

THE BIG IDEAS

Say Yes!

And yes. And yes. And YES!

Don't Prepare

Turn off your brain and be here now.

Just Show Up

Where do you need to be?

Stay on Course

Even when you don't feel like it.

The Silent Gifts

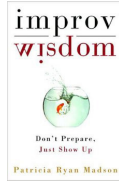
Let's wake up to them.

Ready, Fire, Aim

Get in the game and learn!

Moments

Let's not waste another.



Improv Wisdom

Don't Prepare, Just Show Up

BY PATRICIA RYAN MADSON · BELL TOWER © 2005 · 160 PAGES

“A good improviser is someone who is awake, not entirely self-focused, and moved by a desire to do something useful and give something back and who acts upon this impulse. My students wanted to know the password for joining the society of such people, to play fearlessly, and to work with greater ease.

Here is the password—it is *yes!* Understanding the power of yes is easy; practicing that acceptance and affirmation in daily life becomes our challenge.

I'm writing to encourage you to improvise your life, please. I want you to take chances and do more of the things that are important to you. I'm hoping that you will make more mistakes, laugh more often, and have some adventures...

What is missing in your life? The paperweight on my desk challenges me to ask the bumper-sticker question: What would you do if you knew you could not fail? What would *you* do?

As improvisors we discover we don't need this unrealistic guarantee to begin. The only real failure is not doing anything. Why not explore, get moving on your life, kick-start your dreams, paint outside the lines? This book will provide inspiration and practical suggestions. Try them.”

~ Patricia Ryan Madson from *Improv Wisdom*

In [Turning Pro](#), [Steven Pressfield](#) describes an exercise from [Improv Wisdom](#) and says that this book is on his short list of indispensable books.

Of course, I got it immediately. Anything that makes *that* list is something I'm going to read. :)

And, here we are. [Improv Wisdom](#) rocks. So does [Patricia Ryan Madson](#).

Patricia is an Emerita of Stanford University where she taught for three decades in the Drama Department. She integrates the wisdom of two primary, extraordinary teachers/philosophies: Keith Johnstone's Impro goodness + [David Reynolds'](#) Constructive Living mojo. (Check out the Note on [Constructive Living](#); it's the best little book you've never read!!)

This book is a down-to-earth, inspiring, quick-read featuring the thirteen maxims of improv living. It's packed with Big Ideas and practical exercises (Patricia calls them “Try this!” and they're great). You can get a copy of the book [here!](#)

Here are the thirteen maxims: say yes + don't prepare + just show up + start anywhere + be average + pay attention + face the facts + stay on course + wake up to the gifts + make mistakes, please + act now + take care of each other + enjoy the ride!

We'll explore a handful of them now.

Let's jump in!

“God has given each of us our 'marching orders.' Our purpose here on Earth is to find those orders and carry them out. Those orders acknowledge our special gifts.”

~ Søren Kierkegaard

SAY YES

"Travel guru Rick Steves has a formula for the right way to approach travel. 'Be fanatically positive and militantly optimistic. If something's not to your liking, change your liking.'"

~ Patricia Ryan Madson

"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."

The first rule of improv: say "Yes!" to whatever your partner gives you. Run with it!

Same goes for improv wisdom applied to life. What would your life look like if you said "YES!!!" to more of what life's bringing you?! (Of course, Patricia tells us we can't say yes to *everything* that comes our way, but we can say yes to a whole more than we typically do!)

Reminds me of [Joseph Campbell](#)'s wisdom: "Since all is brahmin, since all is the divine radiance, how can we say no to anything? How can we say no to ignorance? How can we say no to brutality? How can we say no to anything?" To this he said, 'For you and me, we say yes.'"

[Wayne Dyer](#) reflects the same wisdom. So does Hafez.

Dyer: "One of the most effective means for transcending ordinary and moving into the realm of extraordinary is saying yes more frequently and eliminating no almost completely. I call it saying yes to life. Say yes to yourself, to your family, your children, your coworkers, and your business..."

