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## GETTING IT RIGHT (or Having Fun Making Mistakes!)

“The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity... and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself.” \_\_ William Blake

I think that the first real improvisation that I turned into a kind of performance was when I made a haunted house at the local community centre during a city run program. I was 10 years old. There was a young woman, Adrienne, who was working for the City of Calgary Summer Community Program. Her job was to make up things for the local kids to do with themselves. Keeping us off the streets was likely the goal and it was a good idea, given the kinds of stupid things young boys on their own will find themselves involved in. Things like shooting and trapping helpless gophers, or worse, ganging up and behaving like young warriors at para-military play. It was only 14 years since World War 2 had ended and Korea was even closer in the cultural memory. The movies that we saw were war-based stories, westerns and the news media and our schools had us scared witless of the “Red” Chinese and Russians who it was said, would “invade us all like rats coming off a sinking ship”. They had The Bomb. I can remember being petrified that my parents might die.

When Adrienne had asked the small group what we would like to do with the summer, I could not understand her for a moment. I was, like the others I expect, waiting to be told what the plan was to be. But she asked us again, “What would you like to do”?

I said tentatively, “to make a haunted house ride, like at the midway”. Others chimed in, “Yes, that would be fun!” Adrienne looked amused for a moment, and then said, “Well I have no idea how we might do that. Do you?”

I had no idea either, nor that we would be making it all up as we went along. But this is exactly what happened. Whenever we didn’t know what

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to do next, she would throw it back at us to find out what we wanted to do, and then helped us find the way to do it! The way was to try things out until they either worked or failed and then we would try again to find a solution. We improvised.

For me it was a perfect time. To be allowed by the teacher to be 'in charge' of the development, was not something we had experience of in my neighbourhood. To be able to 'operate' according to what seemed natural and a pleasure to do was a discovery. It felt like a return to childhood, but what a thought that is at 10! My 4 years of schooling had changed my perspective on the world. What had been a light filled and exciting childhood had become a painful training period.

I felt so wrong about things; unable to adapt to an ever more complex and unhealthy society. This can be the definition of mental illness, and yet the stories of childhood, the ideologies of things Canadian, British, Italian, American, Indigenous peoples, the literature, the music, the art and the theatre narrated the mythologies to me. Those myths were of heroes overcoming adversity, taking great risks and using trust in something greater than they were to do so. Those heroes were pictured as brave, even when they were afraid. They had to do things that they were warned not to do. But if they didn't, the world would end. So the hero would stand against the odds, sacrifice themselves for the greater good and so create a better world for all.

Yet the real world seemed unchanged for the knowledge lent to us in books and movies. We were always on the edge of catastrophic war. At that age, I had just understood that I was in for a shock, but didn't yet know what it contained. The future had not quite caught up with me yet my childhood dreams were being drained of colour.

The project turned out well and we entertained and thrilled some local kids using quite simple and gentle methods. Nothing disgusting at all...But the effect of seeing the audience react with such pleasure to the experience of being in a 'haunted house' was enduring to me. I can still remember being hunched on a platform in the dark, operating an effect

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that I had devised and there is light coming in through the curtain from the outside as a girl with a green sweater on and pigtails tip-toes in and I move the chord clutched in my hand and a light piece of wool yarn falls across her forehead and she screams and laughs and goes on into the next chamber. The change from trepidation on the part of that girl, to the scream and then the laughter somehow both delighted me and at the same time made me understand something about how we are. I couldn't have told you about it then and even now it seems abstract.

It was the process of making that experience come about that fascinated me for years and still does. The way of experimenting with ideas in a free and open way, without fear of judgement and worse, condemnation had led to a wonderful event, an artifact of being alive that was pure pleasure and learning all at the same time. When I went back to school in the fall, the good feeling dissipated in a short morning as the class outline and the expectations of the coming year were laid out to us.

We are intuitive and spontaneous from the beginning of our lives. It is how we learn. We never stop being intuitive. It is probably needed for survival. I think that, as a concept, it is our common consciousness; people recognize it when they experience it. But it is not much in the common discourse, the chatter amongst everyone about how things are or, more often, how they ought to be.

The teaching methodology of “la via negativo”, or “you get feedback when you are wrong”, is absurd. It makes us fear making mistakes. Our brains function as comparative analysis machines, that is, they compare new input to memory. We learn by experimentation and rationalizing the results. We then allocate some of the learning to the faster, intuitive functions of the brain, and then we can spontaneously make connections between facts and perceptions. If we make a mistake, we try the experiment again, this time adjusting our cognitive skills to take in the information from the mistake. It's a creative process. If we crush creativity, we destroy any chance of finding out anything new at all. It is necessary to question knowledge to learn. What we need in education is

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are teaching tools to take the direction of education towards a more natural or organic path.

