

“The Art of Improvisation”
A sermon by Jay Thomas with Dan Van Sickle
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Appleton, Wisconsin
fvuuf.org

June 26, 2016

Sermon – Part 1, “The Art of Improvisation” (Jay): This past April, the Reverend Wayne Arnason delivered a sermon here entitled “Making It Up.” Wayne shared with us four of his favorite metaphors about the ways we all improvise our lives. And then Wayne asked us to consider whether we saw our own lives as a highway, a bird’s nest, a jazz tune, or a dinner party.

Like any great sermon, it gave me a lot to think about; and I immediately felt a kinship with the bird’s nest metaphor. Yes, that was and is my life: taking my skills as a musician and educator and creating a career-nest built from whatever opportunity comes my way. I’ve been a soloist and ensemble performer, playing from both classical and pop repertoires. I’ve taught in public school classrooms at every level from kindergarten to college. I’ve taught in my own private studio. I’ve directed choirs and conducted pit bands, created and led workshops, and I even tried my hand as a lounge pianist (the only job I was ever fired from, by the way, and no, I’m neither sorry nor bitter). A bird’s nest, indeed, every opportunity improvised and woven together, my skills broadened and honed at every turn.

Wayne’s take on jazz improvisation also grabbed my attention, but for a different reason. Improvising at the piano is a skill I’ve treasured most of my life, and that skill has been applied to a long list of genres. But jazz is not one of them. I may have “faked it” on occasion, but I am certainly **not** a jazz pianist. It came to me that I knew very little about music improvisation as an art. I was familiar with it in relation to soloing in jazz, rock, and the blues. The use of improvisation in Baroque and Indian classical music was known to me but only in the vaguest terms. There was a time when I dabbled in free improvisation as an undergraduate. And my exploration into solo improv these many years was yet another example of an obviously rich and diverse art form. I felt an urge to begin filling the gaps in my knowledge about improvisation.

Upon the suggestion from a colleague, I purchased and read *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* by Derek Bailey. Bailey was a British jazz guitarist who was a pioneer in the free improvisation movement. This movement, whose followers come from every music genre imaginable, embraces the notion that music can be improvised with no preconceptions regarding tonality, meter, style, or form. The music is nothing like what you’re hearing today in this service. To these ears, much of what constitutes free improvisation is at turns brilliant,

confounding, and annoying. But Bailey's book was a very engaging read for me. Its scope is broad, beginning with a concise description of the use of improvisation in Indian classical music whose history goes back thousands of years. The book then continues chronologically, looking at improvisation as it appears in flamenco, Baroque music, church and organ music, rock, jazz, and finally free improvisation itself.

It's well known that during the Baroque period (1600-1750), improvisation was an essential component of the genre. After 1750, the practice faded and disappeared until the 1950's. As I dug into the book, I imagined reading quotes from documents dating from the Baroque era shedding light on the philosophy of improvisation, aspects of technique, and the training necessary to cultivate this art. I was searching for concrete descriptions of this practice, long lost. What I found instead were descriptions of improvisation in the most abstract of terms. In fact, this was true in nearly every chapter of the book, from classical Indian music to free improvisation. A common theme emerges within the book, that to begin to describe what happens as music is created spontaneously is to misunderstand the process from the start. It appears to defy description in the written word.

I can relate to this. I've been asked numerous times, "How do you do that?" And I can't answer without immediately sliding into the abstract. I pick a place to start and I just keep on going. One note leads to the next. The stuff just bubbles out of me. I really can't explain it.

This isn't to say, however, that improvisation is some sort of nebulous thing that magically appears in some musicians. There are countless stories from the legends of blues, jazz, and rock who describe, in their formative years, watching and learning from other musicians, gleaning certain licks or an unusual technique in order to augment their own budding prowess.

Through the centuries, many musicians have honed their ability to improvise by studying the greats in their field. Bailey tells us that common knowledge dictates that you find a master to study, absorb his or her skills through practiced imitation, and then gradually develop your own unique voice from that foundation. Countless students of bebop have done this with recordings of Charlie Parker, painstakingly transcribing his blistering solos so that they could be practiced slowly and eventually mastered. So then had students of classical Indian music and flamenco, without the benefit of recording, obviously.

So the book held no secrets regarding the teaching of improvisation. Instead, it helped me realize that my own sense of the art as something beyond words is indeed valid.

I want to share more of Bailey's book and how we might find parallels between the art of improvisation and "life as improvisation." But before we do that, I'm going to ask Dan to join me at the piano so that we can create some spontaneous music together. This is not something

with which I have a lot of experience, and I'm guessing Dan is in the same boat. You can well imagine that improvising alone and improvising with others are two different creatures. This is something Derek Bailey explores rather extensively in his book, as he describes his transition from creating free improvisation as part of an ensemble to becoming a solo artist in the same vein. The plusses and minuses of each situation are clear, at least in my mind: being in control as opposed to being at the mercy of others; enjoying the interplay between musicians versus performing within a vacuum. But I don't care about any of that right now. I just want to see what happens. Don't you?

