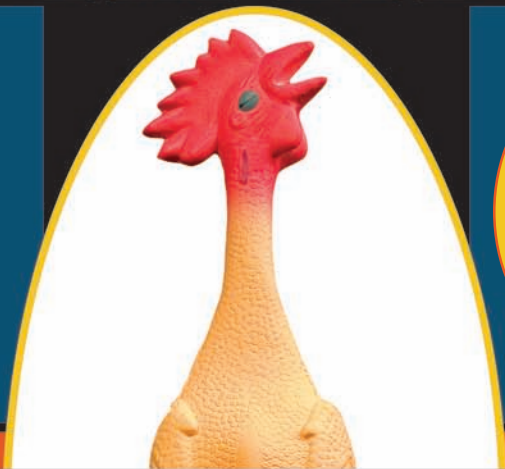


IMPROVISATION

FOR THE SPIRIT



“If Robin Williams and Dear Abby had a baby and hired Tony Robbins to raise it, you might get someone as bright, funny, insightful, and inspiring as Katie Goodman.”

—Arianna Huffington,
Editor in Chief,
The Huffington Post

LIVE A MORE CREATIVE, SPONTANEOUS, AND COURAGEOUS LIFE USING THE TOOLS OF IMPROV COMEDY



KATIE GOODMAN

PRAISE FOR **IMPROVISATION FOR THE SPIRIT**

“If Robin Williams and Dear Abby had a baby and hired Tony Robbins to raise it, you might get someone as bright, funny, insightful, and inspiring as Katie Goodman. But why bother, she’s already here—dispensing laugh-inducing and life-changing lessons. Punchlines have never been so practical.

Life is one big ad-lib and *Improvisation for the Spirit* shows you how to bring the house down.”

—**Arianna Huffington, Editor-in-Chief, *The Huffington Post***

“I’ve always wished I had instructions for applying the principles of improvisational comedy to living a fulfilling life. Now Katie Goodman has made my wish come true with this practical, fascinating, and funny guidebook. I’ve already begun applying hints from *Improvisation for the Spirit*, and I’m hoping that from now on, when people point and laugh at me, it will be for more appropriate reasons. A delightful read, filled with wonderful strategies.”

—**Martha Beck, Life Coach Columnist for *O, The Oprah Magazine* and author of *Steering by Starlight***

“*Improvisation for the Spirit* is an engaging, joyful invitation to celebrate the present moment. Katie Goodman’s inspiring book offers practical but powerful step-by-step transformational exercises from her creative improv workshops, to use listening, collaboration, and creative lessons for self improvement and discovery. Goodman’s enthusiasm for life and improv is contagious and delightful, as she encourages playful participation in life right now!”

—**Greg Mortenson, author of # 1 *New York Times* bestseller *Three Cups of Tea***

“Katie Goodman is spontaneous, creative, and fearless. She has to be: she’s an improv comedienne. Now in her new book, she tells how you too can be all these things. Her writing flows and then jumps with anecdotes and prescriptions for finding courage. Fun to read, hard to put down. The book is smart and wise. Wise-cracky and hilarious.”

—**Lesley Stahl, *60 Minutes***

“You don’t have to be a professional comic to fall in love with this book. Katie Goodman shows how the lessons of improv comedy can help anyone become more fearless and creative. If you feel that something is holding you back, that there is more to you than meets the eye, that the life you are meant to live is out there somewhere if only you could find it, then this book should go straight to the top of your reading list. When it comes to journeys of self-discovery, Goodman is the perfect companion—sharp, energetic, and demanding, but also gentle, generous, and wise. It helps that she’s laugh-out-loud funny, too. By the end of the book, I felt ready to take on the world—with a smile on my face.”

—**Carl Honoré, author of *In Praise of Slowness* and *Under Pressure***

“Bravo to Katie! She brings an amazing positivity to improv comedy. The bottom line: Katie is funny. She teaches you to live your life like an improv scene—no fear and fully committed.”

—**Wayne Brady, improv comedian, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and *Don’t Forget the Lyrics***

“Reading Katie is like giving your brain, and your spirit, a good floss. She has a great knack for zeroing in on bad habits, then giving you the tools to challenge them. Read *Improvisation for the Spirit* and get ready to shake things up!”

—**Colin Campbell, Academy Award nominated filmmaker**

“Aha! So *that’s* what TV news should be. Katie Goodman’s delicious roadmap to unleashing our inner Letterman will help you soar through the next interview, ace the next assignment, cement the next relationship. And you’ll be laughing all the way. I am gleefully transformed.”

—**Lynn Sherr, *ABC News***

“Katie Goodman’s book will put the smile of the Buddha upon your face. Her humor is a profound vehicle for teaching deep truths about human nature so necessary for loosening up the ego’s grip on our all-caught-upness and allowing us to move into the natural space of our spontaneity and authenticity.”

—**Michael Bernard Beckwith, founder of Agape International Spiritual Center**

“Many books promise to unleash your creativity. Katie Goodman’s not only unleashes it, but then teaches it to walk on its hind legs, catch a Frisbee, and maybe even fall in love with a cat. Try it. You’ll love it. It works.”

—**Gail Lerner, Emmy-nominated comedy writer (*Will and Grace*)**

“Katie Goodman strikes gold with *Improvisation for the Spirit*, a must-read for anyone looking to transform their life for the better. It’s filled with fun and insightful advice and exercises that help unleash the creative, spontaneous spirit within us all.”

—**Caroline Hirsch, *Caroline’s on Broadway* comedy club**

“Katie Goodman has written a book using the wisdom of Buddhist principles but in a flat out funny and practical way for everyone. All too often, we in the spiritual field forget to have a sense of humor and Katie shows us how we can loosen the ego’s grip on our lives and quiet our inner voices while using real life tools that can anyone can master. This is zen for everyday people.”

—**Cheri Huber, American Zen teacher, author of *There Is Nothing Wrong with You***

“In this book Katie Goodman proves that indeed ‘Life IS Improv’...and offers some valuable tools to help you keep dancing through your life’s journey.”

—**Jonathan Foust, Founder of the Mindfulness Training Institute of Washington**

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BROAD COMEDY

(co-written with Soren Kiesel)

“Fierce, female, funny, and fabulous!”

—**Eve Ensler, creator of *The Vagina Monologues***

“Sharp writing, playful performances and impeccable comic timing! The fun is infectious!”

—***The Boston Globe***

“Hilarious!”

—***Boston Herald***

IMPROVISATION FOR THE SPIRIT

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**LIVE A MORE CREATIVE, SPONTANEOUS, AND
COURAGEOUS LIFE USING THE TOOLS OF IMPROV COMEDY**

KATIE GOODMAN



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For Soren & Logan



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INTRODUCTION

I am standing on the stage, facing a full house, lights blinding my view of the huge audience, and I am desperately trying to come up with a rhyme for “vegetarian.”

I am performing with Spontaneous Combustibles, a professional improv comedy troupe I’ve been with for twelve years. It’s our typical routine: we ask the audience for a location where the scene could take place. Someone shouts out “The Oval Office!” We have no script, no time to plan, no safety net, and we don’t know what the other actors are thinking. We have two seconds to launch in and perform a never-rehearsed four-minute scene. It needs to have a beginning, which establishes the location and the characters, a middle that creates a conflict, and an end that resolves the conflict. We need to be captivating, funny, and creative throughout. And my team on that stage needs to work together if we want it to succeed.

Time to pull out the Tums?

This may sound like an exciting challenge to some of you, and to others like a recurring nightmare. This is my job.

Packed with successful punch lines, scattered brilliance, a few blank stares, and utter unpredictability, it’s been a complete whirlwind. Most important, though, it’s been a steady stream of laughter and fun.

But it's also been a laboratory for the rest of my life. What I have learned is that what we do and practice in improv can be used in life and relationships and work. The skills required for improvisation are the skills needed for any collaborative or creative process: stay present, be flexible, let go of the goal, gag your inner critic, listen to others with an open mind, don't struggle, give and take, trust yourself and the process, and more. I have struggled on stage with all the same issues everyone has in regular life—competing with others, wanting my own way, wanting to just once not have to make a group decision, being distracted and unfocused, not trusting that I'll have a good idea, and having a great idea that doesn't get used. The tools we use to handle these issues in improv are skills we can transfer to all kinds of areas of work and life.

First of all, improv forces you to stay present. If your mind starts to wander, the scene will fall apart, so you get focused pretty quickly.

Improv also asks you to be spontaneous, to open up, to allow mistakes to happen, to be flexible, and to forge ahead. If you are standing on a stage with an audience watching, you can't just quit or say, "Wait a second while I think this through." You must concentrate and carry on.

You must be aware of others and your surroundings. If you played nicely in the sandbox in kindergarten, chances are you'll do well at improv. Comedy improv games are rarely played alone—you've got to listen to your teammates and share ideas to make the scene work.

Improv teaches you to take risks. It teaches you to be courageous, to trust yourself, and to trust the process. From these skills, you'll learn how to surrender. You must surrender two things: First, you have to let go of the past ("Oh, what a dumb thing I just said!") and move ahead. If you stay stuck in your Past Moment of Lameness, then you will have nothing to add to the present, and things will just spiral downward. And second, you must surrender attachments, such as ideas you have for the way a scene should go. For example, if I enter a scene all prepared to be the character of a tax collector, and someone says, "Hey, Doc, we got a man in trouble here!"—well, then I have to let go of my idea and go with the flow of what's being presented to me.

Improv helps you trust that all the ideas you need are already inside your head, and you just have to relax enough to let them out. Improv generates self-confidence.

You can't be a perfectionist in an improv scene—mostly because it's a one-time event, and you don't get to do it over or fix it. It disappears into the ether as soon as it's been created. It's like a Buddhist sandpainting mandala that way.

Improv is a great place to work on that inner critic we all have, to learn to transform those critical voices in your head into something useful. You can also use improv to learn to tap into that creative source that maybe you didn't even know you had. Because improv games move so quickly, you don't have time to censor yourself, so whatever comes out, comes out—and often it's brilliant and unexpected.

And you want it to feel easy. Improv works best when we are in the flow and have a feeling of effortlessness. Learning not to struggle is vital to a rich and productive creative life.

Finding the flow becomes easier when you know what you want. In improv games, you must know what your character wants in order to help create a story that moves forward in an interesting way. This is a great metaphor for our paths in the real world. We need to give ourselves time and room to explore and understand what we want. Getting in touch with our desires is critical for a well-lived life.

The skills an actor uses in improv to be authentic and to connect with the audience are the same skills we need to live an authentic life. Honesty, introspection, and taking risks lead us to a place where we can truly be ourselves and step up to living authentically.

And finally, the practice of improv or any creative endeavor is just that: practice. Allowing yourself to lose your perfectionist streak and to try again and again will let you live the life you want, without fear of “failure” or shame. And supporting others around you will create the kind of world we want to live in.

When I realized what a long-term and useful (not to mention unexpected) spiritual practice comedy improv was for me, I combined my love of this art form with my lifelong spiritual practices and created a series of workshops and retreats called “Improvisation for the Spirit.” The result has been thrilling for me. The retreats are filled with people who have had little or no experience with improv, who are often coming because they find the idea of improv intriguing or possibly terrifying and they want to challenge themselves in a supportive atmosphere. The participants go home with a newfound belief in their abilities, new friendships, and a rejuvenated spirit caused by sharing bonds with others and laughing 'til their sides ached. It has been a joy and an honor to share this practice during these retreats.

What you are holding is the retreat in book form. *Improvisation for the Spirit* offers both interactive and solitary experiences, just like the retreats, in which you can discover yourself and practice new ways of thinking and doing that will inspire you to develop a more creative, courageous, and spontaneous life. I hope that it is not only a way for you to gain insight, but that it is fun and generates enthusiasm in your life.

Back on the stage, I breathe into the moment. Finally, in what seems like ten minutes but has been under two seconds, several “vegetarian” rhyming words appear in the corner of my brain: “He’s an octogenarian”...“She’s like a caring hen”...no, wait...Then the answer clicks into place, fitting into the musical story created over the past few minutes with the other actors, and I sing:

“Sorry...I don’t eat carrion.”

Phew. Next! And moving on...

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You may want to dip into a chapter here and a chapter there, but I urge you to try to read the book in order, from start to finish. This is because the skills build on one another, and the exercises, experiences, and practices contained here offer sequential benefits. I suggest reading one chapter per week, but if you want to move faster, please do. But think about giving yourself some time to let the practices sink in. If, after you’ve read the book, you want to go back and try some exercises again, that’s perfect. Just jump to any chapter that speaks to you and use it as a refresher course. These are practices that you can keep coming back to again and again.

One more thing: I have changed the names in this book so that I could use these stories (some of them are very personal) without embarrassing people and with their blessings. There are a few stories I have morphed into one to make the point clearer and to further shade identity.

No matter what, though, these stories feature individuals, most with little or no theatrical background, who learned through my workshops how to use these tools in their daily lives. They’re now enjoying the benefit of applying the skills of improv comedy to all aspects of life.

This book will help you do the same.

THE SPONTANEOUS LIFE

You will do foolish things, but do them with enthusiasm.

—*Colette*

This chapter will help you restore your creative self-confidence, discover your potential, and have fun doing it! We begin with creative writing exercises that will help you spontaneously reach for the unexpected and perhaps riskier idea. This chapter offers ways to help you uncover your beliefs, judgments and self-doubts.

Many of you have seen the TV show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* or perhaps an improv troupe. If so, then you know that comedy improvisational performances use hundreds of different types of “games”—we don’t usually call them sketches or skits, because there is no script. When my troupe performs, there are generally two to four actors per game, so we are always collaborating. The actors share a vision, like any team or group does. Ours is to make people laugh. We all have different styles, different backgrounds, and often, different agendas. This is high-risk creative work: high-risk in terms of our egos, mostly, but also in terms of pleasing the audience consistently. We are on stage, creating before an audience’s eyes, thinking on our feet. There’s no time for rewriting or rethinking. And yet, it’s not a total free-for-all. We do have rules. Each of these games has different guidelines, and for each game, we get different starting information from the audience so everybody knows it’s truly improvised.

For example, we generally start a scene by getting the audience to shout out a location where the scene will take place; sometimes we’ll ask for a pantomimed object that we have to work into the scene too. Those are then the criteria that we have to deal with. Our first goal is to create a scene incorporating these criteria in order to follow the rules of the game. Then, of course, we want to make it funny, interesting, and dramatic by adding conflict and plot. We need to share the stage with others (i.e., I shouldn’t totally dominate), and then, ultimately, the scene must resolve the conflict.

At one show, we started a scene with a couple coming home from a first date. The guy stopped at the girl’s front door. The director of the scene yelled, “Freeze!” and asked the audience to shout out who should come out of the front door. An audience member yelled, “Her mother!” So I walked through the door and said, “Oh, hi, sweetheart. Your husband’s on the phone.” The date looked shocked, and the daughter now had to work her way out of the conflict that I created. The result? The date went out with the mother instead.

In improv we have two tasks at all times: actively listening to our scene partner’s ideas and then adding our own to complicate the story. The exchange and adaptation of information and ideas is the main goal for us.

And perhaps, for you. Nobody works in a vacuum. Life is one big collaboration. We collaborate with management teams, clients, family members, friends, PTA groups—even deciding with others which restaurant to pick for dinner is a collaboration. We create organizations from scratch, and we help others to grow. Raising

children is a challenging form of collaboration. We can renew our energy for relating with others by seeing our lives as one big collaborative process.

GETTING STARTED: THE FIRST FOUR SKILLS OF IMPROV

SKILL #1: YOU MUST BE PRESENT AND LISTEN CAREFULLY!

At one show, I had a delightfully embarrassing moment when we were doing a game called “Movie Genres.” (I say delightfully because any mistake in an improv show usually is met with peals of appreciative laughter.) The scene director had us do a scene in the style of “Foreign Film,” and I thought he said “Porn Film.” Needless to say, when I noticed everyone but me was talking with French accents and smoking imaginary cigarettes, I figured out what was going on. But not before I had a leg wrapped around one of the other actors...

Listening is one of the most important collaborative and yet often undervalued skills in our society. How often do you really listen deeply to the person who’s talking to you? Do you ever find yourself thinking about what you need to do next: checking your voicemail, finishing up the laundry, picking up the kids at school? Or planning what you will say in response to them? Do you think about another project? About the person’s appearance and all your beliefs about them? If so, you’re not really hearing what they’re saying at all. And believe me, people know when you are hearing them deeply or are not really present.

Listening is a skill we all need to cultivate. To be creative with others and to brainstorm solutions, you must first understand where everyone is coming from, and to do that, you’ve got to *listen*. (And not sneak a peek at your incoming text messages.)

SKILL #2: THE PINK ELEPHANT RULE: DON’T NEGATE

In improv, it is a cardinal sin to “negate.” Negation is when you deny someone’s idea. The classic example actors use to explain negation is this:

One actor says, “Hey, look at that pink elephant!”

The other actor says, “What are you talking about? There’s no pink elephant.”

Plop. The first actor’s idea is shot down, and there’s nowhere to go.

If someone offers a tidbit of information to move the scene forward (“Oh, man, I left the money we stole from the bank, um, at the bank.”), and I negate the offering (“No! It’s right here!”), it will do several things: First of all, it will be a power play over the other actor, which is really not fun for the others and, over time, makes people not want to work or hang out with you. (Sound like anything you’ve ever experienced?) Second, the energy of the scene will fall flat: if you outright say no to an idea, the scene comes to a screeching halt. Third, and most importantly, *it will blow an opportunity for a creative challenge*, which brings energy and enthusiasm to our lives.

This is certainly something that most of us have experienced in many aspects of daily living, from committee meetings to important talks with our spouses or even with our parents. What happens when your ideas are ignored or shot down without consideration? It cuts off the creative flow. It makes you clam up. It doesn’t exactly invite further communication in a relationship: you’re probably not going to jump in again any time soon.

SKILL #3: AFFIRM & ADD

In a successful collaboration, we work toward “affirmation.” Instead of negating, we “affirm and add.” It’s called the “Yes, and...” Rule. You accept what your partner is suggesting, and you add to it. It requires active listening, and it shows you care about the other actors’ ideas. This fosters trust and teamwork, which leads to more innovation and enthusiasm for the work.

Now, affirmation does not mean saying, “Oooo, yes, I love that idea!” even if it’s a worthless idea in your opinion. It doesn’t mean buttering up the other person, and it doesn’t mean putting your ideas away and being steamrolled over. This is a very important distinction to understand. All of us want our ideas to be heard. We don’t want our teammates, our family members, our co-workers, or our friends to harbor resentment. And we don’t want to harbor it either!

In a recent show, we were doing a spooky Halloween-themed scene in which we had a long story going about a woman who ran an eggplant farm (the audience’s suggestion). We wove the eggplant information into a tale about an eggplant coming alive and taking over the town. We were all headed toward a resolution in which we needed to call in a superhero—when suddenly, another actor jumped in as a townspeople who created some animated Parmesan cheese that engulfed the eggplant and turned it into a delicious force for good. Now, this was not in anyone’s mind when we started, or even as we worked toward the other resolution, but it was

much funnier than anything we had going. Had the rest of the cast not been open to that actor's ideas, it never would have made its way into the scene. It really threw us all for a second, but we had trained ourselves to say, "Yes, and..." to each other, and the result was delightfully creative.

In life, when you affirm another person's idea, you acknowledge both the idea and the other person: "Yes, I heard your idea. Period. Now, we'll explore it, improve upon it, maybe take a sharp turn toward something else, but I acknowledge it!" This creates an atmosphere of trust in which others feel they can offer creative ideas without fear of disapproval.

This happens at home all the time. Perhaps your kids want to have their opinions heard. Have you ever noticed how much it ticks off four-year-olds, not to mention teenagers, to feel brushed off? Listen and affirm what they are saying. Even if you don't agree, acknowledge their perspective—for that reason alone, it is valid. But you don't have to stop there. Maybe you could say:

"Yes, I understand that you want to pierce your eyelids, and I see that there are a lot of other kids doing it, and I can appreciate that there is some aesthetic value to it that perhaps I can't quite grasp due to my limited perspective and high standards of taste...er, I mean, different sense of style, but we need to really take a look at what kind of permanent visual impairment that it could perhaps cause before I say yes."

Or something like that.

SKILL #4: ALWAYS BE WILLING TO SURRENDER YOUR PLANS

In improv, you must be willing to give up your idea if it isn't working or if the time to offer it has passed.

Let's say I walk into a scene fully imagining that I am the mother of the other character on stage. But before I can utter a word, the other actor refers to me as her dog. Okay, so now I'm a dog—perhaps a talking, highly opinionated dog who's just come from his morning shoe buffet—but nonetheless, it's not what I was picturing a minute ago.

You might be tempted to negate the new information simply because you're attached to your original idea. But the better approach is to go with the flow and alter your course. It's a collaborative process and can be so much more fun and interesting if you enjoy that about it instead of clinging tenaciously to your original plan.

For example, when I'm auditioning other actors, I might find myself with preconceived ideas of what I'm looking for, just like someone who is interviewing job applicants. But if we hang on to that image of what we think we want, we might overlook someone spectacular. It's a fine balance between knowing what you want and being rigid. Having no idea of what you want is not particularly helpful, but having an idea and *being willing to let it change* is a better approach.

The same goes for meetings. Say you go into a staff meeting with a fantastic idea you are totally attached to, and the guy to your right starts in on a totally different idea. A fight to the death over whose idea is going to win is one way to go about it, and many people choose that approach. But that ensures one of you will lose (which means that it could be you), and it also doesn't allow for new possibilities that could come about from the *intersection of ideas*. Collaboration in which you work with each other's ideas really creates an atmosphere of trust, fun, and inspiration.

When you surrender your preconceived ideas and instead allow yourself to see new things as opportunities for creativity, you can discover endless possibilities and renewed inspiration.

SPREAD THE SPONTANEITY

Sure, you say, spontaneity is great after 5:00 p.m. But how in the world would this work at the office?

Whatever the scenario, we need to be able to open up, to allow mistakes to happen, and to forge ahead. When problem-solving brainstorming sessions are successful, it's generally not because one person came up with all the right answers, but rather, because one person said something that gave someone else an idea, and so collectively the group came to a solution together. That's spontaneity. That's co-creation.

I have heard people say, "I believe planning is more important than being spontaneous." So how can planning and spontaneity work together?

Here's the deal: A plan is like the structure of every improv scene. The actors heading into an improv scene all share an idea of the shape the scene will take. We know it will begin by working toward a conflict, and we know that we'll need to then solve that conflict.

Say your "conflict" is that your office really needs new computers. What may help is a planning session in which your staff feels free to explore creative solutions about how you can get a hold of that equipment, partner with another facility, or

fundraise for it. You're planning for a solution—and planning to incorporate creativity into that solution. After all, creative solutions can save big bucks. Keeping a plan in mind, but being spontaneous as you creatively collaborate by brainstorming ways to carry out that plan, may be the best solution of all.

And it's important to allow a goofy thing or two to come out as well. The point of spontaneity is that you are *not* censoring yourself. We often fear that if we don't censor ourselves, we'll say something stupid and be embarrassed by it, and everyone will think we're dorky or worse. But if we do censor ourselves, we'll never get to the best solutions.

A fabulous young woman named Emily came to my workshop to get, as she called it, “a swift kick in the ass” to jar her into spontaneity. She valiantly jumped into everything, and she was hilarious and a lot of fun. When she went home after the workshop, she felt prepared to change the way she'd been doing things previously.

“I was determined to take the toolbox Katie had given me and try it out on everything and everybody. And I knew exactly how I would do it, too. Then, in a flash, it all became so obvious—I was planning the ways I'd be spontaneous! My thought processes are always entirely scripted! I had it all planned out, as I do most everything in my life. It has always been comfortable for me this way. Secure. Safe. I was going to go back to my job as a school counselor and do x, y, and z, and by golly, these kids were going to learn what it is like to be spontaneous!”

The irony of the situation helped her laugh and see how she generally operated. She proceeded to keep an eye on herself and try a slightly different tactic: genuine spontaneity.

“Trust that still, small voice that says, ‘This might work and I'll try it.’”

—*Diane Mariechild*

TRY THIS: AFFIRM & ADD

Throughout this book, I will offer exercises as a way for you to try out these skills. Here's one that works with the skill of spontaneously Affirming and Adding:

I'm in an improv scene and my partner says, "Hey, Officer! There's a man with a gun in here!" This situation triggers my imagination (if I can remain freed up and unblocked), and I can come up with different responses.

Here are several:

"I see him! Let's go get him!"

"Oh, dang, I grabbed my son's toy gun by accident this morning. Sorry, can't help ya."

"This is a job for Opera Cop!" (You continue the scene singing the robber his rights.)

"Um, Mr. Cheney, it's July. Hunting season is over, sir."

Now you try one:

Here's a new opening line. Fill in whatever responses come into your head. You can start with simple or obvious ones if you like, but after three or four responses, try to give a few that we might not expect—the unexpected can be funnier sometimes. Repeat the opening line each time, and then quickly respond out loud before you write it down. Don't think long and hard—just respond immediately:

Here's your partner's line:

“Okay, what are you hiding behind your back?”

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

Now, try another:

“Don't play with your food, Joey.”

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

And another:

“Sir, will you be having tea this afternoon?”

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

One more:

“Do you come here often?”

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

(Creative responses to this last one might even prove useful!)

Journal your observations below:

1. What did you discover? Were you quicker than you thought? Slower?

2. Did you have more ideas than you expected? Fewer?

3. How many ideas did you think you SHOULD have?

4. What was your first reaction when you read the first line?

5. Did that first reaction change by the fourth exercise?

6. What are your beliefs about your creativity? Are you creative?

7. Do you believe you are less creative than others? Is this belief true?

8. If you don't like these beliefs, write down a new belief that you'd like to have:

9. How can you really deeply internalize this new belief? In other words, what would have to change? Would you need to have a new experience where you actually succeeded beyond your expectations of yourself? Would you need to take a comedy course? A writing course? Something else? Do you believe you need to have others' approval to feel more confident? (More on this later.) What do you need in order to reconnect with your belief in your abilities? Write down the first step you can take to gain more confidence:

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE: THE SPONTANEOUS LIFE

Each chapter will offer a meditation or practice at the end. Because these skills take some work, you might try the practices for a week to let them sink in or perhaps come back to them now and again.

JOURNALING

What does “spontaneity” mean to you? Does it scare you? Do you believe that being spontaneous could hurt you or be potentially damaging in some way? Would being more spontaneous in certain areas of your life help? Choose an area of your life where you would like to become more spontaneous and inspired. Why do you think you do not act spontaneously in this area? What are you afraid will happen if you are spontaneous? As you go about doing things in this area of your life for the next few days, notice how often you are acting spontaneously. Ever? Are you just doing the same, safe thing each time? Where do you stand as far as living a spontaneous life? What was it about this book that attracted your attention?

BE

**PRESENT &
AWARE**

The noun of self becomes a verb. This flashpoint of creation in the present moment is where work and play merge.

—*Stephen Nachmanovitch*

Being present and listening to others will help you get out of your head and into a creative mode. This chapter offers tools and exercises to help you learn to move through blocks and to trust, commit, and surrender, using the practice of being fully *there*.

“YOU MUST BE PRESENT TO WIN”

About fifteen years ago, I was a teensy bit drunk on free drinks at a Las Vegas casino. My husband and I were at the nickel slot machines (last of the big-time spenders), but we'd occasionally go over to the high-limits area so we'd be offered all the complimentary Kahlua and creams we could drink. I am not a big gambler (or drinker), so I was kind of bored and reading all the signs on the walls. One that caught my eye was “You Must Be Present to Win.” Well, Kahlua apparently creates a world in my head where everything appears more profound than it was originally meant to be, and I took this particular sign as a very important message. I even wrote it down on a “Circus Circus” cocktail napkin, which I later retrieved from my pocket before it was baptized by my Maytag.

I try to remember this bit of wisdom when I am mid-scene on stage (or in the morning, when I sometimes get overwhelmed by the list of tasks ahead of me that day). I consciously redirect my focus on the present moment. But if, like the casino sign says, “you must be present to win,” then what is considered “winning” in the world of improvisation?

Well, there are a few things: the most obvious is a big, loud, appreciative laugh from the audience. Others are seeing new possibilities open up in the scene because I added something that helped get my partners and me out of a rut, or even simply being a partner who helps keep the scene going—not really adding anything brilliant, but stalling for time while my partners and I try to work our way around to something wonderful. That's winning, too: *just being present and moving the scene forward.*

Being present also helps you keep the action in the present tense, which keeps the scene alive and interesting. It generally doesn't work to talk about things that happened outside of the scene—things that are happening somewhere else or that happened in the past, which the audience can't see. Giving a long back story about how you and your partner got to the present scene on stage isn't really fun to watch—there's no action! You're just recounting something the audience can't see. And when you talk about something happening somewhere else, again, it's not really fun to watch. Audiences want to see action and emotion and drama and conflict unfolding in front of them. It took me a long time to stop talking about things on stage that the audience couldn't see. Showing, not telling, is what's key. Being present is where the funny is, and that's what's interesting.

On stage, I feel like I've achieved something great when my self-consciousness vanishes momentarily, and I am suddenly fully present in the scene. I get out of self-judgment and into *creation*. I can think fast without effort. Suddenly, I am George Bush at a self-help meeting—not Katie, wondering what to add to the scene. I come up with more ideas that actually fit, that work, that move the scene forward, and that support my teammates' ideas. All because I am *present*.

Bringing our focus into the here and now works in life as well. How often do we get hung up on what happened in the past? This can manifest itself on a grand scale: the conflict in the Middle East is a good example of people having a hard time looking past, well, the past. But even in your personal relationships, you can bring old “yous” into every conversation, and this is dangerous. Rarely is it useful to be talking to someone while thinking of his or her past transgressions or past behaviors. The past keeps us stuck and unable to see what's real, here and now.

Look at your primary relationship—with your parent, spouse, partner, co-worker...or even your schnauzer. At times, it feels impossible to look past your preconceived notions of certain people and see who they really are here in this moment, today, separate from your beliefs about them and what they've done or said in the past. But this is an incredibly useful practice—letting go of preconceived notions. Let go, let go, let go. Pay attention as each of your subjective beliefs about a particular person comes up. Notice every thought, and let it pass. Are you able to see what this person is feeling or doing right here and now? I can't stress enough how deeply we are caught up in our beliefs about who people are now based on our past experiences of them.

Let's say you want to go out to dinner with your husband, but you think he is probably too tired, so you don't ask. You make an assumption that he would rather be left alone on the couch, because that's what has happened before, say, oh, about forty years' worth of times. Well, it turns out that today he is feeling rather lonely at work and really wishes someone would take an interest in him. But your leaving him alone reaffirms his assumption that no one wants to be with him. If you were to simply ask, “Hey, do you want to go out to dinner, just the two of us?” his reaction might be one of joy. What a surprise and a delight for both of you.

And that's just applying the idea to one relationship! Imagine the possibilities that could arise if you could be truly present in all of your relationships.

“When I’m in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise, there is pure harmony, an easy give and take.”

—*Jackson Pollock*

WHY BE PRESENT?

In an improv game, if you are thinking about the audience, dinner, when you last got an oil change, or whether you should run for office, well, you’re just not *there*, are you? And you’ll miss important information from the audience or other actors and be lost. I admit I’ve done that so many times, I can’t even count. It makes for terrible improv. But more importantly, that habit of letting your attention wander makes for a lame-o life. Missing the present is such a shame, because really, that’s all there is.

But on the other hand, there I am on stage at the beginning of an improv scene, putting together ideas in my head of where the scene might possibly go. Is this being present, or is this thinking ahead? Is it possible to do both?

There is such a thing as bringing the future and your plans for it into the present. Take this example: I am in a scene in which the location the audience has given us is “hospital.” I quickly run through some options to add to the scene: *I’m in labor...I’m back looking for that hot doctor who helped me last week...My gall bladder was stolen and sold on the black market, and I’m trying to track it down.* There are infinite possibilities. Suddenly, I see that the actor next to me is standing in a very confident way. I notice him (in the present) and pick the handsome doctor scenario.

“Excuse me,” I say in a sultry voice. “Do you recognize this?” I point to my nose, hoping he’ll recognize the emergency surgery he did on my imagined broken nose. Now, this is all happening very quickly, and you have to remember that the other actor is also running through possibilities and planning in his head. He may be thinking he’s the head of the hospital, or a reporter, or a patient. So, he gets present, lets go of some of his ideas, looks at me, takes in the line I just offered, and shouts to the emergency room at large:

“I found it! The missing nose! It’s over here! She seems to have stored it here on her face.” Then he says to me, “Well done, nurse. The patient will appreciate what you’ve done with her nose, keeping it safe like that.”

Well! Out goes my “looking for the hot doctor” scenario and in comes the “selfless nose-storing nurse.” But I don’t have to dump my sultry character—I can

add it in. Maybe the nurse becomes someone who's willing to do anything for this doctor she admires, including storing his patient's nose on her face to win his approval.

This is the process we all go through every day in regular life: we encounter problems, we brainstorm solutions, we get ideas, and we get attached to our ideas. Attachment doesn't work, because by definition, when we get attached to an idea we had earlier, we are no longer present with what is needed now. So we either suffer from the attachment (getting frustrated and angry with ourselves and others), or we get present again, unattach a bit, and see where we can go now. And we think ahead, let go of ideas, and move on.

Stacey, a creative financial advisor and singer and participant in one of my retreats, came to a revelation about being present. She noticed that suddenly, toward the end of the last day of the retreat, she became aware that the retreat was coming to an end.

"I started thinking about the upcoming week. It changed my thoughts and emotions and I became different, less in the moment...less in joy," she said. "This made me realize that the weekend could be seen as a microcosm of life. Am I so worried about the last ten years that I am not in the now? Am I so worried about growing older that I am not present and connected? Why I am anxious or in a hurry or so unwilling to be sad or irritated? Or so unwilling to be present with what is? This is what makes life interesting! It makes the scene! It makes me *me*."

LET GO OF THE PAST

Being present also requires being able to let go of past mistakes or shortcomings—we need to know how to move on.

