

Interviews: Collective Intelligence — Alan Arkin

Present: Alan Arkin, Suzanne Arkin, Caroline Pfohl-Ho, David Ulrich.

The wide-ranging interview touched on many topics and took place over brunch at a busy diner and at the Arkin home in Santa Fe in June, 2005.

Broadening the Arc of Devotion

DU: Philosopher Jacob Needleman articulates what I feel is the central question of this book: “We obviously cannot confront this tangled world alone. It takes no great insight to realize that we have no choice but to think together, ponder together in groups and communities.

The question is: how to come together and think and hear each other in order to touch or be touched by the intelligence we need.” How can people come together to reach innovative and creative discoveries? And is there a greater intelligence available when people come together?

Alan, I know in your work with improvisation there really does seem to be many different dimensions of people coming together and making mutual discoveries, and having one’s work with each other spark one’s own discoveries. How does that take place in regard to this theme?

AA: I don’t know. What I’m discovering, and the things I’m learning along the way have very little to do with what I set out to do. Something happens in the workshops that is transforming for people. It’s what I had hoped for, but it’s happening in a broader way than I ever envisioned.

The first workshop I did was about fifteen years ago at Bennington College. The dean asked if I wanted to teach acting. I had no interest in teaching acting at all, but I felt obligated because this was my alma mater and I wanted to do something for the college. I finally thought, what about an improvisational workshop? We did a ten-day workshop with thirty-five kids and at the end of ten days — these were completely inexperienced kids — we had enough material to do a two hour show in front of the entire student body. Which wasn’t what we had started out even thinking about. It was so incredibly exciting that I got the idea of talking to the Omega Institute, who had contacted me earlier. At the time, I didn’t think I had anything I could do, then I finally thought this might be something to do for them. It wasn’t until a couple of years ago that I realized why I don’t want to teach acting, and why doing the improvisational workshops is so exciting. If I taught acting for fifty years, I’d be lucky if out of the hundreds of people I worked with, two people would learn how to fly, maybe three — you know, get out of their own way. But at the end of a two-



day improvisational workshop, we have eighteen or nineteen people that are soaring, and its miraculous.

DU: How do they come to that ability to soar?

AA: I don't know; it's a combination of things that I am only a part of. This is not my own design, but the feedback we are getting from a lot of people says that Suzanne and I bring to the workshop a completely accepting attitude, that we don't have an agenda, we don't have the need for them to be good or bad or to get anything out of it — which is one of the reasons we don't have a website and it's not turned into a business. I don't ever want it to be a business, because I want it to be fun yet I don't want it to be easy. We don't have anything to prove as a result of it. If people get something out of it fine, if not I'll go do something else. I don't care, but its not caring in a positive way and I think people respond to the fact that we don't have a specific need except for them to have a good time.

DU: So you're nurturing and creating an environment where people can come together, and in that coming together there is a power in the group dynamics that brings something to life.

AA: That seems to be what's happening, The design of the workshop itself has people fly. My agenda is wanting to see people get out of their way and have an experience where they're going places that they didn't know they could — being taken on a ride somewhere, like to what athletes call the zone. But that is an individual experience. The sense of the group dynamic, which I think even takes precedent over the strictly individual experience, has become kind of awesome. By the end of a weekend — or in the case of a three or five day workshop it's even more intense — we have twenty people that are bonded for years.

There is a wonderful series of books by Doris Lessing that have become very important to me, the Shikasta series. In one of them she has a preface which talks about the Shackelford expedition of the South Pole. If you read the account, it sounds like they were a bunch of madmen, people who had no idea what they were embarking on. They had no idea what the conditions there were like, they were completely out of their element. They were doing it in the wake of some other expedition, and they just got steamed up and did it. But, she claims, what all the written accounts miss is the atmosphere of the time and the special atmosphere that was created by the group of people that were embarking on this experience. So, there is nothing that we can say, no amount of words can describe the kind of atmosphere that gets set up in the workshops. It's the atmosphere, which is a wordless matrix, that somehow is responsible for this event and I don't know how it happens.

DU: But yet you bring something of that atmosphere through your attitude of acceptance. You allow not only the individuals to find their own way, but you do allow in some way for the group to come together. You talk in your lectures about the difference between anarchy and chaos, and in a sense you're finding a way to transform a group from an anarchical situation to a chaotic one.

AA: Yes, right. But again there was no plan on doing this. Yet as I look back on the way the workshop was set up, the entire first third of it is a series of exercises that force people to depend on each other, so that a sense of interdependence is built into everything that comes afterwards.

DU: How do they depend on each other? In what way does this take place?

