

Book Notes for

Improv Wisdom: Don't prepare, just show up Patricia Ryan Madson, 2005

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The purpose of these notes is to provide an in-depth overview of the contents of this important book. *Improv Wisdom* can be purchased online from

Chapters @ <http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/> or

Amazon@ <http://www.amazon.com>

QUICK SUMMARY

First Maxim: ***say yes*** (p. 34)

Become a "can-do" person.

Look for the positive spin, for what is right.

Substitute "Yes *and*" for Yes *but*."

Add something to build the conversation.

Second Maxim: ***don't prepare*** (p. 44)

Attend carefully to what is happening right now.

Allow yourself to be surprised.

Trust your imagination.

Fear is a matter of misplaced attention.

Third Maxim: ***just show up*** (p. 53)

Motivation is not a prerequisite for showing up.

Use rituals to get things going.

Change your vantage point and refresh your mind.

Be on time for the sake of others.

Fourth Maxim: ***start anywhere*** (p. 59)

All starting points are equally valid.

Begin with what seems obvious.

Talk to you audience. Don't give a lecture.

Trust your mind.

Fifth Maxim: ***be average*** (p. 66)

Close enough is perfect.

Dare to be dull.

Think "inside" the box.

Celebrate the obvious.

Sixth Maxim: ***pay attention*** (p. 67)

Shift your attention from yourself to others.
Keep on waking up.
This moment happens only once. Treasure it.
Avoid multitasking. Attend to one thing at a time.

Seventh Maxim: *face the facts* (p. 83)
Accept other people as they are.
Work with what you have been given.
Insecurity is normal. Count on it.

Eighth Maxim: *stay on course* (p. 88)
Every improvisation has a point.
Keep an eye on where you are going.
Ask often: "What is my purpose?"

Ninth Maxim: *wake up to the gifts* (p. 102)
Who or what is helping your right now?
Make a point of thanking those with thankless jobs.
What are you doing to give back?

Tenth Maxim: *make mistakes, please* (p. 113)
When you screw up, say "Ta-dah!" and take a bow.
Mistake? Focus on what comes next.
Become a confident mistake maker. Lighten up.
Admitting a mistake shows character.

Eleventh Maxim: *act now* (p. 122)
The essence of improvising is action.
Act in order to discover what comes next.
You don't need to feel like doing something to do it.
Sometimes *not doing* is what is needed.

Twelfth Maxim: *take care of each other* (p. 136)
Make your partner look good.
Kindness is essential during chaos or a crisis.
Always put positive thoughts into words and action.
Deliver more than you promise.

Thirteenth Maxim: *enjoy the ride* (p. 143)
Find joy in whatever you are doing, including ordinary tasks.
Look for ways to play. Play is essential to human growth.
Learning is enhanced when we lighten up.

GENERAL NOTES

Prologue

"A good improviser is someone who is awake, not entirely self-focused, and moved by a desire to do something useful and give something back and who acts upon this impulse" (p. 15).

"Here is the password - it is *yes!* Understanding the power of yes is easy; practicing that acceptance and affirmation in daily life becomes our challenge" (p. 15)

"What would you do if you knew you would not fail?" (p. 17)

"They [improvisers] have learned a way of working together on stage that commonly spills over into their daily lives" (p. 17).

"Everyone seems to say 'thank you' often, and 'I'm sorry' slips naturally off the tongue. We smile and laugh a lot. . . . We make mistakes, sometimes whoppers. We correct them or we capitalize on them. We notice how much others are doing for us. We have fun. We screw up; we apologize. We get on one another's nerves sometimes. We move on. We create life and art together" (p. 17).

"Human beings are improvisers by nature" (p. 18).

"Everyone, unless performing a scripted play, makes up his life as he goes along" (p. 18).

"Imagine a life of spontaneity" (p. 18).

"The world of improv is a portal into mindfulness and magic" (p. 18).

Improv "provides a workout that helps to shake loose rigid patterns of thinking and doing" (p. 19).

Improv teaches "how to be in harmony with one another and how to have fun" (p. 20).

"It requires that we say yes and be helpful rather than argumentative" (p. 20).

"All conversation - indeed, all natural speech, if you think about it - is an improvisation" (p. 23).

