



Title: Robert Fass

of Pages: 20

Announcer Intro

The Livelihood Show invites you to make the journey from job to livelihood by finding the intersection between your strengths, your purpose and your niche in the marketplace. Be inspired by guests who found satisfying alternatives to underemployment, burnout and too early retirement. Move beyond the ordinary tools of resume writing, job hunting and interviewing and learn about the new resources that help you identify your portfolio of skills and how to market them to people and organizations that will pay well for these services.

Your host, Marcy Rosenbaum, is a management and an organization development consultant whose company, Consulting Alliance, designs workshops to help people imagine problems differently. Her guests are pathfinders and authors who are at the leading edge of thinking differently about work, professional life and career paths.

You'll always hear interviews from experts and path-finders designed to inspire you and help you take back the ownership of your career path. Check at our website, www.livelihoodshow.com/marcy, for new material, helpful tools, useful resources, and cool products. Now, here's you host, Marcy Rosenbaum.

Key

- Announcer
- Introduction
- Host
- Guest

Host (Marcy Rosenbaum)

00:01:28

Welcome to the Livelihood Show. I'm your host, Marcy Rosenbaum.

How do we make a living? Are we defined by our occupation, by our skills, by the products and the services that we provide? How do we measure success in relationship to our livelihood? Is it the amount of money we make or the awards we win? Who defines these measures of success? Is it more important to have competence or loyalty? Quality or quantity? Is it what you know or who you know?

Many of us should be getting to work and live in a new category of the workforce called "the creative class." Today's guest, Robert Fass, is one of more than 40 million Americans, over a third of our national workforce, who create for a living. The idea of the creative class was first presented by author, Richard Florida in his national bestseller, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and how it's transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life.

Professionals like Robert Fass are leading the way to an innovative definition of a professional identity in which how we work, when and where we work is up to us. Our guest today, Robert Fass is an actor, a writer and a photographer. He's an award-winning narrator of best selling audiobooks, and he's been part of successful corporate programs as a trainer, coach and facilitator.

Defining who you are and what you do is an essential element of the career journey in the creative class. How we define success has everything to do with our experience of success.

Robert

00:03:03

Yes, and it's a very interesting subject it very much depends on how you define success, whether that project was successful or not. In fact, I was interviewed by an Austrian public radio reporter journalist last year who was in the States doing a piece on "how do you define success as an artist." That project in particular has so many facets to what was successful about it and what wasn't successful about it in the sense that, personally, the success was that I just discovered these skills as an interviewer.

I grew my skills as a photographer exponentially. I made all kinds of a lot of contacts. I got involved with Robert Coles, the famous Pulitzer-winning documentarian. I had this phenomenal exhibition at 92nd Street Y. It took me to Europe and it brought me to meet Linda, kind of getting success at a personal level. There is this catalogue that I had published for the shows and that I've sold all but a few hundred.

But seriously, there is a full book that I wanted to get out there with all the interviews. The full manuscript was 50,000 words, or whatever it is, that I came very, very close with several publishers. But again because of the shifting paradigms in technology and the publishing world and the collapse of the great houses and [this net] [ph 00:04:23], and the fact that these kinds of books – the people who counted the beans felt we were saturated with this kind of book, completely ignoring the uniqueness of my book. It didn't happen.

So the only way it's going to happen is if something big happens to create a new surge of

interest in me and/or the project, or technology moves ahead to the point where I can create a print-on-demand version that's going to be a quality product that's not on some flimsy paper that won't – where the photographs bleed through to the other side and that kind of thing.

By now, that doesn't exist unless I just got an e-mail about a publisher to do a print-it-yourself kind of thing, and each copy would cost me \$125, which is silly because not every page is a photograph.

Host

00:05:29

I'm learning that our greatest opportunities for a satisfying and sustainable livelihood are found at the intersection of our expertise, our purpose in the marketplace. Robert struggled with his issues as he sought to define his specialties and his core competencies. Should your area of expertise be broad or narrow? Should we strive to be a generalist or a specialist? There were arguments to be made for each perspective.

Do you consider yourself first an actor, photographer, writer, interviewer or an all around hyphenate? That's very interesting. There's actually a book out and someone I'm going to be interviewing for the show that's called "One Person/Multiple Careers: How the hyphen effect can work for you."

Robert

00:06:14

How funny.

Host

00:06:18

A new model for Work-Life Success, it's called One Person/Multiple Careers, she calls it the slash effect. Her name is Marci Alboher.

Robert

00:06:28

Yes, I'll check that out. That sounds interesting to me.

Host

00:06:32

That there is a power to being a "hyphenate" but there's also a power of being a single artist which subsumes and resonates and expresses through all of those other integrated pieces of your artistry.

Robert

00:06:47

It's interesting. As you have probably seen the LinkedIn profile, my title is "Creative and Corporate Renaissance Man." I had this conversation with someone when the recession hit that I have often felt that having my fingers in so many pies and having so many [hours in the fire] [ph 00:07:10], I was weakening my position because I wasn't fully in any one direction.

