

## **Making It Up**

A sermon offered by the Reverend Wayne B. Arnason  
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
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### **First Reading** *Life While-You-Wait* by Wislawa Szymborska

Life While-You-Wait.  
Performance without rehearsal.  
Body without alterations.  
Head without premeditation.

I know nothing of the role I play.  
I only know it's mine. I can't exchange it.

I have to guess on the spot  
just what this play's all about.

Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,  
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.  
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.  
I trip at every step over my own ignorance.  
I can't conceal my hayseed manners.  
My instincts are for happy histrionics.  
Stage fright makes excuses for me, which humiliate me more.  
Extenuating circumstances strike me as cruel.

Words and impulses you can't take back,  
stars you'll never get counted,  
your character like a raincoat you button on the run ?  
the pitiful results of all this unexpectedness.

If only I could just rehearse one Wednesday in advance,  
or repeat a single Thursday that has passed!  
But here comes Friday with a script I haven't seen.  
Is it fair, I ask  
(my voice a little hoarse,  
since I couldn't even clear my throat offstage).

You'd be wrong to think that it's just a slapdash quiz  
taken in makeshift accommodations. Oh no.

I'm standing on the set and I see how strong it is.  
The props are surprisingly precise.  
The machine rotating the stage has been around even longer.  
The farthest galaxies have been turned on.  
Oh no, there's no question, this must be the premiere.  
And whatever I do  
will become forever what I've done.

## Sermon Part 1

If I was going to take the worship theme of *Creation* and the title of today's sermon, *Making It Up* really seriously, I would improvise this sermon. That's something I've tried before, preaching from cards or from an outline, but I've never felt it resulted in a better Unitarian Universalist sermon from me. It works in some other traditions. But in this congregation, I think there's more of an appreciation of the craft of the written and spoken message. In the writing of the sermon, I am definitely making it up as I go along, especially if it all comes in one draft and one sitting. So even if it's a finished product on the weekend, it was definitely still an improvisation on Friday afternoon.

The biggest improvisational challenge in my life, however, comes not in my writing, but in navigating my most important relationships and commitments and goals. Improvising our lives is where we are each truly doing a new thing. No one else can do it for you and no one else can do it like you. I have some favorite metaphors about the way that I improvise my life, and I'd like to share them with you in this sermon as if they were a riddle. What are the differences between a highway, a bird's nest, a jazz tune and a dinner party? If we unpack this riddle, maybe we can illuminate the different ways that we go about making it all up and the meanings we find in doing so. How about you: Is your life a highway, a bird's nest, a jazz tune, or a dinner party?

The metaphor of the highway is associated with the journey, the oldest metaphor we have for life, rooted in the original nomadic existence of our most distant ancestors. It's a metaphor that reminds us of the changes that are a part of life: the passing landscape of seasons, the aging friends and family, our variable life interests and challenges we face. Some of us understand our life as a journey that has a destination, a goal, some great prize at the end. In retirement I imagine being able to take vacations or weekends for travel with no destination, where the purpose of the journey is simply exploration, enjoyment, discovery and personal growth. But in my life right now, the journeys I take aren't like that at all. I want get to the interstate as fast as possible. I want the non-stop flight.

The highway metaphor seems appropriate for me in one way, since my life has been particularly unwavering in its direction. I decided I wanted to be a minister when I was nineteen. I went directly to seminary after graduating from college and I went directly through in three more years. I got a job right away, and was working full time as a minister by the time I was twenty-five years old. I have worked as a minister ever since. I've never wanted to do anything else. I've never been unemployed. There are plenty of folks these days who will say: "I hate

people like you.” Yet this really was the ideal that was given to our older generations for what we might find in life, that "single rising trajectory.” It is an ideal that is less and less realizable in the world today, as younger people are told to prepare for a life where they could have several careers, some of them not invented yet. False starts and new beginnings are more common than single rising trajectories. So even though some of us have lived on a straight and narrow highway of life, this metaphor isn't going to work for most of us anymore. I think the way that more people live their lives today is less like traveling a highway and more like building a bird's nest.

