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Life Unscripted: Using Improv Principles to Get Unstuck, Boost Confidence, and Transform Your Life

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28 Highlights

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 292

When most people hear the words improvisation or improv, they display any number of strong reactions: No, thanks. Not for me! That's too scary! (Or: That's too goofy!) I saw an improv show once—it was magical! I saw an improv show once, and no one knew what they were doing. It was one of my favorite evenings I've spent in a theater! You mean *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* I could never do that. This is not a book about performing on stage and telling jokes. This is a book about using the skills of improvisation to help you live a more present, engaged, and meaningful life. You improvise every day of your life. Learning how to roll with and grow from life's challenges becomes easier when you understand the basic rules of improvisation. The tools that improvisers use to create spontaneous moments on a stage can be developed into skills you can apply to every area of life.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 327

Life is a lot like jazz ... it's best when you improvise. —George Gershwin

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 371

Our instinct is to survive. Most of us are cautious about new or different situations. As a result, the brain's default is no. But to grow, we need new experiences. In improv terms, we need new “offers,” and we need to say yes to them.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 378

Our doubts are traitors, And make us lose the good we oft might win, By fearing to attempt. —William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 381

Let's insert a cautionary statement here. We are actually big fans of organization and patterns. Everyone relies on them to make sense of the world from moment to moment. Without a good degree of predictability, our lives would devolve quickly into chaos. In fact, the idea of taking an adventure implies that most of the time we live through schedules and patterned responses. But to tap into experiences of creativity, spontaneity, and

improvisation, we need to learn to play with those patterns. We need to bend them, break them, and take respite from them.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 418

The more we're prepared for not being prepared, the more relaxed and confident we'll be in unpredictable situations.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 430

Improvisation in music and theatre were prime movers of the Renaissance. The new idea was that life was not exclusively about pain and suffering. Enjoyment of the arts and music became a fundamental component of a meaningful existence in a more humanistic society.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 453

Over the last thirty years, schools of improvisational theatre have opened in most major cities in America and in places all over the world. In addition, there are amateur improv groups in many small towns and suburbs. In general, these groups are not filled with actors, although they do enroll people seeking to refine their performance and writing skills. These workshops include people from all walks of life: doctors, plumbers, bank tellers, psychologists, waiters, college students, couples, single people, young and old, all with unique stories, yearning for something when they sign up—though they often don't know what that is.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 492

If you're not making mistakes, then you're not doing anything. —John Wooden

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 658

Improvisation, innovation, and life all require us to deal with failure and risk. Harken back to a presentation you saw at school or in a business setting where the presenter had a misstep or meltdown. We have all witnessed something like this happen. We squirm in our seats and probably experience some amount of embarrassment as we watch the presenter not owning the moment. Interestingly, when the presenter does embrace the situation, we're instantly relieved because they're okay. You've probably had the experience of witnessing someone deal with adversity by acknowledging it and incorporating it or rolling with it. What's more, you probably remember it much more vividly than a perfectly run-of-the-mill presentation.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 676

Mistakes are a gateway to a new adventure rather than digging a hole and trying to hide. You can only make it better or make it worse. Why not choose to make it better?

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 713

We must realize that no one benefits when we respond to our mistakes in self-punishing, self-deprecating ways. We do like to see that a criminal can confess his guilt, but in the absence of a real crime, is it really functional to share with people what a bad person you are—or even to stew in this idea yourself—simply because you made a harmless mistake? Reacting by punishing yourself is ultimately self-involved, and others can experience it that way. They really don't want to hear about how bad you are or what an idiot you are or how terribly sorry you are, over and over and over again. Psychologically leaving a group of students you're teaching or your family at the dinner table so you can persecute yourself for a name mix-up doesn't help anyone. It's actually a narcissistic moment because it takes us away from the experience of connection with others and into our own preoccupied, self-obsessed world.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 727

I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been entrusted to take the game-winning shot, and I missed. I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed. —Michael Jordan,

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 860

Openness to experience is consistently the strongest predictor of creative achievement. This consists of lots of different facets, but they're all related to each other: intellectual curiosity, thrill seeking, openness to your emotions, openness to fantasy. The thing that brings them all together is a drive for cognitive and behavioral exploration of the world, your inner world and your outer world. —Scott Barry Kaufman, PhD, from “18 Things Highly Creative People Do Differently,” Huffington Post, March 4, 2014.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 904

Time for the next warm-up game: Enemy Defender. The class stands in a circle. The instructor asks everyone to mentally select another person in the circle without pointing to or otherwise outwardly indicating the person they've selected. Then the instructor tells them to pick another person, again without outwardly revealing the choice. The coach then explains that for the purposes of the game, the first person you chose is your “enemy,” and the second person is your “defender.” When the coach says go, your goal is to try to keep your defender between yourself and your enemy. The teacher usually must explain it a couple of more times to the group as everyone looks for the competitive point of the game. Basically, the concern is How do I win? But there is no winning. Playing is all.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 927

It is very difficult to let go of a lifetime of conditioning. We think: I have to do this right! I have to win! I have to succeed! Or I never get things right. I never understand the rules. I don't ever grasp things quickly. Even though it's impossible to win the games above, people still think they should or that they should be good at them. What we try to stress as teachers is that there is no winning; there is only doing. Once again, the process is the content. By doing the exercises, we are slowly training ourselves to let go and relax. We are learning how to

stop managing every moment through the judgment of our minds. If you think about it, life is process. Perhaps people become materialistic because they wish to have proof of the content of their lives, but in doing so, they may miss the enjoyment of the process of their lives. They give up experiencing the moment and defer the experience to be had someday instead of now.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 952