I was a guy with 80% of an unfinished novel that lives in a drawer with a lot of successful writer friends. I had this awareness that I wasn't getting up at 7 AM and sitting down and starting to write every morning with that kind of discipline. The only time I could write was

when I had a month at an artist colony, away from all the distractions in the internet and you name it.

That same kind of doubt, to some degree, infiltrated all my doings because I go, “Why don’t you have a theatrical agent? Why don’t you have a film agent? Why don’t you have a greater traction in any of these fears? Is it because you’re only doing it some of the time, and what does that say about your discipline? What does that say about your actual abilities? What does that say about how well you can become entrenched in the corporate creative directing market, in the photography world, in this or that?” So is there some fear of completion there?

But then when the recession hit, I suddenly thought, “I changed my shoes,” and I thought this is now an asset because I have all these possibilities. I’m not one thing looking for the one hole that fits my peg. It’s just now, there are a number of fields that if I can honestly say that I’m good enough to compete in each of these areas, then I have a very hard time switching any of them off.

I love it when I’m in a project and it’s taking all my time and making me neglect the other because then I’m fully immersed. I got that kind of involvement level and that kind of fulfillment, but then I can back out when it’s done. I mean, with this audiobook work which has been so terrifically successful in its last two years, it’s ready to pay the bills but it hasn’t yet. While I’m waiting for this booth to get built so I can move in to this new place with my new role in the industry, my ability to work on demand much more readily, there have been a lot of delays. Since we moved in late July, I haven’t had a home studio.

It’s pushed me toward getting back in touch with my creative directing contacts saying, “What’s out there?” and interviewing there again. I want to keep my hand because the audiobook industry is one industry that’s going through the same kind of flux that all publishing world is.

I have to keep one mind outside, which is what improvisers are doing. It’s what makes us successful audiobook narrator because you have to be directing yourself while you’re in the moment, as opposed to a purely on-stage, scripted theatrical performance where you’ve done your prep and now you just dive in. You’re not directing yourself from outside if you’re good.

But the same model applies to the career mindset. That while I’m pushing with everything I’ve got to maintain a career in books and to grow my career in books, I’m still somewhere going, “Hey, don’t neglect this. Don’t neglect that because you might need it.” Well, it’s like Francis Ford Coppola said when camcorders came out, “Anyone in America is able to make a great film now.” That democratization has taken place here too, in all these places and all these levels. Again, the quality question comes flying back in.

Host

00:10:42

I’d still rather see anything that Coppola does with a camcorder, and I’d pay money to see anything Coppola does with the camcorder. I’m not quite sure that I’d see what anyone who’s able to – like my downstairs neighbor is able to do with the camcorder.

Technology such as the personal computer and the internet, have transformed the workplace for all of us. This is especially true in the creative arts with digital imaging, advanced home recording, nonlinear editing, interactive media and digital distribution all

changing the way that we create and express ourselves.

Robert Fass appears to be undaunted by the demands and challenges of these new technologies. He's building an audio production studio in his home. He's as comfortable in front of the camera as he is in front of the microphone, and that serves him well for web-based training seminars and Skype meetings.

Surprisingly, it was the challenges and demands of the social media that seemed to be the most draining of his time and attention. I asked him how he uses the new social media, and why he files all of his social media documentation under the letter "F."

Robert

00:12:02

There's another technology angle, and maybe you already got it in mind to circle back around to it, which is basically the social media aspect. I only bring it up because it's only that since I've gone into audiobooks that I've embraced it.

I was very much not interested in Facebook and particularly Twitter, and now I'm very much involved with Twitter and LinkedIn and Facebook. I don't incorporate it as a business tool. If I want my friends to know, I want to know where to have a nice review, I'll put it up there. But otherwise, I really don't pay much attention to it. But it is something that audiobooks in particular have. I think if you're going to compete in audiobooks, it's very hard not to have some presence there.

Host

00:12:42

Tell me about Twitter. Twitter is one of the things I haven't mastered yet. How is Twitter part of this new work and creative environment?

Robert

00:12:52

Self-promotion is very much a part of the audiobook world. There's not a lot that gets done for you in that regard. Basically, you have a reputation. There's AudioFile Magazine which prints copious reviews each month, e-mails out every week, once or thrice a week, audiobook reviews.

So, reputation is driven by that, by the Audie Awards and one or two other publishers weekly in Library Journal who do some reviewing of audiobooks. But beyond that, it seems to me when I hit this certain point – I won my first Audie Award in May, I was nominated two years earlier as well – that to sort of be in the game, there's now a certain amount of pressure and drive to be active that way.

I don't have my own RobertFass.com website for audiobooks. I have a couple of places where one can go and listen to samples and see a brief profile. This is part of the hyphenate thing – I've never felt comfortable putting it all in one place because I don't want to dilute the message that I'm this good at this one thing. LinkedIn is the only place where I have everything in one. I felt comfortable synthesizing it there. The time will come, I'm sure.

Host

00:14:11

How do you use Twitter outgoing and how do use Twitter incoming?

Robert

00:14:16

Okay, I follow and I am followed. I did come kicking and screaming into this. I have an e-mail folder called "Fucking Twitter" which I reluctantly added to my "Fucking Facebook" folder where I put any important notifications.

