

*“Forces Torn Loose from the Axis: Collective Common Sense
as a Strategic Factor in Successful Group Improvisation”*

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“One afternoon, the violinist of the group and I were driving off campus and happened to cross the Connecticut River. Looking out of the window, he said, “You should play it like that.” From the bridge the river seemed impossibly wide, and instead of a single current there seemed to be a million intersecting currents—urgent and lazy rivers within the river, magical pockets of no motion at all. The late-afternoon light colored the water pink and orange and gold. It was the most beautiful, patient, meandering multiplicity.

Instantly, I knew how to play the passage. Even better, Ives’s music made me see rivers differently; centuries of classical music had petrified them, ignoring their reality in order to turn them into musical objects. Schubert uses tuneful flowing brooks to murmur comfort to suicidal lovers; Wagner has maidens and fateful rings at the bottom of a heroically surging Rhine. Ives is different. He gives you crosscurrents, dirt, haze—the disorder of a zillion particles crawling downstream. His rivers aren’t constrained by human desires and stories; they sing the beauty of their own randomness and drift.”ⁱ

We live in an atmosphere of disturbances and disequilibrium, in the midst of seemingly untranslatable contestations between incommensurable commitments. Disturbances arise in the fabric of the determined ways of things, yet the determined ways continue to enact their opposition to the new questions calling us into the open. Disjunctive efforts vie for position and privilege, insisting on the primacy of determinations we must all accept as defining urgencies, commitments or positions to defend without compromise. Against the grain of these disjunctive efforts to preserve settled determinations, another attunement holds court, calling forth a decentering urgency to attend to what is occurring within these moments of conflict and discord, demanding our openness to the not-yet-determined. We face this on all levels of contemporary life, prominently in the arena of national politics, where political confrontations seem determined by structural divisions fed by ideological platforms, and more generally in our debates over social entitlements (e.g., health care, marriage, and public investment in higher education). Our society flows like a Charles Ives composition, capturing us in a plethora of crosscurrents, and leaving us to consider how best to contribute to the ongoing performativity that challenges our pluralist imagination to rise to the occasion and work against the grain of our unifying impulses to tame the great river in our own selective image, disturbing the safe harbors of our settled dispositions.

*Reason tatters,
the forces tear loose from the axis.
Searchlight casting
for faults in the clouds of delusion.
Shall we go, you and I, while we can
through the transitive nightfall of diamonds?ⁱⁱ*

In what follows, I want to suggest the importance of a collective form of common sense, achieved through a construction of *collective sensibilities* and functioning as a strategic ingredient of group improvisation -- as a way to address intractable or paralyzing conflict and discord, and as a strategic factor in opening ourselves collectively to the not-yet-determined facets of everyday living in relation to one another.

While our notion of "common sense" implies common sensitivity among a group collective, the more common reality is that individuals operate with their own inner dynamic of sensitivities and attunements, with differences often producing friction, tension and disparate forces torn loose from the axis of reason. To repair damage resulting from these disturbances in the "common ground" of collective interests, it might be important to cultivate collective experimental sensitivities. Grateful Dead group dynamics suggest a model for initiating such collective forms of engagement.

As increasingly fractured, divisive, oppositional practices influence the domain of cultural and political conflict, constructive practices become increasingly marginalized and mainstream sensitivities lose their grip on the unfolding conversation. To regenerate a more productive social dynamic, people may need to cultivate collective sensitivities and attunements as a basis upon which to situate and discuss their differences in a more overtly improvisational manner. The type of growth this entails is reflected in those forms of engagement instantiating Grateful Dead musical performances where a "collective" form of improvisation emerged and the music "played the band." I want to consider the importance of instantiating this practice in mainstream popular culture, both as a model for cultivating collective common sense and as an antidote to the self-absorbing dysfunctional makeup of our prevalent investments in personal commitments shaped by persuasive rhetoric.

The challenges facing this model may shed some light on the resistance to overt political and social discourse characterizing Grateful Dead interactions with their fan base and the social scene at large, a detachment traversing forty turbulent years of value upheaval and paralyzing, dysfunctional social discourse across the American cultural landscape. For while the band resisted direct confrontation with controversial social issues, their influence nevertheless spawned countless experiments in personal growth and development geared to the ideal of collective improvisation and productive engagements with difference. This openness to experimentation is central to the cultivation of collective common sense.

