

Yes, And....Improvising A Life
Beacon UU Congregation
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When I was eight years old, I enrolled in Acting classes at the Pittsburgh Playhouse. I can't tell you now what motivated this desire, but I imagine it came from me and not my parents. They drove me down to my class in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh once a week after school (not Wednesdays because that was dreaded Hebrew School).

I remember very little in detail about the experience except the green satin dress my mother fashioned for me to wear in our first production, "The Queen's Creampuffs" and the lump in my throat when our instructor announced that we would warm up at the beginning of each session with improvisations (or improvs).

I realize now that the alarm I felt was adrenaline for who knew what we would be asked to do – "be a teapot, a sewing machine, a dog who didn't speak English, a lost traveler on a spaceship." And, of course, the most famous of all improvisation warm-ups – "Yes, and..." in which you build on the story or scenario with a partner or group. You accept their idea and respond with Yes, and, rather than No, but."

"The sky is blue. Yes, and I see a bluebird in the sky, Yes, and it just landed in a nest in that tree..." "Have you been to the moon before? Yes, and I had a lovely meal there." You get the drift. The improvs were meant to be challenging and allegedly, it was supposed to be fun. I was never especially good at it, at least in a theatrical context.

Yet, the need to practice improvisation has shown up in my ongoing everyday adult life and I've been more Oscar worthy in this respect. I believe it shows up in all of our lives. Doesn't it? We encounter situations when we have to think fast, or pivot and say Yes, and.... rather than "No, but..."

Here's a story - It's one of those sliding door stories from my life that I've replayed many times over. It was 1978 and I had just graduated from college as an English major and moved to Boston. My dream was to be journalist and I had some very naïve ideas about how my career would be launched, especially in a city like Boston, much bigger than my hometown Burgh. I can say that I honestly believed I would waltz into the offices of the Boston Globe, shove Mike Barnicle out of his seat and have my own column by Christmas.

One Friday, I packed up ten copies of my resume, xeroxed at Kinkos (no computers back then) and announced that I was not coming home until I had handed them all out at newspapers and magazines and wire services. I think I hit a publishing house and an ad agency that day, too. These were also the good old days when you could call hiring managers on the phone and even walk into the establishments to drop off resumes and talk directly to HR personnel. It was late afternoon, I was exhausted.

But, I had one more resume in tow and just one more stop – United Press International on Beacon Hill. Yea, cheeky, I know.

So, I strode up to the receptionist with my outstretched resume and she interrupted me, saying, “Oh, you must be here for your 4:30 appointment. Take a seat.” “Yes, I am,” I said. I handed her my resume and she disappeared. Now what? Oh my God. What is happening? Think fast. As I’m sitting there, I wonder if the actual appointment holder is going to enter at any minute. She never does.

When the receptionist reemerges, I ask her as innocently as possible. “I’m sorry, I lost my notes on the subway. Can you remind me who I am meeting and the job title this interview is for?” She bites. “Oh, yes...you are meeting with the Executive Editor about his Executive Secretary/Assistant job.” Okey dokey.

She ushers me into the Exec’s office and he says: “A Pittsburgh gal! Great little Burgh. I did a stint there at the Post-Gazette. Damn good little rag.” So, we schmooze Pittsburgh for a while and review my resume. He notes quizzically that I have no secretarial experience and that my name is not on his interview schedule. Why is that?

So, I tell him the story and he laughs so hard he nearly falls out of his chair. He says I have nerves of Pittsburgh steel and I’m a great little actress and calls in his Deputy to meet me. “Wait till you hear what this gal just pulled off.” He offered me the job, on the spot, even though I reminded him that I was not an expert typist and did not know shorthand.

“Oh, you can learn that stuff,” he said. In the end, I decided not to take this job because I was impatient to have a byline, but I’ll never forget or regret the decision I made to improvise a “Yes...and” that day and get in the door.