Interestingly, it appears that the prefrontal cortex can interfere with the generation of creative ideas in the first place. In brain scanning of musical improvisers using fMRI technologies, Charles Limb and his colleagues at the University of California, San Francisco, have shown that this particular area is turned down or deactivated during improvisation. It's as though the area involved in the evaluation of an idea is turned down to allow for the emergence of new ideas. This appears to also be the case when daydreaming or meditating; the prefrontal cortex (particularly the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex) is deactivated, giving us more room to play.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 984

On stage, experienced players have a valuable resource to help engage their curiosity and guide their storytelling. They know they need to discover their CORE: Character Objective Relationship Environment. When improvisers are doing their best work, they are embracing particular features of a Character, and the character has an Objective, a Relationship with others on the stage, and together they discover their particular Environment.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1022

We play different Characters over the course of a typical day or week. Let's consider Jane, a participant in an improvisation group. Mother, daughter, wife, sister, doctor, boss, employee, shopper, driver, bookstore browser—you get the idea. Jane told us she had never considered the roles she was playing and the expectations that others had of her roles. To herself, she was always just Jane, and she felt authentic this way; but she also told us that in failing to consider her roles, she abrogated some of her responsibilities. She often dressed sloppily when going to work and felt she did not bring enough professionalism to her job. She resented checking in on her mother, she rarely played with her children, and she didn't like standing in lines. We asked her what would happen if she actually brought the idea of role recognition to her life. She said, "Well, if I acknowledged that I was my husband's wife, I might buy him flowers on the way home." She smiled when she thought about the possibilities that might open between them. Simply by wondering about our roles, we can begin to create new stories in our lives and invite our imaginative thinking. Similar to a player on a blank stage, we can begin to color our world with our own ideas.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1177

In class, we tell people the following idea—which we made up, but it rings true for us: As children we have imaginary friends, and as adults we have imaginary enemies.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1268

Consider the following experiment outlined in the book *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* by David Bayles and Ted Orland. On the first day of class, a ceramics teacher announced that he was sorting his students into two groups. Half the students would be graded on the quantity of works produced, while the other half would be graded on the quality of just one work. On the final day of class, the instructor looked at the pots from both groups and realized that the best pots, those that had the most creative designs and seemed most beautiful, all came from the group graded on quantity. As the authors put it: “It seems that while the quantity group was busily churning out piles of work—and learning from their mistakes—the quality group had sat theorizing about perfection and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1309

Friendship with oneself is all-important, because without it one cannot be friends with anyone else in the world.
—Eleanor Roosevelt

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1435

ourselves. The Arbing Institute discusses the idea of living in a kind of carry-box that keeps us at a distance from others.² This may be a better-than box, a less-than box, a must-be-seen-as box, or something else entirely. The point is that we’re trapped in this box and need to find ways to get out to have more authentic and less reactive experiences with those around us.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1534

How many old stories do we walk around with that go unchallenged, perhaps because someone made an offhand comment at some moment in our lives, often when we were young? You can’t sing. You’re not attractive. You’re not funny. You’re no athlete. These simple endowments become evil spells if left unchallenged or unquestioned. Sometimes all it takes to undo the spell’s magic is to wonder about it. How do you know you have a bad voice? Ever think about taking voice lessons? How do you know you’re not funny? Ever try writing to find out? How do you know you’re not an athlete? You actually have the kind of body that would make for a great runner (or weightlifter, or skier, or ...) Imagine how many untold stories we all have within us that yearn to be lived—stories we haven’t wondered about or honored or had a chance to explore. Many improvisational theatre formats give us the immediacy to open up to the stories that want to be told and that will transform us as we become part of them.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1614

Improvisers walk onto a stage with no idea of where their scene will start or where it might wind up. They must be open to the possibilities and opportunities of the moment. This is the key in real life as well. Be present. Open up to the potential stories that others offer, and try to build upon them. Listen, be curious, and open up as you move with someone through a moment in real life.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1651

During a normal interaction in real life, if you felt your mind wandering, you wouldn't normally ask the other person to suddenly start playing Zip, Zap, Zop or insist that every sentence in your conversation start with the next letter of the alphabet (the A-Z improv game). So how do you become more present? Well, if you were in meditation class and your attention began drifting or obsessing, the teacher would remind you to return to your breath and pay attention to your breath. No matter how distracted you are, you can return to the present by acknowledging your breath.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1664

We need to be present and understand the story of the moment we are actually in. And like a good improviser, we need to ask ourselves: What do we want? Where are we? What is our relationship with those around us?

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1708

An improv game that we play to discover the rich layers of story is called ACE—Advance, Color, and Emotion. One player tells a true story that they have told multiple times in real life. However, this time they have a second player acting as their story coach. As player one tells their well-worn story, the second player “coaches” them by responding moment to moment with either Advance (move the story along), Color (give more detail about that part of the story), or Emotion (what were you feeling at this moment and what were the other people feeling?) The idea is to coach the teller into remembering aspects of the story that they have not thought of since first experiencing it and to recall the sights and sounds that might not be part of their practiced conscious memory. We have found this to be a useful tool to dig deeper and discover more of the narrative while painting fresh images in the mind of both the speaker and the story coach.

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