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Improvising ritual

Ronald L. Grimes

Some hear the phrase ‘improvising ritual’ as a category mistake, like a ‘green feeling.’ They insist that creativity and improvisation have their proper home in the arts, not in ritual, especially religious ritual, or liturgy. I know of no definition of ritual that mentions improvisation. From the point of view of conventional theories, ritual tradition is passed on by authorities in oral teachings or written scripts, and these are imitated or reproduced by participants. Rituals are prescribed; there is a right and a wrong way to enact them. Ritual authorities control rituals to ensure that participants do not deviate, or if they do, not far. If rituals vary, they do so only under tightly controlled circumstances. Theorists conventionally link ritual to hierarchy, bureaucracy, prescription, repetition, stereotyping and tradition, all of which seem to preclude improvisation. From this perspective you might even define ritual as actions from which every trace of improvisation has been flushed.¹ Understood this way, ritual participants make the least number of choices, since they are neither authors of the script nor directors of the enactment. Traditional ritual is the least deviant, most predictable kind of human interaction.

The Second Vatican Council opened in 1962 and ended in 1965. Under the leadership of Pope John XXIII, it aspired to ‘open the windows [of the Catholic Church] and let in some fresh air’ (Sullivan 2002: 17). Liturgical revisions were afoot. But a heavy counter-reaction was set in motion by Joseph Ratzinger, a German theologian, whom you may know as the retired Pope Benedict XVI. From 2005 to 2013 he railed against creativity, improvisation and experimentation in Roman Catholic liturgy. Ritual change should consist of slow micro-adjustments in continuity with the past. He was severely critical of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, especially as they were implemented in the United States. American post-Vatican II rituals, he believed, tossed out the baby (the Roman Missal and European classical music) with the bathwater.

Ratzinger declared, 'Wherever applause breaks out in the liturgy because of some human achievement, it is a sure sign that the essence of liturgy has totally disappeared and been replaced by a kind of religious entertainment' (2000: 198). In his view, creative, invented or improvised human rituals are expressions of arrogance. The result is idolatry, the prime example of which was the worship of the golden calf by the ancient Israelites. For Ratzinger, Roman Catholic liturgy is not merely a human attempt to communicate with God. Rather the liturgy *is* the divine presence in the form of a rite. The liturgy *is* Christ in a form apprehensible by participants. The implication is that people shouldn't tinker with Christian liturgy in the name of creativity; otherwise, the result is a bricolage or entertainment, not a liturgy. Liturgists shouldn't improvise on the mass, and they should not criticize it without being duly authorized. No ritual creativity, no ritual criticism.

Like it or not, ritual improvisation happens, sometimes by accident, sometimes as an act of resistance or renewal. A few Christian rituals have boundaries that are not so jealously guarded. In the video *A Footwashing Ritual for Maundy Thursday* (Grimes 2012a), the liturgy happens on the Green in New Haven, Connecticut, where American Episcopalians celebrate the feast outdoors and wash the feet of the poor (Grimes 2012a: 5:48–8:48). The date is 5 April 2012. A few hundred yards away, on the same city Green, is an improvised encampment, a sister camp to the Occupy Wall Street Movement in New York. Some Occupiers have joined the street people and the poor. As the film opens, viewers see a sign, 'All I need is an address.' The drummers are local, probably not Episcopalians. The leader is chewing a fat cigar stub. At his cue, the musicians improvise their beats. Some of the drummers are amateurs; you can hear musical mistakes. Many of the people who come for food, liturgy or music are homeless, a lifestyle that requires them to improvise where they sleep and how to get food. Ethically and theologically, these New Haven Episcopalians aspire to perform service for the poor; however, their liturgical demeanour is awkwardly suited to the outdoors, where the poor find themselves. Some Episcopalians, uncomfortable in liturgical garb, put it on and take it off. They are forced to yell sacred utterances to overcome the loud sirens that regularly cut through the soundscape.

In a scene near the end (8:34), a woman is getting her feet washed while eating. Everyone else has one foot washed at a time. She is having both feet washed simultaneously. I asked why she looked so happy. 'Honey', she says, 'eating while having my feet washed is as near to heaven as I will get, so, you bet, I'm enjoying it'.

This outdoor liturgy is roomy enough for her to make up a bit of heaven without feeling awkward or judged. Even though the Maundy Thursday

celebration is liturgical and in some ways set, this one has open phases and open places, creating room for improvisation and sonic dissonance. Song lines are often in competition with one another. If people tire of the homily and liturgy, they can walk the improvised labyrinth. Walking in and out of formal worship on the Green was part of the ritual ethos.

The point of this illustration is not that improvisation makes a ritual good or bad, only that improvisation can be integrated with liturgy. Since improvisation happens, it should not be excluded by definition from the conception of ritual.

Ritual as invariant

You might expect a pope to hold a rigid notion of liturgy, but there are anthropologists who hold similar views. Roy Rappaport studied pig sacrifices in Papua New Guinea. He defines liturgy (his term) as ‘the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers’ (1999: 24). The example Rappaport uses in his writings is, however, from his own Jewish background. It is the *shema*: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.’ Traditionally, the *shema* is recited twice daily, when awakening and before going to sleep.