I will basically use it to say, "I'm at the grocery store." I'm kidding. But I will say, "I am excited to report that I'm going to be narrating the biography of [inaudible 00:14:50] again" or I've got this great review that came out on AudioFile for a book that I really love. A part of it is just that level of, kind of, utilitarian publicity and self-marketing. Another part of it is occasionally re-tweeting others in the community who either have a message that I think should be heard, or it's a friend of mine and I want to reinforce that friendship or that business relationship.

I let Twitter do some of the work in that it seems to recommend me to people, and I just suddenly get a notice I'm being followed by this audiobook fan or this publisher that I haven't particularly chased down or maybe didn't even know they existed. But because I'm in the game, now that's starting to spread.

I don't have an enormous number of followers, 40s or so, but I've only been doing it for a few months now. There are a few people out there who are very involved with it much more than I ever would want to be, but I'm very glad they're there because they all re-tweet just about everything that I put out there in the way of news or a good review.

Host

00:15:48

So it amplifies.

Robert

00:15:50

Yes, absolutely. It amplifies quite a bit in some cases.

There is a Facebook style or LinkedIn style website for the audiobook community called www.audiobookcommunity.com. If, like on LinkedIn, you want to put out any kind of announcement, there's a little checkbox and you can automatically, simultaneously send it to Twitter and Facebook. Like I've said, I don't usually bother with Facebook, but I will put something on the www.audiobook.com website where I have a profile page, and then that will also go out to Twitter.

I do a monthly e-postcard to every publisher that I know out there and the ones that I don't know but hope to know. That is something that has really caught on apparently with that community. I did it just as a natural impulse for me. It's just sort of how I felt.

I've got some good things going on, how do I get the word out, how do I make it stand out? I created something in PowerPoint that was a nice layout, and I photographed a little column for sort of casual announcements, and then here are the books that I have just finished doing or that have just been released or a review that just came out and here's a coming soon box.

I send it out, saved it down to a JPEG and just posted in to an e-mail. I was doing a recording the month after my first one. A colleague of mine, who's also a director and he's on the board of the audio publishing association said, "Hey, I was just at the board meeting

in Seattle and someone pulled out your e-mail and said this is the kind of communication that we should be getting from our narrators.”

Host

00:17:50

As an actor, Robert has appeared on stage opposite Jesse Eisenberg and Theodore Bikel in the hit-off Broadway production called *The Gathering*. Like many actors, his residuals from commercials help pay the bills.

He’s recently found an interesting new niche for his acting talents, as a narrator of audio books. His skill and styles and genres, characters and dialects have brought him offers to narrate books by modern and classic and classic science fiction writers alike, including Ray Bradbury and Joyce Carol Oates, Isaac Asimov, Jeffrey Deaver and John Steinbeck.

Robert comes to the feel of audio narration in a very personal way. His parents, Bud and Evelyn, were bibliophiles, book lovers themselves.

Just tell us the story a little bit about how you were influenced by the work that your dad Bud Fass, and your mom Evelyn Fass, did in their early professional careers.

Robert

00:18:48

Well, mom was a very special librarian, research librarian. Actually, she was a public librarian for a short time. But mostly she was a special research librarian for various government think-tanks. I love librarians and I’ve always loved libraries. My first job at age 14 was selling books in the public library, so it’s my blood for sure. Being an English minor and a theatre major in college, I was just always a gracious reader. I love travelling to the worlds of books and place.

Yes, that’s very strong in me and my appreciation for the world of libraries and its poor, endangered species that they are. They are very strong. Dad, as you know, among all his pursuits was a volunteer reader for the blind for more than 25 years in Washington. He was on the board of the RFB&D, Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic. When he died 14 years ago, two days ago, I picked up the mantle as it were. I got involved with a radio reading service in New York, the In Touch Network, when I threw 11 years. I was reading the New Yorker every week to as many as 4 million listeners.

They were very much an inspiration to me, very much a direct inspiration to me. That directly led to my audiobook career. The training ground of working, reading at In Touch – such a vast array of quality writing from fiction to essays to criticism to reporting to biography to poetry – just really put me in a very ready place when the opportunity came along that a fellow reader at In Touch gave me her seat at a seminar on audiobooks because they’re looking for theatrically-trained actors to grow the field.

It was 2003 that I was made aware of this interest within the audiobook production community to bring in more theatrically-trained actors. The Old Guard, as it were, are largely folks who went through The Library of Congress Program and The American Foundation for the Blind.

Those folks have recorded hundreds and hundreds of over a thousand titles and are just kind of faultless on some level. There was something interpretative, but it’s all in the service of getting out of the obvious way.

Host

00:21:03

Yes, and in a book, you're also reading dialogues. So, sometimes you're the narrator's voice, and sometimes you're the character's voice.

Robert

00:21:11

Sometimes, and that varies from narrator to narrator. Someone like me tends to go towards really going for a voice than for a dialect. This is something I am working on getting better at because I tend to go too far until I miss having a director.

But I'm learning very much, and they strongly tell me how to moderate and modulate the degree of that. As a friend of mine, a fellow narrator says, "You're not painting, you're sketching." That also is the reflection of the minimizing the preparation time that isn't in the picture anymore, and you do have to make quick decisions.

