

“Yes, and . . .”: The Creative Art of Living

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In improvisation, you make up everything as you go. In the moment, and by listening to other people on the stage, you make up character traits, movement, and dialogue to create art. It might be a simple scene or an entire original play or musical. You might be thinking, “Oh, that sounds horrible.” But to some extent, it is something all of us do every day. After all, we don’t plan out every detail of our day and then have it go according to that script. We wake up, move forward, and maybe make plans, but pivot, adapt, react, eat something, and pivot some more in some variation every day. After decades of performing improv with different groups such as the Garrens, the Thrillionaires, *Show Offs*, and *The Lisa Show* on BYUradio—and certainly after many years of motherhood—I have come to see that the principles that allow for good improv have application for the creative art of living and becoming.

The guiding principle of improv is “Yes, and . . .” It means that you accept whatever is offered to you onstage and add something to it. That is it. You don’t deny it. You don’t question it. You just take it and move forward. There are a million ways to do this. For example, you might walk onto the stage and, with nothing but a suggestion, such as a nongeographic location or a relationship between two people, start the scene with an action. You might be miming a sweeping action, but the other actor might interpret it as curling—you know, the sport in the Olympics? But both are right. It doesn’t matter. Whatever the other says, you accept it and add to it—you “Yes, and . . .”

So if someone comes onstage and says, “Mother, stop sweeping and come get in the car!” you might say, “I just need to finish up this corner before I leave—it will calm my nerves before the

Lisa Valentine Clark, comedian, actor, and host of The Lisa Show on BYUradio, delivered this devotional address on July 20, 2021.

surgery!” You have accepted the offering (you are sweeping and you have a mother-child relationship) and then added to it (there is a surgery and you are nervous). It moves the scene forward—something is happening and you are discovering the characters and the story together.

An example of not doing this, or denying the offering, would be when someone says, “Mother, stop sweeping and come get in the car!” and you stop the scene or make things really uncomfortable by saying, “I’m not your mother! What are you doing?” You have negated the offering (“I’m not your mother!”) and asked a question (“What are you doing?”), putting the other actor on the spot to come up with another offering because they have to immediately respond. You have added nothing; you have only confused the actor and the audience and immediately stopped the action.

“Yes, and . . .” requires you to be in the moment. It requires you to listen to and observe everything that is happening around you. And it requires focus and attention to detail. But at the same time, it is a call to action because you have to be ready for anything.

Understandably, there will be times when you get a “bad offering”—when you, like the audience, have a particular expectation or anticipation for a suggestion that doesn’t come or the suggestion seems dumb. There are many reasons for that, because you are just responding and acting to a lot of things happening all around you. You might have a “blerg” brain moment yourself and give a less-than-perfect offering. This is to be expected. The real test in improv—what separates the easily forgotten scenes from the memorable, magical moments—lies not in the offering but in the “Yes, and . . .” moment that comes next, when the less-than-stellar offering is picked up, polished, and held up as a treasure.

In situations like this, it is the troupe—the community of actors that you are performing with—that makes all the difference. The trust and relationships you have with each other are priceless. The goal is not only to listen, accept, and add but to jump in and save or, better yet, set each other up to succeed in an effortless way that the audience might not notice, all in service of the story being told in that moment. That is magic, when

the unexpected not only happens but surprises, entertains, and creates something you could have never done on your own.

Permission to Both Cry and Laugh

When I was younger—a plucky, extroverted girl from Lincoln, Nebraska, with a bag full of lipstick and dreams—I saw through optimistic, rose-colored glasses, like my life was a musical and “anything could happen.” And now, when I think of life, I see through more middle-aged, dark, kind of scratched and smudged glasses that, honestly, “anything could happen.”