Improvisation "is a way of doing things that emphasizes a flexible mind and a sense of humor; it is not a scientific method" (p. 24).

"Taking an improvised step always leads you somewhere" (p. 25).

[the first maxim] say yes

"Saying yes is an act of courage and optimism; it allows you to share control" (p. 27).

"Saying no is the most common way we attempt to control the future" (p. 29).

"To say 'yes' is to make a leap of faith, to risk oneself in a new and often scary relationship" (p. 31).

"With the rule of yes, we call upon our capacity to envision, to create new and positive images. This yes invites us to find out what is right about the situation, what is good about the offer, what is worthy in the proposal. Exercising the yes muscle builds optimism" (p. 32).

[the second maxim] don't prepare

"Don't spend your energy in preparing for the future. Redirect it to the present moment" (p. 35).

"The habit of excessive planning impedes our ability to see what is actually in front of us. The mind that is occupied is missing the present" (p. 35).

"We need to know everything about *this* moment" (p. 36).

"Substitute attention for preparation" (p. 36).

"Or if the notion of not being prepared is simply too much, try substituting the idea 'Be prepared to let go' or 'Be ready to go wherever things are going.' Cultivate a flexible mind that is ready to act" (p. 37).

"The second maxim's advice, 'Don't prepare,' really means to let go of our ego involvement in the process" (p. 39).

"Substitute acceptance for judgment" (p. 40).

"In the center of our anxiety is the seed of the desire to achieve, to do well. While stage fright isn't pleasant, it is manageable if we don't give it authority" (p. 41).

"Performance anxiety comes from excessive self-focus" (p. 41).

"Notice and accept whatever you feel, and turn your attention to doing something useful" (p. 42).

"Fear is not the problem; allowing your attention to be consumed by it is" (p. 42).

[third maxim] just show up

"Players step onto the stage because that is where things are happening. They just show up. Then the magic begins" (p. 45).

"When you show up it is important to be on time. The issue of punctuality is critical when the activity is a shared one" (p. 46).

Rituals "provide stability. Ironically, stability is a vital element when we improvise" (p. 49).

"So often it is our presence alone, rather than some special ability, that makes the difference" (p. 49).

"Sometimes we are in the right place physically, but we have somehow gone to sleep. At these times I recommend random change" (p. 50).

[fourth maxim] start anywhere

"All starting points are equally valid. They begin where they are, often in the middle" (p.53).

"when you don't know where to start, begin with the most obvious thing, whatever is in front of you" (p. 53).

"Once the job is under way you have a new and more realistic perspective. You are inside the problem while looking at it, rather than standing safely at the perimeter" (pp. 53-54).

"The improviser focuses on making that idea [the first thought that comes into your head] into a good one, rather than searching for a 'good idea'" (p. 55).

"Writers write to discover what they want to say, bringing to consciousness what they already know. It is the same with speech: speak to discover what you want to say. Sculpt, correct, refine, and redirect your thoughts on the fly as you speak. Authentic speech includes lively editing as part of the process" (p. 56).

"To improvise is to create order out of chaos" (p. 56).

[the fifth maxim] be average

"Close enough is perfect" (p. 60).

"When you try hard to do your best, the effect on your performance is often to jinx it" (p. 60).

"try the following advice:

'Dare to be dull.' (Keith Johnstone)

'Be nothing special.' (David K. Reynolds)

'Cultivate ordinary mind.' (a Zen saying) (p. 61).

"Try thinking *inside* the box. Look more carefully" (p. 63).

[the sixth maxim] pay attention

"What we notice *becomes* our world" (p. 67).

"Life is attention, and what we are attending to determines to a great extent how we experience the world" (p. 67).

"For those of us caught in a spiral of self-absorption and rumination, the redirection of attention outward can have a profound effect. Where we are looking makes a difference" (p. 69).

"Enjoy those moments when your attention is aligned with your actions" (p. 72).

[the seventh maxim] face the facts

"Improvisers need to enter the same reality in order to work together effortlessly. They establish the facts of the scene and agree to accept things as they are - in short, they act realistically" (p. 77).

"Improvisers recognize the value of working with many styles of playing and set aside their impulse to try to change others" (p. 79).