Hafez tells us:

*"I rarely let the word No escape
From my mouth
Because it is so plain to my soul
That God has shouted, Yes! Yes! Yes!
To every luminous movement in Existence."*

Imagine going through a "yes!"-filled day.

Your loved one is telling you about their dreams. You say, "Yes! That sounds amazing!" rather than offering feedback or seeing the little (or big) things that might need to be adjusted. You get stuck in traffic. YES! Amazing opportunity to appreciate the car you're in, take a few more deep breaths on the way to wherever you're going and smile at the marvel of automotive locomotion.

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. YES!

DON'T PREPARE

"American Zen writer Alan Watts, clearly an improviser in spirit, named one of his books, 'The Wisdom of Insecurity.' He knew that life was all about balancing, not about being balanced."

~ Patricia Ryan Madson

"Give up planning. Clear your mind instead of filling it. Don't spend your energy in preparing for the future. Redirect it to the present moment. Instead of packing, show up empty-handed but alert, cheerful, and ready to receive unexpected gifts. Change the habit of getting ready for life in favor of getting on with it now."

We often substitute planning, ruminating, or list-making for actually doing something about our dreams."

Don't prepare.

Clear your mind. Quit getting ready for life and just get on it with it NOW.

That's maxim #2.

What would your life look like with a little (a lot?) less planning/ruminating/list-making and a little (a lot?) more living in the moment and doing what can be done about your dreams NOW?

"Performance anxiety comes from excessive self focus."

~ Patricia Ryan Madson

(Let's do that. :)

P.S. This is the maxim that contains the exercise that [Steven Pressfield](#) shares in his books. Here it is:

"Imagine a box, beautifully wrapped, sitting in front of you. Take a moment to "see" the box.

What color is the paper and ribbon? Touch the package. Now pick up the box and check the weight. Shake it, if you like. Now carefully open the package, setting aside the wrapping. Open the lid and look inside.

What's the first thing that you see?

Take out the gift and examine it.

Notice a detail about the object.

Thank the giver.

What did you find? Did you surprise yourself?"

So... What did *you* find?

The cool thing: *"There is always something in the box."*

And so it is with life when we allow ourselves to drop the obsessive analytical preparation and just show up fully in the moment!

JUST SHOW UP

"Just show up. This principle is deceptively simple: Just show up. *Where* we are makes a difference. Move your body toward your dreams—to where they're happening—the gym, the office, the yoga class, your kitchen, the improv class, the garage, a cruise ship, the word processor, the construction site, the senior center, the theater. You know where. Be there physically..."

It's surprising how powerful the third maxim is. How often we avoid showing up for the things we need to do in life. Procrastination, laziness, fears—it's easy to find a reason for not going. The "just" in this maxim reminds us that showing up is already enough. Woody Allen quipped that it is "eighty percent of success." Prerequisites such as motivation, desire, and warm, fuzzy feelings aren't necessary. It is a con to imagine you must have these to get going. Improvisers know this. If they had to wait for inspiration or a good idea, few scenes would ever begin. Players step onto the stage because that is where things are happening. They just show up. Then the magic begins."

That is awesome.

Just. Show. Up.

Not when you're feeling super inspired and ready to fly like superman or woman. NOW. Seriously. Right now. And then now. And now. And now.

Bam!

As I mentioned above, Patricia is deeply influenced by [David Reynolds](#) and his work on [Constructive Living](#). (See those Notes and, seriously, get the book already! Link [here](#).)

David tells us that feelings FOLLOW behavior. We do something *then* we feel a certain way. He tells us: "Behavior wags the tail of feelings... We do, then we feel."

And his primary question is all about getting us to just show up and take the next baby step: "Now what needs to be done?" he asks. Again and again and again.