As we saw in our story today, a bird knows what it needs to build and why, but it's never sure where the materials are going to come from. We saw that finding the right location is important. But we also saw that the building materials will always have to be stuff you pick up along the way. Maybe a lot of that stuff will be the twigs from one tree that offers plenty to build with: a profession, a school of knowledge, a family. Or perhaps the basic materials will come from many different trees. The scraps of wisdom, courage, and meaning we get from those we love are the yarn and tin foil insulation of our nest. They are packed into the dirt and grass of our relationship to the earth. No two of them are exactly alike. Like bird's nests, there is a basic shape to the lives we build, but most of them are a little ragged along the edges. Putting together a life these days is not a straight and narrow path, but a labor of constant renovation, repairing, bailing out, building over.

One of my inspirations in preparing this sermon was the work of cultural anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson, in her book "Composing a Life." In it Bateson suggests some other metaphors which we'll explore in the second part of the sermon, more elegant metaphors for the creative act of improvising our lives, the metaphors of musical composition and improvisation, as well as the metaphor of cooking for a dinner party. The human task of musical creation is a metaphor for living that has always captured my imagination. As much as I enjoy written music of all kinds, classical, pop, country what has always intrigued me the most in music is the adventure of improvisation. It's what I have found so compelling in my lifelong love for the Grateful Dead, and that love led me to jazz. Now I am musically illiterate, a listener and not a player, so improvisation has always seemed miraculous to me. How can they just make this stuff up? I ask myself! How can an individual, or a band of musicians, find their way together through a piece, creating it as they go along? It's both a miracle and mystery. The great improvisational pianist and composer, Keith Jarrett has said of his work: "If I remain the listener and not think I'm the player, if I remain the listener and not control the thing, something happens.... my hands and my listening found that there was something in (the first) chord that led to the next note." Let's listen and see what he means.

## **Musical Interlude**

**Second Reading** Excerpt from *Composing a Life* by Mary Catherine Bateson

Life is an improvisatory art, about the ways we combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations, following an underlying grammar and evolving aesthetic. My life is a desperate improvisation, in which I am constantly trying to make something coherent from conflicting elements, to fit rapidly changing settings. At times, I pictured myself frantically rummaging through the refrigerator and the kitchen cabinets, convinced that somewhere I would find the odds and ends that could be combined, at the last minute, to make a meal for unexpected

guests, hoping to be rescued by serendipity. A good meal, like a poem or a life, has a certain balance and diversity, a certain coherence and fit. As one learns to cope in the kitchen, one no longer duplicates whole meals, but rather manipulates components and the way they are put together. The improvised meal will be different from the planned meal, and certainly riskier, but rich with the possibility of delicious surprise. Improvisation can be either a last resort or an established way of evoking creativity.

## **Sermon Part 2**

So let's talk some more about jazz and cooking. Completely improvisational composition is more rare in the world of music than improvisation within a form. Most jazz tunes, and most meals for that matter, have the basic structure of beginning, middle, and end, just like our lives. Even though the beginning that each of us has is unique, the themes of the opening melody will always influence the way that the tune turns out. The tune will also have an ending that usually comes back to the original melody, like so many adult lives which seek in their closing years to come to terms with their family origins and see themselves and the years they have lived as a whole in continuity with their origins. It's in the middle that we have the greatest challenge of improvisation -- in jazz, and in our living. And one is really able to be a great improviser without practice. That's what's at the heart of this metaphor for me. I'm drawn to jazz improvisation because of the fact that something which looks so free, so unstructured, so unplanned is actually deeply rooted in discipline, in form and in an understanding of music itself and what makes it so satisfying to us.

Jazz improvisation can't happen without an appreciation of the chord structure that is present in the theme melody for that particular tune, what musicians call the chart. What makes improvisation possible is seeing the chart, understanding the harmonic relationships, and absorbing through practice, practice, practice many hundreds, maybe thousands of patterns of notes that sound good together in different keys. It's a little like the difference between learning phrases in a new language from an exercise book, and being able to speak the language with some fluency. Knowing the phrases does not in and of itself mean you can speak the language, but without knowing them you are missing the foundation that enables you develop fluency.