I am the director and co-writer (with my husband) of, as well as an actor in, my women's satire show, *Broad Comedy*, a fairly feisty revue that tackles women's issues and politics. Once, we were performing at a banquet for a fairly conservative women's sports organization. We were following our scripted show, when suddenly, I came to the part of a song about child rearing that had a rather large and glaring profanity in the middle of it. I totally forgot to change the line for this performance, and it came pouring out of my mouth. The line was about how, after my character had been struggling with breast-feeding, she wanted to kill those "buggers" at La Leche League. If I had only said "buggers," it would have been fine, and I would not be using this as an example in my book. But I didn't say

“buggers”...and this was not the audience for an R rating. So where there was normally a nice, big laugh, there were now *crickets*. And darting looks around the room as the audience members tried to gauge each other’s reactions. Not good. Now, if the cast were to spend the rest of the song thinking about how it had gone wrong, that would have read all over our faces and reinforced the mistake. It could also have made us forget our next lines. So what we did was let go of what just happened and become really present with what we were saying *now*. And we built the audience’s trust back up. And the next song, “I’m A Soccer Mom Ho,” which I had carefully cleaned up, brought down the house.

We’ve all said something we thought was stupid, something we wished we hadn’t said. Maybe you took that creative risk and offered a suggestion (“Hey, why don’t we cover the lobby with cute, pink hearts for Valentine’s Day!”), but once it came out of your mouth, you realized it wasn’t good—and you got the feeling others thought so, too. What do you do now?

Some say hindsight is 20/20, but sometimes hindsight can be blinding. The fact is, if you stay stuck in your Past Moment of Lameness, then you will have nothing to add to the present, and things will just spiral downward. You’ll be likely, in fact, to create more moments you don’t feel good about.

Letting go of those moments, though, will allow you to move on and jump back into the flow of the moment. And practicing letting go, practicing moving on, makes this habit become easier and easier. It’s like a mental muscle: practice increases its strength. And that is true for all the skills offered in this book.

JOURNAL

How much time do you spend lost in the past or planning the future?

When you are lost in the past, is there a common theme?

When you are fantasizing about the future, is there a common theme?

What would happen if you ignored the past? What's the first thought that springs to mind?

What would happen if, after you planned what needed to be planned, you just let it go and unfold? Do you need to go over and over what might happen?

What is happening in your present right now?

What does your body feel like when you think about the past? About the future? What about right now?

What do you fear will happen if you let go of the past?

What do you fear will happen if you don't constantly plan?

What do you fear about the present?

TRY THIS:
**MEDITATION AS A WAY TO BRING THE
PRESENT INTO FOCUS**

This is a meditation exercise, so if you've done something like this before, just focus on being present and follow my words below. If you're new to meditation, here are a few instructions:

Sit in a comfortable position for meditation. Keep your eyes open but kind of softly focused on something that isn't moving. Now, let your attention come to your breath. Feel the breath move your abdomen, chest, shoulders, whatever. Feel the hot air go in and out of your nose. Now, here's the deal:

YOUR MIND WILL WANDER, AND THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU FLUNKED MEDITATION CLASS!

Just notice the wandering, give a little smile as if to say, "I see you over there," and bring your awareness back to your breath. You're not alone. Pema Chodron, one of my favorite Zen Buddhist teachers, says she's just terrible at meditation—meaning that her focus wanders all the time. And she's a full-time meditation teacher and monk! So her practice is about bringing it back. And that's what I finally got after, oh, two thousand years of practice.

It's the *awareness* of being away from your center that is the point and the practice of meditation—and it's the coming back that matters! Because this is what happens all day long, although less so as you practice being present. We are always distracted by fantasies, worries, projections into the future, and attachments to the past. And that's what causes suffering in our lives to a large degree: not being here.

So sit and breathe and watch. And if you spin off somewhere, just bring yourself back to your breath. It absolutely doesn't matter how long you do this. It is not a contest. Some people do two really present minutes a day. Some do two hours. Some do nothing at all—they just focus on staying present throughout their daily lives. Whatever you do is great. For now, just practice being aware of where your attention goes during the day. And bring it back. It is a simple practice that will bring you in touch with your life—so it won't

all pass by without your noticing it, so you can live with greater awareness. By coming into the present and being mindfully aware, you can see what's going on in your life and make the changes you want.

PAY ATTENTION! THE ART OF MINDFUL SELF-AWARENESS

When you're doing something you've never done before, you have a really enlightening opportunity to see how you operate. As the wonderful Zen teacher Cheri Huber says, "How you do anything is how you do everything."

When people come to my workshops, I can see within about thirty seconds of their first improv game what their normal habits are: if they are more comfortable being a leader or a follower, if they tend to plow into things without needing guidance, if they hold back until they understand rules, if they trust themselves creatively, if they trust others, and if they are people who are able to commit. I'm not psychic; it's just glaringly obvious. I couldn't agree more that the way you do anything (particularly something new) is the way you do everything.

Now, if I were to take a surfing workshop, and you were a really proficient surfing teacher, you'd know my habits immediately, too. And those tendencies would almost certainly reveal how I operate in the rest of my life: I would want to see someone else go first. I wouldn't want to wait and go last, because I'd feel too much pressure. I would try and make jokes to ease my own tension. These are habits that I have reinforced throughout my life. My awareness practice—that is, the practice of trying to continually be aware in the present moment—helps me notice these habits, and then I can choose to change them or not. It helps me see what goes on inside my head.

And it's an interesting place, the inside of your head. Are you competing with everyone else? Are you believing that you are the only one who's afraid, that everyone else is perfectly at ease? Are you making assumptions about how you'll do? Are you believing everyone else is thinking certain things about you? This is what I love to discover, along with my students and workshop participants. *What's going on in there?*

Mindfulness training helps us notice these thoughts before we get too attached to them. Mindful awareness helps us realize that they are conditioned thoughts, not necessarily based on anything in reality. This is a crucial reason to practice being present: so that we can see our truth and not run on automatic pilot—judging, fearing, and blocking ourselves, and creating problems and confusion. Remembering to be mindful forces us to get present.

So if you are starting something new, take the time to notice what beliefs jump up right away. That is, what are your conditioned ways of approaching a new experience? Most likely, they are habits that have come up over and over in different areas of your life. As I will talk more about in chapter three, being a beginner is great practice, because you get the chance to learn a lot about yourself. When you are alert and aware of your thought process, you are by definition being present to what is going on right now inside your head.

Father Anthony de Mello, a sort of Buddhist-in-Jesuit-priest-clothes, has been an incredible inspiration to me. His writing and public speeches point to the importance of being present. “Wake up! Wake up!” he would shout in a jovial way to his students. “You’re asleep, and you don’t even know it. Wake up!”

TRY THIS:

MINDFUL AWARENESS

Look up from this book. Right now. Notice one thing you’ve never noticed in your environment (your home, office, bed, porch, wherever you are). Do this several times a day. Try it with sound, smell, and touch, too. Do you notice what your chair feels like? What your home or office smells like? Bring the habit of mindful awareness to your life.

WITNESSING

But how can you become more aware of your own self-awareness? Before you get too caught up in a Mobius strip of observing yourself observing yourself observing yourself, try this approach: witnessing.

The practice of *witnessing* is a practice of self-observation without judgment. This is perhaps one of the most important practices you should make a habit if you want to become self-confident, self-aware, and, well, just happy.

The way to practice witnessing is to start by noticing your thoughts throughout the day. Notice what your inner voices say to you when you get up, when you first look in the mirror, when you have breakfast, when you work, when you talk with others. Any time you are thinking, you can practice witnessing. The trick is to notice what your thoughts are without judging them. This is harder than you might think. Try it right now. Are there any unkind words ringing around in there? Are there any voices judging others? How much of the day do you spend making judgments about others or about situations? We will get into the issue of judgment and projection later, but for now, just notice your thoughts. Don't berate yourself if you have negative or mean-spirited words in your head. JUST NOTICE. This is the first step. And also, if you're new to this, allow yourself to do it in short spurts (minutes, not hours). It can be a little overwhelming if you spend too much time observing your own thoughts at first!

What we're trying to learn here is to not identify with our feelings and beliefs so much. There's an old Zen joke: Before enlightenment, I was depressed. After enlightenment, I continue to be depressed! But the difference is that I'm not identified with it anymore.

And that is a huge difference. When you witness, you teach yourself to look objectively and find the truth. You let go of the beliefs that you hold so dearly. You get to see clearly your habitual judgments and subjective "truth." And when you begin to question these beliefs—by simply witnessing what is going on in your head—you get a clearer picture of the way things are.

For example, you walk into work and everyone ignores you, barely saying hello. You immediately jump to the conclusion that your co-workers are mad at you, or don't like you, or were all just talking about you. You stop and breathe and notice that thought. It is perhaps a habitual way of thinking for you, jumping to conclusions based on your limited perspective of the situation. But now you notice this thought, and you allow for the possibility that there is another interpretation. Right there you've made a big change—you don't necessarily buy what your mind was telling you in its first, hasty conclusion. This in itself is a big step in the right direction. You are *disidentifying* with your thought and looking at it objectively. Next, you step back and look at other possibilities: Could your co-workers be focused on their own tasks? Worried about their own deadlines? Did they perhaps

not hear you come in? Could they think you don't care about them yourself? There are so many possibilities, and honestly, the only way you'll ever find out the truth is to ask. And even then it's questionable if you'll get an objective picture of what's going on. But the most important thing is that you didn't immediately believe your first thought, and you didn't act on it.

Father Anthony de Mello said, "Wakefulness, happiness—call it what you wish—is the state of non-delusion, where you see things not as you are but as they are." An illusion is a belief you have about a situation. What we want is to drop all of our illusions so that we can see reality as it is. "Every time you are unhappy," de Mello said, "you have added something to reality...a negative reaction in you. And if you examine what you have added, there is always an illusion there."

Our reactions are based on our beliefs, such as when you believe everyone at your office is talking about you and become unhappy. We see the world from our own limited perspectives, but we want to begin to see it in a more objective way, so that we aren't slaves to our beliefs and reactions.

In improv, witnessing comes about when you observe your thoughts while creating a scene. This happens in any creative process. You form a belief and you act on it before you take a moment to witness it objectively and see if there is another possibility. If I'm on stage and another actor heads off in a different direction, ignoring my idea, is it because he necessarily thinks it is a bad idea? No. He might not have heard it; he might be stuck on his own idea; he might not understand where I was heading; or he might think he is using my idea, but we're just on different tracks. So witnessing helps break the cycle of thought-emotion-belief-reaction. And for many of us, this cycle happens all day long.

Give your thoughts some attention today, and practice witnessing to see what you discover.

Now, how did you approach this assignment? Did you want more guidelines and rules? Were you annoyed for any reason? What was the reason? Write it here:

I was annoyed by/because:

How did you feel about your ability to do this exercise *before* you started?

How about during the exercise? Did you notice your thoughts about being good or bad at it? About something else?

And how do you feel now about what you wrote?

Look at your answers. Is this typical of the way you approach assignments and activities (new or not) in general?

What might be another way of approaching assignments and tasks?

OUR MODUS OPERANDI (M.O.) REVEALED

When Sheila, a TV exec, came to one of my workshops, she noticed she always thought she knew how to do something before it was fully explained. She didn't want help. But she sometimes didn't really get the rules of the improv games she was playing, and this showed in her performances. It turns out that she thought that having to have something explained to her proved she wasn't smart enough to figure it out on her own. A self-made woman, Sheila always felt she had to prove she was smart. But it turns out, she was actually sabotaging herself: she often did

things wrong, because she hadn't listened or accepted help the first time. She wasn't aware until then that this had been her M.O., but because the improv games were new to her, her M.O. was readily visible. This process helped her recognize her behavioral pattern. She is more mindful now, so she can do things differently.

PROP GIRL: THE ART OF GRABBING STUFF AROUND YOU

In improv, I am known as “Prop Girl.” My friend Mike pointed this out to me. He said, “Whenever you are on stage, you grab stuff.” I had no idea what he was talking about until the next show. We were performing in a conference room, and there I was, grabbing the giant, fake ficus tree and using it to create a forest scene. And ten minutes later, I was using an audience member's mink coat. Later, I had a bottle of wine in my hand from the bar. What was this all about?

I am a pretty visual and tactile person in general. I like to picture things. When I am a little lost in a scene, the best way for me to pull myself back into the moment is to grab something real that I can focus on and that can keep me grounded in the present. Hence the unsuspecting ficus's debut on stage. In this same way, I may also really hone in on the person I'm acting with in a scene, employing active listening to keep myself alert and engaged. I do this in regular acting, too: when I'm in a play, the stimulus of the other actors, the set, the music, the words—they all give me a boost. Why? Props help me stay present and mindfully aware. They make it all real.

TRY THIS:

BE PRESENT & LISTEN TO OTHERS MINDFULLY

Practice noticing how you listen and respond to people. Create this new habit: when you listen, listen. Catch your mind wandering? Come back and just listen. It's an incredibly different way of being in the world if you don't normally listen deeply. Now, *wait to respond*. Here are several ways to do this:

- Say, “Let me see if I hear you,” and in your own words, rephrase what someone has said to you. I’m sure you’ve heard this before, but have you really tried it? It’s startling how this practice takes determination and commitment. And what it can do for your interactions is impressive.
- Say, “Hmmm, let me think about that.” You wouldn’t believe how often it’s okay to wait to respond. People really appreciate it when you take the time to think about what they’ve said. You can do this with phone calls and emails, too.
- Say, “You know, I really care about what you’re telling me right now, but I am distracted by something else. Can we catch up in a few minutes (hours, days), so I can really give you all my attention?” Why are we so trained to respond immediately? It really doesn’t often serve any of us to do so. This kind of consideration is what people love, and it will give you the time to be a better listener. Problems and hurt feelings can be avoided, and people can more easily connect and be creative when they use these kinds of deep, active listening skills.

I found the concept of being present summed up perfectly in a mystery novel, of all places. In one of Tony Hillerman’s works, the main character, a detective named Joe Leaphorn, is asked by the FBI to go out to the scene where a body has been found. (It seems to have been tossed off a train onto a reservation.) Leaphorn begins to inspect the area in ever-widening circles, to the confusion of his colleague Jay Kennedy:

“What are you looking for?” Kennedy asked. “Besides tracks.”

“Nothing in particular,” Leaphorn said. “You’re not really looking for anything in particular. If you do that, you don’t see things you’re not looking for.”

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE: BE PRESENT & MINDFUL

Whenever you get caught up in past beliefs, past judgments, or expectations about what you can and can't do in the future, change your focus to the present instead. What is happening now? How does that change the way your body feels? Try different ways to approach mindfulness, such as attentive, slow eating. Try eating without doing anything else: no talking, reading, walking, driving, working. It will teach you about being present. Just eat. Really slowly. It can be completely transcendent or totally annoying. Keep doing it anyway. Journal your experiences.

Be committed in your practice to bring yourself back to the present. Just bring it back, bring it back, bring it back...

BE

**OPEN &
FLEXIBLE**

It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power.

—*Alan Cohen*

This chapter will help you practice being flexible and going with the flow when things change unexpectedly. Being open to change allows for more possibilities than you can imagine, infinitely more than what's possible from a limited perspective in which you plan on everything going the way you imagine. Exercises and journaling in this chapter will offer you insight into your normal behavior, including how you try to control things, and will allow unexpected possibilities to unfold joyfully.

Cameron is a twenty-year-old college student. He is a badass, an extreme-sports fanatic, and he also happens to be my brother. Cam's greatest passion is surfing. Surfing requires an enormous amount of concentration and a willingness to be flexible, both physically and mentally. You don't always know what a wave is going to do, so you can't count on your plan. It's the perfect place to practice being present and fluid. As Cam says, "When surfing a wave and looking for new lines and feelings, improv is key. No one wave is the same, and no single mind-set will work for every wave."

Cam explains that we have certain tools and techniques we know we can bring to any situation in life, and in surfing it's the same thing. You can go into a situation knowing what you're capable of and feeling confident in what you may learn. Choosing how to adapt to each individual situation while using your personal skills is where improv comes into play.

"In surfing," Cam says, "each wave presents different characteristics, which work for some moves and not for others. The wave may pitch and barrel really fast, leaving no option but to race down the line as fast as you can and make for the hole of light at the end of the tunnel. Or it may be a slow, mushy wave with long shoulders, leaving time for big arcing turns. If you get too excited and ahead of yourself, you'll go too fast and shoot off the end, leaving the critical part of the wave far behind and finding yourself slowly sinking back into the water."

Taking your time and focusing on what's around you is just as important as speeding up your attack and making split-second decisions. Every second on a wave requires a decision to be made about how and where to ride it. That decision leads to the next instant, which in turn leads to another decision. Riding waves is so ephemeral that the decision-making process must be broken down into seconds.

It's amazing to watch Cam and his friends surf. A land-based mammal like me thinks they're going to go one way, and zip, they flip around and change direction. It looks so fluid and easy. And because good surfers know to stay flexible both physically and mentally, they can adjust and change with the incoming information of the wave. Their bodies are as flexible as their minds let them be. That's why "hang loose" is their motto.

Oftentimes, trying new or different approaches leads you to places you never knew about. "You may check your speed too much where you originally wanted to go faster—but find yourself in a perfect position to pull into a hollow section you didn't even know was there," Cam says.

And just like in improv, sometimes it's on purpose, or sometimes we try one thing and end up doing something completely different. Either way, it works. As long as each step you make along the way is made with confidence and determination, there's no limit to what you can do.

But it starts with a commitment to being flexible in mind and spirit. Without that, you can't even get started. You'll just get in your own way and create block after block.

"Sometimes it's not even about riding the wave, but dealing with the conditions," Cam notes. "Paddling out, dealing with rip currents, getting caught inside, even finding a good spot on a crowded day, are all key components to improvising in surfing. When you can deal with nature harmoniously, even in the harshest of conditions, dealing with society and people is simple. And in surfing, if you don't get it the first time, there'll always be another wave coming."

Is this kid ahead of the game or what?

TRY THIS: ONE-WORD STORY

We play this game as one of the starter games in my retreats, when we are just getting familiar with improvising. The individuals in the group go around the circle, making sentences together. The rule is that you can only say one word, and it has to make sense coming after the previous word spoken. Picture each word below said by one person after another going around:

"There"

"once"

"was"

"a"

"dog"

"who"

"ate"

"tax accountants."

Now, there's no way to know where this sentence is going to end up. Since you can't know what the person right before you is going to say, you absolutely cannot plan at all. You simply react. You listen to all the words; you hear the one right before you; your brain runs through a list of possibilities; and you pick one. Some people who haven't done improv before can really get hung up on this game. They either want to plan (in which case what's stuck in their head isn't going to make sense), or they get blocked because there are too many choices, and they are too worried about which is the right one to pick—so they don't choose and they freeze. But once they get the hang of it, they know there's no right answer and that the goal is to just “hang loose” and listen. That's it. That's their whole job.

I love seeing where these stories go. Like the one above, it is never predictable, and the unexpected nature of it is what makes it funny and fun.

You can't always know where the collaborative creative process is going to take you, so it's in the best interest of the project, the client, or the management team to be open and flexible. You can come prepared with ideas and perhaps with a goal in mind, but you also must be willing to let go of these ideas instantly if they don't work.

LET GO

I met a geriatric nurse named David at a workshop I led at a health-care conference. David faced the challenge of letting go at work.

“So many of us have often made up our minds about what we think a client needs before we've really listened to the story,” he said. “But if we collaborate with the patients about their care and needs, there are potentially more possibilities, more opportunities to really help make changes in their lives.”

So how do we let go of these preconceived ideas and stay flexible and in the creative flow?

Part of the trick lies in facing our fear—the fear of being spontaneous. We don't always trust ourselves or trust that we'll have more ideas. We get attached to one idea, as if it's part of us. The other thing we have to recognize is our need for approval. A rejection of our idea might feel like a rejection of us, but we need to

remind ourselves: Don't take anything personally. And we also need to remember that we are more than our last idea, especially if our last idea was kind of boring. That's a hard thing to believe in the moment, but we need to remember it to have perspective.

FLEXIBILITY IN THE O.R.

Even doctors must improvise, although most of us would not want our doctor to get too creative: "Um...I prefer that my surgeon uses the tried-and-true method for a vasectomy, please." But how many times does a doctor get into an operation and have to make quick, clear, instinctual judgments? I would prefer a doctor who is not stuck on the notion that everything has to be set in stone. I would want a doctor who can trust his or her gut, who knows how to be flexible, and who is able to surrender previous plans if necessary.

James, a surgeon, told me a story about the need for medical improvisation. Once when he was working in the emergency room, a man was shot in the back while fleeing the police. A bullet went through the man's spine and severed his spinal cord. The X-ray showed the bullet lodged in part of his abdomen. There was no pulse in his right leg, and it was pale blue. The doctors figured out that the bullet, after cutting through the spinal cord, had entered the back wall of the aorta and then floated into the bloodstream, where it plugged up the artery to his leg. The heat from the bullet had seared shut the hole in the back of the aorta temporarily, so there was no bleeding—but this tentative fix could break free at any time, causing the man to bleed out in seconds and die. How could they fix that hole for good?

The hard part was that the bullet hole was directly between the arteries that fed the kidneys. Disconnecting the aorta could destroy the kidneys. None of the doctors had ever seen a situation quite like this before, and there was no protocol to deal with it.

The doctors' solution was to clamp the aorta above and below the bullet hole, then open the front wall of the aorta, sew the hole shut, and close the front wall. Kind of like opening a refrigerator door and repairing the back of it from the inside, instead of turning the refrigerator around and repairing it from the back. It was a very clever solution: one that no one had needed to come up with before, one that required flexibility of the mind. If the doctors had stayed attached to

standard practices or hadn't allowed themselves to look at the problem creatively from different angles than usual, they would have lost that man's life.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

All improv games *require* flexibility. There's a game called, simply enough, "What Happens Next." In it, we start out wherever the audience sets the scene, and once we get a little story going, the game leader shouts to the audience, "What happens next?" The audience suggests all kinds of random, crazy things. Now, because we improv actors are all trained story-makers and plot-devisers, it's absolutely impossible *not* to have an idea of where the scene is going. And because we don't know at what point the leader will freeze us and send us off in a new direction, it's important to have an idea of where we're going. But we also have to be prepared to give our ideas up and turn in an unexpected direction. This happens about every thirty seconds during the four-minute game. And that's what's *fun* about it. If you get into this game looking at it as if ideas are going to be "derailed," then you're going to be frustrated. If you look at it as if the rules are what make the game funny and interesting, then you're in good shape.

And ain't that just like life?

If you are going along with inflexible plans, and you just can't stand the idea of something coming into your life that sends you off in a different direction, well, then you can pretty much plan on being totally annoyed for most of your life. Flexibility—but not begrudging flexibility—has got to be your friend. You've really got to accept it and even look forward to it as a part of your life—and certainly part of a spontaneous, creative life.

TRY THIS:

"WHAT HAPPENS NEXT"

This week, every time something unexpected comes up, notice your reaction to it. See if you can change your mindset to actually *expect* things to require flexibility on your part. Traffic jam on the way home? It's the perfect chance to try that new Thai place you see every day on your route. Trying a new

recipe? You *know* that the chicken isn't going to brown as easily as the book describes it. But with most of the chicken's skin left burnt on the bottom of the pan, you've just created a healthier version of the recipe! So expect and even welcome changes and surprises. Really see if you can look at them differently. Does having the expectation for change make it easier to be flexible? Is there something enjoyable about expecting the unexpected?

I love change, but only in specific areas, such as taking trips or finding great, new actresses to work with, or when my son suddenly outgrows old toys and activities and is ready for something new and exciting. But I have a natural disposition to expect my plans to go as I planned them. I am perhaps what you might call, oh, I don't know, *a control freak*?

I once tried to gently suggest to someone I worked with that she might consider being more flexible. Her response, which I will never forget, was relayed in a slightly intense shriek with absolutely no ironic awareness whatsoever: "Oh, I can be flexible, as long as I know ahead of time!"

So what we have to do is learn to stop assuming things will go according to plan. This takes some work, but when you aren't surprised by plans changing, it really eases up on your stress and distress.

JOURNAL

When you hear the words "control freak," what do you think of?

Do you consider yourself a control freak?

In which areas of your life are you able to give up control? Which areas seem incredibly important for you to maintain control of?

What do you have to do to make the shift away from obeying your inner control freak?

What do you believe will happen if you don't control the things you feel you need to?

Is that true for certain?

CONTROL FREAKS: READ THIS NOW!

(Or in your own time, you know, like when it's good for you. Say, when you personally really feel like it. Don't let *me* tell you what to do...)

So. Has anyone ever called you a control freak? Isn't it funny how it's the one experience we control freaks have in common—that people think it's okay to tell us we're control freaks? And that first time, wasn't it kind of shocking? “Me?” you asked. And then you wondered about it on the way home in the car, where you were distracted for the first time by the idea of it, when you would normally be busy driving and checking how many minutes you had until you had to pick up your kids at school and make dinner so it could be ready at exactly 6:30 p.m., so you'd have time for their baths, two books, tooth brushing, and kisses before *Lost* was on at 8:00 p.m.?

Well, this book is going to be good for you. And you're going to hate me.

“Does ‘anal-retentive’ have a hyphen?”

—*Alison Bechdel*, 1990

Dykes to Watch Out For Calendar

TRY THIS:**CONTROL FREAK CONFRONTATION**

Next time you feel a fit of control coming on, see if you can objectively notice whether it is a matter of life and death or a matter of, say, lunch. Now, if it belongs in the latter category, but you are still tenaciously grasping at it, take one big breath. Sit down. Take another breath. Now, ask yourself how important it is. Can you see any humor in this situation at all? Can you dredge up even a small spark of recognition that this is, perhaps, *NOT REALLY THAT BIG A DEAL?*

If the answer was yes, there is hope. If not, keep trying. Humor and self-awareness will win out in the end. Keep working with your witnessing practice.

Need more practice? Book a vacation like we did that requires you to fly through O'Hare at Thanksgiving during Chicago's first big snow...

FLEXIBILITY, MICROBIOLOGIST STYLE

Serena is a microbiologist who studies everything from the gunk in the hot pools of Yellowstone National Park to the genes of fruit flies. If you ever meet her, ask her how you sex-test and neuter fruit flies. You'll be the center of attention at cocktail parties when you use this tidbit as a conversation starter.

Research biologists investigate a problem, observe—question by gathering information—and then form a testable hypothesis. They do systematic tests so they can draw conclusions that either confirm or knock down their original hypothesis.

Biology is really complicated, and simple answers are rare, so scientists usually can't get too attached to one answer. (Sound like your love life?) Serena and other scientists need flexibility in their work. It has to be a habitual practice, or it won't be an accessible tool when they need to use it.

And this tool, this flexibility in thinking, often results in the most significant moments in science. For example, when Alexander Fleming noticed that a blue-green mold growing on one of his culture plates killed bacteria, well, we got

penicillin! One of the most important medical discoveries in the twentieth century, born out of nothing. And when, as the story goes, some engineer at 3M made a glue that didn't work as well as he hoped, Post-Its were created! And that was one of the most important office supply discoveries of the millennium. So even in places where we think we have the least flexibility, such as medicine and science, we are absolutely required to keep our minds open and flexible in order to come up with creative solutions.

FLEXIBILITY, MOMMY STYLE

Parenthood requires large tectonic plates of flexibility. You plan playdates for your only time off, and that damn neighbor kid gets sick. (“How dare he?!”) You have to get to the airport for a work trip, but the school closes for the day due to a heating failure. (“You’ve got to be kidding me!”) You save money from every paycheck for eighteen years for your kid’s college, and he decides to become an artist. Or worse yet, *a comedian!*

If you walk into this particular propeller with the belief that if you just plan carefully enough, all will work out as you foresee it, you are headed for disaster, disappointment, and a lot of distasteful looks from other adults when you melt down in Target because they’re out of glue for the school art project. (“Glue?! What kind of modern consumer haven is ever out of glue?”) But there it is. Time for Plan B.

Or Plan C...or perhaps K.

Being inflexible (“Damn it! They’re out of our kind of baby formula!”) leads to constant stress and suffering, whereas a life of practicing flexibility (“Oh well, we’ll just give the baby Pepsi this week...”) leads to a life of freedom, ease, and joy. Okay, it might lead to someone calling Social Services on you, too—but you get my point.

GIVING UP POWER

Now, there is a difference between being flexible and being a doormat.

In some of my workshops, people notice that they are letting other actors make all the decisions. Women in particular are conditioned to not ruffle feathers. They don’t want to be seen as pushy, and so they give up power and don’t offer opinions. In improv, it is really apparent when we do this. Even audiences can see when

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE: FLEXIBILITY

Practice noticing when you are being inflexible. How does your body feel? Does it tense up because you believe you have something to fear from being flexible in a given situation? Make conscious choices to be flexible even when it's uncomfortable and you're not sure of the outcome. Experiment. Take a breath when someone suggests something you weren't expecting. Say, "Let me think about that for a minute," rather than giving in to an immediate reaction of tension and fear. Keep working on your witnessing practice and notice when you are holding onto a belief that is keeping you from being flexible. Allow yourself the time to look at the situation from a different perspective. Practice doing things differently than you normally do—from the way you drive to work, to your daily schedule, to whatever is your personal control-freak behavior. Catch yourself. Keep your sense of humor about it. Allow for possibilities to unfold.

TAKE RISKS

Trinity: “No one’s ever done anything like this before.”

Neo: “That’s why it’s going to work.”

—*The Matrix*

The subject of this chapter is vital to anyone wanting to have a creative, fulfilling life. Taking risks gives life vitality. We will use exercises to access our natural risk-taking, courageous abilities. We will journal to find out what holds us back from creating the life we really want, and we will practice the art of committing.

We often perform a game called “Chance of a Lifetime,” in which we pull audience members up on stage, ask them to name one thing they’d like to do before they die, and then act out—ridiculously, of course— their lives leading up to the moments they describe. That is, we used to often perform this game, until we had about our thirtieth person in a row say, “I want to skydive.” Skydiving, it seems, is the great metaphor for what everyone wishes to have the guts to do before dying.

And while most of these people will never skydive, the fact is almost all of them, at that moment, would rather risk skydiving than be pulled up on stage during an improv show. Many people, in fact, would rather do almost anything else than get up on stage and potentially embarrass themselves. Tightrope walk over the Grand Canyon? “Sure!” Wrestle alligators? “No problem!” But make a fool of yourself? “I’d rather die.”

Are our egos that delicate? (Yup.) Are we that attached to our pride? (Yup.) Are we more afraid of being fools than of breaking our necks? (Yup, yup, yup.)

I have said more stupid things in my thirty-nine years than most people do in a lifetime. I have had, shall we say, more practice. And I have even gotten paid for saying stupid things. Not that the producers wouldn’t have preferred I said brilliant things, but no one ever held back a paycheck for a bad improv performance. Even the producers know about risk, and they are willing to go there with us. If improv weren’t risky, the successful moments wouldn’t be as much fun to watch. And the audiences come back—even as early as a week later after a mediocre show—to see if we’ll pick ourselves up off the floor and give it another go.

I have endured absolute silence at a punch line that didn’t quite make it. I have actually been booed when I went over the line. I have cried in more than one bathroom after a performance. (And I consider myself quite stable as far as actors go!) I have regretted things I’ve said. I’ve regretted things I haven’t said. I’ve hesitated, missing the moment, and I’ve jumped in too early without a good setup. And I’ve thought of brilliant things two hours later during the car ride home.

But most of all, I’ve done about 216 improv shows to date, which is about 3,456 games—the same or more in rehearsal—and I’ve taught more than a thousand hours of improv classes. At some point early on, I began to spend more emotional energy on the fun of it and less on the fear.

All I can say is *Thank God*. That would have been a lot of hours of fear.

And if you are thinking, “Jeez, I spend that amount of time on fear,” then know this: You don’t have to. This way of fearless living is available to *anyone*.

Allowing yourself to take risks is a vital skill to cultivate if you want to have a spontaneous and creative life. In my workshop, almost everyone who attends has some initial fear about doing the workshop. People are afraid that they will not be able to step up to the plate and take risks, or that they will freeze up, or that they will just be bad. Some have stage fright or can't open themselves up in front of others, and some are simply afraid of new situations. But by the end, everyone is impressed with him- or herself. Each person has learned how to commit to taking creative risks and leaves with a new sense of self. All of them are, as is everyone who faces a fear, impressed with their own bravery.

“Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what next or how. The moment you know how, you begin to die a little. The artist never entirely knows. We guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark.”

—*Agnes de Mille*

NO HESITATION

Maggie is a forty-something single mother. Although she is a mature-looking, stylish brunette sporting this year's Banana Republic work clothes, she has a bright smile with braces, which sometimes creates an image of a playful eighteen-year-old. Her ability to be silly and have fun is delightful. She came to one of my retreats because she “just wanted to do things spontaneously...I wanted to learn how to say, ‘That's not how I planned it, but it turned out okay!’ Or, ‘Wow! Look what turned out that I wasn't expecting.’” She, like everyone else, came with some fear of the unknown.

For Maggie, the whole process—from signing up without knowing much about the retreat to volunteering to go first at doing the exercises—was taking a risk. What she said she wanted was just to learn to be more spontaneous, as her normal way of doing things was to hesitate and miss the moment:

“The thing that proved to me that I was accomplishing my goal to commit to this process was when Katie said, ‘Careful! Don't forget to listen to what your partners are offering. You're jumping in over others.’ Which to me was hilarious! When I get into group situations, I usually hang back. I watch, and the leader will say ‘Any questions?’ and I don't say anything—and then I'll come up and ask her later on the side. And I told myself when I came here, ‘Jump in, Maggie. Participate.’ So I kind of went overboard! What I realized was that before this experience here,

I was always holding back, strangling myself. So now I'm gonna go home and be able to jump in more! I love it!"

BUT WHY TAKE RISKS AT ALL?

If everything in your life goes swimmingly every second of every day, and you do not need creative inspiration, or better ways to problem solve, or more efficiency, or more funding, or new staff, or a better relationship, or change of any kind, then you don't need this information. In fact, if you could recommend a stock tip or two, I'd appreciate it. If, however, there are things that should change—staff coming and going with new ways of working, new personal financial challenges, kids, partners or spouses, and new areas of your field to keep up with and understand—then you need to collaborate and problem solve. Having any relationships at all—simply *existing* in the world—requires co-creation and problem solving. And finding new solutions means taking some creative risks.

