

**“INSIGHT IMPROVISATION” IN CONTEXT:
Antecedents in Meditation, Theater, and Therapy;
Individual and Group Experience**

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this treatise is to provide a written account of “Insight Improvisation,” an approach developed by the author for integrating meditation, theater, and drama therapy, for personal and artistic growth. Activities in Insight Improvisation range from meditation and active meditation; to improvisational theater exercises that incorporate movement and voice, storytelling and song; to drama therapy techniques that meld authentic movement, psychodrama, and dreamwork. Underlying all Insight Improvisation techniques are conceptual models distilled from Buddhist psychology that help practitioners bring meditative awareness into embodied self-expression.

The treatise, organized into four main parts, begins with an overview of Insight Improvisation, including brief descriptions of core concepts and experiential activities. Next, the author provides a context for Insight Improvisation—the long tradition of Eastern and Western attempts at integrating meditation with artistic and therapeutic practices—and compares the work with developments in the areas of meditation and Buddhist psychology, theater, Western psychotherapy, and creative arts therapy (including drama therapy). Third, the author describes his experiences developing Insight Improvisation and its use one-to-one and in groups, for artistic and therapeutic purposes. The final synthesis presents the author’s learnings in developing and applying Insight Improvisation, and discusses its future potential.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
List of Tables	4
Part I: An Overview of Insight Improvisation	6
What is Insight Improvisation?	7
Why is Insight Improvisation Needed?.....	9
What’s New about Insight Improvisation?	11
Concepts Underlying Insight Improvisation	14
Insight Improvisation Activities & Techniques—An Overview.....	24
Structure and Rationale for an Insight Improvisation Group Agenda.....	37
Structure and Rationale for One-to-One Work with Insight Improvisation	40
Part II: Antecedents to Insight Improvisation	44
Insight Improvisation’s Roots in Meditation and Buddhist Psychology	45
Insight Improvisation as a Theatrical Art Form	57
Insight Improvisation’s Debt to Western Psychology	64
Insight Improvisation as a Creative Arts Therapy.....	86
Part III: Experience with Insight Improvisation	98
The Development of Insight Improvisation	99
Individual Drama Therapy using Insight Improvisation.....	113
Insight Improvisation with Groups.....	125
Personal Experiences with Insight Improvisation	142
Part IV: Discussion and Conclusion	151
Synthesis: Insight Improvisation Found	152
Future Directions	165
Acknowledgements and Final Words	169
References	173
Appendix I: Insight Improvisation Group Guidelines.....	180
Appendix II: Sample Agendas for Group Classes and Workshops	185
Sample Agendas for 3-Hour Insight Improvisation Classes.....	185
Sample Agendas for Weekend Workshops.....	186
Appendix III: Sample Agendas for Working One-to-One.....	192
Sample Agenda for One-to-One Drama Therapy with Insight Improvisation....	192
Sample Agenda for Peer Work with Insight Improvisation.....	193
Appendix IV: Brief Guidelines for Psolodrama	194

List of Tables

Table 1—"Performance Mind" vs. "Being Mind"	60
Table 2—The Five Psychodramatic Roles	195

**“INSIGHT IMPROVISATION” IN CONTEXT:
Antecedents in Meditation, Theater, and Therapy;
Individual and Group Experience**

Part I: An Overview of Insight Improvisation

It was an important day when I recognized that I did not teach Dance, I taught People....It indicated a possibility that my primary interest might have to do with process, not results, that it might not be art I was after but another kind of human development. — Mary Whitehouse (1970, p. 273)

What is Insight Improvisation?

Insight Improvisation is an integration of meditation with theater and drama therapy. Developed beginning in 1993, Insight Improvisation evolved as a way to connect active, expressive techniques—including authentic movement, storytelling, improvisation, writing, solo performance, and collaboration with partners and groups—with the skills and concepts underlying meditation, including mindfulness, choiceless awareness, and lovingkindness.

Equally designed for use in groups as well as one-to-one, Insight Improvisation is best practiced in a group workshop or class of roughly 6-12 individuals, or working one-to-one with a peer or in a coach-coachee relationship. A typical session (or portion of a longer workshop) begins with a check-in, a meditation, and a movement/sound warm-up, and progresses to a culminating activity—a solo, pair, or small-group improvisation or performance.

Insight Improvisation differs from most forms of scripted or improvised theater in that it replaces the focus on “performance”—that is, presenting an artistic work for an audience—with a focus on the participant’s mind-body experience. The art that results from an Insight Improvisation activity is a byproduct of the performer’s process of being mindful, moment by moment, of her¹ own body, her senses, her thoughts and feelings, as well as her relationship to others onstage or in the audience. What gets communicated to an audience, however, is often *more* authentic, more self-expressed, more unexpected and less clichéd than typical forms of theater and improvisation that are conceived in the head.

Insight Improvisation is a vehicle for self-exploration and self-discovery. As such, it can be described as a form of transpersonal or contemplative drama therapy²—one among dozens of existing forms of drama therapy (Lewis & Johnson, 2000)—that combines spiritual and theatrical practices for the purpose of personal growth, learning, and transformation.

¹ The varied use of gender-specific articles (“she,” “he,” etc.) in this document is intentional.

² I consider “contemplative drama therapy” to be an umbrella name for any work that integrates meditation and drama therapy; “Insight Improvisation” is my own specific set of techniques, approaches, and ideas.

Why is Insight Improvisation Needed?

Who Is It For?

Insight Improvisation is for anyone who would like to deepen his own self-awareness; better understand his own body, mind, emotions, and personal patterns; and find new ways of being, playing, and creating in relationship with others.

Those who have attended Insight Improvisation workshops or sought out one-to-one work of this kind have included students and practitioners of psychotherapy and creative arts therapies interested in increasing their range of tools and approaches; meditators wishing to apply insight to issues in their personal lives; students and practitioners in all arts looking to stimulate their creative sourcing of materials; and others looking for ways to connect deeply to their own inner stories as a way of transforming their own experience.

Four Areas of Application

Those who have experienced Insight Improvisation, individually and in groups, have spoken of four main areas in which the practice has had an impact in their lives:

- 1) **Meditation**—Sometimes even experienced meditators can feel a disconnect between mind and body, feeling a need to control their body, rather than really listen to it. Building a bridge between meditation and day-to-day life, Insight Improvisation helps meditators more concretely apply the insights and the skills they have acquired “on the cushion” in real-world action, through body and voice as well as mind. On the other end of the spectrum, for those who

find sitting meditation a challenge or a turn-off, Insight Improvisation provides access to many of the same benefits as meditation through myriad forms of active meditation and other, more dynamic activities.

- 2) **Theater**—Actors (as well as performers and communicators of all kinds) often encounter nerves, self-critique, and tension when appearing before an audience. Insight Improvisation can help actors break free of habits and the need to “perform” onstage, instead offering a new paradigm for exploring theater as an act of awareness—leading to an increased ability to be present, relaxed, and open in front of an audience. Insight Improvisation also offers profound and creative ways of sourcing deep, self-revelatory material.
- 3) **Drama Therapy and Personal Growth**—Insight Improvisation, with its combination of a meditative approach and dramatic enactment, creates a safe container within which deep personal exploration, insight, and growth can occur. Depending on the practitioner and the context, such work can be described as self-revelatory artistic exploration, or, alternatively, as transpersonal drama therapy. Insight Improvisation also provides a host of new ways to add meditation and mindfulness to creative arts and psychotherapy practice in the service of more effective individual and group work.
- 4) **Communication, Relationship, Work, and Leadership**—The concepts and activities comprising Insight Improvisation provide a unique training applicable to the challenges facing all human beings (not just artists or therapists) in their personal and work lives. By helping one to be more

present, aware, and relaxed in day-to-day communication and interaction, Insight Improvisation can improve one’s response to work environments, personal relationships, surprises, difficult emotions, and other life challenges. Taken as a whole, Insight Improvisation trains individuals to be more spontaneous and flexible, and to be more empathic listeners—ultimately preparing practitioners for the challenges of leadership and social action in society.

What’s New about Insight Improvisation?

Insight Improvisation is unusual in that it attempts to integrate practices from several different traditions, primarily from the worlds of meditation, theater, and drama therapy. This integration has resulted not only in a series of new and rich experiential exercises, but also in some interesting ways of thinking about the nature of meditation, theater, and therapy.

New Activities

Although no meditative, theatrical, or drama therapy exercise is truly “new”—all are influenced and inspired by what has come before—there are certain experiential activities in Insight Improvisation that may be sufficiently different from others’ work

that they could be called new or unique.³ These can be grouped into three main categories: Active Meditation, Improvisation, and Drama Therapy (note, the activities listed below are described in “Insight Improvisation Activities & Techniques—An Overview,” beginning on page 24):

- 1) **Active Meditation:** New forms include Movement Meditation and Moving *Vipassana* (three types); Shared *Vipassana* (four types); Mindful Massage and Touch Meditation; Mindful Guide; and City/Nature Meditations.
- 2) **Improvisation:** New forms include Amplification (as well as Amplification Monologue, Dialogue, and Scene); FreeSong (plus the warm-ups Chords, Jams, and One-liners); FreeText; The Three States; FreeBe; Sung Story; as

³ I believe there are many others who have been doing parallel work to my own of which I have been until recently largely unaware. One example—the great mime and improvisation teacher Tony Montanaro—was brought to my attention by my friend and colleague Nat Warren-White:

“It’s interesting to note that Tony Montanaro was a *vipassana* practitioner...his wife, Karen, recently shared with me that in the last days of his life he was totally focused on using *vipassana* technique to help himself cross-over, refusing pain-killers even as the cancer tore at his body, wanting to be as present as possible for the experience...his final ultimate improvisation in this lifetime! Karen has recently delved into *vipassana* practice herself (having just completed her 3rd ten week Goenka session and scheduled for a 4th) inspired by what she learned from and witnessed during Tony’s death process. In my work with Tony, over a ten year period, he talked a little and practiced a lot about the power of meditation and its relationship to stage presence and the actor’s process.” (N. Warren-White, personal communication, December 23, 2004).

well as the Plum Village and Magnification variations of a number of different exercises.

- 3) **Drama Therapy:** New forms include The Five Roles; Life/Dream Scene; Impulse Dialogue, Role Dialogue, and “Yes!” Improvisation; as well as Psolodrama and Sung Psolodrama.

New Discoveries

Working with Insight Improvisation over time has led to a number of realizations about the work, including the following:

- 1) **The combination of meditation, theater, and drama therapy is an organic, powerful approach**—especially the progression of sitting meditation, authentic movement, improvisation, and self-revelatory performance—when used with individuals and with groups.
- 2) **Core ideas of Buddhism and meditation—such as mindful and choiceless awareness, and the concept of *metta*⁴ (the Pali word for “lovingkindness”)—are concretely applicable not only to theater and improvisation but also to drama therapy.** For example, the concept of *metta*—the act of fostering an attitude of lovingkindness toward oneself and others—can be practically applied not only as an actor (toward oneself as well

⁴ In this paper, terms in the Pali language—the original language of the Buddhist scriptures, derived from Sanskrit—appear in italics.

as the audience), but also as a witness to another’s process—which can also serve as a model for bringing *metta* into daily life.

- 3) **Combining drama therapy with a meditative awareness (such as in the Psolodrama⁵ structure) helps the practitioner access a powerful source of transformational material**—inner imagery, pivotal memories, personal roles, and universal archetypes—that can facilitate the individual’s access to insight regarding her own emotional state, behavioral patterns, needs, life challenges, and her potential pathway toward growth and change.

Concepts Underlying Insight Improvisation

Insight Improvisation springs from Buddhist ideas about the nature of existence. These include the teachings of Theravadan Buddhism, a Southeast Asian tradition generally seen as the oldest form of Buddhism, and known in the West as Insight Meditation (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987)—from which Insight Improvisation takes its name.⁶ Other influences include Tibetan Buddhism as well as Japanese and Vietnamese Zen Buddhism (Suzuki, 1970; Trungpa, 1973; Hanh, 1991; Rinpoche, 1993).

The conceptual bases of Insight Improvisation are organized into three categories: the “What,” the “How,” and the “Who.” What follows are brief synopses of these ideas,

⁵ A general description of Psolodrama can be found below. A summary of the process appears in “Appendix IV: Brief Guidelines for Psolodrama,” page 194.

⁶ See “Insight Improvisation’s Roots in Meditation and Buddhist Psychology,” beginning on page 45.

relating fundamental teachings of Buddhism to improvisation, performance, and daily life.

The “What”—Insight Improvisation Skills

The concepts of mindfulness, choiceless awareness, acceptance, letting go (or non-grasping) and *metta* (lovingkindness) are central to Buddhist teachings, and have proven to be extremely valuable as skills to integrate meditation with other practices and with day-to-day life.

Mindfulness, or *sati*, is “awareness of present experience with acceptance” (Germer, 2004). In meditation, it is the discipline of bringing the mind back to focus on the present moment, on the object of attention—such as the breath.

Choicelessness (or choiceless awareness) is a state of being open to whatever is present—the senses, the body, thoughts, feelings, etc.—without judgment. In a *vipassana* (insight) meditation, one does not choose a single object of the meditation; instead, all that arises in the field of awareness becomes the object—the meditator is simply aware of how each object arises and passes away, and notices what the mind does in response (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987).

Being mindful while also maintaining an open, choiceless orientation is a paradoxical challenge of meditation, and also of life and of performance:

- How do I focus, but stay open?
- How can I pursue a goal steadfastly, while remaining aware of other possibilities, of my feelings?
- How can I take action while listening?

All Insight Improvisation activities can be explored through this dialectic lens of mindfulness and choicelessness.

Acceptance and Letting Go. Underlying mindfulness and choicelessness are two other “What” skills at the root of meditation: acceptance and letting go. These may best be understood through their opposites: aversion and attachment. As phenomena arise in the field of awareness, our tendency is either to cling to them (to attach), or to push them away (aversion). Instead, meditation trains us to accept all phenomena as they arise, and to let them go as they pass away—not to cling to them (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987).

Insight Improvisation works with these ideas in a concrete way, exploring how phenomena arise in the body, voice, mind, emotions, and environment; to notice our tendency to attach or push away, often expressed in performance as a desire to manipulate, change, or move away from what is happening in the moment. Instead, Insight Improvisation encourages the practitioner to accept what is arising in the present moment (sensation, impulse, etc.), to accept it, to work with it, explore it, and to let it go as it passes.

Metta. The fifth “What” skill is the heart of Insight Improvisation: *metta*, or lovingkindness:

In the Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* the Buddha enumerates the many virtues and qualities he was able to attain as a Buddha due to his previous training under Devadatta in a previous lifetime, among them the four divine abodes: “He caused me to have loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.” These four attitudes or states of mind are called *brahmaviharas* which means “divine abodes,” because they are said to be the very qualities which allow the god Brahma to have attained such an exalted birth in the heavenly realm. These qualities are also known as the four infinite virtues or the four infinite states of consciousness. In Theravadan Buddhism they have long held a very important role in the cultivation of the mind and heart...outside Asia they

have become very popular in almost all Buddhist lineages. These four states of mind begin with *metta* or “loving-kindness”...in many ways this is the most fundamental of them all because compassion, sympathetic joy, and even equanimity are taught as different modes of loving-kindness. (McCormick, 2003, ¶2-3)

The basic concept of cultivating lovingkindness for ourselves, for those we are working with, and for all beings, is a somewhat radical shift from our habitual day-to-day orientation in this culture: to be highly self-critical, competitive with others, and to grasp tightly to our likes and dislikes.

In Insight Improvisation, *metta* invites the practitioner to appreciate herself and what she is doing in the moment, to open her heart to the miracle and mystery of what is emerging. The concept of *metta* is extremely important for actors—and others in similar situations communicating to groups—because it helps address two central and related obstacles to being present: stage fright and the inner critic. When we have *metta* for ourselves and others, it helps eliminate fear, defuse the inner critic, and to slow down and be in the moment. It helps us to focus as well as to open up all the channels of awareness. So, *metta* is an essential platform for mindfulness and choicelessness. In addition, when working with a partner or a group, *metta* encourages unconditional loving support for all those present, and helps foster a safe space in which everyone can take risks. One key discovery in Insight Improvisation has been that the role of witness—central to many activities, such as authentic movement and Psolodrama—is best approached through fostering an attitude of *metta*⁷.

⁷ I would like to acknowledge Christopher Mogil for inciting the exploration of the relationship between *metta* and witnessing.

The “How”—Insight Improvisation Process

Insight Improvisation provides a simple process for *how* to return to what is important (the “What” skills of mindfulness, choicelessness, etc.) in any given moment of performance—or life. There are five basic steps in the “How” Process:

- 1) **Enter Empty**⁸—Our tendency before improvising is to plan what we are going to do, what our topic, theme, or content will be, and to follow that plan. In Insight Improvisation, we break this habit by actively disregarding the “Planning Mind,” and, instead, listening to the body and senses in the moment for our inspiration, trusting that whatever arises is what we need to be working with.
- 2) **Slow Down (Pause)**⁹—When we slow down, breaking out of our habitual, rushed mode, we naturally are more inclined to be in the present moment, to be mindful of what is happening in our body, and in our entire field of awareness. In Insight Improvisation, slowing down is the “default” mode of every activity—although some structures can invite moments of faster action, a general principle of the work is that you cannot go too slowly, and that pauses are welcomed and encouraged anytime.

⁸ One of the inspirations for this “How” step is the title of Naropa University theater teacher Lee Worley’s book: *Coming from Nothing: the Sacred Art of Acting* (2001).

⁹ The “How” Skills reference and incorporate the “Pause-Relax-Open” model of Greg Kramer’s *Insight Dialogue* (Kramer, 1999).

- 3) **Breathe (Relax)**—Breathing is central to living, as well as to performance. When we breathe, deeply, in the belly, and exhale freely, we reverse the adrenaline response, letting go of our performance anxiety. Breathing and relaxing are central steps in Insight Improvisation and in any good training for actors. (In the corporate world, I teach these skills to executives, engineers, and consultants—for them, breathing is one of the most powerful and relevant take-aways)
- 4) **Listen (Open)**—Actors are challenged by listening. Often we are lost in thought, distracted, caught up in worry about the future, re-processing the past, or wrestling with our confusion, fear, anger, or longing in the present. By pausing and relaxing, however, a new possibility becomes available: to set aside the thoughts and simply open to what is happening right now.¹⁰ Choiceless listening is listening with all the senses, noticing the colors, shapes, textures, light, shadow, pitch, timbre, vibration, temperature, tastes, smells, and sensations around us and within us. When we are truly open, we can listen without an agenda. Rather than choosing what to listen to, the universe chooses us.
- 5) **No “Good Ideas”**—The improvisation teacher Scott Kelman, always says: “If you have a good idea, don’t do it.” (Kelman Group, n.d.). Keith Johnstone, the

¹⁰ Montanaro (1995, p. 170) delineates similar ideas as his “three simple rules to improvisation: read, listen, and follow. 1) Read what is coming at you from all directions. 2) Listen to what the present moment is suggesting to you. 3) Follow your impulses dispassionately and faithfully.”

author of the seminal improvisation book *Impro*, has his own version: “Be average!” (Johnstone, 1979, 1999). As we perform, the mind works overtime, generating many “good ideas” about how to impress the audience and how to hide from them. These ideas often occur as “wouldn’t it be neat if...” In traditional forms of improvisation, for example, the actor is encouraged to be clever and to act on all of their good ideas. This often leads to performance which is stuck in the head—relying on clichés, easy cultural references, and predictable story lines. In Insight Improvisation, dropping good ideas allows the performer to tune into the body, the senses, and inner imagery—infinately varied and richly meaningful sources of inspiration that transcend what the mind alone is capable of.¹¹ Rather than being clever, the Insight Improvisation actor is constantly surprising herself, completely engaged with what is unfolding moment by moment—and thereby fully engaging the audience.

The “Who”—Insight Improvisation Awareness

Buddhist thought describes the self not as a single, unchanging entity—as in Western ideas of “soul” or “ego”—but instead as the sum of our experience, changing in each moment. This passage from the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*—one of the ancient Hindu scriptures and a forerunner of Buddhist philosophy—describes the concept metaphorically:

¹¹ Johnstone (1999, chap. 2) discusses why taking suggestions from the audience in many improv performance venues and forms does not work as well as listening carefully to one’s own impulses.

Not only is the self the source and origin of the whole universe, it is the meeting-place, the convergence point of all reality. All that is comes from the self and goes to the self. As the waters flow to the Ocean as their meeting-place, as all sounds come to the ear, all odours to the nose, as all desires converge in the mind, all knowledge in the heart, as all the Vedas come together in speech, all that is converges in the self. (IV.5.12) as a lump of salt is a homogeneous whole, a taste-mass so is the Self a homogeneous whole, a mass of awareness. (IV.5.13) (Darshana, n.d., ¶29)

This view was codified by early Buddhist philosophers in the *Abhidharma*, a text that explores the elements of the self and all reality, and how they interrelate. A later form of Buddhist philosophy, the Madhyamika school (2nd century AD), deconstructed the *Abhidharma* to demonstrate that “all phenomena exist in dependence on our construction of them...[anticipating] contemporary hermeneutic and constructivist thinking by hundreds of years” (Safran, 2003, p. 15). One implication of this is that who we are being in any moment is a factor of our awareness—“who am I” equals “what awareness am I being in this moment?”

In Insight Improvisation, the “Who” Model reminds the practitioner of the richness and possibility inherent in any given moment. All that is needed is to open the awareness to what is present, in order to tap into an infinitely rich source of inspiration, wisdom, and potential for insight and transformation. Although this is also true in the act of meditation, Insight Improvisation adds channels of movement and embodiment not available in traditional forms of meditation. In any given moment—in an improvisation, a

scripted performance, in a therapy session, or in daily life—I can be present to, be inspired by, and embody, any of the following:¹²

- **Awareness of the 6 Sense Doors**—bodily sensations, sight, smell, taste, hearing, and mental objects (thoughts)
- **Awareness of Feeling**—my reactions to my own senses: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral
- **Awareness of Desire** (greed, attachment), **Aversion** (hatred, avoidance), and **Confusion** (delusion, sloth/torpor, dissociation)
- **Awareness of Awareness**—the quality or tone of my inner-witnessing
- **Awareness of Action**—of my own movement, sound, speech, etc.
- **Awareness of Inner Imagery and Metaphor**—what do I see inside? What is this like?
- **Awareness of Role**—Who am I being right now? (Among the five psychodramatic roles, am I the protagonist, an auxiliary ego, the double, a director or guide, or the audience?) How does it feel to be in this role? How does this character move, speak, etc.? What is this character’s background, present feeling, intention?

¹² Many of these elements can be found in the Buddha’s Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness—first is mindfulness of the body (breathing and bodily sensations); second is mindfulness of feeling (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral); third is mindfulness of attachment, aversion, and confusion; and the fourth includes mindfulness of 108 mental objects (grouped into the five hindrances, five aggregates, six bases, seven awakening factors, and four Noble Truths) (Olendzki, 2004, pp. 13-17). I have added other forms of awareness that have proven useful in teaching Insight Improvisation.

- **Awareness of Projection/Relationship**—what is the quality of the relationship with other roles (or, if present, other actors)? How do I feel about the witness (or, if present, the audience)?
- **Awareness of Story**—including story structure, conflict, resolution
- **Awareness of Intention**—both conscious and unconscious:
 - What is my conscious intention or goal: e.g., insight, catharsis, my own transformation (greater spontaneity, flexibility, generosity, compassion, mindfulness, etc...), to help others, lovingkindness (*metta*)?
 - What are my unconscious intentions or hidden motivations? For example, Jack Engler has described 10 hidden motivations for meditation (Engler, 1997, 2003), which are also relevant to Insight Improvisation:

“These include using practice to

- 1) Pursue narcissistic perfection and invulnerability,
- 2) Calm fears of individuation,
- 3) Avoid responsibility and accountability,
- 4) Rationalize fears of intimacy and closeness,
- 5) Suppress unwanted or conflictual feelings,
- 6) Avoid anger, self-assertion, and competitiveness by adopting a passive-dependent style,
- 7) Satisfy superego needs for self-punishment for feelings of unworthiness, shame, or guilt,
- 8) Escape from internal experience,
- 9) Devalue reason, intellect, and reflection on one's motives and behavior, and
- 10) Substitute for grief and the need for mourning in the face of loss” (Engler, 2003, pp. 49-50).

- **Awareness of Cause and Effect**—noticing how all of the above can interact, e.g., how a bodily sensation can trigger an inner image, role, etc.

Insight Improvisation Activities & Techniques—An Overview

Insight Improvisation is comprised of a host of different experiential forms and approaches, some new, but most borrowed, influenced, or inspired by others. Those that I consider new were created with the help of colleagues and groups. Where possible, in the list below, I have included the names of those who influenced or contributed to a particular form.

Please note that the following summary of activities and techniques contains only the briefest description of each approach, for the purpose of giving the reader a general picture of the experiential components of Insight Improvisation. **The following is not a facilitator guide and should not be used by those wishing to lead these exercises—many important instructions and guidelines have been omitted for the sake of brevity.** A forthcoming book on Insight Improvisation, currently in preparation, will contain in-depth descriptions and facilitator guidelines for each these activities.¹³

Insight Improvisation activities can be grouped into four basic categories, as follows (an asterisk denotes a form that I believe is unique to Insight Improvisation):

¹³ Please visit www.jgluck.org on the Internet for up-to-date information about the forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *Insight Improvisation: Integrating Meditation, Theater, and Drama Therapy* (Gluck, 2004).

I. Meditation, Active Meditation, and Authentic Movement

- **Meditation**

- **Meditation on the Breath** (*anapana*)—a traditional silent sitting meditation focusing on mindfulness of the sensations of breathing.¹⁴
- **Meditations on Senses**
 - **Meditation on Sound**—a traditional form of meditation focusing on mindfulness of sound as it naturally occurs (in Insight Improvisation, the facilitator can add additional sounds, such as musical instruments, and the reading of text).
 - **Eyes-Open Meditation**—a meditation that opens one to the sensation of sight, including mindfulness of forms and colors.
 - **Eye Contact Meditation**—sitting meditation with a partner in which participants maintain eye contact.
 - **Meditation on Body Sensations**—a traditional form of meditation focusing on heightening mindfulness of individual sensations in the body.
- *Vipassana*—a traditional form of sitting meditation, in which choiceless awareness is cultivated to notice the arising and passing away of all

phenomena, including awareness of sensations, thoughts, and the nature of awareness itself.

- **Metta Meditation**—a traditional form of meditation in which lovingkindness is offered to oneself, to other individuals (loved ones, neutral people, and challenging or difficult individuals), and to all beings (Kramer, 1997).
- **Active Meditation**
 - **Walking Meditation**—a traditional form of meditation in which the practitioner brings awareness to the present moment and to the physical sensations of walking (in Theravadan tradition, often performed extremely slowly).
 - **Eating Meditation**—a form of meditation that focuses on the sensations accompanying the act of eating, including awareness of the textures, smells, and tastes of food—to which Thich Nhat Hanh (of the Vietnamese Zen tradition) adds an awareness of the origins of the food (Hanh, 1991)
 - **Movement Meditation***—An eyes-open, slow-motion, movement improvisation, in which the mover cultivates a moment-by-moment awareness of her body and surroundings.

¹⁴ In the context of a typical Insight Improvisation workshop, and in some one-to-one work, meditation is guided verbally by the facilitator, with moments of silence for participants to practice meditating on their own. A typical progression of guided meditation includes relaxation using a scan through the body, meditation on breath, opening to bodily and other sensations, *vipassana* (and, optionally, Moving *Vipassana*), and ending with *metta*.

- **Moving *Vipassana****—A technique encompassing three phases of adding movement to a sitting meditation: subtle movement imperceptible to the outside eye; movement constrained to the sitting posture; and fully entering authentic movement (see below), periodically returning to stillness and meditative awareness.
- **Touch Meditation***—Meditation by oneself and/or with a partner in which the practitioner cultivates awareness of what it is like to give and receive simple touch (e.g., hand on shoulder).
- **Mindful Massage***—Meditation in which participants practice giving and receiving touch and massage in slow motion while cultivating qualities of mindfulness and choiceless awareness. Variations include pairs, small groups, and large group.
- **Shared *Vipassana****—A form of *vipassana* in which the practitioner actively shares his experience with a witness as it unfolds in the present through the use of sound, speech, and movement. Variations include: Shared Authentic Movement *Vipassana*, Shared *Vipassana* Dialogue, and Group Shared *Vipassana*.
- **City Meditation*/Nature Meditation***—A form of meditation in which the practitioner, alone, moves intuitively in an urban or natural environment, cultivating mindfulness and choicelessness, and letting go of “planning mind” and “good ideas.”

- **Metta Dialogue**¹⁵—An activity in which two participants, seated facing one another, take turns offering *metta* to one other by speaking aloud short phrases.
- **Mindful Guide***¹⁶—A silent activity in pairs, in which one partner (the guide) leads their partner (who has eyes closed), through the space (or outdoors), using only touch. Both partners mindfully explore sensory possibilities: textures, sounds, smells, etc.
- Combinations of the above, e.g. Mindful Massage + Shared *Vipassana*¹⁷
- **Authentic Movement (AM)**¹⁸ —a form of movement improvisation (and dance/movement therapy technique) in which the mover, with eyes closed, opens to movement impulse and follows what her body (as opposed to her mind) wants to do. The witness observes and afterwards can offer feedback on what he saw. Variations include:
 - **AM in Pairs** with a mover and a witness.
 - **AM in a Large Group** with any number of movers and a minimum of one or two witnesses.

¹⁵ I developed this practice independently, only to discover that Gregory Kramer has also been doing the same practice by the same name as part of his Insight Dialogue (Kramer, 1999).

¹⁶ Mindful Guide is my own name and adaptation of an exercise originally taught to me by Anja Kollmuss.

¹⁷ Thanks to Marjorie Zohn for the suggestion of combining these two approaches.

¹⁸ Authentic Movement was created by Mary Starks Whitehouse, with subsequent development by Janet Adler, Joan Chodorow, and others (Pallaro, 1999; Adler, 2002).

- **AM with Active Witnesses**—in which witnesses can enter the movement space, observing and/or echoing physically the mover they are observing.
- **Moving in Response To**—in which the witness responds to the mover by doing his own authentic movement.
- **AM with Spontaneous Writing**—following the movement, movers can write or draw, and then share what they did in dialogue with their witness(es). In Insight Improvisation, this writing can also become the basis for the FreeText activity, below.
- **AM with Images and Childhood Memories***—an extended Insight Improvisation activity devised for group workshops, in which the facilitator leads the group through three phases of authentic movement: standard AM, AM focusing on physical images, and AM inviting childhood memories. Afterwards, participants share in small groups and then in the larger group a short piece that combines one image and one childhood memory in the form of an embodied story (see **Storytelling**, below).