In the late summer of 2015, my husband, Christopher, noticed a slight drag in his leg. It seemed to move a little slower, which was odd. I told him to shake it off, like any loving wife and overworked mother of five growing children. When it became worse and affected the way he walked, we went in for tests. Thinking it was an old back issue that had returned, we assumed a cortisone shot or back surgery—at worst—was in our future. When the MRI came back absolutely clean, we were surprised but not alarmed, so we had another MRI done, higher in the neck. When that was clean, we did a full CAT scan. Then, when that showed nothing and he developed muscle fasciculations, many tests were ordered. After blood work (three times), scans, tests, and time, the “worst-case scenario”—the disease no doctor says out loud, even as a theory—was scribbled on a doctor’s note, and Christopher was sent to a specialist who confirmed he had ALS, Lou Gehrig’s disease. It not only has no known cause but has no treatment, no predictable progression (fast, slow, starts in the leg or arm or voice), and no cure. The average life expectancy is two to five years.

For two weeks Christopher and I lived with the reality of the diagnosis. We didn’t talk about it; the shock was too great. But as he started walking with a cane and more and more people tried to help, we knew we couldn’t keep it in any longer. We told our kids, who were at the time ages eight, eleven, thirteen, sixteen, and eighteen; our families; and our close friends. And life has never been the same.

The first year was the hardest, as we tried to wrap our minds around all the things in our

home that suddenly needed to be equipped with handicap features. We live in a 1970 split-level—the absolute worst situation for a wheelchair—but that was just the beginning. We had to think of employment, savings, and family issues. Every aspect of our life felt like a panic. Christopher had a great therapist, and right off the bat he learned an important principle that I also adopted: the ten-minute rule. Give yourself ten to fifteen minutes every day to feel sorry for yourself and your terminal situation. Then get on with the day and live your life. Chris needed fifteen minutes every once in a while, especially in the beginning, but not after a while.

Christopher decided early on in his diagnosis how he would respond. Most important, he gave everyone around him permission to laugh at ALS and himself. He made jokes about his deteriorating health as a signal to others to do the same. When he started losing his voice and it had this Frankenstein quality to it, he and his cousin made a video in which Chris dressed up like Frankenstein in the style of *Young Frankenstein*, the old black-and-white movie (1974), and sang, laughing throughout the video. He did lip sync videos with his kids, and he wrote joke reviews online to make his friends laugh and posted them to social media.

When he could no longer speak and he communicated with a “Stephen Hawking” computer by laboriously typing each letter out with a sensor on his glasses and a slight movement of his neck while pushing his one working finger on the mouse, he would type out jokes that were always worth the wait. The adaptive computer system had predictive texts, things he said a lot that would pop up after a few letters. If he was standing with one of his kids in the store, he would push a button and the computer voice would say, “Help, I don’t know this person!” He would laugh, and the kids would say, “Please stop doing that.” Or if a friend visited and it got quiet, he would type, “No one understands how I feel.” And he would laugh and laugh.

Christopher kept working and creating. He kept teaching. He earned full professor status at Utah Valley University, and they honored him and gave him lifetime achievement awards

and secured the rights for the green room of the new beautiful arts building to be named the Christopher Clark Green Room. There is a huge bust of him created by the talented J. Kirk Richards in there now. Christopher wanted the actors to rub the top of his head for good luck before they went onstage. He wanted a lasting legacy of actors, writers, and directors to go out into the world and create their own art, expanding goodness and beauty to the world in meaningful ways. He directed some of his best plays, with friends volunteering to assistant-direct for him so he could save his energy and bring his creations to life. ALS, he would remind us, was one of the *least* interesting things about him.

He wrote his life story. He told everyone he talked with that he loved them. He didn’t know when he would die, so he never knew if this would be the last time he would see them, and he never wanted them to question how he felt. So he would say “I love you” all the time—and mean it. When he could no longer walk, he focused on teaching and directing. When he could no longer use his arms, he didn’t spend time worrying about not playing the piano or typing. He found ways to use technology to speak, he stopped teaching, he directed, he stopped directing, he wrote plays—he kept focusing on what he *could* do, often expressing gratitude to God for his life and blessings. He used to tell me that he felt like George Bailey in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, that he was the luckiest man in the whole world with the best friends and family.

