

## 2019 Schillinger Essay Competition Honorable Mention

Improvisation in Jazz, Prayer Meetings, and Psychoanalysis:  
The Openings and Closings of Clinical Work

Nathaniel R. Strenger, Psy.D.

To my ears, there is tumultuous rapture found in Charles Mingus' "Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting"—and the religious entendre is intended. As it appears on Mingus' 1960 *Blues and Roots*, the recording is transporting. It swings between frenzies of both instrument and body, hung together only by a centripetal hook as aggressive as it is relieving. Moreover, the track's title only enriches interpretation. For professor Ashon Crawley (2015), of the University of Virginia, it conjures images of black Holiness-Pentecostal gatherings. This Wednesday night prayer meeting, he writes, makes an "ethical demand...for openness and hospitality, improvisation and refusing to be done with seeking otherwise." Such demand calls for radical inclusivity that explores the unique pulsations of the individual human spirit. Even a cursory listening of the Mingus recording becomes quickly aware of brazen and often competing individual improvisations. However, it is also useful to note that the 1960 recording both opens and closes itself with a recognizable melody played nearly in unison. In the last moments of the track, the cacophony finally finds its way to a shared singularity in the form of a droned note expressed by almost all of its elements: piano, saxophone, and even human voice. In this fashion, the recorded gathering begins itself as one, closed together in binding unison. It then opens itself up to the wildly expressive and scattering voices of the individuals only to return minutes later to its closing cohesion. Mingus' masterpiece follows this rhythm--closed, opened, closed again--in a cyclical fashion, and a song is born. Close. Open. Close. Open...

Before considering the ways such rhythm forms the essence of clinical work, I think it is worthwhile examining another human activity. It is one I find deceptively similar to psychoanalysis in both form and function: religion. For this, I owe to the insights provided by the late analyst, Dr. Randall Lehmann Sorenson (2004). In his *Minding Spirituality*, he made the case that clinicians of all stripes do well to "mind" the spiritualities and religious affiliations of both therapist and patient alike. After all, he notes, the ethical strivings and ideological reformations exhibited among both religious and psychoanalytic institutions are not all that dissimilar. Both psychoanalysis and religion--as they express themselves at any given moment--are undeniably the results of an ongoing interplay between unifying, binding, or closing forces and those spontaneous improvisations of the comprising individuals. Religious gatherings themselves, like Mingus' prayer meeting, seem to be guided by that same rhythm. These are liturgies of all shapes and sizes. They open and they close; they open space for the sake of improvisation and they close it for the sake of shared meaning and unity.

The idea is that, in efforts to find new realms of spontaneity and improvisation, one opens up a circumstance to possibilities unprecedented. As Sorenson (2004) notes, though, this newness is "reversible and need not be permanent in order to be worthwhile," meaning that the venturing out leaves itself open to its own reversal too. This is true even if only so that another venturing can take place again later. Like a Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting or an infant negotiating differentiation and rapprochement, there are both ventures and returns, openings and

closings. At the heart of the interplay is that age-old tension between orthodoxy and reformation. It is central to the history of religion. The history of jazz is a vivid expression of it. And psychoanalysis is no exception either.

This rhythm of venture and return, open and close, is everywhere in psychoanalytic understandings of human nature. Historically, however, theories have changed in how they formulate the means and ends of these rhythms. Classical theory emphasized the necessary but oppressive impact ritualistic forces had upon the individual id. Ego psychology moved towards understanding the individual's progressing capacity for individuation from these forces. Arguably, these earlier theories fostered clinical work that set up an interesting environment for improvisation. While the technique of analysis was perhaps clearer and more ritualized—Freud, among his inner circle, ironically enforced a theoretical orthodoxy with religious vigor—the actual aim was to strengthen the patient's capacity for the venturing out. The return, it seems, was less emphasized. The spontaneity of the individual was closed down by the mores imposed upon it by a ritualistic society. Therefore, the thrust of psychoanalysis was towards the opening.

The theoretical revolutions ushered in by the likes of Kohut and Winnicott changed this. With Kohut's selfobject and Winnicott's object-usage came a new understanding of the rhythmic openings and closings. They conceived of a psychic world necessarily requiring both openings and closings, dependence and independence, improvisation and unison. Moreover, the individual self's relationship with its outside and imposing surroundings were, in their proposals, both cyclical and lifelong. The aim of psychoanalysis moved away from the freeing of an individual to be some pure improviser isolated from any liturgy or group-unison that might diminish it. Instead, realizing the necessary and inescapable relationship the individual had with these forces, those mid-century theories emphasized that a dialectical coexistence must occur. Psychoanalytic wellness then became one's capacity to exist playfully in a world simultaneously created through improvisation and inherited through forms put there by others. Winnicott (1971), in his *Playing and Reality*, likened life to a series of creative moments that exist between those pesky facts of life and the capacity to dream beyond them.