II. Theater and Improvisation

- **Walk-Stop-Walk**—Scott Kelman’s exercise in which half the group walks in the space, stopping to “check it out,” and then walking once again.
- **One-minute Solo**—Scott Kelman’s exercise in which the performer enters the space, and has one minute with the main instruction: “If you have a good idea, don’t do it.” Variations include: **Speaking Solo***, **“Naked” Solo***, and duets/trios/etc.

- **Amplification***—Inspired by the Action Theater of Ruth Zaporah, Amplification is an original exercise (developed with the help of Lorraine Grosslight) in which the performer begins with a sound-movement impulse, and amplifies it repeatedly in a variety of ways. Variations include duets/trios, **Amplification with Words***, **Amplification Monologue***, **Amplification Dialogue***, and **Amplification Scene***.
- **FreeSong***¹⁹—A solo improvisation in which the performer begins with authentic movement and proceeds to sing whatever is arising: sensations, thoughts, inner imagery, stories, roles, etc. Warm-ups to FreeSong include various activities in which participants sing and improvise on a single breath: **Chords***, **Jams*** (in a group, in duets or trios, and passing around a circle), and **One-Liners*** (solo, duet, and trios). Variations to FreeSong include duets/trios.
- **FreeText***²⁰—A process that begins with **Spontaneous Writing**—using the guidelines established by Natalie Goldberg (1990)—editing the text with a partner, and performing the resultant “script” using movement, speaking, and singing. Repetition, jumping around in the text, and full embodiment of each syllable and word are encouraged—the focus is not on getting a logical or complete story across.

¹⁹ I would like to acknowledge Christopher Mogil for his encouragement regarding FreeSong and other Insight Improvisation forms involving singing.

²⁰ The process of writing, editing, and performing a text using speaking and singing comes from dancer/poet Christie Svane, as I learned it from her as well as from performer/teacher Billie Jo Joy. The name FreeText is mine and I have my own way of teaching this progression of activities, which has developed and changed over the years.

- **The Three States***²¹—In this dyadic movement structure, participants spontaneously change from their own solo authentic movement, to moving in eye contact, to moving in physical contact. Variations include different approaches to adding sound, words, and song.
- **Storytelling**—An approach to telling personal stories devised by playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie, incorporating concepts such as vertical and horizontal moments, present tense, no “ands” or “ums,” three narrative stances, sensory details, and jumping in time and space. Variations include **Dream-telling**, **Duet Storytelling**, and a new form, **Sung Story*** (a sort of FreeSong meets Storytelling).
- **Zen Rock Garden**—an activity by Daniel Kinsey in which the group imagines the space to be an empty Zen Rock Garden. At the signal of the facilitator, one or more movers enter the space, freeze in a position, and then exit. Variations add titles, sound, and words.
- **FreeBe***—A culminating activity to Insight Improvisation’s set of theater forms. In FreeBe a single performer enters the space, begins with authentic movement, and—using movement, sound, amplification, words, song, and story—improvises for a set period of time. Variations include the **Spiritual Check-in** (a framing theme suggested by Interplay instructor Katrina Browne).

²¹ The Three States is based on an exercise by the theater teacher Carol Fox Prescott, as taught by Jean-Claude van Itallie. Billie Jo Joy had the inspiration to add authentic movement, and I named and further developed the exercise, along with input from Lorraine Grosslight.

- **Special Variations***—there are two techniques that can be applied to any of the improvisation/theater activities listed above, as well as to many of the drama therapy forms below:
 - **Plum Village***—Taking its name from Thich Nhat Hanh’s Buddhist center in France, in this variation the facilitator or a witness periodically rings a bell, causing the improviser to pause, breathe, and return to mindful awareness. For example, in **Plum Village Amplification***, the performer is interrupted any number of times by a ringing bell, signaling a pause.
 - **Magnification***²²—In this variation a ringing bell or verbal instruction causes the improviser to slow down, stretching out their movement, sound, words, and/or song. Optionally, the performer can repeat what just occurred but much more slowly. One use of this is in Storytelling, to help the storyteller drop in to the sensations and emotions of a given moment, rather than rushing on with the story.

III. Drama Therapy

- **Building Blocks To Psolodrama**—a number of activities in Insight Improvisation have been chosen or created to provide an introduction to the concepts used in

²² Magnification also happens to be one of the many forms of Amplification—but singled out as an especially important skill to cultivate (remembering that the second of Insight Improvisation’s “How” Skills is “to slow down”).

Psolodrama, the culminating drama therapy activity in this work (see below). These building blocks are also worthwhile activities in their own right:

- **Psychodrama**—The classic form of therapeutic role-play as described by Jacob Moreno, Zerka Moreno, and others (Moreno, 2000; Blatner, 1996; Leveton, 1992). Psychodrama introduces several important concepts including the five basic psychodramatic roles (protagonist, auxiliary ego, director, double, and audience), role reversal, the psychodramatic spiral, deroling, and the sharing circle.
- **The Empty Chair**—A basic psychodramatic technique devised by Jacob Moreno, and adapted by Fritz Perls for his Gestalt Therapy (1966, 1969), in which the subject envisions someone whom they wish to speak with sitting in an empty chair, and then speaking to them. Variations used in Insight Improvisation include having the subject reverse roles, becoming the empty chair role; and having a partner serve as the double.
- **The Five Roles***—This new exercise was devised to serve as a bridge between the Empty Chair and Psolodrama. Participants work in pairs, with one acting as witness, and, if needed, as a coach. The other partner begins by creating a scene between two characters, the protagonist (himself at some time in his life) and an auxiliary ego (any other character, real or imagined). As the improvisation continues, the facilitator instructs the role-player to add (one by one) the double, the director, and the audience, to their improvisation.
- **Autodrama**—A form of psychodrama (Blatner, 2000, p. 236) in which the protagonist also functions as director. In the Insight Improvisation version, the

protagonist casts other group members to play the various roles, and prompts them through verbal instructions to speak, improvise, and create real or imagined scenes (which the protagonist can choose to role-play in, or not).

- **Life/Dream Scene***—Before entering the space, the subject is asked to think of a recent challenging real-life event, and then to think of a recent or recurring dream (unrelated), and to pick a single character from that dream. In the improvisation, the subject begins by enacting the real-life scene, and then at some point introducing the dream figure. The scene that transpires is an improvisation, not planned in advance.
- **Warm-ups to Psolodrama**—Although any of the exercises above can serve as a warm-up to Psolodrama—including meditation, authentic movement, and Shared *Vipassana*—specific exercises have been developed that are especially suited to working one-to-one, particularly with a peer:
 - **Impulse Dialogue***—In this activity, two improvisers dialogue using authentic sound and movement impulses, pausing in silence while the other is working. Interaction, eye contact, and physical contact are invited.
 - **Role Dialogue***—Similar to Impulse Dialogue, but instead of sound and movement, the improvisers spontaneously take on varying roles, which may or may not be interacting or appearing in the same scene or reality.
 - **“Yes!” Improvisation***—In this open improvisation—inspired by the teaching of Daena Giardella and the drama therapy work of David Read Johnson (2000)—the improvisers can do anything they like, as long as they

say “yes” to any new offer by their partner, including any change in character, scene, or reality.

- **Psolodrama***²³—Psolodrama is an original Insight Improvisation drama therapy form that marries authentic movement and psychodrama. Essentially a one-person psychodrama observed by a supportive witness, Psolodrama is a new variation on the classic psychodramatic form known as “autodrama” (Blatner, 2000, p. 236). It is in many senses the culminant form in Insight Improvisation—incorporating meditation, improvisation, and drama therapy approaches. The psoloist enters empty, without a preconception of what will happen. Beginning with authentic movement, she becomes aware of feelings and inner imagery, sensing the beginnings of a character or scene. She then adds sound, then words, and then find herself in one of the five psychodramatic roles (see **Psychodrama**, above). The solo improvisation that develops is a series of monologues and dialogues featuring these roles, all embodied by the psoloist. The ultimate goal of Psolodrama is to experience a new insight into, transformation of, or full expression of the dilemma, conflict, issue, or scene that is arising. When achieved, this is often accompanied by a profound sense of catharsis or resolution. Variations on Psolodrama include using the witness as **External Director***, and **Sung Psolodrama*** (FreeSong meets Psolodrama).²⁴

²³ I would like to acknowledge my drama therapy colleague and dear friend Jonathan Stein for being present with me at the birth of Psolodrama, and for actively encouraging its development in our work together as peers.

²⁴ For a more complete description of Psolodrama, see “Appendix IV: Brief Guidelines for Psolodrama,” page 194.

IV. Activities for Leading an Insight Improvisation Group

Over the years, particular approaches have evolved for facilitating an Insight Improvisation workshop or group:

- **Check-in**—This usually takes the form of participants sitting in a circle, sharing one-by-one how they feel in order to feel fully present and ready to work. The check-in can also include some kind of summary of individuals’ goals, or particular forms or techniques they would like to work on in that session.
- **Insight Improvisation Group Guidelines***—The guidelines or ground rules that have evolved for Insight Improvisation have proven to be indispensable, in that they establish a clear and firm set of boundaries, as well as speak to the underlying qualities of group interaction that foster the work.²⁵
- **Closure***—To end the workshop, the group stands in a circle, each member sharing three thoughts/feelings—in a past/present/future structure: a reflection on the workshop (e.g., experiences that stand out); how they are feeling right now, including a “safety check-in” (if someone was left feeling bad about something that had happened during the session, they are explicitly asked to bring it up in the closing circle, if possible—if not, to bring it to the facilitator afterwards); and a take-away for the future, a key learning or insight they would like to retain. The group then closes with a final group sound, song, affirmation, etc.

²⁵ See “Appendix I: Insight Improvisation Group Guidelines,” beginning on page 180, for a complete description of the purpose and ground rules of the Insight Improvisation Research Group (IIRG).

- **Insight Coaching**—In a longer workshop (e.g., a weekend or longer), the facilitator can offer an optional one-to-one coaching evening session on issues related to the themes of the workshop—those attending the coaching session become audience and support for one another. Coaching from an Insight Improvisation perspective can include work on acting, movement, and vocal skills; dealing with stage fright or tension; questions about meditation; and life coaching and drama therapy working with issues catalyzed by the workshop.

Structure and Rationale for an Insight Improvisation Group Agenda

Group work can take the form of an ongoing class or practice group (two to four hours in length), a one-day or weekend workshop, or a lengthier intensive training of three days to a week or more. The basic unit of any group work can be thought of as a “module,” a sequence of activities than can fit into the two to four hours of a single morning, afternoon, or evening session. A module tends to have one of two forms:

1. **For a class or short group meeting**, I have found that the work is most effective when the module is a progression of activities drawing upon all the different parts of Insight Improvisation. For example, in a three-hour session, after a check-in and a review of the ground rules, a typical session begins in the first hour with some form of meditation, active meditation, and/or authentic movement; continues in the second hour with one or more theater/improvisation activities such as Amplification, the Three States, or FreeSong; proceeds in the final hour to some form of drama therapy work, such as psychodrama, Life/Dream Scene, or

Psolodrama; and ends with a ritual of closure²⁶. The rationale for this structure is multipronged:

- a. It creates a satisfying arc to the work, allowing the group to arrive and connect through the check-in, become more present and warm-up through the meditation and movement, express themselves using body and voice in the theater/improv work, explore on a deeper level through the drama therapy work, and reflect on the experience with the closure.
- b. By combining all the different elements of Insight Improvisation, this structure creates the feeling of a satisfying, well-balanced, and nutritious meal. All the parts of the individual are involved and touched through this process: mind, body, voice, emotions, and spirit.
- c. By combining a variety of different modalities into one session, group members who have different learning styles, as well as different learning challenges or stretch areas, are all included. For example, for some, meditation can be challenging, for others, Psolodrama is confronting. By doing all of these things, the group is challenged to bring maximum spontaneity and flexibility, and to stretch beyond their comfort zone.
- d. By working with meditation as a foundation, the fundamental skills and concepts of Insight Improvisation—the What, How, and Who Models—are actively reinforced, and then translated into more active theater and

²⁶ See “Appendix II: Sample Agendas for Group Classes and Workshops,” page 185, for two sample Insight Improvisation class agendas with timing.

drama therapy work. This process echoes one of the central purposes of Insight Improvisation: to help practitioners bring the fruits of their meditative practice into the activity of day-to-day life.

2. **As part of a lengthier workshop, such as a day or weekend program,** a module (of 3 to 4 hours) usually focuses on a single theme, such as authentic movement, fundamentals of improvisation, working with a text, working in relationship, storytelling, exploring building blocks toward Psolodrama, etc. When combined to create a complete agenda, these modules form a wider arc of work, from simple, introductory activities to more complex or sophisticated techniques. The result is an agenda that builds on itself as it proceeds, introducing new concepts and techniques and referring back to them in later modules²⁷. The rationale for this approach is as follows:
 - a. By giving each module a coherent theme, it gives participants the chance to focus and go more deeply into individual concepts within Insight Improvisation, as well as to spend more time exploring specific practices and applications of the work in real life.
 - b. Slowing down and being present are a essential to Insight Improvisation. By focusing on one theme or type of activity for an entire morning, afternoon, or evening, participants can take their time, breathe, and learn in a more relaxed, open way.

²⁷ See “Appendix II: Sample Agendas for Group Classes and Workshops,” page 185, for two sample Insight Improvisation weekend workshop agendas with timing.

- c. By starting simply and building to more complex activities over the course of a day or more, participants are better able to fully arrive and assimilate the work before greater demands are placed on them. In addition, concepts (such as the “How” model) which are often taught at the beginning of the workshop, are then incorporated in new ways as participants encounter greater challenges in subsequent modules.

Structure and Rationale for One-to-One Work with Insight Improvisation

As in group work, one-to-one practice with Insight Improvisation usually follows a progression or arc, from meditation and warm-up to some form of climactic exercise. It is typical for the participants to meet for two to three hours in a studio space—coaching or drama therapy using Insight Improvisation often takes a minimum of two hours (twice the length of standard psychotherapy, for example).

There are two basic types of one-to-one work using Insight Improvisation:²⁸

1. **Coaching.** In this form, there are clearly differentiated roles: the coach (or therapist), who has expertise in applying Insight Improvisation techniques, and the coachee (or client), who has contracted with the coach for one or more sessions. The purposes of the coaching can vary, and may include:

²⁸ Examples of these different ways of working can be found in “Part III: Experience with Insight Improvisation,” beginning on page 98. See also “Appendix III: Sample Agendas for Working One-to-One,” page 192.

- a. **Drama Therapy**—through the use of counseling, drama therapy, and Insight Improvisation techniques, to identify, explore, heal, and transform dysfunctional personal patterns, usually of an emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal nature. Activities can include meditation, *metta* practice, authentic movement, psychodrama, Life/Dream Scene, Psolodrama, as well as hybrid activities created by the therapist in the moment to fit the client’s need.
- b. **Life coaching**—through the use of coaching techniques combined with Insight Improvisation, to help the coachee clarify their life vision, achieve their goals, and have greater personal satisfaction in day-to-day life. Activities can be similar to drama therapy, but perhaps with a greater emphasis on learning and developing skills (such as mindfulness) for use in day-to-day life.
- c. **Theater coaching**—can include coaching on specific acting, improvisation, vocal or physical skills or challenges (such as the demands of auditioning), as well as Insight Improvisation activities that help source material for personal performance pieces. Activities can include authentic movement and active meditation, as well as the full range of theater/improv activities (listed above).
- d. **Focused coaching**—can include coaching in particular applications of Insight Improvisation, such as dealing with stress, improving personal presence or communication skills, difficulty meditating, etc.

2. **Peer Collaboration.** In peer work, friends and/or colleagues meet as equals to engage in the work together and provide mutual support, for the purpose of personal and artistic growth, as well as to deepen or improve their peer relationship. In this type of work, the roles are not differentiated—both participants may be skilled in Insight Improvisation (to a greater or lesser extent), and both are willing to coach and be coached by the other. (Peer work can also occur in small groups of three or four.) Peer collaboration in Insight Improvisation tends to focus on one of three themes, but can also be a combination of any of the following:
 - a. **Contemplative practice.** In this type of work, partners meet to do meditation and active meditation, *metta* practice, authentic movement, and select Insight Improvisation activities that focus on the contemplative aspects of the work, emphasizing mindful and choiceless awareness. The purpose of work is for the partners to help deepen and support one another’s contemplative and/or spiritual practices, and to reinforce concepts, attitudes, and skills drawn from meditation.
 - b. **Theater/improvisation workout and sourcing.** Partners in this work tend to choose more active Insight Improvisation exercises, usually involving interaction, contact, improvisation, vocal/physical expressiveness, and opportunities for solo performance (being witnessed by the other). These structures not only help the peers practice their improvisation and acting skills—they also provide opportunities for sourcing personal material for use in playwriting and self-revelatory

performance. A typical agenda might include some form of active meditation or authentic movement, the Three States (with sound and words), FreeSong, Storytelling, spontaneous writing and FreeText, and other active exercises.

- c. **Depth work.** This form of peer collaboration draws upon the drama therapy techniques of Insight Improvisation, delving into issues of a personal nature with the intention of healing and transformation. Participants are, in a sense, co-counselors, providing supportive and nonjudgmental witnessing, as well as insightful coaching when requested by the other. It is important to emphasize that in this work there is no therapist or client role—it is not psychotherapy—but that the work can be highly therapeutic in nature.²⁹ Activities can include meditation and active meditation; authentic movement; expressive warm-ups such as Impulse and Role Dialogue; building blocks to Psolodrama including Empty Chair, The Five Roles, and Life/Dream Scene; as well as Psolodrama itself.

²⁹ As Tony Montanaro has written: “The benefits if improvisation far exceed its unprecedented theatrical value. The act of improvising in front of an understanding audience (fellow improvisers) teaches you more about yourself in two minutes that you sometimes learn in two years! Improvising is a great accelerator of personal evolution” (1995, p. 171).

Part II: Antecedents to Insight Improvisation

Insight Improvisation’s Roots in Meditation and Buddhist Psychology

Meditation: Definition, Background, and Rationale

A popular way of thinking about meditation is that it involves entering states of trance—perhaps similar to hypnosis—in which the practitioner’s consciousness is transported far from this place and time. According to the dictionary, meditation is “the emptying of the mind of thoughts, or concentration of the mind on just one thing, in order to aid mental or spiritual development, contemplation, or relaxation” (“Meditation,” 1999). What these notions and definitions do not acknowledge is that there are hundreds of different kinds of meditation, with roots in a wide range of cultures and religions or spiritual traditions.

One useful distinction that may be made when comparing different types of meditation is the intention behind them. Some types of meditation have a spiritual intention, motivated by the faith or belief of the practitioner—these include Judeo-Christian forms of contemplative prayer, chanting, and focusing on a sacred image, such as a mandala-like picture of a heavenly realm. These types of meditation guide the practitioner toward a more spiritual focus in life. Many forms of Buddhist practice, world-wide, also have a spiritual or devotional emphasis.

In contrast, other meditative traditions focus on mundane reality, stripping away notions of the spiritual (and any other notions), and encouraging the practitioner to live in the present moment. Stephen Batchelor, in his book *Buddhism without Beliefs*, refers to this as “agnostic Buddhism”:

An agnostic Buddhist would not regard the dharma [Buddhist teachings] as a source of “answers” to questions of where we came from, where we are going, what happens after death. He would seek such knowledge in the appropriate domains: astrophysics, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, etc. An agnostic Buddhist is not a “believer” with claims to revealed information about supernatural or paranormal phenomena, and in this sense is not “religious.”

An agnostic Buddhist looks to the dharma for metaphors of existential confrontation rather than metaphors of existential consolation. The dharma is not a belief by which you will be miraculously saved. It is a method to be investigated and tried out. It starts by facing up to the primacy of anguish, then proceeds to apply a set of practices to understand the human dilemma and work toward a resolution. (Batchelor, 1997, p. 18)

The practices Batchelor refers to include some of India’s oldest forms of meditation, which became the basis for Buddhist practice. Preserved in the Southeast Asian Theravadan Buddhist tradition, they include *samadhi* (concentration meditation) and *vipassana* (insight meditation) and *metta* (lovingkindness). It is these practices that serve as the foundation and guiding inspiration for Insight Improvisation.

Active Forms of Meditation

Although meditation is normally thought of as a still practice—usually sitting quietly, with eyes closed—there are traditional and newer approaches to meditation that involve more than just the mind and awareness. For example, many Eastern practices can be seen as “active meditations.” Yoga, Tai Chi, and various martial arts promote awareness of the body, a tranquil nature, and being in the moment.

Jack Kornfield, in his study of Southeast Asian Buddhist masters, writes of the different types of active meditation he encountered:

...Theravada teachers use particular postures, change of postures and bodily movements, space, and such ritual movements as prostrations

for meditation. In some systems, the holding of particular postures—such as standing without moving, or lying without moving, or sitting in a certain position—is considered important in the development of concentration that will lead to wisdom. In other systems, a great deal of attention is paid to movement, first to the mental cause of movement and then to the actual physical movement as it takes place. This changing of postures and flow of movement becomes the focus of some Theravada meditation teachers’ systems. Particular ways of walking are adopted as meditation exercises in almost every meditation system, as well as awareness of the body in relation to robes and environment. Teachers make conscious use of confined and/or open space for different kinds of meditation in some Theravada temples. In other places the use of frequent prostrations, both as a body-movement meditation and as a way to reduce pride, is employed as part of daily practice. In all cases, the use of particular postures, movements, and prostrations must be accompanied by careful cultivation of mindfulness to properly derive the benefits that come from this meditation. (Kornfield, 1996, p. 306)

Walking meditation may be the most prevalent and well-known form of active meditation in Buddhism. Today, different Buddhist traditions practice walking meditation differently. In the Theravadan tradition, for example, Buddhist monks (and ordinary individuals on Insight Meditation retreats) walk very slowly, focusing on the sensation of the feet in contact with the ground, walking back and forth on a pre-established path of perhaps 25 feet in length, for a preset meditation period (e.g., an hour at a time). In the Vietnamese Zen tradition, taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, walking is more rapid, synchronized with the breath and the use of internal mental phrases (“gathas”) to help return the mind to the walking, and is often practiced when walking from place to place (Hanh, 1996).

Walking meditation in the Insight Meditation approach also serves the purpose during meditation retreats of breaking up the sitting meditations, creating a change of focus and allowing the body to relax from the sitting pose, or to add energy when one has become lethargic. For some practitioners, greater insight can come in the walking than in

the sitting—not accidental, as involving the body can often lead to discoveries in the mind, as well as lead to greater healing for the whole being.³⁰

Ruth Dennison, a long-time Insight Meditation teacher, breaks from Theravadan tradition by involving the body in meditation on her retreats. She will often lead her groups in exercises involving movement, sound, and sensorial exploration, as a way to deepen participants’ awareness.

Another form of active meditation can be seen in the work of *vipassana* teacher Gregory Kramer, who developed Insight Dialogue, a practice of meditating in relationship (Kramer, 1999). In his workshops, Kramer combines traditional *vipassana* and *metta* meditations with pair and group exercises in speaking mindfully, and will often add warm-ups involving movement and improvisation (e.g., having the whole group dance playfully through the room).

Meditation and Art

Countless artists and meditators throughout history have explored the link between meditation and the arts. There is a great tradition in the East of contemplative art—examples include the poetry of Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh (Hanh, 1991, pp.123-124), Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, and the sand mandalas of Tibetan monks.

³⁰ More on the relationship between the body and healing can be found below. See “Wilhelm Reich and Body-Oriented Psychotherapy,” on page 82; “Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) and related fields,” on page 84; and “Insight Improvisation as a Creative Arts Therapy,” beginning on page 86.

Mudra Space Awareness, originally brought to the West by Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa, is a set of practices to deepen actors’ awareness of their body, their perceptions, and their orientation to space, transforming their relationship to the stage, to other actors and to the audience—and to performance itself. Mudra continues to be taught by Trungpa’s students Craig Smith (Smith, n.d.) and Lee Worley, the latter the founder of the theater department at Trungpa’s Naropa University in Boulder (Worley, 2001).

Insight Improvisation is only one recent example of how Western culture incorporates and adapts Buddhism and other Eastern traditions. This can be seen in the work of many artists and writers over the last several decades, including the following:

- The Beats, including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder, delved deeply into Buddhism and their writing was highly affected by it—one example: Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* (Kerouac, 1991).
- John Cage’s approach to musical composition came under the influence of Zen Buddhism in the 1950’s, resulting in such compositions as *4’33”*, a silent piece that invites the audience to hear the incidental sounds of the concert hall. Merce Cunningham, Cage’s choreographic collaborator, was also influenced by Zen (GLBTQ, 2002).
- Natalie Goldberg, the author of *Wild Mind*, continues to bring Buddhist ideas into her approach to improvisational or spontaneous writing (Goldberg, 1990).
- Jean-Claude van Itallie, Ruth Zaporah, and Scott Kelman, three theater artists who each had important influences on Insight Improvisation, all

were inspired by Buddhism in the 1960’s and 70’s. (See “Key Theater Teachers: van Itallie, Kelman, and Zaporah,” on page 106.)

Buddhist Psychology and Its Applications in the West

“Buddhist psychology” may be a somewhat misleading term, as all Buddhist teachings seem to point to the ways in which the human mind operates. (Buddhism is not so much a religion—there is no “belief” in a deity, for example, at least in the earliest forms of Buddhism—as it is a philosophy of how to live life, addressing the basic human issue of suffering.) Those aspects of Buddhism that are singled out by Western teachers as “Buddhist psychology,” however, tend to provide a more focused description of the mechanisms that lead to one’s sense of “self,” a phenomenon which Buddhism views as mistaken.

The fundamental teaching in Buddhist psychology is that of the five aggregates (or five skandhas): form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. To summarize the process: when a sensory organ (e.g., the ear) makes contact with an object (e.g., a sound), we immediately and automatically have a perception whether this contact is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Our reaction, typically taking the form of grasping (desire) or aversion (hatred), is what creates the illusion of “self” moment by moment. For the Buddha, there is no fixed “self:” the “self” is a process, made up of these five aggregates, ever changing, and ever dissatisfactory. From this model of the mind can be derived Buddha’s three fundamental aspects of existence: impermanence (*anicca*), egolessness (*anatta*), and suffering (*dukkha*).

All of this is radically different from the Western psychological tradition, in which the existence of at least one “self”—“I” or “me”—is assumed, and often other selves are added, e.g. Freud’s “id,” “ego,” and “superego,” or conscious versus unconscious mind.

Buddhism teaches that there is a way out of the suffering created by our identification with “I,” “me,” and “mine.” By cultivating morality, concentration, and wisdom—both through ethical life choices and through meditation—one is able to increasingly break the habitual link between the perception of pleasant/unpleasant/neutral and the reaction of grasping/aversion. Breaking this link leads to increased acceptance, tolerance, and letting go, and reduces (and eventually eliminates) suffering.

Seen as a form of psychotherapy, Buddhist meditation provides a pathway toward releasing habitual patterns of mind, including dysfunctional forms of identification and projection. This is achieved not by analyzing or discussing the past (as in psychodynamic and a host of other Western therapies), nor by creating new or replacement cognitive structures—as in cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)—but by continually returning the mind to the present moment, and to an awareness of the senses—especially an awareness of the body.

Over the last few decades, a growing number of psychologists and psychotherapists in the West have applied ideas derived from Buddhist psychology and meditation practice in their own approaches to treatment.

Some of the earliest examples of Buddhist or meditative influence in American psychology and psychotherapy can be found in Herbert Benson’s *Relaxation Response* (1975) and Eugene Gendlin’s *Focusing* (1978). Direct borrowings can be seen in the

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, which combines mindfulness meditation and hatha yoga in an 8-week intensive program (Kabat-Zinn, 1990); as well as in Marsha Linehan’s Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), which offers mindfulness skills alongside CBT as a proven treatment for those with borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1993).

Other, more recent example of Buddhist psychology’s migration West can be found in the writings of Mark Epstein (1996), Jeremy Safran (2003), Jack Engler (2003), the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy—including Christopher Germer, Paul Fulton, and others (Germer, 2004).

Insight Improvisation as Meditation and Embodied Buddhist Psychology

Although Insight Improvisation incorporates sitting meditation into its set of practices, all of its forms can be seen as active meditations. Of course, how one feels after doing sitting meditation alone is often different than how one feels after meditating, doing authentic movement, doing physical/vocal warm-ups, and then, for example, doing FreeSong or Psolodrama. The difference lies not only in the fact that Insight Improvisation involves the body, but also in that Insight Improvisation works quite differently than sitting meditation with the thoughts and feelings that arise.

Sitting meditation is a rigorous training in being with phenomena. If a feeling is present, such as frustration, one’s task as meditator is to notice what is happening in the body and mind, to accept what is arising, to notice how it changes and how it passes away. All phenomena—all thoughts and feelings—are regarded as empty; the training is to let go of one’s habitual responses, one’s reactivity, to *not* act in response to what is

arising but simply observe it. The rationale for this, the purpose of meditation, is ultimately to free the meditator from habitual patterns of mind, and achieve a state of enlightenment in which the meditator no longer reacts to positive or negative stimuli with grasping and aversion, thereby ending suffering.

The ultimate goal in Insight Improvisation is the same as that of traditional meditation, but parts of the path it offers are different. Its active exercises engage the practitioner in working with the relationship between awareness and action. In Insight Improvisation, the practitioner is invited to cultivate awareness of thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, etc., just as in a sitting meditation. But rather than sitting with what is arising, the practitioner is encouraged also to move, sound, and/or speak in response to or in expression of what is arising. The rationale for this is that when the practitioner amplifies her inner impulses—including thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations—by expressing them through movement, sound, and words, several interesting things happen:

- 1) The practitioner’s awareness of those impulses is greatly heightened. In addition, she will often find a greater ability to stay present to the flow of new impulses, without becoming distracted.
- 2) The practitioner can work with those impulses in completely new ways—turning them into art through the media of dance, monologue, song, etc.—and through doing so learn to enjoy and discover great richness in impulses that might initially be seen as unpleasant, painful, etc. In this way, she is more available to be moved by her own impulses, have new insights into them, and ultimately, to accept them.