TRY THIS: COUNTRY SONG

Practice the skill of “no hesitation.” Country songs are notoriously predictable and have easy rhyme schemes. Next time you're in the car, turn on the country radio station. Let the song play for a minute to get the tune, rhyme scheme, and rhythm into your head. Then, when it's time for a new verse, listen to the first line, and then sing over the second line with your own made-up rhyming line. It can be ridiculous or simple or whatever comes out.

Radio: *There ain't no woman like the one I've got.*

Me: She's fifty, menopausal, and her flashes are hot.

You could also try it without the radio, but using instead the first line from a song you already know.

Also try it without the rhyming and singing part: Turn on talk radio. Let the DJ go on for about twenty to thirty seconds—then quickly switch off the radio and IMMEDIATELY finish the DJ's sentence. Do it in the DJ's

style if you can. Try this a few times until you're actually speaking in the DJ's style—though, in true improv comedy form, you'll find yourself arguing furiously that the president should absolutely veto the Senate's bill that honey-mustard salad dressing must contain a higher per-volume percentage of midwestern mustard seeds. As always, don't plan anything. Just pick up immediately where the DJ leaves off, as if it were the same person continuing. Try this with TV, too—particularly infomercials.

BE A PARTICIPANT IN YOUR OWN LIFE

Carolann is a tall, fifty-year-old model and commercial actress who holds herself upright and poised. She keeps a serious and controlled look on her face, so when she bursts into laughter, it is a delightful surprise. Her cool demeanor served her well in doling out a calculated deadpan humor that had us all in appreciative fits of laughter and applause.

“Risk taking is not something I specialize in. Actually, I've spent most of my life making sure there weren't very many risks in it. And so one of the big take-aways for me from working with improv in this retreat, and what I'm really ready for in my life, is to take risks—whether it be in my business or my personal life or my church family. Because truly, it translates from being a bystander, an observer of life, to being a participant. And it's very important to be a participant, and it's really true that most failure is not fatal,” she laughed. “And we saw that over and over this weekend. Nobody died. We lived through it.”

WHAT HOLDS US BACK

Simone is a gentle, funny, thirty-something teacher. She seems willing to jump in and play, but inside, she holds herself back at home, at work, and with friends:

“I have reached a point in my life and work where I am safe and predictable. This is neither good nor bad—it simply is. The possibility of learning to touch my inner creativity and spontaneity would serve me well in work and home. The apprehension comes from fear; fear of not doing it well or not doing it correctly. Fear and a lack of self-trust. I want to enhance my friendships and my ability to authentically communicate with others.”

Trying new experiences like these helps us gain trust in ourselves, but it also allows us to safely take risks and see that we can do it—that we aren't going to get hurt or lose our friends. The only thing that's really hurting us in the long run is holding back and buying into the fear. Staying stuck in the fear leads to a boring, tense, and unfulfilled life. Taking risks, even small ones, is a practice that opens up our lives and allows for joy, courage, creativity, and self-confidence.

“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.”

—*Anaïs Nin*

JOURNAL

Write ten things that interest you but that you fear doing because you feel they would be taking a risk. (Skydiving doesn't count.)

What are your beliefs about you and these risks? In other words, what keeps you from taking them?

What would happen if you did one of these risky things?

Are you sure that would be the outcome?

Imagine a different outcome—a positive, successful one. Are you ready for that?

FROM PALE TO BOLD

Jessica is a forty-year-old business owner. She comes across as quietly confident and strong. “I am generally a loner, so groups push my shy/sensitive button. I want to jump into the swimming pool, but fearing the cold, I tend to sit on the side,” she explains. “Though I’ve been called courageous, I’ve never felt adventuresome. During one singing improv, a voice came out of my gut that I had never heard before! Having always felt that I can’t sing, I was totally taken by surprise by the power of this voice. I liked it—the power, MY power!” Jessica says she began to feel stronger, but it was a subtle shift: “It’s a feeling of filling out or broadening... like a color changing in tone from pale to bold, but not all at once.”

Having put herself in a situation of vulnerability—the unknown—and letting the spontaneous emerge and “be,” Jessica says she feels less sure of what she can’t do and believes more of what might be possible:

“How this will play out in my life, I do not yet know. But connecting with this part of myself is extremely gratifying.”

TOTAL HONESTY

As an actor, honesty is one of the most important skills you have. You must portray your character with genuine honesty—otherwise it won’t be believable, and the audience won’t be moved. Some of the riskiest moments in our lives are when we are being completely honest with ourselves and with others.

One of my teen students, Keily, wrote a piece in which she told her own story of being labeled by peers as the “smart girl.” As she told the story, she taped up the sides of a giant cardboard box all around her. By the end she was boxed in, literally. The piece was clever and terrific, and the reason it worked for the audience was that she was completely honest. It’s not easy to stand in front of a group of people and say you’ve had a hard time of it because you’re extremely smart. “My God, how stuck-up!” was what she was afraid her peers would say. But when she really committed to going all the way, she created a fantastic piece that showed us how being smart isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. But if Keily had been afraid of being honest, she never would have arrived at the place where she could really move and affect the audience.

**TRY THIS:
GET HONEST**

If you were totally honest, what would you say to yourself about your abilities in your work?

How about in your relationship?

In your basic daily human kindness? In your thoughts about others?

Remember, honesty means *all* the truth—not just the criticism, but the good stuff, too. Now, sit and witness your thoughts. Simply witness all your thoughts without judging them as good or bad. Just notice. Say, “Hmmm...” instead of just saying, “That was totally stupid/mean/spiritually enlightened/crazy.”

PICKING UP AND MOVING

Audrey is a vibrant, energetic woman. She left New York a few years after college, looking for a big change from the run-of-the-mill career path she was on. She picked up and moved to Boulder, Colorado, when she was twenty-six. She didn't know anyone. She'd given up a career in business that everyone thought was a wise and admirable profession.

“So because they thought it was smart and mature to be on a career path, I had to rebel against that and head out west with no plans, money, or home. By the way, read into this that I was doing it to piss off my parents,” she laughs.

When Audrey got to Boulder, she checked into a motel and went to a restaurant nearby to see if she could get a job learning how to be a cook. She'd always liked food and cooking but thought she was terrible at it. Her plan was to open a restaurant some day:

“The guy offered me a job as a dishwasher. I said, ‘Screw that!’ and left. Three hours later, I came back and took the job. He gave me a fifty-cent raise for just showing up the next day. I'd like to say I worked my way up, but I didn't. I hated food prep and saved myself from a long, hard career.”

But moving out west brought her into the environmental conservation field, which she's in now. She never would have done that in Manhattan. “Not a lot of fields there,” she smiles.

Two other good things also came out of that initial risk-taking experience. First, when she moved from Boulder to another town, she wasn't at all scared the second time. She'd taken the risk before and succeeded, so she knew she could do it again with no fear. And second, she learned enough from that first job to become a really good cook. She cooks for her guests and family all the time. It gives her a great sense of accomplishment, creativity, and relaxation.

"I can't imagine my life without cooking really good meals," she says.

"And neither can your mooching friends," pipes in her friend (*moi*).

There are many picking-up-and-moving stories in this country. It seems like a rite of passage in our culture, it's that common. What's important to remember is that the person moving with you across the country is you—all the issues you left behind will come with you to the new location. Still, sometimes it's incredibly helpful to start fresh, so you can see things more clearly and make changes in your life in an unobstructed manner. And of course, moves like this are a risk, and they can lead to a great deal of learning through the adventure of it. Leaving behind what you know can be scary, but as Audrey saw, it allowed her to make other risk-taking moves later, which were much easier and more available to her because she had already developed some self-trust and learned how to trust a risky process like that.

ARE YOU A GOOD RISK OR A BAD RISK?

There are, of course, terrible risks that no one wants to take nor should take. This could include eating long-standing, lukewarm buffet lunches at 4:00 p.m., having unprotected sex, and putting your money on the Chicago Cubs. And of course there's the world of extreme sports, dangerous fast driving, or drug abuse. Or being a member of the paparazzi. But you bought a self-help book, people. So here's just a quick look at why risking is a positive behavior.

Stephanie came to my retreat and was an absolute joy to be around. She is vivacious, goofy, and full of life. She was hard-pressed to think of things she'd done that were risky in a good way. She generally used risk as a way out of responsibility.

"I haven't taken a lot of risks that you'd use for a Disney movie. I've slept with a lot of men I probably shouldn't have. Those risks aren't exactly ones I'd take again, but then again, I've got good stories to tell...and if pushed, I'd have to admit that I enjoyed it!" she laughs devilishly. "I did a lot of drugs. I stayed out late. I even tried to rob a gas station once with my hand in my pocket and no gun. Unfortunately, or maybe *fortunately*, it turned out I knew the woman who was

working that night. So she didn't turn me in. I was thrill seeking, mostly. But I was also broke, and it seemed like the thing to do. We ended up best friends. After something like that, you either never make eye contact, or you go out and have a really good laugh over about six drinks. Throwing up from alcohol with girlfriends really brings you closer! So the end result was good, and I can say I've had a hell of a life. You probably don't really want to put that in a self-help book, but there it is!"

Stephanie is not afraid of taking risks. In fact, she would say she errs on the side of too much risky behavior—and you probably agree! And what's interesting is that she was totally unafraid of making a fool of herself in the improv games we played with the group. She jumped right in and took risks, and when something "failed" or wasn't as funny as she'd hoped, she shrugged it off. She has lived a life full of risk taking, and her sense of self is not tied up in needing to "look good" all the time.

Let me be clear about this: I'm not saying we all need to be like Stephanie, robbing gas stations and "getting jiggy with it" across the state. What we do need is to find our own way to be *regular risk takers*, even if it's just speaking up a little bit every day or walking a different way to work. The fact that risk taking needs to become a regular part of a creative and courageous life is a given. The how is up to you.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Lisa is an American who has lived in Italy for twelve years. She moved there to get away from a lot of things, as well as to seek adventure in a land of art, culture, beauty, and mystery. She loved becoming someone new when she spoke a different language. Italian allowed her to find a new identity, which was a thrill. Lisa is an intellectual woman, one of the smartest I've ever known. She was a political science major in college and can talk circles around anyone. She is book smart, people smart, and street smart. And in an un-obnoxious way, she knows it.

Which is why it was a complete surprise to all of us who know her when she quit her work to become a full-time mother. As the daughter of a feminist, intellectual mother, she had grown up believing that smart women don't stay at home. Everyone told her she'd be bored. She was deeply nervous about giving up a teaching position at the university and stopping all of her writing and research, but something kept nudging her to try this parenting thing full-on.

“I can’t even put my finger on it,” she says. “It wasn’t like it was a momentous upheaval of a moment where I thought, ‘My God! This is what I was born to do!’”

And she never got sick of her job or anything like that. She just had this lingering sense that she was missing something with her daughter, and she wanted it. Whatever “it” was. So she followed her gut—not something she was particularly good at or trained to do, or even encouraged to do in her circle of rational friends and colleagues.

But guess what?

She absolutely loves it.

Sure, she has moments when she doesn’t love it—but that’s no different from her previous work, she points out. What surprises her most is how rarely she’s bored. She thought that was going to be the thing that sent her over the edge. She thought, “How can I go from writing about international diplomacy to watching *Barney*?” (Though she assures me it’s a better show in Italian.)

“But,” she says, “it’s just been amazing and fascinating and really, really satisfying. At the end of the day, I feel like I’ve accomplished something worthwhile. Who knew?”

UN-SUCCESS STORIES

The risk-taking stories you hear are often success stories. The classic motivational speaker says, “I did this risky thing, and look how it paid off! Now I own my own *Fortune 500* company, and I am retiring next week to Kauai with my surfboard and my four perfect, trilingual children.”

But they aren’t all success stories, are they?

And they shouldn’t be. Telling only the ones that pay off in a material or obvious way would be a disservice. So what’s the point of the other stories? Look at *Tin Cup*, a great movie. The main character is a washed-up golf pro who gets back into golfing, makes his way to the finals, and then blows it—intentionally. He takes a risk by trying for the long shot, and he misses. But the story doesn’t stop there. He stands there while a horrified audience and his caddie watch, and he continues to go for the long shot over and over and over—until he’s not only blown his lead, but it looks like he’s going to come in last. But finally, he makes the shot. And that moment is more heroic than if he’d had his comeback and won. And who would you remember from an event like that—the player who came in first or this guy? He took the risk

and committed to it all the way, and he became more of a hero by losing powerfully than he would have by “winning.”

Your life cannot and should not be filled with only risk-taking success stories. But all risk-taking stories, when you look at them from afar, lead to a richer life. The telling mark is that they are *stories*. If you don't take risks, you have no stories to tell. And when you look back on your life, you'll see that without risks, there won't really be all that much to remember.

So what do you want? A rich life? Or a perfectly smooth one?

ALWAYS BRING YOUR CLOWN SHOES

When I was traveling in India, my husband and I met a man who had giant red clown shoes sticking out of his backpack. Of course we had to ask. It turned out that he was a clown traveling from orphanage to orphanage in India. He had heard of Clowns Without Borders, an organization that goes into war-torn communities and marches through the town and does a show. The kids start to peek out of doorways and from behind piles of rubble, and out they come to see all the color and absurdity marching by. It's an amazing organization. So this man decided to do a mini-version of that whenever he traveled on his own. He took a risk every time he put on those shoes and the gargantuan hat that he kept stuffed in his backpack. Sometimes he was appreciated by kids and the orphanage workers, but sometimes their distrust was so great that they wouldn't let him in.

Being rejected as a clown is particularly harsh. You put yourself out there and then have to walk away in those big shoes. It strikes me as a great image for what we do all the time when we take risks. We put on our goofy hat and big shoes, and then if it fails, we have to walk away in full view of everyone: thump, thump, thump. And everyone can see how ridiculous we look.

Don't we all have some image of rejection before we take a risk? “If it fails, how will I look?” Thump, thump, thump.

BEING COMMITTED

In improv, being committed is taking an idea and really going with it. If you're going to jump into a scene as a giant woolly mammoth, then, well, really do the woolly mammoth with all your heart. You know how this works in real life: if you're going to ask someone out, do it with verve. We've all seen and loved

moments in movies or books where someone quits his or her job in a really committed way, with no backing out. There's something heroic in taking a risk with no escape route. It's something we all are drawn to. It's not always smart or the right choice, but there's something in that to explore. Why do we love these acts of courage more than the semi-committed, one-foot-in-the-doorway type?

Patrick is a thirty-something, on-the-go guy. He is a free spirit who doesn't want to be tied down, but he wants security, too. He was thinking of buying a house but didn't want to feel chained to it. "I want to live my life as I want it," he says, clearly struggling, looking like a cheetah searching for the zoo exit. "How can I have both financial security and a sense of freedom?"

He was seeing the world in a dualistic way: security versus freedom. This is an easy rut to get into for many of us. But the dualistic view of life is not helpful, nor is it really accurate. To begin with, security is somewhat of an illusion. But so is freedom. You could buy the house, feel secure, and then lose your job, your health, or any number of things. You could choose freedom and hit the road, but really you've given up access to the things you really want—like connection, a community, love, an exciting career. What Patrick and I talked about was looking closely at these illusions and acknowledging that there was a fear of commitment: a fear of picking one thing and being wrong.

"So what happens," he shrugs, "is I pick nothing, and I'm neither here nor there. I'm sort of floating in space a lot of the time. And I'm good at nothing."

But when you look at life as if there are no real wrong decisions, commitment doesn't seem so scary. I suggested he try committing to one decision for a while and riding that wave. And to pay attention to his thoughts, beliefs, and illusions during the process. He did and was surprised to find that he didn't mind it once he had made the commitment. He actually found the freedom to explore within that commitment. He bought the house and was able to create a life that felt free and easy with lots of travel and career exploration. It was the indecisiveness and lack of commitment that was causing a lot of his suffering, not the reality of what the commitment itself offered.

Jim faced some of the same stuff.

"It's hard for me to make a choice and stick with it," he admits. As an artist and a freelance writer, he has many skills and lots of enthusiasm—but a fear of picking something that will rule out other options. "I've tried art design and marketing and commissioned portraits, but I'm afraid of putting all my passion into one. It means I'm committing to one path. What if it's the wrong path? My

life is too short. What if I make a mistake and can't take it back or do it over? So I pick none, and I'm not good at anything." Clearly, this is a common theme.

Jim and Patrick's situations are not unique. Everyone can relate to them on some level, but some of us are able to choose and let go of that fear. So if you're of the non-committing variety, how do you learn to let go of your fear and commit to a choice? You practice it in smaller ways first.

TRY THIS: COMMIT!

Start with something small, just to get the feel of the mental process. It's going to be different for each reader, so pick some things you absolutely know you *can* commit to. Here are some ideas just to get your brain going. Perhaps try committing to:

- Going food shopping today, when you know you really need to restock your fridge but could easily put it off for a day
- Doing ten minutes of meditation each day
- Exercising consistently
- Calling your parents
- Finishing painting the bathroom
- Taking the dog for a walk every evening
- Cutting out something like caffeine, alcohol, sugar, lima beans, whatever
- Changing the dead lightbulbs

Now, pick your list of things and write them here. (It'll be interesting to come back to this list in the future and compare it with a commitment list you make, say, a year from now.) Again, jot down small, easy commitments. This is an experiment to learn about yourself, not an attempt to reinvent your personality. And this is not an opportunity to beat yourself up about all the things you can't commit to. Go do one thing on your list right now. Like, as in right now. (Are you doing it or just humoring me?)

Next, look at the list. How did you get your head to commit? Or did you? If you didn't do it, journal below all the thoughts you have as to why you didn't. Are you using hostile words to berate yourself? Can you just look at it more objectively? (If you did commit, journal all those thoughts, too: "Oooo, I'm so good. I'll get to go to Self-Help Heaven," etc.)

Now, how about finding something even smaller to commit to? Pick something, and now do that easier commitment.

Why was that easier? How did you get your head to commit and your feet to move to the edge of the diving board? Journal here:

Begin to watch this process as you make commitments throughout your day, each day. This is a mental muscle we are going to start exercising. In time, your commitments will get bigger and more risky and at the same time, believe it or not, easier.

STAYING WITH IT

In one retreat, I was afraid to risk bringing up the white elephant (or is it pink elephant?) in the room, which was that the very last game we played at the weekend-long event didn't go well. It was called "Improv, the Musical" and included a musical scene where the actors didn't know what I was going to play on the piano, and I didn't know what they were going to sing or make their scene about. It's an incredibly advanced game, but generally it's so silly that it works. For several reasons, it didn't quite make it this time: the actors didn't commit, didn't listen to each other, and lost sight of their objectives. I knew everyone could have done a lot better, from what I'd seen all weekend. I briefly heard my internal voice say it was my fault for not leading the game better.

So I had to first notice the thought that was accompanying this feeling, and then I had to let go of it a bit and just watch myself be wary of bringing it up with the group. But I consciously decided to take the risk and bring it up, thinking, "No, I've had this experience before where I bring up the difficult thing, and then we have a great conversation about it—which is what everyone is here for." And that's just what I did. And the conversation that ensued about commitment and collaboration and self-trust was the most powerful and useful one of the whole retreat.

“Staying with it” is a tool to take into other relationships, too—at home, at work, with family and friends. If something feels unsettled, just go there. Try to explore the thoughts and feelings, and see if you uncover something really useful. Take that risk to share something true and honest. Because if you shy away from all that, you’re never going to grow, and opportunities for new understanding will be lost.

ON THE SIDELINES

Genevieve is an administrative assistant who works in a big, bustling law firm. She is surrounded by energy and achievers, but she doesn’t take part. She loves the energy and wants to be a part of it, which is why she took this job, but she can’t seem to jump in and step up to the plate, such as giving suggestions for better office management during staff meetings.

“That’s kind of what I do in life—stay on the sidelines, don’t take the risks, and then wake up later and wish I had,” she says.

Over the course of a weekend retreat, Genevieve began to experiment with jumping in and seeing what she could come up with on the fly. She shocked herself and all of us. But it was the commitment to jump in that made things begin to work for her:

“I made a commitment to be courageous at this retreat. And I was pleasantly surprised. In one game, it was so hard because I wanted to have a whole scene in my head before I went out there to start one.”

It’s like standing on a diving board. At some point you say, “Okay, here goes,” and your feet follow your head. But your head has to commit. So how do we get our heads to commit? Practice. We have to practice the art of commitment.

“Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always in ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation) there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would otherwise never have occurred.”

—*Goethe*

CREATE SAFETY TO ALLOW FOR RISK TAKING:

Ironically, you need to feel safe to take risks.

What is the safety net in a high-risk environment? It's knowing that you won't be shot down and knowing that you will be allowed to move on or try again if your first idea doesn't work. In management, we need to help encourage this process by creating an atmosphere in which our staff feels it's safe to be creative.

We all want approval. We all want to grow. We all want freedom. We all want safety. At times it seems like some of these things work against each other. For example, we want to grow and take risks, but we want safety and approval—all at the same time. Creating a safe atmosphere in which your co-workers can take risks is vital. Everyone plays a part in this.

If you are top management, you can allow for risk taking to occur. Perhaps you create this atmosphere by creating time in meetings where, in an un-rushed manner, the staff can brainstorm. Rushing creates tension, which ain't real good for creativity. It's important to *mean it* when you create this time. Don't just give it five minutes—like that's going to get you anywhere. It also might not pay off on the first try. If people aren't used to this type of atmosphere, they might feel rushed and tense and uncreative anyway. Make it a part of your lives. Even an extra thirty minutes allotted every two weeks could produce incredible results.

One of the things we do at the beginning of my retreats is to create a list of Creative Process Group Traits we want to have. This is a great thing to do for team building and brainstorming sessions. The list should come from brainstorming with everyone in the room. We usually come up with things like this:

- “We want to feel we are being heard.”
- “We want to keep our sense of humor.”
- “We want to be allowed to think out loud and suggest things without them having to be brilliant or perfect the first time.”
- “We want to have fun.”

Try making a list, either with a group or just by yourself, based on your own intentions that you want to keep in mind. As a leader, particularly as a theatre director and the director of *Broad Comedy*, I have noticed that I want to control, and at the same time, I truly want input from my actors. I have to balance the two and be clear about where I want input and where I might not want it. Boundaries

are fine—important, even. But I have to remember to let my actors know that I want their ideas in certain areas, and I have to create space for that. If I don't want their input in one area, I try to let them know when I will want it, so they know they will be needed another time.

Many of us think we already have created an environment where people feel safe to take risks, but I'd suggest that you really check to see whether others truly do feel safe or not. Saying it's okay to try something is one thing, but when someone takes a risk and it fails, how do you handle it? Overly harsh judgment at that point will ensure that next time, people won't be willing to take creative risks.

The staff has to take responsibility, too. If we show that we can't take criticism—even constructive criticism—then we don't allow creativity around us. Everyone contributes to the creative atmosphere.

READY, FIRE, AIM

A friend of mine, David Thompson, is a bluegrass musician and a brilliant website designer. He is a hilarious MC for his band, Kane's River, and improvises quippy one-liners throughout the show, to the audience's delight. As a Web designer, he understands that perfectionism has a place in—but not throughout—the creative process.

"It's like you have to do it in a ready, fire, aim sort of way," he says. "You can't perfect something before it goes out on the Internet, because you don't know how it will work. You have to fire it out, see how it goes, get some feedback, and then re-aim it."

I think this is a perfect analogy for improv and all creative endeavors, child rearing (and spouse rearing) included. You don't know exactly where you want a project—or your life—to go. You just can't know it all right up front.

In the "ready, set, go" model, we believe we have to be all set before we go, but we don't. If you release yourself from having to be totally set, you are open to more possibilities, and you won't be paralyzed by perfection. In creative endeavors, we need to have the trust to "go" and know that it's okay to be constantly resetting or re-aiming everything as we go along.

In a scene, new information comes from the other actors. And once it does, you re-aim, and the scene heads off in a different direction. Ditto in marriage. You didn't know you were both going to fall in love with that scraggly little puppy you found in your backyard, eating your garbage. So boom! Off you go to the vet for

shots and a collar, and then you come back home to rearrange the house and change your schedule to include daily walks. Which opens up other doors (like carpet shampooing twice a year).

Taking risks means that you don't know the outcome for sure. You don't have to be wild and irresponsible (unless you want to be!), but to take risks, at some point you will have to just fire your idea off and re-aim it as you go.

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE: RISKS

Pick one thing from your risk list that you might be ready to “fire now” and “aim later.” Some of my workshop participants’ risk lists have included the following activities:

- Putting an ad in the paper for a personal assistant before having the extra income
- Going through old letters
- Having an amicable lunch with her ex-husband
- Having a baby
- Having another baby!
- Eating outside of her normal food groups
- Trying the improv exercises without the pressure of having to be hilarious every second
- Telling his best friend the problem he’s been having in their friendship
- Hang gliding, or, yeah yeah... *skydiving*
- Moving to a new city
- Calling an estranged parent
- Taking a job he felt he was not qualified for but was offered anyway
- Learning to sing

Your list might include something big or simply baby steps. Both are equally important and are about *timing*. If it isn’t time to take a giant leap, then wait. Perhaps take several small risks each day—saying something more honest, accepting a task that is a challenge for you, etc. Don’t worry about how to aim it exactly now. Just aim it *somewhere* and fire it off. You can adjust your aim as you go. Continue to practice your commitment lists as well. Make small ones that are perfectly doable, and watch as your head commits and your feet move. Notice this process, and encourage it with self-awareness and self-praise. The practice of commitment and risk taking will change your life. You will live more fully.

TRUST

The first step is to relax—put aside impatience, stop struggling, and learn to accept uncertainty and inaction. Wait for ideas to incubate below the radar, rather than striving to brainstorm them to the surface.

—*Carl Honoré*, *In Praise of Slowness*

This chapter will teach you how to trust that everything you need is available to you. You will learn to trust yourself, others, and the whole chimichanga. You'll learn how to assume that you know nothing, that your judgments and assumptions must first be verified. You'll learn how to get lost, to relish mistakes, and to take steps toward letting yourself become more creative and courageous.

There's a classic and popular improv game called "Freeze," in which two actors perform a scene until another actor yells, "Freeze!" The two actors then freeze in their positions, and a third performer taps one of the actors "out," takes over that position, and starts a brand-new scene. The game is great fun, punch line after punch line, as long as it moves at a quick pace.

Therein lies the challenge for the troupe—they need to watch the onstage actors carefully to notice when the scene has reached its comedy peak and then immediately "freeze" the actors and jump in.

But what happens if no one has an idea to jump in with? The scene that isn't "frozen" goes on and on, grows dull, and the whole game goes downhill. So you have to jump in for the sake of the whole group and the show whether you have an idea or not—there's no choice.

I can't count the number of times in this game that I've rushed out on stage, tapped another player, taken his place in whatever ridiculous position he was in, and then listened along with the rest of the audience as a scene-starting line magically spewed out of my mouth. And what I've discovered is that *as long as I trust that it will be there, it will.*

Improv requires a huge amount of trust. We need to trust ourselves, trust the other players, trust the overall process; basically we need to trust the whole dang universe. And while creativity requires self-trust, fortunately it also *inspires* self-trust. We are inspired to trust that all the ideas we need are already inside our minds, and we just have to relax enough to let them out. Allowing yourself and allowing others to brainstorm and improvise—judgment-free—can generate self-confidence and with that, better ideas. My experience in improv has been that whenever the audience is laughing and applauding and loving us, we rise to the occasion. We actually are better. We live up to its expectations that we are indeed creative.

CONTROL VS. TRUST

Here's a unique mantra to try on for a while: "*I do not always know my own best interest.*"

"But," you ask, "aren't I the best person to make decisions about my life? Aren't we taught to be in control?" We are taught that we should be in control. But control is elusive, and wanting control just leads to suffering, as we've seen. We are unhappy when we can't control things, and it's not possible to control external

things very often. You might have control for a few minutes, but then off it goes again—and gosh dang it if you aren't going to lose it and fall back into being unhappy. You can't control things outside yourself, but you can control how you react to them. And even that's a challenge.

Perhaps a different goal is needed. I vote for trust. Trust is the opposite of control. Learning to trust that everything is working out perfectly is a difficult practice. It's especially hard when the crapola is hitting the fan, but let's at least first try it with easy day-to-day stuff.

For example, let's say I am late to work. Too bad. But as it turns out, I miss having a run-in with my boss, who had to leave early for New York. She was pissed about something I'd done the day before, and it's likely that a run-in that morning would have created a deep rift in our relationship. Instead, because I am late and miss her, I talk to her the next day, when she has calmed down, and we work things out more smoothly.

Ah, the genius of retrospect.

It is much easier to see how well things worked out after the fact. But the practice I'm suggesting is to try to imagine that things might just be working out for the best, even while they don't seem to be.

Here's a common example: You don't get the job you want, only to get another job that turns out to be a much better job than the one you'd wanted. Of course, you wouldn't have even applied for the better one if you had gotten the original one you thought you wanted! I have heard this example a million times from people at my retreats.

And be careful: don't get stuck into the ego's trick of wanting things to go the way you plan them, and then if they don't, just assuming they will still go that way for you later. That's not what we're talking about. Trust that there is a learning experience in *whatever* the outcome may be. As the Buddhist teacher Cheri Huber says, "It's not *what* you do; it's *how* you do it."

Now doesn't that take the pressure off of trying to control things?

JUDGMENT & ASSUMPTIONS: WHAT THE HELL DO YOU KNOW?

What does improv teach us regarding judgment? On stage we practice making very quick, discerning judgments and running with them, but we have to also keep one eye open and be willing to change our judgments and our direction.

Be open, open, open.

We practice this onstage in improvisation as we are given new information. We practice this in *life* as we are given new information.

What it boils down to is that judging others and self-judgment go hand in hand.

I had been struggling for years to understand what's wrong with judging. I was raised with a columnist for a mother and a doctor for a father—born and bred with opinion and skepticism. I have a take on everything! I judged people on the street by the looks on their faces. I made a judgment about my husband's mood and how he felt about me by the way he was breathing...as he slept! So what's a girl to do?

For a while, I tried judging everyone at least *positively*, but that just seemed fake. Then I tried embracing my negative judgmentalism, justifying it by saying it was important to judge and using the old extreme example: "Otherwise another Hitler could come to power, and if no one judges him, he'll never be stopped."

Every time the issue came up at meditation retreats, yoga classes, religious sermons, and friends' reprimands, I asked "What's wrong with judgment?" But I never got an answer—or rather, I never heard one. I knew it felt, let's say, *uncomfortable* when I judged, but I couldn't reconcile my feelings and my beliefs. Finally, I found an answer. Marianne Williamson tells a story of driving around with her mother and making comments about the people who lived in the big houses they drove by, how they probably made money by oppressing people in the Third World. And her mother, appalled, looked at her and said, "How the hell do you know?"

Don't you love Jewish mothers? They just cut right to the chase.

I understood then that it's impossible to ever really have enough information about a situation. How could I possibly expect to make a correct judgment about anyone or anything without all the facts? It would require such vast knowledge—infinite, really—and there must be things I don't know that if I *did* know would alter my opinion.

POOF! I have little interest in judging others anymore. And when I do hear myself saying something in my head like, “What a grump! She should get her life straightened out,” or “He is so cocky. He must think he’s more important than everyone here,” I notice immediately a feeling in my stomach that says, *Hey, girl, what the hell do you know about them anyway?*

Now, this isn’t to say I don’t have opinions anymore. (“Yeah, we noticed,” says a friend reading this.) But I have learned discernment rather than judgment. You must have opinions in order to make decisions, know how to act upon them, stay out of danger, know who you want to be involved with, etc. You need to make discerning judgments every second—will I make it through the yellow light? Should I *really* vote for Nader? Is the third glass of wine gonna make me say stupid things? Do I want to spend time with this nincompoop? These kinds of judgments help us to live and act and accomplish things. But at the same time, I reserve room in my mind that says I don’t know for sure if this guy deserves to be called a nincompoop. Maybe he’s just sad or insecure. Maybe he’s done more for the world than anyone I know. Maybe he’s frowning because he’s concentrating, or had a stroke and can’t move those muscles, or just ate Mexican. Who knows? I am constantly being given further information about people that demolishes my theories. And there’s always more information to be had.

As my eighty-nine-year-old Uncle Mike says, “The older I get, the less I really know.”

Expect there is more to know. There is *always* more to know.

TRY THIS:**ASSUME YOU KNOW NOTHING**

Spend today *not* making judgments. Breathe: it's just one day. Each time you start to judge, say, "What don't I see or understand?"

RELISH MISTAKES

"I want to know what happens if I let go. Will I be okay?"

—*Karina*

Musician Bobby McFerrin is famous for his unique style of vocal improvisation. In an NPR interview, he said the trick is to strike "a fine balance between what you know and what you don't know—between control and surrender." But as the interviewer asked, doesn't that lead to chaos and, therefore, mistakes?

"Every time," McFerrin says. "If you're quick, you use [mistakes]. You incorporate them—you turn the mistake into something else...you let the mistake guide you to a whole other place. And sometimes mistakes are the best thing that can happen, because they might lift you out of your lethargy, out of your complacency, and open your mind up to a whole other area that you wouldn't have gone to intentionally."

Relish mistakes. If you are living a life without mistakes, I would bet money that you are living a life without a lot of vitality and creativity. Mistakes are par for the course. The people who succeed are the ones who make lots of mistakes along the way.

TRY THIS:**FORCED KNOBS WILL BREAK**

Practice for three days in a row assuming that Everything Is Happening Perfectly. See what happens to your level of stress. Are you still trying to *make*

things work? Witness your thoughts. When you have perspective on events of the last three days, see which things worked out and which didn't. Was it worth the stress overall? Do you want to continue to try to control every little detail, or do you instead want to live as if the big picture will work itself out eventually? See the world as just doing its thing: you get to be a part of the changes and the fun. How do you want to react? How do you want to be in the changing-ness? Experiment with this and see if there is a happier medium for you. Play with your edge about trust and control. By cultivating an awareness of how you try to control things and how you feel when you can't, you will be taking the first steps toward trust.

