

THE
Gospel

.....
ACCORDING TO
.....
IMPROV

A Radical Way
**OF CREATIVE AND SPONTANEOUS
LIVING**

Les Carpenter



Morehouse Publishing
NEW YORK

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Morehouse Publishing, 19 East 34th Street, New York, NY 10016

Morehouse Publishing is an imprint of Church Publishing Incorporated.

Cover design by Marc Whitaker, MTWdesign
Typeset by PerfectType, Nashville, Tennessee

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Carpenter, Les (Reverend), author.

Title: The gospel according to improv : a radical way of creative and spontaneous living / Les Carpenter.

Description: New York, NY : Morehouse Publishing, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021047515 (print) | LCCN 2021047516 (ebook) | ISBN 9781640653634 (paperback) | ISBN 9781640653641 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian life. | Pastoral theology. | Improvisation (Acting) | Spontaneity (Personality trait) | Meaning (Philosophy)--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .C264 2022 (print) | LCC BV4501.3 (ebook) | DDC 248.4--dc23/eng/20211118

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021047515>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021047516>

Dedicated to all the soul-friends who helped me
see brilliance and beauty both on and off the stage.

“[Love] does not insist on its own way.”
—1 Corinthians 13:5

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INTRODUCTION

When I was in high school, I went to a youth ministry retreat for six days. I was delighted and elated to meet people that seemed to find me interesting. As a teen it felt miraculous to find a group of peers who enthusiastically and unconditionally welcomed me just for showing up. Near the end of the week, the leaders asked for volunteers to help plan our closing communion service. They told us the bishop would be there, and they wanted the youth to be involved in the planning. By “involved,” what they meant was they put us in a room with a bunch of prayer books and said, “Go.”

I became deeply aware that while we were trying our best, none of us actually knew what we were doing. Still, we made the best of it. People started volunteering for different jobs in the service. Three people wanted to do readings, so we figured one would do the Hebrew Bible reading, one could do the New Testament reading, and one could do the Gospel reading. However, none of us realized there was a rule buried in the rubrics of that pair of prayer books that said only someone who is ordained can do the Gospel reading. It wasn't until after we had finished our preparations that I learned about this rule, and it scared me. I didn't want to offend the bishop or the adults that trusted us to do it “right.”

I didn't dare ask about the issue and didn't know what was going to happen until we were in the middle of the service. As is common in the Episcopal Church, there was a Gospel procession where the cross, torchbearers, and a Gospel book are processed out into the middle of the congregation. We like this ritual because it puts the story of the Gospel in the middle of the people. I was curious when I noticed that

both the young woman who had volunteered to read the Gospel and the deacon were in the procession. A deacon is the ordained person who ordinarily reads the Gospel. As we continued to sing, I wondered what would happen. The young woman stood in front of the open Gospel Book, and the deacon unpinned his stole and laid it over her shoulder as she proclaimed the Gospel.

I've told this story in churches before, and every time I tell it there is an audible gasp. I used to wonder if that gasp was because those who heard the story were offended or because they were moved. Over time I have realized it was the latter. A deacon was present during one of those sermons and blurted out "No he didn't!" when I told the story—but it wasn't out of offense. It was out of awe because moments like that show us the Gospel. Much later I learned that there is a technical term for what happened that day. It is called "Yes, &" or "overacceptance." "Yes, &" is the basis of improv comedy, and the more that I master this practice, the closer I get to touching the inconceivable mystery that is God's grace.

I have had no experience in church or on stage that defines my understanding of the priesthood or even my Christian faith better than that moment with the deacon and the young woman. I, too, am in awe of it. Extending the stole is what I try to do every day, and I know this is what God does for each and every one of us.

I knew I was watching something beautiful that day, but I didn't understand what it felt like to live inside of moments like that. Eventually I dedicated my life to the study of the same God that young woman was proclaiming. Just like music, family, love, and all the other best things in life, these moments can't really be understood from the outside. Appreciated, yes, but not understood. Finding improv comedy gave me not only the release I needed to survive the priesthood but also a mechanism for understanding how to put into practice the experience that I've been talking about ever since that day.

I often wonder about that angelic soul who had the thought, "Hey, we could both respect the deacon's authority and empower this

young person.” For years I used to wonder how someone came up with that kind of graceful creativity. Now I know: practice.