- 3) The practitioner’s expressed impulses are received by a supportive, nonjudgmental witness, who helps model for the practitioner her own ability to witness herself nonjudgmentally.
- 4) The practitioner learns to let go of “good ideas”—the actor’s tendencies to pre-think situations, to be clever, or to hide—and, instead, to work with the body sensations, emotions, and inner imagery unfolding in the present moment.

Also important in Insight Improvisation is the role of others’ presence—and feedback. As is often experienced by performing artists of all kinds, the presence of an observer, a director, or an audience can provide a container for the work that helps increase focus and concentration, and can deepen the overall experience for the performer. This is also true in traditional meditation, where the presence of the teacher or other practitioners in the meditation hall—and the sense of being observed by others—can help one stay steadfast in the practice. In Insight Improvisation, however, this is taken a step farther in the verbal sharing of others’ nonjudgmental, supportive witnessing and feedback, after each improvisation, which helps foster the practitioner’s growing self-awareness.

Insight Improvisation’s form of meditation-in-action has benefits and drawbacks compared to traditional forms of meditation. On the plus side, as mentioned above, involving the body and voice to express what is present can heighten one’s awareness of what is there, and lead to greater acceptance of even unpleasant phenomena. For example, in a shared *vipassana* exercise, or in a Psolodrama, if one notices sadness, the ability to say “I am sad” and to physically embody the sadness can often take the

practitioner on a deeper journey into that feeling and its root causes, often resulting in catharsis, insight, and, frequently, greater acceptance.

The drawback of this approach is that the practitioner can be drawn into a pattern of making more of phenomena rather than less—instead of holding feelings as empty, the practitioner may get caught up in the intensity of his feelings, or become overly attached to the “deep meaning” of those feelings. This can reinforce the individual’s fascination with the uniqueness of his “life drama,” playing into the inherent individualism and narcissism of Western society. As Jeremy Safran writes:

The individual in contemporary culture tends to be narcissistic in the sense that he has a grandiose or inflated sense of his own uniqueness and abilities. This grandiose and hyper-individuated sense of self is a defensive attempt to cope with the underlying sense of fragility and isolation resulting from the breakdown of traditional social structures and unifying webs of meaning. As [Christopher] Lasch (1979) sees it, the institutions of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have developed to fill the cultural void left by the breakdown of traditional cultural institutions. The danger, however, is that psychoanalysis and other forms of psychotherapy can perpetuate or exacerbate the pathology that they are attempting to remedy. By focusing on the enrichment of the self they can create pathological individualism. (Safran, 2003, p. 7)

Safran goes on to add that this narcissistic pattern can lead to problems with developing intimate relationships.

One way of addressing this potential trap lies in approaching Insight Improvisation as a regular practice. Just as with traditional meditation, the repeated and frequent practice of an Insight Improvisation exercise—noticing mindfully, for example, the hundredth time sadness arises, is fully embodied and explored, and then passes away—can lead the practitioner to a greater awareness of his habitual patterns, reactivity, and conditioning, ultimately providing him with greater insight into the empty and ever-

changing nature of existence. As a drama therapist using meditation and Insight Improvisation techniques, I have seen time and again how the reinforcement of these basic ideas—developing mindful and choiceless awareness, lovingkindness for self and others—helps clients break free from cycles of obsessive clinging, self-criticism, and fear.

Insight Improvisation may best be seen not as an alternative to meditation but as a set of practices that accompany and extend meditation. Each Insight Improvisation activity has its own particular approach that highlights a different aspect of awareness. For example, Amplification—in which the practitioner begins with a sound and movement impulse and then amplifies it in a number of ways—is in itself a powerful training in the simple act of noticing the body, parallel to forms of *vipassana* training that highlight the minute details of sensory awareness.

Finally, Insight Improvisation as a practice can make meditative principles and experiences more accessible to those who—for whatever reason—cannot or will not do traditional meditation. Many who have attended Insight Improvisation workshops have had unsatisfying experiences with meditation and are looking for a different approach. For those who are already practicing meditators, Insight Improvisation offers new routes and an expanded “toolkit” for increasing their awareness and acceptance of arising phenomena—including aspects of daily life not always encountered in sitting meditation, e.g.: how our ability to be present and remain aware is affected when communicating or performing; how the body, voice, and emotions express themselves in action and in

relationship with others; and how we gravitate toward certain roles and situations in life and unconsciously shy away from others.³¹

Insight Improvisation as a Theatrical Art Form

Insight Improvisation’s Theatrical Influences

All theater produced today in the United States and in Europe occurs within, or is a response to, the powerful context created by the theatrical revolutions of the twentieth century.

Primary among these was the work and writing of Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), who broke through hundreds of years of tradition and theatrical convention. Not satisfied with the stylized acting and well-made plays of his forebears, Stanislavsky demanded of his Moscow Art Theater actors one thing: the real. He insisted, for example, that rather than indicate shock and grief at the death of a loved one through stock gestures and facial expressions, actors should really feel those feelings (for example, by recalling a similar circumstance), and that their response be an authentic, spontaneous expression in voice, face, and body. Famously, Stanislavsky created a variety of exercises to help his acting students become aware of their habitual approach to performing, and find responses to situations in life that were fresh and real

³¹ Our unconscious attraction and aversion for certain roles is at the heart of Jung’s shadow work—more on this in the subsequent section, “Insight Improvisation’s Debt to Western Psychology,” beginning on page 64.

(Stanislavsky, 1936; Miyazaki, 1998). Seen in this way, Stanislavsky is the grandfather of Insight Improvisation—his was the first form of theater training and exploration designed to heighten the actor’s awareness.

What evolved from Stanislavsky’s approach, as it inspired others in Europe and the U.S., was a new focus on the primacy of the experience of the actor. In America, this eventually took the form of “The Method,” exemplified by director Lee Strasberg and his most famous student, Marlon Brando.

The twentieth century also brought other trends in art: modernism, postmodernism, political, and multi-cultural. Although these were most famously evident in the world of visual art, the impact on performing arts was enormous. Experiments in music, for example, which began early in the century with the dissonant arrangements of such composers as Charles Ives and Edgard Varese, reached their extreme in the work of John Cage—who, as mentioned above, was influenced by Zen Buddhist ideas. Cage created pieces entirely by chance, or out of silence, and modified pianos to produce strange sounds (“20th Century Classical Music,” 2004). Later, the work of Cage, Allan Kaprow, and others, developed into a new form—performance art—which became an important form of experimental theater in the 1960’s. Several forms in Insight Improvisation can be seen as descendents of the pioneering work in performance art—and several have been used as the basis for performance art pieces in recent years.

At the same time, the group theater movement—pioneered by Judith Malina and Julian Beck’s *The Living Theater* in 1947, Jerzy Grotowski’s *Polish Laboratory Theater* in 1959 (Grotowski, 1968); and Joseph Chaikin’s *Open Theater* in 1963 (Chaikin, 1972)—found ways of expressing the political and spiritual ideas of the latter half of the

20th century through experimentation with such elements as the actor’s body, non-traditional movement, interaction with audience, nudity, ritual, and improvisation. One of the master teachers who inspired the creation of Insight Improvisation, Jean-Claude van Itallie, was an original playwright with the Open Theater.

Another thread of development in the theater world was the rise of improvisational techniques, including the work of Viola Spolin (1963), Keith Johnstone (1979, 1999), and others. Their enormously creative and varied contributions to unscripted theater not only changed the performing arts, but strongly influenced other disciplines, including education and psychotherapy (Johnson, 2000, p.12). Insight Improvisation would probably not exist without the work of Spolin and Johnstone.

It is interesting to note that three theater practitioners cited as inspirations for Insight Improvisation, van Itallie, Ruth Zaporah, and Scott Kelman, all are of the same generation. With their creative roots in the 1960’s, they were not only influenced by experiments in the performing arts taking place at that time, but also by that era’s revolutions in politics, individual self-expression, spirituality, gender roles and sexuality, and lifestyles. (More on my own experience of these three theater artists can be found in “Key Theater Teachers: van Itallie, Kelman, and Zaporah,” on page 106)

Insight Improvisation as Theater: Breaking Free of “Performance Mind”

These influences from modern theater—the primacy of the actor’s experience; the juxtaposition of elements from postmodernism and performance art; the physical, spiritual, and improvisational nature of group theater; and the influences of the East and specifically of Buddhism—all come together in Insight Improvisation.

As discussed earlier, Insight Improvisation replaces traditional theater’s focus on performance with an emphasis on the actor’s awareness. One of the useful aspects of this change in focus is that it can allow the actor to break out of habitual ways of approaching her craft.

The actor’s habitual way of thinking is what I refer to as “Performance Mind,” a core concept in Insight Improvisation. Performance mind encompasses a number of actors’ tendencies, each of which have an alternative from an Insight Improvisation point of view—a different set of attitudes or responses that I refer to as “Being Mind.”

Table 1—“Performance Mind” vs. “Being Mind”

“Performance Mind”	“Being Mind”
A desire to secure the approval of the audience, by impressing, entertaining, or gaining their sympathy—often driven by an underlying feeling of insecurity, lack of approval, or of not being loved.	An intention to connect with the audience, to be a present and vulnerable human being with them, motivated by a spirit of lovingkindness— <i>metta</i> —toward oneself, the audience, and toward all beings.
A desire to control what is happening onstage, or to “push” in order to make something happen—e.g., to push emotions to make them bigger, or to push in order to make an improvisation more interesting to the audience.	An intention to <i>let go</i> of control and remain open to what is unfolding moment by moment, enjoying and <i>accepting</i> the unexpected—exercising <i>choiceless awareness</i> . To be open to whatever outcome emerges, trusting that what occurs naturally has its own richness and depth, greater than what is produced by controlling or forcing.
An aversion to performance, characterized by stage fright, butterflies in the stomach, a fear of failure, a fear of making a fool of oneself, and a desire to hide.	A love of performance and embracing of the sensations that occur, including a <i>mindful awareness</i> and <i>acceptance</i> of the physical changes present when one is in front of an audience. Noticing the tendency to project into the future and instead returning the mind to an awareness of what’s actually happening right now—to exercise <i>mindfulness</i> . Honoring the tendency to hide—having <i>metta</i> for the hiding part of oneself—while also being willing to remain present, open, and

“Performance Mind”	“Being Mind”
	vulnerable with the audience.
Strong self-judgment or critique before, during, and after the process of performing.	Noticing and accepting the inner critic without identifying with its messages, then bringing the mind back to the body, reconnecting with the intention to <i>pause, relax, and open—slow down, breathe, and listen.</i>
Lack of connection to the body, the senses, other performers, and the audience—instead being connected mainly to one’s own planning and critical minds.	Appreciating the mind’s ability to plan, and to take what is useful from that, but then to be willing to <i>enter empty, letting go of “good” ideas</i> and returning the mind to a more <i>choiceless awareness</i> of the unfolding present, the body, the senses, other performers and the audience—to reconnect in the here and now.

One example of how I dealt with my own tendency toward being stuck in performance mind comes from a one-man show I created and performed in 1996, *A Naked Man in Boston*. The first act of this theater piece was made up of performed stories and short improvisational structures that the audience could choose from by way of a random selection process. The plan for one of the improvisations, entitled “Naked,” was extremely simple: I would remove my clothes and stand before the audience. I knew in advance that in such a situation, my normal tendency as an actor would be to want to entertain, impress the audience, or to hide, through a number of different means: e.g., being clever or funny, using self-deprecating humor, distraction, or even physically covering up in some way. Instead, I chose beforehand to approach the improvisation completely differently, using Scott Kelman’s guideline: “If you have a good idea, don’t do it.” I had found this guideline particularly inspirational and useful in the past because

it forced me to be fully present—and really naked, stripped even of my own “good” ideas.

On the night when this improvisation was chosen by the audience, what emerged onstage was a very simple improvisation, with a great deal of silence and stillness. Once I removed my clothing, I remember feeling extremely present. I became conscious of each breath, and each gesture I made. Stripped even of my defenses, I stood still—slowing down to take in the moment, to see the audience and to allow myself to be seen by them. Members of the audience shared afterwards that this enabled them to also be simply present, and take in a naked body in a new way. What I discovered was a new freedom as a performer, not to rush through a risky moment, or to try to impress the audience, but to simply be there and appreciate the wonder and strangeness of it all, moment by moment.³²

Insight Improvisation: “Onstage” in the Studio

Although Insight Improvisation has been applied in numerous ways onstage (in my one-person shows as well as shorter performances onstage as part of nontraditional Boston-area theater events such as Gardening at Night and The Performance Cult), it exists as a form of theater primarily in the studio, both one-to-one and in group workshops. Working in the studio strips away many of the trappings of traditional theater: a paying audience, special lighting, scenery, the physical separation of audience

³² For further personal examples of performing onstage using Insight Improvisation techniques, see “In Performance,” beginning on page 147.

seating and performance stage, etc. By doing so, the studio tends to naturally expose and emphasize the basic elements of theater Peter Brook refers to in his seminal work, *The Empty Space* (1968): the actor, the audience, and the space itself. Working in the studio, therefore, is perfect for Insight Improvisation, which is all about stripping away what is unnecessary, and bringing awareness to what is simply there already.

A regular occurrence for those engaged in Insight Improvisation is the sense that the best theater one has ever seen is happening right in the studio, with only workshop participants, or sometimes just one other person, there to see it. This unscripted, spontaneous, self-revelatory theater has a unique quality of freshness and authenticity rarely seen in scripted, rehearsed theater, or in the kind of improvisational theater most audiences have been exposed to—the improv comedy one sees in bars and clubs, in TheaterSports, and on the television program *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*

One example of how Insight Improvisation can lead to spontaneous artistry comes from a 2002 Insight Improvisation weekend workshop, in which the group was doing the Three States movement structure, a form of authentic movement in which a pair moves in eye contact, physical contact, or separately, spontaneously shifting among these three states. Three pairs “performed” this structure for the rest of the group. First, two men moved together with great stillness, silence, and caring, often moving extremely close to one another, barely touching. Their gentle way of interacting had such a profound impact that the audience was nearly brought to tears. The next performance, by two women, had a completely different quality: a wild playfulness that was completely unexpected (one image that arose was that of ponies galloping over open prairie). The final pair, a man and a woman, enacted (safely) what might be described as a barroom brawl waged by

two Neanderthals—a battle of the sexes that elicited belly-laughs from the audience. These performances so galvanized the group that they became reference points for the entire weekend. To me, they reinforced the power of Insight Improvisation as a valid, endlessly creative, and deeply moving form of theater.

Insight Improvisation’s Debt to Western Psychology

Freud’s Influence

As with all forms of therapeutic work in the 20th and 21st centuries, Insight Improvisation has been influenced by the thinking of Sigmund Freud. Although my own work resonates more closely to the work of some of Freud’s students, including C.G. Jung and Otto Rank (see below), certain fundamental Freudian concepts provide an interesting lens through which to view Insight Improvisation:

Self-Analysis. Beginning in the mid-1890’s Freud began a process of self-analysis that continued throughout his life. Much of Freud’s published work, in particular *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/1965a) draws upon and details this process. As one can understand, given the repressed nature of Viennese society at the time, Freud did not feel that he could be completely candid in his writing:

The only dreams open to my choice were my own and those of my patients undergoing psychoanalytic treatment. But I was precluded from using the latter material by the fact that in its case the dream-processes were subject to an undesirable complication due to the presence of neurotic features. But if I was to report my own dreams, it inevitably followed that I should have to reveal to the public gaze more of the intimacies of my mental life than I liked, or than is normally necessary for any writer who is a man of science and not a poet. Such was the painful but unavoidable necessity; and I have submitted to it rather than totally

abandon the possibility of giving the evidence for my psychological findings. Naturally, however, I have been unable to resist the temptation of taking the edge off some of my indiscretions by omission and substitutions. But whenever this has happened, the value of my instances has been very definitely diminished. I can only express a hope that readers of this book will put themselves in my difficult situation and treat me with indulgence, and further, that anyone who finds any sort of reference to himself in my dreams may be willing to grant me the right of freedom of thought—in my dream-life, if nowhere else. (Freud, S., 1900/1965a, xxiv)

Freud’s willingness to have his own psyche serve as a laboratory to achieve a greater understanding of the human mind was brave and revolutionary in his day. His apology above is understandable taken in context, and serves as a warning to those who may not be prepared for his embarking on a new level of candor and vulnerability for a man of science. I see many parallels—and just as many differences—between Freud’s journey of self-analysis and the journey I have taken with Insight Improvisation. Freud’s level of self-observation bears resemblance to the meditative journey—how, in *vipassana* for example, one opens to the entire contents of one’s in-the-moment experience. The difference, of course, lies in the goal: Freud was searching for structure, theory, and explanation; the practitioner of *vipassana* is cultivating acceptance and non-grasping (in fact, Buddhist teachings caution *against* searching for explanations and root causes—an endless search which may not ultimately address the root issue of human suffering). Similar to Freud’s vulnerability in entering and working with his own dream-life, the artistic journey in Insight Improvisation is one of vulnerability, listening to what the body expresses through movement, noticing how sensation spurs inner imagery, following these threads into embodiment of personal material—and, like Freud, being willing to share those discoveries with others. Once again, the goal is somewhat different: both Freud and the Insight Improvisation practitioner may strive for understanding, but while

Freud is attempting to systematize his view of the psyche, the Insight Improvisation actor is focused on her own journey of personal growth, wherever it may lead. Not surprisingly, and despite his protestation above, I am drawn to the “poet” in Freud and his successors, and as an actor and drama therapist feel that revealing my own inner life to the “public gaze”—to my collaborators and (when appropriate) my clients—is a key part of the Insight Improvisation approach.

There is another parallel worth mentioning, which is how Freud was actively developing, through the path of self-analysis, his own inner witness. In a letter Freud wrote in November, 1897, he succinctly described the rationale for using these methods: “Self-analysis is impossible in fact. I can only analyze myself by means of what I learn from the outside (as if I were another)” (Chiriac, n.d., p.2). This reminds me a great deal of my own experiences both with authentic movement and with Psolodrama, in which my own clarity and insight into what has just occurred as a mover or psoloist often do not crystallize until I have heard the perspective of another—the outside witness—and until I have been given a chance to articulate to them my own experience. This exchange of information from a perspective outside the pool of raw psychic material parallels Freud’s process of gathering his own dream material, parapraxes (“Freudian slips”), etc., and analyzing them as if he were “another.”

Structures and Tools of Psychoanalysis. Freud’s ways of conceptualizing the structure of the psyche—into conscious and unconscious; id, ego, and superego—are powerful models which have formed the basis for practically all modern psychological reasoning. (Jung’s work on the self and the unconscious—see below—owes much to Freud as foundational thinking.) As Anna Freud, Sigmund’s daughter, points out in *The*

Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense, not all of the parts of the psyche can be easily or directly understood:

We all know that the three psychic institutions vary greatly in their accessibility to observation. Our knowledge of the id—which was formerly called the system Ucs. [unconscious]—can be acquired only through the derivatives which make their way into the systems Pcs. [preconscious] and Cs. [conscious] If within the id a state of calm and satisfaction prevails, so that there is no occasion for any instinctual impulse to invade the ego in search of gratification and there to produce feelings of tension and unpleasure [sic], we can learn nothing of the id contents. It follows, at least theoretically, that the id is not under all conditions open to observation. (A. Freud, 1966, p.5)

Anna Freud goes on to detail the tools of psychoanalysis—designed to help get past the difficulties in observing the id, as well as its interaction with the contents and defenses of the ego—including free association, interpretation of dreams, interpretation of symbols, the analysis of parapraxes, and working with transference. Two of these approaches have been particularly inspirational in my own work as a drama therapist using Insight Improvisation:

Free association. Freud’s use of this technique has, at times, an almost Sherlock Holmes-like analytical brilliance (his story of the forgotten word “*aliquis*”³³ being but one example). In his *Autobiographical Study* (1925/1952), Freud recounts the origins and use of the free association approach:

Instead of urging the patient to say something upon some particular subject, I now asked him to abandon himself to a process of free association, i.e. to say whatever came into his head, while ceasing to give any conscious direction to his thoughts. It was essential, however, that he should bind himself to report literally everything that occurred to his self-perception and not to give way to critical objections which sought to put certain associations on one side on the ground that they were not

³³ From Freud’s *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1965, pp. 8-13).

sufficiently important or that they were irrelevant or that they were altogether meaningless.

...[Free association] exposes the patient to the least possible amount of compulsion, it never allows of contact being lost with the actual current situation, it guarantees to a great extent that no factor in the structure of the neurosis will be overlooked and that nothing will be introduced into it by the expectations of the analyst. It is left to the patient in all essentials to determine the course of the analysis and the arrangement of the material; any systematic handling of particular symptoms or complexes thus becomes impossible. In complete contrast to what happened with hypnotism and with the urging method, interrelated material makes its appearance at different times and at different points in the treatment. To a spectator, therefore—though in fact there can be none—an analytic treatment would seem completely obscure.

...Another advantage of the method is that it need never break down. It must theoretically always be possible to have an association, provided that no conditions are made as to its character. (Freud, 1952, pp. 74-78)

Several structures in Insight Improvisation bear resemblance to free association, including the various forms of Shared *Vipassana*, spontaneous writing (shared in the FreeText activity), FreeSong, and Psolodrama. These parallel Freudian free association in that the patient is left completely to follow their own spontaneous associations—the therapist is not directive in any way once the exercise is begun. However, these approaches tend to differ from free association in two ways:

- 1) They are not just verbal—each is an embodied improvisation, based in meditative awareness. The result is that the material that arises often seems to come from a deeper or more truthful place than in a free association—in embodiment the patient finds it very hard to be “stuck in their head” (or, in Freud’s terms, stuck in their ego), and rapidly finds that their body and its moment-to-moment experience—a more direct channel for the id—greatly informs what comes through in their speaking.

- 2) Rather than being merely stream-of-consciousness, the artistic nature of these exercises means that they build in their imagery and depth. As the highly respected performer and teacher Tony Montanaro has written:

I disagree with the notion that improvisation is an exercise in free association. Free-associative improvs are random, haphazard. They stay on one level. They often don't build, escalate, or resolve. They often don't reveal anything or challenge anyone. Improvisation (as I teach it) is a probing, accumulative, and high-risk expedition into the unknown. (Montanaro, 1995, p. 168)

It is also worth noting that Freud, in the cases he writes about, will very often direct the patient to free associate on a particular dream, forgotten word, etc. Although I too have done this on occasion in my own sessions as a drama therapist, Insight Improvisation is designed to be closer in spirit to the “pure” free association Freud refers to above. The Insight Improvisation therapist encourages the client to “enter empty” and see what arises, rather than bring specific content into the improvisation to associate with. This emphasis on entering empty also encourages the practitioner to return to an awareness of the body and senses—rather than try to tackle a particular “problem” at the level of ego/intellect, the improviser is diving into the ocean of the uncensored present moment, inviting the greatest participation of the unconscious.

Dream interpretation and the analysis of symbols. Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/1965a) claimed for science what until that point had been seen as mystical or merely illogical. In addition to the root concept—that “a dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (repressed) wish” (Freud, 1925/1952, p. 85)—Freud also hypothesized how dreams are formed:

I have given the name of *dream-work* to the process which, with the cooperation of the censorship, converts the latent thoughts into the

manifest content of the dream. It consists of a peculiar way of treating the preconscious material of thought, so that its component parts become *condensed*, its mental emphasis becomes *displaced*, and the whole of it is translated into visual images or *dramatized*, and filled out by a deceptive *secondary elaboration*. The dream-work is an excellent example of the processes occurring in the deeper, unconscious layers of the mind, which differ considerably from the familiar normal processes of thought. It also displays a number of archaic characteristics, such as the use of a *symbolism* (in this case of a predominantly sexual kind) which it has since also been possible to discover in other spheres of mental activity. (Freud, 1925/1952, pp. 86-87)

In Insight Improvisation, the Life/Dream Scene and Psolodrama activities invite the improviser to explore their dream material in new ways. In fact, Psolodrama in several ways parallels Freud’s description of dream-work, above, particularly in the condensation and dramatization of material, and in the frequent use of symbolism. Psolodrama usually results not in the enactment of a prior dream but instead in a waking embodiment of fantasy that has many of the qualities of a sleeping dream: a lack of logic or faithfulness to place, time, or character (perhaps what Freud means by displacement, above); a richness of symbol and metaphor; and varied emotions one might associate with the dream state.³⁴

In one-to-one therapy, I have used these Insight Improvisation techniques as a Freudian analyst would use psychoanalytic tools—looking for clues into the content and interactions of the id, ego, and superego, and providing interpretation to my client. At the same time, because these are embodied activities in which the client is encouraged to

³⁴ In the documentary film *Matter of Heart*, C. G. Jung says that “what happens in the dream state is more real than the what happens in the waking state” (N. Warren-White, personal communication, December 23, 2004)—a feeling I have often had upon enacting or witnessing a dream-like Psolodrama.

develop their own inner witness, the overall emphasis is not on my interpretation, but on the experience and insight of the client. This represents probably my greatest difference from Freud: his model of therapy seems to suggest the analyst as expert detective; in my own work, I am continually trying to empower the patient to make their own discoveries and, through doing so, strengthen their inner witness and their ability to effect behavioral change.

Jung’s Contribution

When I refer to depth analysis, I’m referring to certain clinical psychological processes. The client/patient who operates with the analyst to enter the unconscious, a realm below that of daily consciousness. This is done by using dreams, being particularly sensitive to images and their associations, becoming familiar with what Jung called ‘active imagination’ and generally accepting a symbolic understanding of life events, inner or outer. The process itself is one of discovering the living reality of the unconscious. (Whitehouse, 1979/1999b, p. 77)

C. G. Jung in many ways deepened Freud’s work, broadening its concerns beyond the personal to the cultural, spiritual or transpersonal, and existential. Jung has had a major influence on a number of fields, from the creative arts therapies (including his fundamental role in the movement therapy work of Mary Starks Whitehouse, quoted above, and others) to the 12-step model of addiction treatment (“Carl Jung,” 2004, paras. 3-4). As with Freud, there are perhaps too many Jungian concepts worth noting that have had an influence on my work. Here are three that stand out as foundational for Insight Improvisation—the collective unconscious, the archetype, and the shadow:

The Collective Unconscious. This Jungian concept I strongly relate to the Buddhist theme (perhaps most pronounced in Tibetan Buddhism) of the universal

interconnectedness of all beings—a theme also present in a number of spiritual/religious traditions. Jung posits that each individual has his or her own link to an infinite well of shared human experience: in the same way that the physical development of the human embryo recapitulates the stages of our evolutionary development, so too does our psyche contain within it the elements of the development of human consciousness, including the root myths, images, archetypes, symbols, and stories universal to all cultures and times.

Of the collective unconscious, Jung wrote:

The symbol-producing function of our dreams is thus an attempt to bring the original mind of man into “advanced” or differentiated consciousness, where it has never been before and where, therefore, it has never been subjected to critical self-reflection. For, in ages long past, that original mind was the whole of man’s personality. As he developed consciousness, so his conscious mind lost contact with some of that primitive psychic energy. And the conscious mind has never known that original mind; for it was discarded in the process of evolving the very differentiated consciousness that alone could be aware of it.

Yet it seems that what we call the unconscious has preserved primitive characteristics that formed part of the original mind. It is to these characteristics that the symbols of dream constantly refer, as if the unconscious sought to bring back all the old things from which mind freed itself as it evolved—illusions, fantasies, archaic thought forms, fundamental instincts, and so on.

This is what explains the resistance, even fear, that people often experience in approaching unconscious matters. These relict contents are not merely neutral or indifferent. On contrary, they are so highly charged that they are often more than merely uncomfortable. They can cause real fear. The more they are repressed, the more they spread through the whole personality in the form of a neurosis.

...As the evolution of the embryonic body repeats its prehistory, so the mind also develops through a series of prehistoric stages. The task of dreams is to bring back a sort of “recollection” of the prehistoric, as well as the infantile world, right down to the level of the most primitive instincts. Such recollections can have a remarkably healing effect in certain cases, as Freud saw long ago. (Jung, 1964, pp. 98-99)

In my own experience, particularly over the past year delving deeply into the Insight Improvisation technique of Psolodrama, I and others have experienced time and time again the healing power of connecting with what Jung describes as the primitive psychic energy. What this looks like in practice is a seemingly infinite variety of characters, symbols, and stories that have in common a sense of *numinosity* (Jung, 1960, p. 115; 1964, p. 99), a quality that is simultaneously mysterious, sacred, and filled with feeling. A few examples from Psolodramas I have done:

- Becoming an ancient rotting tree speaking its wisdom of disintegration and letting go.
- Becoming a giant Mud Monster, the size of a mountain, laughing a deep cavernous laugh as it tells me there is no goal.
- Dialoguing with an old ornery wolf-spirit, conveying wildness and wisdom, and then taking that wolf-spirit into my own heart.
- Speaking to God about the wonder of life, and the infinite sadness of our limited ability to feel and experience in our mortal bodies.³⁵

It is important to note that not all Psolodramas draw upon the collective or primitive unconscious. Beginning a Psolodrama, one purposely enters empty, not deciding in advance on a particular issue or story, but seeing what arises. Often what

³⁵ According to Blatner (2000), Moreno referred to “psychodramas that involve the exploration of attitudes towards some abstract idea or general phenomenon” as “axiodramas” (p. 157). These include role plays in which the protagonist reviews “their relationships with God, a tempter, Satan, a guiding spirit, death, the future (personified), or perfection” (p. 237). Psolodrama frequently takes the form of a potent one-person axiodrama.

emerges is a piece of the personal unconscious—a scene or dilemma inspired by infant, childhood, or adult events, dreams, or fantasies. These Psolodramas often have a distinctly different feeling from ones drawn from the collective unconscious—great emotion can still be present (for example, my feeling of catharsis as I spoke with my mother while still a fetus in her womb, telling her I love her and wanting her to be happy)—but without the feeling of the numinous, sacred presence.

The Archetype. Several of the examples I cite above are also instances of invoking what Jung would refer to as an archetype, a symbol emerging from the collective unconscious. James Hillman, in *The Myth of Analysis*, writes of the relationship between the archetype of the *anima* or inner feminine, creativity, and the soul:

Jung has made it possible for us to know this notion of the creative better. His elaboration of the anima as a function of every man’s personality moves the discussion of creative experience from the special case of the artist to the case of each of us. Each of us has an anima and through our experience of “her” we can approach what goes on in others.