Many of my friends incorporated this practice into their lives, almost unknowingly. As each was trying to get pregnant, she worried about the timing of the birth, how it coordinated with her work and holidays and even the season, so she wouldn't be too hot or so her maternity clothes from the first pregnancy would coincide with her size the second time! But of course, the body is the most unhelpful co-conspirator in pregnancy. And when my friends finally had their babies and gained some perspective, every single one of them told me that the baby had really come at the perfect time after all.

IMPROVISING THE FAMILY

Joan is a smart, funny mother of four. *And she homeschools them all.* Man, is she a different breed of human than I am...I'm endlessly impressed. Joan had a lot to say about improv.

"When *don't* you use improv?" she responds. "I have four kids, and not one of them came with an owner's manual or a script for answers to difficult questions. How about when your oldest child, in the car with the younger three, asks if Santa really exists? No script prepared for that one. Or when your daughter's hamster dies a month after she gets it—how do you explain why it's important to keep loving animals even if they die so soon? There's never time to prepare a good answer when the important questions come up with kids: What about God? Why do people die? Should I ask her out on a date? Why doesn't my friend like me anymore? Good grief. Without improv, I'd be doomed."

Being unprepared has become a perfectly comfortable place for her. She has learned to trust that the answers are there.

“It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare;
it is because we do not dare that they are difficult.”

—*Seneca*

INTUITION

Intuition is a creative ability. It's one of those things that you must practice to make it more accessible to you. Do you listen to what your gut tells you? Creative intuition is the feeling that lingers when the mind has filled itself up with judgments, rationalizations and explanations. What is that feeling trying to tell you that your mind is too cluttered to hear intellectually? We all need to train our intuition to be our creative guide.

Dr. Roberts is a retired surgeon. He had a thriving practice for thirty years and was a confident and competent doctor. Last summer, his twenty-year-old son, Jason, was kayaking without his helmet. During an Eskimo Roll, Jason struck an underwater rock, tearing off a huge swath of scalp just behind the hairline above his forehead, down to the very bone. Thankfully, there was no skull fracture, and even though the wound was only a quarter of an inch from his brain, there was no brain injury. He was rescued by his friends and taken to the local ER, where he was sewn up and sent home with his dad, the retired surgeon. They then had to fly cross-country to visit his grandparents three thousand miles away. While Jason was recuperating at his grandparents' he began to complain of severe head pressure and pain in the wound, which required increasing doses of the prescribed narcotic for only the smallest amount of relief.

Though there was no outside evidence of infection and no signs of brain damage, Jason's pain was unremitting. Dr. Roberts had a lot of experience in treating trauma such as this, and his instinct was to remove some stitches to look for an underlying infection he just knew had to be there. He took his son to a local surgeon, who assured him the wound was not the problem, and said it was just the swelling that was causing his pain. A CAT scan showed Jason's brain to be fine, with no evidence of infection. But when Dr. Roberts looked at the CAT scan, he saw two tiny air bubbles the size of the head of a pin. He pointed this out to the

radiologist, but the radiologist waved him aside, saying, “Oh, that’s just surgical air trapped when they sutured him up.” But Dr. Roberts knew that air bubbles from surgery are always gone in forty-eight hours. It was now seven days later.

“I suffered from feelings of helplessness at the hands of unfamiliar doctors,” Dr. Roberts said.

He took Jason home to his grandparents, where he ran over the details again and again. He was sure there was an infection and that his son needed his wound opened and drained. But he fell into self-doubt, reminding himself that he was retired, and all the “experts” had assured him the boy was fine.

“All my surgical life, I had depended upon my medical instincts and was rarely if ever disappointed. But because this was my son, I was afraid my judgment was impaired, and I was afraid to act. Finally, my wife said to me, ‘You have more than thirty years’ experience in this field, and you are listening to twenty-something doctors with less than five years’ experience?’ She was right. I went to a local surgical supply store and bought a small operating room worth of supplies. Then, at the side of his grandparents’ pool, I opened the wound. Green, infected fluid literally shot across the patio, and my son let out a great cry of relief.”

Dr. Roberts still feels guilt that he didn’t trust himself sooner.

“Listen to your inner guidance,” he says, shaking his head, thinking about how he almost hadn’t. “It’s there for a reason.”

GET LOST

“The marvelous peculiarity about admitting to being lost is that we come to our senses. We wake up. We look around with a keenness we did not have before.”

—*David Whyte*

Frances is an energetic, forty-something single mother who is constantly reinventing herself and her career. She has one of the most vivacious, most contagious laughs I’ve ever heard. In fact, you can hear her laughter over the rest of the audience members on my live *Broad Comedy* CD—her voice rings out above the rest. She is open and gregarious, and one would assume she is afraid of nothing. But creative risk taking was hard for her. She took improv as a way to push her limits with her fear of uncertainty. She is an avid hiker and used this analogy to explain how learning to be spontaneous and taking risks has impacted her life:

“I’ve done thousands of miles of backpacking alone—out two or three weeks in backcountry, alone, all my life. I might be out in the middle of nowhere, but I at least know where I am in terms of the big map, and I know if I keep walking, I’ll hit a trail...and that’s what improvising in life is like. I have become more comfortable with being a little lost and a little scared but knowing it’ll turn out okay. I love looking back at it later and knowing it was all okay.”

Getting lost is about the most helpful thing you can do sometimes. It shakes you up, wakes you up, adds renewed energy, and is sometimes incredibly painful along the way. But most of all, it teaches you to trust: trust yourself and trust the process.

Being lost does not *have* to have negative feelings associated with it. In improv, we are always lost to some extent. You’re standing there with no script, for God’s sake. And if you get the hang of it and commit to the process, then it is wildly invigorating. In fact, we always have to go out after a show because nobody can go immediately to sleep afterward! Getting lost and finding our way out of it give us the juice for new creation. And creation is what we’re here for.

You have to allow yourself to get lost. It’s akin to surrender. Events might precipitate it, like losing a job or experiencing a death. There are times to march on valiantly, and there are times to just shut down and be lost and confused. But there is a fearful way to be lost and a delightful way to be lost. Allowing yourself to be lost with an underlying belief that all will work out, well, that’s what trust is.

The *joy* of being lost is what I’m after here. One of the great things about it, whether it’s in improv or in life, is that people understand this state and are forgiving. You can find support for just sitting quietly in lost-ness. Those who appreciate it (and you should always surround yourself with these types at trying times) understand the value of surrendering to not knowing. And you can release yourself from the responsibility of knowing. What an incredible relief! I love it and look for chances to just be lost when I want it.

Improv comedy, in fact, would not be as exciting to watch if the audience didn’t know we were a little bit lost.

TRY THIS:**WAYS TO PRACTICE BEING LOST**

- Go to a bookstore without an agenda. Just meander. See what pops up.
- Call someone without a reason.
- Literally wander: in the woods, your neighborhood, another country, on the Internet, in a chocolatier, through a menu, in a pet store, on a meditation cushion. Figure nothing out.
- Journal, journal, journal. Have no conclusions.

THERE ARE NO WRONG MOVES

Okay, time to out myself as a geek.

I take part in a role-playing game with ten close friends, a game called Epic. It's genius. I love it, and I'm totally addicted. We don't dress up as knights or anything, but we talk our way through a made-up adventure as a team, and we have a leader, a kind of MC, who comes up with crazy situations and ethical dilemmas for us to solve. As an adventuring team, we come across ogres, mountain goats that turn into people, sorcerers, and giant, poisonous starfish, to name just a few. (If you find yourself making judgments about us, just remember that all judgment is something you really actually want for yourself...okay, maybe not in this case.)

Now, in role-playing games, you create characters with objectives, wants, needs, fears, habits, and histories that color their choices.

Just like improv.

Just like you.

When I first started, I was afraid to make moves or choices for my character that would mess up everyone else. But what I learned was that my commitment to trust in the integrity of my character was what made the game work. It actually helped when I made choices regardless of others or without taking into account what I thought would change the course of events. Since nothing is planned out in gaming (or in improv or in your life) and the future is unknown (ditto), then

everything just makes it more interesting. When players make strong choices based on their characters' tendencies, we all applaud. Gutsy choices that maybe don't set things going the way we'd expected are just what the game needs.

Trust in the overall process is what is called for all the time. There are no wrong moves.

THE INCHWORM SYNDROME

Have you ever watched an inchworm hanging from a leaf by its tiny thread? Here's the thing: the inchworm *created* the string it is attached to, lowered itself down to what it hoped was the optimal spot for finding something new—like food, I suppose—and was then hanging precariously in the middle of a hiking trail or a backyard play area, smack in the way of dogs, people, and birds, susceptible to all sorts of fatal mishaps. When it sensed it was in danger, it began climbing back up its little thread, but very slowly and (I project) painfully, exhaustingly.

Now, what I like about this metaphor is that the little guy created the thing that is making it hang out on a limb...literally. The inchworm also can climb back up this string—which is good, of course, because it has also created an escape route for itself. And the escape route is the same string on which it riskily shot itself into the air.

It's important to understand that we are generally the creators of our problems. But we can create our own way back to safety as well. Everything you need is right there within you already. Trust yourself.

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE:

TRUST

Remember, there are no wrong moves. Practice transforming your belief and looking for proof of this in your life. Be trusting. If you have to fake it at first, do that, just to see what it feels like. Walk around as if you trust the universe. Trust might just creep in and become an actual belief.

Get comfortable with conflict or unresolved situations. Stay with the process and witness your thoughts regarding self-trust, trusting others, and trusting life. “Everything Is Happening Perfectly” is a note I have taped on the inside of my car’s visor.

Get lost. Allow yourself to practice getting lost at least once a day.

Spend a whole week listening to what your gut tells you. Write it down, and see later whether it was right. It might take time to train this part of your intuitive nature, but just play with it for now. I think you’ll find each little experiment is like a gulp of fresh air. You can try following your intuition on something each day—big or small—and just experiment, even if you don’t know where it will take you.

SURRENDER & NON-ATTACHMENT

Whatever, whatever, blah, blah, blah.

—Logan Kisiel, age four

This chapter will take you through the process of learning to let go of your attachments to expectations, goals, and perfectionism. We will learn to cultivate a sense of humor and to lighten up as we surrender the controls and allow life to unfold in a more joyful, free-flowing, and, perhaps, unexpected way.

The quote above is my four-year-old's favorite line. Much to my amusement...sometimes.

This is really the last word on everything. To again quote Cheri Huber's simple Buddhist phrasing: it doesn't matter what you do, but how you do it.

Quit your job or stay? Doesn't matter.

What? I can hear you say. *Of course it matters.*

Nope. The point is that if you quit your job for the wrong reasons, it's worse than staying. If you stay for the wrong reasons, worse. And spiritually, it doesn't matter where you are in the world in terms of how you are going to add to the planet and how you are going to grow. You can learn and grow anywhere. You will get the same lessons everywhere you go, because you are taking you with you.

Bummer, huh?

Perhaps it really does seem like leaving a relationship will solve your problems. And it may. But if you haven't dealt with those problems while leaving, you'll most likely pick up with the next person where you left off with the last. Same with work, children, creativity, money, life. Which doesn't mean you shouldn't move on. But just know as you're doing all this that changing the scene or job or people or place won't necessarily solve your problems. Just notice that. It's neither good nor bad. It just is. So with that in mind, the stress of having to make the *right* decision shouldn't be there. You can detach from making the right choice. There is no "right choice." It's just how you play it out.

Whatever, whatever, blah, blah, blah. That's my new mantra. It's an enlightened statement, really.

TRY THIS: FREEZE

Here's a one-person version of the game I mentioned earlier. Let's say you are stuck in a rut, feeling overly attached to the way something is going—at home, for example. The kids are whining all the time, and everyone's tired and grumpy. Try this: Move your body all around in floppy, silly ways, and then suddenly freeze your body (you might want to try this in your bathroom or office, rather than on the highway or in the middle of the conference

room). Now take a look at what position you are in. What does it remind you of? Let's say you are frozen bent over with one hand reaching out in front of you, and it could look like you're Superman, flying. What does this make you think of? Supermom or Superdad taking on the grouch-infested Metropolis? Perhaps you then can put on this persona to do battle out loud with the culprits. This could be a funny way to lighten the mood and get detached from all the tension. It could also be highly annoying to everyone around you, and you may want to keep this levity to yourself, but the practice will still allow you to get some perspective on the situation.

Another thing to do is let "Freeze" give you an idea for an activity. Just now I flopped around again, and my body stopped in the form of a large tree. Apple picking! Good grief! We haven't gone apple picking in years. That would get us outside, get us in touch with the season, and give us something to do together that is healthy and doesn't require lots of small pieces of toys that need to be put away. Bingo! (In fact, I just might go do that today.)

You can play this game in its full improv-comedy-show mode with kids or groups. You move around and someone yells, "Freeze!" and then you two start a scene based on what these positions look like. (With kids, it's best to assign one person to start and the other to go along.) And after the scene goes on for a while, the leader yells, "Freeze!" and that third person comes in and taps one of you on the shoulder and steps into that person's place. Then the one who steps out becomes the new leader. And again, each time you freeze, you have to start a totally new scene based on these new positions. (You can move once the scene starts—and you should—into new positions, until told to freeze.) This is a great way to become detached from preconceived ideas of where a scene (or day or idea) should go, and just get present with what is right in front of you—namely, the positions. "Freeze" is an improv staple and one we often use for warm-ups, since it really gets us into a present and creative state of mind. You just can't be attached to any preconceived ideas, because you don't have anything to go on until a second before you start.

NOT KNOWING WHAT WE'LL FIND

“You are lost the instant you know what the result will be.”

—*Juan Gris*

Lenni is a journalist for NPR. She is spunky, has gleaming blue eyes, and is not only charming but thoughtful and intelligent. She came to one of my workshops never having done any improv like this. Months later, she wrote to tell me that she now uses the skills of improv every time she does an interview:

“Of course, I do quite a bit of research and other prep work before interviewing anyone, but part of the point behind an interview is to find out what you *don't* know. As subjects answer questions, I have to think about, assimilate, and respond to what they are saying. So I use two skills all the time: working with what the other person gives me, instead of clinging stubbornly to my preconceived ideas, and then not censoring the questions that come to my mind in the course of the conversation—just going with the flow of inspiration, even when I don't know where the conversation will go. When I do this, those are the best interviews.”

Why are we attached to some things and not to others? Think of something that you really care about how it turns out. For me, it's my *Broad Comedy* shows, because I'm very identified with them. “I am an actor,” I think. And then the ego jumps in and adds, “So you'd better be good at it.” But what about something you're not at all attached to? For me, it's sports. I love sports, but I don't really care if I win or lose. I'm just having fun. I didn't ever learn along the way to identify myself as an athlete, and so my sense of self-worth is not caught up in my athletic ability.

Here's another example. One of my best friends and I often do Play-Doh with our kids. Now, she is really into the supreme Play-Doh type A rule, namely that you don't mix colors. She can't stand brown or swirly Play-Doh. Now for me, my type A behavior comes out in other ridiculous ways. For example, I can't stand that next week I have to fly from Montana east to Minneapolis first and then west to Tokyo. This really might send me over the edge. But I have no gripe with Play-Doh. I figure I can buy more Play-Doh! And the funniest part is that we are *both absolutely sure we're right*. We can't understand how it doesn't bother someone else! (You agree with me about the flights, though, don't you?)

The first task my friend and I—and perhaps also you—need to do is detach enough from the belief that it is normal, sane behavior to hold onto our beliefs and to insist that we are perfectly justified in our attachment to them. Step back and just offer up the possibility that it just might be irrational to hold onto these beliefs so strongly. Next, smile or laugh at yourself if possible. After that—this is the hardest one—admit to someone that you might be a little off your rocker on this one. Try admitting it to someone who knows you're nuts, like your spouse. And finally, try doing it another way. Mix up the Play-Doh colors, and enjoy the extra plane ride.

Have a field day with it. Then, try it with bigger and bigger issues. Detach and allow for lighthearted freedom to take its place.

TRY THIS:

PASS IT ON—A GAME OF NON-ATTACHMENT TO PLANS

TO PLAY WITH A PARTNER OR GROUP:

Pick up a book and read a line out of the middle of it. Stop midway through the sentence and have the other person pick up right where you left off and continue with the story. When they have said a sentence or two, have them stop mid-sentence, mid-thought, and then you pick up where they left off. If you have a third person or more, one can be the designated leader and point to someone else to switch speakers whenever he or she feels like it. The leader just points to another person, who then has to pick up where the last person left off. Here's an example:

Book: "Priscilla knew that her mother would—"

You: "—never find the handsome prince she kept in her closet..."

TO PLAY THIS ALONE:

Here's a variation on something I suggested earlier: Turn on talk radio. Listen for about twenty seconds, and then quickly switch it off and finish the speaker's sentence in his or her style.

Radio: “Well, I just think all those loonies should—”
You: “—apply to work at the White House. They’d fit right in.”

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU’RE NOT EXPECTING CHANGES

Now, at some point in your life, it’s almost certain that you are going to run into something that challenges your attachments. That’s why there are about five hundred books with titles like *When Your Life Falls Apart in a Surprising and Disastrous Way* or *Just What You Never Expected But Your Mother & All Your Friends Knew Was Coming*.

I have never met a workshop participant who didn’t have something big and unexpected (good or bad) blow them out of the water at some point—and more the older they got. No one over the age of forty has ever said to me, “You know, my life went exactly as I thought it would.” If you’re forty and you can say this, I think you should start planning for some big changes to start coming your way...

But of course, you can’t really plan that, can you? Hmmm...

THE PARADOX OF PLANNING OUR FUTURES

As a young woman, Darla imagined that she knew what her future would look like. She was a hardworking art teacher and artist. She was very independent and lived happily with her husband and kids. When her mother got early-onset Alzheimer’s, she was shocked and terrified. Her mother had been her confidante and close friend. The fear of their relationship progressively turning into one in which communication would become impossible was debilitating for her.

Darla first noticed her mother repeating stories when they would go out for dinner. She thought it was just a cute, elderly quirk, her mom reveling in the past. But soon she noticed that her mother would ask questions about things Darla had just told her minutes earlier. She blamed it on spaciness, the wine at dinner, Darla’s confusing schedule being hard for her mother or anyone to remember, etc. But soon other people were noticing odd things, too. Part of her knew that there was something wrong, but she repressed it because she was so attached to the image of her

mother that she had always had. Darla had to face up to the fact that her mother was changing rapidly. They would not get to live out the imagined future Darla had always had of her mother as the wonderful old grandmother taking her grandkids on trips to Disney World.

Darla's resistance to giving up her attachment to this vision was intense. She first tried to find ways to keep everything the same. She let her mom keep her house, supported her in volunteering as she always had at the church. But soon, driving, being alone with the grandkids, and even working with other elders at the church became not only impossible but dangerous. Her mother would get lost, confused, and afraid. Darla had to make a real perceptual shift before she could see how to help her mother make changes that would give her a good and safe life.

Surrendering to the unexpected was Darla's first step. She had to practice non-attachment to the fantasy of what her mother's future held and to her own fantasy of her relationship with her mother.

You can't plan life very much, though we'd all like to think we can. There's disease, death, tsunamis, unexpected babies, unexpected stepparents, unexpected downsizing. There are also *wonderful* unexpected opportunities: new possible soul mates appearing out of thin air at what you would have said was the "wrong" time, job promotions, new medical advances that can change a previously difficult health issue, packages in the mail, even (thank God) new presidents. If you are too attached to beliefs about the way your life should be, you can pass up these good opportunities as well.

It's important to take a look at all aspects of attachment. There are reasons we're attached to the way things are. We want the comfort of knowing, of no surprises. But there are situations where we might be stuck, say in ill health for example, and not take the steps to helping ourselves move on. Why on earth would we do that? Well, it's more common than you think. We get something out of staying where we are. Being sick or in pain gains us sympathy, perhaps. It's hard to let go of that attachment, no matter how much we say we don't like the problem. This is true of bad relationships, bad bosses, terrible jobs, financial woes, etc. Staying stuck is a form of attachment.

So how can we practice non-attachment and surrender? First, just knowing that you are attached to fantasies about the future is incredibly important. That's awareness practice at its best. Let's start there.

JOURNAL

What are you attached to? What visions of your future do you grip like the steering wheel when you're driving on ice? List them here. (It's okay if there are quite a few or just one biggie. Doesn't matter.)

If someone were to say that your specific future plans could never come about, how would you feel and what would your first reaction be? If it's a big reaction, it's a tip-off that you have hit on one of your big bits of attachment. Write down your reaction:

If your reaction was a sense of gripping or “clinging,” why do you think you can’t let go of it?

If your reaction surprised you and you felt a sense of relief, that can be a sign that you are ready to let go of the fantasy. Give it some attention this week. Come back to the image of the future not holding what you had imagined. Can you open up your vision to imagine new possibilities? But don’t just trade in one attachment for another! Let your mind wander without clinging. Enjoy the freedom it brings.

Now, imagine that you have no idea what will happen in the future. (Which is actually the only 100 percent accurate fantasy there is.) How does that make you feel? What are your beliefs about not knowing what will happen?

TRY THIS:**CHUCK EXPECTATIONS OUT THE WINDOW**

Today, let go of expectations about what you will or won't accomplish in your day. You can have a list, but just start the day saying, "You know, I think today won't actually go as planned." And see what happens. Allow for the unexpected to worm its way into your day. Keep yourself alert to unanticipated opportunities. Talk to someone at work whom you normally don't interact with. Let your mind wander for a few minutes, and see what piques your interest. Call someone you've been meaning to. Recharge your creative batteries somehow—sneak a peak online at some intellectually or artistically challenging websites, eat something different for lunch, or walk or drive a different way home. Journal how it felt and what your inner voices were saying (or are saying while you read these suggestions), and how you responded to these beliefs. Stay present and aware.

TRY THIS:**"SAY IT AGAIN"**

This is an improv game that we play with three people. It can be done on your own to help wake up your creative brain or to get yourself out of a rut and train your mind to get comfortable with non-attachment.

In a performance setting, you have three actors, and you get a setting for the scene from the audience. Let's say it's a pet shop. The actors set up the scene and their characters and the conflict. Once all that gets going, the game host will honk a bike horn obnoxiously, and the actor who just spoke will have to revise his or her sentence, possibly several times. For example:

Store Clerk to Manager: "Oh my God, I lost the new bunny!" (HONK!)

"Oh my God, I lost the python!" (HONK!)

And when the game host decides the actor has been tortured into coming up with new ideas for long enough, she or he will ring a bell, and that will be a sign that the actors can continue with the new information.

“Oh my God, I lost my glass eye in the tarantula cage...” (DING!)

(This is a great self-trust exercise, too, by the way. It really pushes your limits and lets you experience how many endless ideas you have in that brain of yours.)

So now you try. You'll have to manage yourself if you're alone. You can also do this with others at, say, a staff retreat where you're all trying to brainstorm. You don't even have to do it as a game. You can just tell everyone to write or shout out as many ideas as possible that riff off of each other's ideas or somehow derive from the previous one.

Now, try this and do each one quickly, one immediately following the other:

“Mother, you've got to stop bringing the kids those _____.”

“Mother, you've got to stop bringing the kids those _____.”

“Mother, you've got to stop bringing the kids those _____.”

“Mother, you've got to stop bringing the kids those _____.”

Here's another: You're at church. Pretend you're talking to someone next to you:

“Wow, I never thought I'd see _____ in here.”

“Wow, I never thought I'd see _____ in here.”

“Wow, I never thought I'd see _____ in here.”

“Wow, I never thought I'd see _____ in here.”

Okay, here's a different setup: You're going to the store, and you have a very important item to get. You say: “Oh, man, they're out of _____.”

Now, keep going, but add to it like it's a scene that's continuing:

“Oh, no, and they're out of _____, too!”

“And there's no more _____.”

“And how can they be out of _____?!?”

You can also do this with any kind of real-life attachment issue. You don't get something you want, but what could possibly be the bright side? Quickly shout out several ideas, no matter how ridiculous. In fact the sillier the answers, the less stressed you might become.

I had a friend do this. She and her boyfriend broke up (much to her initial dismay), and she shouted to her empty apartment a big sarcastic list of reasons it was fantastic:

“Now I can argue with an empty room, and I'll always be right! I can eat on the toilet! I can get up in the middle of the night and watch QVC without shame! I can throw away cans and not recycle once in a while! I could paint on the walls of the living room if I like! I could not shave...anywhere!!”

She really gave herself room to find some humor about it all, and actually, she decided to do one of the things on her list that had never occurred to her before this fast, creative explosion. But, um...I'm not allowed to tell you which one.

PUSHING YOUR CREATIVITY LIMITS

Penny is a fun, spunky novelist and journalist who came to one of my workshops. She used “Say It Again” on her own at home, as a way to spark her creativity in her work.

“I've been working on a novel, and an editor told me I needed to get rid of the metaphor I kept harping on, which was the main character's wristwatch. It was a bit of a cliché, but I hung onto it anyway, and my editor just hated it. So I played ‘Say It Again’ with the buzzer. I said something and buzzed myself, changed it, and tried again. And again. Until I came up with something I thought really worked that wasn't clichéd. It was so cool! This stuff works!”

JOURNAL

When you practice non-attachment, you begin to feel more carefree. What does “being carefree” mean to you? Write down what the first images are that come to mind when you think of being carefree. There may be conflicting images, but go ahead now and write them down before you read on. The word “carefree” means:

When I think of someone as being carefree, I see:

When I feel carefree, I am:

When I judge others as too carefree, it's because they are:

I had a funny experience this year. The father of a friend of mine used to be a kind of grumpy old guy. As he has aged, he has started having some form of dementia. Now, this would normally be quite sad—except for the fact that he has become happier and much more fun to be around! He has become quite the jolly old man. While he is confused sometimes, he is more often just tickled to death by everything and everyone around him. The crazy things his relatives say and do don't bother him like I remember they used to. And he speaks his mind these days. He used to just shake his head and frown all the time, holding it in. But now when someone says something asinine, he hoots out a laugh, declares it ridiculous, and guffaws for a minute straight!

In his dementia, he seems to have started expressing himself more honestly. He doesn't seem to need to control others: Let them be nuts! Who cares! He doesn't need to be the patriarchal upholder of the family values and morals. He doesn't need to change other people. He laughs and calls them "bastards" and then laughs some more while they stand there agape!

Being carefree and unattached like this allows you to see the humor in everything, and it gives you the freedom to express yourself without caring how others are going to judge you. This can be one of the most liberating experiences you will ever encounter.

Now, the trick for us is to figure out how to do that without having to wait for dementia to set in...

PERFECTIONISM, PERSCHMECKTIONISM

As I've said, you can't be a perfectionist in improvisation. Every scene I'm in is a one-time event, and I don't get to do it over or fix it. Ever. It disappears as soon as it's been created. The same goes for my workshops. Every workshop is different. Every interaction has its own challenges and unexpected twists and turns.

It's tricky, though, because people tend to look to teachers and leaders as experts. The rest of the world often expects perfection. Practitioners are supposed to know everything. But if we see ourselves as experts, it's harder to be creative in collaboration. We might not feel freed up to think outside the box, to creatively problem solve. But that's exactly what is needed.

It might help to think of yourself as the *champion* of your clients. You have their interests in mind. This frame of mind is very different from being an expert. It's a lot less pressure, for one thing. And it's more useful in that we are being sought out as problem solvers in general, solution generators for whom every situation has totally new criteria. There is no one solution that will work for every situation, and you, like the improv actor, don't get to perfect your work. So chuck the notion that we are here to do things perfectly. We are here to co-create, to experiment with new ideas, and to get better at our craft so we can help people in an infinite variety of different situations.

"Once you accept the fact that you're not perfect, then you develop some confidence."

—*Rosalynn Carter*

LUMPS (OR GET SOME PERSPECTIVE)

My father, a breast cancer surgeon, uses this litmus test when determining how serious a situation in regular life is:

"Well, which is it?" he'd ask. "A lump in your cereal, a lump in your throat, or a lump in your breast?"

I use it when I am wondering if I might be overreacting to something and should relax a bit. It's been deeply useful to me. My plane was delayed? Lump in my cereal. Sink backed up? Cereal. Cat threw up on the carpet? Definitely cereal.

Another version I use is this: "Will you remember this problem ten minutes, ten days, or ten years from now?"

If you won't even remember it ten days from now, no big deal. Let it go. It's a good way to gain more perspective.

As Cheri Huber often jovially reminds her students: "We're all going to die *really* soon." So what are we waiting for to get started on what we love? Will you remember being late for a meeting ten years from now? (Your wedding? Yes. Your meeting? Doubtful.)

Perspective creates a bridge between letting go of perfectionism and lightening up our expectations.

LIGHTEN UP

What is "lightening up" exactly? It's a release of attachment. When you let go of beliefs that things are terribly serious, that life is horrible, fearful, dangerous, unreliable, and that we're all going to hell in a handbasket, then you will be happier. How ridiculous that we even need to say that to ourselves! You may be right that life is a mess and that you'll probably reap all the disasters possible, but, with that approach you'll enjoy it even less. And you won't really be helping anyone either. Plus, no one will want to hang around you, so life will be more lonely and dreadful.

The great thing about a lightening-up practice is that you are never done. You can always lighten up more. So you don't have to worry, "Have I lightened up too much? Am I really too joyful and full of zest for life? Maybe a more sour, jaded approach would benefit my well-being..."

People like lighthearted people. You do, don't you? The Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, even Mother Theresa are all known for their great giggles. And they all spent time in war-torn areas, with lepers, being hungry, dirty, cold. But they still cultivated joy and laughter. And perspective. Or bad relationships with their mothers-in-law. (Okay, these are monks and nuns without in-laws, but still...) And they never complained about ulcers.

Difficult situations are handled better by people with perspective, with a healthy attitude. And from a Buddhist perspective, everything is impermanent, and we're all going to die, so it really doesn't matter anyway. Just ease the suffering of yourself and others if you can. And that's really it. So joy comes in when you cultivate a lighthearted attitude.

Cultivating a lighthearted attitude is not only fun, it's the healthiest way to live.

It can relieve our stress, which is a reaction to attachment. It is the physical and emotional response to a belief that things need to be done or to turn out a certain way. We are attached to our life goals, to deadlines, to health and comfort, to other people's opinions, to other people's happiness. Stress is created when you want things to be other than the way they are, and stress comes about when you are grasping: trying to keep the good thing you have from stopping or changing.

Practicing non-attachment is a promising way to increase joy and decrease stress.

CULTIVATE A SENSE OF HUMOR

At my wedding, my great-uncle, who's been married for sixty-five years (a long relationship being one of the greatest collaborative challenges there is!), gave a toast and blessing to my husband and me, which I offer to you as you go your way in this co-creative process: "May you always remember to keep your sense of humor."

TRY THIS:

SPOOF YOURSELF

Take ten minutes (use a timer, but feel free to continue after the ten minutes is up), and write a first-person monologue. In this monologue, your character (i.e., an exaggeration of you) takes his or her job VERY seriously. Show your imagined audience the humor of this person's over-seriousness regarding work. Perhaps begin with these words:

"You can't imagine how important it is to be a _____."

"At the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities."

—*Jean Houston*

JOY & HAVING FUN DOING GOOD WORK

It's been so clear to me throughout my improv career that I'm at my best on stage when I'm feeling joyful. Putting your focus and attention on the joy of life brings a lightness of spirit. When you see the humor in things, you can solve problems more easily. And things flow better. For some reason, our culture seems to believe that to struggle is virtuous. But things flow better when we're happy, joyful, and having fun. We are more productive; we don't burn out as often; we are better people to work with; and we do better work. We all have read about how laughter and joy boost the immune system. And a joyful attitude is important not just for your co-workers and clients but for you as well.

PLAY WHEN YOU PLAY

Lori is an avid tennis player. During a state tennis match this past summer, she was playing singles, and the referee came over to observe the game:

"I felt the stress increase for everyone. The ref was standing silently, and I felt his presence, ominously, when I hit a bad shot right into the net. I immediately snapped my fingers and said, 'Oh, ball boy!'—which, of course, was not his job. We all cracked up—me, my opponent, and the ref. And ultimately, I did win that match, and our team won state, and we went on to represent our state at regionals. I think we succeeded, in part, because we kept an amused, 'let's laugh' attitude throughout the entire event."

TRY THIS: ACCENTS

Next time you get into a family argument, begin talking in another accent. You can even set this rule up ahead of time as something the family does. There is nothing like putting on a different and, presumably, silly voice to lighten up a situation.

Camille, a mother of three, reported doing this with her husband, and the accents accentuated the ridiculousness of their fight. They were fighting about the thermostat. She was trying to keep the family warm by raising the heat. He was trying to conserve the family's money by lowering it. She found herself talking in a hysterical, overly protective, upper-class British accent ("How can you expect your wee ones to go about their studies with frozen fingers?!"), while he fell into a heavy old-world Russian accent ("I'm trying to keep borscht in bank, woman!"). Not only did it make them laugh and see how silly their attachments to their respective sides were, but they also learned where their beliefs were coming from. His family was an old-world immigrant family that had moved here in poverty. And her family had put the children's needs above all else. The accents had taught them about themselves and dissipated their anger. It was funny, creative, spontaneous, and enlightening for them. One of them will still start this occasionally when things get tense. It made them feel more carefree and less attached to their positions.

BYE BYE, BIRDIE

Someone once described this wonderful image to me: Picture holding a bird in your hand. Now, you wouldn't want to hold it in a closed fist, facing down, so that if you were to open your hand, you'd drop it. You would want to hold it palm up, open, so that it could sit there quietly or fly away, whatever it wanted.

This image comes to me when I picture parenting, wanting a successful show, holding onto relationships, or even wanting the world to change for the better. The closed fist image is what I find myself doing sometimes, and in those situations, nothing seems to work. The tension and the belief that I know exactly what the outcome should be all lead to more tension and few resolutions. When I turn my palm open, face up, and holding, metaphorically, my son or my marriage or my performances, the feeling is that of a non-attached, enthusiastic partner in my life. My inner control freak is released. I surrender when it's time. I focus on what I want. I hold my desires lightly, knowing that there are things I can't foresee or understand.

Palm open, face up. Things can come and go this way, as they are meant to.

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE: **SURRENDER & NON-ATTACHMENT**

Spend this week noticing when you are attached to goals and expectations. Is there tension in your body and mind when you are diverted from your preconceived plans? Feeling your body's tension is a great way to tell when your mind is being tense and attached to outcomes.