Four-Handed Improvisation (Dan and Jay)

Second Reading (Dan) from *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* by Derek Bailey

In the non-improvisor, particularly the straight player, there is no sign of the instrumental impulse. One reason why the standard Western Instrumental training produces non-improvisors (and it doesn't just produce violinists, pianists, cellists, etc.: it produces specifically non-improvisors, musicians rendered incapable of attempting improvisation) is that not only does it teach how to play an instrument, it teaches that the creation of music is a separate activity from playing the instrument. [In other words,] learning how to create music is a [process] totally divorced from playing an instrument. Music for the instrumentalist is a set of written symbols which he interprets as best he can. They, the symbols, are the music, and the man who wrote them, the composer, is the music-maker. The instrument is the medium through which the composer finally transmits his ideas. The instrumentalist is not required to make music. He can assist with his 'interpretation' perhaps, but, judging from most reported remarks on the subject, composers prefer the instrumentalist to limit his contribution to providing the instrument, keeping it in tune, and being able to use it to carry out, as accurately as possible, any instruction which might be given to him. The improvisor's view of the instrument is totally different.

Sermon – Part 2 (Jay): There were lots of gems to find in Bailey's book. One quote from the French composer Francois Couperin jumped out at me: "What we write is different from what we play." My mind immediately flashed back to a memory from my childhood. I was eleven years old and was trying to create a score of a piece for piano I had written titled "Guitar." Some context: I started piano lessons when I was eight and started composing a couple of months after that. I had a teacher who was very supportive of my creative side, and Mrs. Hepola patiently guided me through the rather tortuous process of notating my compositions. (You have to understand: it is a tortuous process in the beginning. Nothing will kill the creative spark in a budding composer faster than insisting that a student figure out the correct time signature of a piece they've written. I know this from personal experience. Mrs. Hepola was a saint.) I started playing when I was eight, but I wasn't improvising at the piano until I was maybe ten. So the

nature of the compositions I was creating after I began improvising was quite different from the nature of those I produced when I was just beginning lessons.

Since “Guitar” was born out of improvisation, every time I played it, it was a little different. Sometimes it was longer, sometimes it was shorter. There was a section in the middle where I, for lack of a better description, played a “solo.” I had decided I wanted to enter this piece into a student composition competition and I was wracked with indecision as to how to commit it to paper. Mrs. Hepola calmly explained that if I wanted to make a score of “Guitar,” I would have to make hard choices. She also said that perhaps this was not a composition but an improvisation and should exist as such. But the teaching moment was lost on me. I had created this cool piece. I wanted to write it down to preserve it for all time. And so I did. The judges found my piece confusing, and it earned no prize. After I had created the score, I stopped playing “Guitar” as an improvisation and only as a composition. And then I stopped playing it altogether. The piece was somehow spoiled for me.

After that experience, I remember struggling with a few more pieces that were cut from the same cloth and trying to create scores for them. Then I happily abandoned that style and began exploring bitonality and dissonance as I discovered my love for Bartok. Luckily, I did not abandon improvisation. But what a shame that I’d missed the significance of that teaching moment, for Bailey tells us that the arts of improvisation and composition are at odds with each other. On one level, it’s easy to see why: the very nature of spontaneous music defies notation. Improvisation is music of the moment. It captures what the improviser is feeling at that moment. These feelings are not relegated to just what’s in a musician’s heart and mind, either; external forces are at play as well. So, by extension, the other musicians, the audience, the weather, the political climate, the light show, the smells of sweat, incense, and other (ahem) controlled substances, these all contribute to the moment when improvisation occurs. It is made and experienced in the moment; and when that singular moment has passed, it and the music are gone forever. What would be the point of notating it?

Going back to our students busily transcribing solos, it’s important to know that while such an exercise could reap some rewards, there is something lost in the process. There is a sense of time and place that is a key element of the improvisation that are not captured in transcription. An accurate note-for-note recreation of that solo will ultimately sound empty and lifeless. Learning to capture that sense of immediacy when improvisation occurs has to be learned elsewhere.

Let’s dig deeper into the differences between composition and improvisation. Now we return to Dan’s reading from Derek Bailey’s book. It is, in my mind, a barnburner of a quote. Bailey is stating that, in our current world of music education which produces essentially all of our classical musicians, the learning of how to play an instrument and the learning to make music are two separate processes. In Bailey’s view, it’s the score, the written representation of a

composition, that is at the center of this disconnect. The musical instrument is the medium (a statement no musician or scholar would contest), but it is the composer who is the music-maker, not the musician. The author sums it up brilliantly: "...composers prefer the instrumentalist to limit his contribution to providing the instrument, keeping it in tune, and being able to use it to carry out...any instructions which might be given to him."