AA: Well, for example in the second exercise you start with one person that performs a motion, any kind of motion, and you tell them that these eight people in the group are going to be one machine. The first person begins a motion, the second person has to add on to that, the third person has to add on to that until the eight people become one cog and one piece of machinery.

SA: And I will add to that by saying initially they don't touch each other. They don't know each other very well and are a bit standoffish, so we encourage them to do it again and to touch each other this time, which starts to connect people.

AA: It gets instantly more important. The way I describe it is that when people are touching something more can happen. In this case the exercise is purely physical so it's a physical touch, but it doesn't have to be a physical touch — like in another exercise you sense when people are connecting with each other, it is a form of touching that doesn't have to be physical. The next exercise is getting groups of three people together and giving them some common task that they have to solve together — like putting furniture into a room in a specific way. Of course there is no there's no real furniture, it's all in their heads.

SA: Often in that exercise people will try to make conflict initially, as a way of being dramatic or interesting. And Alan will stop them and say there's always going to be some kind of conflict with each person, so that you don't have to worry about that, just be cooperative, just get this piece of furniture into the room. It's fascinating how the cooperation between the people is actually riveting.

AA: Yes, but there's always going to be tension in cooperation in a group effort.

DU: But you're guiding people away from trying too hard.

AA: Well, yes. My first exercise is to get twenty people in a ring. They don't know each other, they've never met before and they're all like this, shoulders up around their ears, terrified. And I tell them that each exercise is going to have its own rules, and the rules are mainly for their own comfort so it would be wise to adhere to them. And the rules for this exercise that I want you to pay strict attention to are: I don't want to see anything interesting and I don't want to see anything creative. And immediately twenty people's shoulders go down and they breath a sigh of relief. They say to themselves: well thank god I don't have to do what I came here for. I don't have to be the thing that I wanted this workshop to accomplish for me. So then what we do is just play imaginary ball for about ten minutes, and we keep changing the nature of the

ball, the ball will become a bowl, it will become a piece of rope, it will become a different kind of ball, it will become a small suitcase, and at the end of five or six minutes everybody's laughing, having a good time and being enormously creative. And at the end of the exercise I say, what happened, what were the instructions for this? And they go uh . . .uh . . . (laughter).

AA: I tell them: You failed; the instruction was not to be creative, not to be interesting. I asked, were you creative? Yeah we were creative. I ask, well what happened, why . . . ? And very rarely, every once in a while someone realizes the answer, which is that it is our nature to be creative and that not being creative is the aberration. That when we leave ourselves alone, when we're flowing like we're supposed to flow, without getting in our way and censoring ourselves and trying to please our parents or some teacher or some idea of who we would like ourselves to be, we automatically go into a creative mode.

In this exercise it will happen that the life, the energy, goes out of the circle particularly when people start slowing down and trying to be clever and entertain us. That's why one of the other things I say is to keep it going, keep it moving, no time to think — I don't want you to see thinking in this exercise.

DU: So you bring certain conditions and each individual's work helps to build the energy of the group, but clearly there is also something about the group dynamics that helps each individual become more creative and interesting. They come back to their natural self partially through helping to work with each other.

AA: Yes, sooner or later — it usually happens pretty soon into the experience — you'll see somebody take a big risk, and once somebody takes a big risk I think that it starts dawning on other people, my god they took a big risk and nobody's denouncing them or criticizing them.

SA: Sometimes I'll be planted for that, I'll do something kind of crazy or off the wall in order to let them know it's okay. I do it for fun also but, but it seems to help.

DU: So you become the trickster. Does your own inner work help the group? You both seem you get into the thick of it; you are there attending to whether or not somebody is functioning from their ego and trying to pull them back to a sense of authenticity.

AA: Yes, I feel it's the only real function I serve of any importance in the group. I tell people early on, that the only thing I do not want to see on this stage is any self-congratulatory, Saturday Night Live, smart-ass stuff. And I ask, how do I know when you are doing that, and when you're not? I have an almost infallible guide that tells me when somebody's being truthful or whether they are showing off — and that's my rear end. My rear end tells me. If I find myself sitting forward in my seat, something is really happening and it's interesting because it's out of ego control. If it's smart ass stuff, then I find myself sitting back on the chair and saying, ooohh he's clever, but he's not smart. It's a gauge that I have that I feel I'm good at because I pay attention to it. And it's something everyone in the group can have access to. I tell them, just watch

yourself and see where your attention is as you watch other scenes. And watch if your attention is pulling you back into the seat or whether it's pulling you forward into the event. If it's pulling you forward that means something is really happening, something is transpiring between the two, three, or four people in the middle of the scene.

SA: I think that is the same thing as when tell them to guard against being clever in the first exercise, and that once you give permission to people, once you tell them they don't have to be entertaining or clever, the other people also say, oh thank god, that's great. I can be me instead of all that other stuff.