After living with ALS for four-and-a-half years, Christopher died on June 5, 2020. When he died, he was writing two plays, he was in preproduction for a musical, he was acting as our children’s self-appointed home seminary and theater teacher, and he had planned and executed an elaborate surprise for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary just two days prior. He was the greatest example of taking the offering and working with it to make something—many things—beautiful. Christopher lived with this “Yes, and . . .” attitude, focusing on what he could do, which was a lot.

The specifics of “Yes, and . . .” have become so much clearer to me in these past five years of intense change. One of the worst days of my life was a seemingly ordinary Tuesday that no one

else would have recognized. Christopher wheeled up to the piano early on in his diagnosis, played a little, and then closed the piano and said, “My piano playing days are over. It was a good run.”

I was shocked—he could still play, so why not? It was a big part of his life. He had studied to be a concert pianist, and I loved hearing him play—Rachmaninoff, Chopin, and others. It was a big part of our home life. But he was resolved. He said, “I’ll just get frustrated because I can’t play like I used to, and it’s going to get worse every day. Instead of being frustrated, I’d just like to go out having played well and focus on other things I can still do, like directing and teaching. It’s okay. I’m at peace with it.” And he was.

In the fall of 2019, Christopher, with extremely limited movement and no ability to speak, spent the entire day and into the early evening praying and typing out an individual priesthood blessing for each of our five children. He was using that expensive, adaptive technology to land on each individual letter of each carefully chosen word with a subtle movement of his neck, the assistance of a dot on his glasses, and the click from the pressure of the last remaining moving finger. Maybe it was because it took him all day and a little into the night to do this one thing, which had previously taken him little time, that made it unique, but I don’t really think so. It was a blessing that transcended the simple good thoughts and hopes of a father. With a body that was not whole, he was able to give complete blessings.

There were so many things that Christopher could do a few years earlier that were a blessing in our lives before he had ALS. He could direct beautiful moving theater pieces; act and perform, such as when he portrayed Paul in the Bible videos for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; play the piano by ear; compose beautiful arrangements; hug us; talk to us; and tell us vivid, funny stories. But the fact that he could still call upon the powers of heaven to bless us when he couldn’t speak or move is something that I have thought a lot about. And he accessed power in the same way as before—with the same comfort and faith to move forward with confidence in a time when we didn’t feel very comfortable or confident.

Choose to Live in the Moment

While most of us won’t find ourselves facing a terminal disease, we all have moments when we need to find a way to live with a bad offering. And while we are most notably aware of the nos in our lives, focusing on the “Yes, and . . .” can be used as a tool to move forward and focus our grieving hearts on the reality of our situations and on what we do have to work with—our “Yes, and . . .”

We can act in faith in the face of fear, whether that is of the trauma of death, maybe, or of the unknown—and certainly of the future. President Russell M. Nelson addressed this in his general conference address “Hear Him” during a frightening global pandemic and outlined how our fear is an indication that we are ready to hear the words of Christ. He taught us that before each of the times the Father introduced His Son, the witnesses

were in a state of fear and, to some degree, desperation.

The Apostles were afraid when they saw Jesus Christ encircled by a cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration.

The Nephites were afraid because they had been through destruction and darkness for several days.

Joseph Smith was in the grips of a force of darkness just before the heavens opened.

Our Father knows that when we are surrounded by uncertainty and fear, what will help us the very most is to hear His Son.

Because when we seek to hear—truly hear—His Son, we will be guided to know what to do in any circumstance.¹

We are promised guidance as we make the next “Yes, and . . .” decision or action to move forward in unexpected times. This is an especially meaningful promise to me because I have learned that a lot of humor and joy is found in the unexpected or in seeing the unexpected happen. But to see it or experience it, we have to accept the offering we have, be honest about it, and make a choice to act. President Nelson taught that our circumstances don’t have to dictate our happiness. He said, “I promise that your capacity to feel joy will increase even if turbulence increases in your life.”² Our very capacity for joy in a time when we are the most afraid can be expanded.

President Nelson has given us many specific ideas about how to increase our ability to receive personal revelation, which is a very individual pursuit, but he repeated himself for emphasis when he said:

I renew my plea for you to do whatever it takes to increase your spiritual capacity to receive personal revelation.