What would it be like to live more in the flow? When a surprising change or difficult challenge comes up, try seeing it as an opportunity for greater creativity in your life. But really *stop*. Journal or head for a quiet place (the bathroom is a superb temple for working people and parents!) and brainstorm the following: How is this an opportunity?

While your mind may, from habit, not see opportunity at first, I promise it *will*. You must give time, commitment, and a little effort to break old mental habits. It's like a Creativity Patch: you will be more successful if you come off the habit slowly. Don't expect all this to happen overnight. Remember to just stop and *observe* your tension, your attachment, your beliefs. Stopping-to-notice is 75 percent of the work.

Live this way for a week, and notice how it feels. What would it be like to be detached from bigger and bigger things?

GAG YOUR INNER CRITIC

A man would do nothing if he waited until he could do it so well that no one could find fault.

—*John Henry Newman*

This chapter gives you the chance to really tackle those voices that knock you down. Finally—a way to break the habit of listening to your inner critic and a new way to put it to good use.

There's someone I think you should meet: your inner critic. Perhaps you're all too familiar? The inner critic is that voice that shoots you down, that judges you, that makes you second-guess yourself, that tells you *you are not a creative person*. The inner critic can be powerful. It can rule our lives.

As a beginning improviser, I found that my inner critic was always there, whispering its worries to me: "Hey, that joke wasn't funny enough...you missed important plot details, and now you're in trouble...don't take that risk, because if it doesn't work, the audience won't like you for the rest of the show..." And on and on.

Novelist Gail Godwin describes her relationship with her inner critic: "What I did discover, however, when I sat down to write my first full-length nonfiction work, was that a new inner critic materialized out of the shadows with her own set of no-no's. She blew on my heart instincts with her dry-ice breath and often smothered my creative joy. I have an old working relationship with my fiction-writing inner critic—a picky, prissy, buttoned-up man with a smile that is both sinister and obsequious. (Once, when he was being exasperating, I drew his portrait.) His job consists mostly of wringing his hands and being fearful that I'll fail at being marvelous. I've learned to co-exist with him over the years, but she was something new.

"She cast herself in the form of a beautiful, icy woman in a sari, the ghost figure of a professor I had in graduate school, who once beseeched me in her elegant Oxbridge accent to write a 'real' thesis, not one of those 'creative ones,' even though the doctoral program at Iowa allowed it. I did not take her advice, and the English Department accepted my first published novel as my thesis, but for years afterward I kept my PhD diploma unframed and mildewing in a drawer, because I felt it was not quite authentic. And the kind of writing that would have made it authentic was exactly what my new inner critic kept insisting on, now that I was finally doing a real project."

During improv or any kind of performance, the inner critic can be so loud that you actually can't think over it. Really, now...this is not terribly helpful. Hearing that familiar voice saying that you have nothing in your brain at the moment—"please come back later"—can immobilize you. Which is not exactly an option during a show. And often it is just the volume of that voice that keeps you from hearing all the creative thoughts underneath it.

The inner critic doesn't confine itself to the stage, though. Have you ever been in a meeting in which you're presenting your idea, and you can hear an obnoxious

voice in your head say: “Nobody’s listening to you. They think your idea is stupid. Why did you ever think to get up there and share your idea?”

But here is a new way to look at your inner critic. I have come to understand that the *intentions* of the inner critic are good; it’s just that it’s a little too much like parents: *sometimes they are the least helpful when they want what they think is best for you.*

So it’s time to deal with this bugger once and for all.

TRY THIS:

DRAW YOUR INNER CRITIC HERE

Draw a cartoon or even a stick figure. See what image sprouts up.

BENEVOLENT DICTATOR

Check this out: your inner critic was invented by you! The damn thing's only here because you created it, so now you're the only one who can really deal with it properly. A long time ago, you gave it a role to play in your life. What was that role? Your protector! You created the inner critic to help keep you from making a fool of yourself, saying dumb things at the wrong time, looking unkempt in public, scaring off friends and suitors, and a million other jobs. This was a *good* thing!

Your inner critic is not outside of you. Let's start there. We joke about it and call it lots of names, and it sounds like some nasty virus we picked up. But the deal is that your inner critic is a culmination of voices you've heard elsewhere (parents, teachers, friends, TV, books, society) and that lodged in your ear like an evil iPod. The result is a judge who was supposed to be giving us cautionary warnings to protect us from humiliation, physical danger, and loneliness. But it became too good at its job. It became overpowering, and now it is basically out of control for many of us—even if only in one area, such as our creativity or our body image or our romantic interactions.

So what do we do now that we've created a monster?

We don't necessarily need to kill this Frankenstein, because our inner critic is *trainable*. Think Young Frankenstein singing "Puttin' On the Ritz."

The inner critic can be in our control. The trick is trying to decipher what other voices it has picked up and what recordings it is constantly replaying. Are the things it says too harsh, out of date, or not even really congruent with our own belief systems? For example, if you hear your mother saying, "Nice job, but you could've done more," well, that's a harsh tape you've been playing. Are you really not doing enough? Today? Do *you* think you are? Or have you raised the bar so high that it's impossible to reach? And could you *ever* be doing enough to satisfy the voice?

The next step is to transfer your inner critic to a different department. Like any good manager, you use your staff's best skills to the company's advantage. You don't put someone with no people skills in personnel. And that's what happens with an inner critic out of control. Instead, put the inner critic in, say, the engineering or design department. There, the inner critic gets to have its say, using that discerning eye that it has developed over the years. So the inner critic is perhaps allowed to help you decide whether today is a good day to bother putting on deodorant before leaving the apartment. It is allowed to decide if the discussion

with your spouse about getting a cat would go over better now, in the car, or later, after dinner. But it is not allowed to go near the bathroom mirror or to be in on the “meeting” regarding whether or not you should audition for the city choir.

Like a four-year-old, the inner critic needs redirection. If your kid is focused on an ice cream cone and you say no, he is probably going to cry or whine about it. A good strategy is to redirect his focus on something he can have or do. It’s virtually impossible to say to a small child, “No, you can’t have that. Now stop thinking about it.” You have to replace the thought you don’t want with another thought you do want. The same goes for the inner critic. Give it something to focus on.

In the movie *A Beautiful Mind*, the main character has delusions; he sees characters that aren’t really there. And they are the same ones all the time: a Department of Defense agent, a little girl, and an imaginary college roommate. When finally he is confronted by a doctor and told that these are imaginary people, he has to retrain himself to not listen to them. He has to stop listening to the voices. And the interesting thing is that the characters never go away completely. But by the end of the movie, they are sort of standing over to the side, watching him, saying nothing. He has mastered them by not giving them any attention.

This works for your inner critic, too. At first, you need to unhook from its clutches. The trick is to believe it less and less. It is a delusion, just like in the film. Its voice isn’t real; it is manufactured.

Next, once you’ve given the inner critic less power by becoming more aware of it and by ignoring the negative aspects of it, then you can begin to transform it into something useful.

EPISODE 3

Liz is a wonderfully effervescent young woman. She’s twenty-two, single, and on the lookout. She brings laughter and insidious fun wherever she goes. She is a big *Star Wars* freak, and when *Episode 3* opened, she went down to stand in line for three hours for the opening show, along with other like-minded geeks. (And I use the term “geek” in a most loving way, since I would have been there had I not had a toddler.)

While in line, she decided she wanted to make the opening a memorable day, even if the movie was going to be a disappointment (she’s a picky fan). So she was

eyeing this guy and finally went over to him and shot him with the squirt gun she'd brought for this outdoor summer bonding experience. She gave him one, too, and they pummeled each other until they fell on the ground, laughing. At that point, she said spontaneously, "Hey, you know what would make this really memorable? If we just made out here in front of all these people." And so they did!

Well, this cinematic smooch soon ended, the line started moving, and she wrote her phone number on his popcorn box. When she never heard from him, she immediately believed she had been too forward and that he was scared off. She knew where he worked but didn't want to go there because of her assumption.

But it turns out that he knew she knew he worked near him, and he had been hoping she would come in. Finally, he saw her walking past his store and ran out to grab her. He was bursting with smiles, and he wanted to know why she hadn't come to find him when he didn't call. Well, she retorted, why hadn't he called? He explained that he'd left the popcorn box in the theatre when he went to the bathroom, and an overly ambitious theatre employee had trashed his valuable snack packaging. He had even rummaged through garbage, trying to retrieve it, he said. Well, no woman can resist a man who will rummage through garbage for her, so of course, all was forgiven. And they are still dating.

Liz's inner critic had kept her from pursuing what she wanted, because she had made an unfounded assumption—based on past experiences and on what society tells women about how they should behave. Thank goodness that fate helped them find each other again. As my Great-Aunt Charlotte says, "Better to be lucky than smart." And so too, better to be brave than, well, just about anything else.

OTHER INNER PERSONNEL

Now, there are a few other parts of you I'd like you to meet. Let's say you want to audition for a choir. Here's who you need to help with that process:

1. Your inner time strategist ("Do I have time for this?")
2. Your inner accountant ("Would it be smart to invest in a voice lesson first?")
3. Your inner personal trainer ("Yeah! Go for it! Just do it!")

Now, *these* guys should be allowed in on all your meetings!

The inner critic could be allowed to offer a memo, perhaps. But only if it says something like: "Last time you auditioned, you were embarrassed, because you were unprepared."

See? That’s basically factual. Not judgmental. The inner critic should be given jobs like these to help us learn, grow, and not make the same mistakes.

But if the memo says something like, “You stunk last time, and it’s likely you’ll stink again, since you have no real innate talent,” it should be tossed immediately into the shredder. (Both the memo and the inner critic.)

TRY THIS:
**THE TEN-STEP INNER CRITIC
RETRAINING PROGRAM**

STEP ONE:

Write down an example of something your inner critic says a lot to you:

STEP TWO:

Write down exactly what about this sentence bothers you and why.

STEP THREE:

Where did this criticism come from? Someone else? Society? Did you make it up? Write down what evidence you have on both sides:

STEP FOUR:

Assume your inner critic had at one time a benevolent intention. What do you suppose it could have been? (Perhaps to help keep you safe, unhurt by others' criticism or by failure, etc.)

STEP FIVE:

Thank your inner critic for doing its job. But it now needs to get updated and retrained. Think of it as an inner coach now. Write down your appreciation for all the things it has tried to help you with, even if these experiences were not successful because the inner critic didn't know how to help. Just write down what it was trying to do in a few examples:

STEP SIX:

What neutral, objective, helpful job could it do that would actually be of some use?

STEP SEVEN:

What would be a sentence that the inner coach could say instead?

Maybe something more neutral and informative, rather than filled with judging words and emotional content? Write that now:

STEP EIGHT:

Give your inner coach a new name:

STEP NINE:

Write out its new job description below. What are the grounds for dismissal—things you will not put up with on the job site? What will earn it a raise?

STEP TEN:

In a week from now...

Let your inner coach know how it's doing at its new job. All new employees are a little insecure and need to know they are doing what you hired them to do and that you're happy with them and won't fire them. Occasionally, sit down and write your inner coach an employee evaluation—let it know how it's doing or if you'd like it to make any further changes. Get to know it—take it out to lunch. Ask it about its background—where did it come from? What are its hopes and dreams?

PARTNERING WITH YOUR INNER COACH

I retrained my inner critic to be like that character from the movie *The Bird Cage*: Hank Azaria's fabulous, gay, Guatemalan houseboy. My new inner coach now has a thick, flamboyant Latino accent and says things like, "Honey! Choo need a break! Look at choo! Choo need some rest and a ped-i-cure. Go. Go take some time off, girl." The humor of it helps me, and the tone helps get me what I need.

When we are not aware of our inner critic, we just believe whatever it says as if it were truth. Gianna, a twenty-four-year-old actress, came to my workshop to get more improv comedy experience, but what she really ended up with were changes in how she would act in the rest of her life:

"I have always been afraid to really open myself up, to let everything simply flow out of me. What has been holding me back is my inner critic. This weekend, my inner critic and I were introduced. I learned why she says these things."

Gianna had been struggling in her marriage. By dialoguing with her inner critic, she saw that she had received the same criticisms from both her father and her new husband. Her father had implied that she was prettier than her sisters but that they were the smart and funny ones. And lo and behold, she comfortably but unwittingly wandered into a relationship with a man who loved her for her beauty but undermined her intelligence and wit. And it's not a huge surprise that she turned to theatre to seek appreciation for her talents.

Gianna never realized how she had internalized these criticisms as her own deep-seated beliefs. These beliefs ruled her life. After she went through the process of looking at and understanding her critic at our retreat, it was easier to take responsibility for her beliefs, even though they had been taught to her from her childhood:

"I'm an adult now. I can't blame anyone if I still hang onto these statements from my inner critic. If I am staying in a bad marriage because I believe I am not worthy on my own, then that is my own fault. My inner critic and I came to an understanding this weekend, a friendship. We decided to take care of each other. We will be partners, guardians, best friends. This is really different than what I did before. I am relieved and excited. I think this is going to be a big change for me."

When Elizabeth, a spunky, twenty-something woman, came to my retreat, she said she'd been drawn because of the phrase "gag your inner critic."

"This seemed like a bit of an impossible goal," she says. "But I thought it would be nice to try."

Elizabeth's inner critic was extra loud, especially when telling her she had no acting or dancing talent. She had performed throughout her childhood and half of college, but somewhere along the line, she began to convince herself that she had no talent whatsoever. By her sophomore year in college, that thought was deeply ingrained:

"My inner critic was extra sneaky in that it wore a cloak of acceptance. Instead of being completely negative, it said to me, 'It's okay. You have no talent, but that's just who you are. You perform because you love it!' Great. Thank you. This served in making those thoughts even more believable. It also meant that as soon as I left the comforts of a small-town dance studio and a junior college theatre department, I completely blocked myself from any thoughts of even trying to continue following one of my life passions. Until two weeks ago, I had not attended a single audition or made any other effort in this direction in seven years."

Elizabeth really took the bull by the horns at the retreat and went to work on transforming that inner critic into her inner coach. She was incredibly successful and insightful all weekend, and she even found the courage to audition—the very day after leaving the retreat, actually—for a local improv troupe. And she was accepted. And amazingly, a week later, she was asked by someone in that troupe to be in another show for kids. This was some big and immediate payback for all her hard inner work.

"But the even bigger reward was the feeling after the audition," she says. "I came home that night and realized, for the first time in my life, that I had won either way. I had a fantastic time at the audition, but I also was simply thrilled that I had done it and especially that I had given myself permission to believe that I belonged on that stage. I had a great feeling all the next day, and I knew that instead of being devastated if I didn't get in, it would be icing on the cake (albeit very thick, sugary, indulgent icing!) if I did."

A diabetes-inducing success story, I would say.

TRY THIS:
“PASS IT ON”

This game can be played with others around the room, around the dining table, or even just back and forth between two people in the car.

One person starts to tell a story. After five to thirty seconds, that person stops mid-sentence, and the next person picks up where the first person left off. What is important is to not censor yourself or think you have to come up with something terrific. You are collaborating, and the creative part is that you just jump right in where the other person left off.

I taught this game to a group, and later, one woman emailed me to tell me she now uses this with her husband as a funny way to see the differences in how they both viewed the same event.

There is good, juicy, smart, creative stuff in that head of yours. You are learning to access it. Give yourself some time to play and allow your mind to open up.

Most of all, *observe the process without judgment*. Your new inner coach can be your biggest ally in creating the fulfilling and exciting life you want.

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE: THE INNER COACH

After you've done this chapter's exercises, keep using your new neutral language for your inner coach. Use the language you came up with in the guided exercises to help support your desires for growth. Your inner coach should offer helpful feedback rather than judgment. Keep the tone objective. If you hear words that sound mean or harsh or simply not true, stop, breathe, and then ask if your inner coach could instead offer some clear facts—just information without judgment.

This practice can change the way you do everything.

GET CREATIVE

I'm curious to learn how improv performers go about crowbarring open the fire doors between their mouth and their muse.

—Sharon, on why she came to the “Improvisation for the Spirit” retreat

This chapter lets you in on the dirty little secret that everyone is infinitely creative. No exceptions. You will have the chance to see that for yourself and to learn how to access this creativity by getting unblocked and finding inspiration everywhere you look.

EVERY SINGLE PERSON IS CREATIVE (THIS INCLUDES YOU)

Bali. I have never been anywhere where the pace is so perfect. The heat slows you down to just the right speed. The people do exactly what they need—no more, no less. They play with their kids, eat well, and are generally healthy, happy, and loving. They have religious festivals every few days. They prepare little, stunningly beautiful flower offerings to the gods that they put everywhere.

But here's what's so impressive to me: every person there is an artist...and good at their chosen form! Artists are not outsiders the way they are in the West. Art is not separate from life. Art *is* life.

My husband, Soren, and I went to Bali because we wanted to see how a whole country does this. How is art immersed in every aspect of life? In *everyday* life? Art is not just entertainment or an escape from life in Bali. In the small, palm-sized religious offerings, in their batiks, wood carvings, puppets, religious ceremonies, performances, in the sidewalk chalk drawings they dedicate to the gods outside of their shops each morning...art is everywhere.

No one in Bali is left out. No one feels uncreative. No one needs to recover his or her "inner artist." No one needs to learn to take time out for creativity. Art is a part of every day for everyone.

I just wanted you to know it is possible...

ADDING CONFLICT

Does "conflict" sound like a dirty word to you? It shouldn't. Without conflict, there is no drama. Now, it's legitimate to be afraid of conflict. It can lead to a breakup of personal or working relationships, it can get you fired, etc. But if the fear of conflict is too great, it will stop you from being creative. So finding balance is the trick. Part of the solution is practice. And that's why I love having improv as a vehicle to practice all the tricks of the trade, which I then take back to my other working and personal relationships and co-creations.

Conflict in an improv scene is the problem that needs to be solved. What's so much fun to watch in a scene is that the outcome is always unexpected. If there is no conflict in improv, there is no scene. And at work—no conflict? No growth. And no progress. If there were no conflict, life (like the scene) would be BORING!

WORST ENEMY, BEST TEACHER

Deidre Combs is a mediator and the author of a terrific book about conflict called *Worst Enemy, Best Teacher*.

“When conflict strikes,” Deedee enthusiastically tells me, “it really helps to be ready and willing to play!” And play she does. Deedee is the vivacious kind of woman you can’t even picture being in conflict with. She is fun-loving, present, open-minded and kind. She really walks the walk.

“Being *ready* is holding the attitude that *anything* can happen during a confrontation, so we are then alert and more able to respond,” she explains. “Being *willing* means welcoming every conflict, as best you can, by remembering that every conflict holds great opportunity. Without discord, you simply stagnate and become weaker. It may be messy and risky, but we really need it!” she laughs.

Deedee describes conflict as occurring any time two or more things disagree: “So conflict is not only two people fighting, but it’s internal battles—like being a working mother, for example, or reading something that bothers me or even wrestling with a mid-life crisis. So you can use the ‘ready and willing’ approach with any challenge that crosses your path to become stronger and more versatile.”

A longtime committed fan of our theatre company, Deedee also notes, “Improv is a perfect tool to practice being both ‘ready and willing.’ As I watch you perform, I can tell that anything can happen! I also understand that to do improv well is to always be willing to say ‘yes’ when offered a new direction from your partner. Great improv artists welcome surprise and open themselves to it—not from a complacent or docile position but from a bouncy ‘bring it on’ space. From that location, there is lots of freedom and possibility for the unexpected.”

Because Deedee is a woman who sits down with people in conflict every day, I trust her notion that conflict offers great possibilities and brings us places we never knew we could go. Conflict is where the real meat of relationships is discovered. Conflict gives us the chance to grow stronger. With a limited perspective, we think we don’t want conflict. But with a little broadening of that perspective, we can begin to see that conflict brings our lives opportunity and “oomph.”

And the same goes for conflicts at work. When others bring a willingness to share ideas and problem solve together, you can co-create new solutions that one of you couldn’t have done alone. Conflict allows us to generate new, unexplored ideas. If we all agreed and did things the same way, we wouldn’t improve, and there

would be little innovation. And most of us have experienced the boost in energy we get when we are given opportunities to be creative. This is what we're after.

GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH CONFLICT

Dina teaches art to teenagers. She is very outdoorsy, a woman who is strong and gentle at the same time. She attended a retreat where we did an improv exercise in which one person begins a scene and a second person creates a bit of conflict in it, which the first person must then quickly resolve. The scene is very short, and the exercise can be either hilarious, thoughtful, or contrived in its quick solution. Dina loved this exercise, because it helped her see how she always wanted to continue trying to resolve things to her satisfaction. "Sometimes in my life I don't necessarily agree with how something was resolved," she observed. "But I'm learning that it's okay. I can go on and do something else."

Dina thought that her school didn't give the kids enough time for art and that they wanted her to stick with the traditional painting of still lifes and such. She knew that when she got the teens outside and incorporated other people, garbage, graffiti, or even the weather, the kids lit up—and so did their artwork. But she couldn't make her principal understand the value of her style.

Previously, Dina would have tried to push the issue, wanting to resolve it completely, but her co-workers were not always willing to continue the discussion. She had to learn not only to just stop and let time heal some of the issues but, more importantly, to let some issues alone. She had to realize there were things she could not resolve perfectly:

"That kind of goes along with not being too attached. This weekend, by practicing non-attachment in improv, I am learning how to get unstuck. My snowplow just started moving forward really fast!"

The irony, of course, is that as soon as she stopped pushing, people began to genuinely listen to her for the first time. And she now does the kind of inspiring art with the kids that she'd been hoping for.

Sandy, a preschool director, wrapped up the retreat with these words:

"I'm really glad I didn't listen to my inner critic—no, wait! I want to start over. That's not what I meant to say!" she laughs with the group. "I'm really glad that my inner critic protected me! I was in total denial that I would have to get up on stage and do anything in front of people. If I had known that, I would never have come! What's really been helpful is being able to stay calm and focused in a situation that

feels out of control. Whether or not you're being funny and successful, people are watching you, and you don't know what you're doing next in the scene, and you want to just walk away and sit down. So it's a great place to practice *staying*. It's just like at school when I have two parents in front of me with a child who has severe behavioral problems, and they're in total denial and screaming at me for what a total idiot I am—those are situations that I have to deal with. So practicing with improv has helped me with just trusting that I can get through it and not run away when I feel uncomfortable—and just hang on, because you don't know what's coming or how it will turn out. You just keep going and staying with it, and it will eventually resolve.”

RESOLVING THINGS TOO QUICKLY

David is a marketing manager who is focused on results most of the time:

“I think I like to get to the positive so quickly. Usually my tendency is to resolve the scene too quickly—both on stage and in life. I'm the kind who wants to avoid talking about how much people hated the inner critic and just skip ahead to how to turn it into a benevolent coach. I need to take more time with *exploring the conflict*. And on stage, I'm learning to allow the conflict to unfold and have fun with complicating it.”

Learning to stay with conflict is an important part of creativity. If you want to succeed at having a creative life, know now that conflict will be a big part of it. And making friends with conflict—in fact, even looking forward to it as a way to get further into the juicy pulse of creativity—will take you where you may not have expected, but where you ultimately want to go.

THE COMPETITIVE IMPULSE & CREATIVITY

“Since you are like no being ever created since the beginning of time,
you are incomparable.”

—Brenda Ueland

Competition can be healthy or harmful, depending on how you do it and view it. When we push ourselves to be more creative because we enjoy the challenge, that's generally healthy. It adds joy and vitality to our lives. When we compete to appease a sense of inadequacy or impress others or because we can't stand the idea of someone being better than us, well... you might want to take a look at that. And if you spend

all day thinking competitive thoughts and happen to also have, oh, say, an ulcer (just by coincidence), then there are lots of good therapists around.

Some say competitive impulses are only destructive, but I think you can use the drive positively if you're not ruled by it. It's so deeply ingrained in us evolutionarily that it would be harmful to spend your whole life criticizing yourself for being competitive. Cut yourself some slack and redirect that fire.

TRY THIS: GET ENGAGED

The next time you are involved with something in which you feel competitive (sports, work, friendships, parenting, beautifying, making money, making art, making out), stop and notice your thoughts. Journal if you want to, but then put your attention back on your craft. What part of what you're doing really engages your attention, joy, and enthusiasm? Let your zest for parenting, work, earning income, art, sex, beauty, or connecting with others be your focal point. When you spin off into disturbing, competitive angst, just calmly breathe, notice it, and come back to what you're doing and enjoy it for its own sake.

AFFIRM & ADD TO GET CREATIVE

The skill of “affirming and adding” is offering, receiving, and then adding more offerings. As I mentioned in chapter one, when an actor comes into an improv scene, he or she immediately offers information to the audience and the other actors. The other actors need to accept the information (affirming it) and then add more information of their own.

Sherry is a full-time parent. She noticed that affirming and adding was very similar to what parents do with young children.

“You offer the children information (“Look at the doggie!”) and see if they are interested. If they are, you carry on talking about the doggie. If not, you go on to something else. When they receive your offering, the whole process is more fun,

but if they don't, let go of the goal and move on. This is also very similar to what I do with homeschooling—I offer styles of learning, even topics (at least sometimes those are offered—sometimes they're presented), then see what the kids receive, how they play with it. I find that if I keep the bigger goal in mind (what's really important to me is that they learn) but don't get too attached to the particular method, then I can adapt, adjust, go in all kinds of directions, and they learn the material faster, easier, and it's more fun for all of us."

It doesn't only work for young children. Chrystall is a fun and energetic mother of a teenager. Which is a necessary combination.

"Our nearly fifteen-year-old daughter got the 'teenage attitude' overnight. She went from a cooperative, likeable kid to an alien being who appeared to not even understand English anymore. Asking her to set the table prompted these looks of absolute disgust! I mean really, it's just setting the table. The improvisation skills I learned in the workshop have been very helpful for communicating with her and for maintaining my own sanity. Thinking on one's feet and staying in character (as the adult) are two things that keep me from turning into either a ranting maniac or an emotional wreck when being told how I am ruining her life. Get a grip! I especially like the affirming and adding exercise. She says, 'I totally think I'm old enough to get my own place now.' I respond calmly, 'So you want to get your own place? That would be nice, but how would you pay for it?' She says, 'Uhhhh, well, that's a problem.' I say, 'Hmmm.' Conversation over. It really isn't about me."

Instead of negating, which would have made her daughter feel disrespected, Chrystall found a way to accept her daughter's offering and to add further information, but in the vein of where her daughter started. This approach avoids the pitfall of derailling someone's train of thought. It keeps both parties on the same side, instead of clashing or fighting each other head-on. And in improv, it makes the scene move forward, instead of moving two agendas on two separate tracks.

In Buddhist practice, this is called "compassionate listening." You put yourself in someone else's shoes, at least partly, so that you can understand where the other person is coming from. Then you make your offering, but not as a defensive weapon. It's coming from the same side of the fence.

INSPIRATION—WHERE CAN WE GET IT?

My belief is that you can find inspiration ANYWHERE. That's not just a fluffy-ooney-gooney-man-she's-so-damn-happy-I-could-kill-her belief. It's real. Here's how:

Understand that your mind overlays its own perception of reality on EVERYTHING you see. How many times a day do you misunderstand someone? Or for those of you in long-term relationships, how many times a day are you downright unjustly misunderstood? We can see any interpretation we want of anything, and we can create a story about anything.

The next few pages will give you some exercises designed to invigorate your inspiration.

TRY THIS: ROCK PROJECTION

I learned this exercise from my friend and teacher, Nancy Stetter. I believe it's a shamanic practice. And it's really cool:

Take a rock, preferably one that you can lift and hold in your hands. Discern three or four separate sides to it. Now try to look at each side for a while, one at a time, finding an image in each. Here is what I see in the rock in front of me: a rabbit, the profile of the vice president, a gun. (You can do this with a crumpled piece of paper, too.) Now, start with whichever side and image appeals to you, and begin to tell or write a story (you can do this alone or with others) about these three or four images. ("There once was a rabbit hopping through the Montana woods, and he came across a militiaman's gun just lying there in the hills. Out of nowhere came Dick Cheney, who had been preparing for the apocalypse...")

Now, it certainly doesn't have to be funny or snide, and you don't have to worry about the bizarre, deep, hidden psychosis you've unearthed. But this exercise does two things: First, it shows you that you can ignite your imagination using absolutely anything (a rock, for God's sake!) and second, that you have a uniquely creative imagination unlike anyone else's, and it is available to you at any time.

Next time you feel stuck for inspiration, try these little suggestions:

- Look at the carpet. What images stand out after a thorough staring?
- Look at your dog. What is she thinking about you?
- Turn on the TV for one-tenth of a second and try to decipher what you just saw. Write a story about that image.
- Open any book and read one word from six different pages. Put them together in a sentence. This is the opening sentence of your next story.
Don't wait for the Muse to visit you. She's already living in your attic.

TRY THIS:

ALPHABETTING

You can do this at the grocery store, at home, with a waiter, with co-workers, with anyone. As you converse, the one rule is that the first letter of the first word of your sentence must begin with the letter A. And then the next time you speak, with B. For example, you are at a restaurant:

WAITER: Can I help you?

YOU: **A**ll I'd really like tonight is a salad. That sounds great. Thank you.

WAITER: Can I get you something to drink?

YOU: **B**etter get me a glass of the merlot...I think I need it tonight.

Having used the first word "better," I sounded kind of harsh, so I was led to make the second sentence ("I think I need it tonight") a little funnier or nicer. The whole line was therefore more interesting than if I hadn't had the restrictive rules and just said, "I'd like a glass of the merlot, please." See? The rules of this game force you into unexpected turns and allow you to be more creative. As Bobby McFerrin says, it's how you use these moments.

TRY THIS:

BRAIDING

This is a more formalized exercise to help inspire. It's called "Braiding," and it was taught to me by a woman named Wendy Fox, who is an improv

dance/movement teacher and performer. You can do this with a friend or do it alone using two to four different books (fiction, nonfiction, newspapers, etc.)

Open up a book or newspaper or magazine to any page and pick out a word. Write it down on a fresh piece of writing paper. Flip a few pages of the book and pull out another word. Get a total of five words. Now, the writers do a ten-minute timed writing session, being sure to use all five words in their writing. Everyone starts with the same five words. What you write can be fiction, stream of consciousness, nonfiction, poetry, whatever. The trick is to keep writing! Don't be too focused on the quality of the product. Focus on the process. When the ten minutes is up, read aloud to each other, one at a time, what you've all written. As you listen to each other, write down phrases you hear in the other people's writing that really jump out at you.

After you've listened to everyone's first reading and written down these strands of words and phrases, go onto a second timed writing of fifteen minutes. In this session, you must use all the strands that you pulled from the other writers' pieces. Now these strands are being braided into new pieces. You will end up with each writer having a separate piece of writing that has bits of other writers in it. This is why this exercise is called "Braiding."

Here's an example. The five words my group found in newspapers lying around the house:

Hospitable
Mine
Dominoes
Clearly
Wander

With these words, we each wrote a story, poem, whatever. Here's a snippet of one of ours, which turned out to be more or less a stream of consciousness piece:

"Formidable task, this. An aimless wandering of my eyes over the page produces what? A fear of Lack? What's really mine, what's there that I should

bring out and braid with others? The soul was meant to be bared...or barred. It's clearly not my brand. The collective dominoes of our answers knock each other down. Who stands them back up? Who could be so hospitable?"

Get the idea?

Then out of this, different group members pulled different bits. Here's what one woman pulled:

"fear of lack"

"what's in there"

"the collective dominoes of our answers knock each other down"

"formidable task, this"

After listening to everyone's first shot of writing and scribbling down the two or three strands you chose from each piece, you will have a whole page of strands. Don't share what you chose with each other yet. Instead, launch into the fifteen-minute writing session using these strands. Braid these strands together with some more original material and see what you create.

Now, read your new pieces out loud. Notice what effect it has on you and others to hear certain words spoken aloud in someone else's piece. What does it feel like to have someone choose phrases of yours? Finally, share your experiences with each other regarding this process.

Here's a braided piece from one of the women in an *Improvisation for the Spirit* workshop:

"Like kindred warriors, we advance and retreat, into the secret corners of our psyches, wading through the shallow of the egos and self-absorbedness, we arrive on the shore of belonging. We claim this gift, this soul, that will permeate our lacy awareness and empower our every now."

This final braiding didn't even have any of the original words left in it. The original words had inspired the group into writing, but they enthusiastically picked up each other's original phrases and kept braiding and reading and then braiding some more, until their work evolved to a very different ending point. One of the other women in that braiding group ended up with a hilarious piece about sex on the ski slope! We are each creatively unique individuals, that's for sure...

So what's the point?

1. This is a great way to break through any creative block (especially for writers)! You won't realize it, but suddenly you've written easily. This is a wonderful opening exercise for a writing group or any kind of creative workshop.
2. You are approving and validating other people's writing by pulling and braiding bits of their works that strike you. It empowers them.
3. It's wonderful to hear people say a line of yours because it struck them. You're being validated. It empowers you.
4. It's fascinating to see that people are struck by different things and that you, as a creative being, can affect different people differently. This can be jarring if you never realized it, but it's important to know.
5. It's a terrific way to bond a group.

TRY THIS:

THE TITLES GAME

Jordan found that he and his wife were having a hard time communicating verbally without getting stuck in a rut:

“So often in relationships, we find ourselves going over the same things over and over again. The cyclical arguments, the things that never get resolved, the repeated he said/she said, the ‘no, I did not say,’ gets soooo old. My wife and I have now taken on several improvisational tools to deal with this. Our favorite is to have a conversation that only uses song titles. One song title after another. Trying to actually respond with an appropriate song title uses so much brain power that soon the tension is released, forgotten, and we are both hysterical!”

Give this one a try. It's totally ridiculous, but, well, that's what we're after here. Take a risk. You'll see where this silly stuff can take you once you've tried.

TRY THIS:**CONTACT IMPROV DANCE**

Lillie is an improvisational dancer. She finds words get in the way of communication with her husband.

“If words are not getting us anywhere in a disagreement, one person offers a hand and the other person meets it, and they create a dance from there. Sometimes it takes all of the effort in the world just to meet the other person’s hand when one is angry.”

It is a very open and courageous exercise and might seem like something you could never do, but it is inspiring. There are many versions of this kind of thing, but I offer this up as one to try—or create your own version.