"the mark of a good improviser is his ability to work skillfully, kindly, and respectfully with those with whom he has difficulty" (p. 79).

"life is about *balancing*, not about being *balanced*" (p. 81).

"Stay with the uncertainty, please. Really, it's *all about the struggle*" (p. 82).

[the eighth maxim] stay on course

"An improvisation always has a point. It is never simply 'whatever'" (p. 84).

"Instead of asking, 'What do I feel like doing?' substitute 'What is my purpose now?' The difference in the answer may be illuminating" (p. 84).

"Use the litmus of purpose when overwhelmed with feelings or confused about a decision" (p. 86).

"'What is my purpose now?' Use this question as a weathervane. Ask it often, especially when you are anxious or unsure of what to do next. When you have the answer, act upon it" (p. 86).

[the ninth maxim] wake up to the gifts

"I am always using some kind of filter when I encounter the world, whether I notice this or not. The light in which something is perceived will determine its value" (p. 89).

3 vantage points from which to observe others or events:

- critical method: see what's wrong with it/them
- scientific method: see it objectively
- improviser's method: see the *gift* in it/them (pp. 89-90)

"Our natural sense of entitlement can be an obstacle. If I experience something as *mine*, I won't see it as a gift" (p. 90).

"We are not on the stage alone" (p. 90).

Investigate your debt to the world by focusing on these three questions:

- What have you received from others during your life?
- What have you given back to them?
- What trouble or bother have you caused them? (p. 91)

"The questions are used to examine important relationships and are directed at key individuals in one's life. A set time frame is assigned and one moves forward chronologically. . . . [B]egin reflecting on your mother (or whoever was caring for you at the time of your birth). The time periods are determined by logical groupings - earliest memories, grammar school years, junior-high school years, etc." (p. 91).

"We need to see the contributions of others in bold relief and to recognize our interdependence" (p. 92).

"Is there something right in front of you now waiting to offer service to you? Are there people who are giving to you, unnoticed?" (p. 93)

"Think of an idea to change our world - and put it into action" (p. 94).

"We complain loudly if we are inconvenienced by something, but do we also speak loudly of the routine work that others are doing for us?" (p. 95)

"While the critical method sharpens the mind, it dulls the heart" (p. 96).

"Cultivate a generosity of speech. Be extravagant with your positive findings" (p. 96).

"By replacing the myth of the self-made person with an understanding of our interdependence, we discover a more realistic view, especially of our relationships" (p. 96).

"What supports you at this moment? . . . What other objects, energy sources, or people contribute to your well-being right now?" (p. 96)

"whenever you take the time to thank someone, go that extra step and mention something concrete" (p. 99).

[the tenth maxim] make mistakes, please

"Making mistakes is how we [improvisers] function. We don't consider them as something to be avoided; they are part of our operating system" (p. 103).

"When I say, 'Make mistakes, please,' what I really want is for you to do something risky or challenging, something out of your comfort zone, where mistakes are possible (and likely), and to proceed boldly" (p. 104).

"I sometimes require that my students make at least one ego-crushing mistake per class to get used to the experience" (p. 104).

"A mistake is most often a result that we had not planned - something unexpected, an odd outcome or side journey, usually something new. . . . While we may bemoan a blunder or miscue, the real question to ask afterward is not 'How on earth did I do that?' but rather 'What come next? What can I make of this? What kind of a bonus might this be?'" (p. 104)

"Are things not going your way? Notice the way they are going, and follow the situation for a while to see where you touch down" (p. 105).

"Don't be careless, and don't be overly careful. Our goal is resilience, and perseverance in the face of failure" (p. 105).

"Instead of shrinking and berating himself silently with 'Oh, no, I really blew it!' the clown turns to the crowd on one side and takes a magnificent bow with his hands extended and his arms high in the air, proclaiming 'Ta-dah!' as if he had just pulled off a master stunt. He then turns to face the other side of the audience and repeats the bow" (p. 106).

"The virtue of this is that it pulls his attention out into to the world again, looking around and standing tall. This engaged and forward-looking vantage point is an excellent place to be after a blooper" (p. 106).

"The more precise my vision of an outcome, the more likely I am to be disappointed" (p. 106).

