

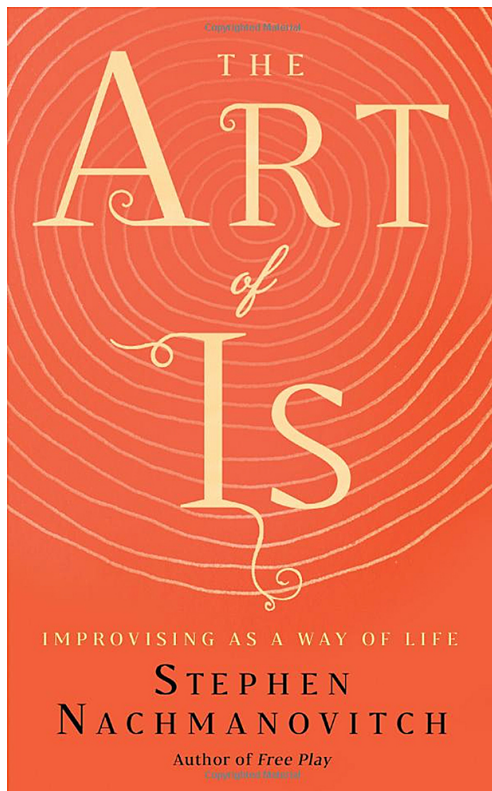
The Ecology of Improvisation

A way of mutual learning

A WIDER LENS Blog by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

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I recently read *The Art of Is: Improvising As A Way Of Life* by Stephen Nachmanovitch (New World Library: Novato, Calif., 2019), a timely and well-written book that exemplifies what it means to be systemic as an antidote to today's problems. Dr. Nachmanovitch demonstrates how mutual learning, listening, mindfulness and inter-dependency can be available to anyone at any moment. Through improvisation, everyday truths that we often overlook can lead to the creation and celebration of unforeseen possibilities. This journey is a delightful passage that savors the gift of discovering by tuning into the essence of relationships.



Source: Stephen Nachmanovitch

Nachmanovitch delivers resources that compel us to learn from each other in order to become uniquely ourselves. His use of aesthetic narratives of civilizations, and those individuals who have profoundly inspired him (as well as poetic descriptions), places the importance of context at the forefront of how we have and continue to evolve. His clarity of expression and background as a musician and historian of consciousness invites us to be accepted into a community so "...that the voice of spontaneous energy is our voice, interdependent with the human world in which we live." His belief that "improvising is life itself," is well stated and documented.

Being There

The importance of experience and "being there" is having the wisdom to understand that "The key to creativity is other human beings." Following the advice of his mentor, Gregory Bateson, Nachmanovitch wisely

“stomps” out nouns, which usually confuse the name of something with the thing itself (or the map with the territory). Living through verbs and relationships makes it much easier to “see people without captions.” In this way, “we can make the jump into thinking systemically, to realizing that we are verbs, not things.” When this becomes apparent in one’s behavior, it allows you to recognize that “something else is always going on amid the endless tape-loop of consciousness.”

Nachmanovitch goes on to mention that “freedom to act at the moment, the capacity to improvise, can liberate us but also terrifies us.” Thus, the emphasis on learning from our mistakes and listening to each other to blend and synchronize is for a larger context. The result is to share and to trust our self-organizing attributes as well as adjust to the moment, which allows an understanding of our impermanence and interconnections.

Listening

Improvising has such a meaningful consequence to teaching, healing and governing, in a manner that is in balance with how nature works. The beauty and wisdom to understand how patterns connect forms an ecological wholeness. Nachmanovitch holds our attention as he explores these actions using, for example, frogs and their relevance to epistemology; Zen haikus; and the wisdom of William Blake, Shakespeare, and Carl Jung all of which contribute to understanding the ecology of our minds.

Most of all, his emphasis is on listening. To connect and respond reflects our original nature and its quest to be in mutual relationships. There is a uniqueness in every moment for each person and combinations of people which is the raw material of improvising. This is the essence of what he calls “rubbing,” the social connections waiting to be experienced through making art with all its imperfections, resilience and beauty.

The rewards in this book are immense. Stephen Nachmanovitch leaves us with a message of being “interesting” as a relationship mode that brings “prodigious kindness,” which arises from taking an interest in other human beings.

I recently had the opportunity to talk with Stephen and ask him a few questions:

KS: How do you reflect on the message in your book?

SN: The message is who you are, who I am, and we are all together... when you play a musical instrument or in inventing things or writing or cooking you are the message...your complete being is the message rather than some sort of slice of virtuosic behavior. It reminds me of the last statement by the Buddha before he died when his followers ask, "Please master give us your final teaching" and he says, "Be your own light."

KS: When people say I wish I can be creative, is this a good jumping off place for improvisation?

SN: Improvising isn't a thing, all improvised art forms are to some extent hybrids between the plan and unplanned and things that you thought you knew... Doctor King had a script for his speech and he began reading the script but then the script didn't mention [dreams](#) and suddenly here we are in a whole new world because he went off script.

KS: You write that we are not things.

SN: Your body or my body is full of infinitely many stories. The only thing it isn't full of is an independent inherent existence which is why the first principle of Buddhism is called emptiness of inherent existence. We exist only in this nexus and network of infinitely many relationships. So, when we try to stamp an [identity](#) on people, on things, on processes, on a piece of music, what we're really trying to do is pin it to a board and say ok just gave you a name and don't wiggle anymore.

KS: Can you elaborate where that core of artistic power exists?

SN: I like to talk about points of contact. I mean in the very simplest sense; I would begin with this kindergarten exercise of holding hands on arriving in a room together. It's a kindergarten thing we've all done a million times and it's corny but out of its corniness, we have the everyday experience of contact of one hand to another. And out of this corny everyday experience arises the most extraordinary music because it gives people a context. That moment of contact of hand to hand gives you a context and a launching place for people to create extraordinary things together, make music that they did not know an hour ago how to make...in the presence of other people doing the same thing.

KS: How is it that we all have the potential to create surprises?

SN: For each of us, we are an ongoing process that reflects everything that has ever happened to us, everything we have ever done. If we just speak naturally that is a symptom of the larger being that we are...which encompasses all our history, all we have learned.