AA: Yeah. That's my only . . . if I have an agenda that's it.

DU: But that's a very important role because your being honest with your own responses, and by being honest you're helping each individual become more authentic within themselves.

SA: Insisting on it really

DU: So there's a relationship that we have with each other. Inner work is infectious, is it not? If everybody is working in a way that attempts to go beyond their ego, and to both witness and challenge their implicit assumptions, something can come to life that is of a different quality, of a different order.

AA: Yes, without question

DU: Can we talk a little bit about that? How can we get from a strictly group dynamic to accessing this larger wisdom that both lies within us and surrounds us? It's hard to know the steps of how to get there, but maybe we could explore together how can we access this wisdom.

SA: Maybe in relation to that question, its about intense devotion.

AA: Yes, I think that's the key. And it can be devotion to anything. The way that I talk about it is — I think the first sign of being connected is being in the zone. That is a huge step, but I don't know how you go between the normal state of walking around and what I call the zone, where things are flowing and effortless. I think there probably are alot of steps after you hit the zone, but I don't know if there is an intermediate step between our normal state and being in the zone. In my experience with people who have been in that zone, it can be in any walk of life, but it has to be accompanied by an intense devotion to whatever mode that zone appears in.

DU: Could you briefly define the zone before we go on to the intense devotion?

AA: Alot of athletes can tell you what it is for them. The zone is being in a place that's timeless, a place

where they can't make mistakes, where everything slows down, where they know where every teammate is, where they know that they're going to get the ball even though they haven't yet been passed it. They just know things they have no way of knowing. They're out of the way, they're a vehicle rather than imposing themselves in any way. Your ability to reach the zone in different areas of your life depends on where you have placed your devotion. Without intense devotion, it's something you can never touch on or fully engage. I had this experience with acting for many years, but I made an interesting mistake. This was the most exalted place I had ever experienced, and I really thought that acting gave me that experience, that the god of acting brought that experience to me. What I didn't realize until years later was that there is no god of acting, there is no special acting place, that my devotion to the craft of acting gave that experience to me.

DU: What. Oh no! There is no god of art?

(laughter)

SA: What a disappointment.

SA: But a housewife can have that too, and you don't call a housewife an artist.

AA: That's right. But I brought that to the craft of acting with my devotion, and the next step from that, and it's another huge leap, I think is for people to realize, wow, if I experienced this extraordinary and exalted state in this little area, maybe if I extended my devotion, if I broadened the arc of my devotion, maybe I can experience it in other walks of life, in other places of my life.

DU: Broadening the arc of your devotion. That's a beautiful concept.

Do you think that when you broaden the scope of your devotion, does that energy extend to your workshops? And also does the energy from the individuals in the workshop, as they begin to broaden the devotion they bring to the task, does that help the other person they're working with?

AA: Unquestionably. I think ultimately that anybody can teach these exercises and do an improvisational workshop. At Omega, they asked me if I can think of some actors and directors that I could train to teach these workshops. And I thought who we could train, and I couldn't think of one actor or director that I would want to train in this. And I questioned: is this ego on my part, do I think we're the only people on the face of the earth that can do it? And I said no, and then thought about it further. What do we bring to the workshops? I realized I wouldn't get actors and directors, I would get people who have done some intense interior work on themselves, and then teach them the acting techniques which is infinitely easier than opening yourself up to yourself.

DU: The interior work helps in what way?

AA: People know instinctively when they're safe and when they're not, and if you are presenting a picture of being guarded and closed off, and in fear, people are going to absorb that no matter how much love you're preaching or how much spiritual talk you're talking. It's the difference of talking the talk and walking the walk. The only gauge that I have of whether I'm walking the walk or not is the feedback from the workshop.

Alot of times I feel like I failed in the workshop until I get the feedback from people saying that they've been transformed. The first day I almost invariably feel like it's a failure, I'll tell Suzanne every night — it's no good (laughter), it's not working, it's not going to come together, I've got to get out of this.

DU: We don't trust the energy do we? We don't trust the intelligence that we know will organically transform the group, because ego gets in the way, which is also fear.

SA: Right, right, absolutely.

AA: Well, how does one know whether one's got it or not? If you go around saying you've got it your in trouble.

SA: Usually on the second day we start feeling that sense of relaxation or safety where people can let their guards down. We have to get through that first day.

I think a large part about it is just nervousness, Alan doesn't consider himself a celebrity but he has some celebrity. There's a little bit of that going around, and once they see that that isn't going to be a problem, and be in fact on the opposite spectrum of the problem to be with him, then they seem to change.

DU: And that's really important because, Alan, you came to this through your work as an actor. Have you had this experience of a powerful group dynamic on the film set or do you find it more in the classroom?