*Doing so will help you know how to move ahead with your life, what to do during times of crisis, and how to discern and avoid the temptations and the deceptions of the adversary.*³

When we seek Christ, we are learning to listen and to develop the ability to receive personal revelation, which is the ultimate way to practice “Yes, and . . .”

I don’t want you to underestimate how hard this is. I have never had a more difficult time practicing what I preach than in this past year. It is not like I have been laughing my way through caregiving, mothering, grief, isolation, or exhausting work. Not at all. But it is the practice of all of this that changes me and my capacity, not a singular event. I think of life less as a performance and more as a working rehearsal. But I also don’t have complicated feelings about laughing *and* crying. Just as Christopher didn’t want to be defined by ALS, I don’t want to be defined by what I have lost. And I don’t want to miss any of the offerings of joy around me because I am too in love or loyal to grief, pain, or suffering.

With each next step or choice, living in the moment is all we have. What we will think about, what we will focus on, who we invite in, and how we deal with each moment is all we have control over. Personal revelation becomes so vital because it accounts for the elements we cannot see when the needs are immediate. It is individual, vulnerable, and guiding—and, most important, it is all motivated by love. Sister Julie B. Beck emphasized this idea when she said, “The ability to qualify for, receive, and act on personal revelation is the single most important skill that can be acquired in this life. . . . It requires a conscious effort.”⁴

When working in a scene, whether it is on a stage or in a conversation, specifics matter.

Individual choices make a difference. Every character adds something. You cannot have everyone be or look or act the same. Not only would it be boring, but beyond that, nothing would happen; there is no theater, conflict, resolution, or change. Specifics are individual, and they make up everything.

Personally, I was able to physically lift my husband when there was the need and no one else to help, have impossible conversations with great focus and mental clarity, and make connections with people at just the right moment for a very specific need that answered an unspoken but desperate plea given only in my mind. There are many experiences—some too sacred to talk about here today—that I will hold in my heart forever as evidence that sometimes we are asked to do impossible things with great love, and we are not left alone to do them.

The Shakespearean quote “serve God, love me, and mend”⁵ from *Much Ado About Nothing* rattles in my brain as a way to remember the guiding principles of improv in living life:

“Serve God” is the driving force, the super objective of our lives, reminding me that God has a plan for me, my faith is in Him, and my relationship and communication with Him are creative offerings that need to be expressed in the details of how I live.

“Love me” reminds me to choose love—to love everyone, to be the one who loves more (the most!) and show it. It reminds me that it is a human need to be loved, and when all is said and done at the end of our lives, that is what we will remember.

“And mend” is the acknowledgment that we are human and we are practicing. We are going to make mistakes and our hearts are going to be broken, but they don’t have to stay broken. As L. R. Knost beautifully said:

*Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break. And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention. So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.*⁶

And, of course, when we feel weak and uninspired, we have the right to ask for personal help.

We cannot underestimate the evidence of God’s love and our reliance on it. Instead, we can look with new eyes and expand our understanding of God’s love. Elder Gene R. Cook said:

*It is part of the gift of charity to be able to recognize the Lord’s hand and feel His love in all that surrounds us. At times it will not be easy to discover the Lord’s love for us in all that we experience, because He is a perfect, **anonymous** giver. You will search all your life to uncover His hand and the gifts He has bestowed upon you because of His intimate, modest, humble way of granting such wonderful gifts.*⁷

When I feel weak, I remind myself that none of us perform in a vacuum and that I need to look to family, friends, my “ride or die” connections, and my peripheral connections—neighbors, ward members, and colleagues. Christopher’s career was all about people, about the students and the cocreators in the creative arts. His legacy is the legacy of all these actors, producers, directors, and creatives going out into the world and creating art with the tools and education and passion that they learned from Chris. On the wall in his office opposite his desk were the words “All is love.” He put them there to remind himself that whether as a department chair, director, teacher, colleague, friend, or student, no problem and no frustration was more important than the person in front of him who was a child of God, a friend.