The *shema* is not as invariant as Rappaport would have us believe. Over the course of history, the *shema* has gone from having one part to having three; the three-part variant is now embedded in Jewish liturgy. There are other variants: eyes closed or open, standing or sitting and so on. The *shema* is a revered and ancient Jewish prayer. Jesus appropriates part of it, relabelling it ‘the greatest commandment’. In modified form the *shema* morphs by entering into Christian discourse. Like the Catholic mass, the *shema* has a history of being borrowed, edited and reshaped. The *shema*’s forms and contexts, as well as the intentions of those who perform it, vary. And just so you know, Justin Bieber, said to be a devout Canadian Christian, recites the *shema* before his concerts. His manager is Jewish.

Ritualized perfection

Jonathan Z. Smith, a religious studies scholar, considers ritual a perfected and protected zone. Citing two brief parables, he explains why ritual precludes improvisation (Smith 1980: 112–27). The first is a parable from Franz Kafka, ‘Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs

repeatedly, again and again; finally it can be reckoned upon beforehand and becomes part of the ceremony.’ The second parable is from Plutarch, ‘At Athens, Lysimaeho, the priestess of Athene Polias, when asked for a drink by the male drivers who had transported the sacred vessels, replied, “No, for I fear it will get into the ritual.”’ In the first case an accident makes its way into the ritual, so, repeated across time, the action becomes a change in the ritual. In the second, the priestess fears that some ordinary, mundane action will worm its way into the ritual, so a ritual change does not happen. Both are fictive rituals in parables, not actual rituals.

For Smith ritual is a ‘focusing lens,’ in which humans and the divine are transparent to each other, where things are perfected, thus incongruent with ordinary, imperfect life outside the ritual. So accidents or mistakes have to be incorporated as miracles or ruled out as blasphemies. Smith concludes: ‘Ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life have been displaced *precisely* because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful.’ Then his famous definition: ‘Ritual is a means of performing the ways things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things’ (Smith 1980: 63). Smith is a historian of religions, so he knows that rituals change, but his definition of ritual as a perfected, controlled environment emphasizes ritual’s resistance to change.

The model that Ratzinger, Rappaport and Smith espouse is what I call a North Star theory. When everything is shifting and moving, survival depends on being oriented to something unchanging, or as Rappaport would put it, ‘more or less’ unchanging.² In North Star models a ritual, like Aristotle’s God, is an Unmoved Mover, an anchor, a standard by which participants measure and judge ordinary, non-ritualistic life; accidents and innovations are actively suppressed or ignored. The North Star is useful for navigation, but Polaris (its real name) is not static; it has its own little orbit.

Scholars formulate North Star theories because they are important to practitioners. The beliefs of many religious practitioners are North Star theories. Could thousands of years of belief and practice be wrong? I am suggesting so. The problem with North Star theories is that they are based on a false premise: that an invariant or perfected model can orient practitioners in a flowing, changing universe.

Research with any historical depth or ethnographic breadth shows that rituals do, in fact, change. Occasionally rapid, dramatic shifts in ritual sensibilities happen: the Lutheran Reformation in sixteenth-century Germany and the ritual

revolutions among nineteenth-century trust networks in Fujian province of south-eastern China and currently in Singapore:

Singapore continues to act as a central node in evolving networks linking temples across Southeast Asia and Taiwan. These temples are currently caught in a cycle of mutual escalation of contacts and exchanges. These turbulent whirlwinds of interaction (the flow of ritual specialists, ritual change, new understandings of local traditions in globalized networks) create a new sense of space for the people participating in them ... The situation begins to take on the complexity of contemporary models in physics of multiple coexisting parallel universes. (Dean 2015a: 287–8; 2015b)

As surely as the hour hand on a clock moves, rituals undergo editing, evolve or revolutionize. There is no such thing as stasis, not for clock hands, not for rocks and not for liturgies (even ‘divine’ ones). The premise of my counterargument, then, is that there is no unchanging ground either inside ritual or outside it. There are orienting patterns in movement but no fixed points. All is flow, all is flux; there are only differing rates of change. The tectonic plates of the earth move by subduction; they shift and float. Not only is the universe variant and imperfect, so are the rituals by which people negotiate and orient to it. Most theories and theologies account for the ways rituals persist but not how they emerge, change or die. An adequate theory must account for ritual creativity, ritual criticism, ritual revolutions and the deaths of rituals.