Space for Social Transformation

There are very interesting case studies to explore where improvisational practices have been utilized to address social conflict. One area concerns the role played by "truth and reconciliation" commissions, e.g., in Peru, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, where efforts to "perform reconciliation" and "improvise accountability" have opened spaces for public testimonials where people have come together to give voice to the harms and injustices experienced by indigenous populations, whether through violent civil wars, or through systematic disenfranchisement and abject neglect of entitlements

established through colonial treaties that were never honored by the dominant social powers. As Tracey Nichols writes, in “Speaking Justice, Performing Reconciliation,” one can look to an “ethos of improvisation” to discern an “ethic drawing on attitudes and practices that help improvising musicians negotiate fruitful courses of action in uncertain situations. She offers an account of how improvisational musical performance can serve as “an analogy and an instructive lesson for postcolonial social reconstruction” to frame an “ethos” for thinking about the “political challenges faced by societies who are struggling with the question of how best to reconcile justice claims arising out of their colonial pasts.”ⁱⁱⁱ Her interest is in “the potential of commitments to improvisation and solidarity to help reconcile an insufficiently concerned mainstream with communities it has marginalized” through what she calls “a critical examination of the historical harms and marginalizations” impacting indigenous peoples, and directing “sustained attention to the obligations set forth in ... promises and treaties” established over the years to deal with disenfranchised communities. “To speak justice,” she says,

demands that we set aside our narrow conceptions of politics as the cut and thrust of partisan policy debates, and take up instead a broader notion of politics as responsiveness to the material needs and human rights of all members of the polity.... Speaking justice is a process of stepping outside the status quo and negotiating new, more inclusive, social relations. (Nichols, 2)

She sees reconciliation testimonials as a performative mechanism of remembrance, and argues for truth and reconciliation commissions as “improvisatory mechanisms” supporting a “process of creation (of awareness, and potential for solidarity) *through* performance.”

Like improvised musical performances, these improvised performances in pursuit of justice are –ideally– concerned with process rather than finished product, with the presentation of multiple voices rather than imposition of a coherent perspective, and with interrogation of real-world power differentials among participants rather than endorsing a formal –even fictitious– egalitarianism.... In both truth and reconciliation movements and musical improvisations, the process of performance opens up a space for richer appreciation of otherness. (6)

Recognizing that the fruitfulness of this process hinges on an “ethos of improvisation,” she suggests that “improvisation as a model has something to tell us that we can’t learn from mainstream political theory literature:”

Specifically, it can tell us *how* to go about building and rebuilding community across a diverse population when we hope to have the active participation of all members. First, we need to commit ourselves to the greatest inclusiveness consistent with carrying on a process in which testimonials can be heard and responded to. Closely related to this principle of inclusiveness is the notion of *listening trust*; even those negotiating participants whom we suspect of bad faith or impure motives must be allowed to have their say and must be listened to. Rather than judging in advance, we need to commit ourselves in the moment, to listening closely –even to that which sounds unsettling, false, or

incomprehensible. Later, once the entire contribution can be assessed, each of us, individually, can make assessments about the value of the message we think the participant was trying to articulate, and then, subsequently, negotiate with each other about which of these assessments...best captures our own experience of the contribution (on the model of ongoing debates)... An ethos of improvisation builds on these initial commitments to inclusiveness and attentive reception in ways that aim to make us more responsive to the performances of others and more attuned to the nuance of messages conveyed in our own performances. (Nichols, 7-8)

These “collaborative creations” represent a “performance of openness to others” that open spaces for engagement with new understandings framed by shared “testimonies” addressing “how and when we have failed to be just to each other.” Nichols recognizes the risks associated with these practices:

What we are risking, of course, is failure, the possibility that we might reach out and be rebuffed, ignored, manipulated, or misrepresented. Taking one’s chances, instead of trying to rig the situation to increase one’s own chances of success, is the sense in which the improvisatory attitude I endorse is not just performative, but transformative.... the courage to take risks generates a particular kind of generosity with respect to others –a willingness to support people who are struggling to articulate their ideas and an enhanced capacity to forgive mistakes they might make in that struggle. It also encourages development of respect for process; a willingness to trust oneself and others to find creative ways out of what might seem to be impasses; the ability to integrate, adopt, or even switch between different perspectives and different types of tools. As a participatory ethos, improvisation ... is not limited to discourse. Improvisation’s emphasis on performativity means that responsiveness, respect, acceptance, and its other ethical commitments can be telegraphed non-discursively, emotionally, through, for example, behavior and facial expressions. (Nichols, 8)

