What doing improv taught me about scarcity and choice

We went on with four performers instead of 10. It was invigorating.

by MaryAnn McKibben Dana in the June 20, 2018 issue

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Improvisational theater often begins with a group of players, a couple of chairs, and a word from the audience. That's it. It never seems like enough, yet improv always happens.

I once took an improv class that had about ten members. Our time together culminated in a showcase with other improv classes. As the day of the showcase drew near, members of our class started announcing conflicts with the date. By the end, there were four of us. Four newbie improvisers, instead of ten.

I sent my teacher a panicked note: How could we do this with so few people? She replied reassuringly but firmly: "It'll be fine." She spoke with the confidence of someone who knew from experience that fears over not having enough are

common—and can often be the fuel for something fantastic.

The night of the showcase came, and the four of us gamely showed up. Wonder of wonders, it turned out to be one of the most invigorating evenings I've had onstage. I can't speak to the quality of the improv—though we did get a lot of laughs—but I can say that each of us was fully invested in giving our absolute best and supporting everyone else. There was no hanging out on the back line, wondering if someone else would initiate a scene. If we felt the impulse to jump in, that was our sign to just do it. When we finished our set, we dashed offstage, high-fiving each other, relieved but also ecstatic. What started as an experience of "not enough" became a great victory.

We're all improvisers, often without realizing it. We improvise in order to get through the day. We improvise when life surprises us. We do it without even thinking about it. There can be gifts of grace in those unplanned experiences.

But when we're faced with a difficult situation, we often approach it with an eye toward what's lacking: If we had just a little more time. A little more money. A few more people. A few more resources. A little more support for our project.

Phil Hansen is an artist who began his career interested in pointillism—applying numerous small dots in patterns to make a larger image. His focused pursuit of this art form resulted in a tremor in his hand that made drawing dots impossible. So he'd grip the pen harder, which only increased the shaking. Eventually he was diagnosed with a neurological problem that he himself had made worse by holding on so tightly. He was devastated, wondering if his art career was over. As he was leaving his doctor's office, the doctor shrugged and said, "Maybe you should embrace the shake."

Ultimately, he did—he found other ways to create art besides pointillism. A working artist today, Hansen also speaks to groups about embracing limitations as a source of creativity. He describes his experience of finally having enough money to buy art supplies and going hog wild at the store. He came home, excited to create, and . . . nothing. He felt blocked. He was surrounded by his myriad supplies, yet the unlimited options they gave him left him feeling stuck. He needed more structure in which to work.

This experience led him on a quest: to see if he could create using less than a dollar's worth of art supplies, for example. He started by making drawings on

donated coffee cups. Then he began creating art that would end in its own destruction. He made a sculpture of Jimi Hendrix with 7,000 matches that he then lit on fire, and an image using frozen wine that disappeared as it melted.

Hansen concludes, “Embracing the shake for me wasn’t just about art and having art skills. It turned out to be about life, and having life skills. Because ultimately, most of what we do takes place here, inside the box, with limited resources. Learning to be creative within the confines of our limitations is the best hope we have to transform ourselves and, collectively, transform our world.”

Leonard Bernstein liked to say, “To achieve great things, we need a plan and not quite enough time.” Too much time, or even adequate time, will leave us wedded to the details. We can cross off all the steps and think that it’s the plan that saves us, that makes us successful. But not enough time means we need to improvise. We may end up throwing things overboard that we once thought were indispensable.

I think about the preachers I know who every week—barring vacation or other circumstance—climb into a pulpit or walk onto a stage with some kind of prepared sermon, whether they typed it out, or jotted down notes, or planned a note-less sermon. Every week.

How many sermons would be completed if ministers had all the time in the world?

How many sermons would be completed if we preachers had all the time in the world, if our congregations said, “Go ahead and let us know when you want to call a worship service together. Whenever it’s done will be fine”? Real life would conspire against us every time, not to mention the headiness of trying to preach the word of God. Yet the sure knowledge that Sunday is coming drives us to our laptops, our desks, or the big table at the coffee shop. Preachers complain about the relentlessness of Sunday, but I’m not sure many of us would get the words down otherwise. An enforced deadline imposes scarcity upon us, thus spurring creativity.

But while everyone deals with a feeling of “not enough” from time to time, not all scarcities are equal. Too many people in the United States and around the world live in a state of real scarcity, without access to adequate food, water, shelter, or education. Too many worry about making ends meet, having to weigh whether to make the car payment or pay for the prescription essential for one’s health. There’s nothing playful in that kind of deprivation.

Yet learning to improvise our lives means that each of us, regardless of our privilege or scarcity, has a personal agency that cannot be taken away. Each of us can choose how to respond to our own lives—and that choice is ours and ours alone. In the end, if improv has anything to offer us, it's a way of understanding that choice, which is ours regardless of circumstance. Whatever life hands us, we can make the most creative choices possible within the constraints in which we find ourselves.

That doesn't mean we accept inequality in our systems as the way things should be. If life—like improv—is oriented toward serving others, we must care for those in our communities, so that their choices can be as rich and as life-giving as possible.

This article is excerpted from MaryAnn McKibben Dana's book God, Improv, and the Art of Living*, just published by Eerdmans. A version of it appears in the print edition under the title "Enough to go on."*