AA: I'll experience this to some degree periodically on a movie set, but, by and large, acting today has become a kind of sad and painful and exhausting experience.

That's why I love the workshop so much, because there's no future, you're not, literally banking on the success of the workshop. But most of the people connected with a film are, to one degree or another, banking the next year or two or three years of their life on the outcome of the film. There's a sense of tremendous kamikaze urgency to it, which takes away most of the possibilities of joy

DU: Did Second City begin as a response to the problems that existed in the industry or as a response to how improvisation can bring people together and bring a larger intelligence?

AA: I have no idea. I was there to save my butt. I think all the actors were there to save themselves. We had nowhere to go, we had nothing to do. In my case, I just couldn't get work. I'd come out of an enormously happy comfortable scholastic situation where you'd sit and talk about projects, analyze them, and try to see things that would work and things that would fail. When I tried to get into the commercial theater I couldn't get auditions, and when I did get work there was none of the discussion and camaraderie and friendship and joy that I experienced in the school situation. It took forever for me to realize that nothing was going to happen for me in the commercial world.

Then Paul Sand offered me a job in Chicago with this little, tiny, insignificant company, and my initial reaction was, fat chance. I don't want to bury myself in Chicago for a hundred bucks a week for the rest of my life. And then another year went by of starving in New York and I said, ah, okay, I'll go bury myself in Chicago for a hundred bucks a week for the rest of my life. There was still a position open and I took it. Six months later we started receiving national attention, which is another spiritual lesson — throw it away, give it up, and you'll be reborn in some way.

DU: Throw it away, let go of what you think you know, in order to come into a deeper movement.

AA: My teacher, and a lot of eastern thought, says that nobody's going to teach you anything, you don't need to be taught anything. You need to remember, you need to shed skin after skin after skin until the truth, which is within you already, just starts revealing itself to you. With some help along the way, like prods — a mentor here or a mentor there.

DU: Sometimes cattle prods.

(laughter)

SA: Right, with electricity

AA: If you're lucky

CPH: What is remembering? Is it something inside you or are you connected to something else, something on the outside?

AA: Yes, both. Supposedly you are connected to everything. The whole new concept in physics now is that the universe is like a hologram, which means that every piece of the universe is a hologram of the entire universe. So as you make contact with yourself in a deep way you are making contact with the entire universe. This is physics talking now, it's not even a yogi in the woods.

DU: What are the practical tools or methods that encourage this kind of remembering? How can we

connect to this inner and outer wisdom, and can we help each other? I can sit at home in retreat and meditate and that brings beneficial results, but I can also enter my creative life in collaboration with others, I can open to other people's ideas, and I can see that sometimes a movement grows that is in the air, or we say it's in the air.

SA: What are the steps in the workshop to bring people to that place together? Some of them are very simple techniques, like intention, to have an intention in a scene. Which basically means to have some kind of need of the other person and to drive that through the entire scene, not to ever let go of that intention unless the other person says something or has a strong enough intention to organically take you in another direction, which of course in improvisation you need to go there if that's what you choose to do. So that's part of what I think creates that dynamic.

I think that the concentration that you have can begin that process towards connection. With intent, concentration, and then somehow with that deeper level of concentration, I find myself sometimes in that zone.

I think it's also by listening. I think there is so little of that happening in the world and in the arts. By listening I mean when someone can really hear what's being said, or what's being transferred, I mean, not just in terms of words, but in terms of an energetic level as well.

CPH: Do you mean between people as well as from somewhere else, or do you believe that exchanges between people gets you to a somewhere else?

SA: Both, I would say. I think hearing the subtler levels of an energetic connection with people, but I think actually listening to what's being said is, for me, miraculous in a day. How many times during the day do you really feel like someone's hearing what you're saying. I think it's just so rare. I think that gets into that other realm — through attention

DU: Could you say something also about how we connect with these subtle energies? The sculptor, Isamu Noguchi, talks about creativity as something that we access that he describes as "flowing very rapidly" through the atmosphere, and you do touch that in your improvisational workshops, I'm one hundred percent convinced of that. Are there subtler levels of reality that we can gain access to?

AA: It's become very simple in the workshop. As far I'm concerned every great performance — and I'm not just talking about acting — every great performance in the workshop, in the world, in movies and television, to me boils down to two things: to intention and the emotional or feeling connection with the intention. And emotions and feelings are two different things, but I'll get to that later.