Improvisation in traditional rituals

It is tempting to set ritual creativity and improvisation on the one side and tradition on the other. Alfonso Ortiz, a Pueblo and anthropologist from San Juan Pueblo (*Ohkay Owingeh* is its traditional name) in New Mexico, once remarked to me that no one person knows the entire Pueblo ritual system, because ritual knowledge is held collectively. Mythically and ritually, he said, ritual knowledge originates not from a holy person but from the sacred mountains (Ortiz 1977). From there it is funnelled towards the village centre, where it is held and danced collectively. Pueblo ritual is both ecological and social. Ritual knowledge, in this natural-to-social dynamic is traditional but not static; it is continually reinvented. The innovation, play and critique in this ritual process lie not in individual experimentation but with collective adaptation. The Pueblo rituals of *Ohkay Owingeh* contain another improvised dynamic: ritual clowns (Ortiz 1977). They fix costumes and create scenes to refocus people’s attention. Disrupting

the ceremonial flow, they improvise, lurking on roofs, surprising and mocking people, cracking jokes and offering criticism. Their activity simultaneously supports and resists sacred ceremonial actions.

Improvisation can be woven into traditional settings. The Mohawk Condolence Ceremony is traditional and usually celebrated among Mohawks or other Iroquois people. In the video *A Mohawk Condolence Ceremony for Myriam* (Grimes 2014b: 12:25–15:45), this ritual is being enacted among Jews, Muslims, Christians and secular participants. This is a condolence for the friends and family of Myriam, a Muslim woman who converted to marry a Jew, had a child and died young. The ceremony is as improvisational as it is traditional. Francis Boots, who is enacting this condolence, is both following a tradition and improvising. He is enacting the ritual across the gaps separating several religious traditions and at the same time educating a mostly non-native group. He is consoling Myriam's family. He is speaking traditional ritual words in Mohawk and explaining them in English. He is editing the ceremony as he goes. He breaks the frame of seriousness by injecting it with humour. Each time he enacts the ceremony, it varies in response to the situation. It gets shorter; it gets longer. It is in Mohawk; it is in English. It is sombre; it is funny. It is traditional but not unchanging. It is adaptive.

Three scholars on ritual improvisation

The idea of improvisation in ritual is an anomaly among ritual theorists. Since improvisation in ritual is rarely written about, I asked three scholars to tell me informally in an email what comes to mind if asked about improvisation in the traditions they study. Ute Hüsken, who studies Hinduism, wrote:

In Hindu ritual worlds one meets improvisation all the time and everywhere. When people enact ritual scripts, and these scripts are never exhaustive, the performers have to fill in. Improvisation is more pronounced if the performers cannot fall back on a performative tradition that they imitate.

Improvisation is necessary in ritual actions that are only rarely performed, such as taking a wooden statue of the deity out of the temple tank every 40 years. There is hardly any performer who has seen this ritual twice. How do people fill in? In the Brahmanic temple tradition which prides itself on being very orthodox, people usually use staple acts borrowed from other, bigger rituals. Another example would be a ritual that is performed because of extreme circumstances (e.g., the 1000-water-pot ablution after a brutal murder in the temple).

Historically, the Bhakti movements were trends towards individualization and improvisation, when access to the deity became defined through personal (often emotional) engagement with the god rather than through priests as mediators. The ritual expressions of Bhakti vary widely. This improvisation happened through all kinds of media such as poetry, dance, and songs. Bhakti movements also democratized access to the divine. Low castes and women were included. In fact, some of the gurus were women or low castes.

Improvisation also takes place in ritual traditions without fixed scripts, where creativity, innovation, and efficacy are valued. Navaratri (the festival of the nine nights of the goddess) is one such example. In Tamil Nadu women set up the Kolu arrangement of deities in a miniature world, often using these arrangements as social critique or to mirror tastes and fashions. One sees much improvisation when the ritual of Kolu is adapted by low caste women, who then creatively make their own Kolu rituals.

Similar things happen in small goddess temples. Every evening the priests decorate the temples and goddesses with different themes. The prototype of this kind of creativity is the Durga Puja in Kolkata, in which artists design the makeshift temples. In these temples one would generally find a small 'original' Durga, who receives traditional worship, so here improvisation and tradition go hand in hand.

How are we to know what priests did before ritual scripts were committed to writing, standardized, and published? Judging from the different ways rituals are performed in different locations today, I assume this variation has a long tradition.

I would also say that improvisation is to some degree a standard response to contingencies and unexpected situations that happen during longer and more complex rituals. In these the improvisational skills of a priest are a key to his success.

Even ritual texts allow for improvisation: Sacrifice a goat! If you don't have a goat, sacrifice a chicken! If no chicken is around, sacrifice a rice ball! (Hüsken 2016)

Bert Groen, a specialist in Christian liturgy, wrote:

During the first centuries of Christian liturgy, in some texts such as *Didache* and *Traditio Apostolica* there are remarks that a presider should 'pray like this, or 'with other words' or 'with similar words'. The *Didache* explicitly says that the presider prays 'according to his ability,' which leaves ample room for improvisation. In the *Rule of St. Benedict*, one of the most influential documents in medieval Western Christianity, the author explains how the Psalter must be prayed during the Liturgy of the Hours, and then says 'If someone has a better system, he should apply that.'

Gradually, because of sacralization tendencies, these prayers became fixed; the texts themselves became holy. This change happens in both the East and West. The same applies to the readings. Initially there was a lot of freedom in selecting lessons, an important criterion being that they ‘fit’ the occasion, but gradually fixed lectionaries developed. Both in the East and West, directories were being written to specify how, when, and where the liturgy should be performed.