...The representations of the anima in Greek mythology, where the archetype appears in the configurations of nymphs, maenads, amazons, nereids, and so on, or in the more numinous and articulated divine forms of Persephone-Kore, Aphrodite, Artemis, Hebe, Athena, refer to a structure of consciousness relevant to the lives of both men and women.

If we have found the opus in psychology to be the soul, and if anima is *âme*, *alma*, *Seele*, “soul,” will not psychological creativity have something to do with engendering soul or psyche through anima? ...The modern use of the term “anima,” following Jung, takes it to be a personification of the soul, and anima figures are supposed to be soul images that reveal the soul’s character and predilections.

...The image of the soul-personality as an opposite to the usual ego is contrasexual; therefore, empirically, in a man this “soul” is feminine, i.e., the anima.

However, the soul presents aspects that extend beyond a man’s unconscious femininity—his dream figures of favorite women and his inner personality. These wider aspects touch questions of loss of soul, immortality and redemption, human vitality, sacredness and relatedness, and they also evoke the cosmic *anima mundi*, intimating a world-soul, or the psyche at common levels of subjectivity. Soul, psyche, anima, and animus...have etymological associations with body experiences and are concrete, sensuous, and emotional, like life itself. (Hillman, 1972, pp. 50-51)

Hillman’s writing here resonates deeply with my own experience of Insight Improvisation as a channel to my own inner feminine. Although I have experienced the embodiment of the anima perhaps more intentionally in other forms of drama therapy (e.g., through the enactment of a fairy tale in which my anima plays a key role), the way my anima has risen up spontaneously in my own work with open improvisation such as Psolodrama has led to profound experiences—being present to my own inner tenderness and motherly caring; heartache, sense of tragedy, and loneliness; and feminine sensuality and sexuality. Often the emotion after these experiences is one of sad joy—a bittersweet smile through tears—and of integration, as if I had brought forward a part of myself that was longing to be seen and understood.

Of course, the anima is but one of many archetypes, and through my work with Life/Dream Scenes and Psolodrama I have seen an incredible richness and variety of archetypal roles emerge: from powerful kings and young heroines to tortured peasants and old bums; from nature spirits such as trees, whales, wolves, and snakes, to fantasy monsters and deities.

From a drama therapy perspective, archetypes can be viewed through the lens of role theory, which states that a healthy person is able to flexibly take on a variety of roles,

not becoming too attached to any one role, or out of balance in terms of the roles they are playing in everyday life (Landy, 2000).

Often in Insight Improvisation a role will emerge that feels so fundamental, so inevitable, it feels as if it were always there—such as the Mud Monster mentioned above. The following is an excerpt from a Psolodrama—which I experienced while working with a peer, who served as my witness—on April 1st, 2004. I am playing both roles—the Mud Monster (MM), as well as myself, the Protagonist—and fully entering each role using my voice and my body:

MM: (in a huge deep voice) AHHHH...I am a monster made of clay. I am all powerful. I feel goood. And I neeeeed nothhhhing. I am as big as a building. When I move people flee in terror. HA HA! But I’m not mean. HO HO! I do nice things for the people. I make them mud buildings. I build bridges across rivers. I love to help out. I’m dirty and messy. I’m probably smelly. I’m so comfortable in my own muddy being. I am wise, yes—having been alive since the dawn of time, made of all the burbling mud that has ever been. There is no goal, Joel. There is no goal, Joel. Don’t you get it? That you are just made of mud? (louder) YOU THINK YOU’RE UP TO SOMETHING? GETTING THINGS DONE? (in a thundering voice) WHEN YOU’RE LYING IN THE EARTH AT THE END OF THE DAY *WHO WILL GIVE TWO SHITS!?! Be like me, Joel. No goal, Joel. Just mud—smelly mud. It feels good to vibrate with brown mud. Ohhhh...*

Protagonist: (in fear and awe) How...how can I be like you? My life feels so...I don’t know...structured and compartmentalized [...] I want to break the cells of this spreadsheet and let them explode with mud!

MM: (HUGE voice) YES LET IT FLOW!!!!

Protagonist: But I can’t—I have to make money—I have to show up on time for my girlfriend—

MM: (thundering, shaking the building) LET IT GO JOEL!!! What the fuck—you may die tomorrow. Feel the mud in

your veins. We’re all just MUD. MUD! Feel it!
OOOOOOH!!

Protagonist: Ah, ah, I need an injection of mud—can you give me one?

MM: YES—open mind and heart. (Gives injection.)

Protagonist: Aaaaah!!! (Shaking with sound.) Oh thank you! Thank you...

MM: You and me we gotta go mud bathin’ together sometime...

My experience of doing this improvisation—which left me feeling joyful, satisfied, deeply moved, excited, and somewhat in awe—is echoed by Jung’s description of the power of archetypes:

The archetypes have, when they appear, a distinctly numinous character which can only be described as “spiritual,” if “magical” is too strong a word. ...Often it drives with unexampled passion and remorseless logic towards its goal and draws the subject under its spell, from which despite the most desperate resistance he is unable, and finally no longer even willing, to break free, because the experience brings with it a depth and fulness [sic] of meaning that was unthinkable before. (Jung, 1960, pp. 115-116)

The Shadow. Robert Bly, in his marvelous work *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* (1988) imagines the Jungian shadow as the bag we all drag behind us. Another way to think of the shadow is that it is both a part of the psyche—the unowned, unlooked-at, undesired, or what we perceive as shameful or even undesired parts of ourselves³⁶—as well as an archetype, represented by symbols of evil: the villain, the snake, the dark prince, Satan (Spencer, n.d.).

³⁶ Note that the shadow can also contain positive parts of ourselves that we tend to project onto others—e.g., those qualities we envy in others or are in awe of.

For example, a client who often plays the serious, burdened king in life, may gravitate toward a playful, mischievous child role when doing improvisation or drama therapy—this shadow role is not their own invention, but draws from the infinite well of collective archetypes we are all familiar with. Bly describes in detail how we tend to project our shadow onto others—how, for example, a man will give his “witch” away, projecting onto his wife, leaving the man sensitive and gentle, but ineffectual (1988, pp. 29-31). As Bly puts it, the work that needs to be done with the shadow, ultimately, is for us to not only become aware of its nature but to fully confront and integrate it—to *eat* our shadow:

It is proper to ask then, “How does one go about eating the shadow or retrieving a projection, practically?”

In daily life one might suggest making the sense of smell, taste, touch, and hearing more acute, making holes in your habits, visiting primitive tribes, playing music, creating frightening figures in clay, playing the drum, being alone for a month, regarding yourself as a genial criminal. ...A man might try being a witch at odd times of the day, and see how it feels, but it has to be done playfully. He might develop a witch laugh and tell fairy stories...

For the man, when he figures out which woman or women are holding his witch, he can go to that woman, greet her cordially, and say, “I want my witch back. Give it to me.” A curious smile will come over her face, and she may hand it back or she may not. If she does the man should excuse himself, turn to the left, facing the wall, and eat it. ...Even if the person who carries the witch or giant or dwarf is dead, the encounter is often helpful.

There are many other ways to eat the shadow, or retrieve the projection, or lessen the length of the bag, and we all know dozens of them. ...If we want our witch back we write about her; if we want our spiritual guide back we write about the spiritual guide rather than passively experience the guide in another person. ...If language doesn’t seem right at the moment, painting or sculpture may be right, or making images with watercolors. When we paint the witch with conscious intention, we soon find out whose house she’s in. So [eating the shadow]

involves activity, imagination, hunting, asking. “Always cry for what you want.” (Bly, 1988, pp. 42-43)

Insight Improvisation helps one to become aware of and integrate the shadow in two ways that Bly alludes to: through the heightening of awareness that comes with meditation (“making the sense of smell, taste, touch, and hearing more acute”) and through enactment (“try being a witch at odd times of the day, and see how it feels,” and doing it playfully).

For me personally, practicing *vipassana* meditation has been a potent, and at times almost overwhelming path of facing my shadow. On a silent meditation retreat of, say, 8 to 12 days, in which one is not permitted to speak, read, or write, or even make eye contact with others, one is forced to face oneself, one’s projections, and one’s habitual habits of thinking and behaving. Much of what arises on retreat is shadow material: frustration, rage, loneliness, sexual desire, sadness, grief—as well as a feeling of meaninglessness or pointlessness (the shadow of all my big plans and visions). Although there is some opportunity for discussion with a teacher, the primary mode is to sit with whatever is arising—for example, to *feel* anger as it fills the body, and to notice how it arises and how it passes away. Although Insight Improvisation in its typical forms (short workshops and individual work) cannot match the rigor of a lengthy retreat, practitioners are still forced to confront, through shorter meditations and related exercises, their shadow material, and in incremental ways develop their capacity for awareness and acceptance.

Psolodrama, Life/Dream Scene, and related Insight Improvisation activities provide a perfect context in which to explore the human shadow through enactment. One

example comes from one-to-one work I witnessed in March of 2004: Richard³⁷, the psoloist, is a man of roughly 40 years old, who has been struggling with finding a steady and fulfilling career, and feels a pervasive lack of confidence into his life. The following is an excerpt from Richard’s Psolodrama:

Jesus: (standing with arms stretched out to each side) Jesus on the cross watching the sun set. Beautiful sunset behind the mountains, shiver across his shoulders, the dusk of life. Good night-ness, goodbye-ness. Shedding of light, drawing of darkness, aloneness, the quietude of 3am. No more pain, just silence. [I am] Jesus and it doesn’t matter at 3am in the dark silence. I am alone with the wind. Stirring morning dove, restless in his sleep, deep shivers throughout the body. Step near—I want to come down!!! I want to watch the sun come up with my feet on the earth! I don’t like it up here!! When will I have suffered enough? My arms are sore—when will I have suffered enough? When may this aching body feel the triumph of a lived life? Alas I’m getting old on this cross. [I’m] not doing this for you! I’m doing this for me. It’s a selfish thing—I’m being selfish! WAKE UP! WAKE UUUUUPP!!! Welcome the sun into your heart because you love the way it feels! It’s not about sharing warmth with others! Let yourself feel good—feel good. Ow. My body aches— tense.... I am Jesus. You will remember me. Like a sun in the purple sky rising above the mountain range each morning, that beauty you’ll remember and call it Jesus—“Oh Jesus—my God—Jesus Christ that’s beautiful”—and you’ll remember how good you feel. Good God! Good God! Almighty Jesus. Jesus.

(He stretches his arms. With his hand in front of face, he curls his legs, breaths, sighs, and comes into a sitting position, kneels, stretches, crouches, lays on his belly, shakes his head, and makes sounds.)

³⁷ Names and distinguishing details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals referred to in this document.

(He stretches his arms out against the wall, once again in a crucifix position. He speaks in a broken down old man voice, like an old cowboy or drunk.)

Old man: Who am I? I'm Jesus, I'm Jesus Christ. That's right, I'm the savior of the human race. That's right, don't forget I'm Jesus. I've lived a long life on this earth, my choice, no one else's. I've had many women, many men, and many drinks. (He stands.) Now it's time to cash it in, yep. I coulda been different. I think I made the best choice, yes I do. I think I did...

(Richard transforms into another character pointing at the old man.)

Interrogator: (In a serious voice) Jesus, what are you avoiding? What did you decide not to see in your life? You decrepit old man—what pain have you been hiding from all these years? What is it?

Old man: I need to think about that. Need to think about that...

I see three aspects of Richard's shadow emerging in this improvisation. The first is Richard's inner Jesus, a role he may feel is a undeserved—to be seen as the most divine human being ever to have lived. Another shadow figure is the broken down old man, corrupt, a failure, perhaps representing Richard's deepest fears about himself and what he could eventually become. Finally, the other role Richard becomes, the interrogator of the old man, is a also a shadow role for Richard—like Jesus, the interrogator is the embodiment of what Richard would like to be but is not: rigorous, confident, questioning authority. The appearance of the interrogator marks a shift toward integration for Richard; rather than be at the mercy of his inner critic (as I had seen in previous improvisations), Richard was able to become this sharp energy and use it to raise valid and important questions—what have I been avoiding and what pain am I hiding from?

Other Influences of Western Psychology/Psychotherapy

In addition to the Creative Arts Therapies, such as drama therapy (discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section), several other key figures and movements in psychology have proven important in my thinking about Insight Improvisation as a form of therapy:

Otto Rank. A student of Freud's, a younger man who was somewhat like a son to him, Rank eventually broke away from the mainstream of psychoanalysis. He brought an artist's perspective to his thinking about the psyche, and was later seen as being ahead of his time, a forerunner of later developments in psychology. I am particularly inspired by Rank's idea of the artist as a channel for expressing society's unconscious, thereby spurring on and shaping cultural development (Menaker, 1982).

Wilhelm Reich and Body-Oriented Psychotherapy. Reich's approach began with a focus on sexuality, which later developed into a more holistic process of freeing the body (and psyche) from its "armored" state. Also originally a student of Freud, Reich influenced many others who followed, including the developers of Bioenergetics, Alexander Lowen and John Pierrakos (Dunn & Greene, 2002). Insight Improvisation, with its focus on the body's present state; the mind's awareness of the body; and what messages, emotions, and imagery the body carries for the mind; owes a fundamental debt to Reich and the field he pioneered. (More on the importance of the body in therapy appears below, and in the subsequent section, "Insight Improvisation as a Creative Arts Therapy," beginning on page 86.)

Carl Rogers. The developer of client-centered therapy and a founder of the movement toward a more humanistic psychotherapy, Carl Rogers' example models for

me an emphasis on listening and empathy; following instead of leading with groups as well as individuals; and bringing a quality of unconditional positive regard in every interaction. Rogers’ presence, as seen, for example, in the famous “Gloria” film (*Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*, 1965), exemplifies the quality of *metta* in a therapist.

Fritz Perls. Inspired by Moreno, Rogers, Reich, and others, Perls developed Gestalt therapy (Perls, 1966, 1969), which in practice focuses on “the here and now,” and uses active techniques such as the Empty Chair exercise (originated by Moreno but adapted by Perls). Qualities of Perls I am influenced by include his challenging, mischievous, and rigorous presence; his intuitive and creative qualities; and his bold use of embodiment. His work also resonates strongly with the idea of mindfulness, developing the client’s appreciation of the richness of the present moment. The Empty Chair technique, in which Perls encouraged his clients to play all the roles, is a direct ancestor of Insight Improvisation’s Psolodrama technique (Litt, 2000).

Co-counseling. Although the history of co-counseling (also known as “Re-evaluation Co-Counseling” or RC) is mired in scandal and controversy,³⁸ the basic format, in which two peers come together to serve as witness and counselor for one another, is parallel to the peer work I have done using Insight Improvisation, especially meeting to witness and do Psolodrama. There are two key difference between standard co-counseling and Insight Improvisation peer work: first, Insight Improvisation peer sessions begin with meditation, which helps both participants begin in a more present,

³⁸ See the *Re-evaluation Counseling Resources Site*: <http://www.cocowebs.com/liberaterc/>.

empathic way; second, all Insight Improvisation exercises are fully embodied—rather than just talk about an issue, one explores the issue through improvisational role-play.

Transpersonal Psychology (TP). This field has its origins in the integrative work of Jung, Aldous Huxley, Teilhard de Chardin, Abraham Maslow, Roberto Assagioli, and Stan Grof, and continues to be developed by Ken Wilber, Eckhart Tolle, and others (Daniels, 2003). What these individuals have in common is a desire to link the psychological to the spiritual, and by doing so, to attempt to map the universal experience of what it is to exist and be human. The word “transpersonal” conveys the idea of “beyond the personal.”

“Transpersonal Psychology” is...concerned with the study of those states and processes in which people experience a deeper or wider sense of who they are, or a sense of greater connectedness with others, nature, or the “spiritual” dimension. ...A common assumption in transpersonal psychology is that transpersonal experiences involve a higher mode of consciousness in which the ordinary mental-egoic self is transcended. (Daniels, 2003)

Like other kinds of transpersonal psychology, Insight Improvisation, particularly when used as a therapeutic modality or in peer collaboration, offers participants powerful means to become more present to a consciousness larger than their day-to-day concerns. This can happen in several ways, through traditional meditation (especially the *metta* practice), the various forms of active meditation, as well as through improvisations—such as Psolodrama—that invite the practitioner to tap into their intuition as a channel to the collective unconscious.

Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) and related fields. Over the past few decades, researchers in a number of related fields have begun to dispel the notion of the separation of mind and body—a dualism with origins in the philosophy of Descartes (Haruki, 1998).

Candace Pert, a neuroscientist who has done fundamental brain research with the National Institute of Health since the 1970’s, sees recent advances in understanding the chemistry of the body pointing to new way of viewing the mind and emotions:

The anatomical distribution pattern of neuropeptides and their receptors—being enriched in several “nodal points” like the dorsal horn of the spinal cord and other sensory input areas—suggests that all sensations and perceptions are filtered through our emotions. ...Modulation of receptors at nodal points by the various neuropeptides regulate which memories, perceptions and sensations readily percolate across synapses up the neuroaxis to emerge as conscious thought and which get suppressed in the subconscious or unconscious mind. The subconscious mind is located, not only in the back of the brain, but through the network of peptidergic interconnections spanning the autonomic ganglia, end organs, immune system and even the skin. **THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND IS YOUR BODY!!**

...The mind has potential access to every molecule and cell of the body through the psychosomatic network. Behavior takes place at the level of the whole organism, the sum of all decisions, conscious and unconscious, which are constantly being made from moment to moment. Because of the network rather than hierarchical organization of our bodyminds, old unconscious traumas lodged deep in the body (the intestines, for example which are a very rich source of neuropeptides) can “take command” and lead us to irrational or destructive behaviors. The ideal state for perfect health is one of free-flowing communication, integration, wholeness.

Mindbody techniques such as meditation, yogic breathing, conscious movement and massage are powerful tools for enhancing consciousness and enlightening “dark,” “blocked-off” areas of the psychosomatic network where pain and disease-causing trauma can persist in the form of “somatoemotional cysts” (as John Upledger has called them). (Pert, 1998, p. 151)

What I take from Pert’s writing, and other research I have done in the relationship between body, mind, emotions, and embodiment—for example, Miyazaki’s work on the relationship between imagination and the body (1998)—is that there is an emerging scientific basis for why Insight Improvisation seems to have such profound and healing power. The combination of meditation (increasing one’s awareness of blocked areas in

the body-mind network) with movement, embodiment, and enactment, (which join bodily awareness with a full engagement of voice and imagination) forms a holistic approach to fostering awareness, release, and healing of current and old tensions, traumas, and dysfunctional patterns.

Insight Improvisation as a Creative Arts Therapy

The Creative Arts Therapies (CATs), and, in particular, drama therapy, have proven central to the development of Insight Improvisation, and to my own development as a therapist, coach, and facilitator of groups. Certain individuals and schools of thought have been particularly important.

Antecedents to Drama Therapy

Drama therapy’s earliest roots are in shamanic traditions dating back to the beginnings of civilization (Snow, 2000). Shamanism is often cited by drama therapists as the primordial source—Snow’s argument, for example, is that the healing rituals used by shamans were performances that had many of the features of theater, including impressive make-up, lighting, sound effects, etc. However, overviews of the field (Edwards, 1995) indicate that shamanism is a set of traditions based on ecstatic trance states, lucid dreaming, and “out-of-body” experiences. Although no form of drama therapy I have come across uses such trance states—in fact, drama therapy almost universally relies on both therapist and client being completely present with one another in the moment—one could, however, make a more solid claim that modern-day drama

therapy resembles theatrical/spiritual rituals used by ancient cultures. Alice Lovelace, in an article on Augusto Boal’s work and social change, writes:

In pre-European Christianity communities such as the Arawaks, Celtic, and some West African and Asiatic cultures, magic was in the religion which was the theater. Western European Christianity removed the magic from religion and invested it in their theater. The two periods could also be characterized as the age of the people’s theater and the age of people in the theater. In the aboriginal theater, the community (artists were always a part of the community) gathered in the open, under the sky, nature providing the scenery and backdrop. The action was interdisciplinary, using mask, songs, dance, ritual, and unscripted so that the audience/community was free to intervene and shape it to their needs. This theater was under the authority of the community. Together they told their stories reflecting their values and world view (Lovelace, 1996).

As this description implies, drama therapy represents a reintegration of the parts of theater—ritual, community, healing, and spirituality—that were split off in theater’s development in western civilization.

Drama therapy in its modern incarnation began with Jacob Levy Moreno, who, in Vienna in 1913, began developing psychodrama, sociodrama, and a host of techniques for incorporating role-play into therapeutic situations, as well as other ways of working with groups, such as sociometric activities. Moreno—who emigrated to the USA in 1925 and continued his work there with partner Zerka—is not only considered to be the father of drama therapy, but along with Fritz Perls he is also considered to be one of the inventors of group therapy (Garcia & Buchanan, 2000; Sternberg & Garcia, 2000).

Drama therapy continued to develop in the 1960’s and 70’s partly as a reaction to some of the constraints imposed by the structures of psychodrama, which were designed by Moreno to appeal to his colleagues from the world of psychiatry (Johnson, 2000). The new drama therapists were also influenced by other forms of therapy, such as Perls’

Gestalt (Perls, 1966, 1969), Pessó’s psychomotor work (Pessó, 1969)—both Perls and Pessó had trained with Moreno—and Play Therapy (Axline, 1969). A third major influence came from developments in theater, embracing what had come to be thought of as “traditional”—including Stanislavsky (1936) and American “Method” approaches (Strasberg, 1987)—as well as the more experimental, interactive forms pioneered in Viola Spolin’s improvisation (Spolin, 1963), the Polish Lab theater of Grotowski (1968), Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space* (1968), Chaikin’s Open Theater (Chaikin, 1972), Augusto Boal’s Invisible Theater, Image Theater, and Forum Theater (1979, 1992, 1995), Keith Johnstone’s *Impro* (1979, 1999), etc.

Recent Developments in Drama Therapy

Several more recent developments in the field of drama therapy have had a strong influence on the development of Insight Improvisation:

Robert Landy and Role Theory. Landy, the founder of NYU’s drama therapy program, has pioneered the use of role theory in drama therapy (Landy, 2000). The general idea behind his work, that a healthy individual will play out a great variety of roles—and that the roles that we find difficult to play point to areas for our potential personal growth—has been a guiding light in my work melding drama therapy with Insight Improvisation. Psolodrama, for example, can be seen as a very pure expression of role theory in action.

David Read Johnson and Developmental Transformations. A leader in the drama therapy world, Johnson developed his own approach—Developmental Transformations—in which client and therapist play and improvise together throughout

an entire session. Johnson’s concept of the transformational power of the “play space,” and my own experiences working with him and his colleagues, have inspired several Insight Improvisation activities, including Impulse and Role Dialogues, and “Yes!” Improvisations.

Adam Blatner and the development of Psychodrama. In his book *Acting-In*, a standard text in the fields of psychodrama and drama therapy, Blatner clarifies and summarizes the work of the Jacob and Zerka Moreno, making the power of psychodrama more accessible to a broad range of practitioners. In my own communications with Blatner, he has been greatly encouraging regarding Insight Improvisation³⁹ and has contributed his own thoughts about the work, such as this comment concerning the function of catharsis:

For your information, I make a similar point about the dynamics of catharsis in my book, *Foundations of Psychodrama*—i.e., that catharsis isn’t an end, it’s a side effect of when the psyche experiences a shift towards integration. Emotionality is not to be sought in itself, but rather integration is what is sought. (A. Blatner, personal communication, n.d.)

Blatner’s point is an important one because of the central place that the pairing of “insight” and “catharsis” have historically taken in psychodrama. And, as I have experienced and seen many times first-hand, the potential for catharsis may even be stronger in activities such as Psolodrama, which invite the practitioner to delve fully into

³⁹ I have written a chapter on Insight Improvisation for Adam Blatner and Daniel Weiner’s forthcoming book on interactive theater, working title: *Who Else Can I Be?*

their feelings, without the guidance of an external director to move them on to the next moment or scene.⁴⁰

Penny Lewis, Saphira Linden, and Transpersonal Drama Therapy.⁴¹ My studies under Penny Lewis and Saphira Linden, both important contributors to the field of drama therapy (Lewis co-edited the standard text, *Current Approaches*, with Johnson), have had a pervasive and substantial impact in my work, spurring me on to extend Insight Improvisation into the area of drama therapy. In addition, the concept of Transpersonal Drama therapy has proven useful as a way of thinking about work which merges the spiritual—in my case, Buddhist practice—with the artistic and the clinical. Lewis’s writing on this topic, perhaps more than anyone’s, feels closely aligned to the work I am doing:

Winnicott’s transitional space and the imaginal realm described by Jung (1955-1956) as the *mysterium coniunctionis* can transform the therapy room into a nursery for old pathological scenes to be reexperienced, a stage for new object-related dramas to be played, or a jungle for a hero to confront his or her inner instinctual beast.

From a Jungian archetypal perspective, this means that numinous energy can enter the room through the embodied personification of a goddess or spontaneous enactment of an ancient ritual or rite of passage. (Lewis, 1993, p. 37)

⁴⁰ Interestingly, according to my Lesley evaluation team member Susan Pollak, a clinical instructor in psychology at the Harvard Medical School, “current theory and practice now *avoid* catharsis, as it is not thought to be useful, turning years of theory on its head. In fact, newer theorists argue that it is *detrimental!*” (personal communication, November 4, 2004).

⁴¹ More on Linden and Lewis appears in “Key Drama Therapists: Linden, Lewis, and Johnson” on page 108.

In this passage, Lewis succinctly describes what I have experienced and seen in my own work with Psolodrama, and related activities such as FreeSong and FreeBe: through the open, witnessed space—whether one refers to it as a transitional space, an imaginal realm, a *mysterium coniunctionis*, or simply a stage—the emergence and working through of archetypal roles and dramas becomes not only possible, but—barring active resistance—nearly inevitable.

The Importance of the Body in Creative Arts Therapies

What many CATs have in common is an emphasis on the active role of the body in healing. M. K. Hudgins, a noted drama therapist and developer of the Therapeutic Spiral model, writes about the importance of body-oriented approaches in working with trauma:

In 1997, a noted Harvard researcher on trauma, Bessel van der Kolk, was the keynote speaker at the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama. He stated that body-centred, experiential methods are a ‘treatment of choice’ for these patients, and called for more research to demonstrate the claims of psychodrama. Moreover, van der Kolk (1996) states:

Prone to action, and deficient in words, these patients (trauma survivors) can often express their internal states more articulately in physical movements or in pictures than in words. Utilising drawings and *psychodrama* may help them develop a language that is essential for effective communication and for the symbolic transformation that can occur in psychotherapy (1996, p. 195, emphasis mine).

In fact, recent empirical research indicates that experiential psychotherapy can be equally as effective as psychodynamic, cognitive behavioural, and behavioural theories of psychotherapy in studies with a variety of psychiatric diagnoses (Bergin and Garfield 1994; Greenberg, Elliott and Lietaer 1994; Greenberg, Lietaer and Watson 1998; Greenberg

and Paivio 1998). Post-traumatic stress disorder (Elliott, Davis and Slatick 1998; Elliott et al. 1996; Hudgins and Kipper 1998), anxiety disorders (Wolfe and Sig11998), and borderline personality disorder (Eckert and Biermann-Ratjen 1998) have all shown therapeutic change using experiential methods of psychotherapy. (Hudgins, 2000, p. 230)

One of the elements that Insight Improvisation adds to the body-oriented nature of CATs such as psychodrama and drama therapy is mindfulness, through traditional meditation and more active forms of meditation. Mindfulness increases the power of working with the body because both therapist and patient are bringing a greatly heightened sense of awareness and acceptance to what is happening in each moment. Along with this awareness comes an increase in useful information. With acceptance comes greater potential for healing, as resistance is decreased.

Of all the CATs, the one most close to Insight Improvisation in spirit may not be drama therapy, but, in fact, dance/movement therapy, particularly as practiced by Mary Starks Whitehouse—a pioneer of the field—and her students, the developers of authentic movement. Learning to let the body be moved, rather than controlling or planning our movement, is a fundamental shift in perspective that can be built on—as many Insight Improvisation activities do—by opening to authentic sound, words, imagery, etc. Authentic movement’s focus on the body, nearly to the exclusion of all else, creates a quality of openness to the work that has been a key influence on Insight Improvisation.

A quote from Whitehouse, which I use to lead off this paper, speaks of her fundamental realization: that her work was not one of making art but of exploring—and fostering—human development. Here she takes this idea one step farther:

We are beginning to place enormous emphasis on creativity, but there is a tendency to think that being creative is limited to ‘producing’ something. I would suggest to you that the basic creativity of the human

being consists in his working toward his own fullest development, the realizing of his own potentials, the allowing himself to grow. What we create first is ourselves and it is out of ourselves that the producing comes. (Whitehouse, c. 1956/1999a, p.40).

Reading this, I have an image of the human being as a self-watering plant, raising itself until it bears fruit. In my own approach to therapy using Insight Improvisation, I have found that it never helps to try and force the plant to grow, or to fix the plant in some way. Instead, as in authentic movement, Insight Improvisation encourages therapist and client to reside in an open space of awareness—fostered by the unconditional positive regard and listening of the therapist—in which the client can experiment, improvise, and grow themselves.

Two other important concepts are central to the practice of authentic movement:

- 1) The idea of movement that is not dance—in a silent space, the mover enters empty, with no agenda, and practices letting go and listening to their body.
- 2) The development of witnessing and the inner witness. As Janet Adler, a student of Whitehouse’s, writes:

Witnessing oneself in Authentic Movement can thus only be developed through extensive experience, first as a mover being seen by a witness. Because of being witnessed, the mover is automatically developing an internal witness, which is, in turn, preparing her to witness another. (It never, of course, is so neatly developmental in practice). It is at this point, mastering the witnessing of another—loving another—that the next essential step occurs. For no matter how well and objectively one can witness oneself, that self-witnessing is transformed after truly seeing another as she is. It is as though there is now a reversal. In the same way that being seen by another originally enabled me to see myself as I am, in a further sweep of the spiral, seeing another as she is—loving her—enables me to see myself as I am. This is a different seeing myself as I am because it is no longer birthed by another—the mother, therapist, witness or lover. (Adler, 1987/1999, p. 154)

My own experience—doing intensive authentic movement bimonthly for the past 18 months with a group of men—bears out Chodorow’s observation: as my ability to witness others with compassion has grown, my ability to follow my own process from the viewpoint of the inner witness has also developed. Naturally, the concepts of the witness, the therapist as witness, and the development of the client’s own inner witness, are also all components of Insight Improvisation, derived from authentic movement—as well as from meditation practice itself—but extended in exercises such as Psolodrama, in which the inner witness becomes embodied in the form of the psychodramatic role of director.⁴²

Insight Improvisation as a Contemplative Drama Therapy

As described above (“Structure and Rationale for One-to-One Work with Insight Improvisation,” beginning on page 40), two of the applications of Insight Improvisation as a form of one-to-one work are in individual drama therapy and life coaching. In my own experience, the line between “therapy” and “coaching” is a permeable one: all good therapists do some coaching (e.g., helping clients achieve their vision and goals through replacing disempowering attitudes and behaviors), and all good coaches do some therapy (e.g., helping coachees explore the intrapsychic and familial roots of their present difficulties)—as recent literature in the field confirms (Naughton, n.d.).