From there, contemporary approaches to psychoanalysis have increasingly focused their attention on this intersubjective space. The spontaneous individual mind, in order to live with enough wholistic presence to maintain self-continuity, must learn to tolerate a dialectical living between improvisation and shared unison. This is because the two can never be separated from one another. In this way, the experience of the improvising individual is always co-determined with the help—if we may now call it that, rather than simply describing it a hindrance—of the forces that bring about the close. The intersubjectivists, famously, have even given us a way of considering the ways that such ritualistic and closing forces were at play with the classical theorists all along (Atwood & Stolorow, 1999). Like the preexisting time-signatures, rhythms, and chords covertly at work even in the most open or avant-garde of jazz's iterations, these theorists were also bound in ways difficult to detect. They were opening and closing, opening and closing, opening and closing.

This briefly brings us back to the Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting. Regardless of the sociocultural makeup or the binding theology of a certain religious gathering, I think that there are similar dynamics at work. As Mingus' representation of such a gathering suggests musically, there are centripetal and centrifugal forces acting simultaneously. Perhaps it can be stated that, to any religious gathering, individuals bring unique and even ineffable spiritual experiences. When this multitude of individual spiritualities begins to find inter-resonance within itself, religion is initiated (or reinitiated). Rituals, liturgies, and other closing forces are developed in

order to feed the gathering's centripetal needs that prevent fragmentation and isolation. From that moment, the interplay between spontaneous spirituality and ritualized religion is at work, reflecting the same interplay that exists in all other human activity.

By now, the reader may be aware of the influence of Irwin Hoffman (1998), solidifying the dialectical roles of both ritual and spontaneity in psychoanalysis. If one is to declare improvisation as the essence of psychoanalysis, perhaps a more complete definition of the term is necessary. The definition must include a nod to *all* of the forces that make it possible. Spontaneous or creative expression, in any activity as in jazz, the prayer meeting, and psychoanalysis is reliant upon the rituals and traditions bestowed by predating forms. A gathering, say of two individuals in the clinician's office or two musicians on stage, may improvise and venture into new and creative openness together. Even so, their relation to the predating forms remains quite intact. The 20th-century American composer, Harold Shapero, wrote this of the creative moment:

"The musical memory, where its physiological functions are intact, functions indiscriminately: a great percentage of what is heard becomes submerged in the unconscious, and is subject to the literal recall. The creative portion of the musical mind, however, operates selectively, and the tonal material which it offers up has been metamorphosed, and has become unidentifiable from the material which was originally absorbed. In the metamorphosis which has taken place the original tonal material has become compounded with remembered emotional experiences, and it is this action of the creative unconscious which renders music more than an acoustical series of tones, which gives music its humanistic aspect." (Ghiselin, 1952)

Here a musician recognizes the important role of those forces--the previously encountered, even imposing, and musical theories and moments--as they become submerged in the unconscious only to serve as the coordinates that orient the wild inspirations that spawn when such past exposures meet the flurry of reality in a present moment. In other words, one cannot revolutionize without the previously established restrictions against which one can rebel. Improvisers *depend*. They depend on that holding environment that provided both the openings and the closings.

Others have noted the importance of this dependence/independence dialectic as it rests at the heart of jazz improvisation. Margolis (1954) asserted that the psychology of jazz has never involved a "complete rebellion" or a "complete protest," despite its historic-cultural roots in black America's search for greater freedom. Instead, there was tension, ambivalence, and conflict. Black traditions interplayed with oppressing European ones to give rise to an art form that was somehow brand new and yet not so. At its midcentury time of publication, Margolis' paper framed an understanding of such tensions as happening between Id and Superego forces. A more contemporary language might instead interpret the tension as occurring within the dialectic of intersubjectivity, occurring between the individual improviser and the surrounding environment. Like there is no infant in isolation, there is no improviser in isolation. So perhaps such materials should be included in considerations of what it means to improvise in psychoanalysis.