The sixteenth-century Reformation, especially the Radical Reformation, offers more room for improvisation, but in these ‘Free Churches’ spontaneous prayer usually had fixed patterns.

During and after the period of the Second Vatican Council, when the official liturgical books were being renewed, there was room for improvisation, but gradually the ropes were tightened again.

Now there are many documents insisting that participants ‘stick to the rules.’ These rules are strict for the Eucharist and the other sacraments, less so for Word of God celebrations, and even less so for devotional practices. In Vatican II’s *Constitution on the Liturgy* there is a warning that no priest should add, omit, or change anything of the liturgical texts and rites. In my experience, practice varies. I know Catholic priests who improvise all Mass prayers, including the Eucharistic one. Others never do so. Some omit this; others add that. In ecumenical celebrations such as the Thomas Celebrations, improvisation continues to be an essential part of the ritual.

Although it seems that everything is fixed in the current Byzantine rite, the amount of texts, songs, and rituals is so large that one cannot abide by them all. Therefore, the *Typicon* (directory) makes all kinds of suggestions about what can be left out and what must be done. In practice, many priests decide for themselves what to do and what not to do. Conservative liturgists complain about the chaos they think this practice creates. (Groen 2016)

Larry Hoffman, who teaches Jewish liturgy, wrote:

The question you ask is complex. Originally, all Jewish prayer was improvised. It was an age of orality and nothing was written down. Whereas former scholars sought out an ancient text for every old prayer, by the 1950s we had learned not to do that. There is no such solitary text to find. But eventually prayers were written down, and with printing, everything was recorded, black on white, as if coming direct from Sinai. In the traditionally Orthodox world, even today – as in the late medieval world before it – our liturgy was largely, if not wholly, set in stone. One simply consulted one’s memory or a book, and said the right thing. I recall two examples, even in my own lifetime, that stand out as examples: one historical (from the Shoah) and one more recent, from my own family experience.

The first is a manuscript I came across of the Passover Seder, written by hand in a concentration camp near the end of the war. Of course the writer had no way to know the war was ending soon. He was simply a concentration camp inmate who had no Passover Haggadah with him, but who knew it by heart and who took it upon himself to write down the ritual for anyone who still wanted to (and could) celebrate it – without the traditional food, we may well surmise. I read through the handwritten manuscript expecting some reference to the horrid conditions that prevailed. This is the rite of redemption, after all, the occasion on which God took us out of Egypt by a mighty hand and outstretched arm. The ritual recalls other such occasions. It laments the fact that ‘in every generation there rise up those who want to destroy us.’ Surely, I thought, the author would say something about the camps, Hitler, the death of so many all around him. But he said nothing. He wrote the rite down from memory; that was all. He could have been in the sunny medieval Riviera, for all the reader could gather. Only at the end – after the rite was completely finished and he had prayed for ‘Next year in Jerusalem,’ he allowed himself the luxury of a single added line in Yiddish (not the sacred Hebrew, but the Yiddish that he and the others would know from home): ‘May this be the last Haggadah written in exile!’ he says. That’s it.

The other story concerns my daughter’s intractable epilepsy and one of many times she was in hospital. Although she rarely has grand mal seizures (she has a different kind), on this occasion I arrived at her room to see nurses and doctors huddled over her bed. She indeed had a grand mal seizure and the healing staff were gathered around her to make sure oxygen was plentiful and she regained her consciousness. I waited at the door, being careful not to get in their way. As I waited, the Orthodox Jewish chaplain arrived, by chance. I had been told that he existed, and I expected such a visit, but not then. As he began walking into the room, the nurse tried to stop him, pointing out the severity of the situation. But he insisted. ‘I’ll just be a minute,’ he said. ‘I’ll just say a prayer.’ With that he shouldered her aside, and I took over, explaining who I was, ‘What’s your daughter’s Hebrew name?’ he inquired, and then he added (not knowing I was a rabbi), ‘I am just going to say the prayer for the sick. It won’t be long.’ With that, he launched into a rote recitation of the standard prayer for the sick, inserting my daughter’s name in the right place. He made up not one word. The Orthodox rabbi added nothing, because in his world there was nothing to add. He said the right prayer and hoped God would send healing.

To be sure, these two examples represent traditionalism, not modernity, and nowadays, it is commonplace to find rabbis making up healing prayers, adding to the one they have, and otherwise inserting creative meditations of all sorts. One of the most moving such prayers I know of is something I found in a Cantor’s handbook from New York of 1840. The cantor had penned in a prayer for the

well-being of England and France, the two countries that had intervened with the Ottoman Empire in a famous case known as the Damascus Incident. Jews had been rounded up in Damascus, charged with the Blood Accusation, and tortured. England and France objected and the *Times of London* even printed a full-page copy of the Passover Haggadah on its front page to indicate that Jews do not use children's blood on Passover. No doubt, the governmental intervention was all part of the political conflict with the Ottomans, but the cantor in New York didn't know that. He served in a Sefardi congregation that hailed from the Middle East; these were his and his congregant's countrymen being held and tortured. Hearing the unbelievable news that two modern nations intervened on the Jews' behalf, he took it upon himself to compose a prayer for them. He wrote it down; so we do not know how improvised it was. It follows a standard form of prayer for the welfare of communities. But perhaps he made it up the first time and then repeated it: or perhaps he didn't trust his ability to make things up, so he wrote it down that day before services, making sure to use traditional models. I suspect that is the case; a sign of the way tradition (he was Orthodox) had trouble with improvisation, but also how improvisation occurred anyway.

