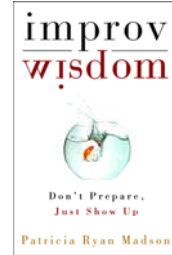


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The First Maxim: Say Yes

... *yes I said yes I will Yes.* —James Joyce, *Ulysses*

This is going to sound crazy. Say yes to everything. Accept all offers. Go along with the plan. Support someone else's dream. Say "yes"; "right"; "sure"; "I will"; "okay"; "of course"; "YES!" Cultivate all the ways you can imagine to express affirmation. When the answer to all questions is yes, you enter a new world, a world of action, possibility, and adventure. Molly Bloom's famous line from *Ulysses* draws us into her ecstasy. Humans long to connect. Yes glues us together. Yes starts the juices rolling. Yes gets us into heaven and also into trouble. Trouble is not so bad when we are in it together, actually.

The world of yes may be the single most powerful secret of improvising. It allows players who have no history with one another to create a scene effortlessly, telepathically. Safety lies in knowing your partner will go along with whatever idea you present. Life is too short to argue over which movie to see. Seize the first idea and go with it. Don't confuse this with being a "yes-man," implying mindless pandering. Saying yes is an act of courage and optimism; it allows you to share control. It is a way to make your partner happy. Yes expands your world.

Gertrude, one of my adult students and a mother of three small children, reported a lively adventure based on her application of this maxim. "Friday, my eight-year-old, Samantha, burst into the kitchen with a gleam in her eyes. 'Mommy, Mommy, there's a monster in the closet!' she shrieked. Normally, I would have thought my best reply to be a reality check for her. I would have said something like: 'No, dear, there is no monster in the closet. It's just your imagination, sweetie.' Instead, considering the rule of yes, I turned from the dishes I was washing and said: 'There is? Wow, let's go see!' I accompanied her to the closet, where we had a dynamic encounter with the monster, capturing it and squealing with delight as we tickled it into disappearing. It was a magical shared adventure. I would never have thought of joining Samantha's fantasy before considering the rule of yes! Thanks, improv."

It is undoubtedly an exaggeration to suggest that we can say yes to everything that comes up, but we can all say yes to more than we normally do. Once you become aware that you can, you will see how often we use the technique of blocking in personal relationships simply out of habit. Turning this around can bring positive and unexpected results.

I can remember the day nearly forty years ago when I made a conscious decision to adopt the yes rule. I was attending a tai chi workshop, and a woman whom I hardly knew asked if I could give her a ride home. I normally shy away from encounters with strangers, much preferring silence over casual social exchange. My heart sinks if I find myself with a chatty airplane seat-mate who wants to talk for the entire flight. I couldn't find a good reason to say no, so I said yes. She climbed into my car, and I pulled the old Chevy onto the freeway. As we searched politely for areas of common interest, the conversation turned to our tai chi experience and our physical well-being. I learned that she, too, had some problems with lower back pain. We commiserated, and she offered the name of a wise and skillful acupuncturist who had helped her considerably. As we parted, she wrote down the name and phone number of the healer and handed it to me while thanking me for the ride. What struck me at that moment was my wrongheadedness. I had thought that I was doing her a favor in giving her a ride, when it seemed (and here we get into some metaphysical difficulty with language) reality (the universe? my guardian angel?) was actually offering me some help. The acupuncturist turned out to be a godsend. I would not have found him without the connection with the woman I drove home. "Always say yes if someone asks for help and you can give it," I vowed. I admit a selfish motive in adopting this rule at that time, but the maxim has become a great teacher. Who benefits as we say yes to life? Notice.

Saying yes (and following through with support) prevents you from committing a cardinal sin—blocking. Blocking comes in many forms; it is a way of trying to control the situation instead of accepting it. We block when we say no, when we have a better idea, when we change the subject, when we correct the speaker, when we fail to listen, or when we simply ignore the situation. The critic in us wakes up and runs the show. Saying no is the most common way we attempt to control the future. For many of us the habit is so ingrained that we don't notice we are doing it. We are not only experienced at blocking others, we commonly block ourselves. "I'm not good at brush painting, so why bother? Whatever made me think I could do art?" "I'll never be the cook that Mom was, so I might as well order take-out." Blocking is often cleverly disguised as the critical or academic perspective. Finding fault is its hallmark. A sophisticated critic may even appear to be agreeing by offering the "yes but" response. Try substituting "yes and" for "yes but"—this will get the ball rolling.

