

# Grounded Improvisation

Joan Sutherland

*Over the long haul, says the American Zen teacher Joan Sutherland, we need to develop binocular vision: one eye aware of how things are coming and going all the time, the other aware of how they've never moved.*

Something remarkable happened to the national mood in the United States recently: people have been able to hold two contradictory feelings—elation and sobriety—at the same time. This was unmistakable around the time of Barack Obama's inauguration, which happened just after the collapse of the economy. The general uplift of one event didn't cover over the anxiety of the other, and the anxiety didn't cause most people to hedge their bets on the uplift. Equally remarkable, during inauguration week millions of people moved spontaneously into public spaces to share the experience together—not just on the Mall in Washington, where the ceremony took place, but in city squares, pubs, meditation halls, and friends' living rooms. Americans who by and large had retreated into their private lives in recent years were suddenly pouring back into the commons.

These shifts in mood—a capacity to tolerate paradox and a resurgence of fellow-feeling—coupled with a new administration that values inquiry, empathy, and reality-based decision-making

are encouraging given the challenges we face. We have a chance to radically change course, together and as individuals. We've apparently decided to value both experience and innovation, and to see what happens when we bring them together. Maybe it's time for a little grounded improvisation.

This isn't the first time we've faced hard times, nor is it likely to be the last. The old philosophical and spiritual teachings are the voices of our elder kin, offering their best advice about what to do when things get tough. Across the generations, they connect us to the vast mystery play of human life, reminding us that people have faced circumstances like this before and have even gotten wisdom out of them. That's the grounded part.

At the same time, and here's where improvisation comes in, some important things have changed over the millennia. In the famous parable of the mustard seed from early Buddhist literature, a woman is overcome with grief at the death of her child. The Buddha says that he will bring the child back to life if she brings him a mustard seed from a house in the village that hasn't experienced loss. Of course, she can't find such a house. From our perspective, those times had a kind of innocence: the world was bounded by the village; if you knew what was happening with your neighbors, you had a whole philosophy of life. Now the images and stories of villagers from all over the world appear in our homes, knocking at our hearts for their share of our concern. And in industrialized nations, it's as if the country were hooked up to a bank of ICU monitors whose readings are beamed instantaneously to every citizen: the state of the stock market and Senate votes are reported in real time on the television screen, news alerts flash across our e-mail and text messages, everyone's got an instant opinion and a media outlet to express it.

We know so much more, in so much greater detail and so much more quickly, about events in our own countries and all around the world than humans ever have, than either our nervous systems or our hearts have evolved to handle. So how do we handle it? How do we draw on the wisdom and the practices that people have been using in difficult times forever, and at the same time acknowledge

that there's something different about this time, and make the adaptations we need?

We can begin by recognizing that, under modern conditions, it's natural to feel worried, overwhelmed, outraged, or despairing at such a time. Meditation and similar practices are for moving us deeper into life, to face whatever happens with as clear a mind, open a heart, and willing a pair of hands as possible, and so it would be strange not to feel those things. "I am sick because the whole world is sick," the great lay Buddhist Vimalakirti said a long time ago. Feeling unease in an uneasy world just means you're paying attention; the difficulty comes when you think you shouldn't be feeling that way. Then you're in a fight with life, for being life in all its uncontrollable complexity, and with your own heart-mind for reacting to it. The focus shifts from a direct engagement with the way things are to something more self-centered: how to stop yourself from feeling this way, or how to change the circumstances so they don't make you feel this way.

It's actually helpful to start with accepting the situation as it is. You're more likely to discover a useful response to the situation if you have a less self-centered and therefore more realistic view of things. At times the anger or despair we feel about something is a way of avoiding or taking a break from the fear and sorrow underneath, and so another aspect of having a more realistic view is acknowledging our inner states as well as the outer circumstances. Then sorrow and fear are included as part of the situation and not reasons to turn away from it.

That's the up-close, village view of a crisis—what it's like as it's happening. It helps to have a big, horizon-wide view, too. During the inauguration, Martin Luther King Jr.'s words resounded: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." To see that is to be more at ease with the fact that we're not there yet, that the human mystery play is a work in progress. Too often it can break our hearts, how short we fall, but part of the big view is that we're all in this together, all of us awakening together—slowly, sometimes painfully, but on the way. All those smiling and tear-streaked faces

on the Mall in January reminded us that a big view is aware of the long arc of things and of how many of us are walking it together. This is what "grounded" means: rooted in history, rooted in each other, rooted in eternity.

The ancestors grappled with how to join the neighborhood view of a crisis and the horizon-wide view of what a big landscape the neighborhood sits in. In mid-eighth-century China, a serious rebellion ushered in a decade of civil war, famine, and disease so devastating that two out of three Chinese died. In the blink of an eye, China went from being one of the greatest empires the world had ever seen to a devastated country whose population had shrunk by two-thirds. A kind of order was eventually restored, but it would be centuries before the nation fully recovered.

The poet Du Fu was trapped in the city where the rebellion took place, and he wrote a poem called "The View This Spring" about what it was like. The poem contains two spare lines that sum it all up:

The nation is destroyed,  
mountains and rivers remain.