Nowadays improvisation happens more frequently, at least in modern circles, not just Reform but Orthodox and Conservative and others. New Age Jews (Renewal Judaism) probably do it most. I expect it happens frequently also among Reconstructionists and in the Boston seminary (Hebrew College) where Art Green is a major influence. We still teach little about it [ritual improvisation] at our Reform seminary. I insist that my students learn how to make up prayers: benedictions, at least, other things too. But in most established seminaries it is still little practiced, except by a few. At Hebrew Union College, it is somehow becoming commonplace to add improvised blessings during the Grace After Meals. I do not know where the students got the idea, but it happens frequently at a communal lunch that we have weekly.

I have improvised my own rituals – I regularly pass around a cup that I call 'the cup of hope and blessing' at our family seder, and ask people to speak aloud their hopes and dreams of blessing, then to pour wine from their cup into the one being passed to them. I conclude with a prayer that cites the 23rd psalm, 'My cup runneth over.' I also have guests at a wedding improvise blessings for the bride and groom. I have taught these practices all over the continent by now.

Sorry I cannot say more. By its very nature, improvisation is hard to track after it happens, because it is oral, improvised, and ended – usually without a trace of its happening. (Hoffman 2016)

One conclusion from these informal email exchanges is that improvisation is not noticed, even by those who engage in it, so it disappears. Another conclusion is that improvisation can be quick or slow, almost imperceptible. So we cannot

conclude that improvisation is absent from ritual, only that its presence is not noticed or not remarkable. I study ritual by using video. When I edit, sometimes frame-by-frame, I notice improvisations that one would have missed while reading a ritual script or even watching a live performance.

Improvisation research

Surmising that ritual and improvisation are not mere opposites, I decided in 2011 to take a detour through the arts, where improvisation is more at home, to understand its dynamics. My research for the ritual-improvisation project tacks back and forth between rituals, the performing arts and interviews. One result is a Vimeo Showcase called *Ritual Creativity, Improvisation, and the Arts* (Grimes 2012e) consisting of seventy-three videos. The capstone video is *Rite to Play* (Grimes 2012d); the other result is this chapter.

Contemporary interdisciplinary research on improvisation is exploding. The publication of the scholarly journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation* began at the University of Guelph in 2004. Much of the research culminates in 2016 with the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (Lewis and Piekut 2016). The two, six-hundred-page volumes include not only studies of improvisation in music, dance and the performing arts but also scientific studies in interspecies improvisation, digital improvisation in interactive game-playing, psychological studies of the effect of improvisation on empathy, contact improvisation, the use of improvisation in farm-land burning, improvisation in business management, hypergestural improvisation in politics and many other surprising topics.

In the West, jazz, blues and flamenco are known for featuring improvisation, but historically and cross-culturally it appears in many other arts and practices: in classical Greek rhapsody, Italian popular comedy, French liturgical organ, stand-up comedy, modern dance, music therapy, freestyle rap, storytelling, performance art and even European classical music. Classical Indian music is constructed around ragas, a set of rules, or musical qualities, that frame improvisation. Korean Pansori, a musical storytelling genre, is also improvisation-based.

Classical musicians of the West and East were trained in improvisational skills. Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Handel, Mozart, Liszt, Mendelssohn and Verdi were skilled improvisers (Grimes 2012c). The divide between composed and improvised music became rigid only during the rise of symphony culture in the twentieth century. Christopher Small studied the musical, ethnic and ritualistic

dimensions of symphonies and jazz. He concludes that in African and African American music the dualism between composed and improvised music never occurred (1998).

Orchestral sheet music sits on a music stand, but that is not *the* music – the primary, sensory stuff that enters the ears and arouses emotions. Violinists activate page-music by using micro-improvisations, small stylistic adjustments and ornamentations, throughout the performance (Grimes 2011c). For singers, micro-improvisations in timbre, tone and vibrato contribute to a vocalist's distinctive style. They go on all the time in the performing arts, and a performer can either dampen them or play them up.

Definitions of improvisation

Musicians can get away with declaring improvisation a mystery. The violinist Stéphane Grappelli says, 'You can write a book about [improvisation], but by the end no one still knows what it is. When I improvise and I'm in good form, I'm like somebody half sleeping. I even forget that there are people in front of me. Great improvisers are like priests, they are thinking only of their god' (quoted in Nachmanovitch 1990: 4). Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990: 41) says, 'Improvisation is intuition in action.' Derek Bailey (1992: 142) says, 'Improvisation can be considered as the celebration of the moment.'

