

COMPOSING A LIFE

Mary Catherine Bateson

This is a study of five artists engaged in that act of creation that engages us all--the composition of our lives. Each of us has worked by improvisation, discovering the shape of our creation along the way, rather than pursuing a vision already defined.

In a stable society, composing a life is somewhat like throwing a pot or building a house in a traditional form: the materials are known, the hands move skillfully in tasks familiar from thousands of performances, the fit of the completed whole in the common life is understood. Traditional styles of pottery or building are not usually rigid; they respond to chance and allow a certain scope for individual talent and innovation. But the traditional craftsperson does not face the task of solving every problem for the first time. In a society like our own, we make a sharp contrast between creativity and standardization, yet even those who work on factory production lines must craft their own lives, whether graceful and assured or stunted and askew.

Today, the materials and skills from which a life is composed are no longer clear. It is no longer possible to follow the paths of previous generations. This is true for both men and women, but it is especially true for women, whose whole lives no longer need be dominated by the rhythms of procreation and the dependencies that these created, but who still must balance conflicting demands. Our lives not only take new directions; they are subject to repeated redirection partly because of the extension of our years of health and productivity. Just as design of a building or of a vase must be rethought when the scale is changed, so must the design of lives. Many of the most basic concepts we use to construct a sense of self or the design of a life have changed their meanings: Work. Home. Love. Commitment.

For many years I have been interested in the arts of improvisation, which involve recombining partly familiar materials in new ways, often in ways especially sensitive to context, interaction, and response. When I was a teenager, I used to go to the house of my mother's sister Liza and hear her son, the jazz flutist Jeremy Steig playing and practicing with his friends, jamming in the back room, varying and revering familiar phrases. "Practicing improvisation: was clearly not a contradiction. Jazz exemplifies artistic activity that is at once individual and communal, performance that is both repetitive and innovative, each participant sometimes providing background support and sometimes flying free.

The concept of improvisation stayed in the back of my mind later, as I became interested in studying languages and in thinking about the ways in which each speaker learns to combine and vary familiar components to say something new to fit a particular context and evoke a particular response, sometimes something of very great beauty or significance, but always improvisational and always adaptive. In college, I became fascinated by Arabic poetry, particularly the early poems from the oral tradition in which poets combined memorization and improvisation to fit particular situations. Creativity of

this kind has now been well studied. It can be discerned in the Homeric epics, which show every sign of having been produced this way; and equally well in the rhetorical style of a Martin Luther King, Jr. with its echoes of the rousing preaching in the black churches.

This is a book about life as an improvisatory art, about the ways we combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations, following an underlying grammar and an evolving aesthetic. It started from a disgruntled reflection on my own life as a sort of desperate improvisation in which I was constantly trying to make something coherent from conflicting elements to fit rapidly changing settings. At times, I pictured myself frantically rummaging through the refrigerator and the kitchen cabinets, convinced that somewhere I would find the odds and ends that could be combined at the last minute to make a meal for unexpected guests, hoping to be rescued by serendipity. A good meal, like a poem or a life, has a certain balance and diversity, a certain coherence and fit. As one learns to cope in the kitchen, one no longer duplicates whole meals but rather manipulates components and the way they are put together. The improvised meal will be different from the planned meal, and certainly riskier, but rich with the possibility of delicious surprise. Improvisation can be either a last resort or an established way of evoking creativity. Sometimes a pattern chosen by default can become a path of preference.

The following excerpt is from the opening of a book by Mary Catherine Bateson entitled Composing A Life. It is a book about the lives of five artists. Please read the excerpt twice and then write a response to ONE of the two questions below.

1. Bateson writes, "This is a book about life as an improvisatory art" (p.2). For your essay, discuss what you find important or interesting about her concept of improvisation, using examples from Bateson's text and from your own life. You do not have to agree with Bateson to develop a response.
2. Bateson says that something improvised is "riskier" than something completely "planned," but "rich with the possibility of delicious surprise" (p.3). Write about a time when you had to improvise in some way, and, on the basis of your example, say whether you agree or disagree with Bateson that it is "riskier" but "rich with the possibility of delicious surprise."