

## **Improvisation Can Help to Heal — Even Trauma, Even Alzheimer's**

I'm a trauma survivor. Like many other survivors - like many people, actually - I tend to be fearful of the unknown. Because of our fear, we often try to deny unwanted realities or to control what happens next in a desperate attempt to know the future. Improvisation performer, teacher, and author of *Impro: Improvisation and The Theatre*, Keith Johnstone, calls us "no-sayers." Through our efforts, he says, we experience more safety. Alternatively, "yes-sayers," - those who accept what is and are comfortable not knowing what will be - experience more adventure.

In the arena of improvisational theatre, Johnstone's assessment may be a primary truth. In the arena of real life, though, another, deeper truth about no-sayers and yes-sayers emerges. By saying "yes" to what is - accepting reality - and wondering about, rather than fearing the future, we can experience more healing. Johnstone proposes that we no-sayers can learn to say "yes," and my own life is a hopeful testament to this possibility.

I discovered improvisation during a truly terrible time in my life. An abusive relationship had ended, and the dividing of our mutually owned property and assets was festering in the courts. My suffering was evident to everyone. A wise friend suggested that, in addition to my therapy and support group, I might benefit from having some fun. She encouraged me to attend an improvisation class. I did and my life changed forever.

At first, I was terrified. The other students were much younger extroverts with a knack for comedy. Many were actors interested in improving their performance skills. I was the only sad, frightened introvert seeking healing. The first few classes I cowered in the corner, hoping with all my strength that the teacher wouldn't call on me to participate in an exercise in front of the class. He didn't. After the third class, as I walked alone down the stairs of the studio, I heard that judgmental little voice inside proclaiming firmly and sarcastically, "Well, you're certainly getting your money's worth out of this, aren't you!?" That awareness was all I needed to propel me into participating fully in the class; and as my friend predicted, it was such fun!

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The camaraderie among classmates, the hilarity, and the laughter facilitated the first level of healing that I experienced. The class raised my energy and resurrected my joy. Soon, though, I began to notice that the principles of improvisation resembled spiritual qualities I had studied in theology classes, practiced through prayer and meditation, and aspired to integrate into my life, such as:

- Attentive listening
- Being present in the moment
- Expanding awareness and observation
- Letting go of the need to control - or even know - what happens next
- Being open to noticing and receiving what the situation is offering
- Responding in a way that is supportive and promotes self-esteem
- Acknowledging our interdependence
- Opening ourselves up to previously unimagined possibilities
- Experiencing, embracing, and expressing joy

I discovered through experience that all of these qualities - embodied in the practice of improvisation - could lead me to healing.

The reason that improvisation surprises us with its healing potential is because we think that this creative drama craft is about comedy and performance and being outrageously clever or quick-witted. But it's not. At its core, improvisation is about being obvious, and saying or doing the next logical thing; it's about being authentic; it's about exploring what it means to be human. My first teacher, David LaGrafte in Portland, Maine, has moved away from improv comedy over the years, focusing now on what he calls "pure improv." He describes pure improv as "an unconditional welcoming of the present moment." From this perspective, he continues, "Improvisation is not so much inventive as it is revelatory. We learn to trust that everything we need is already here, waiting to be discovered - if we are willing to be open to it."

My efforts to heal from my failed relationship led me to the revelations of improvisation and helped me see my life patterns of resistance and control. Previously, in my no-saying life, I used will, skill, and persistence, trying to make situations fit my preferences when I didn't like or want what was happening. When resistance is implemented in an improvised scene, it's called "blocking the offer." This is the realm of no-saying - where scared improvisers seek safety - and it inevitably leads to a very bad scene. The awareness of my resistance became indisputable (even to me) during a class scene when my partner said: "I've dropped

my contact lens on the floor.” I blocked her and substituted my will for how the scene should unfold. “Oh no,” I replied. “It’s probably still in your eye. Let me look.” Then, I moved closer to have a look in her eye.

