response, instead of reacting stereotypically or with an unconscious or well-worn pattern. Moreover, the speed at which the improviser is to react tends to inhibit the development of other defenses that block the emergence of emotional truth. The improviser does not usually have time to think of a face-saving, sugar-coating to his true emotional response.

In addition, when engaging in improvisational movement, the improviser often discovers that the body has its own truth which is often stifled by the mind’s preconceptions and old tapes about what is “proper.” The improvising body will often spontaneously tell the truth about what it has been holding, often for years, without appropriate expression. And when the body begins to express itself in new, additional ways, the improviser is freed to make many more choices about how she wants to move in the world.

Optimism and Trust

Of course, an improviser's entering the unknown and thereby giving up the familiarity and thus safety of even those constricting patterns may create an initial fear; nevertheless, the ensuing sense of new possibilities often overcomes this beginning trepidation. Moreover, with more and more practice in opening to the NOW, the improviser develops a kind of optimism that what is needed in the moment will present itself from his or her depths. This optimism is in line with the paradoxical belief fostered by David Bohm and also Chaos Theory: in the midst of the most profound uncertainty lies an inherent order that was not anticipated through the usual paradigms, but which will unfold into actuality if attended to with openness and trust. This developed optimism is a healing balm to those whose narrowed vision and experience have taught them that everything will always be the same, dull gray.

Such optimism is based not only on the trust that what is needed will come from within, but also on the trust that one's improvising partner will also provide what is needed to further the action. Herein lies the application of the second of the two basic improvisation rules: "Make your partner look good!" This rule does *not* mean that the partners should rescue each other and thus avoid challenging each other to use imagination to the fullest capacity. Instead, the rule invokes the original meaning of competition, which is "to seek or petition together." What this means is that the improvisers seek together their greatest imaginative strengths, challenging each other so that each does his or her best.

The Development of a Team Consciousness Without Loss of Self

Thus, no one in an improvisational dyad or group seeks her power and achievement by herself. Nor *can* she. If the improviser tries to "score points" at the expense of her partners, the improvisation will fail, falter, or at least interrupt the flow of the improvisational movement. Thus, puns designed to show individual cleverness, side-jokes and clichéd expressions that unnecessarily divert the flow, irrelevancies that show inattention to the partner's offer, and other kinds of blocking destroy the authenticity of the interaction and are quickly noticed by the audience unappreciative of the individual's grandstanding. In contrast, improvisers acceding to the two basic rules experience a communion with each other that heals the pain of isolation and disengagement.

But such communion does not obliterate the individual by fusing him with his partners. In one of the more famous improvisation games (that has many variations), a group of improvisers (from 2 to, in principle, 200) tell a grammatically accurate and meaningful story with each person saying in turn only one word until the story comes back to him and he says a new word in response to the word of the person speaking before him. While this is truly a team game because the story requires the equal participation of each member of the group, and while no one person can anticipate what word he will say until he hears the word of the person before him, nevertheless, despite these

constrictions, any one individual can really change the course of the story, at least to some degree, with his or her contribution. This sense that one's unique contribution is very integral to the unfolding of the story, one that is also ineluctably the story of the group as a whole, is a wonderful, healing integration of self and others often not found in other contexts.

Creativity

The game of One-Word-At-A-Time, like other improvisational games, also promotes the healing quality of creativity. When improvisers, even those very new to this art, develop trust in the process, the degree of their creativity is quickly enhanced. They find that they are *naturally* creative if they simply trust without judgment in what can emerge. The psyche in *every* person is seen to be fundamentally imaginative, full of possibilities for new thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Some improvisers discover this creativity most quickly in verbal exchange, while others find it in movement, in letting their bodies twist and turn and flow in strange, but wonderfully novel ways. Moreover, creativity is thereby seen not as something rare and necessarily earth-shattering (though it can be such), but rather something that can quietly occur at virtually every juncture where the person opens to the multitude of healing possibilities inherent in the moment.

The creativity of improvisation is also healing in that it explodes the frustrating notion that one must be totally free to truly improvise—a rather impossible condition to achieve! In fact, improvisation—another one of its fundamental paradoxes—always works within limits or constraints. Every improvisation game begins with parameters: a time, setting, characters, situation or past story to change, not to mention the constraints inherent in the offers of one's improvising partner. Much as a boat builder exercises and stretches his creativity by multi-tasking every nook and cranny of the boat within its set limits of size and shape, so the improviser learns that constraints are only the challenges necessary to jump start the imagination and keep the improvisation going. How healing it is to envision every problematic situation as a goad to the power of one's imagination!!

Complexity of Response and the Probability of a New Story

In dealing with the challenges of a problematic situation and seeing new possibilities of response, the improviser's internal self also inadvertently becomes more complex. Such complexity is necessary to deal with the vast, diverse and complex array of stimuli from the modern environment. The more complex a response one can have to one's internal and external world, the more centered and grounded one becomes in one's resources. With improvisation exercises going just about anywhere they want and often at lightning speed, the improviser has to become very flexible and adaptable in moving from one context to another and spontaneously knowing what is needed in each venue. Improvisation games

also foster such complexity of response because the spontaneous reactions emerge without real world consequences. Trying out more varied and thus more complex responses is easier when internal and external judgment is suspended.

In extended improvisations, like the dilemma scenarios I regularly conduct in my improvisation work with others, such complexity of response and suspended judgment also allow the re-visioning of an old story that may have stultified the improvising storyteller. In seeing the situation from improvised new perspectives with the help of other improvisers, the storyteller can tell, enact and incorporate into his identity a new, liberating story. Then, as master storyteller Paul Costello says, the healing lies in the fact that “My story becomes your story becomes our story.”

The Seriousness of Silliness

When judgment is suspended in an improvisation game, silliness and consequent laughter often ensue. Improvisation offers a wonderful opportunity to play and cavort, frequently with lots of input from the inner child—keep in mind Spolin’s original motive for creating improv games. The silliness frees the inner child to express its spontaneous, joyful essence and thus also to release its creativity and wisdom; for play is the original out-of-the-box experience.

While an individual may be afraid that his or her inner child will simply take over if allowed to reveal itself, the final outcome is almost always a resurgence of energy and imagination and connection with others. When individuals allow themselves to be silly with each other, inhibitions and shyness diminish or even fade away. In creating together, for instance, mechanical or organic objects with their body movements and sounds, participants bond, not first through pain and tragedy, as is the case in many personal growth gatherings, but rather through shared goofiness and sometimes botched, but hilarious responses to each other.

All in all, the healing aspects of the art of improvisation are diverse, profound, fun and inspirational. But there are few if any venues in which improvisation is geared primarily toward personal growth. As a result, I developed RoundTable Theatre, which is an improvisation in itself as it continues to develop new iterations. Its main thrust is to promote personal growth through participants playing improvisation games and processing their results and then engaging in extended personal dilemma scenarios by improvising various, dramatized solutions. The cohesion that develops during the playful games among the improvisers and between them and the audience is conducive to their doing a more powerful, insightful job with more obviously serious dilemma scenarios. Such improvisational work is effective also as a spiritual practice and in the business setting.