Other pastors and authors have talked about improv. While there are some glaring exceptions, most seem to me to use improv as a means to illustrate what they already thought. This book is not that. The practice of improv saved my priesthood, integrated my mind and soul, and finally taught me to make visceral sense out of what I learned about God in church and seminary. The awkward, scary, thrilling, and hilarious lessons of improv have become a bridge between what Christians talk about and how we live. Those lessons challenge and strengthen me in every conversation I have, or even in each breath I take. They are a gift to me every day, and now I give them to you.

Reading This Book Won't Work

When you are both a priest and an improviser, the word gets out quick. I am often invited to speak or share on improv and the gospel. I am not a known name in the Church, so usually I am offered the church conference equivalent of an opening act. They give me a quick slot in the beginning because the organizers don't want the participants to feel bored, and they figure at least I will be funny. While I deeply appreciate the gig, I always chuckle inside because it is clear that they don't know me or what this improv stuff is about.

Improvisation isn't about “being funny,” which is good because I am not. My humor is an acquired taste, like coffee, or whiskey, or gasoline. I mean, I can go off on puns all day long, because it is funny to me to watch how not funny they are to those around me, but the skills and philosophy of improvisation (and the gospel for that matter) are not about trying to achieve a result. They are a *process* that reveals the humor, the creativity, the beauty, and the grace in this life we live.

Whenever I am invited to speak, I ask if there will be space for me to get participants to actually improvise with each other as part of my

presentation. A predictable dead silence follows on the phone because the organizer is thinking, “Wait, this was supposed to be the ‘fun’ thing, and that sounds scary. People aren’t going to want to do something where they will fail.” Then there is this awkward back-and-forth with me and the organizer where they try to imagine why I would ask such a crazy thing, and lobby me to do something fun or funny instead. Then I tell them the truest thing I know about improv. **Watching improv is entertaining (well, hopefully), but doing improv is transformative.**

A few years ago the word “neuroplasticity” was in vogue. I remember once hearing four different people say it in the course of one day, which surprised me because I don’t usually spend time with people who will spend more than three syllables on a word. Basically, the idea of neuroplasticity is that your brain rewires itself. It is not just that you can be exposed to a new thought; with practice you can create a whole new way of thinking. This is extremely useful in the case of brain injury, but it also has huge implications for how we experience the world. Changing what we think can change the way we think. We can learn peace, joy, patience, and generosity. We can learn to be more creative, or holy, or even funnier—but only through practice.

Let that seep in for a moment. When I sit with that idea, I also hear an echo of some of Jesus’s words. “Your faith has made you well” (Matt. 9:22). It is the faith that changes the reality.

Here is my recommendation. Take an improv class while you read this book. Heck, take twelve. Short of that, I am providing a list of exercises you can do as you read this book. Understanding these ideas can make for a fun read, but improv has changed my faith and my ministry, not because of my understanding, but because of the gifts that came when I experimented with these methods of graceful living. I learned that **there is one way to becoming more creative and loving: act that way as much as possible.** Hopefully this book will help you reflect on these practices and give you some ideas about how you can do just that. In the end, though, only you, with God’s help, can rewire your brain. As my friend the Rev. Gini Gerbasi said in my all-time favorite last line of a sermon, “Good luck with that.”

A background of thin, light gray lines radiating from the center, creating a sunburst or starburst effect.

SECTION

I

**“Yes, &”—Collaboration,
Creativity, Incarnation,
and Salvation**

Chapter 1

The First Class

Embracing the Awkward

Let's face it: life is awkward. From first breath to the first day of school, from first dates to last rites, most of us try to escape awkwardness as if we were hiding in the shade from the Texas summer sun. Between awkward moments, we struggle with the overwhelming desire to find meaning. How do we love well, stay authentic, build community, enjoy life, and live justly all at the same time? No one knows, but sheer probability implies the gifts of awkwardness play a huge role.

I don't claim to be an expert on life, or improv, or even faith. It cracks me up every time I see my seminary degree listed as "master of divinity," as if God's ways are something you could master. More than that, though, I think you will find in these pages that I am not particularly courageous, smart, or wise—but that is the good news. I am aware that my ordained ministry was set up to fail. Maybe all of them are. But after a dozen years I am still kicking along, loving my people deeply, witnessing miracles, and having fun because of one very simple thing: God led me to the practices of improv early in my ministry and those practices have become so ingrained in my understanding of life and work that I literally cannot pull them apart.