Once we get past the first exercise, I say that I don't want to see anybody get up on stage without an idea. I

don't want to see anyone just go up and spew. In this context, I want to see people go on stage only when they have an intention of some kind. And that once they have an intention, once they have that idea down of not going out on stage until they have an intention they can never make a mistake. You will never have a boring scene, it will never be devoid of contact or connection of some kind. That's on a very mundane level but it will work, it will always work. Once you have that idea down, then we work on the idea of filling that intention with something personal, something that's emotionally, kinesthetically personal to you because if, if the intention stays intellectual you'll get into the place of being a playwright on stage and you'll be pretending to relate to somebody while you are watching this typewriter going in your head.

One of the exercises I like to give is of simple buying and selling where the intention is built in. You come into the store, your intention is to buy something, the other person's intention is to sell something — so the intention is mutually there. But your connection to the buying is what will turn it into an event rather than just a transaction. The depth of your connection with it, your emotional or feeling connection with it, takes it from being a transaction to the possibility for it being an event.

The minute you have a feeling connection with the intention, then you have a live organism up there.

DU: When people get beyond the typewriter in their heads, and work toward a feeling connection with the scene, is that when something really starts to happen? Where they build something together and it goes back and forth?

AA: Yes, there is a wonderful story about a friend of mine telling me of this great guitar player, John Scofield. Suddenly, one day I was picking up my granddaughter who was at his place playing with his kids. I'd never met him before, and he commented, I hear you play the guitar. And I said no, I don't play the guitar. And he says, yes I know you do. I insist that I don't and he claims that I do, and throws a guitar at me. I nearly got hysterical. This guy is a master, maybe one of the five best guitar players in the world, and he forced me to play with him for an hour. I was laughing and sweating simultaneously. But in that hour I played better than I know how to play. His effortless expertise and joy at sharing whatever limited talents I had allowed me to be a better player than I'd ever been and ever will be again.

DU: That's very powerful, very important. I once spent an evening with W.S. Merwin, the poet — drinking wine — and he started reciting spontaneous poetry and then expected me to also. But it was that same thing, it brought something to life. His challenge became a gift that helped me rise to the occasion.

One of the things that Caroline and I have observed is that the partnership that you two have seems to be a means of getting to something. Your mutual participation in the workshop seems important. You seem to help each other and your connection with each other seems profound, in terms of helping to encourage a flow of energy. There's a tone that comes through in your relationship, it sparks feeling. — and I'm sure that the student's feel it also. Do you think that the energy that you two embody as partners, apart from the

sense of parentalness or nurturing, touch the participants of the workshops on a level they might not even be aware of?

SA: That's so lovely.

AA: it's never entered my mind, I don't think it's entered your mind either, but we've gotten at least fifteen or twenty letters over the past few years acknowledging that. We don't feel like it's profound, we just know we love each other and try and stay open. We've got a new perspective on what a relationship can be like, we don't have any sense of doing anything. It's not anything we're attempting.

SA: We don't present it as though a couple is doing this workshop, and we want to keep it that way because the surprise element seems to be important. There is something very subtle about the energy between us, and their being able to witness our connection helps them feel safe enough and open enough to have some of these changes take place.

AA: One of the most important things that happens in the workshop is that people get tricked into growth because it's all in the guise of play and fun, and so that development catches people by surprise. It's not anything they planned on, but it's what they wanted. I wanted to create an atmosphere of play where people are just having a good time and things just happen as a result of that.

The one caveat is that the play is related to other people and not on the screen in your head that is merely self-involving.

DU: That seems so important, the relating to other people, bouncing off other people. And that's where we are going with this way of thinking too, that there's something that grows from interaction.

AA: Yes, there's a great scientific principle, that I've only heard of recently, that explains the only way that you can know anything in the world is when you relate it to something else. You can't know anything by itself, but the only way you can know one thing is by relating it to another, person, object, whatever, and so the workshop is an extension of that idea. You learn about yourself through interaction with other people.

SA: I think it's also through love. I know this sounds so romantic, but we have a deep connection, a very deep love for one another and I think people pick that up. And they also tell us that they feel loved in the workshop. They have said that to me often, and I feel that we do love them in this process, that we're somehow nurturing, whatever the word is you want to use. You don't have to use the word love if it feels too romantic.

DU: It's an impersonal kind of love though isn't it?

AA: I wouldn't say it's emotionally charged. But every once in a while it gets like that when somebody does work that's incredibly deep and very revealing. It will engender some kind of a more personal light for a little while.