⁴² Ideally, the director role in Psolodrama draws upon the inner “wise mind” or “inner therapist” of the client. In actual practice, how this role is expressed can often help identify shortcomings in the psoloist’s ability to draw upon their inner witness, exposing instead the inner critic (or even inner sadist!), or, sometimes, the lack of a sufficiently strong inner witness to contain the psoloist’s process.

Insight Improvisation, as a form of drama therapy, adds to this mix what all good drama therapy does—an opportunity for the client to embody and play out memories, life challenges, dreams, and potential futures.

What Insight Improvisation contributes in addition to mainstream forms of drama therapy is an emphasis on meditation, its underlying concepts, and how those ideas and related practices can be powerfully integrated not only in process with the therapist/coach, but also in day-to-day life.

One term that may emerge for this integration—perhaps an alternative to “transpersonal”—may be “contemplative,”⁴³ that is, a drama therapy that has its roots in a meditative approach. The power of such an integration is multi-faceted, and is expressed in at least five different ways:

Five Elements of Contemplative Drama Therapy

- 1) **Mindfulness as Leitmotif.** By speaking about and encouraging mindful and compassionate awareness throughout the session—e.g., at the beginning and end of each activity to have the client return to stillness and an awareness of the breath, the body, and feelings—the contemplative drama therapist models a way of being in the world that encourages the client to break out of habits of neurotic obsession (e.g., endlessly cycling through self-criticism, fear, shame, anger, etc.) and instead return to the present moment, enabling a fresh perspective.

⁴³ One parallel to this: authentic movement is sometimes referred to as “Contemplative Dance.”

- 2) **Meditation as Experiential Component.** By introducing meditation as an actual step in the therapeutic process—e.g., as a first stage in warming up—the contemplative drama therapist encourages the client to get out of his head and into his body, inviting him to shift from the world of recent complaints and problems to the deeper layer of developmental issues and needs residing in the body-mind. Meditation can include a variety of approaches and modalities, ranging from guided or silent sitting meditations (*anapana*, *vipassana*, *metta*, and others), to walking meditation, to the many traditional and newer forms of active meditation.⁴⁴
- 3) **Mindful Enactment.** Through the combination of mindfulness and fully embodied enactment, the client embarks on improvisational journeys accessing personal, archetypal, and imaginal roles with an enhanced ability to be present, aware, and embrace whatever is emerging. The strong presence of mindfulness in the session—as both prevailing philosophy and emphasized technique—helps dissolve resistance, increase acceptance, and deepen the resultant work.
- 4) **Translating Meditation into Daily Life.** As a coach, the contemplative drama therapist can explore next steps and design homework that builds on the mindfulness practices of the session, encouraging the client to experiment with sitting meditation, walking meditation, mindful observation and writing,

⁴⁴ See above for a list of the many forms of active meditation included in Insight Improvisation.

and other ways of living mindfully in daily life—creating new conditioning that further empowers the client to break free of old patterns.

- 5) **The Meditating Therapist.** As a listener and witness, the contemplative drama therapist fosters her own growth on the path of mindfulness and *metta*, recognizing that her ability to repeatedly return to the present moment with acceptance and compassion helps create the space within which her client can safely play, explore, and takes steps toward transformation. She does this through a regular practice of meditation, and through herself experiencing Contemplative Drama Therapy as a client and with peers.

In these and other ways, the power of meditation/mindfulness and the power of experiential drama therapy become not only additive, but seem to multiply one another. This becomes evident both working one-to-one and in groups, as detailed in Part III.

Part III: Experience with Insight Improvisation

The Development of Insight Improvisation

Roots in Life Experience and Training

My life experiences as well as formal training, particularly over the last 20 years, have had a profound impact not only on who I have become as a person, but also on the development of Insight Improvisation. My experience and training has followed several interrelated threads or themes—including theater, psychotherapy, facilitation, coaching, meditation, and drama therapy. So fully intertwined is Insight Improvisation’s development with my own, it is necessary here to provide a summary of my own life experience:

Born in 1964 in Manhasset, New York, I grew up in Merrick, Long Island, in a middle-class suburban family. My strong interests as a boy, beyond dinosaurs, Greek mythology, and science fiction, were theater, creative writing, and computers. On the theater side, I entertained my family at home with acting and puppetry, and landed roles in public school theatrical productions and in summer camp. When, in the 7th grade, I discovered computers, my adolescent hobby became programming original games, educational software, and experiments with graphics and sound.

Looking back now, I see the roots of Insight Improvisation in my earliest pursuits. For example, the kinds of computer games I designed were often for two or more players—my focus was not on the programming per se, but on getting people to interact in creative and fun ways. My favorite Insight Improvisation activities have the same qualities as the favorite games I designed, giving users (in Insight Improvisation, actors

or participants) the freedom to create or accomplish something of their own, rather than be overly controlled by the nature of the game.

Once at MIT—I applied out of my love of working with computers—I soon discovered that “The Institute” was all about hard math and science, and not about the kind of creative exploration that I was doing with my games. I found myself struggling to stay interested and keep up with my course work. Things came to a head in my second year—after a tough fall semester I stuck around for the January independent studies break, and decided to audition for the winter production of MIT’s Dramashop— a restoration comedy entitled “The Clandestine Marriage.” This decision changed my life: I landed the lead comic role, made new friends (many of whom, like me, did not really belong at MIT), and was surprised at the positive response I received from audiences, my family, and the MIT newspaper’s theater critic. When it was time for the new semester to begin, I went to the first day of classes, realized that I simply could not face more calculus and physics, called my parents, and dropped out. Then, thanks to the director of MIT Dramashop, Robert Scanlan, I visited and auditioned for Trinity Rep Conservatory, a program in acting, directing, and playwriting, in Providence.

My two years at Trinity Rep were pivotal—a time of intense personal and artistic growth. I was able to immerse myself in theater day and night—dance class at 8AM, breathing and voice, scene study, improvisation, Shakespeare. I would write a short play one day, a director and cast were assigned the next, and a week later I’d get to see my own words brought to life onstage. I also had the incredible good fortune to learn from Richard Toma, a real master of improvisational movement theater, who made each of his three-hour classes into a process of self-discovery and collaborative imagination. Toma’s

powerful influence on my thinking and development as a theater artist continues twenty years later and can be seen in the open-ended, physical nature of every Insight Improvisation activity.

After finishing the program, I applied to Columbia’s School of General studies, and pursued a degree in Literature and Writing. At the same time, I landed a job on Wall Street—I would have preferred to go into the budding computer games industry, but my first interview ended up being at E. F. Hutton—so I learned how to apply my computer skills to a business setting. I worked hard for several years while living in Manhattan, resulting in graduation from Columbia with honors, and computer consulting work in various investment banking firms.

But when my MIT friends from Boston called to say they were putting on a season of theater at the Lyric Stage on Charles Street, and asked would I come join them as an actor, I couldn’t resist: I dropped everything and moved to Boston in 1989, and have lived here since. After a summer of Beckett and Shakespeare, I threw myself into the local theater scene, doing all kinds of work—straight theater, improv comedy in bars and clubs, auditioning for commercials and voice-overs.

Thus began the second phase of my professional development as a theater artist, including training and acting with two theater companies. With Shakespeare and Company (in Lenox, Massachusetts) I received an intensive training in Shakespeare and Linklater voice technique, performed with the company for two summers, and directed Pittsfield high-school students in *Twelfth Night* for the Shakespeare and Company’s schools program. Next, as a member of Pilgrim Theater, a Boston-area group specializing in the experimental approach of Grotowski’s Polish Laboratory Theater—I trained and

acted with the company for several seasons, and through them met other theater artists, such as Ivan Middeligh of France’s Roy Hart Theater, and the playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie, who was teaching workshops in storytelling and the “Healing Power of Theater.”

I was so struck by the depth of van Itallie’s work that I began organizing his Boston-area workshops, and ended up co-teaching with and artistically collaborating with him. I also had some of my earliest meditation experiences in Van Itallie’s theater workshops. Van Itallie, a playwright and student of Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa, probably more than any other single individual spurred the development of Insight Improvisation (more on him, below.)

It was around this time, from 1992-1994, that my life took a turn into deeper waters. Middeligh, the Roy Hart voice teacher, suggested I work with a local singing teacher (and cabaret artist), Belle Halpern. At a singing workshop led by Halpern and others in Tuscany Italy, I met and fell in love with Anja Kollmuss, a classical musician and environmentalist (we married a year later and lived together in Boston from 1994 to 2003). Anja strongly recommended the work of Arnold Mindell, the founder of Process-Oriented Psychology—so I read his books and attended a one-month training for Process therapists in Portland, Oregon. Anja and I also began to attend improvisational theater classes led by Daena Giardella, whose work is as equally focused on the therapeutic nature of theater as it is on theater’s artistic side. Both the experience with Mindell, whose work is in many ways a successor to Jung’s, and the experience with Giardella, a talented drama therapist (although she did not use that term), also contributed key ingredients to the Insight Improvisation approach.

Halpern was also attending Giardella’s class, and in the spring of 1994, on the basis of the coaching and feedback she heard me giving to other students, she invited me to attend a public workshop she was leading with Kathy Lubar (one of the founders of the New Repertory Theater). Halpern and Lubar had recently started a new company, the Ariel Group, and were interested in training others to lead Ariel’s theater-based educational programs in communication skills, leadership, and teambuilding. Following this training, I traveled to the Roy Hart Theater in France for an intensive 10-day program with Mark Rittenberg, a theater director who had originated this methodology (known as “Active Communicating”). After a nine-month process to become certified as a facilitator, I set aside the computer consulting work I had been doing to support myself, and went on to become the Ariel Group’s first affiliate leading theater-based training in the corporate world.

Since 1994, with the Ariel Group (and Mark Rittenberg’s company, Corporate Scenes), I have made a career designing and leading programs for corporate, governmental, and not-for-profit organizations—as well as providing one-to-one coaching in presence and leadership for executives. My work with the Ariel Group continues to be a source of personal growth and an opportunity to use theater techniques and creative approaches with non-actors to facilitate their development and learning. As Design Coordinator with Ariel Group, I have come to learn and practice some of the fundamental principles of experiential learning, which have made their way into how I design and lead Insight Improvisation classes and workshops.

During the same period, from 1994 to the present, my interest in theater, particularly as a means for my own personal growth and the growth of others, has

deepened. In 1994 I founded a weekly event called “Gardening at Night” at Central Square’s Dance Complex, which invited performers and audience alike to come warm-up, improvise, and perform together. (A successor to “Gardening at Night,” a group called “The Performance Cult” of which I am a founding member and active member, continues to perform to this day.) My one-man shows, *A Naked Man in Boston* and *Meditate on Dying*, which I wrote, directed, and performed, used my own personal stories, as well as a great deal of interaction with the audience, to explore possibilities in theater that I was not seeing in mainstream productions. Also, in a further evolution of my interests, I found myself specializing in helping performers develop their own one-person shows. This process, which I undertook with area actors Marjorie Zohn, Eda Roth, Jean-Claude van Itallie, and others, proved to be an extremely rich area of exploration—a form of personal journey in which the performer has the opportunity to play out difficult and transformative moments from his or her life, and reinterpret them for the audience. One piece I directed and helped develop, Jean-Claude’s *War, Sex, and Dreams*, toured to Highways in Los Angeles and New York’s LaMaMa ETC, and received positive reviews in *The New York Times* and elsewhere.

My own one-man show, *Meditate on Dying*, combined theater with my interest in Buddhist meditation and philosophy. At the time I developed this piece, I also became interested in creating an experiential educational program to further explore that synergy, drawing from the work of many great teachers I had encountered who also happen to have Buddhist backgrounds. I led the resultant workshop, entitled “Mindfulness and Choicelessness: Freedom in Performance,” for groups in the Boston area, as well as at

Shantigar, van Itallie’s retreat center in Rowe, MA. That workshop was the original basis for Insight Improvisation.

My strong interest in psychotherapeutic approaches also grew over time. The seeds planted by the intensive program with Mindell led me to study other kinds of therapy, such as psychodrama and Systems-Centered Therapy (the work of Yvonne Agazarian). I also began to practice a form of one-to-one coaching often called “life coaching”—working with individuals to help increase their personal effectiveness and achieve their goals. In practice, I began to find that coaching has much in common with forms of therapy, particularly cognitive-behavioral approaches.

The year 2002 marked a new turning point: my friend and colleague Nat Warren-White (a Lesley University INDS graduate) invited me to sit in on a one-to-one session he had with the therapist Saphira Linden. I was impressed with the creativity, effectiveness, and caring quality of her approach, and began to study with her and to read about this form of therapy. To my surprise, I discovered that my own approach to theater as a vehicle for personal growth actually had an official name—drama therapy—and that there are a host of such techniques being practiced by a diverse group of therapists worldwide. I was also intrigued by Saphira’s way of weaving her spiritual practice (Sufism) into her therapy—an approach known as “transpersonal drama therapy”—and realized that I had already been doing something very similar by weaving Buddhist philosophy and meditation into the theater and coaching I was doing.

It was at Saphira’s suggestion that I looked into Lesley University’s Independent Study Degree Program. Saphira, as a board certified master teacher-trainer with the National Association of Drama Therapy (NADT), has worked with Lesley’s ISDP staff to

help guide several students in the process of earning their master’s degree through Lesley while fulfilling the “Alternate Route” requirements to become a Registered Drama Therapist (RDT).

In approaching my graduate study at Lesley University, my goal has been to integrate what I have learned so far in the areas of theater, psychotherapy, and education, as well as to deepen and expand my knowledge in those areas that feel most “missing.” My primary educational goals have been to equip myself with a solid knowledge of psychology and psychotherapy—as well as the theories and practices underlying drama therapy and transpersonal drama therapy—through coursework, reading, supervision, and practical work in the field with individuals and groups from diverse populations. All of my learning in the field of drama therapy over the past few years has further fed the development of Insight Improvisation.

Key Theater Teachers: van Itallie, Kelman, and Zaporah

Three theater teachers—all with backgrounds in Buddhism and meditation—were most influential in the early development of Insight Improvisation:

- **Jean-Claude van Itallie**—original playwright with Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theater in the 1960’s, van Itallie was famous for pieces such as *America Hurrah* (1964/2001) and *The Serpent* (1968/2001), and went on to become a renown translator of Chekov’s plays. His interest in Buddhism flowered in the 1970’s when the Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa, founder of Naropa, lived for one year at van Itallie’s home in Rowe, MA, renaming the place “Shantigar” (Tibetan for “peaceful home”). Van Itallie later went on to integrate his interest in Buddhism and theater through a

staged version of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1983/2001) as well as founding Shantigar Foundation, a workshop center located at van Itallie’s Rowe estate, whose mission is to combine meditation, theater, and healing—integrating Eastern approaches with Western theatrical practices. In addition to his work as a playwright and teacher of playwriting (1997), van Itallie leads workshops in “The Healing Power of Theater,” focusing on his unique approach to storytelling, as well as a workshop in “Playwriting on Your Feet,” teaching a technique for combining authentic movement with playwriting that he and I developed in collaboration. My own work with van Itallie has been extensive: first as a student, then as an assistant co-leading his workshops, and later as a director and co-developer of van Itallie’s one-man shows and new theater pieces, as well as a co-developer of new workshop techniques. In addition to the great contribution of his storytelling techniques, van Itallie’s approach to workshop leading—e.g., how to integrate meditation and authentic movement, and how to create a safe space within which healing can occur—has been highly influential on my development as a workshop leader and on the design of Insight Improvisation.

- **Ruth Zaporah**—Originally a dancer/choreographer, Zaporah went on to develop Action Theater (1995) a body of original techniques and approaches for working with movement, sound, and words in individual and group improvisation. Zaporah’s work and unique way of thinking is highly influenced by her background in Zen Buddhism. My own training with Zaporah has consisted of several intensive workshops over a period of roughly eight years. Her endless creativity in spawning variations on her own work, as well as her unique way of breaking down the elements of and “rules”

behind improvisation, has been a model for the continued development of Insight Improvisation as a unique set of ideas and approaches. In addition, Zaporah’s work was the direct inspiration for Insight Improvisation’s “Amplification” series of exercises.

- **Scott Kelman**—another product of the 1960’s avant-garde theater scene, Kelman went on to be one of the most prolific producers of experimental theater in Los Angeles in the 1980’s. Now residing in the Portland, Oregon area, Kelman teaches a unique “backwards” form of improvisation greatly imbued with a meditative sensibility (Kelman Group, n.d.). I trained with Kelman twice in 1996 and began a collaboration with him to develop his work for the corporate world. Kelman’s approach to performance—including his exercises “One-Minute Solo” and “Walk-Stop-Walk”—are key components of Insight Improvisation and offer a profound paradigm shift in how one thinks about the role and purpose of acting. His trickster spirit is also reminiscent of great Tibetan and Zen teachers, and informs my own approach to creating a playful but rigorous workshop atmosphere.

Key Drama Therapists: Linden, Lewis, and Johnson

Thanks to my friend, colleague, and mentor Nat Warren-White, I was fortunate enough to learn about the field of drama therapy at a perfect time in my own personal development as well as in the development of Insight Improvisation. Although I have been influenced in recent years by a number of drama therapists and psychodramatists, three figures stand out:

- **Saphira Linden**, my drama therapy trainer, has been practicing therapeutic and healing uses of theater since the 1960’s, when she trained with the inventor of psychodrama, Jacob Moreno. A practicing Sufi, Linden strongly integrates her spiritual life with her work in drama therapy, which she refers to as “transpersonal drama therapy.” Linden’s freely integrative approach—drawing upon a broad range of techniques and ideas both dramatic and spiritual—has helped me in a two main ways: by seeing the parallels between her work and my own, I have come to see Insight Improvisation as a transpersonal form of drama therapy; in addition, Linden’s eclectic approach has encouraged me to broaden the roof over my own work, encompassing diverse techniques I may in the past have considered only peripheral.
- **Penny Lewis**, who died last year of cancer, was one of my main drama therapy instructors (along with Linden). Lewis, originally a pioneering dance therapist, as an author and teacher brought to the drama therapy world enormous conceptual rigor and a deep background in Jungian ideas (Lewis, 2000a-d; Lewis & Johnson, 2000); as a therapist she was inventive, playful, and caring. The clarity and creativity she brought to her work has been an inspiration in the development of the drama therapy-oriented parts of Insight Improvisation. In addition, Lewis’s brilliant explication and use of Jungian archetypes in original drama therapy forms—such as her “Embodied Psyche Technique”(Lewis, 2000b)—helped lay the groundwork for my own discovery of Psolodrama (in which archetypes emerge and dialogue freely) and related exercises.
- **David Read Johnson** is a long-time drama therapist and developer of a unique approach called Developmental Transformations. His work is informed by Buddhist thinking, as well as by the work of Grotowski (1968). Johnson co-edited along with

Lewis the “bible” of the drama therapy world, *Current Approaches in Drama Therapy* (2000), and continues to be an influential leader in the field. My training with Johnson and others in Developmental Transformations has been an extremely useful counterpoint over the last two years as I have begun to clarify what is unique in my own approach to drama therapy.

Evolution in the Studio: One-to-one, Workshops, and Practice and Research Groups

Although Insight Improvisation, is a form of theater, its de-emphasis on performance has meant that its primary evolution has occurred not on stage, but in the studio. This development in a safe environment—free from the eyes of professional critics and potentially judgmental audience members—has taken three basic forms over the years:

1. One-to-one work. Before putting together the first “Mindfulness and Choicelessness” workshop, I had already for years been working one-to-one and in small groups in the studio, practicing many kinds of improvisation and sourcing of theatrical material. This continued as I began to integrate meditation and authentic movement more and more into my own work. Over the years these sessions with peers and coachees have evolved from pure theater experimentation to an integration of drama therapy—although I still work with partners who are actors, in the last few years I have also added fellow drama therapists and expressive therapists to my list of studio collaborators. Many key Insight Improvisation approaches made their first appearance working one-to-one with peers and coachees, including Amplification, FreeSong, The Three States, Life/Dream Scene, Impulse and Role Dialogues, and Psolodrama.

2. Workshops. The very first “official” Insight Improvisation group session was a one-day workshop on May 29, 1999 at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education (CCAЕ) in Harvard Square, Cambridge. The title was “Mindfulness and Choicelessness: Freedom in Performance.” Prior to that date, in addition to doing a great deal of one-to-one work, I had been gathering ideas and techniques from others’ workshops, as well as my own explorations and inventions. I had also been meditating regularly for a couple of years, and was looking for ways to integrate meditation with my theater practices. One answer was my one-man show, *Meditate on Dying*, which I performed onstage at the CCAЕ during that May—the other was the workshop. Participants seemed to enjoy the exercises in authentic movement and storytelling I was bringing—and the experience inspired me to begin to offer similar workshops at Jean-Claude van Itallie’s retreat center, Shantigar. Since then I have led variations of this workshop at Shantigar; for interns at Kripalu, the Berkshire’s major yoga center; for members of the Ariel Group; and for Soulful Sundown, an interactive artistic series at a Boston Unitarian church. The experience preparing for and leading these workshops, as well as the feedback I elicited (I always ended each workshop by asking participants to write me a note before departing summarizing what they liked and what could be improved) helped enormously over the years in developing, expanding, and improving Insight Improvisation as a viable and coherent form.

3. Practice and Research Groups. Two groups I founded over the past two years stand out as being significant in the development of Insight Improvisation:

- a. **The Applied Drama Practice Group (ADPG).** In the Spring of 2003, strongly sensing my own and others’ need to practice newly-acquired

drama therapy skills, I founded the ADPG, a small weekly practice group for students and practitioners of drama therapy, psychodrama, creative arts therapy, and expressive therapy, which has continued to this day. As the group progressed, and as I felt safe enough to bring in some of my own experimental forms, ADPG became a testing ground for some of the newer exercises in Insight Improvisation that marry meditation with drama therapy.

- b. **The Insight Improvisation Research Group (IIRG).** This year, 2004, in preparation for work on this Master’s treatise, I founded a new group, the IIRG, to focus completely on the continued development of Insight Improvisation, particularly as a group form (my one-on-one work having continued and expanded through the years). In addition to five day-long workshops at its outset in May and June, IIRG has continued with regular Monday evening 3-hour sessions. The group has proved invaluable in two major ways: first, it is a welcoming context—truly a laboratory—in which I can freely experiment with new ways of combining aspects of meditation with theater and drama therapy, leading to an explosion in my own creativity and the number of exercises and approaches now included under the Insight Improvisation umbrella; and second, the honest feedback of group members has contributed immensely not only to the development of the exercises and ideas comprising the work, but also has deeply informed my continued learning as a workshop facilitator.

Individual Drama Therapy using Insight Improvisation

Overview of Experience

I have worked with several clients using Insight Improvisation as a therapeutic modality in private practice. One of these is a long-term client of over two years; the others have been short term, usually one to six sessions.⁴⁵

My experience with the form has been a successful one, by my own subjective measure. Clients speak of how useful the integration of meditation and theater techniques are with talk therapy and coaching, one saying that “this is the best therapy I have ever had.” In individual sessions, I have repeatedly seen how clients entering heavy with a particular problem, issue, or mood often leave feeling lighter, more open, with a greater feeling of possibility, and often with powerful new insights into their emotional and behavioral patterns, what may lie beneath them, and how to take steps to change.

Of course, it is difficult to differentiate clients’ experience of the therapy from their experience of the therapist. Studies have shown that the individual qualities of the therapist, and the fit with the client, may have much more to do with a positive outcome than the actual techniques used (I. Goldman, personal communication, September 30, 2003). On the other hand, I have seen time and again how a problem that seems

⁴⁵ As I have been doing mostly leadership training work over the past ten years, I have not in the past actively marketed or sought to grow my private practice—clients have come to me almost completely by word-of-mouth. Prior to my drama therapy work with individuals, I maintained a small private practice as a life-coach and theater coach.

intractable when just talking about it with a client can often loosen up and transform in the process of engaging them in meditation, movement, improvisation, and psychodrama or Psolodrama.

One element which lies in between the personal qualities of the therapist and the techniques used are the beliefs of the therapist which govern their approach to the work. A core belief I have as a drama therapist is that individuals must ultimately heal themselves. Although a good therapist can sometimes help point the way, self-discoveries are almost always the most powerful insights, and lead to greater ownership of potential solutions, and therefore greater commitment to taking action.⁴⁶ For this reason, I have included in Insight Improvisation exercises such as Psolodrama that operate almost as a form of self-therapy, with little outside direction required—just the presence of a supportive witness to watch and debrief with. In addition, in my drama therapy work with clients in which I am playing a more active role, I generally avoid inserting new ideas, situations, or characters, but instead try to mirror back what the client has said as a way to frame or provide an entry to an improvisation or role-play.

⁴⁶ “In fact, we need our obstacles and challenges in our life to grow. They help us develop strength, patience and compassion. There’s a...classic story about a little boy in the woods. He's walking on this path and he sees in a tree, this little chrysalis, a little cocoon where a butterfly is just partially out and really struggling to get out of its cocoon. The little boy is so touched. His compassion moves him to try to help the butterfly get free. So he cries out, ‘Oh, wait for me butterfly. I'll help you.’ And he rips open the chrysalis and the butterfly just falls to the ground and dies. The boy contemplates what happened and he realizes that if he would’ve just let the butterfly struggle and work on opening the cocoon by itself, the butterfly would have cultivated the strength to be free, to fly and enjoy” (Friend, 1999).

My overall approach—and what I consider to be a core principle of the use of Insight Improvisation as therapy—is to invite the client to notice what is already arising, and reflect back to them their own movements, words, roles, imagery, and conflicts, through nonjudgmental observations and open questions. I offer my own experiences and interpretations only when appropriate.

Case Example

A long-term client, whom I’ll refer to as Mary⁴⁷, is a 40-year-old woman working as a writer who has, in recent years, been pursuing the performing arts as a hobby. In our first session, in July of 2002, Mary described herself as feeling bitter. She was having negative feelings about her successful brother and her ineffectual father (who had died a few years before), and felt she was seeking approval in vain from her brother and from an editor who had asked her to rewrite three pieces in a row. She had recently told her boyfriend of three years she was not ready to move in with him, despite having originally decided to, and the two had started couples therapy. Mary had stopped seeing her previous therapist due to a lack of money and being tired of “talk therapy.”

During our early work together, it emerged that some of Mary’s deepest feelings concerned her father, an outwardly successful businessman who seemed completely absent and ineffectual at home. Mary felt entirely unseen by her father, frustrated that she could not communicate with him, and unloved by him. Throughout our work, Mary’s

⁴⁷ Names and distinguishing details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals referred to in this document.

feelings about her father have most strongly emerged through psychodramatic role play, in which she has often appeared as a lost little girl who cannot be seen and wants to be loved and played with.

It became clear early on that Mary was open to and responded well to Insight Improvisation techniques. She was already doing some meditation in her daily life and finding it useful; her love of performing made it easy for her to do improvisational movement and role play. Mary and I began working once every two to three weeks, each session lasting two to three hours⁴⁸.

In a recent interview (November, 2004), Mary was asked to describe her experience of doing Insight Improvisation as a form of therapy. The following are excerpts from that conversation, along with my own post-interview commentary in italics:

Q: How would you describe the work we've been doing together? For example if you were to try to describe it to a stranger?

A: The way I describe you to friends is as my drama therapist. It's the kind of therapy that is much more expressive and gives me the opportunity to move and tell my stories and embody different parts of myself and what's going on inside myself in a way that feels much more healing or effective than just talk therapy.

Q: What's more healing about it than talk therapy?

A: It really feels like it's work that goes—I think of the word crucible—it's like it goes into this crucible of my psyche or my process and really enables me to experience what's going on there—below a conscious

⁴⁸ It has been my experience that a minimum of 2 hours is best for doing one-to-one drama therapy using Insight Improvisation. Some of that time is spent in checking in and more traditional talk therapy and coaching. The additional time is also helpful to create a progression of work beginning with meditation and authentic movement, and culminating in self-revelatory improvisational drama-therapeutic structures.

level, or to bring it to a conscious level—in a way that just processing things through talk or analysis was never able to do for me. It accesses all of this really fertile material—it feels much more hands on—much more that I’m diving directly into whatever process is going on.... I’m thinking of really getting down in the muck, the mud, or the manure—[a] disgusting but also sensual good/bad mix of things.

Ultimately what I’ve found with you is that I often am baffled when I leave a session; I’ve experienced a lot more emotional pain than I ever did in talk therapy; but it really feels like much more authentic work. It’s not skirting around anything—it’s really getting in there.

Mary’s references here to a crucible, getting down in the mud or manure, and to the emotional pain of our work together, are apt metaphors and pointers to the pain and messiness of working with the unconscious, particularly with difficult secondary-process material (in Mindell’s sense of the term⁴⁹) that the conscious mind does not wish to integrate. Mary’s sense of sometimes being baffled upon leaving a session underscores the idea of the conscious mind not yet ready to integrate the messages or interpretations emerging in the session.

Q: What’s the effect for you of Insight Improvisation—combining meditation, theater, and drama therapy—in the work we’re doing together?

A: The meditation is the best opportunity to observe myself and what’s going on. In the meditative part of what we do, the meditation itself and how we talk about what’s going on cultivates this witness in myself which really helps to bring a lot more compassion and less judgment to my unfolding. The meditation feels important because it’s like a still point I can return to—even if what’s going on isn’t always still. The act of meditation feels like a still point—a safe place, a place

⁴⁹ Arnold Mindell, whose Process-Oriented Psychology is highly influenced by Jung, uses the terms “primary process” and “secondary process” differently from the Freudians—to Mindell, secondary process includes those elements of the mind-body experience that have not yet been integrated into what is conscious, intentional, and acceptable by the day-to-day self (Mindell, 1985).

to observe even if what’s going on is crazy.