FEELING RESTRICTED

At work, at home, even at the grocery store, when things don’t go as you’d hoped or planned, you can get angry, sad, or confused, or you can completely shut down. Here is one way to practice using restriction to help you learn that it provides the opportunity for a more creative life, not a less creative one.

TRY THIS:**THE QUESTION GAME**

This is great with kids at home or with your partner. The rule is simple: you can only speak in questions...both of you. No answers, no statements. It’s harder than you think. See where it takes you. It can spark imagination and liven up dinner.

Criteria that are restricting, like these, provide opportunities to be creative. Virtually every improv game, in fact, is built around a restriction like this.

COLLABORATION

Improvisation is collaboration. So is, well, just about everything. We do almost nothing in a vacuum. We raise our children together in our community. We work together even when we think we don't, because we always have a client or community that we are serving by our work. And we create art based on our context of our culture and how we relate to it, so even if we are painting alone in a room, in a way, there are centuries' worth of dead artists there along with us.

So collaboration, or co-creation, is the basis of all life and all creativity. You can't go anywhere or do anything without collaborating. Even you and I, as you read this book, are collaborating on our thoughts. And this book has come out of working with thousands of people, so their ideas and experiences are collaborating with me right now.

So let's take a little time here to look at the challenges and potential around collaboration.

THE ART OF ALLOWING IN COLLABORATION

The "Law of Allowing" is a wonderful way of explaining the importance of affirming in collaboration—or as the creator of this philosophy, the Abraham-Hicks team, calls it, "co-creation."

"Collaboration means that you allow others to have ideas that you can co-create with," Abraham and Hicks explain.

But we don't always do that, do we? We have a hard time allowing others to have different ideas than ours and to co-exist with us.

"World peace," they say in a wonderfully catty tone, "means one mindset big enough to make the decisions about what everybody else wants and the rest of the world conforming. That is the ultimate definition of world peace. You say, 'Oh, let's get along!' And what each of you mean is, 'You do what I want.' A peaceful world means, 'Everybody wanting what I want. Going along with what I want.' And the only problem with that is there are more than one of you, and you have endless desires that are born within you."

So how do we reconcile this and live together?

"The ultimate experience," they suggest, "is everyone having their experience and launching their individual rockets of desire, and the Universe yielding to all of them simultaneously. And everybody not worrying about what anybody else

created, and so, then allowing what they are wanting. What a world that is, when there are endless desirers who are allowing the fulfillment of their own desires.”

So what does that mean in plain English? What we want to cultivate is the enjoyment of allowing others to have ideas, rather than “tolerating” or putting up with them. The co-creative process allows for people to create more than they could on their own. Collaboration gives us energy and allows for greater and greater possibilities.

ENERGY

We are all here to create. Creativity is what life is about, whether it’s literally creating more life (children), discovering new possibilities (medicine, science), progressing spiritually, or creating joy and a zest for living. And creative expression gives us energy.

JOURNAL

What gives me energy in the workplace? What drains me? List as many things as you can think of:

What parts of my collaborative process inspire me?

We want to work with others in a way that is productive and joyful and that allows for creative problem solving. All of life is an improvisation of sorts. There is no written agenda, or even if there is one, you hardly stick to it. You know the old joke:

“You want to hear God laugh? Make plans.”

Now, because these sometimes overlap, put a star by anything that both drains you and gives you energy. As you really look at those stars, check to see whether they drain you—as in make you feel unhappy in some way—or if they just tire you out physically and emotionally, without you being upset about it. For example, doing shows both gives me energy and tires me out. But it doesn't drain me. Email drains me. Now look at what drains you in a negative way, and see if you see anything in common with those items on your list. And what is similar about the items that give you energy?

There is a model of introverts and extroverts that helped me understand this better. An extrovert is someone who gets fuel and jujū from other people and from being “out there,” while an introvert is someone who gets recharged by being alone. When I was younger, I got all my energy from being around others and doing group projects—an extrovert to the max. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve noticed a need for both introverted alone time to recharge and the same old extroverted fun and inspiration. What is your natural tendency? Play with this a little bit this week and discover where you get your creative fuel.

For me, what I noticed was that the things that drain my energy are situations in which I want to do something creative, but there are blocks to my doing it—like late trains, cancelled rehearsals, computer glitches, people not getting back to me, situations where the show is ready to go but the venue isn’t available. It’s about impeded flow and my inability to control it all in my made-up, impatient time frame. What I’ve learned is to recognize that frustration, to surrender to the circumstances and understand that I can’t control them, to slow down, and to let go and detach from my clinging to the goal or time frame. I am learning to trust more.

And as we’ve discussed, this is what all suffering is, really: attachment. So look at what drains you and see what you are really attached to. Understanding this will ease a lot of the tension and stop the energy drain. Next, learning to let go of these attachments—and knowing that you can’t control all the circumstances you want to—can offer your life a little wiggle room to breathe and relax into surrender. This will open up more avenues for joy and creativity. Which is the real goal anyway.

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE: GET CREATIVE

Practice finding inspiration all around you. It's there.

It's inside you as well. You really don't have to go far.

Don't use the excuse that you can't get inspired. You might have to create inspiration and not wait for it.

Look at what gives you energy and juice, and discern the difference between being enthusiastic-but-tired and being drained. Take some time to make changes in your routine so that you can create more "energy juicers" and fewer "energy drainers."

Give collaboration some attention. Find the joy in it, because you are here to co-create, whether you think you are an interactive sort or not. Look for chances to collaborate in a new way, with zest and vigor, getting your ego out of the picture and enjoying the process.

Give yourself some time to put creativity back into your daily routine. Don't put it off like it's for weekends or vacations.

Creativity is the life force of your day.

EFFORTLESSNESS

A monk came to his master and asked how long it would take to reach enlightenment. The master thought for a minute and said, 'About ten years.'

The monk said, "But master, I'm really quite smart. What if I work really hard? How long then?"

And the master replied, "Twenty years."

This chapter will help you take a good, hard look at your beliefs about effort, struggle, and the value we place on working hard versus working with ease. Exercises will lead you to a new flow, without beliefs holding you back. We will learn how to create a more leisurely life in which you can slow down and be more effective at the same time. Learning to "chill" will become more important to you as you create a fulfilled life. You will learn how to slow down, relax, and allow for creativity. We'll explore how to find a calm place from which to create within a high-stress or high-energy situation. We'll look at why tension undermines everything you do, and you'll learn techniques for battling the pressure to speed up.

One day when I was searching for a new affirmation that could encompass my main needs, I came across this one in a book:

My life is effortless.

I tried it on out loud and suddenly burst out laughing. I juxtaposed the image of “effortlessness” with my day ahead: the shopping list, the snow tires in the trunk waiting to be put on the car while it was *presently* snowing, the forgotten show-and-tell menorah for the first day of Chanukah left on the kitchen table—and we being the only Jewish family in our Montana school (oh, the pressure!)—and the 141 emails in my in-box that I hadn’t gotten to yet. It seemed absurd. I couldn’t get over the realization of just how full of complication and effort everything I do is. I seem quite attached to effort. Can something be valuable if you don’t have to work hard for it?

TRY THIS:

IS YOUR VALUE DEPENDENT ON HOW HARD YOU STRUGGLE?

Write down your beliefs about effort and value. What do you consider worthwhile? After writing your whole list, prioritize your list by number, determining which ones are the things that you value most. Next, put a star by the items that seem to take the most effort. Maybe put two stars by the outrageously effort-full endeavors. Now check out what you did. Does anything surprise you here? Are the starred items the highest ranked? In other words, do you only value what takes the most effort? Where did this belief come from? Do you agree with it now that you are a working adult? Do you want to change any of these beliefs you have regarding value and effort? You can, if you like...

When I did my list, I noticed several things. One was that I valued my long-distance friendships more than my local ones because they required more attention, so they must be more worth it. I changed my beliefs about this, and now I give extra attention to my low-maintenance local friendships—and they have proven to be surprisingly delightful, easy, and fulfilling.

I also noticed that I forget sometimes to value other “easy” things, like my health, my house, the sold-out audiences for our theatre’s shows. Things that I don’t struggle for, I write off and forget to appreciate.

But getting *Broad Comedy* a performance in Times Square? Well! That took a ton of effort, so of course I value it! When I wanted to then get the show a longer run in New York, and I knew this would be incredibly challenging, I began to leap for it in sort of a habitual struggling way. But there was a little voice that said, “Wait a second. Is this even what we want for this show?” I had to sit back and look at what made me leap. Was I just being pulled along by the *idea* of doing a run in New York? Was it the struggle itself that was attracting my attention? My gut kept telling me that there were other, easier ways to get what we wanted, which was to have more people see our show. And New York was about the hardest way to achieve that without an assurance that we’d get what we wanted. So we looked at different avenues, other cities, and we made sort of a U-turn: instead of struggling to pull our boat upstream, as Abraham–Hicks refer to it, we turned and flowed downstream. And this has made the process a complete delight!

JOURNAL

Is there anything *effortless* that you do value? Or that you want to value but believe you shouldn’t? Write them here. Next to each one, write your beliefs about their value. Now write possible new beliefs. How does that feel?



STRUGGLE VS. EASE

We all know the saying “Follow your bliss.” Well, I used to do something else: I called it “follow your blister.” My belief was that if it was hard and exhausting, it must be worthwhile—if I sweat and bleed, then this will prove I am worthy.

During the last play I directed with my teenage students, I had a totally different experience than on the ten or so teen plays I’d directed before. The kids got off-book (meaning they memorized their lines) earlier than ever, so there was no panicky feeling that last week of rehearsals before the play opened. But I noticed that I was actually uncomfortable with the ease! Every show I’ve ever worked on has some panic or breakdown or hissy fit somewhere close to opening night. This was the model I’d learned, and I had never questioned its validity.

So once I noticed my own completely ridiculous reaction to this new situation, I decided to go with it, enjoy it. But it was almost a letdown how easy it was! I kept expecting the lack of panic to mean there would be a lack of quality. If we don’t fret and fuss over something, how good can it be? Was this the neurotic Jewish grandmother gene inevitable in me after five hundred generations?

But I was wrong! The show was excellent and a breeze ! I began to wonder at my feeling of disappointment...do I thrive on adversity?

In recent years, I would have a director's nightmare before every show, where I'd be screaming at the top of my lungs at my cast and no one would be listening to me. This loss of control would become a real feeling in rehearsal as I felt the panic rise. But finally at this last show, I kept cool so I could experiment with this new notion of panic-free performing. The irony was that I was actually more in control as a director than I'd ever been before. There was no need for fear and tension. We'd created a new model.

I still have a little theatre superstition when all is going too well. "A bad dress rehearsal means a good show!" is the motto most of us were raised on. But slowly, I'm learning to play with the new model, and it's a hell of a lot more fun. It's saved me at least a buck a show in Roluids...

JOURNAL

What do you picture when you hear the word "struggle"? What blisters are you proud of? If they were taken away, who would you be?

TRY THIS: CANCEL SOMETHING

This may make you totally uncomfortable. If you must—but only the first time—tell the world that you are sick or that something has come up. Now, go do nothing. You might instinctually reach for a video, make a dinner date, or otherwise fill up this new time. DON'T. (Note: Does this idea alone make you uncomfortable? If so, do this page!)

For the first time, do the following (Remember: This might be HUGE for you, so take it slow):

Go home or somewhere where you can be alone.

Sign off on work or productivity for a limited time—you decide ahead what that time frame is: all day, two hours, until the kids get home, until next month, whatever.

Now, sit and do NOTHING for only fifteen minutes. Set a timer. Look around, maybe. Breathe. Breathing is good. But do nothing.

Next, journal about that experience. Write anything that comes to mind. You might be surprised by how much or how little you have to say. Just experience it all.

Eat if you need to. Observe eating. Don't read or talk on the phone. Just eat.

Next, taking a little break from nothing, do something mellow, like take a bath or read. But read something frivolous, like catalogues or something not work-related. And if you're like me and have a stack of *Newsweeks* sitting by your bed, don't read those if it makes you feel productive, like you've accomplished something. Do this for one hour. Set a timer.

Now, do nothing again for fifteen minutes. This time, write little short thoughts in your journal as they appear in your mind. Not long entries that take up the whole fifteen minutes—that's cheating! If you are a meditator, don't meditate. That's perhaps part of your productive daily routine. Maybe it's what you use to "accomplish" a sense of peace and balance for the day or to be a good meditator. Don't do that. Just sit. Again, look around if you like. Notice things. Or don't. Don't figure anything out. Set the timer.

Remember: This is an experiment, not a test.

This is an attempt to break a pattern. Journal when you need to. Don't be hard on yourself if this is difficult. I know very few people who would find this easy. Also, be wary of backlash afterward—you might find yourself in a fit of organizing and working extra hard the day after this. BE AWARE of that. If you must accomplish in a frenzy, at least notice it. Then try to come back to *just looking*: look around your office or workplace for thirty seconds. Do that when the frenzies hit. Or if they don't hit and it was a relatively easy experience, perhaps try a more prolonged experiment of doing nothing...

Try cancelling more things. Learn what the consequences are of not being as productive as you're used to. *Are* there any bad consequences? Are there more or fewer bad consequences than you expected? Are there any good consequences? Write them here:

DOING VS. BEING

If you're like me, a recovering type A, then you know what it's like to DO, DO, DO all the time. But if you get your head in the right place, then the actions should be more effortless...

CASTING & HIRING

They say 80 percent of the director's job is casting. And it's really true. Casting is basically THOUGHT, not action. After casting, all your ACTION is directing rehearsals, and that is either easy or hard based upon the previous casting decisions; i.e., your earlier thoughts. Same with life.

Thoughts are POWERFUL! It's like hiring your employees. If you've done it before, you know that putting more time into the hiring process saves you, oh,

about ten thousand problems later. Hiring requires THOUGHT and getting a clear picture of what you want. Then it's easy. If someone walks in the door who isn't right, you quickly can assess that: "See ya!" And then someone who is right stands out immediately.

"You don't have to do a lot. You just have to be willing. The rest falls into place...unless it doesn't. Then you continue to be willing."

—*Dr. Bradford Brown*

TRY THIS:

DOING VS. BEING

Here is a page that you can rip out and xerox. I suggest you copy this page and then cut the entries up, mix them up in a hat, and pick one a day.

If we are going to try to align our brains before we DO, then here are some questions you might answer before ACTING on anything.

What part of this stress/productivity/belief/effortlessness did you create?

To my inner guidance: What would you have me do?

Where is your energy flowing and thriving?

When you don't know what to do or what to say, can you just be still and wait?

How can I be of service?

Are you thinking BIG or small?

Who are you resenting? Is it their fault, really? What do you want that they have?

What are you projecting?

ATTITUDE, ATTITUDE, ATTITUDE (THE MARTYR SYNDROME)

There was a woman I knew who was working to keep a homeless shelter going. She was always struggling, and so was the center. She was mad at the rich people she

asked for donations, because she thought that they should give more and that they didn't really give a hoot about anything but themselves. Whenever she went to meetings to ask for money, she was filled with expectant resentment. Her energy was not enthusiastic, but rather whiny and negative. Who wants to be around that?

She finally took some time off (actually, she was forced to) to look at what she really wanted. She did a lot of work on herself and came back with a totally new understanding of money, fundraising, funders, and how “struggle” was a way of life for her. Now, she shares her vision of what her hopes and dreams for the shelter are—she inspired her funders through her enthusiasm and belief in the possibility of a better future for the people she serves. This is a very different way to be in the world.

Her shelter has since doubled in size and income, and the number of success stories has multiplied in terms of shelter residents getting their lives together. Another by-product of her having done this personal work is that she has less turnover in her staff. Before, no one wanted to work with a boss who was always moaning and being deeply negative. Her changed attitude has saved the shelter time and money in staff training due to less turnover.

Once again, it comes back to attitude and beliefs. She always believed she was doing good. What was keeping her from really doing good (and being happy about it) was her belief that it was an insurmountable task, that life was unfair because she had to beg funders for money, that funders were inherently evil, and that no one appreciated how hard she worked. Her changed attitude and beliefs brought about a whole new way of being in the world, a whole new way of living with the negative beliefs that come with attachment to the struggle. Ultimately, she got what she really wanted: positive social change. And she feels good about herself as well.

A LIFE OF LEISURE

Many years ago, I finally created a life in which I did not have to work twelve-hour days anymore. But I suddenly realized that a leisurely life scared me. While I had been complaining about overwork and had longed for more leisure, when I actually got all this free time, I was totally uncomfortable with it. My new work life allowed for several free morning hours until noon, but I found myself jamming it full of “productive” activities—none of which were creative or fun: errands, paperwork, etc.

Soon after, I was on the road on a long tour, where I was paid to perform for two hours a night. Here, I got into the habit of reading and enjoying my

mornings. But I kept calling it “vacation”—my mind wanted to justify only working two hours a day. This couldn’t be work! When I got home, I had a slow week, but instead of continuing those “vacation” habits, I felt compelled to do paperwork again, anything to busy myself. I believed I had to kind of pay for my sins of having under-worked.

When I caught myself at this, I looked at it carefully. What I found was a deep-seated belief that I do not deserve leisure. As an American artist who is fed, clothed, housed, and enjoys her work, mustn’t I have to be a little bit miserable to relieve my guilt at what others see as “having everything”?

Slowly, I noticed that my “leisure” actually freed up enough time and energy, which I could then put back into doing good for the world. But the irony is that then I felt great because I had found a new way to justify leisure! Leisure allowed more productivity! Yikes! I had to work hard (and I still do sometimes) to change these beliefs.

STARVING ARTIST SYNDROME

At around this time, I also realized that I was inadvertently teaching my teen students to believe in the “Starving Artist Syndrome.” I would make jokes about this syndrome and about the arts. I made little sarcastic remarks and hinted that it was noble to be in the arts, because as we all know, “You certainly aren’t going into it for the money!”

But eventually, I started to hear them make cracks about being starving artists. Sadly, I realized I’d taught them that, just as I’d been taught it! I was appalled that they were buying this reality, too—and it was my fault! Now I am very careful about what I put out there and what beliefs I download onto my students.

We need to be aware of self-fulfilling prophecies! Below is a way to start transforming your beliefs in this arena.

JOURNAL

Do you believe in the “Starving Artist Syndrome”? Do you believe that creativity is only for “free time”?

What are your beliefs about leisure? Write down the first three things that pop into your head.

Leisure is...

If I have time off, I...

If I were to have more time off, I would...

People who don't work are...

Who taught you these beliefs? Where did you pick this up?

What are some other things you've learned about overwork, productivity, even about procrastination and laziness?

Is all of that true? Objectively? Always?

What do you want to believe?

AND NEXT: THE LIFE-OF-LEISURE PRACTICE FOR THE RECOVERING WORKAHOLIC

Do you believe productivity is the only worthwhile way to spend time?

What kind of guilt do you experience when not working?

Lined writing area for the first question.

Do you want to experience this guilt?

Lined writing area for the second question.

Is there another way to think about work and leisure?

CHILL

The day before I went to my first Zen meditation retreat, I ran over my husband's foot. I was trying to get my son to school on time; I had about a billion things to finish at the office; I had a rehearsal for *Broad Comedy*; and I had to search every store in town for snorkels, flippers, and bathing caps. (They were for our musical number about global warming. Once again, nothing but high-brow art for me...) And I took this *very* seriously. You might wonder how I, a professional comedian, could take the shopping of ridiculous props so seriously that it was causing me this kind of fast-moving stress. But this is how I operate much of the time.

So, peeling out of the driveway while my husband was still trying to say good-bye to our son, I drove over his foot.

Our society has sped up vastly, and it's continuing to do so. But so much of the culture of speed is just that: culture. We are all trying to keep up with each other and to compete and sometimes just to simply not lose our jobs. And having someone in the office who moves as quickly as you can be contagious. It's a very

difficult thing to practice, being relaxed or moving more slowly when everything around you is speeding up. But I challenge you to do just that.

JOURNAL

How do you see yourself? Slow or fast, in general?

What are your feelings about speed, getting things done, being on time, producing, waiting in lines, waiting for others?

When you are late, how do you feel about yourself?

When someone else is late, how do you feel about them?

How is your body reacting to speed during a typical day? In the car? On the phone? On the phone in the car? In the supermarket? Talking with co-workers, clients or friends?

What is your first emotional response when I suggest that you physically stop, stand still, and take three breaths right now?

Try it.
(Did you? Try it, for real.)
Now, how do you feel?

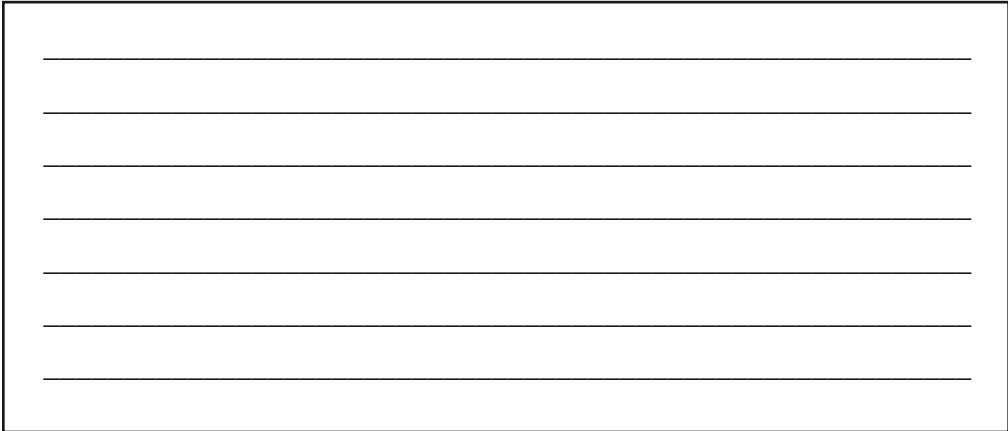
How did you “do” the breathing and stopping? Did you have judgments or thoughts about it?

Where did these judgments and beliefs come from? Look at your upbringing, but also look at those around you and the culture of your work and home life.

What’s objectively true about tension and doing things fast and being productive? Which parts are your beliefs, and what is actually objectively true?

What would be an interesting experiment for you in terms of slowing down or being mindful about tension and speed?

Make a commitment to trying one new practice this week. Write it here:



GOING SLOW IN IMPROV?!? YOU CAN'T DO THAT!!

How is it possible to go slow in improv? Aren't we supposed to think fast, react fast, move fast? Isn't fast what improv is all about?

Yes and no. What you are trying to do in order to be a creative person is get out of your own way, so that the flow of ideas can be free and easy. What often slows us down is having to listen to the voices that censor us or that tell us something's a bad idea or that say we don't have any ideas at all. All of that creates tension, blocks, and ultimately slows you down by distracting you from the creative thoughts lurking below the surface.

When you unlock your creativity and stay present to what's going on in the room, which includes listening and being engaged, then your ideas should flow quickly and freely *by themselves*. This is a kind of a miracle, as I see it. Think *less*, and your creativity will pop out faster, as we've seen through the exercises.

Now, we're not talking about talking quickly, making quick, rash decisions at work, or speeding around focused on outcomes and goals, as is our (or my, perhaps I should say) normal mode of operation. This is where speed creates tension, conflict, and problems with other people. Slowing down as a daily *practice* is vitally important to creating both a sane and a creative life.

Carl Honore is the author of one of my personal bibles, *In Praise of Slowness*. I talked with him for the first time when I was writing an article for *O, The Oprah Magazine*, in which I did a thirty-day email detox as a way to slow down and reconnect. I literally shut down my email for thirty days and lived to tell the tale.

I asked Carl these questions: Where does vitality come in? How can we be slow but still enthusiastic, inspired, impulsive, spontaneous, all that good stuff about creativity and leading an engaged life?

“The reason we even ask this question,” he said, “is that there is a powerful cultural taboo against being slow, which is seen as another word for laziness or slacking. Of course, if you did everything slowly, that *would* be a defeat and lamentable, but that’s not what the slow philosophy is about; it’s about striking a balance between fast and slow, or relearning the lost art of shifting gears. You need to shift into slow to rest, recharge, reflect, tap into the deeper stuff, and when you need to shift into higher gear, you have more get up and go, and you have more clarity and va-va-voom.”

This is certainly true of creative work, but it carries over into all areas of our lives.

“One of the ironies of slowing down,” he noted, “is that you have more of that vitality, because you’re not worn out from being stuck in fast-forward all the time. You slow down in order to step it up, when you need to, with more vim and vigor. All the big questions you never had time for before—because you were always on the phone or on email—now you have time to delve in. You get to be more here, and it’s richer. Before, when I was moving fast all the time, I felt like I was surfing through. Now I feel like I’m actually in the water. It’s such a different feeling.”

But *how* can we slow down?

First, you might need an actual break. Not necessarily, but it helps. I recommend a spa, a yoga retreat, a Zen sitting and walking meditation retreat, a writer’s retreat...anything where you actually leave your home or work environment and get some alone time. Solitude is important for slowing down.

If a retreat or solitude is not an option, you can practice in your regular environment. At work, program your computer or cell phone to play a calm-sounding bell, chime, or perhaps something silly to go off at intervals. I like a one-hour bell, and I call it a “mindfulness bell.” When you hear it, you take three slow breaths and focus only on the sound of the bell and your breaths. Nothing else. It’s incredibly easy and sometimes incredibly hard to commit to. I guarantee it will change your speed and bring awareness.

There are other ways to do this. Use other sounds in your environment. At Thich Nhat Hanh’s monasteries they use each time the phone rings as a “mindfulness bell.” (So if you call there, don’t expect the phone to be answered right away!) A bird, an airplane, even some shnook at the office yelling—anything you

choose can be something that calls you back to yourself and reminds you to take three slow breaths. If you're presenting in a meeting and can't stop everything, just notice your breath.

I have had some amazing interactions with people who do this all the time and have inspired me. They also don't answer questions right away. They might take a breath and look at me thoughtfully first before answering. Their answers are so much more clear and honest. And helpful. I am blown away by people who do this regularly, and I'm working on adopting it myself. How nice to have someone really ingest what you're saying or asking before responding! I feel so respected when they do that. And the answers are better because they've taken their time to get clearer.

Now, just like in the middle of an improv game, there are times when it's really hard and impractical to actually take breaths or pause. So in that case, what this practice does, in a sneaky way, is to build up a day of Slow so that when you need some Quick, you've got a store of it. Your mind is more practiced at being at ease.

"When you slow down and reconnect with your inner tortoise, the payoff stretches far beyond the moment of deceleration itself," said Honoré. "Slipping into slow mode helps cultivate an inner calm that you can then carry back into the faster parts of your day. That means that in the heat of battle, you remain still, sharp, and focused; you keep your head when all about you are losing theirs. Athletes call this 'being in the zone,' and if it works in sports, where speed is king, then it can work anywhere, including improv."

With a body that knows how to breathe in the long term, you can maintain a general sense of peace and relaxation, even when in more tense situations. When I used to walk around with my shoulders up by my ears, tense all day, and then something really intense came up, I just freaked out. The heightened level of tension, worry, and planning that went through my head all day left my body a wreck. Now I maintain a more aware and mindful state all day. When something intense that needs speed or concentration arises, my body is more able to jump into action efficiently and calmly without looking like I'm having an epileptic seizure.

Your friends are going to love this. And your kids. And your partner. And the teenager at Burger King who's really slow and annoying. Because learning to breathe and be mindful also allows anger and frustration to drain away more easily, you will be more fun to be around. And you won't want to strangle people as much. And you won't spill coffee on your newly cleaned suits. And you won't run

out of printer ink at just the wrong time. Because there won't be as many wrong times. Slow down. Take the time to take three breaths. I'm telling you, it's magic.

And by the way, if you see me, remind me. I forget, too.

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE: CHILL

Do it. Just slow down. But don't wait to do it in big chunks, like on vacation. That will only be a Band-Aid. Slow down minute to minute. Get yourself a "mindfulness bell" of some sort, like a cell phone alarm or a computer message that pops up every couple of hours. This will catch you unawares and help you bring yourself back to yourself. When you hear it, take three breaths. And set up another system that is proactive on your part, like an actual "mindfulness bell" that you ring. Listen to the tone ring out until you can't hear it any longer. Breathe. Now adjust your speed—or your metronome, as a friend of mine calls it.

There is nothing that will go worse in your life if you slow down your general speed (unless you are a jockey).

Consider achieving *less*. Be less productive, in the way we think about it. The irony is that we are often more productive when we move more slowly and consciously, so if your type A brain needs that excuse, use it...for now. Look at your lists. Is it objectively necessary for you to accomplish all of it? Today?! Look at it and see if you can discern whether it was fabricated to give you a sense of accomplishment or if it *is* really necessary. Check in with your thoughts about this, and witness this process.

Consider taking a real live *retreat*. You might want to retreat for a minute, an hour, a day, a year. You pick. I have never heard of anyone coming home from a retreat wishing they hadn't taken the time to take care of themselves. If you can't leave town or take off a day, just find five minutes to sit every day and watch your breath. Commit to it.

DESIRE & DISCOVERING WHAT YOU WANT

For want of desire, life's vitality began to evaporate.

—*Mark Epstein*

This chapter offers several ways to bring one's desires to light and put them to use. It will help you stop repressing and fearing your desires and see the importance of allowing yourself to know what you want and don't want. Several exercises will give you the opportunity to really explore what you want and discover how to move forward and attain these desires.

In improv and acting, we call what our character wants our “objectives.” A super-objective is what we want overall (world peace, to be married, to teach horseback riding, etc.), and the plain old ordinary objective is what we want in any given moment (to not yell at our kid, to be semi-charming on this date, to not fall off the horse in front of the riding school owner).

When you’re lost in an improv scene and don’t know what to do or add, the most likely reason is because you don’t know what your character’s objective is. What do they want overall and, as a result, right in this minute?

What do you want?

Some of my workshop participants believe they are not passionate about anything. That is just not possible. Generally, we have repressed desires, things we don’t feel we can have or should want. But like the character you create in a scene, you may not know yourself well enough to know what you want. You may not be aware of what you’re repressing. So how can you unlock this mystery?

Awareness. I know, I know, that’s my answer for everything. Well, that’s because it really is the answer.

Louis Pasteur said that “chance favors the prepared mind.” If you *happen* to be at a bookstore and your eyes synchronistically fall upon a book about India and your heart leaps and you gasp—well, pay attention! Your inner guidance is the one gasping. And everyone’s gasp is different: For one person, it may be an instantaneous knowledge that he or she wants to go to India and start a school for orphans; another will see that book and hear the calling to open an Indian restaurant right at home. Many will gasp and not know what comes next. But it will come. If you open that door and let even just a crack of light in on the word “India” and let it flip-flop around in your head for a while, a clearer picture will emerge. Be careful not to force it. Just notice it. Allow room for your desire to grow. And it may take you on a very circuitous route to get there, not ending up looking like what you pictured in the first place. Perhaps it will have nothing to do with India at all. It works differently for each of us. But I guarantee more and more things that make you take notice will appear to you. They may have been there all along, or they may sidle up to you suddenly, but they are there because you and your imagination listened to that initial gasp.

Trust, openness, staying present, and listening are your improvisational tools and allies for the practice of fostering awareness of your deepest desires.

BUT DOESN'T WANTING CAUSE UNHAPPINESS?

In the East *and* the West, we have a lot of judgments on desire. Desire is seen by many cultures as leading to vice—such as adultery, gluttony, selfishness, etc. And it *can* lead to these things. Strong desires can also cause us much pain when we can't get what we want.

"Anger stems from frustrated want," David Hawkins says in his book *Power vs. Force*. This frustration is a feeling that we can all relate to and that makes many of us turn off our "desire taps" and shy away from anything that might make us want because it is too painful. . But what we don't understand when we toss out the baby with the bathwater is how harmful not allowing ourselves to have desires can be.

Mark Epstein, an insightful psychiatrist and author with a Buddhist perspective, wrote a book called *Open to Desire*, which tries to demystify desire from a spiritual context. In Buddhism and many other religious and spiritual contexts, desire is frowned upon, even seen as the thing that keeps us suffering. An oversimplified view, Epstein points out, is that we should rid ourselves of desire in order to free ourselves from the ties that bind us.

When he went to Asia to study in silent meditation retreats, he says he found "a general valorization of the state of 'having no preferences'"—what Epstein calls a "demonization of desire." At first, he found the "relinquishing desire" approach appealing, having come—albeit with some guilt—from a culture that indulges desires (food, sex, TV, shopping sprees, etc.). So perhaps, he thought, the answer was to not have preferences and desires. That sounded like a great solution! But what happened in actuality for him was that "it often degenerated into a group of people unable to decide where to go or what to do. Even going out to a restaurant posed insurmountable problems. 'You decide,' one person might say. 'It really doesn't matter,' another might reply, and a general paralysis would result with no person willing to reveal his or her true preferences. Apathy ruled. For want of desire, life's vitality began to evaporate."

Dangling precariously on the other end of this confusing seesaw, Hawkins says that "frustration results from exaggerating the importance of desires." So should we then just simply downplay the importance of our desires? How can we give our desires enough strength to be a useful tool in our lives, but not so much that they overpower us and create frustration and anger when we don't get what we want?

This balancing act is one we will play with for the rest of our lives. We have to make friends with that fact. An awareness that this seesaw of feelings is inevitable will allow us to play in this playground more joyfully. And the first step is to allow yourself to really discover and listen to your own desires, fully and honestly.

TRY THIS:
“WINNING THE LOTTERY”

Answer this: what would you do if you won the lottery?

About three times a year, I ask myself this question as a gauge to check and see if I'm really doing what I want and what I came into this world to do. We give money so much power. It can determine our self-worth.

Now, look at what you've written. How far away from what you're really doing is it? Are there creative ways you can do what you want without winning the lottery? If you want to travel more, can you find a job that requires living overseas? If you want more leisure time, how can you change your financial situation to allow for that? Can you live more simply? Be more efficient?

My goal has never been to actually have the amount of money one would get from the lottery, but rather the sense of freedom it affords. So the game is a freedom-seeking game. And it works—without having to buy a single ticket.

JOURNAL

See where you are. Write up a list of what you want. What are your beliefs about what kind of freedom you “should” be allowed to have or not?

Where did you learn this? Do you buy it? Do you *want* what’s on that list?