There's a great statement — I talk about it in the workshops a lot — that I heard on national public radio that made an enormous impression on me. It must have been fifteen or twenty years ago, and they were interviewing a Greek orthodox monk. There was something about his voice and the way he was speaking that really captivated me and I listened and I listened, and then finally there was a question to him that I thought was fascinating. The interviewer said to him: Do you find that you've changed, can you track the changes that have taken place in you in the twenty-five years that you've been a monk? And he said: Oh yes, I can. I feel enormously different from the person who I was when I started out. Twenty-five years ago I was a very passionate person. Now I don't see myself as a highly charged emotional person anymore, but I think of myself as a person of much finer feeling, and that I'm a much more feeling person. I said, god, what a great and fascinating distinction between a highly emotional person to a person with deeper, deep feeling. And I spent a lot of time thinking about that and I even looked into the roots of the word passionate

Passionate is related to the idea of torment and suffering, and a genuinely feeling person is somebody who has their feelings accessible to them, which you don't have when you're in a state of passion. You may have one single feeling accessible to you but the panorama of them will not be accessible to you.

DU: Gertrude Stein once characterized American writers as having passions, but not true passion. I think she was making something of the same distinction. This is really important. Because it seems to me that this quality of feeling, or this quality of love that you feel is what brings us to a different quality of attention and a different quality of perceiving life. And it opens us to something, which I would call a greater intelligence. I would actually characterize a greater intelligence as that heightened sense of feeling and perception that we have in the presence of extraordinary people, in the presence of nature.

So I like this way of thinking a lot. (pause) What is the role of feeling in opening to the wisdom that lies within us and surrounds us? We're talking about love, we're talking about feeling versus passion. It seems to me that there is something big in this. When I come to what I would call a deeper experience of a moment, it's characterized by two things, it's characterized by being in touch with my body and my senses. It's also accompanied by a heightening of my feeling that seems to attract different kinds of perceptions, different kinds of relationships with people and nature. Is there something about this difference in passion and feeling where we tune ourselves, if you will, to a higher vibration?

AA: Right, I think it happens, I don't think it's something you decide. I think it's something that if you take care of the early stages, which is being attentive to your feelings states, then that's kind of a natural byproduct of it.

SA: I think it's also a form of grace. When we're in the workshops, it's not that I'm saying to myself, okay now I'm going to do this and that in order to get to that higher place. What happens, perhaps, is that somehow we're able to open ourselves enough to be used in some way as an instrument of grace.

In terms of what someone may believe in, whether it's a spirit or god or Buddha, perhaps when we find our way of helping or serving, we open at those moments to that force and have it flow through us to help heal or help teach or help change. I have to honestly say — and not out of any kind of humility — that it really never feels like I have anything to do with it. It feels as good for me and as healing for me as it feels for participants because of this thing that's flowing. And sometimes it does feel like maybe I'm being used, you know, but maybe they're also being used to give it back to me.

AA: It didn't at first but

SA: It's often now

CPH: How does it take place? Does it happen every time? Do you have reliable access to this flow? What is the point of entry for this experience?

AA: The point of entry; I knew this when I was a kid. I didn't know a lot, the only way I knew anything was through the filter of theater and film. The one thing I wanted badly to have and to work on was entering the flow and having that power — which I never did at that time. But I would watch people and would talk to people and I would find that there were some people that had a deeper intuition about things — and it felt like they had some genuine psychic experience. I found that what was almost invariably true was that they had less agenda than other people. They didn't have a rigid agenda, they had a fluid ability within the structure of their lives to change, to go in different directions and that seemed to be a constant. This is the atmosphere I want to create with the workshop. I don't have any need to be a mentor, I don't have anything vested in that. But I still, god help me, have something invested in doing good work in the movies because it's something that I was trapped in by the time I was five. So, I tend to go in to a film even though I often do not want to. I want to do good work and I don't want people to think badly of me. I recognize this as an issue that I have to sooner or later get over, but I don't have that with the workshops. If it fails, I don't care, if it goes well it's wonderful. I do care but it is a different kind of caring.

SA: In defense of what you said about acting, I feel like you had an incredible destiny. I think you view it as an obsession at some level. Perhaps that is true to some degree, but I also feel like acting was a real destiny for you.

AA: All I know is it's on the edge of being torturous now, and I'm almost on the verge of having to give it up, almost against my will.

There is another story I have to tell you but I won't use any names. There is a Broadway actress, who is also on film, that I've admired for years because there's a wonderful ease about her work. It doesn't feel that she is under any pressure, it feels like she's always having a good time. I had an occasion to meet her at some big gathering in New York. And I didn't spend any more than five or seven minutes with her but it seemed she embodied all those qualities that I had hoped she would embody. We had a very nice time, she seemed completely genuine, very relaxed, at ease and pleasant. She seemed very comfortable with herself and very much in contact, and I walked away feeling, god, how nice it is to find someone like her in acting.

About a week later I was walking down the street with a friend of mine who's a producer. We were talking and I said, gee, I was at a party with so and so last week, and she seems like such a happy, well adjusted woman. He said, not a chance. I said, what do you mean not a chance? How can you say a thing like that? Do you know her? He said, no — but there's not a chance that she's happy and well adjusted. I'll tell you why — because no kid ever woke up in the morning and said, god I feel happy and free, I think I'm going to become an actor.