The work we do really cultivates that kind of [meditative] awareness. It’s...the vessel for everything else that goes on. The meditation is not just during the meditative periods—it’s cultivating this constant attention and awareness about what’s going on, tending to whatever is going on in the moment.

Building on Mary’s observation, I would add that meditative awareness is used in Insight Improvisation in five main ways, as detailed above—as an overarching theme, as an experiential technique, as an accompaniment to enactment, as a focus of coaching and H.W., and as a set of skills and attributes the drama therapist is cultivating in himself (see “Five Elements of Contemplative Drama Therapy” on page 95.)

In this way, everything that happens in a one-to-one Insight Improvisation session with a client is directed at strengthening their ability to witness themselves more accurately and more compassionately—so that anything and everything that arises, whether in day-to-day life or in the session, is held in a container of loving awareness (the “What” skill of metta). Of course, this emphasis on cultivating a supportive inner witness not only echoes Buddhist teachings, but also can be seen in the work of many skillful therapists, theater coaches, authentic movement practitioners, and others.

There’s that, and then there’s what’s going on in the moment—whatever’s manifesting in movement, or sound, or story. It’s so great to express what’s going on through movement and not have to make sense of it...let it express, let it flow through. Regular therapy was much too much analysis and not enough expressing. The opportunity to actually embody, to get up and use my body in understanding what’s going on and to express what’s going on through my body rather than just talk about it—brings me 100% more into what’s going on.

We have structures that create opportunities—these open-ended structures—like Life/Dream Scenes for instance—that let the material come up and it...ties itself together and makes its own sense without me or you having to stop it and try to understand it. It's like I'm this organism, I'm this physical, emotional, and narrative organism that's constantly changing —and in this kind of work I get to fully experience that.

It is significant that in this interview, looking back over the work, it is the power of the active elements, using her body, her voice, etc., that Mary points to as most important—in fact, she seems to devalue meaning-making, interpretation, or intellectualization. However, in my own experience with numerous clients, it is the balance between active work and interpretation that makes the work most powerful—active work alone without a proper debrief can leave a client feeling confused about what they have just experienced. After every experiential activity Mary and I do, we always stop to discuss it. I know—from past experience with Mary—that these discussions, in which I sometimes offer an interpretation of what I have seen, or help Mary form her own interpretation through asking open questions, have been valuable for her.

One concrete example of this is the Life/Dream Scene structure which Mary refers to above: after enacting a Life/Dream Scene, Mary often has little idea of the possible meanings and emotional implications of what she has just done. The feeling is “What the heck was that?!?” or even that the improvisation was simply strange or bad. Often only after discussing it, and after hearing the interpretations I have to offer, does

Mary usually see the full power of what she did, and how it relates to her therapeutic journey.

Of course, this is not always the case. There have been countless times in my work with Mary and others that the client has had a clear insight and/or catharsis in the act of embodiment (of a dream, life scene, fantasy, etc.). In those cases, although the debrief is still important—to help clarify and ground the client’s discoveries, as well as to help them de-role⁵⁰ and reconnect with the here and now—it is not necessary for me to provide new interpretations: the client has touched something powerful, and I see it as my job to help them be present with what has just happened.

Q: Two possibly related questions: What particular memories stand out from our work together? And how would you say our work has evolved over time?

A: Initially when I started coming to you I was very involved in my own discomfort. And I found that working with you in a single session—I know in the first session and probably in the second and third sessions—I was able to just detach from that—and find that right underneath that there was some kind of liveliness. That was huge, eye-opening—that I was clearly attaching to my discomfort. And very quickly from the work we were doing—[e.g.,] body work: I remember following a guided meditation; you were guiding me as I was following the sensation of an emotion—...I think I just became more fluid. As a

⁵⁰ To “de-role” is a term from psychodrama that refers to the act of overtly stepping out of an embodied role (such as a role assigned to an auxiliary ego by a protagonist) and return to being one’s “normal” self. After a particularly intense psychodrama, it is important to take a moment for the auxiliaries to de-role in front of the protagonist (or, as some directors do, have the protagonist verbally de-role the auxiliaries) so that the psycho-emotional residue of the psychodrama will not bleed into the continued work of the group or the ongoing relationships among group members. Blatner (2000, p. 240), discusses the technique of de-roling.

result of this work [I have become] much more fluid and less attaching to particular grief or pain or discomfort—even slight, small things.

As one might expect from work that is based on the principles of Buddhist meditation, one of the benefits to the client can be a decrease in attachment—such as the grasping for comfort and aversion to pain that we all undergo. Clients can learn how to better live with their experience, as Mary suggests, in a more fluid way, cultivating non-reactivity, following their feelings and emotions with awareness rather than trying to push them away. Insight Improvisation amplifies the effects of meditation in a variety of ways, chief among which are the “Five Elements of Contemplative Drama Therapy” (page 95). In addition, not only is the client engaging in meditation, this meditation can be guided and shaped by the therapist to suit that client’s particular challenges and needs. The meditation is complemented by experiential activities that challenge the client to carry their awareness and non-reactivity into movement, embodiment, improvisation, and speech—paralleling the challenge of carrying meditative awareness into real life. Finally, the meditations and activities are held in a container of dialogue with the therapist that further focuses the discoveries of the client, purposely moving them in a direction of non-reactivity and greater awareness.

I’d also say some really important thing early on...was this urging me to take action rather than to stew—that seems more like a coach thing than a drama therapy or Insight Improv thing, but that was good.

When appropriate, drawing upon my background as a life coach, I will encourage a therapy client to be in action on those issues in their life

that are causing them dissatisfaction, or to move forward in concrete ways toward achieving their life objectives, visions and dreams. From an Insight Improvisation perspective, cultivating awareness is the ground from which authentic and useful action can spring; by helping to deepen my client’s awareness of the causes of their suffering, it is natural to then also suggest possible courses of action, in the form of homework. Often homework assignments are designed to reinforce and deepen the practice of cultivating awareness, such as an assignment to meditate, write, or create a meaningful work of art—one that builds on the client’s discoveries in the session.

About a year ago, [we did] work in which I started to identify these different characters of the “drama queen,” the “caretaker,” and the “witness”—and then the “actor.” The caretaker is this compulsively responsible care-taking side of myself. The witness is a way to take care of myself with simple attention—and perhaps of other people—without going into this compulsion. And the drama queen...is this acting-out figure, who “falls down.”The drama queen is the one who falls down and calls attention to herself as opposed to the caretaker who is always paying attention to other people. The drama queen has a more healthy corollary in what we called the actor, which is someone who is able to take action—and act out in the world in a “right action” kind of way, in an authentic kind of way, rather than a compulsive way. Recognizing that paradigm, and acting it out...I remember...I was playing a drama queen, me [with]...my boyfriend—I vividly remember that whole session because it was so powerful. Going home in the weeks after that and being able to very clearly see when my care-taking was kicking in and be able to step out of it and be more of a witness—that was huge—something I’m still working on, but tremendous.

A common approach in the field of drama therapy is the identification of roles—roles that the client is already playing out in their life, as well as those roles that may be missing or that they could further

explore.⁵¹ With Mary, what emerged in our sessions were certain roles she came to recognize as dysfunctional—such as the drama queen and the caretaker—habitual roles that were comfortable in some ways but seemed to be causing problems in her relationships. The roles of the witness and the actor then emerged as healthier alternatives—roles that emerged partially out of the work we had been doing with meditation, developing Mary’s inner witness.

Identifying the whole pattern of “falling down” was also huge—it was this ingrained pattern that I had no consciousness of when I started to see you, which you pretty quickly recognized and labeled falling down, and which over a period of over a year I began to identify and disidentify from. And I’m sure I still do it...I’m sure I’m still working on all of this.

Q: Can you take me back to the “falling down” and how we discovered that?

A: Yeah—it was remembering a dream, and then tying it into something that had happened in my life. This was a dream I had after my Dad died—this was two years after my Dad’s death (four years ago now), and for some reason I was telling you this dream...it was about going skiing with my Dad, and having a wonderful time. And I [also] had this [actual] memory of going cross-country skiing with my Dad and my brother and sister, and I was really inept and kept falling down, and finally [I] fell down and started to cry—because my life was so terrible. I was probably 12 or 13 and full of hormones. And my Dad was there and...was completely inept and didn’t know how to respond and was uncomfortable with the whole thing and didn’t get me anywhere.

But at that point you labeled this behavior “falling down,” in which I...blow things up or stir things into some kind of emotional crisis and demand attention—and want to be picked up—and it never works. (Laughs.) I was acting out that dream and then acting out that memory.

⁵¹ Drama therapist Robert Landy describes role theory and how it can be used experientially (Landy, 2000).

And I remember too when you reflected back to me what was going on, I felt revealed—I felt like I had had a mask ripped away that I didn't even know I was wearing. I felt like you had completely disassembled the structure I had for operating in the world. (Laughs). I recognized that and that was good and at the same time it made me really uncomfortable.

Through the enactment of Mary's dreams and memories, and by distilling the metaphors and images they contain, we have come to recognize core themes—in Jungian terms, complexes—which have become central to our work. Once we recognized one of Mary's key patterns—“falling down,” and wanting to be picked back up by a loving, competent father figure—we began to see the implications of that pattern in her relationship with her boyfriend, her family, her friends, in her workplace, and in the client-therapist relationship itself. This process of identifying core themes through the metaphoric understanding of dreams and memories could be characterized as fairly typical for good, standard psychotherapy and drama therapy. However, the use of Insight Improvisation techniques may provide an added boost to this process in several ways:

- 1) Through activities such as meditation and authentic movement, Insight Improvisation can help clear away the tension, noise, and mental/emotional clutter of ordinary life, providing the client with a more clear state from which to explore their memories, dreams, and metaphors.*
- 2) With its focus on the body, Insight Improvisation encourages the client to tune in to bodily sensations, “gut” feelings, the experience*

of subtle movement, and inner imagery—fertile ground for associating memories, dreams, and metaphors.

- 3) *Once the core theme/metaphor is discovered, Insight Improvisation helps the client remain aware of how this theme manifests itself in their life by heightening their awareness of their behavior—the supportive inner witness—both inside and outside of therapy.*

My own experience of working with Mary is that it has been an effective form of psychotherapy. Our sessions usually leave me with a satisfying sense of having journeyed to a deep place, and that we have made significant discoveries together. I have seen her grow over the course of our work together, finding new ways to deal with some daunting life challenges. For reasons mentioned above, Mary is a good fit for the Insight Improvisation approach, and her enthusiasm for the work has helped me to remain extremely engaged throughout our time together.

Insight Improvisation with Groups

Overview of Experience

My experience facilitating workshops in Insight Improvisation has been more than satisfying—a rich learning experience that continues to unfold.

I have been extremely fortunate to work with groups of extremely creative, intelligent, sensitive individuals, whose contributions to the work have been too many to

number. In addition, working with such bright and aware people keeps me at my best as a facilitator—I cannot get away with anything, including being lazy, careless, insensitive, inflexible, controlling, etc.

Over the years I have noticed that there are many hats that I wear when leading a group in this work. Here are some of the roles I play and some of what I have learned from each:

- **Workshop Designer.** Creating the agenda for an Insight Improvisation group, whether it be a 3-hour session or a weekend workshop, is a challenge. I must contend with a number of changing factors, including the purpose of the workshop (e.g., an introductory session, an ongoing group, an intensive program, etc.); the size and composition of the group (often of varying levels of experience and from different backgrounds—e.g., meditators and non-meditators, actors and non-actors, those comfortable with drama therapy and those not, etc.); my own and others’ ideas for new exercises and applications of meditative concepts; and the need to create a pedagogically effective, elegant, and seemingly organic progression of activities—a progression that begins simply, builds naturally to climactic moments, and has a satisfying resolution.

Over the years I have discovered that what really works best is to enter with a plan but to be flexible and incorporate others’ ideas live in the session. When I can really listen to what the group needs, and create an agenda from that, the work is often its most creative and exciting—for example, I have invented whole new activities on the spot by combining the seemingly contradictory desires of two different participants into one exercise. I also need to stay flexible with the design when conditions change:

- the number of participants is different than I’d hoped, or I find myself running out of time.
- **Organizer.** Much as I would like to simply lead a workshop or class, a great deal of the energy I put in to my work comes under this heading. As organizer, I must settle on a date or dates for the workshop; arrange, reserve, and pay for studio space; write up workshop descriptions, fliers, e-mails, etc.; market myself to my own mailing list as well as others; keep track of who has signed up, who has paid, etc.; as the day arrives make sure that all is prepared regarding the space as well as my own clothing, equipment, music, etc.; and—if I am working without the support of a workshop center—as participants enter to make sure all are registered and, if necessary, paid up, and ready to work.
 - **Facilitator.** This role includes all aspects of managing the workshop as it unfolds, with the goal of helping each participant, as well as the group as a whole, have a satisfying, fun, and moving experience with the work. Much of the work of the facilitator is to listen carefully to the energy of the group, be sensitive to their needs, and flexibly accommodate them while also delivering on the original intention of the program. As a facilitator I make sure to use tools such as check-ins, debriefs, short physical warm-ups (such as a massage circle or dancing to music), and anything else I care to invent in the moment, as a way to keep group members engaged, present, and involved in what is happening within themselves and with one another. I also model supportive witnessing and feedback, and I bring caring rigor when a participant says or does something which I sense detracts from the group process (e.g., leading off with critical or negative feedback after someone performs).

- **Teacher.** I rarely give lectures in my workshops, but there are times when I need to convey certain information—e.g., at the start of the program, or before a new activity. Other situations arise in which there is an opportunity for a “teachable moment” —to offer an observation about what’s happening for an individual or the group that draws upon my experience as an actor, meditator, and drama therapist. This role can be a trap for me, and so I need to wear this hat lightly—if I find myself talking too much in a workshop, it’s a sure sign the teacher has taken over, and it is time to get active and/or encourage the group to speak. My ongoing challenge is to find a way to teach the basic concepts of Insight Improvisation that does not feel heavy-handed, didactic, or dry—a goal that is still very much alive for me as I develop this work.
- **Drama Therapist.** Although I always make clear up front that my Insight Improvisation workshops are not psychotherapy, and that there is no therapist or client role, it is still true that I must draw upon many of the skills and attitudes of a drama therapist in this work. Among these are the ability to bring deep listening—listening beyond the surface to understand the deeper feelings of a participant—as well as helping them find ways to work on the important personal challenges they are bringing. Insight Improvisation is highly evocative work, and can invite moments of strong feeling and cathartic release. With my drama therapist hat on, I am able to be fully present when a participant has a strong emotional reaction and needs extra support (from myself and/or the group). I also remain attentive to see if what is happening in the room is becoming too much for a participant, e.g., if they need to sit out an activity or even take a break. Finally, in advance of certain workshops, such as

- a Psolodrama Intensive, I use my drama therapy skills and knowledge to screen participants, knowing that this work is not appropriate for everyone.⁵²
- **Meditation Teacher.** Particularly when leading meditation and *metta* activities, my role takes on a more spiritual aspect. Interestingly, this feels quite natural to me, and has not (so far) interfered with the work in any way—in fact, the feedback I get from participants is often that meditation and *metta* make a big difference for them personally, and they are interested in learning more and practicing in their daily lives. One beneficial aspect to this role is that when I begin a session with a meditation—and especially when leading *metta*—I am left with a feeling of deep connection (the numinous quality Jung describes) that can last throughout the session, and help me bring a quality of unconditional love to my facilitation of the work.
 - **Participant.** One of the pleasures of leading an Insight Improvisation group is to participate in the activities. Sometimes this is in the form of a “demo” before the group attempts a new exercise. In other instances I may enter an activity as just another participant—for example, in a pair activity if the group has an odd number, or in a large-group improvisation. I have learned over time to let go and not try to control the outcome, particularly when demonstrating a new form in front of the

⁵² It is important in group drama therapy work to have a process for advance screening of those individuals who may not be ready for an intensive group experience involving strong expression of emotions and enactment of potent memories, dreams, and fantasies. Such a workshop is not appropriate, for example, for those dealing with acute depression, suicidal ideation, schizophrenia, weak ego boundaries, serious drug or alcohol abuse, PTSD, or a personality disorder.

group—this can be especially difficult when I know there are certain lessons my inner teacher wishes to convey.

Others’ Experience

Recently I interviewed two members of the Insight Improvisation Research Group (IIRG) to learn more about their experience of the work. Here are excerpts from those interviews—for this paper the two interviewees are called “Army” (A) and “Betty” (B)—with commentary in italics:

INTERVIEW WITH “ARNY:”

Q: Why are you attending the IIRG?

A: ...to strengthen my acting and leadership, and also personally, to become more present, and spontaneous, and enjoy myself more. To feel less anxiety, and performance anxiety in life.

I feel happy to have discovered Insight Improvisation and appreciate your working with me on it—it feels like a natural part in my own developmental process of over the years starting off with being creatively blocked with writing, pretty intensely, and extremely shy as a young person. I’d been working hard at this my whole life—I’m 48 now. I take delight in something that’s felt in my life as an important calling which is to be out in the world doing social change and social healing work. And being a shy and creatively blocked person that felt unacceptably in the way of what I felt called to do. So Insight Improvisation has been a wonderful and delightful resource in this part of my journey.

[In a recent challenging situation involving my own leadership and a demanding theater exercise, I was] initially resistant to doing any kind of performance because I wasn’t quite relating to the exercise—and then telling myself “Oh I can just do what I would do in Insight Improv”...show up and see what was inside me at that moment. I just felt I was immediately released from this grumpiness and performance anxiety and I could just relax and be more present and play with people that were there. And I was able to support another person who was feeling alienated from the exercise, and suggest that we both do what we felt like doing in the moment. And it works quite beautifully for me each time I remember to do that—I can center in myself and listen to the impulses in my body, and my voice, and my imagination, and let

there be some dialogue with what was happening around me but essentially be coming from some authentic place inside me. So it's been wonderfully liberating—some of these little old pieces of the old iceberg.

Arny's observations echo and underscore one of my own main take-aways from cultivating Insight Improvisation as a practice: in performance situations—e.g., needing to present something in front of a group—I find I have a noticeably increased ability to be present, to draw on my body and feelings for grounding and for inspiration.

Q: What specific aspects of Insight Improvisation are you particularly interested in?

A: Certainly Psolodrama is probably at the top of my list. It feels like it so fully integrates the different principles of what you're trying to do in Insight Improvisation—that it has such a strong therapeutic dimension to it—where not all of the work that we do is as overt about that—as well as having the meditative and the acting components. And that it feels more full—you have all the resources to play with—instead of just using the reds and blues in your palette you can use all the colors. So in some ways a lot of the other work feels like a building up to doing something like Psolodrama—if it weren't Psolodrama it would be something very similar to it.

What else do I like? ...[Singing is] something that's very dear to my heart—I'm totally thrilled that it seems like you've wholeheartedly embraced that—bringing it in.

I love also that you are so open to integrating so many different forms—just looking at “well does the principle apply here, let's just weave it all in”—so it makes for a very rich and satisfying full palette of expression. And I've just been grateful that you've been as a leader so responsive to and seemingly delighted by people's impulses to propose variations and “I feel like doing this” and “OK let's try that”—so it feels like you're helping as the head cook facilitate a whole feast that everybody's being creative in together.

One other thing I've loved has been the Jean-Claude van Itallie storytelling technique—on a more technical level.

Arny's comment reminds me that a key learning I had in facilitating the IIRG was to take the idea of it being a “Research Group”

quite literally: to imagine we were together in a laboratory, beakers and test tubes bubbling away, cooking new combinations and recipes. By having this attitude I felt encouraged to take risks, try crazy ideas, and be much more open to others’ ideas than I would be in a typical workshop setting.

Q: Tell the story of a Psolodrama you have experienced.

A: I’ve only done about eight Psolodramas—I’m a relative beginner. [In the Psolodrama I did last night in the Insight Improvisation Research Group,] I was only partially joking in saying that not only was I able to get more present having this head cold that had been bugging me all day, I physically felt better while I was doing it and immediately afterwards....

I started off having been already warmed up [we had done authentic movement earlier in the session]. I did a very short authentic movement. I remember feeling tightness and heaviness in my muscles, and my breath was making a growling sound, and I felt these contortions taking my body, and the struggle of these two different parts: my left hand was pulling my hair, a part of me became this abusive troll-like creature—and another part was this scared little boy, who was trying to get away, terrified and hurt.

So there was a struggle in my body between both of those parts pretty much at the same time, and I became the troll character. I felt—as I have other times—a pleasure in the freedom to be characters that are repulsive in certain ways, that I may not like, more fully stepping out of “OK, I’m really not Army right now” even though there may be part of Army still there—that...I’m transported to a different way of thinking, feeling and experiencing reality.

I remember becoming the swimmer in this river of work, that was sometimes overwhelming, and just sweeping me along in a crazy, and at times, moments, delightful way. I remember becoming an audience member who is in a good humored way amusedly confused about what was going on in the piece, and wondering if anyone is in charge of directing it, and became a director character, and stroking my goatee, and suggesting that there be a protagonist, and asking if the one swimming in the water could be the protagonist, and what he wanted, what would move things forward. And I became the protagonist swimming in water and wanted to have more perspective.

And I morphed into the Sky God or Guard...some kind of Norse God—speaking very slowly and there was the amplification of my voice,

deeper and slower, and the character was amused and bemused at how humans and other life forms created this suffering for themselves. In that character: “You earth beings create so much pain for yourselves, take it all so seriously.” And I remember laughing in a deep voice. And I came back to being the troll character who was much older and had no teeth, and was given a Balance Bar by the swimmer, to suck on—[instead of] sucking on some flesh, he got a Balance Bar. ...Now thinking about the symbolism of a Balance Bar [Arny and interviewer both laugh].

And the swimmer had come out of water and was lying on his side, and asked how he wanted to close it. [And he did] a closing song of enjoying himself, taking the advice of the Sky God to take it less seriously. And coming out of the Psolodrama I felt this relaxed enjoying myself feeling.

I also remember going into it without feeling any performance anxiety, which I remember during the summer in doing some exercises in the group...I was feeling a lot of resistance and performance anxiety. One or two times when we were doing group work—and I was thinking to myself “no I’m not going to do it in the whole group.” And when you invited me to do it yesterday I felt “sure.”

Q: What made the difference?

A: There’s some way in which even in this short time I feel like I’ve integrated it and claimed it as my own.

Arny’s journey with the Psolodrama technique, in which he now feels more able to be vulnerable and do it in front of the group, parallels his own journey within his Psolodrama, related above: as the swimmer/protagonist, Arny can be overwhelmed sometimes but also loves what he does. The Guard/God figure reminds him to not take things so seriously—to feed his suffering inner “troll”—and in the end he is able to let go, relax, enjoy, and achieve more balance (the “Balance Bar”).

Q: What’s the effect of the witnessing?

A: ...There’s a little part of me that’s aware of the external as well as internal audience—and even though I’m not feeding energy into it...I’m still affected by that, part of my impulse is to make things a little clearer—although that’s something I want to do anyway, because I

want to have mostly clear characters even though they don't start off being clear, I want them to be named in some way.

When G [another member of the IIRG] was witnessing [me one-on-one], I felt both with witnessing her and with being witnessed, this wonderful energizing feeling of a complete circuit—like energy flowing around and coming back to me, and with her the same thing. One thing I didn't get to do last night was to witness other people's Psolodramas... In the witnessing [with G] there was something so fully delighted and energetic in the feedback, and affirming of each of us as a person—that's not to say there couldn't be other feelings that came up during it—confusion, or worry, or whatever it was—but it felt like it was still wholeheartedly grounded in affirmation of each of us and the work that we were doing—which in general I haven't felt in most of the witnessing we've done not only in Psolodrama but in the group in general.

Arny's comments about witnessing raised some fascinating issues, which he and I went on to speak of in greater depth. Although there is insufficient space in this document to include the entirety of the conversation, certain points of understanding and ideas for further exploration are worth mentioning:

- *When doing Insight Improvisation in a group, the quality of witnessing is extremely important—as important as it is working one-to-one. The group leader cannot assume that the group understands the principles of being a compassionate and nonjudgmental witness, even if the leader has explicitly communicated those principles.*
- *One way to address this potential problem is to focus on metta as the basis of witnessing—beginning with metta as a form of meditation, and then extending it through dialogue and other activities to the practice of witnessing. If as a witness one can use*

one’s presence and ability to share as a way to express lovingkindness, the recipient will experience a greater sense of being understood, empathized with, and “held” by the witnessing—which will ultimately encourage greater depth and risk-taking in the work.

- *Arny also shared that he had once experimented doing Psolodrama without any witness, completely alone, and that it had been a worthwhile and fulfilling experience. Recently I attempted the same experiment—allotting 15 minutes to do a Psolodrama, improvising alone in a studio space. The result was worthwhile: the Psolodrama itself was moving and rich—it had an interesting arc and story with its own dream-logic, and was filled with the same variety of images and characters as when I have been witnessed doing Psolodrama. Two things felt lacking, however. First, I did not feel as emotionally moved as I often am in Psolodrama—somehow the lack of a witness providing a container, or the lack of an audience to appreciate my conflict, made for a less cathartic experience. Second, I missed being able to discuss the Psolodrama with an outside eye and get their point of view and insights into what it was about. So, although I am very excited that it is possible to do Psolodrama by oneself when a witness is not available, I would not recommend this option to someone new to the form.*

Arny also made other experiments with Psolodrama. He did a short version of it while walking outdoors with his partner one day, and found it surprisingly effective and moving:

A: I remember one time being surprised, when I was first describing Psolodrama to S [Arny’s partner] we were walking outside, and I was talking to her about how you can allow yourself to discover what characters might come up and what dialogues might happen. And I said “for instance” and I just took a moment—and my father, my inner father, appeared, which was not the character I would have expected to show up just on a casual outside walk. And in the course of a one-minute little dialogue I had this powerful little shift inside—of feeling some release of resentment towards him and appreciation of his presence in my inner psyche.

So, I know the preferred way to do Psolodrama is to really take time, to warm up to it well, and do authentic movement, and be in a protected environment—but I was delighted to discover I could still have some of the impact of a Psolodrama even in the space of two minutes, and outside, and without any preparation.

Q: That’s a great story—a real example of someone taking the process and bringing it into day-to-day life....This experience of becoming one’s parent...and through that empathizing with the parent having a shift—that’s something I’ve experienced many times in Psolodrama. As well as other forms of drama therapy. But there’s something about Psolodrama—when it arises spontaneously—there’s no outside director saying “let’s play this scene”—that it seems to have even more power because it’s organic. It’s what’s coming up.

A: Mmm. There’s a certain power to it that’s quite wonderful. I’ve also done what I think of as “Applied Psolodrama” on a topic—I am remembering one other one now. I decided at the very beginning I wanted to focus on my addiction to sweets—just as I was starting the Psolodrama I chose that as the focus.

Q: I like that term, “Applied Psolodrama”—that’s great. Go ahead.

A: So after moving, my initial movement took me to...this creature that was totally addicted and hungry. And then I became the sweets who wanted to be devoured, who were being made to entice. And somebody from the NECCO Wafer Company who was delighted to get people addicted, to have a sure income stream....And then a shaman who was preparing a ritual of exorcism, and invited the protagonist to step into the fire and... be burned, have it burned out of him, and as the protagonist deciding whether I wanted to do that. I found it wholly unpleasant and a lot less fun than eating sugar. But I

decided to jump in. And I was the fire that ate the addiction. The Shaman was singing during some of it. There was a lot of movement to the fire and intense energy.

And I felt as I came out of it, this lightening about it. I didn't experience being free from the addiction; I've certainly acted on the addiction since then. But I felt a lightening of tension around it, like a layer has been removed of embarrassment, and greater freedom to take it on if I want to. And I loved that—I often think of a resource being there—sometimes it's just the director helping direct things—but often there's somebody else, it may not even be a director, there wasn't in this case I don't think, but the shaman served perfectly to help advance the inner work that I needed to do.

Robert Landy, in his writings on role theory in drama therapy

(Landy, 2000), distinguishes the role of the “Guide.” In Arny's applied Psolodrama, above, the shaman is filling the guide role normally taken by the director. This makes sense because what Arny needed in his Psolodrama was some kind of ritual—and shamans are better at rituals than directors are!

I am excited and inspired by Arny's experiments with Psolodrama, and our conversations together—I see him as a real collaborator on the path, and I look forward to continuing our dialogue as Insight Improvisation develops further in future.

INTERVIEW WITH “BETTY:”

Q: How would you describe the work we are doing to a stranger, who has never done this type of work [Insight Improvisation] before?

B: It's an opportunity to explore places of your self, and your soul, and your being that you otherwise might not have a place or opportunity to do that. Within that—the parts of it have been meditating, and meditating in different ways and discovering different ways of being and becoming in silence and doing that in a group. What's important for me in all of this is that I'm doing this as an individual and as a group—so I have witnesses and support for what we have been

doing.

The second part of it has been using different forms to—it seems we’ve always meditated first so that has been an anchor for the evening—using different forms to explore mindfulness and choicelessness. And I’ve been connecting it with improvising, and improvising in daily life, and how I can be in the world as an improviser and as a conscious being. And to be more awake and alive to who I am and what I’m doing as I move through my days and hours, and move...with other people and in community.

Betty, a frequent participant in the group, highlights two aspects of the work worth noting: first, the important functions of the group including witnessing and support; and second, how the emphasis on mindfulness and choiceless awareness has affected not only the work in the group, but also her daily life. It is interesting that these two strongest aspects for her are related—that the quality of witnessing and support in the group may in fact be a function of developing the meditative qualities of mindfulness, choicelessness, and particularly metta, which Betty discusses below.

Q: What have been the high points, key learnings, or surprises of the last 6 months?

B: The Zen [Rock] Garden—that was a surprise to me—I just always remember that evening with your friend who came [Dan Kinsey]. He came for one time, and how someone can enter... [and be] able to contribute and give to the group. That’s another learning for me: when I have the thought or feeling “where is everybody” to accept this is the way it is and these are the people who came tonight and embrace that. ...Multiple levels of takeaway: the form of Zen [Rock] Garden itself and the learning about being in the moment with who’s present.

Betty is referring to two things. First, she recalls the wonderful contribution of an old performance colleague of mine, Dan Kinsey, who visited the group this past summer. Although Dan came just to participate,

I encouraged him to lead an exercise I remembered he had facilitated once at Gardening at Night, many years back. The exercise worked so well at IIRG—and was so relevant to the work of the group—that I asked Dan’s permission if I might include it in the set of Insight Improvisation activities.