As with the term 'ritual,' there are competing definitions of 'improvisation.' Frederic Rzewski tells this story: 'I ran into Steve Lacy on the street in Rome. I took out my pocket tape recorder and asked him to describe in fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation. He answered, "In fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds"' (Bailey 1992: 141). The parable implies a definition of improvisation: 'composing as you perform,' as distinct from '*first* composing, *then* performing'.

'Composing while performing' seems to make improvisation a cult of genius; most of us could not imagine doing it. However, when two people converse, they are simultaneously composing and performing. We improvise during conversations because we know the vocabulary and understand the grammar. So a second definition is implied: 'adapting your knowledge to changing circumstances.' Improvisation can also mean 'making do with what you have' or 're-purposing available or discarded materials': building a Trinidadian steel

drum from discarded oil drums, slapping two spoons back-to-back as a rhythm instrument or creating art by gluing found objects together into a bricolage.

Improvisation is not mere spontaneity, anarchy or doing what you please. It is a practised skill enabling you to respond in an environment that is changing, sometimes rapidly, sometimes unpredictably.³ Beginning or unskilled improvising musicians repeat musical patterns more often than skilled ones; they fail to innovate (Lehmann and Kopiez n.d.). Improvisation tends to occur in situations where resources are limited or restricted, on frontiers where experimentation or resistance is required for survival or among people wanting to distinguish themselves from the mainstream.

If musicians East and West were trained to improvise, and if ordinary people improvise all the time in conversations, it would be odd if there were no evidence of improvisation in ritual. In the video *The Day the Clock Stopped* (Grimes 2015: 5:47–8:36), residents of Oslo witness rituals springing up in the cracks created by disasters (Post and others 2003). On 22 July 2011, Oslo's streets were flooded with large-scale, public examples of improvised ritual activity: being silent, processing, carrying roses, burning candles, singing hymns and folk songs.⁴ At the island of Utøya commemorative shrines were improvised by parents and friends of murdered youth. In the city funeral ceremonies were modified or changed. Many of the actions were improvised, so were the spaces. The 22nd July Centre in Oslo and the island of Utøya were reclaimed, redefined, rebuilt. As a visitor arriving for the first time at the ring in Utøya or at the Centre, you have to improvise or imitate what others were doing. So we would do a disservice to ritual by imaging it only as an immovable structure, a rock sitting still through the eons.

The dynamics of improvisation

One of the most widely known forms of improvisation is stand-up comedy. Tina Fey, best known as a performer on *Saturday Night Live* and *30 Rock*, offers one of the most often-quoted summaries of the rules of improvisation:

The first rule of improvisation is AGREE. Always agree and SAY YES. ... If we're improvising and I say, 'Freeze, I have a gun,' and you say, 'That's not a gun. It's your finger ...', our improvised scene has ground to a halt. But if I say, 'Freeze, I have a gun!' and you say, 'The gun I gave you for Christmas ...' then we have started a scene because we have AGREED that my finger is in fact a Christmas gun.

The second rule of improvisation is say yes ... AND. You are supposed to agree and then add something of your own. If I start a scene with 'I can't believe it's so hot in here,' and you just say, 'Yeah ...' we're kind of at a standstill. But if I say, 'I can't believe it's so hot in here,' and you say, 'What did you expect? We're in hell ...' It's your responsibility to contribute.

The next rule is MAKE STATEMENTS. This is a positive way of saying 'Don't ask questions all the time.' If we're in a scene and I say, 'Who are you? Where are we? What are we doing here? What's in that box?' I'm putting pressure on you to come up with all the answers. In other words: Whatever the problem, be part of the solution. Don't just sit around raising questions and pointing out obstacles ...

MAKE STATEMENTS also applies to us women: Speak in statements instead of apologetic questions. No one wants to go to a doctor who says, 'I'm going to be your surgeon? I'm here to talk to you about your procedure? I was first in my class at Johns Hopkins, so?'

The best rule: THERE ARE NO MISTAKES, only opportunities. If I start a scene as what I think is very clearly a cop riding a bicycle, but you think I am a hamster in a hamster wheel, guess what? Now I'm a hamster in a hamster wheel. I'm not going to stop everything to explain that it was really supposed to be a bike. Who knows? Maybe I'll end up being a police hamster who's been put on 'hamster wheel' duty because I'm 'too much of a loose cannon' in the field. In improv there are no mistakes, only beautiful happy accidents. (Fey 2011)

Improvisation begins with a diffuse receptivity to what is transpiring in the moment. By joining the flow of action rather than blocking it, you become vulnerable to others and the environment. If the emergent actions or sounds seem 'out of tune' or 'off-key', you, as a respondent, can include them in a larger frame of actions or sounds, making them part of an emerging interaction. You have the opportunity to transform off-key sounds into music rather than noise. As a result of this kind of interaction, a conversation, joke, story, dance, ritual or some other example of collective creativity can emerge. When the flow flows, participants become attuned to one another by entering a collaboration to which they jointly contribute. What emerges is a cycle of mutual support.