So, now what needs to be done in your life? Not the big, "finally-find-your-true-purpose-and-live-a-truly-meaningful-life" stuff. The basic stuff. The little email. The dishes. The blog post

" Start anywhere. Identify a project or task that needs to be done. When you put this book down, follow your first thought and begin the job. Do the very first thing that comes to mind. Continue doing what comes next."

~ Patricia Ryan Madson

you've been putting off. Do THAT. Again and again and again and watch everything else come together. And then when you're feeling stuck (which you will) do it again and again and again. :)

Just show up.

Pressfield has a bunch of gems in [The War of Art](#) (see Notes) about this. Just showing up is, in many ways, the essence of winning the war against Resistance and officially Turning Pro. This always blows me away: "Someone once asked Somerset Maugham if he wrote on a schedule or only when struck by inspiration. "I write only when inspiration strikes," he replied. "Fortunately it strikes every morning at nine o'clock sharp.""

Feelings follow behavior.

Maugham didn't *wait* until he felt inspired. As Pressfield puts it: "Maugham reckoned another deeper truth: that by performing the mundane act of sitting down and starting to work, he set in motion a mysterious but infallible sequence of events that would produce inspiration, as surely as if the goddess had synchronized her watch with his."

How about You?

How can you JUST SHOW UP more today?!

(Let's do this! :)

STAY ON COURSE

"Some guiding force underlies each moment. We need to keep in mind what we are aiming for. Instead of asking, "What do I feel like doing?" substitute "What is my purpose now?" The difference in the answer may be illuminating. We have become a culture in which "How do you feel?" is the most commonly asked question (by therapists, doctors, news reporters, etc.), as if our emotions were *the* most important thing in life. This is odd, since feelings are fleeting and temporal and certainly not always the wisest basis for our actions. Most definitions of the word "purpose" suggest a moral component. It can be seen as "the proper activity" for a person or "the right thing to be doing." It always implies conscious attention. Answering this question provides direction."

This is really good.

Reminds me of [Dan Millman](#)'s wisdom. Dan is the one who introduced me to [David Reynolds](#)'s work. (Dan LOVES him.) In [Body Mind Mastery](#) (see Notes), he puts it this way: "Body mind masters do not deny or repress their feelings but learn to stay physically relaxed even under stressful situations. Even when feeling angry, fearful, and sorrowful, breathe evenly and fully. Keep your body relaxed. You have much more control over your behavior than you do over your thoughts or emotions so paradoxically the best way to master your emotions is to let them be, stay relaxed, and focus on constructive action. So, accept your emotions as natural to you in the moment, without trying to fix them. Know your purpose or goal—not someone else's. And, do whatever you need to reach that goal, whether or not your emotions or moods help or hinder you."

Again, we want to move away from asking ourselves "How do I feel?" and focus more on "Now what needs to be done?" and "What's my purpose now?"

[Eric Maisel](#) (see Notes on [Rethinking Depression](#)) presents another really cool way to show up in the moment. He advises us to ask the question, "How can I make myself proud right now?"

—> "How can I make myself proud in this moment?"

That's a really powerful question. A really powerful way to bring meaning and purpose into our lives. And to help us stay on course.

" While we may bemoan a blunder or miscue, the real question to ask afterward is not "How on earth did I do that?" but rather "What comes next? What can I make of this? What kind of a bonus might this be?" A constructive response to a mistake is to notice it, acknowledge it, and, if possible, use it. Artists do this all the time."

~ Patricia Ryan Madson

So... How can you make yourself proud?

WAKE UP TO THE SILENT GIFTS

"Make a point of thanking people for thankless jobs."

~ Patricia Ryan Madson

"Are you sitting right now as you read? If so, then a chair, sofa, or bed is supporting you. You probably have not paid much attention to this fact until I mentioned it. Nor have you been thinking that someone designed the chair (sofa, bed, etc.); someone manufactured it; someone brought it to where you are sitting; someone paid for it—perhaps it was you. It is likely that many people (mostly unknown to you) had a hand in the chair's creation and journey to where it is now. It is fair to say that you are receiving a service from the chair and from all of those people whose efforts were part of the story. Whether you notice it or not, whether you thank it or not, the chair offers you support, comfort. The chair is a silent gift."