In the reading we just heard, Mary Catherine Bateson invited us to consider another improvisational metaphor that may be more familiar to most of us than playing jazz: the metaphor of cooking. "The improvised meal," she said "will be different from the planned meal, and certainly riskier, but rich with the possibility of delicious surprise. Improvisation can be either a last resort or an established way of evoking creativity." The balance between planning and improvisation in a dinner party has to happen with the guest list as well as the dishes you want to prepare. The sequence of courses, the way the meal is served, all create a form within which the conversation around a dinner table of family or friends becomes a creative act in itself. I find the metaphor of a dinner party more and more compelling as I consider the next chapter of my life, when I have more choices about how I spend my time, who I want to be with, and how I re-connect with distant family that has always come second to my work.

The analogy to our living is not hard to see. Through education and through experience we enter our adult years with some basic understanding of ourselves and what is important to us

in human relationships and our work lives. We begin our careers, our families, with the compositions and recipes of our ancestors and parents. But to truly understand the underlying structure of human life through study and experience is the task of a lifetime. Then there is the moment of improvisation itself, when a life circumstance or opportunity or choice presents itself to us. Can we seize the time? Make the leap? Invite the change? Throw together whatever we've got and make something new?

The lessons of improvisation for our lives are equally powerful when we move beyond the individual and consider how human communities engage in improvisation. Take the improvisation involved in the small community created by a dinner party conversation. Any community of people who are trying to arrive at a common creation must meet the challenges of listening, and surrender, as well as creativity. Many musicians describe improvisation as a conversation. But just as in a conversation, some reciprocity is needed or the creativity is stifled. No one musician takes over the piece or the whole creation is lost. Individuals can solo, but everyone needs everyone else. So ego is a big issue for musicians and for all of us who seek to work creatively together in any form of human community, whether that be a dinner party, a congregation, or a country. Surrender to the integrity of the whole is a common theme in the religious life as well as the musical life.

Religion inquires into whether there is a foundation that stands apart from the world of change - eternal truths, teachers, writings, whose message and being is beyond time. Those who improvise jazz would tell you that their creations are entirely within the changing flow of time. Regardless of whether you play the same tunes over and over again, regardless of whether they are recorded and can be played back, that tune exists as a function of that very moment and is only heard live and alive but once. But the swallows and the robins will tell you something similar about their nests. They exist for a season and have to be rebuilt next year. And even the engineers who build highways from concrete and asphalt know that their work will last, but not forever. Since what we create today will almost certainly not be here tomorrow (whether that tomorrow is in the next month or the next century), we must ask ourselves in the context of our faith what activities in our lives truly bring meaning into our lives? We must ask ourselves what is truly worthy of our time, and why we do what we do. Is it a reward in heaven? Is it the promise that all the relationships we have built and all the good that we have done will somehow be reviewed and redeemed in another life?

Most of the people I've come to know in this congregation, even those who anticipate other realms of existence beyond or after this one, have no calculating approach to the question of how we should be living our lives in the present. In improvising our lives, we do not conduct ourselves in the world in moral, creative, and generous ways in order to chalk up points in another life, in a predestined heaven. Instead we do these things for the same reason we listen to music, or enjoy a dinner party: because we find intrinsic satisfaction and beauty in the listening and the sharing.

We put together the gifts that life has given us, including the tragedy and ugliness that we encounter. Bateson tells the story of the Chinese painter who having just completed a magnificent landscape on rice paper, spilled a drop of ink in the center of his creation. He paused and contemplated his painting for a few moments. The ink was indelible. He should throw the

painting away, for clearly it was ruined. But instead, he improvised. He took his brush in hand and converted the drop of ink to a fly buzzing in the foreground of his scene. It was not the idyllic scene of his first creation, but it was a landscape more real than any he had ever done before.

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