(laughter)

I think it's true. I think that the need an artist has to manipulate the world indicates some kind of aberration. What do you need to manipulate it for, it's fine the way it is.

DU: It's fine the way it is, that's true. Are you finding in the workshops that you can come into accord with the way it is, rather than struggling?

AA: What's happened to me is, I'm starting to feel like, I'm kind of flowing in my life to a degree. When I met people now I don't ask, what am I going to say to them, is this going to be interesting? I don't go through any of that crap that I went through thirty or forty years ago. If I don't like them I'm perfectly comfortable with that, if they don't like me I'm perfectly comfortable with that. I don't care if they understand what I'm saying, I don't even feel like I have anything much to say anymore.

DU: Do you feel like you're being guided from a deeper place?

A A: Yeah, I feel like I have a touch of that now, more so in social situations than when I'm alone. What happened to me about seven or eight workshops ago is that I found myself becoming inarticulate. I said what the hell is wrong, I'm turning into a vegetable, I can't speak in the human language anymore. Instead of becoming paranoid about it I, I found myself thinking about it — what is it, what is my inarticulateness trying to tell me? Finally, after about three or four workshops, I realized that what it was telling me was I'm talking too much, that I have just got to shut up, just let the work do itself and not say anything. After this realization, my inarticulateness abated to an enormous extent. The work will do itself, the thing will do itself. There's a level of trust here.

DU: I keep coming back to this question about trust, that we trust the creative process to proceed on its own, with our participation to be sure, but that we allow it to move in a certain direction, Does something else take over, do invisible energies contribute to that process? Do you find that there is a greater intelligence available?

AA: My god, it's everything

SA: Yes, and in the workshops you have to establish some form. So we start with throwing the ball in a circle, and then let's do this, but after a while the exercises almost disappear. Something else is happening. We're doing it but something else does take over.

AA: Talking about invisible energy, it doesn't take a genius or great mystic to know that if you're connected deeply with somebody and you walk into the house and they're in another room and they're in a lousy mood you can feel it. I would say millions and millions of people experience that. Because when you walk in the house, you open yourself, you relax, and you have a close relationship with this person so you allow it. But most people don't allow it in other places, they shut down, they shut down those impulses, they allow tensions to take over. But it's something that everybody's got. Whether you choose to make use of it or not is an individual thing.

And the opposite is true also. When something has an extraordinarily warm and loving atmosphere you can, you can pick up on that.

DU: That's an important point

AA: How do we broaden the arc of that devotion? One of the questions we've been getting more and more lately, which to me is terribly sad. At first I laughed, it stuck me funny, but I soon realized it is very sad. People say at the end of the workshop, okay this is all very well and good but what do we do in the real world? And I ask: Was this not happening, was this some imaginary world? Is this something that you're going to go away and think you imagined? One person said no, but here everybody is happy and getting along. What can I do when I go to an audition everyone is mean and nasty? My answer was that you now have a responsibility. This is very much the real world, but it's your responsibility to carry this with you and insist that it becomes part of the rest of your life — which is a pretty big order. And not a lot of people are going to be able to do it right away.

DU: It gives people a taste of something. And then they do have to do the work in order to bring in into their lives. But it shows them it's possible doesn't it? I've had that experience repeatedly in workshops where something comes alive due to the group energy and what the teacher brings. The group energy can feed and nourish us, then next week I have to try to do the work to incorporate that into my life.

SA: Right, and unfortunately sometimes it's hard to do, and people feel they can't do it so they'll get frustrated and discouraged. In some ways it's saying, without actually saying it, you need to do some spiritual work. Sometimes they come back to the workshops because they want to get another fix. What we are hoping is that there they take something away and use it, find it in their lives rather than becoming addicted to the workshop experience.

AA: They'll become sour grapes, or they'll become workshop geeks. I think that's maybe why there's been such contact between people in the group, there's been a lot of people hanging on to each other.

CPH: Is it find it or create it? Do we find this energy and this way of working in the world, or do we create it, or a combination of the two?

AA: Well, that gets to the question of being and doing; it's two aspects of the same thing. Ultimately the work consists of learning how to not force it or make something happen, not do it as work, but just let it happen.

SA: I also find, from my own experience as a participant, that whatever the experience is that happens in the workshop, I'll find, maybe two days later, something will happen, and I find I'm doing this task differently because of what happened in the workshop. Other participants have talked about that dynamic also.

To bring the workshop experience into our lives is also about healing. In the workshop, we try to keep the space safe for people to be able to open and heal. I think that is why people are so drawn to a situation where they can feel safe. I think it's just so rare.