Maxim #9?

Wake up to the gifts. They are ALL around us.

E . v . e . r . y . w . h . e . r . e . !!!

We need to wake up to them!

Einstein tells us: *"From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that we are here for the sake of each other— above all for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of my fellow men, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received."*

<— Wow.

[Maslow](#) tells us "getting used to our blessings" is one of the most powerful "nonevil" evils. It's not actively hurting people but it subtly corrodes our well-being and sense of interconnectedness. Self-actualizers count their blessings. They wake up to the gifts around them!

Here's a really cool "try this" exercise from this chapter (again, the book is packed with them): "Practice thanksgiving. See how many times each day you can find to say thank you. Express thanks out loud, looking for variations of ways to express it ("Thanks"; "It was kind of you"; "I appreciate it"; "How thoughtful of you")."

Let's find all the ways we can express our gratitude today!

(Note: This is the longest chapter in the whole book. It's *that* important! :)

READY, FIRE, AIM

"The eleventh maxim reminds us of the power of action as part of the discovery process. For the improviser it is: ready, fire, aim. We begin before there is a plan. What we do moves us forward and gives us more information about how to proceed. The doing itself becomes the teacher and guide. Nike's snappy logo "Just do it" reminds us that it's unnecessary to be motivated, get ourselves together, or even feel like doing it. The key is to get up and go. "For all my dreams, I am what I do," muses psychologist David K. Reynolds. We know this, but taking action may appear daunting."

Ready, FIRE!, aim.

I smile every time I see that. Ready, fire, aim.

As a recovering perfectionist who used to struggle making sure staples were perfectly parallel to the top of a sheet of paper (I kid you not; hah!), inserting a healthy dose of this wisdom has been highly impactful for me.

"What work has been given
to me that is uniquely mine/
What would not get done if
I were not here?"

~ Patricia Ryan Madson

I first heard it from John Mackey, the co-founder + co-CEO of Whole Foods. I interviewed him about it a couple years ago and he said he actually prefers FIRE!, ready, aim. Hah. (Here's the [full interview](#) + the [snippet](#) of that part of our chat.)

So ready, FIRE!, aim. Or, if you're especially frisky: FIRE!, ready, aim.

Why on Earth would we want to do *that*?

Because, as Patricia advises, once we're IN THE GAME, we can learn. But if we're always on the sideline (or backstage) thinking.planning.ruminating.getting-ready, then we miss the chance to learn and grow and respond to life.

How about *you*? Ready to just do it? How can you fire more in your life today?!

WHY WASTE ANOTHER MOMENT?

"Why waste another moment? Today is an ideal day to begin. I'm sure that you aren't waiting to come up with a perfect plan or memorize all your lines before you start. You know better now. Just jump on the stage of life and try/see. Then you will have earned your membership in our secret society of improvisers. I wish you good fortune and great adventures as you skip, jump, and stumble along this way. Step on stage. Take a bow. Have a good time.

Improvise!"

Love it.

Well, there ya go. That's a quick look at this great little book. Hope you enjoyed!

Let's not waste another moment. It's time to step on the stage of life, take a bow and improvise!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[Constructive Living](#)

[The War of Art](#)

[Turning Pro](#)

[Body Mind Mastery](#)

[Play](#)

About the Author of "Improv Wisdom"

PATRICIA RYAN MADSON



Patricia Ryan Madson in her own words: "I am an Emerita of Stanford University where I taught for three decades in the Drama Department. I founded the Stanford Improvisors in 1991, and I have spent a happy lifetime leading classes, seminars and workshops that teach the ease of the creative process and the magic of improvising. I currently teach for the Esalen Institute and for Stanford's Continuing Studies. I design workshops and keynote presentations for organizations worldwide. My current passion is plein air watercolor painting."

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.