As this last that I did, I had 77 characters or whatever it was, you can't go and create a whole biography for each of these people when you've got two weeks to prepare an entire thing. You know there's an enormous amount of research to doing an audiobook. The hourly rate does not reflect all the time spent doing that kind of research. In dialect research, I have to chase down a Croatian folk song.

You want to engage the listener. [Inaudible 00:22:08] her name. That's such a big one right now, and it's the one that's gotten all the critical acclaim. I won an Earphone Award for that title. So I'm very hopeful it'll be a contender comes Audie time this spring, but there's a lot of competition particularly in the fiction category. So, we shall see. But it was named one of the top audiobooks of 2011 by AudioFile Magazine just this month. I'm very proud of it and hope people will go listen to it.

Host

00:22:35

You have re-envisioned your livelihood as an actor. You started as a performer, as an actor, and as you said earlier you've done what you wanted to do since you were 14. You were just trying to find ways of being able to make a livelihood out of it, which is often the story of people who find a passion early. This is what they want to do, and now they need to find a way to bring the market to the passion.

I can see where having an actor who has their emotions available to them in their voice, in their interpretation and to be able to share that in the moment would make the difference between reading a book like this and sharing a book like this.

Many of us were introduced to short form improvisational comedy by the TV show, *Whose Line is It Anyway*. Originally a British radio program, it moved to television in 1988 as a series made for the UK channel 4 for 10 series or 10 season run. Following the conclusion of the British run in 1998, ABC began airing a version with the same name for an American audience which lasted another eight seasons.

Many of the current rules of comedic improv were first formalized in Chicago in the late 1950's and early 1960's among The Compass Players troupe, which included Elaine May and Mike Nichols. Several generations of actors, writers, directors and performers were trained in these techniques.

Here's what I learned from Wikipedia. Many actors who work with scripts and stage or film or television use improvisation in their rehearsal process. Improv techniques are often taught in standard acting classes. Some of the basic skills improvisation teaches actors are to listen, to be aware of other players, to have clarity and communication and confidence to find choices instinctively and spontaneously.

Knowing how to improvise off the script helps actors find lifelike choices and rehearsal and then to keep the quality of discovering the present moment in their performance. One of the things I know is quite influential in your background and training as an actor is your work in improv.

Robert

00:25:11

Absolutely.

Host

00:25:13

Talk a little about how your training as an improv performer has guided your career as an actor, as an audio narrator and as a director in terms of being able to create that moment for yourself and for your listener. So, the first part of the question is, how did improv influence your development as an actor?

Robert

00:25:40

It absolutely tapped the well string in me that was bursting to come out. It was a thing that I never knew that I was great at. But as soon as those doors opened, it was so obvious to me and to those I was working with that this was an innate skill based on my intellectual curiosity, based on my willingness to look foolish, based on my naiveté, based on my sense of wonder, my hunger for interaction and expression.

There was a time – that was probably 10 years – when that was all I really was doing was improvisation in terms of my arts. I was having a work, an evening job, to make ends meet. But because of being an improviser, that opened doors to me in terms of television commercials, in terms of excelling at auditions for plays, being able to just truly understand what it meant to be in the moment.

That was, of course, in conjunction with all my other actor training that was going on with doing [inaudible 00:26:39] and others where I was bringing those skills to bare and learning when to draw them and when to not draw them equally important.

Host

00:27:00

My fascination with improvisational technique began in early 1990s. I was developing a high-performance curriculum for corporate clients such as Lever Brothers and Glaxo Pharmaceutical. I was searching for an approach that would help corporate professionals step outside of their comfort zones. In order to master skills involving negotiation and leadership, participants needed a way to be challenged to practice doing and not just talking about these skills.

In those years, Robert was an improv performer and teacher in New York City, and he

provided me with some early assistance and some crucial support in bringing this unusual practice to the corporate world.

You did some work for me back in the early 1990s when I was first bringing in improv to the corporate world. Having improv performers will teach them the skills of improve, how to be in the moment, how to take what you are given and mold it, how to share a story with somebody else and make it work together, and also to act as role play partners in exercises to really give a corporate person the chance to practice a skill without getting the goofy response that as amateurs do when we're role playing, trying to throw them off. You were one of the best I've ever seen.

You had a knack for, as you said before, making the shift about when to do it and when not to do it. You had the ability to be able to explain a complex idea to people who are not in the theatre. This wasn't true of everybody in that troupe that I was using.

But to be able to translate those skills to corporate people so that they said, "I can use this part of myself or my skills without overwhelming them with directorial language and drama." Your work in that is what gave me the confidence that I had to go forward with that and actually build it into my practice.

Robert 00:29:04

That's really nice to hear.

Host 00:29:06

Rex and Sherry were the people I tapped and did some more work after.

Robert 00:29:10

Who I'll be listening too after we finish this call.

Host 00:29:13

I don't know if I ever told you clearly enough how inspired and how encouraged I was. You showed me that this was possible.

Robert 00:29:22

Wow!

Host 00:29:23

At the same time I was seeing how it was impossible – that it wasn't easy. Some people could do it and some people couldn't.