In the 1950's and early 60's, "inspiration" did not seem connected to life. It was never discussed in school much less acknowledged in conversation. Life was something to be planned out and followed by rote and rule. The schools and the church had done their work. I had forgotten my true self and had been more or less shamed into behaving properly. And yet I had a nagging thought behind the curtain of my day dreams. It was that my immigrant ancestors were of sturdy folk who explored beyond the horizon to find their futures. They took great risks in their time, leaving behind the status quo of their worlds in favour of something braver. They seemed to be like the heroes of the myths and stories that I was exposed to. Surely I could have such an ambitious agenda for my time alive? But the message of the culture was to do the right thing. That somehow got to be experienced most of the time as a self-limiting question that was posed along the lines of, "Why am I so afraid of saying the wrong thing?"

To make a mistake, an error, was to be the cause of public discomfort and not only for myself, but for everyone around. Either they become embarrassed because they know me and now they don't want to, or they are ready to blame me as being the cause of having 'gone off the track' socially. It seemed like madness to me. Was I mad? Was I the wrong one? Did I deserve to feel shamed for not having the correct response to a question...any question? I began to feel wrong all the time. No matter how hard I tried to get things right, there was always something that was not. The teaching and training made me question my own relevance to everything. Like everyone else around me I spent my time worrying about how others thought of me. I constantly compared myself to them. My identity was being constructed by a process of trying to be 'like' someone else. By the time I was 18 or so, I actually thought that my social self was the real me. No wonder I was so confused. For of course we all know that it isn't true. We suspect that there is something else inside of us,

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something that we keep hidden from public scrutiny, from judgement. Something they haven't told us about.

I rebelled. I wandered the earth and along the way in the early 1970's I got into rock and roll music. My favourite thing to do in music though was to jam. That more or less carried me along until I was in my late 20's and then I met Keith Johnstone because I had heard that he was working with improvisation in the university. The only improvisation I knew of was what I had experienced as a young artist in the making.

The first day he came in and had us sit on mats along the wall while he got down on his knees and sat on his feet to call the class to order...so to speak. Everyone just settled down before he said anything, and then he said, "if anything goes wrong for you, in this course, never blame yourself, but blame me." I now know that he was using his knowledge of relative status to make us/me feel unthreatened by him as a teacher. He didn't want his authority to be the ruling principle in his classes, but rather the creation of conditions whereby the students felt relaxed enough to experiment with themselves and with relationships.

Later when I met with him on a break, we spoke. He began, "You seem a little, um, older than the rest?" Then, "What do you do? I mean what else besides this?"

I told him about my music. About how it was kind of weird and sounded like runaway train wrecks sometimes. I was experimenting with sound and feedback loops. I had been in London and heard the loops of Mike Oldfield and was experimenting with how to make sound in the current "studio" that I had built in the garage behind the old house that I rented in downtown Calgary.

Keith asked if I recorded any of it. I said "sometimes" and he then asked if he could hear it.

So far this teacher had been so unlike any other since Mrs. Hodge in Grade 5. She had encouraged me to draw and had allowed me to go to the back of the room at any time to continue work on a drawing that I

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had started. Instead of telling me to sit down and pay attention, she had allowed me to draw as she taught the arithmetic lesson. I remember her asking me if I could understand what she was talking about while I was drawing. I understood numbers better that year and I won a prize at the Calgary Stampede for my drawing too!

Keith had asked me what I was interested in and then showed genuine interest in that.

Eventually he heard the recordings and then offered me the spot as Music Director for his production of *The Tempest*. He had wanted a live band on stage to make the sounds of the Storm and the sounds of Magic and the Music for the Songs etc. We began by conducting some experiments with putting live music together with improvisers from Keith's classes.

Eventually the project took shape and the outcomes were spectacular. It was the real start to the big changes in my life. The thing I took away from those sessions was the easy attitude to 'trying things out' that Johnstone had that had the greatest effect on those of us working with him. That is, his attitude towards 'the work' was one of commitment and honesty. The two most important things were, to please the other participants by creating a safe place to try things out, and by being honest about our own participation. Nothing else would do.

The honesty I speak of is that of trusting one's spontaneity to be 'good enough'. Our spontaneous self is that which reacts immediately to any kind of stimuli or offer made by others. If we accept, not the offer, but our honest reaction to the offer, then we have the potential for the development of both a healthy working environment and of dramatic action taking narrative forward. If we question our spontaneity and give in to the fear of judgement, the moment is lost and a mistake has been made. That's ok. We can do it again.

"The true method of knowledge is experiment" \_\_William Blake