Betty’s other point here has to do with attendance: the IIRG is a drop-in group, and attendance sometimes consists of just a few people. My attitude has been that whoever shows up is the perfect group—I am even happy to work one-to-one if only one participant shows up. Betty is echoing that idea in her statement, finding that this is not only the modus operandi of the group but also, in fact, an opportunity for learning, and for letting go.

I really liked also the combination of writing—the authentic movement, and witnessing, and writing—spontaneous free writing after witnessing— then taking the free writing and doing a solo with the words and singing [the FreeText activity]. That for me was a [learning] opportunity...whatever the time was that was given—5 minutes, 7 minutes—I thought I wasn’t going to be able to fill the time and my anxiety was about running out of material. And, in fact, looking back on it, I covered not even a quarter of [my writing]. And having the trust and the freedom and the opportunity to again just be present and look at the page, and not be concerned and not edit, but just take the phrase that’s right there and go with that. That’s an important learning piece.

Especially for those in the group newer to theater, such as Betty, the idea of being onstage solo for any length of time is daunting, let alone five minutes or more, which can seem like forever. Betty’s discovery—and a fundamental lesson in Insight Improvisation—is that returning to the present moment actually helps. In Betty’s example, it helped on two levels:

first, to relieve performance anxiety, and second, to return her to the source of inspiration (which, in that exercise, was the text she had written and was holding in her hand).

I have a memory of Carol doing Amplification, visualizing her and her body and her voice getting louder and louder and louder—and just kind of relishing what a human being can do when they’re testing it out and focusing on the exercise and what I can learn from being a witness.

And one memory that comes to me—is Delores—the...time Delores was with us was after her girlfriend had moved here—and she was sharing her being in love (laughs). So part of it is people that were in the group and over time sharing and being a witness to life changes....the things that shaped who we are in our outside life, our private lives, our...work and family lives that we bring to a [session]—that make us who we are—but then we work with that.

Here Betty highlights two other reinforcing aspects of doing Insight Improvisation in a group: witnessing others perform (e.g., seeing Carol do a powerful, fully embodied and voiced Amplification improv); and sharing, both through group discussion and through the activities themselves, aspects of participants’ (and the facilitator’s) personal lives that bring the group closer together and create a sense of intimacy and trust.

Q: What has been the effect of the *metta* practice we have done? How do you feel it relates to the theater and drama therapy work?

B: Carrying around the notion of *metta* and that *metta* is a possibility in my life and in the world—and however you want to translate it: peacemaking, lovingkindness, a way of believing—which I believed before Insight Improvisation. That we’re all connected, and that we all matter. The form of *metta*, though, the simple words—I remember the first time you did it, it was profound for me—the way that you said the words, but said them so deeply and honestly, not theatrically. And again I’m not a theater person, all this is new to me in the past year or two—if you’re in the theater and you’re playing a part or have a role in the play or production, you are the vehicle for the character. So...if we’re using *metta* as beings in the world, we are the vehicle as

individuals for sending that out, for believing that it's true, and for trying to live with others in that way—and it's really a high priority for me. However you want to link it all together: compassion, peacemaking, conflict resolution, lovingkindness, *metta*—it's all connected for me.

It is worth underscoring the parallel Betty draws here between an actor as vehicle for their character, and a human being as vehicle for metta—both the actor and the person need to approach their task with authenticity, caring, commitment, and real feeling.

So, being kind to oneself. I don't know that I've consciously said to myself—you know when I try to release the editor or the critical person [the inner critic]—I don't think yet I've said *metta* or believed *metta* or some kind of line in my head or heart to help me focus compassion toward myself—but that's probably something I could use as a tool. Instead of just [saying] “monkeys get off my back” and “critics get out of here” or “out of the room with you!”...reframing it to *metta* or lovingkindness toward myself. And it's a more positive way—instead of banishing [the inner critic by saying] “Begone!” or “I'm locking the door! You stay out there and you can come back later!” it's reframing it to compassion for oneself.

Betty's learning here highlights another side to the metta practice: the way that it can—in a form of spiritual cognitive-behavioral therapy—substitute positive messages for negative ones, such as those of the inner critic. I have experienced and seen in others how the use of metta, whether directed toward oneself or toward others, can dispel not only self-judgment but also fear and anger, emotions that often have a particularly sticky, persistent quality. As the designer of Insight Improvisation, working with metta, I feel I have just begun to develop the myriad

*possibilities in applying the concept to the challenges facing the actor, and the individual in general.*⁵³

Personal Experiences with Insight Improvisation

Work with Peers

It would not be an overstatement to say that my one-to-one work with peers using Insight Improvisation has been the best psychotherapy I have experienced. The process of entering the studio, shedding the cares and busyness of the day, checking in, meditating together, moving, improvising, and then witnessing and delving deeply into the realms of the imagination, the unconscious, and the archetypal, has been a process that has kept me sane and allowed me to develop and grow through the personally challenging times of recent years.

This is not to say that the experience of working with different peer partners has been the same. Each person brings their own strengths, and their own challenges, as a collaborator. But I have been blessed to know and work with some extraordinarily intelligent and sensitive performers and therapists.

As mentioned elsewhere in this treatise, the culminating activity of Insight Improvisation is Psolodrama—so, in this section, I will focus on my experiences with that form (Psolodrama incorporates many of the skills developed in other Insight Improvisation activities, so it is valid to use it as a representative example). It has been in

⁵³ More on the potential of *metta* appears in “Part IV: Discussion and Conclusion” on page 151.

working with peers, in particular with drama therapist Jonathan Stein and with expressive therapist Kat Mitchell, that Psolodrama has shown its highest potential. In some ways, it is a form designed *for* creative arts therapists—perhaps more than for their clients—as it demands a level of commitment, ego strength, and willingness to plumb the depths, that is not typical for an average therapy client. To put it another way: one needs to experience a good external director—a good therapist, drama therapist, psychodramatist, etc.—before one can be guided by one’s own internal director.⁵⁴

For me, creating Psolodrama was like accidentally stumbling across a perfect recipe, one that tasted just right, the very first time. The trap here is that a structure that feels so comfortable can lead to laziness or bad habits. So, I have built into the guidelines the demand—borrowed from Natalie Goldberg’s work—that the psoloist work to go ever deeper, not avoiding what feels difficult, painful, or strange, but to go right into the heart of it. Of course, even exploring one’s own pain can in itself become a bad habit.

What saves Psolodrama from being a self-indulgent journey into ever-greater narcissism is the role of the witness, who is there to help contain and then reflect back on the experience. Often, it is in dialogue with the witness that the greatest discoveries take place. What may have seemed like a bizarre mess in the enactment is often reclaimed with the help of the witness as an ingenious and surprisingly apt metaphor for a core life issue—or a potent clue or insight into one’s early patterning and development. A

⁵⁴ More on the challenges of adapting Psolodrama appears in “Part IV: Discussion and Conclusion” on page 151.

Psolodrama is very much like a dream, but a dream that is unfolding live, in the studio, for another to see—and to help interpret, if the psoloist so desires.

Possibly unique to Psolodrama is the opportunity at any time to dialogue aloud with one’s own inner director or “wise mind.” This recreated sequence from one of my own stints as psoloist illustrates this in action:

- Protagonist: (holding his head, and crouching on the floor)
Stupid. Same thing over and over. No sense. Emptiness.
Everything seems so bleak, I can’t stand it. Arrrrrrr!!!
- Director: (moving a bit to the side, pausing to breathe, and then speaking as if to the protagonist)
How do you feel right now?
- Protagonist: (reversing back to crouching) I don’t know. Stuck.
- Director: (moving to the side once again)
If you could talk to anyone right now, who might that be?
- Protagonist: (reversing back, and pausing to think)
...God. Yes. I really want to talk to God.
(Looking up.)
GOD!?! Are you there?!? I’m feeling so...I can’t stand it!
Why does it all feel so hopeless? Why am I here? I HATE
FEELING SO USELESS!!!
- God: (slowly coming to a standing position, and then looking down at the floor, as if from up in the heavens)

Mmm.

(Very slowly, silently, God reaches down, and lifts the protagonist up as if he were a tiny doll. God holds the small figure up in front of his face, and then gently blows air onto him and through him, as if cleaning and purifying him.)
- Protagonist: (moving to the side, and standing lightly, as if floating gently in space)
...ohhh.
(Pause, then looking back to God, speaking very softly.)
Thank you.

One thing that surprises me over and over again in doing Psolodrama is how effective becoming the director is. This role reversal is not a logical or obvious thing to do—in fact, it feels quite strange whenever one does it (after all, one is sitting or standing in the middle of an empty space talking to oneself!). But shifting positions physically, taking on the distinctly different role of director (or inner wise-mind, coach, or therapist)—invariably and fundamentally alters the action of the Psolodrama, opening it to its next organic phase, and often sending it deeper.

One of the most striking features of Psolodrama, from a personal point of view, is how consistently moving it is. I would guess that four out of five times I have had the opportunity to be psoloist, I have experienced at least one, and usually several strong emotions in the course of a Psolodrama. Roughly one or two out of five times I have experienced a deep sense of catharsis, a sense of touching a place in my heart of profound and deep sadness mixed with joy, accompanied by a powerful feeling of release. Invariably these experiences also come with new insight—a fresh take on how I am being in the world, and on what needs to change.

Here is one example of a scene which communicated an existential insight, recreated from a recent Psolodrama. The scene begins with me lying on the floor on my belly, chin on the floor, mouth open, speaking in a deep guttural tone—I am an infinite dark cave. Later in the scene it becomes clear that this character is a manifestation of

Death:

DEATH: (moving on floor, groaning, grumbling) Ohhhh.
 OOOOOhhhhh. (Lying with chin on floor.) If a bug crawls
 in, I will be happy. I will EEATT. Ohhhh. Food. Soldiers.
 Africans. Old people—I love their flesh. Huh-huh.
 Children.... Ohhhhh. I am a mouth like a cave. My entrails

tunnel miles into the earth. Coiled like a snake. (laughing)
Huhuhuhuhuhuh!!

Protagonist: Who are you and why are you here?

DEATH: I am here to eat you! (laughing) HUHUHUHUH!! Are you afraid?

Protagonist: Yes. I am afraid.

DEATH: Gooood. You should be!!! You can't escape me.

(The protagonist, as young hero, grasps tightly to his sword with both hands, and stands ready to fight)

Protagonist: I will fight you! I have my diamond sword! It can cut through anything!!

DEATH: GO AHEAD!!! HUHUHUHUHUUH!!! Cut me! Cut me! I love it! (laughing uproariously and coughing) Cut me into a million pieces. I will digest myself. That diamond sword will make a nice toothpick.

Protagonist: I am fighting my way through the forest, slicing through trees. With my diamond sword I am unstoppable!

DEATH: HUHUHUHUUH!!! Ahhhh... You sweet boy. I've told you before...you've just got to let go. You're caught up in illusion. I am the only thing that's real.

Protagonist: NO!!

DEATH: Let me sing you a song...

“Death will come, in the end, no matter what you do....”

So before you die, my boy, try to love someone.

The messages of this Psolodrama felt starkly clear to me: as I keep running around wielding my diamond sword, trying to do good in the world, am I, ultimately, trying to stave off Death? Can I instead, let go of struggling and striving, and perhaps—

as Death spells out in the end—just love someone (rather than always loving and fearing for my young-hero-self)?

One of the qualities I often experience with Psolodrama is the feeling of inevitability—as if those characters, that scene, always existed, and that all I was doing was unearthing something that was already there. Somewhere, I feel, C. G. Jung is smiling. Taking the two examples above, the characters of God and Death felt (in embodying them, and afterwards) unstoppable, supremely powerful—speaking and acting with a voice or in a way completely their own, and surrounded by a sense of the numinous: magic, mystery, the sacred.⁵⁵ Psolodrama, I feel, may be the best form I have encountered for accessing and finding expression for the archetypal roles we all have within us.

In Performance

One of the exciting aspects of developing Insight Improvisation has been to try and apply the same techniques onstage as an actor that I have been using in workshops and one-to-one. As the saying goes—“you can fool the fans, but not the players”—so, for me, the test of whether these ideas actually hold up onstage, with a paying audience, is an important one.

⁵⁵ This is also true of the Mud Monster cited in the Psolodrama transcript that begins on page 76. The numinous quality can accompany a great range of archetypal figures—not only absolutes such as God and Death.

In more recent years, I have had the fortune to experience a veritable explosion of creativity around Insight Improvisation’s forms—inventing something new almost every year—and have brought many of these experiments to the stage in a Boston-area group, The Performance Cult (also known as PCult).

In the early days of PCult, and its “uncle,” Gardening at Night, my favorite mode of performance was storytelling. I was very comfortable using Jean-Claude van Itallie’s techniques, including beginning with a vertical and horizontal moment, working entirely in the present tense, paying attention to the three narrative stances, etc. These guidelines helped develop my skills in a new direction—neither improv comedy, nor traditional scripted performance, nor abstract physical and sound improvisation—but something in-between or a middle path: a kind of non-scripted, authentic improvisation based on real-life experience.

More recently, having assimilated van Itallie’s approach, I have become more experimental, working more and more with the idea of “entering empty,” with no preconception around content, and only a basic idea of form. Scott Kelman’s simple guideline—“if you have a good idea, don’t do it”—has become the basis for many performance experiments over the years, which have all contributed to the development of Insight Improvisation.

One such form is FreeSong, which I have had the pleasure to perform as a solo improvisation on two occasions this Fall (2004). The experience was enormously satisfying and freeing: beginning with authentic movement, and performing mostly with eyes closed (not typical for theater), I used improvisational singing and sound to express the feelings, images, characters, and stories arising spontaneously. (This is an activity

similar in spirit to Psolodrama, but without the convention of the psychodramatic roles, nor with any expectation that the result shed light on my own personal life issues.⁵⁶) The second of these FreeSong performances, for example, went something like this (the piece was roughly 10 minutes long):

I begin against the rear wall of the theater, face away from the audience, and begin to hum. As a song emerges, I slowly turn to face the audience, eyes still closed, but scanning with my face and gesturing outward with one arm. In my song, I am a surfer, surfing over the seas of the earth, a young vital romantic figure, searching for adventure.

The scene shifts and I come to stillness, crouched center stage. I am an insect, emerging from its skin, like a cicada after a long period of dormancy. I emerge and am reborn, singing in a high-pitched voice, piercing and rapid falsetto. I move in rapid, angular jerks. I sing of my brain, and the fever of insect-mind, all rapid, quick, green, and electric. I sing of the others flying around, all of us in a frenzy to mate. I sing of the mating, and the song gets strange, not logical, breaking off into tangents and losing itself in jumbles of words.

The scene transforms and I am alone. Bleak, grey. I am an old man, the last man on earth, sitting on a hillside, looking out over the ruins of the burnt-out world. I sing of my loneliness, of the stupidity of humankind. I sing of my youth, and gesture back to where the young surfer appeared. I sing of how I would wave to the young native women on the shores as I passed on my surfboard. I sing of deep loneliness. I wail

⁵⁶ I have tried Psolodrama itself as a performance structure, but found it difficult to go to the same depths with an audience of strangers as I can with a trusted witness. Other forms such as FreeSong seem to evoke images, emotions, and archetypal figures just as strongly as Psolodrama without stepping over the line into what feels like therapy.

and sob, my voice racked with echoing, desperate pain—I choke on my own tears.⁵⁷

Afterwards, the feedback from the audience was some of the most enthusiastic I have encountered. One audience member felt sure that the entire performance had been carefully planned and well-rehearsed. Another compared the old man to Shakespeare’s King Lear. One young man wanted to know how I had created the piece; could the flow of images, emotions, and characters be harnessed for use in traditional theater (the answer is yes); and how he could learn how to do the same thing. Days later he joined the Insight Improvisation Research Group and, to my great satisfaction, and his, did the same exercise I had done onstage—in his own unique way, of course.

For me, performing onstage, even for a small audience, provides an important impetus to keep Insight Improvisation vital and relevant as a theatrical form. The challenge and energy of live performance is not better than studio work or drama therapy, but different, and necessary.

⁵⁷ As with any of the transcripts of improvisations in this treatise, it would be interesting to analyze this piece from a Freudian and/or a Jungian perspective. For me, the imagery in this piece says a great deal of where I am in my own life—as a 40-year-old, in mid-life, facing questions about my future, and about love and relationships. One does not need to be young to find our culture’s take on sexuality at times strange or alienating; and one does not need to be an old man to mourn one’s youth. The feeling of apocalypse at the end of this piece may also echo my own deeper feelings (underneath my veneer of optimism) about the state of our society, particularly after the 2004 election.

Part IV: Discussion and Conclusion

Synthesis: Insight Improvisation Found

In working with Insight Improvisation—developing, practicing, teaching, and applying it onstage and as a therapist—I have found that the integration of meditation with theater and drama therapy is a path that is not only personally fulfilling, but that others, too, seem to understand and benefit from this effort.

In synthesizing the various points of view, it is useful to summarize what Insight Improvisation means not only for myself, but for others—both the positive aspects of the work, and what may need to change or develop further.

Takeaways from Insight Improvisation

Throughout much of this paper I have written a great deal about what I get out of the practice of Insight Improvisation (more on this below). But what do others walk away with when doing this work? Some of the answers I have heard fall into the following categories:

- **Meditation and mindfulness.** Participants tend to experience this strongly in the session, and feel they are applying it more frequently in their daily lives.
- **Metta (Lovingkindness).** Participants frequently single this out as a particularly moving aspect of the work—some have emotional experiences and insights in the act of trying to send *metta* to themselves, or to another. In addition, the application of *metta* to witnessing and to performance is a takeaway for some.
- **Psolodrama.** Although not for everyone, Psolodrama has some extremely ardent fans, some of whom have even practiced it by themselves (alone!) or with their significant other. One participant even did a Psolodrama for his wife as they walked

- together outside on a path by a local pond. The insights gleaned from a Psolodrama session in the studio with a supportive witness are often significant and lasting.
- **FreeSong.** People tend to really enjoy the progression of singing improvisations in Insight Improvisation, including One-liners, FreeSong, and FreeSong duets. Singing has a way of unlocking participant’s energy and playfulness, and is a channel to feelings, emotions, and inner imagery. I have had participants many days after the fact mention a favorite moment from a FreeSong duet performed in a workshop—how they still reminisce about the spontaneous humor and surprise of it.
 - **The Group.** The quality of group support, trust, and closeness engendered at least partially by the integration of meditation and mindfulness (including ground rules concerning mindful and supportive speech in the group) has been a strong component of the work, that individuals consistently refer to as a take-away.
 - **Favorite Activities.** Among the other exercises often requested include meditation, authentic movement, the Three States, Zen Rock Garden, Amplification, and Storytelling.

Of course, short of doing a double-blind placebo-controlled research study, it is hard to know what effect Insight Improvisation is really having on participants. But my sense is that the integration of meditation, theater, and drama therapy is a rich and fascinating stew that keeps people returning. For others, Insight Improvisation fills a gap that might be filled by doing yoga, more traditional improv, dance, or some other activity that lets them use their body and/or voice mindfully.

Insight Improvisation as Personal Mirror

In many ways, Insight Improvisation developed as a deep expression of my own core beliefs about life, spirituality, theater, and therapy. As the work has developed, it has become an ever more clear expression of these personal principles:

- **The answers lie within us; we are often our own best teacher and therapist.**

Perhaps more than any other drama therapy modality I have encountered, Insight Improvisation empowers the participant to access their own wise mind and inner witness. When needed, the therapist or witness is always there, ready to lend support. But often the best coaching we can get is from ourselves.

- **Transformation—for ourselves and in our relationships—happens through deep listening, empathy, and acceptance.** To meditate is to listen; to embody is to empathize; and to relax, open, and breathe is to cultivate acceptance. Insight Improvisation fosters all of these.
- **Nothing worthwhile happens by forcing or pushing—to succeed we must remain completely present while completely letting go, surrendering ourselves to the moment.** Time and again I have found that my best moments as a therapist or workshop leader have been to do less, let go of control, listen, and open. The truth of this as an actor and improviser is also emergent for me—the more I mature in this work, the more I learn to let go in front of an audience, to work “without a net.”
- **Creativity is infinite if we tap into what is already there.** There are no better sources for *inspiration*—literally from the Latin “to breathe,” and the source of the word *spirit*—than our own breath, our own body, our own senses as we take in our environment, and our relationship with whoever is present. Insight Improvisation has

taught me to trust the moment onstage; if I just listen to my belly, my gut, to the *hara*,⁵⁸ there is always something unfolding, something the body and psyche need to express.

- **What’s worthwhile when working with others is helping them connect to their own inner resources of love, freedom, play, and power.** For me, this speaks to the true meaning of the role of *facilitator*—in the original Italian, someone who helps ease the way. As a facilitator of Insight Improvisation, my job is to offer a structure (a meditation, an activity, a safe container) and then *get out of the way*—allowing the individual or group to make their own discoveries (which are always far more meaningful than whatever *I* was going to “teach” them!).
- **By connecting with my own inner life, the flow of mindful and choiceless awareness, I as performer am fully engaged and will fully engage an audience.** There are very few actual secrets to great acting, but I think this is one of them: if, as an actor, I actually care about what is happening, the audience will, too. Insight Improvisation provides tools to help the actor drop beneath layers of stage fright, distraction, and ego—and through mindfulness of the body, sensations, and inner imagery, touch real feeling and channel it through expression.
- **The most effective learning is experiential.** Insight Improvisation integrates experiential learning approaches in several ways, including

⁵⁸ *Hara*, also known as *tanden* (in Japanese) and *dantian* (in Chinese) means “the seat of power—the center of gravity, located in the abdomen just below and behind the navel. This area corresponds to the Svadhisthana Chakra of Vedic Kundalini and Yoga systems” (“Tanden,” 2004).

- Active exercises that engage the full range of body, voice, energy, and emotion.
- Cognitive models that organize concepts from Buddhist psychology and other sources into useful structures integrated with active work.
- Module and program designs that incorporate standard structures such as check-ins, debriefs, and forms of closure, to help participants by creating a strong container for the work.

The Uses of Insight Improvisation: Pluses and Deltas

It is useful to look at the different ways Insight Improvisation is applied—to view it through the distinct lenses of embodied meditation, mindful theater practice, contemplative drama therapy modality, and process for personal growth,⁵⁹ in order to understand its impact and where it needs to grow as a body of work. These are summarized below in terms of “Pluses” (what seems to be working) and “Deltas” (where Insight Improvisation could improve, change, or develop further):

Embodied Meditation

Pluses.

- 1) From my work with individuals and groups, it is clear that the integration of traditional forms of meditation with the active meditations of Insight

⁵⁹ These four categories correspond to the “Four Areas of Application” as discussed beginning on page 9.

Improvisation can be not only a welcoming introduction to the concepts and practice of mindfulness, choicelessness, *metta*, etc., but also is in itself a rigorous training and conditioning for bringing these same qualities of awareness into daily life.

2) In some ways, Insight Improvisation improves on traditional meditation training in that it invites an active, creative, embodied way of working with the mind, one that more closely resembles the challenges of real life, as well as one that honors the needs of the body as well as the mind.

3) Participants in Insight Improvisation groups and individual work often observe that the power and applications of *metta* are one of the most exciting aspects of Insight Improvisation—how for the actor, the witness, and for individuals in daily life, *metta* holds enormous potential for benefit.

4) The practice of Insight Improvisation, by incorporating meditation and Buddhist ideas, invites the practitioner to touch back into those basic approaches on a regular basis. For those, like myself, who have busy lives, Insight Improvisation provides an extra reminder and opportunity to meditate more frequently, and to bring mindfulness and *metta* into interactions with others.

Deltas.

1) Insight Improvisation cannot and does not attempt to match the rigor and depth of traditional meditation training, such as a silent retreat. The experience on retreat of being confronted with oneself and one’s own mind, through the rigor of sitting and walking meditation, cannot be duplicated, and probably cannot be improved upon. For those serious about Insight Improvisation, I would suggest to

them to experience more in-depth forms of meditative training.

2) In many ways, I have only begun to explore the potential of mindfulness, *metta*, and all of the meditative concepts, in how they meet theater and drama therapy. Buddhist teachings provide an almost endless source of stimulating and challenging ideas, including the teachings on morality, the concept of “no-self,” the exploration of states of deep concentration—all of which may have implications for this work.

3) At the same time, it is a trap to think that Buddhist teachings exist merely to serve my own agenda of melding them with theater and drama therapy. Buddhist teachers often caution about mixing the dharma with other practices (e.g., the *vipassana* teacher S. N. Goenka), and Trungpa warns against the seduction of spiritual materialism (1973). As the developer of this work, I need to find a “middle path” that allows me to pursue what appears to be a creative and beneficial integration, while at the same time honoring the power and rigor of the Buddha’s teachings in their pure form.⁶⁰

Mindful Theater Practice.

Pluses.

1) In one-on-one work, workshops, and onstage, it has become evident that the power of applying mindfulness to theater—resulting in an impressive level of

⁶⁰ One way to do this may be to emphasize for Insight Improvisation practitioners the importance of cultivating their own spiritual practice apart from this work.

quality, depth, and creativity of performance—is inarguable.

2) As a form of theater training, mindfulness and meditation may be exactly what young actors need to balance their tendencies to want to impress and/or hide (performance mind) and to become more aware of their acting habits in general, be cultivating greater awareness.

3) As mentioned above, there is great potential in the application of *metta* to working with stage fright and the inner critic.

4) For any kind of improvisation, as well as for sourcing new material (e.g., for original performance pieces), Insight Improvisation strengthens the performer’s ability to be more present—to the messages of their own body, the subtleties of their text, the sensory input from their environment, their relationship with other actors and audience—all the channels available in the present moment.

Deltas.

1) The “spiritual” nature of Insight Improvisation could alienate some theater practitioners who might find the eastern philosophical influence foreign to them.

2) Meditation is simply difficult for some. Actors and improvisers in particular can be high-energy people who have trouble sitting still for *anapana*, let alone *vipassana*. This is compounded by the increasing prevalence of ADHD in our society. (Of course, all of this might also argue that meditation therefore is *more* necessary, not less.)

3) One potential trap in using Insight Improvisation for theater training is that one can focus on meditation, authentic movement, and open improvisations, leaving behind the rigor of traditional theater training’s ability to stretch the body and the

voice to their expressive limits. Of all the Insight Improvisation activities, Amplification does this best, but is now only one exercise out of dozens. For now, I would suggest to theater instructors to combine Insight Improvisation with other forms of training, including Action Theater, modern dance, clown, commedia dell'arte, and Grotowski on the physical side, and Linklater, Roy Hart, and Shakespeare for voice.

Contemplative Drama Therapy.

Pluses.

1) Overall, the addition of meditation and mindfulness feels like a completely natural fit for drama therapy, an organic integration benefiting both therapist and client. The five applications of meditation/mindfulness delineated above (see "Five Elements of Contemplative Drama Therapy" on page 95) strengthen the container for the work, the therapeutic alliance between client and therapist, and the client's own ability to bring new awareness and real insight into their behavior. Trends in psychotherapy at large toward integrating mindfulness (Germer, 2004) would indicate that a similar merging with drama therapy is inevitable.

2) Specific activities, such as Life/Dream Scene, Psolodrama, etc., hand the power to the client to make their own discoveries. Developing, strengthening, and increasing the client's trust in their own inner witness/wise-mind is ultimately the path to healing: as therapists we aim to work our way out of a job. For this reason, Psolodrama and related activities are more effective for exploring archetypes and

shadow material than traditional forms of psychodrama and drama therapy because, like meditation, they direct the practitioner toward working with their own body-mind in extremely subtle ways. In psychodrama, for example, one can be easily distracted by the presence of and suggestions given by the external director. In Psolodrama, as in, for example, Gendlin’s Focusing approach (1978), one is increasingly—through the body—becoming attuned with one’s actual feelings and needs, ultimately, in my experience, tapping into a subconscious level of knowing.

3) As I have seen in my work with patients suffering from borderline personality disorder (at Two Brattle Center in Cambridge from 2003-2004), one of the greatest obstacles to effective use of drama therapy techniques is client resistance. Insight Improvisation cuts through that resistance by organically integrating meditation into its warm-up process, creating an increased feeling of safety and a willingness on the part of the client to open up and try new things. In addition, because of the emphasis on mindfulness throughout the session, the client is bringing a deeper level of awareness—for example, for borderlines, regarding their own emotional reactivity—to how they are approaching each moment of enactment. The use of mindfulness and *metta* in a group setting can increase the quality of mutual support necessary for effective drama therapy.

4) The act of inserting meditation into a therapy session has an additional effect: it serves as a reminder to reconnect with the basic questions of existence— “who am I?,” “why am I here?,” and “what is really important?” The meditation experience can offer a fresh, existential context for therapy, helping the client

detach from their dysfunctional patterns of mind, and to see their issues from a radically new perspective.

Deltas.

1) Meditation and mindfulness are not for everyone. Some clients and some drama therapists will not be open to this integration—it may come off as a new-age approach, lacking in rigor.

2) Activities like Psolodrama, in which the client improvises by herself (with the therapist as witness) need to be used wisely and with great care. Not all clients have the ego strength (not to mention grasp on reality) needed to contend with the powerful feelings that can arise, or with the archetypal nature of the material that emerges. My recommendation to therapists wishing to practice Insight Improvisation is to start with the more basic exercises—meditation, active meditation, and theater/improv—and only over the long term, once they really know the client and feel they are capable, to introduce the more advanced drama therapy techniques.

3) I have not yet led a full-fledged ongoing drama therapy group using Insight Improvisation, and so do not at present know all of the implications of doing so.⁶¹ My guess is that such a group would need to be made up of fairly sophisticated and capable individuals—more toward the “normal neurotic” end of the spectrum—to help contain the power of what can emerge through the drama therapy exercises. I would *not* recommend such a group for those dealing with

⁶¹ It is my hope to begin to form such an ongoing group in 2005.

serious depression, schizophrenia, or emotional reactivity, as the material that can arise might trigger these individuals. For clients dealing with these more serious disorders and issues, certain Insight Improvisation activities may be more appropriate, such as basic mindfulness and *metta* forms, as well as those exercises emphasizing “fun” theatrical improvisation.

Personal Growth Process.

Pluses.

1) From a purely personal perspective, I have noticed the effects of this work in many domains of my own life: in my profession as a facilitator doing leadership training in the corporate world, in my personal relationships, and even in the most challenging interactions I face with difficult individuals. Insight Improvisation has conditioned in me a more conscious habit of returning to mindfulness and *metta* in response to life’s challenges and my own reactivity.