The spirit of improvising is embodied in the notion of "yes and." Agreement begins the process; what comes next is to add something or develop the offer in a positive direction. Avoiding this next step is a form of blocking. I once taught a student who was scared to add anything to a scene unless he was instructed to do so. I think he was afraid of making a mistake. If Martha walked over to him on stage and proffered an imaginary ice-cream cone, Sheldon would accept the cone and just stand there, holding it. He appeared positive, seemed to be saying yes to the offer. But nothing else happened. Sheldon just stood there, blankly, until Martha advanced the scene by saying: "The elephants are coming right after these clowns." Sheldon's unwillingness to add something to the story became a kind of aggression. Players learn that sharing the control of the story is the only way to really have a good time. The rule of "yes and" can be used in relationships. Build upon someone else's dream. And when you are meeting new people, it is helpful to

volunteer information about yourself, your interests, hobbies, dreams. This can open a door to friendship.

try this:

Support someone else's dreams. Pick a person (your spouse, child, boss), and, for a week, agree with all of her ideas. Find something right about everything he says or does. Look for every opportunity to offer support. Consider her convenience and time preferences ahead of your own. Give him the spotlight. Notice the results.

As we practice this affirmative response to life, positive things can happen. Kathleen Norris, in *Amazing Grace*, points out the connection between the impulse to say yes and our capacity for faith. "An alert human infant, at about one month of age, begins to build a vocabulary, making sense of the chaos of sound that bombards the senses. . . . Eventually the rudiments of words come; often 'Mama,' 'Dada,' 'Me,' and the all-purpose 'No!' An unqualified 'Yes' is a harder sell, to both children and adults. To say 'yes' is to make a leap of faith, to risk oneself in a new and often scary relationship. Not being quite sure of what we are doing or where it will lead us, we try on assent, we commit ourselves to affirmation. With luck, we find our efforts are rewarded. The vocabulary of faith begins."

I can't remember a time in history when the need for optimism and affirmation has been greater. In an article that examined how prevailing film sensibilities portrayed the question of individuality on screen in the last century, *San Francisco Chronicle* critic Mick LaSalle made this shocking claim:

"American movies [2004] are more cynical and despairing than before. Their implicit message: people are garbage and the world is terrifying." Negative images surround us. Unimaginable horrors are now part of our collective unconscious.

With the rule of yes, we call upon our capacity to envision, to create new and positive images. This yes invites us to find out what is right about the situation, what is good about the offer, what is worthy in the proposal. Exercising the yes muscle builds optimism. However, we sensibly understand that the practice of affirmation is not a guarantee of outcomes. Saying yes to life will not banish problems or promise eternal success. A positive perspective is a constructive one, however, and it is easier on those around us.

try this:

For one day say yes to everything that's offered. Set your own preferences aside. Notice the results. See how often it may not be convenient or easy to do this.

Obviously, use common sense in executing this rule. If you are a diabetic and are offered a big piece of pie, you'll need to find a way to protect your health. Perhaps you can say

boldly, "Yes, I'd love to have this pie to take home to my son who adores cherries."

Inventing Proverbs

There is wisdom in all of us. A beloved game that I learned from Rebecca Stockley, a professional improviser and educator, involves inventing a new proverb by speaking it one word at a time. This is done by a group of players who add the next most logical word to what has gone before. Do this quickly without "thinking" of a good idea. When it is clear that the proverb is finished (and this seems to happen by a natural consensus), all the players put on a "knowing, wise look," tap their fingers together in a prayerlike mudra, and say, "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes . . .," affirming the wisdom of whatever sage or nonsense aphorism has been invented by the group. It is very easy to teach and to play this game, and it often releases a lot of laughter."