Even in a class during a theatre game, I couldn’t accept the reality my partner had described - that she dropped her contact lens. If I had made the obvious response and said, “Yikes! Contact on the Floor! I’m afraid to move!” my partner would have felt heard and possibly an interesting scene would have evolved. What happened instead was conflict. “No,” she said, angrily, as she pushed me away. “I dropped it.”

After coming face to face with my pattern of no-saying that night, my life changed. Subsequently, through my practice of improvisation with my mother during the years she had Alzheimer’s disease, her life changed, and our relationship healed. Over the past nine years, I have passed this healing through improvisation onto thousands of other Alzheimer’s caregivers all across the country through programs offered by Healing Moments™, the non-profit organization I founded for caregiver education. ([www.healingmoments.org](http://www.healingmoments.org)) The practice of communicating and connecting with persons with dementia through improvisation is now going mainstream: Neuropsychologists at the University of Iowa are studying the impact of the two-day workshop for Alzheimer’s family caregivers that I developed for Healing Moments™.

My mom was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s in 2001, and three years later I travelled from Maine to Iowa to spend two weeks caring for her while my sibling, who lived with Mom, went on vacation. It was my first time being alone with someone who had Alzheimer’s and I was worried about this unknown, especially because my sibling told me that Mom was angry, combative, and uncooperative.

I prepared myself for this presumed terrifying experience by searching the Internet for caregiving ideas (finding few in 2004) and ordering a newly published book, *Learning to Speak Alzheimer’s* by Joanne Koenig Coste. While reading the book in the plane, I had a “flash” of an idea that trying improvisation with Mom - meeting her in her world, as all the experts were suggesting - might work. And it did!

During those two weeks Mom gave me countless opportunities to practice saying “yes” to her reality. When I was able to meet her in her world she wasn’t the angry, combative person I was expecting. One meeting with Mom that was both sweet and touching involved her sister, Milly. We had planned an outing to the nursing

home to visit her friend, Martin, and when it was nearly time to go, I asked Mom, “Are you ready?”

Visibly upset by my question, she replied, “We can’t go.”

I reacted with curiosity. “But I thought you wanted to see Marty.”

“Not now,” Mom said. “This is the time that Milly comes to visit me.”

Milly died in 1991; we had planted flowers on her grave the day before. Instead of correcting Mom and possibly demeaning her for forgetting or breaking her heart by reminding her that her sister was long dead, I chose to improvise. I joined Mom in her world - where we were expecting Milly.

So, I said the next logical thing. “Well, what would you think about leaving Milly a note, telling her where we are, and asking her to come in and wait for us?”

After pausing for a moment, Mom said, “That’s a good idea.”

“OK,” I said. “Could you get a piece of paper and a pencil, and we’ll write the note?”

“Oh, Yes. I’ll do that.” And off Mom went to find the paper and pencil. I wrote the note, Mom taped it to the door, and off we went to visit Marty.

Improvisers would call my response “advancing the offer.” Alzheimer’s experts would identify this as a “therapeutic fiblet.” Spiritual teachers would call this accepting reality - Mom’s reality, according to Alzheimer’s - and would remind us that accepting reality in the present provides the most positive springboard into the future. Researchers have informed us that this kind of radical acceptance is the only coping technique to relieve caregiver stress.

Through improvisation, Mom and I allowed her reality to spring us into a future that overflowed with connection and healing. The day before I was leaving to return to Maine, Mom was able to tell me that my efforts to learn about Alzheimer’s, my attempts to communicate creatively by using improvisation, and my compassionate attention had made an impression on her. She looked up at me from her chair in the living room, and said, “Will you stay and take care of me? You’re so kind to me.” In reply, my heart shouted out, “Yes!” - and in that moment, my yes-saying, healing adventure into Alzheimer’s sprouted wings.

Although I may not be “perfectly OK” with the unknown future, as my diploma from ImprovBoston proclaims, this recovering no-sayer is now more curious than I am afraid about what is yet to be revealed.

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