

Improvising life

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

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I had a great time last weekend with the folks at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlotte. For their all-church retreat they chose the theme **The Improvising God: A New Theology for an Imperfect World.**

For many people, the struggle to understand God's presence and work in the midst of suffering is THE sticking point for faith. For some people, they're led to dismiss the idea of God altogether. Others grab onto notions about God's plan and purpose. I find the latter rather unsatisfying, not to mention problematic to the idea of God as love: it requires us to believe that God would bring about God's purposes by employing all manner of terror against the people God claims to care for. As David Bentley Hart wrote after the devastating tsunami several years ago, **"It seems a strange thing to find peace in a universe rendered morally intelligible at the cost of a God rendered morally loathsome."**

I'm still working on a nuanced middle. As a follower of Jesus who finds truth in the stories of scripture, I see God's nature as one of self-limitation. Jesus wasn't just a piece of God, or God in disguise: Christ was fully God, which means it is fully God's nature to limit God's power and sovereignty. That's what I see in the gospel story again and again.

What God does is work improvisationally with us to say "Yes, and" in a way that moves us in the direction of the best wholeness possible for all. And how can we participate in that Yes-Anding?

I like to mix things up in my retreats and workshops. Lots of interaction, video, and music along with straight-up "lecture." We watched clips of people performing improv comedy, a speech by Stephen Colbert, and even a scene from *The West Wing*.

But the piece that really grabbed people was this [TED talk by artist Phil Hansen](#), called Embrace the Shake. In it he talks about how a nerve injury destroyed his ability to make the kind of pointillist art he felt so drawn to. Instead a doctor advised

him to receive that limitation as a gift, to embrace the shake ... which led him to find gorgeous (and FUN) new ways of doing art:

Hansen is describing the fundamental task of improv ... and of life: to take what is offered and build on it in a way that brings about the best Yes for all concerned. It's well worth ten minutes of your time.

During the retreat I leaned a good bit on Brené Brown's latest book, *Rising Strong*, which talks about how we come back from failure—how failure becomes a source of our power instead of something we need to run from. For the Trinity group, Embrace the Shake became a kind of shorthand for that process.

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