



IMPROVISING MY WAY INTO THE FUTURE

BY JOE GUPPY PHOTOS BY ERNIE SAPIRO

ACT I: IMPROV!
ACT II: PSYCHOLOGY!
ACT III: IMPROV AND PSYCHOLOGY!

In the early 1980s, my improv group, The Off the Wall Players, regularly earned rave reviews and played to sold-out theaters. I recall the thrill of looking from a balcony of the Bagley Wright Theatre at a line that stretched far around the building before one of our shows.

Next I joined the cast of KING-TV Seattle's comedy show *Almost Live*, where I won eight Emmys. After that, I moved to Hollywood, where I wrote on network TV projects for directors John Landis and Blake Edwards, both legendary comedy forces. I'd had a great first act.

But by Act 2, in my early 40s, I wanted something different. I enrolled in a Seattle

University therapist training program to earn a master's degree in existential-phenomenological psychotherapeutic psychology. Explaining this makes terrific cocktail party conversation.

For 10 years, I worked in community mental health, followed by another decade in private practice. I didn't lose sight of the arts: I used improvisation exercises for my teen anger management group and a couples communications group. I wrote a memoir and performed improv from time to time.

I had expected Act 3 to be pretty much the same as Act 2. Plenty of therapists practice into their 70s or 80s. But, by 2015, I was eager for something different.

And so my Act 3 combines psychology with the arts. I help organizations, corporate groups, and individuals learn how to use improv as a resource for team building, creativity, and wellness. I present insights from two perspectives: the scientific study of the brain and reflections on the phenomenon of one's own lived human experience.

In the winter of 2016, in the early stage of my improv renaissance, I show up at a drop-in improv gathering at the Seattle Center. About 12 improvisers are in a circle, engaged in a fast-moving warm-up game. Everyone looks at least 20 years younger than me. Someone tells me the rules. Players pass an imaginary ball around the circle—to the left, to the right, or across—by shouting one of three tongue-twisting phrases: *Whiskey Mixer*, *Mister Whiskers*, or *Misty Vista*.

I have two thoughts: 1) "I LOVE IMPROV! ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW!" and 2) "Holy shit! I had better rev it up if I want to keep up with these young brains!" My brain and body fire up the adrenaline, serotonin, and dopamine—and I have a blast.

When I started improv, we were taught that we had to box out the left brain—the linear, logical brain where the “censor” lives—in favor of the right brain: our creative, playful side. While it is true that MRI studies show that the inhibitory area of the brain is muted during improvisation, I am convinced that improv is also a joyous collaboration of the left and right brain. My left brain loves the challenge of trying to follow the rules, while my right brain rejoices in the silliness, play, and creativity.

The *New York Times* recently reported on a study of “super-agers,” like Warren Buffet, who continue doing work they love into their 80s, and whose brains resemble those of much younger people. The study noted that most people, in retirement, decide to “take it easy” in their pursuit of happiness. But what keeps brains young is the sometimes painful process of real effort, of trying to solve a problem, of trying to craft something well, of learning something new. Scientists used to believe that, after our late teens, the brain starts losing cells and it's downhill from there. Now we know that we retain “brain plasticity,” the ability to make new neural connections, well into old age.

But this takes effort. Like when I learn a new improv game. Or write an article like this one, which, up to this point I've been improvising, merrily typing a first draft as fast as my thoughts and fingers will go. Editing it down to the essay you are now reading will take some concentrated, and sometimes painful, effort.

Bring it on!! 🌀

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