Even D.W. Winnicott, the great instigator of therapeutic play and intuition, did not attempt to escape his own closing forces. His 1945 presentation to the British Psycho-Analytical Society on "Primitive Emotional Development" began with an admission. "I shall not first give an historical survey and show the development of my ideas from the theories of others, because my mind does not work that way. What happens is that I gather this and that, here and there, settle down to clinical experience, form my own theories and then, last of all, interest myself in

looking to see where I stole what." (Rodman, 2003, p. 3). Here, perhaps, Winnicott revealed his own capacity to live out a fuller understanding of improvisation (or play) in his work. He did not venture to create new psychoanalysis from scratch, but rather to piece together the countless forms and rituals that had "submerged" themselves into his own unconscious in such a way that was inspired by the settling down into his own clinical experience. He taught us to integrate the opening and the closing. Open. Close. Open. Close...

Many, including Irwin Hoffman, have documented the interesting position into which such rhythms place any idea of psychoanalytic technique. Many debates, I am sure, have been left incomplete as to whether or not one can teach a thing like psychoanalysis. Sure, there are the theories and case studies passed on by forebears and supervisors, but are these not simply impositions? Are they not pesky closing forces that impede the far more authentic improvisation of here-and-now affect or instinct? Perhaps they are, but perhaps they are also quite necessary.

To consider this further, I turn to another offering of the intersubjectivists: reification. As I read it, there is a concession that, the moment we ritualize and/or reify any spontaneous phenomena to the realm of symbols and repetition (where it can be shared meaningfully), we rob it of some of its originally intended essence. We do this when we speak with one another or with ourselves of mind, of affective experience, or of self-hood. The jazz musician spouts an improvisation or a religious faithful shouts a prophecy. If either is deemed reasonable, useful, or worth repeating, it becomes a shared melody or a religious doctrine. Of course, if we could not symbolize or speak of these things such things in psychoanalysis, I do not know where the field would be. There would no unison, no collaboration among clinicians and no shared therapeutic space to be created with patients. So even in the practice of analysis, we rob subjectivity. But we do so in the service of a patient's capacity to live meaningfully in shared time and space. The improviser must learn to play with other improvisers and the ritualized forms, potentially "closing" in nature, they have already injected into the shared space.

It seems that, in attempting to avoid collapses in the dialectical space offered by openings and closings, one must give way to these reifications. Reifications, admittedly simplified symbolic or material representations of the abstract, seem to be necessary for a gathering's cohesion. A spontaneous, immaterial inspiration springs forth from an individual. But when it is appropriated by the intersubjective space for collective use, it unavoidably loses some of its original complexity. While such a simplification can feel stifling to the individual improviser, it may also be the only bridge he or she has to the outside world. Without these theories or instructed therapeutic postures (or, in music, repeated licks or hooks), would there be any way for others to make meaning from the improviser's musings? The creative mind is not isolated and thus cannot escape its immediate or historical community. This is why any conception of what it means to improvise must include healthy respect to the sacrifice one must make to the forms that gave rise to the improvisation in the first place.

And so, I can say indeed improvisation is the essence of psychoanalysis. It is the essence of psychoanalysis like it is the essence of religious prayer meetings and also of jazz. Improvisation itself encompasses the dialectical forces of spontaneity and ritual, venturing and returning, opening and closing. Just as Crawley demands exploration and openness, Sorensen reminds us that we also have to go home occasionally. Those gathered at the prayer meeting do so that they might both find spiritual vivacity within themselves and unity with others past and present. We do so in psychoanalytic treatment that we might both strengthens one's capacity for authentic personhood while simultaneously remaining ever connected to the interpersonal matrix that is always imposing, but also gifting, its own meanings. Open. Close. Open. Close...

### References

- Atwood, G. E., & Stolorow, R. D. (1999). *Faces in a cloud: Intersubjectivity in personality theory*. Northvale, NJ: Aronson.
- Crawley, A. (September 18, 2015). Wednesday night prayer meeting by Ashon Crawley. Retrieved from <https://www.thenormalschool.com/blog/2015/9/18/wednesday-night-prayer-meeting-by-ashon-crawley>
- Ghiselin, B. (Ed.) (1952). *The creative process: A symposium*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hoffman, I. Z. (1998). *Ritual and spontaneity in the psychoanalytic process: A dialectical-constructivist view*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.
- Rodman, R. F. (2003). *Winnicott: Life and work*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
- Sorenson, R. L. (2004). *Minding spirituality*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press. Margolis, N. M. (1954). A theory on the psychology of Jazz. *America Imago*, 11, 263-291.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1971). *Playing and reality*. New York: Routledge.