Reading this was like receiving a blow to my chest. Such a blunt critique of music history spanning hundreds of years seemed so presumptuous. And yet given classical music's waning influence over the music industry, perhaps it is a wise observation. Consider that the very first music created by humans was improvisation, a visceral reaction to the moment. Then consider that since its disappearance, purveyors of classical music have come to regard improvisation as a trivial exercise and a waste of time. This outrageous quote seems to make light of the power of interpretation that the conductor and the solo and ensemble instrumentalists seem to hold. But then we remember those artists who have dared to interpret classical masterpieces in bold and innovative ways, and how they are often seen as outliers within the classical community. Perhaps we have forgotten something.

Improvisation, in Bailey's eyes, restores this disconnect between music-making and the musician. The instrument is still the medium, but the instrumentalist becomes the music-maker. Bailey, in preparation of his book, interviewed scores of musicians who improvise. He heard again and again the presence of this intense and personal relationship between instrument and instrumentalist. Classical musicians are renowned for complaining about their struggles with an inferior instrument they own, especially if finances prevent them from acquiring a higher quality instrument that will respond better to their efforts. Truth be told, when it comes to improvisation, I never met a piano I didn't like. As a high school senior in Toronto, I attended a party held at a friend's parents' summer home in northern Ontario. There was a decrepit baby grand piano in the living room that years of neglect and poor humidity control had ravaged. Broken strings and hammers, a defective damper system, a warped and cracked soundboard, the works. But that piano had the most strangely wonderful array of tones and colors I had ever heard, and it was ripe for the picking. But set me in front of a keyboard when I need to prepare a classical piece, and I will pick a fight with that instrument. Perhaps I am missing something.

Reading Derek Bailey's book certainly gave me a better understanding of music improvisation's nature, its history, and its place in today's music world. It helped to validate many of my intuitions regarding spontaneous music and my own musical journey. It has caused me to rethink how I teach music in my studio and in the rehearsal room. I have great concern over the disconnect between music-making and the musician and wonder how this chasm might be bridged. And I wonder what I may be able to contribute to this problem in my own small way.

Reading Bailey's book also gave me a better understanding of my own place in the world at large. Viewing life as an unending improvisation is such a powerful metaphor that can give us some understanding of why we live our lives the way we do. Reverend Wayne told us that just as in jazz improvisation, the way we engage with the rest of the world depends a great deal on how willing we are to work together, to hear each other out as well as to make sure we are heard. This conversational model works well for building community. I would add that being present in the moment and conscious of the total environment of that moment makes it a better model still.

Can there be a similar disconnect in how we live our lives that parallels the disconnection between musician and music-making? Are we following some sort of societal score or unseen notation that threatens to undermine our roles as life-makers? I think there is. Just as a composer's score dictates how a piece of music is to sound, there are social norms that can heavily influence the choices we make throughout our lives, especially the improvised choices. The power of these norms can be terrifying to behold. After all, they are everywhere in advertising, in our popular culture, and in our social media.

Let me give you an example. As someone who is experienced in the navigation of online dating, I have to ask: why are there so many middle aged women on these dating sites that want to meet a mate with a motorcycle? I understand the need to recreate ourselves as we advance through our 40's and 50's. The kids are too soon grown and gone. We want to live again, to move beyond the staid roles of breadwinners and parents. We want to rebel. Why do so many of us associate this need with buying hogs and leather chaps and wearing bandanas instead of motorcycle helmets? Why this, when there are so many other creative (and most likely more satisfying) ways to reinvent ourselves?

There is a much darker side to this, we all know. There are other deeply seated social norms that cause us to hate and distrust. Where else would preoccupations with who uses what bathroom, who travels where, and what banner hangs outside our Fellowship come from but those norms created out of the fear of the "other?" And darker still: what a different score parents are following who tell their children they are beautiful and valued from those parents who tell their children that they are ugly and stupid and worthless. How do those scores affect our children as they grow up and become adults? How do they affect our children's life choices? I think that we do run the risk of abdicating control to these norms and expectations at every turn, that we allow them to become the life-makers while we do what we're told, what is expected of us, what is beaten into us.

An answer to this disconnection can perhaps be found in musical improvisation. If we truly work to acknowledge the time and place of every moment by being mindful of all the details our senses pick up, *if we are present in the moment*, and if we then interact within that moment honestly and compassionately without defaulting to our social norms and expectations, perhaps

then we will reestablish ourselves as the life-makers. The trick is to set aside the score handed to us again and again, and to see every moment of our lives with fresh new eyes...and ears.

If I may, I'd like to end with a delightful quote from the composer and improviser, Frederic Rzewski, as he tells the story of running into Steve Lacy, another composer and improviser, and pressing Lacy for his opinion on the difference between the two arts. Rzewski says: *In 1968 I ran into Steve Lacy on the streets in Rome. I took out my pocket tape recorder and asked him to describe in fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation. He answered: 'In fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds.'*

His answer lasted exactly fifteen seconds and it is still the best formulation of the question I know.

May we always be able to take the time to reflect when we have the time and be able to improvise in a manner that is mindful and compassionate when we have just fifteen seconds.

Thank you.

© 2016 by Jay Thomas. All rights reserved.