To prepare for this oceanic rhythm, participants have to practice and to practice is to make mistakes – together, in concert. After the interaction, participants need reflexivity, self-critical examination, to identify blocks and other mistakes so they can continue to improve their improvisational skills.

This prose summary, synthesized from several sources, can be idealized.⁵ Few who practice or write about improvisation say much about *dissenting* from an opening gesture (saying 'no' to an invitation), but power dynamics are displayed

in improvisation as much as in scripted performance. So learning how and when to say no is as crucial as saying 'yes'.

Improvisation can create a space for ritual change. Just as musicians distinguish between jazz, a jam session and an improv soiree, so we scholars who study ritual need to work out a continuum of ritual change. 'Ritualizing' is the term I use for deliberately creating rituals. There are many kinds of ritualizing: from slow, traditional, anonymous 'editing' and micro-improvisations, through design-and-execution models, to composing as you perform.

Imagine that the top end of the continuum is heavily structured; here we would locate ritual that is both scripted and read (with micro-improvisations in the performance). At the bottom, 'ritualists' (people who enact rituals) compose as they perform, making up the ritual as they go.⁶ In the middle of the continuum are other possibilities: rituals with an improvisational phase⁷ or improvisation used as a way to compose rituals.

- scripted and read
- scripted and memorized
- scripted but the script is ignored or laced with spontaneous talk or actions
- seeded improv: you are given a few notes or a theme and expected to expand on it
- selected ritual options: there is too much, or there are multiple suggestions, so ritualists pick and choose – this, but not that
- incomplete directions: the script assumes ritualists already knows what to do
- adaption: doing what fits the situation
- invited improvisation: you are asked to say or do something that was not previously planned
- improvisation before the performance, improvisation as means of composing rituals
- improvised during performance using practised formulas or patterns
- covertly cued ritual: you may improvise but only when signalled to do so
- scenario-driven improvisation: the narrative structure is given and you may improvise within it
- invented rituals: exceptional, rare or new circumstances for which there are no rituals, so you or a group invents one
- composing while performing: making up actions or words on the spot

The list is not exhaustive; there are other possibilities. The point is to disrupt the easy bipolar split: scripted versus spontaneous performance.

Where might we look – not for models, because I doubt there are any – but for actual instances of ritual improvisation, bits of inspiration to seed our imaginations? Scholars should focus on rituals that emphasize flow and performance rather than liturgical structure (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 8), examining rituals that include improvisational phases: Haitian Vodoun, Pentecostalism, Quakerism. Ritual improvisation and innovation have been prolific among several groups: First Nations and intertribal gatherings, the LGBT community, interreligious meetings and interritualistic events, immigrant groups, protest movements. We should study traditional religions that include clowning, play and open critique and look at situations for which new rituals had to be invented because there was no existing ritual: the reburial of human remains among First Nations people or ash-scattering after cremations in the Netherlands. We should study rituals that run inside or alongside regular rituals. Wild Fasnacht in Switzerland was a counter-ritual that ran within the Basel's official Fasnacht. In the Czech Republic Vaclav Klaus, much disliked as a president, was 'deinaugurated' by the citizens of Prague. He was made into a straw man and thrown off the Charles Bridge. The Women's March of 2017 ran outside the precincts of official power to counter Donald Trump's inauguration. The march included 4 million participants in the United States and 300,000 more participants around the world.⁸ Collectively, these sister protests constituted the largest one-day protest in US history. Counter-rituals require advance planning, but once they hit the streets, much can be improvised to great effect. And, of course, mistakes happen. In New York City some of the streets were so jammed that people could not walk.

Ritual, improvisation, democracy

It is common to associate ritual with top-down, male-dominated hierarchy, so readers would not expect a discussion of ritual to end with reflections on democracy. The top-down view of ritual is a stereotype. If not, associating ritual with democracy is either wishful thinking or the aspiration of a minority.

As early as 1987 the music educator Christopher Small (1987) was arguing that improvisation in jazz and other kinds of African-based music underwrites a socially responsive form of community-building different from the well-heeled society engendered by composed, conducted orchestra music. George Lewis, a trombonist and music educator at Columbia University, considers improvisation a symbol of democracy itself (Lewis and Piekut 2016: 19). Improvisation, he says,

has the capacity to cultivate empathy and generosity, so it is a key to negotiation, because it provides participants with the courage and freedom to be transformed by others (Lewis 2011). Daniel Belgrad argues that improvisation nurtures a democratic sensibility and fosters egalitarian community (2016). David Lawes and John Forester show that improvisation functions effectively to enhance street-level democratic behaviour in the Netherlands (2015). Improvisation, then, is not just an art process but also a practice that can help people live and thrive (Madson 2005).

Reassembling Democracy (also called REDO), a Norwegian research project on ritual, raises the question whether there is, or could be, a link between democracy and ritual.⁹ In my view there is no *necessary* connection; the one doesn't imply the other. Every ritual has its own internal politics implied in the way the ritual was created, how it is enacted, how it is maintained and how it interfaces with its ambient society and environment. So I would ask more precise questions: Which rituals? Which democracies?