The burnout rate among clergy, much less laypeople serious about ministry, is through the roof. When I think about my ministry, I am reminded of Paul's constant badgering of his own church plant in 1 Corinthians: "The world thought you all were idiots. That is why God chose you. If losers like you can do this love and ministry stuff, then God must be phenomenal."¹

Some of these improv/Gospel lessons will make sense. Others will seem ridiculous. I encourage you to open your mind, body, and soul and try them. Don't be afraid to read aloud or shout. In fact, I dare you to right now let out a big "Yippee!" Getting used to embracing that awkward feeling in your body is the beginning of inspiration and joy. Every improviser knows this truth because we have in common the experience of going to our first improv class. One thing is sure: it was excruciating.

Prologue to My First Class

I have a lot of practice in being awkward. Ask anyone in my middle school about the phase where I wore a hat with a fish through it every day. Still, nothing had prepared me for that brisk night on Massachusetts Avenue in Indianapolis.

It was a bizarre and painful confluence of events in my life that brought me there. I had been a priest less than a year and I wasn't sure if I would make it to year two. Many people have a rough time learning how to be a priest and I was no different. I am sure the same is true for many careers, but to become a priest in the Episcopal Church you must convince a group of strangers that it is who you truly are. They call it the "ontological priesthood," and while we believe that all people have a calling from God that will bring them challenge and fulfillment, I know of no other calling that expects you to bare your soul, say, "This is who I am," and then wait (often for years) for

1. 1 Corinthians 1:26–28. Loosely translated.

people you don't know to say, "Sure," or, "Nah." I will point out that for any other job we would say that this thinking is unhealthy. Can you imagine someone at a psychiatrist's office saying, "No, Doc, you don't understand. Being an accountant is who I am. It is who I am meant to be. I am nothing without debits or credits. I am failing as a human being unless I can be an agent of reconciliation." That person would leave with some serious prescriptions. Yet we require clergy to talk that way not just in front of psychiatrists (there is extensive psychological testing to become a priest in our church), but also in what is basically a job interview. I shouldn't complain because I don't have a better idea for how to discern who is right for this work, and there is no question to me that faith, ministry, and the priesthood make their way into your identity, but I also have come to believe that having some critical distance from that process is invaluable. What I didn't know when I walked into that black box theater is that the one thing I needed to learn how to do was to separate my vocation—my calling—from my job.²

I had a lot on the line with this priest thing, and after less than a year, it was shaky at best. I found what on paper should have been the best job in the Episcopal Church. I was just a hair under thirty when I was ordained, and I was hired to work in a gorgeous church doing young adult ministry (for people in their twenties and thirties). At the time the average age of Americans was thirty-three and the average age of an Episcopalian was sixty-three. That's right, at just about thirty, I was the difference. And the difference was a priest.

Not long after my ordination my boss, the rector (head pastor), was removed from his position because he had had an affair. Many people were hurt and angry. The church had suffered from similar situations in the past. Then the other priest on staff had to take a leave of absence to care for her husband, who was dying of Alzheimer's. With less than a month's experience as a priest, I was the only one

2. In my experience that is the only way to do both well.

left standing in this large church (350+ people on average per Sunday) with an endowment of over \$30 million. Oh—did I mention the stock market had crashed and the church had laid off a bunch of employees right before the rector was removed?

That's when I realized that the ontological priesthood had gotten the better of me. All I thought about was what was going on at the church. I was trying to reach out to a completely different group of people and bring them into this institution that was shaken and bitter and weak. While there was a lot about my situation that was unique, I didn't realize that trying to reach out to a completely different group of people and bring them into an institution that was shaken and bitter and weak was what most clergy and vestries (board of directors of an Episcopal church) do most of the time.

I am not sure how the next thing dawned on me. Sometimes I joke that the clouds opened up and I heard a great voice, but, somehow, I came to the conclusion that I needed a hobby. I needed friends that weren't wrapped up in this system. I needed a social outlet. I needed something to do to escape from the world of church. It is ironic that my escape would open up a world of seeing and doing that would breathe life (Gen. 2:7) into the priesthood I was hiding from. Why improv? I figured I didn't have time to pick something that would take preparation. I was so ignorant. It's funny. Sometimes I miss naive Les.

The First Class

I was crazy scared. I have always been shy, and my stage fright is off the charts, which is yet another little irony of my preacher/improviser life. Between seminary and my parish ministry, I hadn't met anyone in about four years who didn't know anything about my religious preferences. The point was to get my head out of church. I decided that I would keep that part of my life quiet for as long as reasonably possible. Admitting you are a priest to a group of strangers is a bit

like passing gas in an elevator. No one says anything and everyone backs away slowly.

