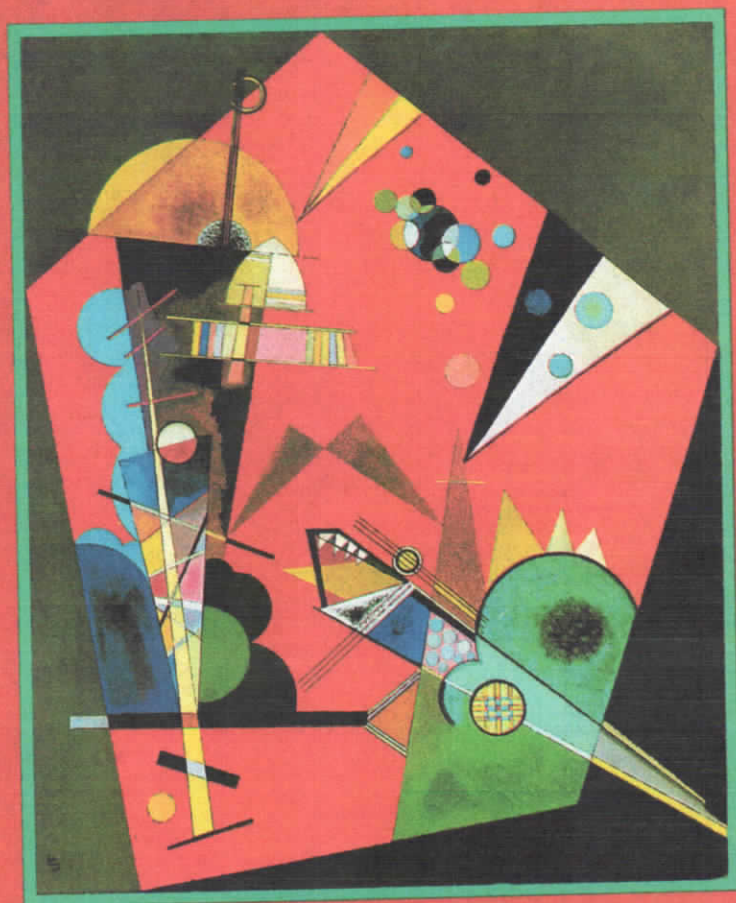


# FREE PLAY

*IMPROVISATION  
in Life and Art*



Stephen Nachmanovitch

# The Power of Mistakes

*Do not fear mistakes. There are none.*

MILBES DAVIS

*Poetry often enters through the window of irrelevance.*

M. C. RICHARDS

We all know how pearls are made. When a grain of grit accidentally slips into an oyster's shell, the oyster encysts it, secreting more and more of a thick, smooth mucus that hardens in microscopic layer after layer over the foreign irritation until it becomes a perfectly smooth, round, hard, shiny thing of beauty. The oyster thereby transforms both the grit and itself into something new, transforming the intrusion of error or otherness into its system, completing the gestalt according to its own oyster nature.

If the oyster had hands, there would be no pearl. Because the oyster is forced to live with the irritation for an extended period of time, the pearl comes to be.

In school, in the workplace, in learning an art or sport, we are taught to fear, hide, or avoid mistakes. But mistakes are of incalculable value to us. There is first the value of mistakes as the raw material of learning. If we don't make mistakes, we are unlikely to make anything at all. Tom Watson, for many years the head of IBM, said, "Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment." But more important, mistakes and accidents can be the irritating grains that become pearls; they present us with unforeseen opportunities, they are fresh sources of inspiration in and of themselves. We come to regard our obstacles

as ornaments, as opportunities to be exploited and explored.

Seeing and using the power of mistakes does not mean that anything goes. Practice is rooted in self-correction and refinement, working toward clearer and more reliable technique. But when a mistake occurs we can treat it either as an invaluable piece of data about our technique or as a grain of sand around which we can make a pearl.

Freud illuminated the fascinating way in which slips of the tongue reveal unconscious material. The unconscious is the very bread and butter of the artist, so mistakes and slips of all kinds are to be treasured as priceless information from beyond and within.

As our craft and life develop toward greater clarity and deeper individuation, we begin to have an eye for spotting these essential accidents. We can use the mistakes we make, the accidents of fate, and even weaknesses in our own makeup that can be turned to advantage.

Often the process of our artwork is thrown onto a new track by the inherent balkiness of the world. Murphy's law states that if anything can go wrong, it will. Performers experience this daily and hourly. When dealing with instruments, tape recorders, projectors, computers, sound systems, and theater lights, there are inevitable breakdowns before a performance. A performer can become sick. A valued assistant can quit at the last minute, or lose his girlfriend and become mentally incapacitated. Often it is these very accidents that give rise to the most ingenious solutions, and sometimes to off-the-cuff creativity of the highest order.

Equipment breaks down, it is Sunday night, the stores are all closed, and the audience is arriving in an hour. You are forced to do a little *bricolage*, improvising some new and crazy contraption. Then you attain some of your best moments. Ordinary objects or trash suddenly become valuable working materials, and your perceptions of what you need and what you don't need radically shift. Among the things

I love so much about performing are those totally unforeseen, impossible calamities. In life, as in a Zen koan, we create by shifting our perspective to the point at which interruptions are the answer. The redirection of attention involved in incorporating the accident into the flow of our work frees us to see the interruption freshly, and find the alchemical gold in it.

