

How to be average (and why it's a good idea)

by Keith Johnstone

A student still looks uptight, so I say, 'Are you trying your best?'

'Of course!'

'Is that a good strategy?'

'If I don't try I won't get anywhere.'

'If we saw mountaineers "doing their best" we'd know that they'd moved outside of their area of competence and were fighting for their lives. An admired team of gymnasts at the Olympics saw the gold medal receding, and they "tried" with all their might, and started to fall off the bars.'

'But how can I achieve anything worthwhile if I don't struggle for it?'

'Just be average!'

Consternation.

'Look at the room!' I say. 'Look at the chair! Now "try" to look at the room; "try" to look at the chair. Does it help? I don't think so. Touch your nose! Now do it again but this time "try" to touch it—did that improve the action? Hypnotists ask you to "try" to open your closed eyes or your interlocked fingers, because the harder you "try" the less ability you have.'

'But I don't want to be mediocre!'

'Trying makes you mediocre. It's like running up the down escalator.'

No comprehension.

'We only try when we don't trust the forces within us. Each brain organizes a universe out of the electromagnetic flux—no brain equals no universe—so if we have this magical computer inside our skulls and yet feel that we can't draw, or compose a tune, or write a

story, or improvise, we must be under some prohibition.'

Not a glimmer.

'Sometimes being average is the best possible strategy.'

Outrage.

'Anyone can walk a plank, but if it stretched across an abyss, fear might glue us to it. Our best strategy might be to treat the abyss as something ordinary... and to walk across in our average manner.'

'You mean if we were content to be average we'd be just as good as when we try harder?'

'Yes, or better, because "being average" allows automatic processes to take over, and there are parts of the brain that are infinitely more gifted than the social-self. Are there any athletes here?'

A few hands go up.

'When was your fastest time?'

They tell me.

'Were you trying your hardest?'

I get answers like, 'Funny you should ask, because I really had no idea how fast I was going.'

Such answers are almost routine (a world speed-skating champion used almost exactly those words in Calgary recently).

Try to make your arm immovable, absolutely rigid, and it'll be easy for me to move it—because half of its muscles will be assisting me. Allow only those muscles to operate that are needed to resist the force and it will be a third stronger.

I might tell my students about the weightlifter who broke the world record because he didn't realize that extra poundage had been added accidentally. Or I might mention the elderly heart patient who lugged one end of a 1,600-pound steel pipe off of a trapped child. Interviewed on TV, he said, 'Well, I saw what had happened so I lifted it off without thinking.'

The consciousness that we experience as 'ourselves' is a defence system against the intrusions of other people (why else would so much of our inner dialogue be concerned with manipulating their opinion of us?), but in life-or-death situations our good angel shoves us aside, slams time into slow-motion and does its damndest to rescue us. If improvisers were content to be 'just average', and to 'go with the flow', this good angel could operate even when there wasn't a dire emergency, and we'd call this 'being inspired'...

If 'trying harder' meant staying relaxed and happy while you spent more time with a problem, then it could be recommended, but it usually involves treating the mind as if it were constipated and had to have ideas squeezed out of it.

from [*Impro for Storytellers*](#) pp.66-77