2) Working with peers using Insight Improvisation, particularly doing Psolodrama with a supportive witness, has been the deepest, most satisfying personal growth process I have encountered. (I do not make this statement lightly, as I am someone who has been through a number of different programs oriented toward personal growth and development.) One reason for this may be that Insight Improvisation combines so many different channels of self-expression. Whereas practices such as authentic movement (a deeply transformative approach in its own right) tend to focus on a particular modality, such as movement, Insight Improvisation invites meditation, movement, voice, enactment, conflict,

storytelling, song, and other means of expression.

3) There is great potential for creating training based on Insight Improvisation to address practical problems facing ordinary individuals, as well as therapists, leaders, and other more specific populations. For example, it would be a natural fit to address areas of work/life balance, reactivity in leadership, personal presence, and other important areas of skill development and personal growth.

Deltas

1) Accessibility of Insight Improvisation may be a challenge for the general public. To fully grasp the work, it helps to already have some background or interest in meditation and improvisation.

2) Some participants are quite happy with meditation and improvisation (geared toward acting and performance), but find the drama therapy aspects of Insight Improvisation threatening—and in some cases simply will not participate in those activities. It is important for a workshop designer/facilitator using Insight Improvisation techniques to adapt what they are doing very carefully to their target audience.

3) Insight Improvisation is in its infancy and has barely begun to venture out to other populations—beyond a small group of creative arts therapists and experimental theater folks. It would be extremely interesting, for example, to try to teach it to a group of committed meditators, to a group of traditional talk therapists, to a group of schoolteachers, etc. Until then, it is hard to predict how adaptable this work is to society at large.

Future Directions

Questions and Challenges to Address

As I consider Insight Improvisation to still be in its infancy as a set of practices and ideas, many outstanding questions and issues remain. Here are some:

Teaching Insight Improvisation Concepts. One ongoing challenge is to find ways to teach the models behind Insight Improvisation—the “What,” “How,” and “Who”—in ways that are dynamic and well-integrated into the experiential work I am doing. This past summer, at the outset of the IIRG, I did attempt to succinctly put forth a couple of these models. People found them interesting and thought-provoking, but it tended to put them in their heads (particularly, their critic-minds!), and not in their bodies. Ultimately, I may find that the models belong in a book, and that for workshops and classes I will do what I already do—to weave the concepts in naturally, as needed, when introducing or coaching active work.

Teaching Psolodrama. This Fall I was scheduled to teach an intensive weekend workshop in Psolodrama, but had to cancel due to laryngitis. Although I have a draft of a workshop design (see “Insight Improvisation: Psolodrama Intensive Weekend” on page 189), I am still very curious how the weekend would have worked. Teaching Psolodrama is a challenge because it demands fluency in so many skills, particularly authentic movement and psychodrama. Some people seem to “get” Psolodrama immediately—as if

they were born to do it. Others find it daunting, scary, or alienating.⁶² Learning more effective ways of teaching Psolodrama through presenting a clear progression of authentic movement and psychodramatic skills work is an important task that lays ahead in the development of Insight Improvisation.

Adapting Insight Improvisation for Different Populations. As mentioned in several passages of this treatise, there is great potential for applying Insight Improvisation with a number of different populations. However, the work was developed within a relatively supportive cocoon: my own local experimental theater and drama therapy community. I have led Insight Improvisation workshops elsewhere to very enthusiastic response (e.g., with interns at the Kripalu yoga center in Lenox, MA), but it remains to be seen how far this work can be taken. For example, one might imagine the meditation world is a natural fit for Insight Improvisation—I have had conversations about it in the past with Andrew Olendzki of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and he is guardedly open to the idea—but it is unclear how experienced meditators would react to some of the strange theater and drama therapy elements of Insight Improvisation. The same is true for psychotherapists, for corporate leaders, and others—adapting the work to fit their needs presents an interesting set of challenges.

Addressing the Theater/Drama Therapy Split. As mentioned above, whereas most participants enjoy the combination of meditation and theater/improvisation, some

⁶² As mentioned earlier regarding drama therapy for groups, Psolodrama is not appropriate for those whose ego strength and boundaries may be in question, e.g., those suffering from mental illness, clinical depression, substance abuse, etc.

find they cannot deal with the drama therapy aspects of Insight Improvisation, and tend to sit out and observe when faced with activities that invite them to explore their own personal material. Although this is by no means the majority (currently there is one participant in the IIRG—the woman I refer to as “Betty,” interviewed above—who exhibits this response), it does pose interesting questions about how to communicate what Insight Improvisation is to others, and how to design workshops and individual work to be least threatening to these individuals.

Locating Insight Improvisation in a Broader Context. Although others seem to like the name Insight Improvisation, it raises questions about the scope of the work. For example, does the name reflect the drama therapy aspects of the work? Also, by using “Insight,” do I limit the work in that it seems to refer only to Insight Meditation, leaving out other types of meditation and other Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions? One umbrella term that I like is Contemplative Drama Therapy. In the same way that authentic movement can be seen as a form of Contemplative Dance, Insight Improvisation is a kind of Contemplative Drama Therapy. The question is, what other forms are there? One task that lays ahead is to learn about and connect with other drama therapists using meditation in their work.

Future Potential, Hopes, and Plans

As mentioned above, there are many future directions for exploration, including potential applications for Insight Improvisation in clinical drama therapy, education, peacebuilding, leadership and communication skills training, working with special populations, and other fields.

Do I see Insight Improvisation being used primarily as a new form of meditation? As therapy? As a theater training or performance technique? The answer is Yes, Yes, Yes, and Yes. My hope is that Insight Improvisation will be taught and used for all of these reasons.

One final question that arises is how will I teach it, and to whom? There are a few ways I hope to spread the word about Insight Improvisation, in the near future and the long term:

- 1) **Writing a Book.** In 2005 I intend to devote myself to writing a book for the general public about Insight Improvisation. My hope is that this will be read by meditators and those interested in meditation, actors and theater instructors, as well as drama therapists.
- 2) **Teaching Workshops.** In 2005 I am already planning to teach introductory and advanced workshops in Insight Improvisation at a retreat center in Maine, and would like to teach more in other places, too. Ultimately, my hope is that in publishing a book others could become interested in the work, creating more workshop opportunities.
- 3) **Practicing Drama Therapy.** In 2005 I would like to expand my practice of drama therapy, working with individuals and possibly with an ongoing group using Insight Improvisation.
- 4) **Teaching Drama Therapists.** Recently I submitted a proposal to the National Association of Drama Therapy to present workshops in Insight Improvisation and Psolodrama at their next conference, summer 2005 in Portland, OR.

- 5) **Peacebuilding.** I have dreamed for some time to take my skills as a workshop leader into a wider sphere, working to promote dialogue and build peace in regions of the world (including the United States) suffering from the effects of war, mass violence, and other forms of conflict. I believe that the concepts and experiential approach of Insight Improvisation could provide a new method for dealing sensitively and skillfully with the difficult challenges arising in these situations. Another intention for 2005 is to begin to explore how to integrate my work with developments in this field.
- 6) **Farther in the Future.** I would love to form a group practice in drama therapy in the Boston area, joining with other expressive and creative arts therapists doing similar work. Ultimately, I'd like to see a center or institute for Contemplative Drama Therapy, of which Insight Improvisation could be a part.

Acknowledgements and Final Words

There are many people to thank for their help and support in the development of Insight Improvisation—fellow-travelers in theater, meditation, and drama therapy.

Without this community of extraordinary individuals, my life would lack its richness and meaning:

My friend, colleague, and mentor Nat Warren-White, my personal model of what it is to be a warm, open-hearted man, teacher, and drama therapist.

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May all beings be happy.

May all beings live in peace.

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Appendix I: Insight Improvisation Group Guidelines

The following description of purpose and ground rules, originally developed for use in the Insight Improvisation Research Group, could easily be adapted to fit any ongoing group or class using Insight Improvisation techniques.

Our Purpose

The Insight Improvisation Research Group is an informal Boston-area group devoted to exploring the synergy between meditation and theater, for personal learning and growth, and for practical application in theater, drama therapy, education, training, and other fields.

Our Ground Rules⁶³

- 1. We are a Learning Laboratory.**
 - a. We Learn Through Play.**
 - i. We Encourage Experimentation, Play, and Humor!**
 - ii. We Love Mistakes.** We embrace the making of mistakes as a natural, necessary, and beneficial part of the learning process.
 - b. We are Aware of How We Speak and Listen.**

⁶³ Some of these ground rules were originally inspired by “Informed Consent for Alternate Route Training” by Penny Lewis, PhD., RDT-BCT and Saphira Linden RDT-BCT, as well as the Leslie University guidelines concerning multiple roles in clinical training. Some ground rules were originally suggested by IIRG group members.

- i. **We Practice Mindful Speech.** We share from our own personal experience (e.g., using “I” statements), and avoid making assumptions about or judging others. Through mindfulness of how we act, speak, and give feedback, we actively strive to create a shame-free environment.
 - ii. **We Give Supportive Feedback.** When giving feedback, our focus is always on how to support the recipient.
 1. We begin with what we liked and/or what we experienced.
 2. We always ask before giving constructive criticism. (Sometimes constructive criticism is not appropriate for a particular activity, and we are sensitive to offering it in the right timing and context.)
 3. Ideally, we create a feedback sandwich, finishing up with a specific supportive comment.
 - iii. **We Listen to Learn.** We listen with an open mind to feedback and to others’ points of view—because we wish to learn from one another.
- c. **We Believe in More Communication Rather Than Less.**
- i. **We Share Our Feelings.** We speak openly about how we are feeling in the moment, knowing that it will contribute to the group’s learning process. We share when we feel put on the spot, ashamed, defensive, upset, disconnected, etc.
 - ii. **We Speak Out.** We do not wait until the end of a group session to let others know when we feel we are not getting what we need, when we feel unsafe, or when we are not satisfied with how the group is operating. We speak up and speak out.

2. **We Maintain Clear and Appropriate Boundaries.** This group is an opportunity to practice the kinds of physical and psychological boundary setting we must also practice in our lives.
- a. **We Acknowledge the Difference Between What is Therapeutic and What is Therapy.** While it is common for participants to experience some therapeutic benefits from the activities of the group, we understand that:
 - i. **Participation in this group is not psychotherapy.**
 - ii. **There is no therapist or client role in this group.** The relationship between the facilitator of the group and a participant in the group, or the relationship between someone directing an exercise in the group and a participant in the group, is not a psychotherapeutic relationship—the facilitator or director is not in the role of therapist, and the participant is not in the role of client.
 - b. **We Respect the Limits of Our Own Ability to Participate.** This includes knowing when to sit out and when to push ourselves, when to say no and yes, and to do this for the right reasons—not guided by the habits of the past, but by mindful and intuitive awareness of how we feel in the present moment.
 - c. **We are Sensitive to When It’s OK to Use Touch, and When It’s Not.**
 - i. **When in Doubt We Ask Permission.** Touch can be a part of our interaction with others if it is commonly agreed upon as part of a group activity, or if we ask and receive permission beforehand.
 - ii. **We Do Not Sexualize Touch.** We are aware of our own motivations in touching—e.g., noticing whether this is for the other person or for ourselves. Although sexual feelings may arise during the group, we do not act on them.
 - d. **We are Aware of Others’ Physical Limitations.** When doing active work together, we remain aware that others may be in a different physical state than we are—and we

are especially sensitive when moving in contact, sharing weight, etc.

- 3. We Strive to Create a Safe Container.** Safety for all group members is the group’s responsibility:
- a. **We Are Present.** We strive to arrive at group sessions on time, to be present in heart, mind and body, and to help hold the consciousness for the whole group. Also, in the spirit of being more present, we turn all cell phones off.
 - b. **We are Responsible for Our Own Safety.** For example, when moving or improvising with eyes closed, we open them when moving rapidly or through the space.
 - c. **We Maintain Confidentiality.** We agree that personal information shared in the group does not leave the room.
 - d. **We Respect Differences.** Some members are “veterans,” others are relatively new to this kind of work. We embrace all levels, and invite everyone to shine and everyone to be a beginner. We value diversity of all kinds. When diverse points of view are present, we welcome healthy conflict and honor all sides.
 - e. **We Stop If Something Feels Unsafe.** Anyone can stop the action of the group anytime if they feel what is happening is unsafe, by saying “STOP” or “TIME OUT” and by making a T-shape with their hands. We do this only when something feels seriously wrong—otherwise, we try to support the facilitator, and trust that they will notice and respond to what is happening.
 - f. **We Cultivate Loving Intention.** We believe that there is no healing without grace and love—we bring our heart and soul to our participation in the group. We offer *metta* (lovingkindness) to all beings and dedicate our work to alleviating suffering

and promoting peace and joy for one another and for the planet. May all beings be well and happy!

Appendix II: Sample Agendas for Group Classes and Workshops

(Please note: brief descriptions of most activities referred to in this section can be found in “Insight Improvisation Activities & Techniques—An Overview,” beginning on page 24. A facilitator guide to Insight Improvisation is currently in development; please see www.jgluck.org on the internet for up-to-date information.)

Sample Agendas for 3-Hour Insight Improvisation Classes

Introduction to FreeSong

The purpose of this class is to introduce Insight Improvisation approaches to incorporating singing in improvisation, and how singing can provide an important channel of self-expression, connecting performer and audience to images and feelings with power and depth.

- Check-in and review of Ground Rules⁶⁴ (20 minutes)
- Meditation/warm-up: Shared *Vipassana* II—using authentic movement—in pairs, including pair sharing and group debrief (30 minutes)
- Singing circle: (40 minutes)
 - Introduction to singing in Insight Improvisation, with an emphasis on letting go of “performance mind” (3 minutes)
 - Chords (5 minutes)
 - Group Jam (3 minutes)
 - Jam Duets in circle (7 minutes)
 - Intro to One-liners and facilitator demo (5 minutes)
 - One-liners and One-liner Duets (12 minutes)
 - Debrief (5 minutes)
- Break (10 minutes)

⁶⁴ See “Appendix I: Insight Improvisation Group Guidelines,” page 180.

- Introduction to FreeSong, facilitator demo, sharing and discussion of demo (20 minutes)
- FreeSong: two solos, each followed by sharing (25 minutes)
- FreeSong Duets—two pairs perform, each followed by sharing (25 minutes)
- Closure—final reflection and/or closing ritual (10 minutes)

Metta in Action

The purpose of this class is to explore the concept of *metta* (lovingkindness) in a variety of ways, including through individual (silent) and pair (aloud) meditation, through physical touch, through movement and improvisation, and in the act of witnessing and sharing.

- Check-in and review of Ground Rules (20 minutes)
- Meditation as a group (15 minutes):
 - *Anapana*—meditation on breath (3 minutes)
 - *Vipassana*—open awareness (5 minutes)
 - *Metta*—lovingkindness meditation (7 minutes)
- Eye Contact Meditation and *Metta* Dialogue in pairs, plus sharing (15 minutes)
- Group debrief/discussion of *metta* (10 minutes)
- Mindful Massage + Shared *Vipassana*: introduction with emphasis on communicating *metta* through touch; receiver shares their experience moment-by-moment. Activity in trios, 7 minutes per receiver, plus debrief (35 minutes)
- Authentic Movement in pairs—one witness per mover, followed by sharing in pairs, emphasizing *metta* in witnessing. Then switch roles. Group debrief. (25 minutes)
- The Three States: introduction, simultaneous practice in pairs, followed by pair “performances” and sharing with emphasis on *metta* (50 minutes)
- Closure—final reflection and/or closing ritual (10 minutes)

Sample Agendas for Weekend Workshops

An Introduction to Insight Improvisation

The purpose of this workshop is to provide an overview of the concepts and methods of Insight Improvisation, with a particular focus on introducing new forms of

meditation, active meditation, improvisation, and theater techniques (the drama therapy approaches of Insight Improvisation are *not* emphasized in this workshop). The workshop agenda below is adapted from the original program entitled “Mindfulness & Choicelessness: Freedom in Performance,” versions of which were taught at Shantigar, Kripalu, the Cambridge Center for Adult Education, and elsewhere, between 1999 and 2004.

Friday

12:30-1:30PM Arrival/Registration

2:00-5:30PM Afternoon Session:

- Warm-up: Movement with partner using eye-contact/physical-contact.
- Welcome and introduction to the workshop and the facilitator; logistics.
- Check-in/goals in pairs and then in whole group.
- Mindful Shoulder Massage—with group standing in circle
- Intro to “What” Skills, including mindfulness, choicelessness, and *metta*.
- Guided Sitting Meditation and Debrief
- Authentic Movement with Images and Childhood Memories
- Sharing Image-Story-Image in trios then in whole group, with optional feedback and facilitator coaching. (Depending on size of group, this activity may have to be completed after dinner.)

5:30-7:00PM Dinner

7:00-9:00PM Evening Session (as needed, to complete the afternoon's activity):

- Movement Meditation
- Complete Image-Story-Image activity
- H.W.—Notice three moments of mindful and choiceless awareness between now and tomorrow morning; stop briefly to notice what’s happening (mind, body, emotions, etc.)

Saturday

10AM-1PM Morning Session:

- Free silent movement, stretching, breathing
- Meditation on Sound (facilitator can add bells, musical instruments, and spoken poetry) and debrief
- Introduction to morning session—“Insight Improvisation Basic Elements”
- Report-outs from last night’s H.W. and brief check-ins.
- Scott Kelman exercises: Walk-Stop-Walk and One-minute Solos (as well as Duets, Trios, and variations involving speech), with witness sharing and group debrief.

- Amplification:
 - Basic version: introduction and facilitator demo; practice in pairs with coaching; perform solos, duets, trios
 - Amplification Monologues: introduction and facilitator demo, practice in pairs with debrief; perform solos
 - Amplification Scenes (if time allows)
- Introduce Nature Meditation lunch assignment
- 1:00-2:30PM Lunch followed by Nature Meditation
- 2:30-6:00PM Afternoon Session:
 - Participants write/draw about their solo experience over lunch. Debrief in small groups. Report out in large group: any surprises, discoveries, anything interesting shared in small groups?
 - Intro Afternoon: “Mindfulness & Choicelessness Working with Text”
 - Singing circle warm-up: introduction, Chords, Jams, One-liners
 - Spontaneous Writing (first introducing Natalie Goldberg’s rules)
 - Editing text with partner
 - FreeText: facilitator introduction and demo of speaking/singing/moving with a text; practice in trios; performances with optional sharing and facilitator coaching.
 - Intro to optional evening session of Insight Coaching
 - H.W.—remember (write down) any dreams you have tonight.
- 6:00-7:00PM Dinner
- 7:00-9:30 PM Insight Coaching (optional)—participants are invited to work on anything they like, including activities from the workshop, any aspect of performing (e.g., relaxation, dealing with nerves, movement/voice, etc.), or life issue (for coaching/drama therapy). Group attending provides mutual support/witnessing.

Sunday

- 9:00AM-12:00PM Morning Session:
- Free movement/stretching in silence
 - Sitting meditation focusing on bodily sensations; debrief
 - Intro morning: “Insight Improvisation in Collaboration with Another”—theme: how do we maintain our own center while being in relationship?
 - The Three States: introduction; practice in pairs; showings before the group with sharing witnessing.
 - The Three States with Sound/Words: introduction; practice in pairs; showings before the group with sharing witnessing.
 - If time remains, facilitator can offer opportunity for trios or larger groups to perform using Three States in silence or with sound/words.
 - Lunch assignment: think of a story or a dream you are willing to share in the afternoon session.
- 12:00-1:00PM Lunch
- 1:00-4:00PM Afternoon Session and Closure:
- Brief *vipassana* meditation

- Introduction to the afternoon—“Plot and Character in Insight Improvisation”
- Introduction to Jean-Claude van Itallie’s storytelling structure
- Solo storytelling and dream-telling with coaching, and embedded breaks as needed
- If time, facilitator can introduce duet storytelling and/or Life/Dream Scene.
- Reflection on the weekend; introduce evaluation letters⁶⁵
- Closing circle with *metta* meditation

Insight Improvisation: Psolodrama Intensive Weekend

The purpose of this workshop is to provide an introduction and opportunity to practice the drama therapy approaches of Insight Improvisation, with a particular focus on Psolodrama and its building blocks, including authentic movement and psychodrama. The following is based on the agenda for a workshop originally scheduled to be led at Pinetree Institute in Eliot, ME in November 2004 (the workshop had to be postponed due to illness). Although untested as a whole, all of the components of the following have been used successfully with members of the Insight Improvisation Research Group and others.

Friday

12:30-1:30PM Arrival/Registration

2:00-9:30PM Afternoon & Evening Sessions (with built-in dinner break roughly 5:30-6:45PM)

- Brief Welcome
- Meditation: *anapana*, *vipassana*, *metta* — review concepts of mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness.
- Authentic Movement (will be introduction for some)
 - Authentic Movement as a group

⁶⁵ I typically end a full-length Insight Improvisation workshop by asking participants to write a letter to me (before they depart) listing what they liked most about the weekend, and what could have been improved. This feedback has contributed to the development of Insight Improvisation over the years.

- Shared *Vipassana* II with partner
- The Three States with same partner
- Official Welcome and introduction to Insight Improvisation, Psolodrama, and key principles; workshop logistics
- Group check-in and goals
- Group Psychodrama with a volunteer protagonist (will be introduction for some)
- The Empty Chair in pairs—partner acts as double
- Debrief and Reflection on Day One

Saturday

9AM-1:00PM Morning Session

- Meditation on bodily sensations
- Warm-up: Authentic movement; Impulse & Role Dialogues (in pairs)
- The Five Psychodramatic Roles in pairs—partner acts as witness
- Introduction to Psolodrama and Demo
- Psolodrama in pairs (in breakout spaces)—partner acts as witness
- Debrief and Psolodrama Q&A; lunch assignment

1:00-2:30PM Lunch with Mindfulness Assignment

2:30-6:00PM Afternoon Session

- Meditation on Sound lying down; Shared *Vipassana* IV as a whole group
- Warm-up: Amplification and Amplification Monologues in pairs
- Psolodramas with group as witness
- Debrief and Reflection on day; introduction to optional coaching in evening;
H.W.: remember dreams

6:00-7:30PM Dinner

7:30-10:00PM Optional Insight Coaching and/or additional Psolodrama

Sunday

9AM-1:00PM Morning Session

- Silent Group Meditation: *anapana*; *vipassana*, *metta*.
- Mindful Massage, Eye Contact Meditation, and *Metta* Dialogue in pairs
- Singing circle warm-up: introduction, Chords, Jams, One-liners
- FreeSong: introduction; demo; practice in pairs; individuals perform for group
- Sung Psolodrama: introduction; practice in pairs in breakout; individuals witnessed before group

1:00-2:00PM Lunch

2:00-5:00PM Afternoon Session and Closure

- Meditation; Shared *Vipassana* IV as a whole group
- Warm-up: Authentic Movement in pairs with partner as witness; The Three States
- Introduction to Life/Dream Scene; demo; individuals witnessed before group
- Open time for Psolodrama, Sung Psolodrama, and Life/Dream Scene witnessed before group
- Reflection on the weekend; introduce evaluation letters

- Closing circle with *metta* meditation

Appendix III: Sample Agendas for Working One-to-One

(Please note: brief descriptions of most activities referred to in this section can be found in “Insight Improvisation Activities & Techniques—An Overview,” beginning on page 24. A facilitator guide to Insight Improvisation is currently in development; please see www.jgluck.org on the internet for up-to-date information.)

Sample Agenda for One-to-One Drama Therapy with Insight Improvisation

The following is a typical agenda for a two-hour session facilitated by a therapist with an individual client:

- Check-in and sharing of what has transpired since last session (30 minutes)
- Guided Meditation: *anapana*, *vipassana*, *metta* (15 minutes)
- Authentic Movement: therapist witnesses client (25 minutes)
 - Silent movement (5 minutes)
 - Optionally, add sound (5 minutes)
 - Optionally, add words (5 minutes)
 - Debrief (10 minutes)
- Life/Dream Scene⁶⁶ and debrief (35 mins)
- Reflection; Optional Next Steps and H.W.; Feedback on Session/Closure (15 minutes)

⁶⁶ In this agenda for one-to-one drama therapy, Life/Dream Scene is the culminating activity (the “main dish”). Other activities that can also be used in this way include FreeSong and Psolodrama, as well as more traditional drama therapy approaches such as psychodrama and “couples” therapy (in which the client plays both roles).

Sample Agenda for Peer Work with Insight Improvisation

The following is a typical agenda for a three-hour peer session using Insight

Improvisation techniques:

- Check-in and planning of session (20 minutes)
- Silent Meditation plus *metta* (20 minutes)
- Warm-ups (50 minutes):
 - Simultaneous Authentic Movement—no witnesses (10 minutes)
 - Impulse Dialogue (10 minutes)
 - Role Dialogue (10 minutes)
 - Yes! Improvisation (10 minutes)
 - Debrief (10 minutes)
- Break (10 minutes)
- Psolodrama⁶⁷ (70 minutes):
 - Partner A is psoloist, B is witness (20 minutes)
 - Sharing (15 minutes)
 - Partner B is psoloist, A is witness (20 minutes)
 - Sharing (15 minutes)
- Final reflection; Closure; Scheduling (10 minutes)

⁶⁷ In this peer agenda, Psolodrama is the culminating activity. Other possible activities to use in this way include Storytelling, Dream-telling, FreeSong, FreeBe, and Life/Dream Scene.

Appendix IV: Brief Guidelines for Psolodrama

Psolodrama is a melding of authentic movement and psychodrama, and in many ways is the culminating activity in Insight Improvisation, a vehicle for self-discovery. (“Psolodrama” is a term coined to suggest a mixture of solo, drama, psyche, and a bit of soul.) As in authentic movement, Psolodrama requires two people, psoloist and witness:

The witness provides a supportive, nonjudgmental container for the work: they observe and keep time—usually 15 minutes or more. The witness maintains the container by practicing mindfulness and *metta* (with the psoloist as the “object” of their meditation), noticing their own feelings and experience. When time is up, the witness says “slowly, in your own time, bring your Psolodrama to a close,” and then asks the psoloist whether they would like to speak first or second. If the psoloist so desires, the witness can share what they experienced during the Psolodrama, their feelings and associations, with an emphasis on providing loving support to the psoloist.

The psoloist enters empty, without a preconception of what will happen. Entering the space, the psoloist finds a comfortable position to start in, and closes their eyes. Tuning into breath and body sensations, they enter into authentic movement, becoming aware of feelings and inner imagery, sensing the beginnings of a character or scene. The psoloist then adds sound, then words, and then finds themselves in one of the five psychodramatic roles, below. **The solo improvisation that develops is a series of monologues and dialogues featuring these roles, all embodied by the psoloist:**

Table 2—The Five Psychodramatic Roles

The Five Psychodramatic Roles	
1. <i>The Protagonist</i>	Oneself in the scene. This can be the psoloist in the present, but can also be oneself in the past or future, e.g., as a child, a teen, an old woman or man, etc. It can also be oneself in an imaginary state—e.g., before birth, after death, transformed into a monster, a different gender, etc.
2. <i>The Auxiliary Ego</i>	Other characters who may appear in the scene, real or imagined. These can be people; talking animals, plants, or objects; gods, forces of nature, or other archetypes; ideas or emotions; etc.
3. <i>The Director</i>	One’s own inner guide or wise mind. Whereas in psychodrama, the director is the psychodramatist leading the session, in Psolodrama the director is oneself. The psoloist is encouraged to embody and speak as the director role, particularly when feeling lost or confused. The director can dialogue with and ask questions of the protagonist, such as “How do you feel?” or “What do you need right now?,” and can also suggest or confirm what the next step might be.
4. <i>The Double</i>	A special form of auxiliary ego, the double gives voice to the thoughts and feelings the protagonist may not be able to speak in the context of the scene being enacted. For example, if one were enacting a Psolodrama scene between an auxiliary ego role of “Wicked Witch” and the protagonist as a little boy, the boy might be too afraid to yell at the witch. By becoming the double, the psoloist can access and speak what the boy might really be feeling inside, or what the adult mind in the boy wants to say.
5. <i>The Audience</i>	Whereas in psychodrama the audience is comprised of other group members who are observing the action, in Psolodrama the psoloist can take on the role of audience themselves, in order to comment on what he or she thinks observers might say if they were watching the scene at hand. The audience may also take the form of inner critic, inner family, inner chorus of support, etc.

Other Guidelines:

Go for the Heart. The psoloist’s goal (as in spontaneous writing) is to go for the heart of the matter—to not avoid, delay, or dance around the issue; but instead to dive in and completely embody the images, feelings, and roles arising. The ultimate goal of Psolodrama is to experience a new insight into, transformation of, or full expression of the dilemma, conflict, issue, or scene that is arising. When achieved, this is often accompanied by a profound sense of catharsis or resolution.

Follow Intuition & Let Go of Logic. At any time, the psoloist can return to stillness, silence, and authentic movement, or can shift roles or scenes. No distinction is made between fact, fantasy, past, present, or future—Psolodrama can mingle them all. As in any Insight Improvisation activity, all of this happens from an intuitive place. The psoloist consciously avoids doing their “good ideas” but instead draws inspiration from what the body is experiencing in each moment, as well as from internal imagery and “gut” feel or intuition.

Embrace Conflict and Exchange. Psolodrama is not a monologue, nor is it a form of storytelling. It is typically a give and take between the protagonist and at least one auxiliary ego. If you find yourself stuck in a pattern, introduce a new role. Be daring—what parts of you are not being expressed? Do not be afraid to invite the inner mother or father, the monster, the critic...wherever your edge is in the moment.

Not a Performance. Psolodrama is not performance, but personal process—the psoloist is there to explore their own growing edges. The witness will get what they get. The psoloist’s eyes can be closed throughout, which often helps.

Ask the Director... If the psoloist feels lost or confused, they can always enter the role of director, and provide supportive coaching to themselves. Invariably, dialoguing with the inner wise mind results in a useful shift and deepening of the action. Another option is to return to stillness, awareness of breath, and authentic movement—it is often very helpful in Psolodrama to simply move and/or make sound.

...Or the External Director. If the psoloist feels a need for outside coaching, they can ask their witness for support by making eye contact with them and saying: “I think I need some help. Could you be my external director?” At this point, the witness, remaining seated, can offer a supportive comment or question to help guide the psoloist. However, this guidance should remain succinct and spare—ideally encouraging the psoloist to dialogue with their own inner director, to bring in an auxiliary ego who can help support them (such as an ideal parent, mentor, or higher power), or to return to stillness, breathing, body awareness, and then authentic movement.