Once I was preparing for a full evening poetry performance, with multiscreen slide projections and electronic music I had composed on tape for the occasion. But in the course of overrehearsing during the preceding week, I managed to give myself a case of laryngitis, and woke up the morning of the performance with a ruined voice and a high fever. I was ready to cancel, but in the end decided that would be no fun. Instead I dropped my attachment to my music and preempted the sound system for use as a P.A. I sat in an old wicker wheelchair and croaked into a microphone. My soft, spooky, obsessive, guttural voice, amplified, became an instrument of qualities that totally surprised me, releasing me to find a hitherto unsuspected depth in my own poetic line.

A "mistake" on the violin: I have been playing some pattern: 1, 2, 3, 6; 1, 2, 3, 6. Suddenly I make a slip and play 1, 2, 3, 7, 6. It doesn't matter to me at the time whether I've broken a rule or not; what matters is what I do in the next tenth of a second. I can adopt the traditional attitude, treating what I have done as a mistake: don't do it again, hope it doesn't happen again, and in the meantime, feel guilty. Or I can repeat it, amplify it, develop it further until it becomes a new pattern. Or beyond that I can drop neither the old pattern nor the new one but discover the unforeseen context that includes both of them.

An "accident" on the violin: I am playing outdoors at night, in misty hills. Romantic? Yes. But also humid. The cold and the humidity take all the poop out of the bottom

string, which suddenly slackens and goes out of tune. Out of tune with what? Out of tune with my preconceived benchmark of "in tune." Again I can take the same three approaches. I can tune it back up and pretend that nothing happened. This is what politicians call "roughing it out." I can play the flabby string as is, finding the new harmonies and textures it contains. A low, thick string, when it goes flabby, not only becomes lower in pitch, but because of the flabbiness will give to the bow's weight much more easily and will produce (if lightly touched) more breathy and resonant tones than a normal string. I can have a lot of fun down there in the viola's tonal sub-basement. Or I can detune it even further, until it comes into some new and interesting harmonic relation with the other strings (*scordatura*, a technique the old Italian violinists were fond of). Now I have, instantly, a brand-new instrument with a new and different sonic shape.

An "accident" in computer graphics: I am playing with a paint program, which enables me to create visual art on the screen and then store it on disk as data that can be called up later. I intend to call up the art I was working on yesterday, but I hit the wrong key and call up the zip code index of my mailing list. The thousands of zip codes, transformed into a single glowing screen of abstract color and pattern, turn out as a startling and beautiful scene of other-worldly microscopic life. From this serendipitous blunder evolves a technique that I use to create dozens of new artworks.

The history of science, as we well know, is liberally peppered with stories of essential discoveries seeded by mistakes and accidents: Flemming's discovery of penicillin, thanks to the dust-borne mold that contaminated his petri dish; Roentgen's discovery of X rays, thanks to the careless handling of a photographic plate. Time after time, the quirks and mishaps that one might be tempted to reject as "bad data" are often the best. Many spiritual traditions point up the vitality we gain by reseeing the value of what we may

have rejected as insignificant: "The stone which the builders refused," sing the Psalms of David, "has come to be the cornerstone."<sup>30</sup>

The power of mistakes enables us to reframe creative blocks and turn them around. Sometimes the very sin of omission or commission for which we've been kicking ourselves may be the seed of our best work. (In Christianity they speak of this realization as *felix culpa*, the fortunate fall.) The troublesome parts of our work, the parts that are most baffling and frustrating, are in fact the growing edges. We see these opportunities the instant we drop our preconceptions and our self-importance.

Life throws at us innumerable irritations that can be mobilized for pearl making, including all the irritating people who come our way. Occasionally we are stuck with a petty tyrant who makes our life hell. Sometimes these situations, while miserable at the time, cause us to sharpen, focus, and mobilize our inner resources in the most surprising ways. We become, then, no longer victims of circumstance, but able to use circumstance as the vehicle of creativity. This is the well-known principle of Jujitsu, taking your opponent's blows and using their own energy to deflect them to your advantage. When you fall, you raise yourself by pushing against the spot where you fell.

The Vietnamese Buddhist poet-priest, Thich Nhat Hanh, devised an interesting telephone meditation. The sound of the telephone ringing, and our semiautomatic instinct to jump up and answer it, seem the very opposite of meditation. Ring and reaction bring out the essence of the choppy, nervous character of the way time is lived in our world. He says use the first ring as a reminder, in the midst of whatever you were doing, of mindfulness, a reminder of breath, and of your own center. Use the second and third rings to breathe and smile. If the caller wants to talk, he or she will wait for the fourth ring, and you will be ready. What

Thich Nhat Hanh is saying here is that mindfulness, practice, and poetry in life are not to be reserved for a time and place where everything is perfect; we can use the very instruments of society's nervous pressures on us to relieve the pressure. Even under the sound of helicopters—and this is a man who buried many children in Vietnam to the roar of helicopters and bombs—he can say, "Listen, listen; this sound brings me back to my true self."