



## Knowing When to Improvise, by Patricia Ryan Madson

A successful life involves both planning and improvising. Sometimes we actually do need a script. Those scripts that are working well for us (positive habits, for example) should be preserved and treasured. Spontaneity for its own sake is never the key. Knowing which strategy to use involves examining things clearly. Our moment-to-moment experience is improvisational, even though it exists within a structure or plan. That is, life brings us opportunities, questions, and problems to solve, and we respond in real time, trying to make sense out of each challenge or offer.Â \_How\_ we live our lives within the structure of our day is an eternal improvisation.

The invitation to improvise is not a prescription for a careless approach to life. True improvisation is always an act of responsibility; it implies a conscious morality. We may know individuals who flaunt spontaneity as the supreme virtue and excuse thoughtless or selfish behavior in the name of "going with the flow." I am reminded of an inscription on a gold-lettered plaque over an oak bar in a Welsh bar: *\_Pisces Mortui Solum Cum Flumine Natant\_*. ("Only dead fish go with the flow.") Failure to plan can have real consequences. Scheduling medical checkups is important. It is important to buy airline tickets in advance, fill up the gas tank before the fuel gauge signals empty, and pay a parking ticket the day you receive it. [...]

You are always the one steering the canoe, however. Sometimes on the white-water-rapids course it is both relaxing and exhilarating to be swept along by the swells, oars at rest, watching the scenery and marveling at the ease of it all. And sometimes we must paddle [...] against the current in order to take a fork in the river.

In 1982 I took a year off from teaching to circumnavigate the globe. I bought a one-way around-the-world airline ticket. I was allowed to make as many stops as I liked, in the line of direction, but couldn't backtrack or go too far north or south of my last stop, and I had to complete my journey within twelve months. Buying the ticket gave me a sense of stability (planning); experiencing all the places was the great adventure. Planning provided a platform for me to improvise. Taking an improvised step always leads you somewhere.

Notice where you are going.

--Patricia Ryan Madson, From "Improv Wisdom"

