

UNLOCKING THE CREATIVE IMPULSE: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF IMPROVISATION

By Denny Zeitlin

What ignites the creative spark? As a jazz pianist and composer, and a practicing psychiatrist, this question has intrigued me for many decades. I've enjoyed exploring this topic with musicians, artists, performers, psychotherapists, educators, and lay audiences in workshops I have conducted internationally, entitled "*Unlocking the Creative Impulse: The Psychology of Improvisation.*"

I believe that the highest forms of creativity involve the bringing together of two disparate disciplines. One, a more classically "Western" tradition, involves the thousands of hours of practice that lead to technical expertise; the study of the history and scope of the art form; and development of a personal aesthetic. The other, a more classically "Eastern" tradition, involves the development of the capacity to enter an ecstatic state, where personal boundaries dissolve, and the artist merges with the act of making art.

This integration occurs at peak moments of creativity, whether or not the artist is consciously aware of it. Both disciplines are necessary. For example, a musician leaning too heavily on the "Western" tradition may sound technically and formally impeccable, but cold and sterile—too much light and not enough heat. A performer totally immersed in the "Eastern" tradition may tap into and communicate deep emotional states, but lose the aesthetic sense of form—too much heat and not enough light.

The anatomy of the Western tradition is understandably familiar to those of us growing up in the western world; that of the Eastern tradition, less so. When we examine cultures and disciplines throughout history that aim to develop ecstatic capacity, there is a word that frequently emerges: "flow." We find it in the Tao Te Ching, the poetry of Walt Whitman, and as a catch phrase of the Human Potential Movement: "go with the flow." Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has studied the "flow" phenomenon extensively for decades in a series of books, and enumerates the main elements of that state:

1. A sense of confidence and clarity of goals
2. Immediate feedback
3. A balance between challenges and skills
4. A merging of action and awareness
5. Exclusion of dimensions from consciousness because of the intense concentration on the present
6. A feeling of total control without exerting control, with resultant freedom from fears of failure
7. The disappearance of self-consciousness
8. An altered sense of time
9. The activity producing the "flow" state becomes "autotelic," it becomes an end in itself.

When I'm improvising on a bandstand in a "flow" state, I'm confident that I am up to the challenge and feel clear about my over-all musical goals, trusting that my diligent practice and study will be brought to bear, and that the notes and my personal aesthetic will take care of themselves; I get immediate feedback from my playing and the musicians on the bandstand as to how the music is progressing; the musical challenge is neither too boring nor overwhelming; I am merged with the music, and am not even aware of pressing the keys; I'm free from intrusive thoughts; I feel intensely curious, open, and engaged, effortlessly in control and unafraid of mistakes or opinions of others; At times my solo feels like it is lasting forever, or over in a moment; the act of playing is its own reward.

Of course no musician is in "flow" all the time. States of consciousness frequently shift, and an improviser typically moves in and out of flow during a performance. The challenge is finding ways to "gentle" ourselves back into flow when we slip out of it. I've learned to not seize on an intrusive thought, or a missed note, or noise from the audience, but trust that if I love the music, and step out of its way, something special can happen.

The set and the setting has a lot to do with entry into and maintenance of the flow state. Musicians often have preliminary rituals before they play. Some have specific warm-up exercises; others hang out with the band or audience; others meditate, etc. I see these as ways people create a sense of centeredness and psychological safety. Good vibes in the band and an enthusiastic, attentive audience help greatly. Developing a "process" rather than "content" orientation is tremendously useful in avoiding perfectionistic traps. There will always be another chance to take a solo. And there is nothing inherently demeaning in seeing oneself as a perpetual student of one's art.

In my clinical work with patients suffering from creative blocks over the years, there have been three major themes that most commonly interfere with the psychological safety necessary for inhabiting the flow state and drawing upon the fruits of countless hours of practicing in the "Western" tradition. One is the fear of loss of control. Classical musicians faced with the challenge of improvisation often experience this. In extreme cases, there is a fear of becoming psychotic, and not being able to return. Another main theme is the fear of failure and humiliation. Frequently, extremely competent professionals are hampered by this spectre. In psychotherapy, what may initially present as a fear of failure, may prove to be the third common theme: an underlying guilt about success. Individuals struggling with this theme often have a family history where they emerged better off than some other family members, and unconsciously feel they don't deserve it. This can lead to a lifetime of inhibition and self-sabotage where defeat is snatched from the jaws of victory.

One of the overall attitudes that is most conducive to successfully mobilizing and integrating these Western and Eastern traditions is feeling grateful for the opportunity and capacity to be creative. Depending on personal beliefs, this might range from gratitude to a supreme being, to gratefulness at the good fortune to possess the DNA and life experiences that allow creative expression.