Perhaps you have your own version of a time when you had to pivot, to throw your glove into the subway and let go of the well-laid plan or your rational objections to what is actually happening. Improvising a life requires us to move out of our comfort zones and invite some unpredictable creativity.

Last week, I read a story called “Winging It – Love, Loss and 50 chickens” about a woman named Pauline Buck who moved her husband with dementia from the city to a small farm because she knew he’d find some meaning in taking care of their chickens. Her conclusion: “You’ll never be ready. Ready is an illusion. There is only now and our response to it.”

The hardest thing about saying Yes, and to the Universe is accepting what life puts in front of us. Naturally, we mostly have the habit of saying “No, but” to what we don’t like and Yes to what pleases us, even though everything we encounter is our life.

We may like to argue or be smart. We may think “No, but” is the way to communicate or stave off the undesirable. We may be afraid that if we say, “Yes, and” to the things we don’t like we’ll be stuck with them forever. On the contrary, acknowledging

what is with a “Yes, and” gets us unstuck and enables us to enter a process of reflection and change. It is a positive conversation with the Universe that expresses a belief in possibilities.

Even more so, as an institution, improvisation is a way for us to demonstrate flexibility and creativity in response to a challenging world. (How must we adapt our 5 year plan in the face of a pandemic, for instance)? The process also builds trust and mutual support. It builds and strengthens community.

My colleague Karen Hering, calls this process “Creative Slow Down.” She writes: Creative living is full of encounters with the unpredicted and the messy. Divine surprises. Revelations that will take your breath away, and give it back, time and time again. This is how we make meaning on in our utterly human (perfectly imperfect) lives.”

Since my arrival here at Beacon, we have been offered an abundance of “Yes, and” opportunities, haven’t we? A veritable treasure chest or perhaps, more like a Pandora’s box! Yet, instead of responding “No, but” to a pandemic, we pushed out of a fearful and rigid place and into the abundant and hopeful energy of “Yes, and.”

The previous ministry failed. Yes, and we will explore that, heal and grow from the experience.

The building isn’t finished. Yes, and an army of eager volunteers will paint and plaster and weed and plant and hammer and quilt.

The pledge drive has fallen short. Yes, and we will ask folks to dig down and we will do church as best we can on what we have.

We need to close the building because of COVID. Yes, and we will produce worship services for YouTube, we’ll communicate on Zoom and Facebook, we will adopt our motto: “Beacon, Always Connected,” and we will endure.

What if people don’t come back or we don’t attract new people. Yes, and we will rebuild. Yes, and, remember that we have welcome 20 new members, in spite of it all.

Our very religion itself embodies the “Yes, and” principle. Like the energizing jazz music we’ve enjoyed this morning, Unitarian Universalism is premised on the concept of freedom within form. The ability to act from presence and instinct, with intentionality and cooperation within a framework, is at the heart of improvisational theatre, of jazz, of this liberal faith we share.

There is nothing random or chaotic about these things. Rather, it is structured spontaneity. From a religious perspective, the goal is to be so present in the moment and so steeped in our core covenants and values that we act from that center without needing to think about it. It’s no longer what we do, but who we are.

Back in 2015, way before the ramifications of a pandemic, my colleague the Rev. Lindasusan Ulrich, preached a sermon that speaks profoundly to us, in 2022, here at Beacon.

She wrote: “This congregation is in a moment of finding its way through new circumstances. But the decisions you’ve made in the past and the effort you’ve put into them – to communicate with respect and kindness, to practice generosity, to value personal growth and spiritual development, to understand your past while turning towards the future – those are the real choices that speak to who you are, not just what you do.”

“Let’s act from a place of delight and abundance rather than one of dread or scarcity; that place of presence, of love, of gratitude, of possibility, of risk rooted in grounded instincts.”

That place in the footlights of Yes, and...with plenty of joy and laughter, bloopers and triumphs along the way.

Yes, and....Blessed be. Yes, and....Blessed we. And Amen.

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