DU: I resonate with Caroline's question too because I feel that we do both, we participate, we bring initiative to the process and then we let go and relax into the flow. But there has to be both, we can't do it without some initiative and some effort and at the same time we can't do it entirely on our own, it comes from a deeper place. So I think both are true, we find it and we create it.

I'm just beginning to realize how rare that safety is that encourages this balance between initiative and receptivity. Even environments that you would normally consider safe, such as a university are not safe any longer for collective sharing and genuine intellectual inquiry. There's too many agendas, everything is agenda-ridden. What you were saying before about getting beyond one's own agenda is really important because don't our personal agendas often impede creating the right balance between being and doing? They certainly often prevent us from listening, really listening to another.

AA: Yeah, it's nuts, it's crazy. I sat down at my computer about a year ago, and I wanted to write down

everything I know for sure, everything I unequivocally know to be absolutely, categorically true. I sat there for about three hours, and I finally put down; everything changes. It's the only thing I could put down with any degree of certainty.

As a result of that I started realizing that most of the struggles people have with each other have nothing to do with reality, they have to do with belief systems and belief systems which are things you want to be true, but are not necessarily true. We're killing millions and millions of people for century after century over things we would like to be true, that we don't even know whether they're true or not.

Another few days went by and I came up with a second axiom that I knew to be true, and that is that there is no such thing as too much garlic. It's nice to have two things to live by.

DU: It's nice to have two things to live by. And what happens in the improvisation workshops points to a way of living, doesn't it? I think that there's a lot of people for whom these ideas can help. What I am gaining from this book is that we can learn from each other in ways that we can not do by sitting on a mountain top. This sense of interaction and engaging with each other is so important. So much of our growth takes place through relationship — relationship with others, relationship with nature, relationship with god or whatever you wish to call it, but we're always in a relationship. We are always in a relationship to either the higher or the lower currents of energy, usually to both. Do you have any final thoughts on how we help each other?

AA: I use the metaphor frequently in the workshop of learning one's voice, how to become a singer. I studied voice for a couple of years at Bennington and my teacher drove me nuts because ultimately nothing he said made any sense to me. It ultimately came down to either yes or no. Then one day, after about a year and nine months, I sang from the right place, and then everything he said finally made sense. But up until that point he might as well been talking gibberish. The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. You can talk and talk and talk and talk and talk, but until you have the experience of letting go, all you can do is believe that this guy doesn't sound like he's lying, so maybe that does exist. You have to have the experience of letting go in order for anything to really sing for you.

Get out of the frontal lobe, get shoved down to the rest of your system.

With ideas, I have no interest in any tradition of any kind. My new teacher, who was recommended to me by a friend who is a Tibetan Buddhist, is again from a Hindu tradition and I find myself once again in that tradition — only because I found a teacher I liked as a person. I didn't give a damn what tradition he was in, and he says, you know, you're very much in this lineage. I said, damn it, I wanted to think of myself as a Tibetan Buddhist. And he says, yeah me too, but your not. And I realized it's true, that I don't have the patience, I don't have the austerity to be of that tradition. I'm happier being a wild man, I'm happier being god's fool.

I don't know if you want to put this down, but I want to tell you one of my favorite things to do. I can't stand situations where people turn themselves into machines. I can't bear people doing that to me, and I can't stand seeing people doing that to themselves, so I have to watch myself constantly from turning to a raving lunatic in public places where people are doing that. The last time I did this was a few weeks ago in one of those markets where they serve you enormous quantities of things.

I forget where it was, Home Depot or Sam's Club, but I bought a thirty-six package of toilet paper — you know, a four year's supply. And I said to the salesclerk, what's the guarantee on these things? She said, whaaat!?! And I said, what's the guarantee on this? She said, with great seriousness, we don't guarantee toilet paper. While the guy next to me gets a guarantee on some electric tool, I said, he's paying less for that electric tool than I'm paying for the toilet paper. Why can't I get a guarantee also? Finally . . . after about six minutes she cracked up, she finally cracked a smile.

I have to keep myself from saying outlandish things all the time to people or saying them too rigidly. So I want to be god's idiot, and I'm working on that.

A veteran star of stage, screen, and television, Alan Arkin is also a founding member of the famed Second City improvisational troupe where a performing arts method now used by acting programs nationwide was initially developed. Known for his roles in such films as "Wait Until Dark" and "Catch-22", and more recently in "Edward Scissorhands", "Grosse Pointe Blank", and "Thirteen Conversations About One Thing," Alan is a consummate and versatile actor as well as a master teacher. Between his ongoing work as an actor/director/writer, Alan has been teaching retreats at The Omega Institute, Bennington College, and Columbia College

© David Ulrich 2006. All Rights Reserved