Robert 00:29:28

Correct.

Host 00:29:30

So, I thank you for that.

Robert

00:29:32

Well, I thank you. It's very nice to hear and much appreciated. It is still the case and we haven't gone there yet. I hope we will, but I'm still involved in role play training. It's evolved to a different kind of work. Whereas, what we were modeling then, we used a lot of "non-real world" application scenarios, I should say.

Now, I'm much more involved with real emergent style, fishbowl, playing one-on-one role plays that are based on specific scenarios that really are all about their culture. They are very different animals but they draw on a lot of the same skills for me, and this leads back to the second part of your question about the directorial side.

Role Play Done Right, which is the working title, a new venture that my colleague Meg Anderson and I were just starting to grow. But Meg and I have been thrown together a number of times in role play work, and we just have a very good working relationship. We have very good balance and we have – over the last couple of years – been called on by a handful of UK-based companies who've been looking to increase their footprint in the US for role play training and to implement programs that they've been developing over there. They may have a multinational client with offices in the US they want to roll it out to rather than bring their people over.

They have sought to create a US-based company, and Meg and I have been kind of the core pair for that along with some other colleagues that we've recommended as it's grown. We've had phenomenal response, and we've realized how well we worked together, how economically we worked together and how we have a great balance of strengths; mine being much more in improvisation background and design, and hers much more on – although she's a very accomplished actress, she is very much on the facilitation side. We bring this great mix.

So we decided, "Let's see if we can get it out there in the training development field." We picked this name *Role Play Done Right* because there are those who feel has a negative connotation because what they're used to is "Turn to your neighbor. You're the salesman. You're the customer. Go!" and then nobody learns anything and they're just, "It was really funny when you did that thing."

We just bring a different kind of level, as you were describing, the work that we did together when you have professional role players who come in and really bring you to a committed place with it. It's a whole different learning experience, and you can actually drive lasting change. That's kind of the holy grail I guess with training.

Host

00:32:36

One of the feedback comments that I got from an executive who was part of this kind of role play training that we had done for a pharmaceutical down in North Carolina is he said, "This is the first time in a role play I actually got what I deserved."

What improv actors are able to do is not only learn enough of the script of the company and the background and everything else. But if the practicing executive means to be open but their body language is tight and closed, the improve actor responds to all of those messages and isn't misled by the surface of it.

<p>Robert</p> <p>By the status or the attitude.</p>	<p>00:33:18</p>
<p>Host</p> <p>The status or the attitude. We saw that without having to create very complex scenarios, it had to be realistic but you've got very real behavior, because a good improv actor isn't operating off of their own separate scenario script. They are operating exactly off of what their partner is giving them and then returning that like a mirror.</p>	<p>00:33:20</p>
<p>Robert</p> <p>Yes, absolutely, and if you have the right set of skills, you will bring them to a new insight that will get you that kind of response. It's very rewarding when you will get the kind of resistant personality who says, "God, I've been doing role play for 30 years. Yes, I know all about what you're doing and we'll throw the buzzwords back at you and stuff."</p> <p>If they're willing to actually get in the hot seat and do it with you, it's really rewarding when they kind of go, "Wow! I got to admit, I did learn something here."</p>	<p>00:33:47</p>
<p>Host</p> <p>I would agree to that. Having designed and run and facilitated skills-based training programs for more than 20 years, the hard part is to get people to really practice the skill so that they can utilize it, learn it, integrate it and take it home. In my experience, you cannot do that and turn to your partner and do the role play with someone who has the skills of receiving, blending and then responding so that it's all about the opportunity and not about an outside story.</p>	<p>00:34:19</p>
<p>Robert</p> <p>A lot of the kind of training work that we do now is about having managing difficult conversations. It's a big part of management training. When you've got a sensitive issue, you're going to have people who are sensitive and who are fragile and maybe dealing with a particular personal situation that mirrors the scenario you're doing. If you're talking about someone who's got a sick relative at home, who has lost their job – who knows what, it is fearful for whatever reason. You're going to have people who are going to get emotional. If you can't manage that because you're having fun, you're going to fail.</p> <p>So, it's about balancing. Again, it's improvisation. But it's improvisation with that multiple mind. If you're not aware of how far this is going for somebody and if you're not adjusting what you're doing to match them and to keep them comfortable and keep them safe, you're not serving your goal at all. That's not really driving good skills practice.</p>	<p>00:34:58</p>
<p>Host</p> <p>Most people think of improvisation as humor-oriented, but the heart of improvisation is truth.</p>	<p>00:35:58</p>

Is it an oxymoron to say the “study of spontaneity” or the “technique of improvisation?” The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines oxymoron as “a combination of contradictory or incongruous words.” More broadly, they define it as “something that is made up of contradictory or incongruous elements.” So yes, improvisational training brings together the contradictory and incongruous elements of differentiation and integration.

Differentiation is the number of distinctions or variables or separate elements into which an event can be analyzed. Integration refers to the connections or relationships between those elements. The extent to which an individual differentiates and integrates an event is seen as a measure of cognitive complexity, of the sophistication of your thinking.