You can’t have personal revelation without honesty and vulnerability. One offering at a time, one choice, with actors whom you trust. This quote from C. S. Lewis illustrates this:

In Friendship, . . . we think we have chosen our peers. In reality, a few years’ difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another, . . . any of these chances might have kept us apart. But, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking, no chances. A secret Master of the Ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,” can truly say . . . , “You have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another.” The Friendship is not a reward for our discrimination and good taste in finding one another

*out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each the beauties of all the others.*⁸

My “Yes, and . . .” way of seeing life as one long improvisational story has helped me become more comfortable with the idea that the future is never what you think it will look like and that we are all just making it up as we go. And when we do it with great love and intention, when we ask ourselves the big questions in life, we get to choose what we offer moving forward. But we need to know who we are and what we want. We can change what we want, but we need to be honest about how we feel, which requires us to be vulnerable and brave when we approach God in prayer, asking for individualized, personal revelation.

Elder Michael John U. Teh said:

*Oftentimes it is easier for us to think and speak of Christ’s Atonement in general terms than to recognize its personal significance in our lives. The Atonement of Jesus Christ is infinite and eternal and all-encompassing in its breadth and depth but wholly personal and individual in its effects. Because of His atoning sacrifice, the Savior has power to cleanse, heal, and strengthen us one by one.*⁹

Our personal development and answers are so individual, but sometimes in our anxiety to get life “right,” we look around at others to see how they are doing, and that can create expectations for ourselves. This is common but dangerous because expectations can kill creativity and certainly create suffering in life. We all have ideas of how we want to live and what we hope for. I don’t think it is possible to get rid of all expectations, because they are tied to our dreams, hopes, and goals. But when modern prophets encourage us, as Elder David A. Bednar said, to have “faith not to be healed”¹⁰ or, as Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin said, to have the attitude of “come what may, and love it,”¹¹ I interpret it as direction to accept the offerings we have and focus on where we want this personal revelation to take us: to Christ. Of course it is one thing to walk onto a stage and have an expectation of what you might do or say. It is an entirely different thing to live your life, having expectations for yourself, your friends, your family, and your children. Our hopes

and dreams are so closely tied with happy expectations. But ultimately our faith is in Christ, not in a specific outcome.

This excerpt from Bruce and Marie Hafen's book *Faith Is Not Blind*, in which they shared an email received from Nathan Leonhardt, is particularly meaningful to me:

*For every Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who [is] saved from the flames (Daniel 3), an Abinadi is allowed to burn (Mosiah 17). For every wayward Alma the Younger [who] is brought to the light from a pleading, faithful parent (Mosiah 27), a Laman and Lemuel continue to stray (1 Nephi). For every 2,000 stripping warriors who leave the battle with nothing more than wounds (Alma 56:56), 1,005 are left to be slain by the sword (Alma 24:22). For every Ammon who brings thousands of souls to repentance (Alma 26:22), a Mormon and Moroni labor all the days of their life and never see the fruits of their labor (Moroni 9:6). For every blind to see, deaf to hear, and lame to walk (Matthew 11:5), the experience of unfathomable suffering awaits in Gethsemane (Matthew 26). **However . . .***

For every Abinadi who is burned, sometimes an Alma takes the doctrine to heart and begins a lifetime in service to God (Mosiah 17). For every 1,005 who are left to be slain, sometimes we see "the Lord worketh in many ways to the salvation of his people" as more souls are brought to repentance than the number who perished (Alma 24:27). For every "thy will be done" in submission to the agony of Gethsemane (see Matthew 26:39), there is a prayer too beautiful to be recorded, the blessing of children one by one, angels descending from the opened heavens, and tears streaming down the face from One who can finally declare full joy (3 Nephi 17).¹²

I didn't want the outcome I am living with. Caring for a terminally ill husband while navigating a new career, while raising five children (most of them teenagers), and while navigating death, a funeral, and mourning during an isolating global pandemic is not as glamorous as you might think. But I know that God is good; the Lord hears my prayers. He weeps with me and He prepares the path, and He is preparing me for the path. He prepared Christopher in a very beautiful way, and He is doing the same for each of our unique five kids. In the middle of extreme fatigue, frustration,

grief, and difficult work, we were blessed with joy and happiness. I will never think of Christopher's life or our family's life together as a tragedy. It is an ever-changing, creative triumph.