The Dalai Lama says to ask what will bring you happiness versus pleasure. Happiness is not necessarily determined by circumstances and can permeate everything you do. Pleasure is impermanent and is dependent on circumstances. Put an H or P next to each item on your list (or even both if that comes up).

On your list, add a “Why” column so you can see if there are any underlying desires that are more important: do you have deeper core desires? This way you can really get at what you want. For example, you think you want a new job, but what you really want is respect. Now you can make a better decision: is it that I want a new job, or can I work on getting respect here at this job?

TRY THIS:

HOW WILL YOU FEEL WHEN YOU HAVE WHAT YOU WANT?

If you already had what you want, how would you feel? Imagine it. If your tastes are expensive and what you want is to spend loads of money on extravagances, you can do an imagination exercise: Put yourself in that space and ask yourself, what do you feel now that you have all those things? Are you satisfied? Or will you just want more?

Certain needs are hard to meet, because they are insatiable. Could you try feeling now what you think you’ll feel later? Because if not, later you’ll still feel what you feel now. We don’t necessarily change our feelings and desires once we have accomplished our goals. We are still the same person. So trying to cultivate a feeling is what we’re after here. Can you imagine feeling the way you will feel and bring that into the present?

I want to feel _____
 Try saying to yourself today,
 I feel (same as above) _____

MAKING A CHOICE

In one of my retreats, Samantha, a funny, loud, and rambunctious woman, noticed a clear shift happening during one of the improv games:

“Katie was explaining that we get to choose a character, an objective, and something to say or sing. It can be anything, *but I have to choose*. If I don’t choose an objective, the scene ends; if I don’t choose a character, the scene doesn’t begin. It doesn’t matter what I choose. This is what I get to do. I realized how much like real life this was for me. I get to choose my clothes, my hair, my makeup, my morals, my values, my job, my objectives, my goals...I get to choose *this* character: me. If I want to change it, I get to! But if I choose nothing, it’s over.”

TRY THIS:

PLEASURE VS. HAPPINESS

What super-objectives do I believe will make me happy?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

The *real* answer? Being happy will make you happy.

This exercise is the flip side of “Winning the Lottery.” It gets at your desires from another angle. For some, this exercise is very revealing, because you generally get an immediate, visceral response, like, “Oh, God, I would quit my job tomorrow. It would be a great excuse.” Or, “I would commit to that guy and marry him immediately. There’s no time to waste.” Or you might get a calm feeling that you are indeed living your life the way you want to. I have found that when I pose this question to my retreat participants, they have a very clear and strong understanding of what they want. *And what they don’t want.*

JOURNAL FURTHER:

What changes to your life would you make immediately?

What would you want to wrap up or get a sense of closure on?

How would you look back at the life you've had so far? Are you satisfied? Disappointed? Angry? Bitter? Peaceful? Appreciative? Just get a real, honest sense of your feelings.

Did you get to do what you wanted? Did you enjoy it? Did you give enough time to the things that mattered?

How would you tell the story of your life? In journalism school, they have you write your own obituary. Write it as if you died today. What would it say?

Now write it as if you died a year from now, thinking about the things you'd change if you knew today that you only had a year:

Now write it as if you lived until you were old and gray, completely satisfied with your life and having done everything and had everything you wanted. And as if you became exactly who you wanted to be:

Now, here's the thing: *you might only have a year to live*. This is a very real prospect. Death creeps up on many of us at a time much sooner than we'd expected. We all assume we're going to live forever, and that allows us to put off living the life we really want to live. We forget to spend time with people, to take those risks to have a creative life, to become bold, courageous, spontaneous, and joyful. Don't put it off. You will regret it. What can you do right now to move yourself in the direction of your year-to-live clarity?

If you don't want to walk out on your job, because you actually do like having savings for retirement, what can you do to ensure that security while finding the work you love?

Think about the people you want to connect or reconnect with. List one step that you can take today to make that move:

If you want closure on something—an unfinished project, a relationship unfinished or unsettled, an apology made, or an appreciation offered—how can you take some small steps each day to do that now? The Jews have a great holiday called Yom Kippur, and every year we ask our loved ones (and not-loved-ones sometimes) for forgiveness for any wrongs we may have committed. This way, we metaphorically get written into the Book of Life for another year. But this is a great exercise for anyone. It's a way to have closure on the past year and to move into the next year with clarity and comfort. Yom Kippur is in the fall, but New Year's is a great time to do this sort of thing, when you are already thinking about New Year's resolutions. Use it as a time to look at your "Winning the Lottery" and "Year to Live" lists. Or do it today. Commit to making some changes from each list. Being present with your desires each day ensures that your life won't slip past you. Time expands when you are present and notice what you want.

TRY THIS:**THANKS, AND WHILE YOU'RE AT IT...**

Set aside a brief time every day to make a desire practice. You might want to pair it with an appreciation practice. Sometimes just writing down or meditating on what you want all the time can start to feel like you've got the "gimme-gimmes," even though that's not what the practice is about. If you pair it with appreciation lists (writing down all the things you're thankful for), you'll be able to see what you appreciate, which is really just another way of saying what you want. In other words, whatever you appreciate, you generally want more of *that*. And appreciation just feels good. Try letting others know what you appreciate about them. This practice goes a long way to improving your sense of well-being and making the world a better place.

FOCUSING ON LACK

Creativity is about limitless ideas, infinite solutions. But when we focus on the lack of what we have—lack of funding, lack of resources, lack of time, and lack of ideas—we get more lack, and we get more exhausted. The nonprofit field is notorious for burnout. There is a mystique, which I know I grew up with, that we have limited resources and that we are heroic to struggle despite the difficulties. Again, it's the "starving artist" mentality rearing its ugly head. But what I'm finding is that if we focus on what we believe is lacking, we will have more lack, because of our focus on it. When I am in a scene and I am blanking, it is always because my attention is on the fact that I am blanking and can't think of anything. I am training myself these days to instead focus on the abundance of ideas. I let my mind roam. I look at the others in the scene and focus on what they are offering me. This always pulls me out of trouble and back into a creative mindset. We can shift our focus to the abundance of what we do have: the abundance of ideas, of solutions available, of common experience, of the good we are able to accomplish. Time, energy, and money are all available, and if we collaborate, over time, it creates more of it. You have taken a grand step in partnership and collaboration here. You have

different skills and resources and experiences. This is our strength as creative beings. Keep an eye out for this infinite supply of creativity, and it will grow further.

TRY THIS:

“MONEY COMES EASILY TO ME” (AND OTHER HARD-TO-BELIEVE AFFIRMATIONS)

As soon as I start saying an affirmation, I tend to look at things more positively, and THEN I see the good I already have. They are a kind of lead-in to appreciation. Yes, often it feels like you're lying to yourself, and yes, you might feel full of it sometimes. Do it anyway!

When my husband, Soren, and I started doing the affirmation “Money comes easily to me,” we started it as a joke. “I am a money magnet!” one of us would shout, just as we were writing a check for a terrifyingly big bill. But soon, we really began to notice how the affirmation affected our lives. First of all, it lightened our mood regarding money. The humor of it helped us change our attitude. But we started to notice that every time we needed money, some form of it was offered, like in the form of a telephone call offering freelance work. But sometimes we had an experience that just showed us how “rich” we already were. Sometimes we'd get an offer for something we didn't want to do, and we'd realize we weren't that hard up and didn't have to take that job. We only *think* like we are hard up. So that's where the “starving artist” stuff plays in.

Now, I am fully aware that we had education and opportunities, and I've decided to not presume to know that this works for everyone. And I don't presume to know if there are similar philosophies and practices in places with famines, etc. I hope there are. I want to believe that *thoughts* are at the heart of problems universally, because changing thoughts is easier than trying to change the outside world all at once. You have control over your own thoughts but not always instant control over other people and the world. I do know stories where thoughts, information, and connection are what led to real change in our world, but for now, I'm going to stick

Write down your beliefs about why you should not have more. (You have beliefs about BOTH sides of this, whether you realize it or not—take a minute to snoop into your mind.)

Write down where these beliefs might possibly have come from.

Write down which of these beliefs you want to keep and which are not serving you and you want to discard.

Now, take these new beliefs you want to support and write them out on a nice, clean sheet of paper or on a card. Put it somewhere where only you will see it. Look at it every day.

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU WANT

“The quality of your life is determined by the focus of your attention.”

—*Cheri Huber*

In improv, if you focus on what isn't working in a scene, you will remain stuck there. We have to instead focus on what we want as actors. Now, this also works for our characters—if you focus on what the character *doesn't* want (“I don't want to marry Herbert the prince!”), the scene might have a conflict, but it also might not move along at all—it will just be a battle of wills between two characters:

“You must!”

“I won't!”

“You must!”

“I won’t!”

We see this all the time at our kids’ camp: a back-and-forth fight between two characters that goes nowhere.

You have to be willing to move things ahead and change and grow as a character. And of course, as a person. This is non-attachment working with flexibility and imagination.

Try practicing this all day; it is a great skill to have. Focus on what *is* working. You will undoubtedly get more of it, because you will think about it and talk about it, and people and the planet will move toward you and your goal, because it is clear and because you have energy and enthusiasm behind it. This is good. You *want* this habit.

TRY THIS: GETTING UNSTUCK

Pick something that you negatively reinforce throughout your life. Perhaps it’s nitpicking your looks as you pass a mirror, or maybe it’s worrying every day about how low your bank account is. Maybe it’s seeing all the horror in the world. Or that everyone but you has the job you want, or the family you want, or the love you want. Now first, get some awareness going about how you usually operate. Catch yourself and your habit as it stands. Don’t judge—that’s just more of the same. Just NOTICE. Witness it non-judgmentally. Use objective, neutral language to name what you are habitually doing. Look at it with interest.

Now, flip it around. Notice how you have had enough money to pay for...what? If you hear yourself say, “But I never have enough!” that’s more of the same old habit. Instead, write down what you were able to pay for this week or even today. Make lists. Appreciation lists. You can put the lists somewhere that you’ll see them, if you like.

Do this with other things. What about your personality do you like? What about the people around you do you like? What are politicians doing that is good? (That one should be reserved for the advanced student only...)

Notice what is working in your life and in the world. Generate enthusiasm and energy for all of that awareness! I guarantee you will create more of it by your attitude and enthusiastic presence. It is contagious. Start with one thing you are going to focus on, and then add more as you feel like it. If you backpedal, just notice that with curiosity and humor. Start again. This is a wonderful lifelong practice.

TRY THIS: GOLD STARS

Make a grid on a piece of paper. This is going to be a little gold-star-type chart that you might have gotten in school when you were little. On the left side, write as many things you want to work on as you like, or even just one. This week I wrote things like:

Listen. Laugh. Connect with Others. Don't Spin Off into Habitual Planning. Notice Inspiration. Get Outside. Help Others More.

Each column to the right will be your day-to-day check-in. Do not use a letter grading system. Find stickers (even ridiculous ones from a kids' store—I use my son's Spider-Man stickers), or you can write things in. When I'm not using stickers, I write things like *Yes! Did It. Check. Not So Much. Hell, Yes! Bravo, Girl. Somewhat. HmMMM...need more attention here. Nope. Whoops...etc.* After a few days, you can scan the grid and see where your attention and time is going.

This week I noticed I was aware of and practicing almost everything I had wanted to focus on—except one thing on my list: getting outside. It was 10-below out, but I needed that “outside time.” I decided to stop trying to work in a big cross-country skiing day, and instead, I made a snowman with my kid—and it was a brief, hilarious frenzy. Five minutes of snowman, thirty minutes of hot chocolate and warm shower. But it did it for me. I had had a preconceived notion of what I should want from “outside time.” I had an image of an hour-long ski in the sun. I was focusing on it not being warm enough, and that made me feel lack. So I checked the chart, became aware of what I wanted, and gave it my attention.

This should not be a tool to beat yourself up with. If that happens, notice those voices and write them down. They are just ways the Ego wants to keep you suffering. Notice that. Perhaps laugh a little. Say, “Nice try.” And come back to looking for the positive. And change your chart as often as you like. One week, I had a full page that just said GO SLOW in giant letters. It was my only request. And I marked in each day where I had been able to go slowly. When I looked at it at the end of the day, I was excited to see how many times I had brought myself back to slowness consciously. I stopped looking for perfection and noticed when things *did* work. Try it.

THE BUTTER THIEF

Remember that all of this stems from a commitment to deciphering what you want. And finding the *joy* in desire is of the utmost importance.

The blue-skinned Hindu god Krishna was affectionately known as the “Butter Thief.” He absolutely loved butter, and they say people used to peek into his kitchen and watch surreptitiously as he would eat gobs of butter.

“His desire was so pure, and his enjoyment so thorough,” recounts Mark Epstein in *Open to Desire*, “that watching him eat evoked ecstasy in the onlookers. There was no residue to Krishna’s enjoyment, no leftover dissatisfaction or guilt or shame. His desire was not just a reminder of God’s blessings, it *was* a blessing in itself.”

Your desires are a blessing to others? What a great way to see it. What permission! We can discover our desires and revel in them. With desire in mind, we need to stay present with our awareness, focused on appreciation of what we have, and continue to give attention to what we want. If we balance the see saw of over-attachment to desire with the lighter open-palmed, bird-in-the-hand version, we will find this path fruitful and filled with joy.

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE:

DESIRE

Practice paying attention to what you want this week. Do the journaling sessions from this chapter more than once, perhaps, as you unearth new layers of desires.

Get in touch with the feeling you want to have, rather than just the stuff or experiences. When you think about what you want in the future, what is it you are expecting or hoping you will feel? Happy? Safe? Secure?

We all want the same thing (to be happy), but we have different beliefs about what will make us happy. Pay attention to whether you are projecting your happiness into the future. Once you discover what it is you really want (more money for better security, or good health, or perhaps a job you love), then start practicing the feeling you expect to have—but practice the feeling *now*. When you feel and act the way you think you would feel and act when you have everything you want, you will experience what you really want, which is happiness. People who are unhappily focused on the fact that they don't have money will be less likely to attract it into their experience. Would you want to hire someone who is a grump? No! You'd want to hire someone who is full of life and abundance. So practice focusing on the feeling and belief that life is abundant—and presto, it becomes more so.

This is a practice, and it is not magical; it is very real. You cultivate more of what you focus on. So search for the feeling you want and give it your attention. You will grow that feeling like a zucchini. Ever grow zucchini? They grow really fast...and they take over everything else.

AUTHENTICITY

Some writers confuse authenticity, which they ought always to aim at, with originality, which they should never bother about.

—*W.H. Auden*

This chapter will help you get real and keep it real. We will look at issues of the Ego, including performance anxiety, wanting approval, and wanting attention. Exercises will help you understand and be able to identify when you are projecting beliefs onto others, and when your conditioning is ruling your life, rather than you being able to be who you really are

I am standing backstage on opening night, waiting for the second act of my new show, *Broad Comedy*, to start. A Pepto-Bismol moment under normal circumstances, but this time an entire bottle of Nexium wouldn't do squat. This is the part of the show I'm dreading, and I'm not even in it. Except I *am* in it. I wrote it.

The monologue about being a mother of a three-year-old begins. (Wonder what inspired that?) My hands begin to sweat. (Why don't they make antiperspirant for hands?) I strain to hear over my adrenaline surge. The actress is doing a beautiful job. She hits just the right over-the-top, slightly hysterical, exhausted mom note. I know this note intimately.

"It's great. I love being a mother," her character chirps unconvincingly to her unseen eight-months-pregnant friend. The lady doth protest too much... "But you know," she continues, "there's that moment when he grabs the milk out of the baby's hands, and when she tries to get it back, he pushes her over, and then the baby starts to scream, and you just want to take him by the ankle and swing him 'round and 'round until you get enough momentum to just launch him over the porch railing."

I hold my breath. I picture audience members looking at the name of the author (me) in the program, and after the show, going directly out into the lobby to call Social Services and narc on me.

The actress sighs.

"But you just can't do that, can you?"

Much to my relief and my stomach's reprieve, a gust of unimpeded laughter erupts. They get it. I have taken the risk of sharing an authentic piece of myself, and I'm not being hauled off to jail. Or ousted from the Mommy Club.

Our Egos, monsters that they are, are desperately afraid that people will not accept our authentic selves. And that's really it. The crux of it all. Why do we fear speaking in public? Making a toast? Telling someone we love them? Wearing *that*? Writing from the heart? Putting our creativity out on display? We are afraid that our real selves won't be worthy, lovable, understood, or good enough. And that we are alone. That others (like, oh, perhaps, other mothers) will judge us. That we are the only one on the planet that has pictured, say, using our child as a shot put.

I think of authenticity as the *real* me: genuineness. But interestingly, authenticity also suggests our need for validity and legitimacy. We want to be validated, as in authenticated, like a piece of art—which, by the way, is always done by an expert... *hmmm*. In this same way, we want others to think we're okay, even

fabulous. And putting your authentic words, thoughts, actions, or creative impulses out there, well, that's really asking for it, isn't it?

Let's look at the improv game "Psycho Date." Two people start a scene in a bar and switch emotions as I call them out. They start out with, say, a lust-filled romantic encounter, which then jumps to paranoia. These games force us into an authentic state as performers, because we have no time to censor—no time for the inner critic to pipe up. We have to use the resources we have: past experience, our unique perspectives on life, our one and only voice that can't be rehearsed. We have to let out our inner trickster, our inner comedian. The game forces it out, in fact, if the person is willing to play along.

Interestingly, this can be a very provocative exercise for most people, because it begs for authenticity. But often during this game, someone has a big, whopping self-judgment that stops their spontaneity dead in its tracks. I'll then take a moment to stop and ask what went on there inside that brain of theirs, and it generally goes something like this:

"I couldn't stop thinking that the other person in the scene was so much funnier than me."

"So, what happened to you then?"

"I wasn't in the scene anymore. I was looking at it from a separate place."

"Right, and...?"

"Then I wanted to be that person, not me."

"So your inner critic said everyone else is better in some way than you."

"Right. More creative, more interesting, smarter, more acceptable."

"Is that true?" I ask.

"I'm not sure..."

And on we go to see what this person can do now, with a little more awareness about the internal blocks interfering in the scene. The person heads back into the game with more commitment to staying present and involved in the creativity, focusing on the game and the other actors and the storyline while trying to ignore any interruptions from the inner critic. Finally, the person lets loose, and out pops a spontaneous, genuine line. There is nothing more satisfying to me than the moment when someone's authentic self leaps out and throws itself into view, and everyone gasps. *Whoa. There it is.*

But where do we start? Which skill will lead us to being able to act authentically in life?

THE PRACTICE OF COMMITMENT

I recently had a workshop participant who just simply couldn't stay in character. Every time the scene would get going, she'd break into nervous giggles and drop her character and be unable to play along. I challenged her to make a commitment to being present in the game and to really stay in there and not let her inner critic tell her that she should be embarrassed and bail. Finally, she got focused. You could see it. It was a scene in which she was supposed to be a police officer. The other actor came running on and shouted:

“Hey, Officer! There's someone with a gun in here!”

And my actress stepped up and, without thinking, said,

“Oh, man...not again. Come on, Ma! Put the gun down! We've talked about this before...”

Now, of course the room just totally cracked up. We were all so shocked that she had actually committed and had such a funny response. That idea was in there, available in that brain of hers, all the time. She just let it out.

Our being *willing* to commit and trust ourselves to come up with spontaneous, creative ideas is the first step in making friends with our authentic selves.

And interestingly, when that authentic self leaps out, the rest of the room always laughs. Why is that? It's because we recognize it for the insightful, genuine observation of life that we all can relate to: Oh-my-gawd-did-she-actually-just-say-publicly-what-I-am-thinking-at-least-once-a-day? Laughter is generally a physical response to a feeling of relief or surprise.

Laughter connects people if it's in the “laughed with” variety. It is a good way to gauge when your authentic self is being recognized by others. If we look at what others might laugh at us for, and if we own it and even laugh along, then we are on our way to living in a brave, authentic way. When we react with defensiveness or embarrassment, it's because we're not okay with our imperfections. To be authentic, you have to let go of perfection. You have to accept everything in yourself. All of it, good and bad.

Sometimes we can fall into the trap of saying what we think our “audience” wants to hear. That's a surefire disaster. It doesn't have a damn thing to do with your authentic self. And it never resonates. It's the same reason we are so cynical about our politicians. (Well, there are other reasons, too. Namely, that they suck.) But often, it's because they are just saying what they think we want to hear. We

immediately see through them, don't we? But when someone comes onto the political scene who seems authentic and honest, we listen. Intently.

It's so ironic that the minute you are genuine, unpretentious, not trying to be somebody else or trying to be "better"—whatever that is—then you *are* accepted. And people gravitate to that. Why? Because we all want to be authentically who we are. And we want to be accepted for it. If we get kudos for being that other imaginary person, underneath, we'll never be satisfied, because we know it's not us. Who wants credit for something we didn't really do? Where's the joy in that?

In theatre, we call it "playing for truth." In *Broad Comedy*, there's one ridiculous scene about an egg that's interviewing competing sperm for the job of fertilization. We've got a giant egg costume on stage with three human-sized sperm all running in with headshots and resumes. And I still direct my actresses to play for the truth. "Come on guys, keep it real," I coach. And they all laugh at the absurdity of that. In that scene, if you play a sperm as a caricature, it doesn't work. If you play him straight, it's hilarious. (The sperm. Yes, I'm talking about playing the part of a sperm. The high-brow nature of my career astounds me.)

But here's the thing. Your authentic self cannot, absolutely cannot, *rely* on other people validating it. Now, note that this is coming from an actor. I am a professional applause seeker. When you are truly genuine, there will invariably be people who do *not* accept you. And in that case, you must be your own badass self, without apology. At some point, the importance of being real, and perhaps even going against conventional wisdom, makes you not give a damn about what others think. Ever had that kind of moment? It feels good and strong. It cures the disease to please.

There's a classic theatre tale from the old days of vaudeville where one night Costello (from Abbott and) came running out on stage genuinely thirsty and asked for a glass of water before he could start the scene. The audience laughed. The next night he decided to work that into the scene and came running out asking for a glass of water, and no one laughed. He was confounded why it didn't work, and Abbott said, "Last night you asked for a glass of water. Tonight you asked for a laugh."

My friend Kari King, a writer, sometimes comes up with words to help her spiritual life. She started using the word "blesson," which was a combo of "blessing" and "lesson." One particularly hard week, she kept walking around trying to be positive, forcing a smile onto her face, saying "What's the blesson in this?" when anything went wrong. Then, a final straw hit and she paused, looked up, and said, "You know what? Fuck the blesson."

And we all laughed. *That* was real. And funny. We could see the real her. We loved the real her. It was a genuine, authentic moment.

Backstage, hearing the laughter at my throwing-the-child-over-the-railing joke, I breathed a sigh of relief. I had decided to go ahead and put the piece out there, approval or no, but there's no doubt it feels good to have shown the real me and to have been accepted. It's not that you don't ever care if you're accepted. But that can't be the focus. You can let yourself be *defined* by what other people think.

I look around at my cast, standing there with me in the wings, and we smile. One actress mouths, "Yeah!" She's a mother, too. I let the tension drain out of my body, pull on my white sperm suit, and get ready to head out for the next scene.

PATH: WE ARE ALL CLIMBING THE SAME MOUNTAIN—WE JUST STEP IN DIFFERENT POO...

In improv, we each bring our own uniqueness to the scene. If we try to be like everyone else, we're really not adding anything new, and there is no point for more than one person to be there. It is vital that you trust that your unique, individual spirit is what makes the scene interesting and complete. Notice what feels as if you're trying to "fit in," versus adding your own individuality and content.

A lot of people in the spiritual self-help movement struggle with the idea of Path. Some of us are coming from a childhood where our family's religion was the "right" religion. Some of us turn our backs completely on our early religious upbringing. Some of us feel we're being disloyal if we do that, so we stringently adhere to something we no longer believe in deep down. Some of us seek something new and sample everything we can. And some of us wait desperately for permission to come from somewhere that says there's no one right path. For those of you in the latter group, here's your permission! You can follow your own path. It's very hard for many of us to feel comfortable with that.

I had a teacher, a woman who grew up Catholic and took her Buddhist vows as an adult, who described the spiritual journey as all of us climbing the same mountain to seek Truth and Joy. But each of us is attracted to different flowers on

the side of the path—and for very different reasons: one person likes the bright flowers because her past was full of darkness; another likes the aggressive weeds because she is meek; and another is attracted to those same weeds because she is strong and tenacious. It's VERY complicated, this business of what attracts people to these different jewels along the path. But the good news is that YOU get to decide which flowers you take, which bits of wisdom have meaning for you, which teachers you want to learn from, and which poo you want to walk around in.

Another version of the metaphor is that we're all climbing the same mountain but taking different routes: some walk straight, some stumble, some wind around and around, and some skydive (of course) onto the summit.

Be *AWARE!* Is the path you take—or the flowers you pick or whatever—is that what you appreciate, or are you doing it to please someone else?

JOURNAL

Write down the major spiritual influences of your life and, if you can remember, how you came across them. Was there synchronicity? Were you dragged to a meeting by a friend? Forced to go to church by a parent? Did you discover a mentor unexpectedly?

Take a look at why you stayed on a particular religious, spiritual, or cultural path. If you moved away from a particular path, why? What motivated you?

If you could explore an area of your spiritual life without anyone knowing or recognizing you, what would it be?

THE WISDOM OF NONDISCRIMINATION

The role of the Ego is to make us believe we are separate from one another. We judge and believe we are better or worse, smarter or dumber, prettier or uglier, kinder or meaner, more or less successful than others. This puts us in an adversarial position with the world. Look at this in your daily life and witness all the comparing and separating you do.

Now, what if we were all on the same side?

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen Buddhist master, describes this wisdom of imagining yourself on the same side as others—what he calls the wisdom of “nondiscrimination,” in his typical playful, gentle manner:

“I am right-handed, so I do most things with my right hand...I have written all my poems with my right hand. But my right hand is never proud of itself. It never says, ‘Left hand, you are good for nothing! I have to do everything by myself.’ And my left hand does not have an inferiority complex. It never suffers, it’s wonderful. My right and left hands are always at peace with each other...”

JOURNAL

Pick a relationship where you are on the same side, like a best friend, significant other, parent, niece, etc. Why are you on the same side?

How does that manifest?

Are there times when you're not on the same side? How does that happen?

What is your part in that separation or competition?

Can you switch gears and put yourself on the same side as this person? What would you say to this person to indicate you're on his or her side?

Next, pick someone who you are most definitely not feeling like you are on the same side of. Why is that? What's wrong with this person? Why do you feel you're better or worse?

Could you step back and look at where you are the same? What common goals are you both after? Is there anything in this person that you can relate to?

What could you say to him or her that would bring you into alignment and oneness with one another?

Can you think of a way to take *blame* out of the equation; that is, just see things as they are, just see this person as he or she is?

What is an action you could take to get you two on the same side?

My husband and I work very hard to see ourselves as on the same side, and when we do, things work. When we forget this and get into blaming or competing, we aren't happy. ("I *told* you I couldn't do the school pick-up today! I have rehearsal all night. I *knew* you weren't listening. Why am I always in charge of the schedule?!") Luckily we have locked into an understanding that we aren't competing or separate, so our relationship can generally flourish. ("Oh, dang. We got our wires crossed again. Guess the kid'll have to sleep at school. Just kidding. Can you get him today, and I'll get him tomorrow? And let's sit down tonight and go through the week with our date books together, 'cuz it's a complicated week.")

Stage fright can be addressed in this way, too. The audience is on your side, believe it or not. Audiences don't go to see shows hoping for a bad

performance. So know that they are ready and willing to support you. Even a heckler at a stand-up comedy show on some level wants you to step up and handle his heckling creatively.

At work, in a staff meeting, people need to feel like they are on the same side, working toward a unified goal. A leader who can accomplish this is a good leader. This is the goal in every relationship.

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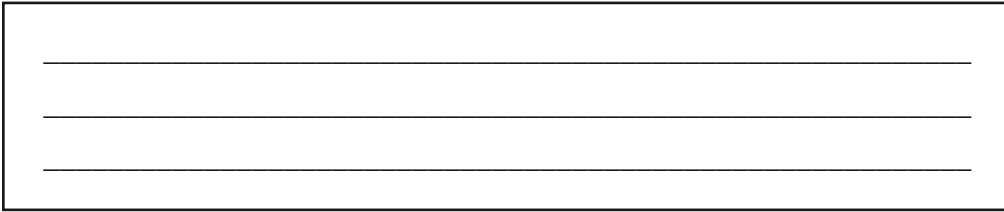
“You like me, you really like me!”

—*Academy Award-winning actress Sally Field*

Do you think of yourself as someone who needs approval?

Whose approval do you constantly seek? Is there someone or a group of someones in particular? Is it everyone?

Is there any part of your life in which you really only care about your own approval or opinion? What is it?



GIVING UP SISTER MARY PAT

Mary grew up in a Catholic family that was committed to service. They were quite wealthy, and she became somebody who was dedicated to helping the poor in other countries. But it became more of a compulsion than a joyful experience for her. As an adult, she jokingly referred to her overextended “savior personality” as Sister Mary Pat. By the time she was fifty, she knew something had to give. She pulled back from her work and basically dropped out of every commitment she had out of sheer exhaustion.

“I was so tired, I wasn’t thinking straight,” she says. She had been trying to save the world for her entire life, but there was a constant feeling of guilt and emptiness driving it. “The hardest part for me was the Catholic piece. I still have an old wooden bowl with little metal feet on my desk from my childhood. It says, in little girl’s handwriting, ‘Help the Missions: Girls’ Team.’ In second grade, I was in charge of organizing the girls’ team at my Catholic school to raise money for the mission. We raised the most of any team. So for forty years, it’s been an unconscious motivation. What I wanted wasn’t really my parents’ approval or my teachers’ approval, but *God’s* approval. I was trying to make God happy. Even as I talk about it now, I get all choked up. It’s the Old Testament God, who is vengeful and hateful! And you’re trying to make God happy? You can’t! Now I see that we’re each divine. All the mystics teach this, out of every tradition, even quantum physics. *We are* divine, *we are* that.”

So what Mary did was step out of the race. It was rather traumatic. Not only was she taking a risk to let go of all her previous commitments, but she was risking losing friends, which she actually did. There were many people who did not understand what she was doing. They projected selfishness onto her, which was so interesting, because that is what was motivating many of them to work: they were

afraid of feeling guilty that they were selfish if they didn't help save the world all day and night.

Poet and author David Whyte tells a similar story: When you first get off the speeding treadmill, there is a period of time in which you feel like the world is going past you—because you are still tuned into the world vision where everything is going fast. This is just like when you literally get off a treadmill, and it feels like you're still moving forward, but you're standing still. When you change your life drastically, you have to wait a bit, because it takes a period of time to let your eyes and body adjust. You start to see things that are moving more slowly, things that you actually couldn't physically see from the treadmill. That's when we're most vulnerable to wanting to get back on the treadmill, he says. You really have to wait it out.

"I shut off my email and said no to almost everything," says Mary. "It was like being in limbo. And I had a moment when I panicked. I can picture it. My husband was home and in the living room, and I was by myself, standing in the middle of the bathroom, and I banged on the wall and shouted, 'Damn it, nobody wants me or needs me! I'm so pissed!' Before, I did a lot of what I did because I was appreciated for what I did, and not because I loved it. I loved the strokes I got for doing it. But that doesn't carry you through. I had recognized that this M.O. wasn't sustainable. But when I turned fifty, I decided I was going to live to a hundred—so if I had fifty more years, I had to find a new pattern! But I didn't have a new pattern yet. I had to just stop and stay still. And that's what I did.

"It's like when I'm skiing. I'm the kind of person who has to stop, look at the map, assess my options, and make my choice about how to get down. Other people just keep going and say, 'Oh, I'll just figure it out as I go.' But for me, I have to actually stop and stand still. And the same was true now. I had to reflect, read books, journal, and think about what trail would get me down the mountain so I'd have the best ride. It feels courageous looking back on it now, but at the time, it was a feeling of survival: If I didn't stop (and I know this sounds dramatic), I would die. The old Mary went to guilt about it and would have said, 'Oh, I'm so fortunate, and it makes me feel so guilty that I can stop and others can't. So if others can't do it, then I can't do it. How can I be happy if Darfur isn't happy?' But now, what I'm learning is I can only really make myself happy. It's not possible to make sure everyone else is happy.

"I needed permission to be happy. A friend who had done the same thing and had modeled for me the possibility of stopping and changing said, 'Do you know how hard it is to come forward in the world and be happy when the world is falling

apart, without everyone thinking you're selfish and stupid?' That really hit me. So now, I want to come from joy, finding a place of beauty."

When she does it now, she says she has people coming to her as if she's given herself permission to be happy. And in some odd way, it's giving them permission to be happy, too.

Author Marianne Williamson talks about how you can get away with things when you aren't conscious, but once you are aware, it doesn't work anymore. She says, "It's like, 'What's up with my wand?! What happened? It's broken!'"

So what's the answer to wanting to make the world a better place but wanting to do it from a place of joy—rather than of guilt, pressure, approval, or other places that will just lead to burnout and resentment and ultimately won't make much of a difference to those you're trying to help?

"Just being present with others is the answer," Mary Pat says. "Where it starts is inner peace. We're all pushing against things like China and terrorists. That's actually a lot easier than coming to peace within *ourselves*. It's really hard to do your 'shadow work,' but you can't do anything else really well until you've done that."

One conscious, enlightened individual can shift the planet more than a hundred thousand people pushing against something. So the inner work is more important for the world than anything else. Otherwise you make more of a mess.

So there. Here's your permission.

KEEPING A SENSE OF SELF

We've talked about not losing yourself in collaboration, while at the same time being able to go along with other people's ideas. Traditionally, women want to get along and are willing to go along to do so. Men have been socialized a bit differently, but the concern is still there.

Everyone struggles with maintaining an authentic self while working with others. It's par for the course. The upside is that it can make the collaborative process interesting.

When you've got two actors, by definition, you have two agendas. How do you get both into the play? The greater good is the scene. The balancing act is figuring out when it is okay to lose yourself and when you need to maintain your character.