A democratic ritual could be one whose words espouse a democratic ideology, but what people say about their politics or rituals has to be measured against what they actually do. Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederation) people say, 'We are all the same height.'¹⁰ Americans, borrowing from the Haudenosaunee, say, 'All men are created equal.' These ideologies articulate ritually inflected aspirations, but the politics of a ritual are more deeply reflected in what people *do* than what they *say*. Some of the US Constitution-makers owned slaves, and women did not have the right to vote. Ideologies, myths and theologies, whether political or religious, do not necessarily reflect actual practice, and actual ritual practice does not necessarily predict actions outside the ritual context.

Since *Reassembling Democracy* started, I have tried to imagine: What would a 'democratic ritual' look like or sound like? Would it be one in which participants had a vote on what participants do? Would they vote for *every* change in the ritual? Would they vote for the leader? For a party? Would they vote before, during or after the ritual? How often? Every four years? After a non-confidence vote? Which models for democracy should we assume?

After the election of Donald Trump many have been re-reading Alexis de Tocqueville's classic critique of early American democracy (Tocqueville 2000 [1835]).¹¹ Tocqueville writes eloquently about 'the tyranny of the majority', reminding readers that democracies are not immune to fascism. In fact, some forms of democracy may actually cultivate it.

Like all key terms 'ritual' and 'democracy' accumulate baggage. Sometimes it is more effective to redefine or dump them altogether. I have already suggested

ways of redefining ‘ritual’ (Grimes 2014a: 185 ff.), so I conclude with brief reflections on ‘democracy’. There are many variants of democracy, so it is worth experimenting with ‘assemblage’. Among ecologists the term ‘assemblage’ refers to the gatherings of multiple species in a geographical setting. Interactions in an assemblage happen by juxtaposition rather than by intentional or hierarchical coordination. Assemblages are designed from within, not from above (Stroud and others 2015). So my preferred version of the ritual/democracy question is: What ritual dynamics might facilitate assemblages that foster justice and the thriving of a multitude of species on the planet?¹² The beginning of a provisional answer is something like: rituals that include, or are preceded by, at least one sustained improvisational phase that stimulates attuned co-acting among the species and that facilitates self-critical reflexivity. Whether we call this an ecological or democratic view of ritual hardly matters. What matters is whether we have the courage to imagine and try it.

Survival value

Charles Darwin is reputed to have said, ‘In the long history of humankind (and animalkind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.’¹³ Probably he was thinking about ordinary social life in the environment: how to form groups for protection, how to get medicine from trees, how to stay warm in the winter. But ritual too was among the tools by which people oriented themselves to others and the earth. Ritual had survival value, and to invent rituals people had to improvise.

Rituals might have survival value today if they taught us to improvise and collaborate, act in concert, resist injustice, practice responsivity and adapt to an ever-changing universe. A ritual with survival value would have to be designed for teaching participants to respond to pervasive flux and change, so the ritual would have to be open, flexible, creative, critical – not a North Star. Circumstances change, sometimes unpredictably: the GPS fails; the map is out of date; the North Star cannot be seen from the southern hemisphere. New rituals should be laced with improvisational capabilities.

This is a tall order. We need a model that accepts uncertainty and unpredictability. Sarah Pike’s *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism* studies planned and improvised rituals of resistance. She also considers indigenous and non-indigenous cooperation and conflict in ritualized protest (Pike 2017: 170–6).¹⁴ Merrilyn Emery’s *Participative Design for Participative*

Democracy (1993), based on an open-systems epistemology, embraces many of the same values as certain indigenous worldviews. An assemblage hatched at this convergence point – indigenous/open system – could brood practices capable of transforming its participants, if not the world.¹⁵

Several big questions haunt this aspiration for rituals with survival value:

1. Since *sustaining* an improvisation creates a tradition, can improvised rituals take root and last across generations?
2. Can ritualists overcome the self-consciousness that plagues self-created rituals?¹⁶ How can self-consciousness be transformed into self-awareness?
3. Can these rituals be just: fair to indigenous people, kind to the planet, accessible by the poor, equally open to all kinds of people?

To enact rituals in an open, improvisational way is to make errors. Human DNA is a replicating machine. Of the billions of times that DNA replicates, there are sometimes ‘misprints;’ an error occurs.¹⁷ On the one hand, this deviation can be read as a mistake. On the other hand, it may be the first step in a genetic mutation, an environmental improvisation.¹⁸ Nature moves forward by both: replicating and making mistakes. If ritual-makers identify ritual with perfection, sameness, hierarchy and repetition, mistakes look like the enemy. But if participants understand that ritual is *not* the performance of perfection but rather the enactment of collective aspirations cobbled together provisionally in a fluctuating universe, a different outcome is possible (although not predictable). If a widely shared aspiration is to live together justly, among a multitude of species on the planet, and if all evolution, including that of human life, thrives on prolific experimentation, a mistake-tolerant ritual would have survival value. So sin bravely, make ritual mistakes.