Researches, Streufert and Swezey, in their book, *Complexity Managers and Organizations* by Academic Press said this, “People who are high in cognitive complexity are able to analyze – that is to say differentiate – a situation to many constituent elements and then explore the connections and potential relationships among those elements. They are multidimensional in their thinking.”

“Complexity theory assumes that the more an event can be differentiated and the parts considered in novel relationships, the more refined the response and the more successful the solution. While less complex people can be taught a complex set of detailed distinctions for a specific situation, high complexity people are flexible in creating new distinctions in new situations.”

A final word on the work oxymoron. Hunter Leachman of the University of Texas at Austin points out that the correct pronunciation of the word would be “ocks-im-oron” from the Greek words dull and sharp. In any case, Robert Fass is a serious student of the spontaneous arts.

Who are your formal teachers and tell us about those informal teachers.

Robert

00:38:36

Influences, improv wise, were all the original Second City cast, the Compass Players Second City folks. For me, probably Severn Darden was the true role model because he was an intellectual improviser, and I always brought that first. I was always puzzling and being clever, and it took me a long time to stop that and just let the rest of the scene happen on an emotional level. Then I found how they can work together most successfully.

There goes Meg, of course. I had all the records. But Jeffrey Sweet’s book, *Something Wonderful Right Away* – it was a major eye opener for me. That’s one of the Second City alumni, how he described what Paul Sills was asking of them when they were doing the work with *Something Wonderful Right Away*.

It was Barbara Harris and – God, there are so many. What’s the word I’m looking for? I mean the passion, the mission, the sense of mission of guys like Paul Sills and David Shepherd, who really thought they were going to change the world and had the means to do it through this wonderful art.

I think what Jeff’s book is so brilliantly successful at – that I don’t think any of the others on Second City have been – is in capturing that, in capturing this passion, this craziness, this chaos, and of course it was a product of the times. We’re talking about late 50’s, University of Chicago, all those post-war intellectual passion and all the European émigrés on the faculty there.

That's the big part for me. The teacher I guess who kind of unlocked me was John Monteith of Monteith and Rand. I had seen Monteith and Rand when I was in my teens. They came to Washington in a show at Arena Stage. I was completely overwhelmed and so hooked, and I got it and I wanted to do that. When I moved to New York and found that John Monteith was going to be teaching the course, I always ran to be first in line basically, and worked with him for a number of years actually.

Nancy Ponder is another, who was one of the original Second City Players. She was in the Saint Louise Company with Stiller and Meara. She just hadn't lost an ounce of that wacky passion and belief that anything is possible.

Host

00:41:06

Can you make a living as a performer of improvisational theatre? Is improvisation the achievement or the performance or can it be someone's core skills which can influence their work in other roles and occupations?

Robert Fass expanded his career path beyond improvisational performance. We asked him to tell us about the turning point, how he found ways to integrate those skills, that passion into opportunities for work in related professional careers.

Robert

00:41:37

I hit the point where after perhaps a dozen years of doing this, I really had nothing to show for it. I was getting to a certain age and I thought, "This isn't going to sustain me as a livelihood." If someone wants to say, "Well, why should I hire you? What have you done for the last dozen years?" I can show hundreds of performances on a piece of paper and talk about all these venues and these clients et cetera. But who's to say that, "Where's evidence of the work?"

That's when I started writing fiction and taking photography classes. I wanted these concrete kinds of art forms that I could present. I quickly learned that that had imbued on itself and everything that having the improvisation background let my writing flow in a way that I didn't have to quite so labored about. That it came out better in first draft form than I might have hoped, not that it didn't need serious reworking, like any writing.

So on that side, it was very important. On a photography side – this will now get to your second half of the question – it made for an openness when I approached this whole project. A little background, which you know, I convinced my parents while I was taking photography classes to exhibit for a series of portraits back in 1997, a number of them came out really well and that's when dad passed away a few months later.

So we went to those pictures as a kind of a record, and they took on a lot more significance. They were put out at his memorial service, and lifelong friends of my parents saw them and asked if I would do a series of portraits of them. Immediately I thought what a cool subject for some kind of photo essay.

The combination of an improvisational attitude about what could happen and saying "yes" to whatever my partner in the situation suggested combined with a growing sense of self-examination, self-discipline allowed it to evolve in a very natural way and to point that I felt really proud of a lot of the work that came out of it.

I think what emerged as the overall structure for the interviews were very open-ended up front. I would always open with the questions, "Why are you married?" which very often was interpreted as "Why did you get married?" Other times it was, "Why am I married? That's a really good question, I hadn't thought about it," to really coaxing their story out of them.

Then starting to talk about the institution of marriage in America and how they view it, what its relevance is today, how they feel about the changes and shifts in attitudes towards marriage, towards divorce, towards same sex marriages, towards whatever else. Religious intermarriages intentionally gather such a wider array of types of people with so many different attitudes about that – very progressive left-wing thinkers to the most traditional, fundamentalist Christian kinds of folks.

So with those three parts, it's more general, very open-ended to "let's talk about you, let's talk about marriage in general." I found that I got a lot of dynamics emerging and spinning between them. A lot of times they would say, "I don't think I ever said this to you, but..." and reveal some wonderful detail, some attitude, something that showed a little bit of growth happening right then and there with them.