I collaborate with my husband on our writing for *Broad Comedy* and other projects. When I tell people this, many of them get looks of horror on their faces

as they imagine working with their spouses. It would not be their first choice, I can tell. Soren and I met in a show, however, so we've been collaborating from the start, and it's absolutely one of the best parts of our marriage. There's nothing like finally getting something right creatively that you are proud of together. But you also have a very clear picture of what's important: when do you let the other person take the lead, and when do you allow her to keep an idea, even if you like yours better? The importance of our relationship trumps everything else, and remembering this helps us to let go when we need to, to give and take creatively without having to be the "winner" in the collaborative process.

Soren and I also collaborate with our music video producer, Ryan Stumpe. One of the first big projects we did together was the first *Broad Comedy* music video we made for YouTube, called "Soccer Mom Ho." (You can go to my website or YouTube and still see it in all its ridiculous glory.) Ryan is brilliant at what he does, so we trust him—but the three of us are very opinionated about our work. There were moments early on when we struggled to figure out how we were going to be successful working together.

I asked Ryan recently how he felt about our collaboration and if he felt frustrated by having to compromise:

"I think when it's a situation where people feel like they are compromising, that's not really a collaboration," he says. "It's more about *melding* talents and ideas. You want to take something you know works in a certain arena, like with *Broad Comedy's* stage show, and trust me to move it into another arena for the video. And the communication can make or break the collaboration. A couple years ago, we were having trouble reading each other, and I remember you writing me an email and in the subject line putting, 'A long but important note to Ryan from Katie.' I still have it!"

I remember it. I had written a letter saying I was projecting all sorts of things onto the poor guy. He's quiet and thoughtful at times, so I wasn't sure what he was thinking. Lucky for me, I have an overactive imagination, so I made up all kinds of things: he thinks I'm butting in too much; he thinks our ideas aren't as good, but he's putting up with them, because it's ultimately our writing and show. When I became conscious of my projections, I knew I had to discuss it with him so the collaboration could move forward and work.

"There were a couple days where the three of us had to consciously put aside the work and communicate what we were feeling about the collaborative process," he recalls. "We had to talk through where we were going as partners and what it

meant to us. If we hadn't done that and felt good about what the others were saying, then we wouldn't be here now."

We just finished a new video, and it was our best yet. The process was smooth and easy (except for the delightful blizzard during our outside scene...I love shooting in Montana in November...). We have gotten to the point where we talk out our ideas, respect each other, hold onto our favorite ideas, and gently (and respectfully) fight for them, and we let each other try experiments as often as we can, supporting the creative process. Some ideas work and some don't, and the beauty of film is that we edit out what we don't like. The result is a product we all feel total ownership of. And the more fun the collaborative process is, and the less we hold tenaciously to ideas we have individually, the better it comes out. The melding of ideas is what works. And it's why we choose to do collaborative art in the first place. It's *interesting*. And invigorating.

WANTING ATTENTION

Everyone wants attention, and it's totally normal, or so I keep telling myself. I am in the "attention field," so I will pay particular attention to anything that justifies it. But from my experience, even people who say they don't want attention really do. It's just human.

People who are afraid to speak in public tell me that if they were being honest, they would say they really would love to do it *as long as they felt safe*. People who are loners want attention, too. It's just that they fall into one of two camps: either they fear attention for various reasons (were rebuked as a child for wanting it or got it for the wrong things and feel shame, etc.), or they *are* getting enough of it—and to us attention seekers, they just look like loners instead of the satisfied customers that they are.

But there are certainly different levels of attention seeking, and some are healthy and some are not.

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What are your beliefs about people who seek attention?

What about people who actually get attention (celebrities, politicians, your sister...)?

When you want attention, how do you try to get it?

What do you believe about yourself in terms of wanting attention? Are you judgmental?

What is wrong with wanting attention? Why shouldn't you pursue it?

If you got a lot of attention, it would say that you are:

What have you gotten attention for in the past (good or bad)?

What would you like to get attention for now?

THE BEAR-MAULING ATTENTION SYNDROME

Evonne came in on the second morning of our workshop to report this: “I was hiking early today and was all up in my head about how nobody ever pays attention to me, when I suddenly thought I saw a black bear, and my very first thought was, ‘Hey, that would be good if that bear attacked me. I would end up in the hospital, and no one would know where I was for a day, and they’d all be worried and when they found me, cry and tell me they were so relieved I was okay.’ Can you believe this fantasy? I actually *wanted* to get mauled by a bear so that I could get some attention. The difference is that normally this would be a little fantasy that I would entertain and not really notice how incredibly psycho it is, but today I stopped, I mean literally in my tracks, and said, ‘Evonne, girl, you gotta grow up. There has got to be a healthier way.’”

CONDITIONING

The Ego, or as many Buddhist teachers call it, conditioning, is made up of thoughts that you have come to believe, based on your upbringing and the culture around you. It is very sneaky at times. Your conditioning makes you feel things, like rage, jealousy, fear, all that crappy stuff. The good thing is that it can be undone—because you can learn to not believe those thoughts. Your conditioning wants you to remain stuck, separate from others, judging, comparing, fearing. But your natural state and the one that we are working toward is one of connection and love.

In Zen Buddhism we talk of “dropping” our conditioning or beliefs. It’s an amazing thing when it happens. You can actually let go of fearful thoughts and

beliefs and not be really bothered by them again. If you are afraid of performing or of failing at work, say, and you work on your awareness practices and the tools in this book, at some point, you are going to notice that you are not holding those thoughts like you used to. For some people it is an immediate “aha moment.” For others, it’s gradual. Either way, it’s wonderful when it happens.

First, you become *aware* of why you hold the belief you have. If, say, you are afraid everyone will laugh at you on stage, you first just become aware of that thought and understand that it is an Ego-based thought and that it is part of your conditioning. How do you know this? Because it’s *your* thought. We all have different fears. If we had the same ones, they’d be less about conditioning and more based in reality. Like fear of heights or snakes...fairly helpful fears that keep us safe. These are kinds of “natural” fears. But we all have different levels of other fears, and these are based on our conditioning. Not everyone has performance anxiety. Some people are afraid they’ll never get on the stage again! And some are afraid of speaking up, while others are afraid of not being heard. We’re all quite different in our fears this way, and that’s how you know that your fears aren’t real.

What do I mean “they aren’t real”? I mean that your fears have this hold on you. A thought like, “He doesn’t like me because I am not smart enough,” is very possibly completely fabricated and even false.

Most likely it’s a projection.

PROJECTION

We constantly project. And if you haven’t heard that word before, hopefully it will become one of your new favorites. Projection is when you attribute your own beliefs and feelings onto others. It can come across as if you know what another person is thinking. “He thinks I can’t do this job because I’m not educated enough, like he is.” “She thinks I’m too bossy and hates to be around me.” “He thinks I’m a wimp.” And on and on we go. These are all projections of things we think about ourselves.

In improv, projections come into play because we are all always guessing we know where the other actor is going in a scene. Yet we rarely do.

It’s the same in life. When I learned to actually ask the people I was projecting onto (“Hey, are you mad at me?”) and verify if what I was projecting was true or not, I was absolutely shocked and embarrassed to find out I was wrong, oh, probably 85 percent of the time. (The response: “No, not at all. I was just thinking

about how I'm going to get home in time to watch *Grey's Anatomy* tonight.") Generally, people had their own agendas, and they had nothing to do with me.

WARNING:

This practice is very dangerous to the Ego, who believes that everything centers around it!

And if you start to pay attention, you'll notice how many times other people make assumptions about you that are completely wrong. It's all quite funny when you start to notice it. How we come to understand one another at all is really a mystery. Committing to this awareness practice of noticing when we might be projecting, and perhaps even trying to verify whether we're right or wrong, is one way to really begin to have a more objectively real view of ourselves and everyone around us.

AWARENESS PRACTICE

We can practice being aware of the thoughts that are not real, that are just a fabrication of conditioning. As we talked about in chapter two on "being present," awareness is a crucial part of developing a more courageous, spontaneous, and creative life. And awareness is the first step to undoing the voices of conditioning.

The goal is to *detach* from believing the voices of conditioning. In Buddhist practice, this is called "disidentification." It's not repression, in which you are cut off from your memories and feelings. It's quite the opposite. You are very aware of these things, but you notice that they are just feelings and beliefs and are not necessarily an objective reality.

If you get solid, helpful information from your head that is worded in neutral language, like we worked on with the inner critic exercises, then that is probably not conditioning, and you're in good shape. Conditioning sounds like an attack:

"You can't do that."

"You're not good enough."

"You have to work harder, or you'll be a loser."

"You aren't (fill in the blank) _____ enough."

"And certainly not as good as (fill in a name or more) _____."

When you hear something that sounds like fear ("I could never do that. I would look like a fool."), try to stop and notice with full awareness that it is a voice and that it is probably not really true. This is the first step toward disidentifying with these voices, to awaken from their grasp. If you can laugh at it, even better.

My favorite line of the moment that I say back to my Ego is: “Nice try.”

It goes like this:

Ego/Conditioning: “Everyone would rather you weren’t in this group. Why do you keep hanging out with them?”

Me: “Nice try.”

Ego/Conditioning: “You’ll never get that show up—and half of it sucks, anyway.”

Me: “Nice try.”

Ego/Conditioning: “Man, you’re turning forty. Why don’t you get a real job?”

Me: “Nice try.”

By saying “Nice try,” I am acknowledging that it is just a voice and not real. I am acknowledging that there is some entity that is either totally obnoxious or perhaps, like the inner critic, just trying to help but isn’t good at it. Either way, I am made aware by this practice that *I am not a believer*. I don’t buy what it’s saying.

Now, let me make this very clear: *a part of me buys it*. That’s why the thought forms and can be heard in the first place. But another part of me—the healthy, not-conditioned part, the *real* me—that says, “Yeah, right. You’re full of it.” And this is so crucial. If you can at least get one toe in the door long enough to say, “Wait a second, I don’t buy that entirely,” then you are fully on your way to, well, enlightenment. And happiness.

TRY THIS: WHAT YOU SEE...

This exercise has been used by Buddhist teachers, and I learned it from Cheri Huber. (Check out her fantastic podcast at www.livingcompassion.org.)

Without thinking too hard, write down three answers in the spaces provided. They can be “good” or “bad” qualities:

Katie Goodman is: _____

Katie Goodman is: _____

Katie Goodman is: _____

Now say them out loud convincingly. Now, because this is a projection exercise and we Buddhists are tricky little buggers, change the beginning to say, “I am...” but write in exactly what you wrote about me above. So redo it here:

I am _____
 I am _____
 I am _____

Now say these out loud convincingly.

What we see in someone else is what we are experiencing ourselves, not what they objectively are. In other words, whatever you saw in me is an aspect of yourself. It may be a part of who you really are, or something you wish you were, or even some part of yourself you judge. In my workshops, I have overheard people say:

“Katie is smart, challenging, bossy, conflicted, centered, intense, beautiful, in shape, out of shape, enlightened, soul-searching, confused, funny, not as funny as I’d expected, afraid of what people think, conceited, wise, normal, calm, hyper, rich, afraid of money, demanding, encouraging, exhausted, energetic, thinks she knows more than everyone, doesn’t know what she’s talking about all the time, has got it all together.” You can see what’s going on here, right?

Because I am in a position of authority and am teaching a workshop people are enjoying, they usually project the good things about me. So it’s a good place for them to see their own fabulousness. If I didn’t understand this exercise, I’d be tempted to enjoy the praise as I walk through a room full of people saying, “Katie Goodman is funny and wise.” But what I understand before they do (because I am so wise) is that it’s them seeing the best or worst in *themselves*.

It can also be an exercise to see what they *want*. The important thing is that you notice your projections. If you wrote, “Katie Goodman is demanding,” what does that say about you? Are you demanding? Are you feeling like everyone around you is demanding things from you all the time? Do you wish you could be more demanding and get away with it? Notice

that you didn't write, "Katie Goodman is encouraging or nurturing." Why not? Or why didn't you write, "Katie Goodman is very angry about politics"? Or, "Katie Goodman is worried about what other people will think"? Because that's not what's on your mind.

Now, there are certain things no one will write, like "Katie Goodman is a wallflower," or "Katie Goodman is always sitting on her ass," or "Katie Goodman is blonde." Because there are some things that objective reality insists we agree on. But of the things that are available to your conditioned mind to see, it will pick the ones that are issues for you. It's an incredibly helpful exercise.

You can do this projection exercise with your boss, spouse, kids, parents, therapist (that's a good one and similar to doing it with your spiritual teacher), celebrities, and even the president, which is my favorite subject to rant about. Then look carefully at what you have to own: "Oh, God! At times I'm power hungry and a total asshole, too!"

Or start with a simple one: your pet. You can use a magazine and go through and project, project, project. In fact, you probably do that with fashion magazines without even knowing it. Check it out the next time you flip through one.

CONDITIONING VS. THE REAL US

So what do conditioning and projection have to do with authenticity? We are trying to unearth our authentic selves, and this excavation can only happen when we first become aware of what is really us and what was conditioned by our upbringing and the culture around us. Awareness practice will introduce you to your true self.

On stage, this is what people want to see. I have a song called "Apathy" about my sometimes not wanting to read the news or do anything to change the world, about certain days when I'd rather just complain about it instead. I sat down at the piano while I was writing a new show for *Broad Comedy*, and I said, "I don't care what I write today. I just want to say something I am really feeling."

It's absolutely one of my favorite songs, because it's so true. It's not being overly self-deprecating, which I find gets an easy laugh and is tempting. It's just simply

true for me. And apparently it resonates with a lot of people, which I saw from the reaction in the audience. I'll hear laughter and "Oh, man..." as someone gets it and feels the same. It's not the funniest or smartest or most political song I've ever written, but it's authentic.

**TRY THIS:
CLOSET AUTHENTICITY**

Look at your closet. Go through each item of clothing and say what you project onto it. Now look closely. It's fabric, perhaps plastic, metal, and dye. Can you see through your beliefs and just picture how random style is? Now look again, but without totally buying into it. Who are you, and what image are you shooting for? Journal here:

**THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE:
LIVING AUTHENTICALLY**

Watch projection and conditioning and how they play out in your life. Notice how often your hard and fast beliefs come up, and ask whether they are based in objective reality or if they come from your conditioning. Are you projecting onto others what they are thinking? Say one authentic thing every day, even if it might not be accepted. Keep a journal on how it feels and manifests in your life. It may be complicated, so take a long view of it as well as seeing what the immediate responses are. Don't judge—just notice. Don't accept your first thought as a real, objective, appropriate response to the world. Check it out. Why do you believe what you do? Who are you really?

ALLOWING IMPERFECTION & PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

When you are using the North Star to guide you, and you are following the direction of the North Star, you wouldn't expect to actually reach the North Star...

—*Thich Nhat Hanh*

This final chapter will help you review what you have learned in this book and then put it all into further practice with self-awareness and a gentle hand, allowing for those times when you fall back into old patterns, or make mistakes, or jump too quickly into something you weren't ready for. The whole point here is to keep practicing. There is no final exam, and there is no moment when you *finish*, perfected. It's a lifelong practice. We just stay with the practice and witness the process, enjoying it all the while.

At dinner tonight, I tell my four-year-old that I am writing a book to help adults remember how to have fun, because they forget. While I'm saying this, he's blowing bubbles into his milk, seeing what it can do. In this one isolated moment, he is following every single suggestion that I've used here to create a great life: he's exploring and being a beginner; he's present (not with me and my fascinating work tales, but with the milk); he's risk-taking, because the milk is about to spill all over him as it bubbles up to the top of the cup; he's being spontaneous, with not a care for what anyone thinks of him; he's flexible in that it's not really working the way he planned and he is now altering his technique so it doesn't spill; and he's having a hell of a lot of fun.

I was just amazed at the fact that he is able to be a total little Buddha in this one act. He's not yet been spoiled by rules of propriety or by shame. He isn't thinking about where we're going later. He's *here*. And he's fearless, and he just doesn't give a damn about what might happen to his shirt.

We all start out like this.

I am doing my best to help him keep these qualities while also prepping him to make it through his first date without total humiliation. I'm not sure if I'm succeeding, but the point is that we all come by this stuff naturally. It's our basic state: joy, exploration, freedom. You can't say you don't have this in you, because we all do. We just have to relocate it.

GOOD DAYS & BAD DAYS (OR "COMEDY-LESS IN SEATTLE")

Is it possible to get to the point where you are so good you never fail or flail again?

I have to say I don't think it's possible. Sorry. There's no way to be assured of perfection. And it's not like one day I'll wake up and say, "Oh! *Now* I get it!" and then be appointed the ruling Improv Queen until death, a member of a Comedy Supreme Court.

But the day that I realized this, two good things happened. First, I recognized that improvising both on and off stage would be a lifelong delight that I would never tire of, unlike other areas of my life I'd left in my wake. And second, I was off the hook. I no longer believed it was even a possibility to be failure-free, and so when bad improv shows or bad improv rehearsals happen, or even when dorky comments come

out of my mouth at a dinner party, I know that it's all part of the game. And if I want to play the game, I have to chalk it up and not berate myself about it.

Spontaneous Combustibles, my improv comedy troupe, had been together for about three years. We were a huge hit at home, and we ventured out to the Seattle Fringe Theatre Festival to see how we'd do. It was a fantastic week, and people showered us with praise. At one of the shows, a sort of bigwig on the social scene showed up. He ran a company that was called, if I remember correctly, Fabulous Parties for Big Rich Software Companies, Inc. He got our card after our show, and when we got back home, he called and hired us for a huge Christmas show back in Seattle, all expenses paid plus several thousand bucks.

We got on the plane to Seattle doing our best to look, well, completely juvenile—like our parents had just given us the house for the weekend—but we arrived all professional-looking and full of creative energy and, no doubt, ready to present brilliant comedic timing and innuendo oozing from every pore. (You know what's coming...)

So we show up at this glitzy palace of glamour and hip-ness. There were even ladders, a brick-wall backdrop, and, appropriately, comedy club-esque set pieces strewn about the stage in a sort of post-apocalyptic-HBO-special-back-alley-dumpster sort of design. We had arrived.

And actually, that's about all we did do right. Arrive. On time.

The show started out simply, professionally, but little by little (did we have too much to prove? to live up to? to eat?), we just weren't funny. We weren't bad or unprofessional or gross—well, later we got a little gross out of desperation, but it was already too late—we were just not very interesting and not very funny.

“Wait!” we cried. “We did everything right! We listened to each other! We offered! We affirmed! We added! We said unexpected things! We kept the scenes going! We were good teammates! What did we do wrong?!”

Nothing, really. We just weren't “on.” And the audience didn't really give us a break, either, to be frank. (Buggers.) Hell, they could've laughed at *something*, just to be nice, for God's sake! (Um...I guess there's a little bitterness still lurking.) Anyway, we got our check and stayed in our beautiful hotel rooms, and we did what any self-respecting comedians do after a bad show: we drank at the hotel bar for a while.

But by the time we got back on the plane the next day, our sense of “oy vey” was turning into “oh, well” for all of us. And we went home and the next week had a great show. Interestingly, in Seattle we had three forty-five-minute shows. The

first one was the above-mentioned fiasco, but the next two shows were some of our greatest improv moments ever, because we had given up (surrendered) and didn't care! But needless to say, by then the word had gotten out to the party-goers to "skip that improv troupe," and so we had about a total of seven people witness our infinite genius...

So ya got good days and ya got bad days. Whatcha gonna do?

Life is not fail-safe. And a creative life is filled with ups and downs. If your desire is to lead a creative and spontaneous life, then you must allow for failure—otherwise it would mean you weren't really taking creative risks.

My friend John is an improv comedy actor and director in Chicago. His observation is that the difference between a beginning improv actor and an advanced improv actor is this:

"Advanced guys aren't affected by the quality of the show. They are equally excited and interested in a 'good' or 'bad' or 'mediocre' show. They walk out wanting to go out for a drink with the other cast members, whereas the beginners say, 'Yeah...um...so, see you guys later,' and they go home."

And I think that's the goal. To be equally excited by all of it. The whole process.

JOURNAL

Journal about an incident you failed miserably at. Did you try again? Did you avoid it like the plague? Do you *wish* you'd tried again?

How are you in general at getting back up on the horse? Do you fail and bail? What's wrong with failure? What are your beliefs about failure?

Do you want to change these beliefs? What would you try again if you could?

Answer the famous self-help question: "What would you try if you knew you could not fail?"

But now answer this: What would you do if you knew you'd fail three or four times and then still not necessarily succeed? Would you risk that? If not, why not?

THE INFAMOUS BACKSLIDE

In the course of writing this book, as in any year, I had bouts of flamboyant backsliding. And most likely you will, too. It happens to everyone. *Two steps forward...two steps back.* The good news is that it will happen less and less with time. And it will be easier to get back to where you want to be.

When I returned from a fabulous Zen meditation retreat last fall, I knew for certain that I was completely and permanently enlightened.

That is, until about two months later.

So what's a self-help writer to do? Someone close to me (who shall not be named for the sake of our marriage) suggested I read my own damn book. I believed I thanked him for his insightful suggestion with various expletives.

But backsliding is part of the game. And if you begin to expect the backslide, you can use it as a way to practice self-compassion and surrender. If you hold onto the idea that you should be able to understand and integrate something new on the first try and never lose sight of it, you will surely be in for a harder time when you slip. If, on the other hand, you see slipping as a part of what happens when you shake up the Ego and recalibrate your habits and practice, then you can accept slip-ups more readily and move on.

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice. How do you get to a more creative, spontaneous, and courageous life? Practice, practice, practice...

NOW GET YOUR MONEY BACK FOR THIS BOOK

The second pitfall to be wary of, as you turn the exercises and suggestions in this book into a personal practice, is to not give yourself over to any teacher fully. The goal is to go beyond the teacher, to just take the bits that work for you and leave the rest. That said, I really can't teach you much of anything you aren't ready to learn. (Don't tell my publisher this.)

And furthermore, it's really almost impossible to tell other people how they should go about gaining enlightenment. All a teacher can do is point to the answer. Carefully laid out ten-step programs often fall flat because of their specificity. One must, like Dorothy, learn that they had it inside themselves all the time to go back to Kansas. Or wherever you'd like.

THE MELTING SWORD

In David Whyte's book *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, he uses the epic story of Beowulf as a metaphor for slaying our inner dragons. *Beowulf* goes down into the lake (our subconscious) to slay the monster Grendel's even more monstrous mother. He does so with a sword he finds there underwater. But when he tries to return to the surface, back into the world of consciousness, the sword melts away in the open air. In David Whyte's words, "the dissolving sword reminds us that we can never ultimately show to others exactly how we slew the monster."

And Whyte helps us understand the backslide as well. "Don't, says the story, get carried away with your display of inner mastery and try to wield that same inner sword in the world above," he warns. "Your delusions of grandiosity will melt away as soon as you try to use it again." As with my post-retreat high and then inevitable hangover, we need to give these practices time to get integrated into our psyches and our practical lives. Be easy on yourself. Go slow. As Cheri Huber says, "Be kinder to yourself than you think you should be."

So for now, *enjoy* the practice.

Ready? Go! And *later...set*.

NO FAILURES

“Situations are thrown at us every day, from the minute you get up to the minute you go to sleep,” Gwen, a nurse in her fifties, said to me at one of my workshops. “And now, after this retreat, I think I will be better able to say, when I have an off day, ‘Yeah, that was off, and I’m okay with that.’ To allow yourself to just go ahead and move through it is the point. I didn’t think there were any failures here this weekend. None at all. We just kept trying and moving and playing, and that’s the key. That’s why it worked overall. That’s how to be fulfilled and happy.”

SURRENDER REQUIRES COMING BACK TO THE PRESENT

Whenever you get caught up in past beliefs, past judgments, or expectations about what you can and can’t do in the future, remember to change your focus to the present instead. What is happening *now*? How does that change the way your body feels? Are you less tense when being present and surrendering the need to succeed? There are always going to be good days and bad days. You cannot guarantee success all the time, so try letting yourself off the hook. Ask yourself, “Are we having fun yet?” Forget about past failure and don’t even try to second-guess if you will succeed in the next upcoming creative endeavor. Just *Be*.

“What is a mistake, anyway?” asks Jennifer, a smart, feisty forty-year-old. “Mistakes come down to the raw truth, the core of who we are, and in improv, they are funny! The freedom you feel when you trust and let go is invigorating, no matter what it looks like. Forget the script—I don’t want it anymore. What matters is being present enough to know the truth and then putting it out there unrehearsed, with all its imperfections, for all to see.”

No one wants a perfect performance. We want it real, raw and funny. As Jennifer puts it, “Screwing up is funny, perfection is not. ‘Improv for the Spirit’ may be better described as ‘Improv for Real Life.’ If I could improv my way through life, it would be an honest life.”

The question is, are we trying to impress, or can we surrender and face life without a preconceived notion of what it is supposed to look like? In the moment of uncertainty, can we trust and let go? The more planned and rehearsed we are,

the less we believe. We can stop taking our life so seriously. Why not laugh and revel in our imperfection?

THE FINISHED PRODUCT

So do you work on the self first, and then one day wake up and feel enlightened enough to switch over and save the world? Not exactly. Rather, it's a simultaneous process. Work on yourself at the same time as helping the world. I have seen enough insecure, blocked people to know that lack of self-confidence equals self-centeredness equals not serving others. We have to make room to take care of ourselves, and we can't take care of the world at the expense of ourselves. I really see this as a side-by-side practice. We are all affecting one another, and our example will help others, by definition.

“What I noticed with the retreat group,” says Scarlet, who has come for her second time, “was that it showed how we all felt as people in this world. All of us shared stories of not feeling good enough, of wanting to be accepted by society, of not feeling ‘normal,’ of being fearful of failing in life, of feeling alone, and of having the need to compare ourselves to others. By the end, I felt totally connected with everyone and realized we all have the same hopes and fears. We are all in this together.”

That sounds about right.

The musical *Rent* states this philosophy: “The opposite of war isn't peace; it's creation.”

And if we're in this together, on the same side, connected, present, collaborating, co-creating, listening, being open and flexible, affirming and adding with others creatively, this is the way of creation. And we're here to create. That's really the whole point of this thing—by which I mean life, not just this book. So open up a little more space every day for creation for yourself and others. It's the best way to find happiness and the best way to make a difference. I really can't think of a better use of our lives.



THE



PRACTICE

Here is a short summary to refer to for your practice. You can pick one subject each week to focus on if that's easiest, or just let your eyes roam to whatever stands out when you need a little help on a particular day, and gravitate toward that.

WEEK 1:

Be Spontaneous

Surprise yourself several times a day this week by doing something unexpected. Try saying something spontaneous rather than planning everything you do and say. If an interesting opportunity arises, jump on it even if you don't know what the outcome will be. If that's too risky, just be more spontaneous in your language. This practice will lead to greater spontaneity in other areas later.

WEEK 2:

Be Present & Aware

Whenever you get caught up in past beliefs, past judgments, or expectations about what you can and can't do in the future, change your focus to the present instead. What is happening now? How does that change the way your body feels? Let go of past ideas that are no longer working for you. It's not personal. You are not just that one idea. Be vigilant in your practice to stay present.

WEEK 3:

Be Open & Flexible

Practice noticing when you are being inflexible. How does your body feel? Does it tense up when you believe you have something to fear from being open or flexible in a given situation? Make conscious choices to try being flexible, even when it's uncomfortable and you not are sure of the outcome. Experiment. Take a breath when someone suggests something you weren't expecting. Say, "Let me think about that for a minute," if it helps, rather than giving an immediate reaction of tension and fear. Allow for possibilities to unfold.

WEEK 4:

Take Risks

Pick one thing from your list of what you might be ready to "fire now" and "aim later." It might be something big or simply a baby step. Both are equally important and are about timing. If it isn't time to take a giant leap, then wait. Perhaps take several small risks each day—saying something more honest, accepting a task that is a challenge for you, etc. The practice of risk taking will change your life. You will live more fully.

WEEK 5:

Practice Trust

Practice trusting yourself, others, and the overall process. Know that everything you need is already inside your head. Practice assuming you know nothing. Relish your mistakes, knowing that it means you are taking risks and stepping onto a creative path. Practice ways of getting happily lost. Listen to your intuition. Trust, trust, trust.

WEEK 6:

Practice Surrender & Non-Attachment

Spend this week noticing when you are attached to goals and expectations. Is there tension in your body and mind when you are diverted from your preconceived plans? What would it be like to live more in the flow? When a surprising change or difficult challenge comes up, try seeing it as an opportunity for greater creativity in your life. Live this way for a week and see how it is to live this way. What would it be like to be unattached to bigger and bigger things?

WEEK 7:

Change Your Inner Critic to an Inner Coach

Spend this week finding new, neutral language for your inner critic, giving it a new job as an objective inner coach. Use the language you came up with in these pages to help guide you and support your desires for growth with helpful feedback without judgment or looking to the past. Keep the tone that of witnessing.

WEEK 8:

Get Creative

Find and use creative stimuli for inspiration. It's absolutely everywhere. Use conflict, restriction, and collaboration as tools for creativity. They are not to be avoided, but rather embraced. Discern your energy drainers and boosters and make some changes to your schedule that offer more juice. Think of yourself as creative, because you are.

WEEK 9:

Let Your Life Become Effortless...Chill

Use ease and joy to propel your creative work and make your life flow. Combat the “Starving Artist” and “Martyr” syndromes. Practice the art of chilling. Give yourself the chance to slow down. Relax and allow for creativity. Find a calm place inside yourself to handle a high-stress or high-energy situation. Release tension through breathing, mindfulness, and a determination to slow down both physically and mentally all day long, until it has become second nature. When things rev up again, bring your awareness back to it, and change your metronome back to a blissful pace.

WEEK 10:

Unearth Your Desires

Find out what you really want through the exercises in this chapter. Without knowing what you want, you are lost. Practice “Winning the Lottery” and “One Year to Live,” journaling your beliefs and changing them as you discover your truth. Focus on abundance versus lack. Make a gold star chart to reinforce what you want and what’s working well for you. Know that to want what you want is not only okay, it’s what you were put here for. Keep digging and discovering as you get down to deeper and deeper layers of what you want from your life.

WEEK 11:

Authenticity

Discover the real you and separate that out from what you believe you should be or what you think others want you to be. Whose approval do you really want? Assume all audiences are on your side, including family, friends and people you work with. And with those who seem not to be, work to create common goals to bring others into harmony with you. Practice the exercises about conditioning and projection, to help get a clearer picture of what you were conditioned to believe and what you really believe.

EXTRA CREDIT:

Look for the Potential in Others

Spend a week looking for the potential in others as you have done for yourself. Especially try it with relationships that are not new. It's harder here to see the potential, I think, with people you already have preconceived judgments about. Try it with new people as well—what are your judgments of people when you meet them? Look for what they can do. I guarantee they will surprise you and do better than you thought, because you are seeing the best in them. They will rise to the occasion, just as you have done when you've looked for the best in yourself.

FROM HERE ON:

Allow Imperfection & Keep Up the Practice

You don't have to assume that one day you will get all of this perfectly and then be done with personal growth! It is a lifelong practice. Enjoy that. What fun would it be if you had nowhere to grow?! Keep looking to the present; keep practicing all of the exercises. Allow for your ups and downs, and stay supportive of yourself. Stay in "witness mind," just noticing where you are and where you are going, without judgment. Remember to give yourself permission to allow time and space to work on yourself. Keep your focus on the joy of the process. Love the practice. Have fun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katie Goodman is the creator, writer, and director of *Broad Comedy*, a women's satire show, as well as the co-artistic director of the Equinox Theatre Company with her husband, Soren Kisiel, with whom she also co-writes *Broad Comedy* and does other co-things that led to co-parenting, most recently. She and her husband were recently nominated for the MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant for their unique work in theatre.

Katie is a contributor to *O, The Oprah Magazine*. She offers workshops and keynote speeches nationally under the title of "Improvisation for the Spirit." She does not use PowerPoint.

Katie is also a founding member of the nationally touring improv comedy troupe Spontaneous Combustibles. She was also the founder and producer of the National Women's Theatre Festival in Los Angeles and an artistic director of the Philadelphia Women's Theatre Festival.

She lives in Bozeman, Montana. Like everyone else there, she moved there from a city and now feels she has the right to complain when others do the same. As a frequent flyer, she was recently upgraded to Northwest's Silver Elite status and hopes to work her way up to Pilot status next year.

**WISH YOU COULD GAG YOUR INNER CRITIC?
FEELING BLOCKED CREATIVELY?
WANT TO MAKE A BIG CHANGE, BUT FEAR TAKING THE LEAP?**

*“A practical, fascinating, and funny guidebook. I’ve already begun applying hints from **Improvisation for the Spirit**, and I’m hoping that from now on, when people point and laugh at me, it will be for more appropriate reasons. A delightful read, filled with wonderful strategies.”*

—Martha Beck, Life Coach Columnist for *O, The Oprah Magazine*,
and author of *Steering by Starlight*

Comedy improv requires quick thinking, collaboration, getting out of your own way, and being in the moment without being a perfectionist. Katie Goodman, an internationally touring improv comedian and comedy writer, uses her witty and encouraging style to show you how to acquire the skills of improv comedy and apply them to every aspect of daily life. Along the way Goodman shares hilarious and insightful stories from her experiences onstage, as well as step-by-step exercises from her popular self-discovery workshops and retreats. Packed with creative, original, and, most importantly, fun exercises, *Improvisation for the Spirit* offers a truly transformational guide for anyone wanting to get more out of life.

“Bottom line: Katie is funny. She teaches you to live your life like an improv scene—no fear and fully committed.”

—Wayne Brady, improv comedian, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and *Don’t Forget the Lyrics*

“Katie Goodman’s writing flows and then jumps with anecdotes and prescriptions for finding courage. Fun to read, hard to put down.”

—Lesley Stahl, *60 Minutes*

“If you feel that something is holding you back, that the life you are meant to live is out there somewhere if only you could find it, then this book should go straight to the top of your reading list.”

—Carl Honoré, author of *In Praise of Slowness* and *Under Pressure*

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Katie Goodman is an internationally touring improv comedian and actress, keynote speaker, comedy writer, and creativity coach. She is a contributor to *O, The Oprah Magazine* and the creator of the internationally acclaimed women’s sketch comedy show “Broad Comedy.” She offers workshops, retreats, and keynote speeches under the title of “Improvisation for the Spirit.” She does not use PowerPoint.
www.katiegoodman.com



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