Do not let the "miscue become the event, just one moment of it. When you make a mistake, turn your attention to what come next. Focus on doing that well, with full mind and heart. Look ahead, not back" (p. 108).

"the team that makes the most mistakes is going to win" John Wooden (p. 108).

"If your mistake creates a problem for others, don't forget to apologize" (p. 109).

"Planning carefully is no guarantee that things will turn out error-free. And improvising is not a magic pill for success" (p. 111).

"Improvising, or dealing artfully with what is already there, can be understood not only as a backup approach, but also as a way of life" (p. 111).

"Knowing that mistakes are inevitable, and admitting them freely, demonstrates courage and character" (p. 112).

"fess up when we mess up!" (p. 112)

[the eleventh maxim] act now

"The essence of improvisation is action - doing it in real time" (p. 114).

"We [improvisers] begin before there is a plan. What we do moves us forward and gives us more information about how to proceed. The doing itself becomes the teacher and guide" (p. 114).

"On the improv stage action creates the world of play. There are no huddles in the back room. Motivation is not required. Good intentions, beliefs, resolutions, even promises don't matter. Action does" (p. 116).

"When I see something that needs to be done, I usually do it without debate. The improviser in me is trained to take action rather than muse over whose job it may be. It is always my job if I see it to do, and I'm able to do the task" (p. 116).

"Improvising is a collaborative art, and when members of a group show up, action naturally follows. We get energy from one another" (p. 117).

"Constructive action arises from clear purposes" (p. 118).

"Our [improvisers'] goal is always *appropriate* action, doing what is needed. Occasionally this means doing nothing while being watchful or waiting for others to act before proceeding" (p. 118).

[the twelfth maxim] take care of each other

"Consummate improvisers are marked by their generosity, courtesy, and ability to watch for the needs of their teammates" (p. 123).

"We are told early in [improv] training to make our partner look good, to do whatever is necessary to honor and advance all of his offers. The safety, welfare, and reputation of

each player are in the hands of his team members. In practical terms we agree to take care of each other" (pp. 123-124).

"Learning to work together moment by moment without a known formula is the essence of improvisation" (p. 126).

"The improv 'talent,' which involves listening carefully, observing the actions of others, contributing, supporting, leading, following, filling in the gaps, and looking for the appropriate ending, can be taught and learned" (p. 126).

"In the improv world the working paradigm is one of 'shared control.' . . . [B]oth parties must stay alert and energized and actual leadership is likely to change moment by moment. . . . The rule is that all improvisers have the right and responsibility to move the scene forward, adjusting always to what the new reality is. Doing what needs to be done becomes the guiding principle" (p. 127).

"The skill that the improviser cultivates here is attention to the needs of the moment and an outward focus" (p. 127).

"With shared control you must constantly wake up to the moment and act on that information" (p. 128).

"It is always my job, if the job needs doing and I am there to do it" (p. 128).

"We are always responsible, but never in true control of the situation" (p. 129).

"Working together with so many unknowns, sometimes kindness among players is all we have" (p. 129).

"Give up criticizing. Listen attentively. Pay attention to your partner's story. Look for ways that you can advance his dreams and interests" (p. 131).

"You cannot improvise successfully without applying the rule of consideration" (p. 132).

"Players know that part of their contract is to give more than is asked" (p. 135).

Tom Byers' 5 rules for the successful entrepreneur:

- Show up on time.
- Be nice to people.
- Do what you say you'll do.
- Deliver more than you promised.
- Work with enthusiasm and passion. (p. 135)

[the thirteenth maxim] enjoy the ride

"A flexible mind works differently from a rigid mind" (p. 137).

"We need to be reminded of our capacity for delight and pleasure. Finding wonder, remembering how to play, . . . these are the things we all yearn for" (p. 139).

"Beyond all other freedoms our greatest liberty is our ability to choose our attitude" (p. 141).

"Make someone else's day" (p. 141).

"Enjoy your life. Seriously" (p. 142).

[epilogue]

"Improv points to ways of being more and better alive, ways of cutting through our patterns of procrastination and doubt. It is up to each of us, however, to make the move. . . . a life of meaning and value is achieved through purposeful action. Risk is involved. Feeling insecure is natural, expected - part of the territory" (p. 147).