Some Chan (Chinese Zen) practitioners saw what Du Fu saw, from their own perspective: in our world things are always getting broken and mended and broken again, and there is also something that never breaks. Everything rises and falls, and yet in exactly the same moment things are eternal and aren't going anywhere at all. How do we see with a kind of binocular vision, one eye aware of how things are coming and going all the time, the other of how they've never moved? How do we experience this not as two separate ways of seeing, but as one seamless field of vision?

A few Chan innovators had the big-horizon view, but they also recognized that they were facing unprecedented times that cried out for unprecedented, immediate responses. They wanted to leap out of the usual ways of doing things and into new territory—not to escape the catastrophe looming around them, but to more fully meet it. If they were going to be helpful they had to develop, and

quickly, flexibility of mind, an easy relationship with the unknown, and a robust willingness to engage with life as they found it. They had to become improvisers.

One of them, Great Master Ma, said that “a person bathing in the great ocean uses all the waters that empty into it.” Wherever we find ourselves, whatever we’re faced with, that’s the Way. There are no detours from the Way; we can’t lose our Way. To engage and entangle ourselves with whomever and whatever we meet, to care about them, to throw our lot in with them—that is the Way. Every moment, every circumstance, is another chance to experience things as they are, rather than as we wish or fear them to be.

It’s the same with our inner landscapes. Ma famously said that ordinary mind is the Way. We don’t reject our thoughts and feelings; even, maybe especially, the mind that doesn’t understand is exactly “it.” At such a time, maybe not getting it is the most realistic position. Anyone who claims to have an explanation for what’s going on, from a metaphysical or conspiratorial or any other perspective, probably doesn’t, and is limiting the field out of which improvisation might come. In unprecedented times, no one is an expert yet, and anyone might become one.

It’s a good time to be asking questions and to appreciate the ordinary mind’s talent for grounding itself in cooking a warm breakfast on a cold day and researching what it would take to become carbon-neutral. It’s a good time to turn off the national ICU monitors for an afternoon or a month and read a really old book or go look at some petroglyphs or sit in an old-growth forest. In other words, it’s a good time to widen and deepen the field out of which improvisation might come.

There is a unity between our inner lives and the outer world, a continuum that only appears to be separated into factions that are sometimes in conflict. Turn too far toward your own heart-mind and you become self-obsessed; turn too far in the other direction and you burn out. Bring an attitude of warmth and curiosity to both, and the Way begins to open on its own. This is what Ma called living a natural life according to the times. Be part of what’s going on

around you, and “just wear clothes, eat food, always uphold the way of the bodhisattva.” We might think: Oh sure, clothes, food, way of the bodhisattva—nothing to it, right? Just so, according to Shitou, another of the great Chinese teachers of the time. “Your essential mind is absolutely still and completely whole, and its ability to respond to circumstances is limitless.”

When we open out into the big view, we rest in this fundamental wholeness, whatever else is going on. From there we’re free from the illusion that what we’re capable of is determined solely by our individual will. Put that down and things get big and alive. Our essential mind isn’t bounded by our skull, and our capacity to respond isn’t either. This aspect of realization has everything to do with relationship: We feel more whole and at peace and able to respond because we know we’re part of something very large. Remembering this even some of the time can make a huge difference; it can make us bold.

Many people feel that we’re entering uncharted waters with our economy and our ecology. As in Ma and Shitou’s time, some of what we already know will continue to be helpful, a lot of it won’t, and we’ll often feel desperately inadequate to the work ahead of us. In eighth-century China, how did people get up every morning and pitch in, knowing that they wouldn’t be able to feed the vast majority of starving people or restore most of the ravaged land? The kindly, implacable Ma told them to go out and “benefit what cannot be benefited, do what cannot be done.” His words were a particularly Chan form of encouragement: just because something is impossible, don’t let that stop you. Put down your despair and your hope, begin from no position at all, and look for what becomes possible when you do.

I have two quotes over my desk: that one from Ma, next to Eleanor Roosevelt’s, “Most of the work in the world is done by people who aren’t feeling very well that day.” These words encourage and console me, reminding me that doing what cannot be done *gets* done by people with all the ordinary human frailties. It gets done by us. For the times when we really get stuck and can’t find a way through, Ma suggested that we make ourselves into a raft for others. The old teachers didn’t offer any blueprints for constructing such a

raft, because it would be different in every situation; we have to improvise. But when we're well and thoroughly stuck, if we help others to discover a way across, they'll bring us along. Eleanor Roosevelt's life of service also turned out to be her way through a desperate personal unhappiness.

One of Ma's heirs said that his teacher taught him two crucial things: First, that each of us is already endowed with the treasure of everything we need. Our enlightenment is already here, as is our kindness and our curiosity and our courage. Second, each of us is free to use that treasure to respond to the life around us. Our freedom to fall willingly into the frightened, blasted, beautiful, tender world, just as it is, is already here. To know for ourselves that we have this treasure and are free to use it, no matter the circumstances—that's grounded improvisation. Ma's heir called it a happy life.