Ursel Schlicht expresses similar sentiments in discussing the value of teaching a course on improvisation. “Improvisation is not only a vast, multi-faceted musical realm, but also a complex social activity with almost limitless potential to foster creative and social growth,” adding that “core elements of improvising include opening oneself to the unexpected and unpredictable, freeing the mind from preconceived ideas, and learning to take chances.”^{iv} Daniel Fischlin adds a deeper reflection to this when he writes about the co-dependent synergies of “being Instrumental” as a form of “deep listening:”

Spontaneity occurs, but only in a context that delimits what emerges, what is thinkable in that particular improvisatory context. Freedom occurs but only in a context that acknowledges precedent and the historicity of what is played. Community expression is achieved but only in the context of the degree to which the player is shaped by the listening that informs the improvisation. Independence of voice is achieved but only in the context of how that independence is a function of multiple contexts, communities, and social practices that shape it. Creative liberty is achieved but only in the context of the

deep histories of formation and development that lead to the improvisatory moment.^v

Fischlin draws out a crucial recognition, namely, that improvisation is never simply a function of the “spontaneity, freedom, and virtuosity (technical freedom) of the singular individual, but actually “a necessary, primal cultural practice of encounter, a profoundly creative aspect of being human in a community.” But if we recognize this, we can also see that “its repression or marginalization from discourses that shape how we collectively rethink our humanity is a profound failure of the imagination, a betrayal of the very residual traces that define what it means to be in the world.” In laying out the special logic of improvisational encounters, he adds:

If improvisation is a key way in which humans collectively adapt, communicate, and respond (both consonantly and dissonantly) with their environment; *if* it is a ubiquitous trans-cultural practice that points to an underlying quality of what it means to be human; *if* improvised discourses articulate ideas only to be found therein, testing the limits of our capacity to think new thoughts, to see beyond the constraints of current notions of freedom of expression; *then* there is a profound relationship to be recognized between improvised musical discourses and other more expansive discourses in which other forms of human agency are at stake. (4)

“Improvisatory musical communities” and successful improvisational performativity within group dynamics represent “important sites where historical contingencies are at work, and where ongoing interchanges between individuals and the community at large are re-imagined, contested, subverted and reconfigured. The impressive results of these experiments open a path to rethinking the role of the individual, “as one aspect in a complex overlay of contingencies” that reveal the primacy of “group dynamics and contexts that always far exceed the individual.” In fact,

the individual in this sense does not really exist, except as a function of the community out of which s/he emerges, to which s/he responds, and into which her additions (consonant or dissonant) are added as a function of her participation in the community. Moreover, the individual exists not so much as a marker of domination and elevated status in musical improvisation but as a generator of new ideas in concert with others. So the musical form, generally and in its specific iterations, gives rise to other ideas, other ways of thinking about social practices that are interconnected...[thereby pushing] us to think harder about the relationship between musical signifying and more expansive social practices. (4)

Fischlin closes with a pair of questions worth considering in light of the extraordinary success we attribute to Grateful Dead improvisation and its impact on the community of Deadheads who continue to discover its profoundly engaging qualities:

Are there ways of thinking about the aesthetics of improvisation that overlap with re-invigorated notions of civic engagement –that move us closer to meaningful forms of social justice and progressive change? Can musical improvisation in its most effective forms lead to enacting other forms of human potential? (5)

ⁱ Jeremy Denk, "Flight of the Concord: the perils of the recording studio." *The New Yorker* (6 Feb 2012, p. 25)

ⁱⁱ Robert Hunter, "Dark Star," in *Box of Rain*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tracey Nichols, "Speaking Justice, Performing Reconciliation: Twin Challenges for a Postcolonial Ethics," *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, 6/1 (2010), 1.

^{iv} Ursel Schliet, "'I Feel My True Colors Began to Show': Designing and Teaching a Course on Improvisation," *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, 3/2 (2008), 1.

^v Daniel Fischlin, "Improvisation and the Unnameable: On Being Instrumental," *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, 5/1 (2009), 3.