

Foreword by Joan Sutherland, Roshi

Ruth Zaporah and I are just getting to know each other, sitting at a kitchen table groping for how to express something we both intuitively know but don't yet have words for. She begins to move the objects—salt shaker, butter dish, silverware—around on the table. She isn't illustrating anything; I don't know whether she's even conscious she's doing it. But it's clear that she's thinking not just with her formidable mind but with her hands as well, inviting the simple objects in front of her to reveal something that thoughts alone can't. There are thinking and words, yes, and there is also—another note in the same chord—the way the bodies of things move in relationship to each other.

That's what's so powerful about Ruth's work: mustering the intelligence of the whole person—body, heart, mind, psyche, intuition—to enter into the intelligence of the whole moment, the whole life, the whole world, to make something new. And doing that in a way that isn't stuck in a literal interpretation of reality, no longer prisoner to the idea that a salt shaker can only ever be a salt shaker, or even what being a salt shaker, or a self, means. She calls this seeing through the mirage, something we hope to do because things are actually so much bigger and stranger and more radiant than the mirage, and it's so awe-inspiring and such a relief to be intimate with that.

When the various Buddhist traditions traveled from Asia to the West, they mostly came from cultures in which monastic and householder life were separate spheres, and the meditative practices of one were completely different from the other. One of the grand projects of our time has been to try to merge or at least blend the two, in how people live their lives and in the practices they do. This book is a milestone, as a woman deeply grounded in both traditional

meditation forms and contemporary dance and theater does her own boundary-crossing to create a form of improvisation that lives on the stage and equally in every other moment of the day. It's likely to become a manual for those who are discovering, with what my tradition calls great trust, great doubt, and great perseverance, that it's less necessary to retreat into the solitude of the hermitage, because we come to carry the hermitage inside us. As Ruth says, "We practice and practice with solitude as the riverbed from which the artful act arises."

In other words, Ruth's work is for anyone trying to understand the meditation of real life; it's direct and insightful and blissfully free of spiritual cliché. It's wise about how mental and feeling states work, how stories form, and what it's like when all that falls away. The wisdom is earned, and you believe it.

The writing in this book doesn't just *describe* a process, it *is* the process itself, improvisation stepping into language. Questions are much more interesting than certainties, since they're closer to how things actually are. Images and memories convey something theory never could. Meanings aren't forced and descriptions are precise and evocative, opening a field for the reader to find her own way in.

This process, this never-ending improvisation, is the through-line of Ruth's life; under theater lights or in the kitchen or curled up on the porch with her laptop, things arise from that place where the particular improvisation of an individual life meets the great collective improvisation of the world. This is apparent in small moments and in large ones too, as on a trip to the war-torn former Yugoslavia. The collaboration between person and world isn't always an easy one, and the book is honest about the times when it flows, the times it doesn't, and what the repercussions of a difficult improvisation can be.

Underneath all that is the vast, empty, roaring silence, about which it's a fool's errand to try to say anything directly but which can

sometimes be invoked when you appear to be talking about something else. One of my favorite passages in the book is when Ruth walks with us through her home, pointing out the numinous objects it contains, and I'm reminded of Rilke's remark that any house is the last house before the infinite.

In a great barn of a studio outside town I watch Ruth watch her students as they do an exercise. After a while she calls out, "Remember, there's no improvisation without *you!*" Like life, the improvisation doesn't just happen *to* you, and nobody does it *for* you. Without your genuine presence, it's just movement and sound. This is different from what we commonly think of as self-expression, unless the self we're talking about is very much more than what's bounded by an individual skull and skin. Improvisation requires a ferocious discipline, honing skills until they're second nature and also dismantling what Zen calls the head on top of your head: the head of judgment, opinion, self-regard, preconceptions, and self-deception—all the preoccupations that distance us from what we're actually perceiving and doing. It takes a lot of dismantling of the vast engines of thought and feeling to clear the ground so that something new might become visible. But when that second head disappears, or at least gets a lot quieter, we come to any moment not as a self longing to be expressed but as a participant in something larger than ourselves that would like to be revealed.

Without you there's no improvisation, but with you there's mad jumping off cliffs and sheltering others under your branches and finding the mercy life has for your mistakes. Ruth talks about fully inhabiting whatever appears, be it grace or clumsiness. By not retreating into that second head of opinion about it—grace good, clumsiness bad—we're able to fully experience clumsiness, to allow clumsiness to experience *us* fully. That's a good thing in the meditation of real life, because we spend a fair amount of time in states like that.

Ruth's description of when an improvisation isn't working is vivid: she's grasping after herself and what on earth she's going to do next, piecing together things that worked before, desperately trying to keep the show going. And then there's the moment of surrender to whatever the uncomfortable state is, and suddenly clumsiness *is* the grace, and what seemed like a detour from the improvisation is the thing itself. Suddenly the question of the possibilities of *clumsy* is fascinating.

At one point Ruth says that she's having an odd and boundless life, which sounds just about right. How fortunate that with this book everyone, whether they're able to see her perform or not, can feel for themselves the texture of that improvisation life.

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