We have grand ideas, dreams, and plans for our lives, and we should. But we shouldn't let our plan for the way we want our lives to go stop us from living the meaning of the lives we have. Just as there are infinite choices you can make in a scene, there are infinite ways to find goodness, happiness, and love. Chris put it this way in a talk about happiness he gave shortly before his death. It will give you a perspective of his state of mind nearing the end of his life.

I am reminded of the story of two young fish swimming along, when they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit. Eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, "What the heck is water?"

I submit to you that happiness and divine providence, like a fish in water, are all around us like the air we breathe. We are enveloped in God's love.

Chris continued with his testimony:

I testify that our Savior is the Lamb of God, that He lives, and that He fulfilled a divine mission to redeem us from the darkness of the world. There is an eternal plan for all of us, even though it may be difficult to see or understand at times. As the Apostle Paul says, although it feels like we see our life "through a glass, darkly," the day will come when we will see the Lord face to face, with perfect clarity. What love we will feel! Until then, how blessed we are to have the teachings and example of the Savior to help us learn the gospel, love our fellow man, mend our ways, and live . . . fulfilling lives. The keys to happiness exist right now. We only have to turn the lock.¹³

The gift of living in the moment and being in the details of life is something Christopher did to "Yes, and . . ." his way through a happy life. The inside jokes with friends, the conversations with his kids on a drive, the way he cut the lawn, the detail in a play—specific lighting, a song choice, or a costume piece—and the typed-out words

of a blessing on a computer screen are all details buried in our memories that stay with us, forever changing us. These bits of life, of art, and of beauty are what change us, and they wouldn't have any meaning or joy without the people who make up our community of trusted actors.

No matter what offerings come our way, accepting each offering and adding to it is how we "serve God, love me, and mend." The way we live our lives is the most creative art form. Guided by personal revelation, the creative art of living and becoming requires our full attention and intention to "Yes, and . . ." because that is magic—where the unexpected not only happens but creates something we could have never done on our own. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Russell M. Nelson, "Hear Him," *Ensign*, May 2020.
2. Nelson, "Hear Him."
3. Nelson, "Hear Him"; emphasis in original.
4. Julie B. Beck, "And upon the Handmaids in Those Days Will I Pour Out My Spirit," *Ensign*, May 2010.
5. William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, act 5, scene 2, line 33.
6. L. R. Knost, Instagram, 10 October 2016, [instagram.com/p/BLZ08gfhY6S](https://www.instagram.com/p/BLZ08gfhY6S); see also L. R. Knost—Little Hearts/Gentle Parenting Resources, Facebook photo, 10 October 2016, [facebook.com/littleheartsbooks/photos/1246582185372383](https://www.facebook.com/littleheartsbooks/photos/1246582185372383).
7. Gene R. Cook, "Charity: Perfect and Everlasting Love," *Ensign*, May 2002; emphasis in original.
8. C. S. Lewis, "Friendship," in *The Four Loves* (1960).
9. Michael John U. Teh, "Our Personal Savior," *Liahona*, May 2021.
10. David A. Bednar, "That We Might 'Not . . . Shrink' (D&C 19:18)," CES devotional for young adults, 3 March 2013, Church of Jesus Christ broadcasts, [churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/ces-devotionals/2013/01/that-we-might-not-shrink-d-c-19-18?lang=eng](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/ces-devotionals/2013/01/that-we-might-not-shrink-d-c-19-18?lang=eng); see also Bednar, "Accepting the Lord's Will and Timing," *Ensign*, August 2016.
11. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Come What May, and Love It," *Ensign*, November 2008.
12. Nathan Leonhardt, email to Bruce C. Hafen, 12 February 2018; quoted in Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, *Faith Is Not Blind* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 123–24; emphasis in original.
13. Quoting 1 Corinthians 13:12.