

Improvising the weekend

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On the TV show “Whose Line is it Anyway?” four improvisers invent characters, jokes, scenes, and even songs on the spot. To demonstrate just how spontaneous these scenes are, the stars of the show often incorporate a suggestion from an audience member. Sure, there are occasional bloopers and not every scene is perfect. But the show does a great job of providing an entertaining half-hour and making its performers look good.

We may think that we ourselves could never do anything like that. And surely, the show's stars are talented, funny people and skilled improvisers. But we too are all improvisers. No one wakes up with a script that tells them exactly how their day will go. We improvise every time we interact with another person – making small talk, ordering food, even passing someone on the street. We improvise every time when things don't go as planned – when we run out of an ingredient in the kitchen, when a friend says they're running late to our meeting, or when the weather isn't what we hoped for.

And church musicians improvise our way through our weekends. I tell people that my usual weekend prayer is “Just once, God, I'd like a nice boring weekend.” A weekend without any surprises, where everyone is healthy and knows their notes, where all the liturgical ministers respond promptly to their

cues, where the time for Communion goes exactly as long as I expected. And yet this seldom – if ever – happens. I'm guessing your weekends are similar.

So given that we are all already improvisers, I suggest that there is a lot we as church musicians can learn from improvisers. Theatre professor Patricia Ryan Madson condensed wisdom from years of teaching improvisation into a short book called “Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up” (Bell Tower, 2005). She says that “a good improviser is someone who is awake, not entirely self-focused and moved by a desire to do something useful and give something back and who acts upon this impulse” (15). Sounds a lot like a pastoral musician to me! In this book she prescribes thirteen maxims from improv that she recommends to anyone to help them bring an improvisational mindset to daily life. As someone who has been fortunate enough to work with improvisers (like musicians, we often call what we do “playing”) I would like to commend three of them to you which — surprisingly — have a lot to say to pastoral musicians.

Just to clarify, I am not specifically referring to the art and discipline of musical improvisation, where one might, say, build a keyboard work based on a hymn tune. Improvisation is an integral part of music but it also is much broader. Along the same lines,

improvisation on the stage is not just for humor. It's a tool in the actor's toolkit that can help them explore a situation or a character. And, I suggest, it should be a tool in your toolkit.

Don't Prepare: Live in the Moment

Have you ever realized that you had tuned out a homilist and had no idea what they said because you were busy thinking about the music for the Preparation of Gifts? It's human nature to let planning and preparation distract us from being fully present to the moment at hand. This maxim tells to live fully in the moment, to be attentive and present to what is going on.

So yes, this does not mean that we never prepare. Quite the contrary – preparation is a huge part of our jobs as musicians. We prepare ourselves, our scores, and our colleagues at choir rehearsal. Likewise, I assure you that improvisers also practice faithfully. Theatre veterans might recognize some of their warm-ups, where they warm up physically, mime invisible props, practice rhyming, make up their own songs, and even brainstorm names or places. They practice listening and they practice remembering. When we see the improvisers performing on the stage, we don't see the hours of practice that goes into their skill. In the same way, the people we serve often see the final results, not realizing how much preparation has gone into each Sunday. (How many of us have been asked, “So, what do you do the rest of the week?”)

But when we get to the weekend, we

need to be fully present. We need to pay attention fully, to listen and watch, and to enter as fully into prayer as we can, along with members of the assembly. We, like them, need to experience each liturgy as if we are experiencing it for the first time, even if it's our second or third or fifth. By paying attention, we might find someone to pray for, think of a piece to play instrumentally, or even get a spiritual insight that puts our ministry in perspective.

Being Average and Being Obvious

Gerald Moore was a British pianist. He wrote a book with a title that I've always loved: *The Unashamed Accompanist*. His work raised the profile of those we now call collaborative pianists, as he always defended and championed the work he did with soloists.

Those of us who perform music in church should be equally proud of the work we do, which is its own art form. It may not be as glamorous as performing, and if we do our job right we probably do not draw a whole lot of attention to ourselves. While we have much less need for vocal cadenzas or Chopinesque flourishes in most of our parishes, we work hard to be reliable enliveners of the assembly's song. Leading a group of people involves giving good cues, leaving clear places to breathe, and having a steady beat. It means being consistent in how we play congregational pieces, giving notice if we need to skip stanzas or verses, or plan to repeat a chorus. These are all examples of being obvious. And something

that I find to be more and more true: what is obvious to you is not necessarily obvious to anyone everyone else. You offering your “obvious” gift is part of you offering your God-given, God-blessed talent.

But what about being average? We musicians know that trying to get psyched up and ready for a challenging passage is asking for trouble. You don't want to have to rely on having a good day, or on being perfect, to do what you need to do. If that means you leave out a few extra notes, then so be it.

It may sound strange to say “be average” when we want to give our best to God. But perhaps this we could think of this as a prayer: “I bring you exactly who I am today, O God – all of who I am. Bless this music I do in your name.”

Saying Yes and Sharing Control

The most popular maxim you might have heard from improv is to say “yes.” If two improvisers are on stage, they have to agree on the reality that they're building together. This involves both of them being fully present to the moment and seeing what the scene needs. It involves being obvious, to ground the scene in its own logic. Saying “yes” is a vital part of the alchemy that makes this work. Saying “yes” is not meant as an escape, a way to commit to nothing. Saying “yes” is embracing a partner's idea and sharing control.

As an accompanist (who happens to be the parish music director), I really enjoy

working collaboratively with cantors and small groups. When someone tells me what their favorite song is, I see if I can schedule them for a weekend when we'll sing it. When a singer asks if they can sing a harmony, I try to say yes, even if it not right away. While I'm still trying to keep the needs of the assembly at the forefront of my mind, I also want for the singers to have ownership and think of ideas that may not have occurred to me (of which there are plenty!) I want them to have the confidence that will allow them to be bold leaders, as well as the humility to know that we are there to serve the people of God.

Conversely, early in my career I worked for a parish with a very experienced staff. When I brought ideas to staff meeting, the answer was always “No, we tried that once and it didn't work.” As you might guess, I found it very discouraging and soon I stopped bringing ideas. I'm sure not every idea I had was worth pursuing, but at this point in my career I would consider it a failing of a church staff not to create an environment where all members are thinking of ways to better do what the parish is doing.

Now It's Your Turn

If anything I've suggested in this article has resonated with you, why not try it out this weekend? There's plenty more to read and study about improvisation, but the best way to improvise your life is to learn by doing. Give it a shot!