We began the class by sitting in a circle in a well-worn black box theater room in the middle of Indianapolis. I twisted nervously in the squeaky folding chair, feeling far from the protections of the pulpit, much less suburbia. I hadn't ventured into public in a T-shirt since my ordination, and here I was with people who had no idea who I was. I thought it would feel liberating. Instead, it felt like just a matter of time until my secret came out.

We were almost halfway through the introductions, and I was wound so tight I hadn't listened to a single name or detail.

What about you? What's your name, what do you do?" The teacher's raspy voice sailed toward a particularly scruffy-looking individual across the circle.

"I am Larry, and I am . . ." Larry looked around slyly with his big brown, golden shepherd eyes, ". . . and I am a contract killer." He seemed to be waiting for a laugh, but none came.

"No," said the teacher. "First rule of this class. Don't try to be funny."

Internally, I panicked a little; judging by the confused and desperate looks around the circle, I wasn't the only one. No one made a squeak, but the sound of our collective thought was deafening.

How are we supposed to learn improv comedy without trying to be funny? we all wondered together.

"Uhhh," said Larry.

"What do you do for real?" asked the teacher.

"I'm a cook," Larry said, looking down.

The guy next to him chimed in, "So I was going to say that I am a priest, but since we aren't supposed to be funny . . ."

"Yep," said the teacher.

"My name is Winston. I teach middle school," the guy said.

I was next in line. "My name is Les—and this is awkward, but I am actually an Episcopal priest." I was so embarrassed that I couldn't

look any of my classmates in the face. Then I heard the teacher's voice. It sounded uncharacteristically soft and kind.

“Okay. That's good.”

That was probably a huge mistake, I thought to myself, but at least I know that my teacher is a good actor.

Les's First Rule of Improv and Spirituality

I don't tell this story so that you can feel sorry for me. I hope this story doesn't scare you away from improv class. That was the beginning of one of the greatest blessings of my life. I will point out that almost all of us came back for the next class and most of us fell in love with the art form. I tell the story because it reveals something about the nature of the experience of doing improv.

The emotional response that I call awkwardness is what improvisers refer to as being “in your head.” You are in your head when you are so focused on how things look or how bad or good you are doing that you stop being fully in the moment. Most of us know the crushing self-critical voice, and most of us know those demon whispers that keep us from finding creativity, love, and meaning. Almost all the teachings of improv are strategies that help you get out of your head and into something more interesting, like the moment, or your body, or your connection with your partner. As you work on those strategies, they go from being a method to a set of choices, and then from a set of choices to an instinct, which allows them to be there in real time. Eventually you come to love the awkward moments because of the potential they offer.

You can see the love of awkward in the comedy we create. Watch any movie from one of our generation's great improvisers: Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Mike Birbiglia, Kristen Wiig. The force behind all their strongest comedic moments is awkwardness. They are hilarious *because* they have mastered the awkward feeling that we all get.

Many people have written and taught about the “rules of improv,” which you will hear more about in the rest of this book. People especially talk about “Yes, &” as the foundation of all improv, but I will submit “Embrace the awkward” as an unwritten rule that is even more foundational both to good improv and to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

From an improv perspective, this is evidenced by the first class. Long before we learned anything about what to do, we were all cowering and afraid to be seen. I can’t tell you how many evenings I sat in the bar next to that improv theater with those same people, laughing and joking and retelling what that first night was like from each of our tortured perspectives.

Awkwardness is the prelude to meaning. It is that push of resistance that tries to keep your true, beloved self hidden from view. **Awkwardness is the doorway to grace, because awkwardness is the sensation we feel when we realize that we are losing control.** Without the ability to push through those moments, there are laughs, but no belly laughs. There is fun, but there is no full joy.³ We are trained by our society to value control and so we choose comfort and predictability over awkwardness, but in my experience that leaves us in the shallow end of the pool of life.

A New Dimension in Seeing

I imagine that many of you are thinking, “I see your point about improv, but what does that have to do with Jesus?” Well, Jesus’s ministry was ridiculously awkward. I mean, what kind of teacher speaks in parables and riddles with the express purpose of being misunderstood?⁴ What kind of miracle worker heals someone only

3. Cf. John 15:11

4. Matthew 13:13