When I was down in Florida, the first time I visited you, I was interviewing the Cuban-Jewish couple and the husband who at one point looked at me and said, "You're like a great psychiatrist," because they've never been asked these kinds of questions. If you go in there hitting hard and demanding certain kinds of answers, you're not going to get anything. Otherwise if you just say, "Tell me about yourself. What's on your mind? How do you feel about Y, X, Z?" Then it start to flow and you really can just like narrating a book and get out of the way.

Host

00:46:02

This idea of cognitive complexity, what Robert Fass refers to as "three levels of mind" is something that can help any of us act as the directors of our own performance. Instead of either/or – I'm either being in the moment or I'm thinking strategically about what I'm trying to accomplish or I'm being sensitive to what's happening all around me – I can apply the improv technique of yes/and, opening my awareness to be aware of all of these distinct dimensions while integrating them into a flow of learning and doing.

Robert

00:46:35

Having the improvisers multiple brains where you're an actor fully invested in the moment, and that's laid over with the mind of an improviser who is willing to go whichever way it goes and not to lay it over with a mind of a director who needs to keep the overall narrative arch in mind. Whatever that arch may be, that's a real balancing act that takes a lot skill and lot of training.

That's what, again, the continuous circling that back around. That's what applies at the time when improvisation and that kind of multiple mindsets feed audiobook narration when you're on your own in the studio. That's how it feeds role play training when you have to be leading a participant to a certain set of conclusions, or a certain arena in which they can make certain kinds of discoveries to being our own editor when it comes to making choices in a photography session.

Host

00:47:33

<p>I think I'd like to end the interview with these three levels of mind idea that you have. The ability to be in the moment, to be aware of what's going on around you, and then to have a director's mind in terms of the arch of the story or your overall purpose, what you're trying to accomplish.</p>	
<p>Robert</p> <p>Basically, you want to be 100% emotionally committed in the moment as a performer. You want to have some part of you remaining aware of what your tool kit is, what choices are open to you in any given moment. Then again, you want to have this over arching idea of what is the narrative arch, what's your goal which can always shift of course. Your objective can always change, but it needs to change for some organic reason that's coming out of your moment-to-moment interaction.</p>	00:47:52
<p>Host</p> <p>It sounds to me like a perfect model for career reinvention or professional identity development and for navigating a personal career path. Understanding in the moment what you're good at to have a sense of where there's a need for that and how much to give and where to give. Then from an overall point of view saying, "How do I apply this to be able to make a living, not just to have a personal experience."</p>	00:48:25
<p>Robert</p> <p>"Is it working?" is how I would say it.</p>	00:48:53
<p>Host</p> <p>Is it working and...</p>	00:48:54
<p>Robert</p> <p>In both senses of the word "working." Is it "Working as an interaction," or is it "Working as a plan," and is it "Am I working?"</p>	00:48:58
<p>Host</p> <p>Exactly right. Robert, thank you so much.</p>	00:49:07
<p>Robert</p> <p>It's been a pleasure. Thanks, Marcy.</p>	00:49:10
<p>Host</p> <p>As always.</p>	00:49:11
<p>Robert</p> <p>As always. Until next time.</p>	00:49:12

<p>Host</p> <p>Until next time.</p> <p>Let's have a clip of Robert narrating from the best-selling novel, <i>Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of Cuban Refugee Boy</i> by Carlos Eire.</p>	<p>00:49:15</p>
<p>Robert</p> <p>In other words, I've just died. I've passed through the burning silence that strips you bare of everything you've ever been, and so have the other two boys sharing the table with me; Luis Del Riego Martinez, age seven, and his little brother Roberto, age six.</p> <p>The sandwich I've been served is very white. It's on that kind of bread that comes in square slices and is all spongy and tasteless, with a thin rubbery crust; American bread, Pan Americano.</p> <p>The chicken is almost as colorless as the bread, and so is the mayonnaise that oozes out, cautiously. It's been cut down the middle, diagonally, and the square has been turned into two triangles. It reminds me of the sandwiches served at my first communion reception, at the Havana Yacht Club, back when the world was still spinning in the right direction. Except those had ham salad inside, not sliced-up chicken, which gave you a hint of pink.</p> <p>I stare at it, this white thing, these symmetrical triangles, there, on the flimsy white paper plate, which is round, on a square table that's covered by a white tablecloth. It's so orderly, so controlled, so geometrical, so colorless, this plate of food.</p> <p>Two triangles that form a square, inside a circle, laid out on a larger square. It's the perfect disguise for the very messy and painful process that made this meal possible. Chickens aren't square or triangular. Chickens don't just lay themselves down on bread, in neat thin slices. Where are the feathers? Where are the feet, or the beak, or the blood and offal? Who dismembered this lumpy, clucking creature and turned it into a geometry lesson?</p> <p>The plate has scalloped edges that curve upward slightly. The curving indentations on the rim are perfect, having been stamped by a machine, a contraption that is surely a masterpiece of modern engineering, made possible only by very precise computations and the manipulation of Euclidean geometry.</p> <p>Bright fluorescent bulbs flood the room with a bluish yellow light that makes everyone look slightly jaundiced or just plain ugly. The bulbs are long and tubular: perfect circles stretched out, in which mercury vapor atoms go berserk. The fixture into which these tubes are inserted – as two parallel lines that could stretch to infinity – is rectangular.</p> <p>The other two boys look like zombies. The nuns look very kindly and very stern all at once, and very wrinkled, save for their habits and veils, which are the very definition of order, neatness, and control expressed in cloth.</p> <p>"Pan Americano, Pan American: how hilarious, this double meaning," I say to myself, thinking of the bread on my plate and one of the two airlines that link Cuba and the United States. I've just flown on the other one, KLM, Royal Dutch Airlines.</p>	<p>00:49:26</p>

This is only one of the many non sequiturs that are racing through my mind as I adjust to my death and rebirth, and prepare for torture.

Having just flown for the first time, I have airplanes on my mind. Aircraft are all about geometry and symmetry too, and about using exact calculations to transcend our limitations. Airplanes are all about leaving messes behind too, and forgetting they exist.

I meditate briefly on the fact that if it were up to me to invent airplanes, there wouldn't ever be any, given my loathing of exact calculations and my inborn distrust of the laws of nature. No airplanes, no way, if it were all up to me. No triangular chicken sandwiches either.

"Ay, pero esto es pollo," I yell inside my head, very, very loudly. Oh, but this is chicken. Talk about a rough landing.

This chicken meal offends me, greatly, and scares the hell out of me. My parents have always been extremely indulgent when it came to my food preferences. I've spent my entire childhood shielded from chicken flesh, which, as every well-educated person knows, is not much different from that of reptiles. Even the not-so-well educated know this, I suspect. After all, is there anyone on earth who hasn't noticed that bird feet are thoroughly reptilian? How is the taste of reptile meat described by those who have sunk their teeth into frogs, snakes, alligators, and iguanas?

"Tastes just like chicken." Big problem, this likeness between avian and reptile ...

Host

00:54:36

Robert Fass is an Audie-winning narrator, performer, improviser and director. He's been reviewed in AudioFile Magazine as masterful, earning praise for his crisp narration, personal touch and distinct characterizations in titles by such modern and classic masters such as Bradbury, Oates, Asimov, Deaver and Steinbeck.

In his narration of John Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights*, Robert presented voices for 160 distinct characters, surpassing unofficially the Guinness World Record held by Jim Dale for one of his Harry Potter books. A record, they tell me, which may have already been surpassed again.

Two of Robert's narrations this year, Goldman's *Say Her Name* and Carlos Eire's *Learning to Die in Miami*, are best sellers in both the written and the audio categories. We have links to both on our website, www.livelihoodshow.com.

Robert has over 20 years experience in role play, improvisation and training in the business arena. A principal workshop designer and facilitator with a group some assembly required a long-running New York City based improv company. He has also worked as a trainer and role play consultant with several companies for a wide range of clients in financial services, accounting and insurance companies.

He provides coaching and corporate presentation technique and freelances as a creative writer, director for meetings, events, and interactive projects including facilitating live and video presentations, executive speeches and road shows.

He's a creator of the internationally-acclaimed documentary photo-essay, *As Long as We Both Shall Live: Long Married Couples in America*, which establishes and examines the

cultural diversity of long, married American couples. It has been on exhibition at the 92nd Street Y in New York, and it's numerous has been used in the US and Europe, including most recently Beijing, China.

A fine art catalogue in English and German are available via this award-winning project website www.longmarriedcouples.com.

You might also have heard Robert as playing base in the Washington DC rock band Insect Surfers.

Host

00:56:54

To all of our listeners, welcome back and Happy New Year. We have a great series of programs lining up in 2012, and we appreciate you for being part of the Livelihood community.

A special shout out to Junior Rodriguez and friends and family in Spinal Care Center in Coral Springs Florida for keeping my head on straight, to Rida Clinger and Morgan Tew in Cleveland, and to Rose Cove in New York City who listens in to the show with Andrew, Weslan, Stephan and of course Dr. Cove, and a big thanks to Dan Grech, an NPR producer, who's provided me with hours of coaching and mentoring support through the association for independence in radio, and special thanks to Erin Mishkin for pulling all these together.

Join us next week when we talk to Dr. Dan Lovavitz, a psychologist and marathoner, who shows how running a race can be more fulfilling than focusing on winning the race.

For the Livelihood Show, I'm your host, Marcy Rosenbaum. Send us your tweets at @livelihoodshow. Like us on Facebook and get more information about our guests, resources and links at our website www.livelihoodshow.com. Until next time, keep up the good work.

Announcer Intro

Thanks for listening to today's program. To find more information, pass programs, helpful tools, resources and cool products on our website, visit www.livelihoodshow.com/marcy. Marci Rosenbaum is your host. Dave Jackson is our technical producer. Steve Katsikas is the musical director and our program features music by his band Little Atlas.

If you want to contact Marcy Rosenbaum to bring her innovative style to help you and your organization imagine problems differently, you can reach her at www.livelihoodshow.com/marcy.

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The narration used in today's program is courtesy of Tantrumedia.

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Marcy Rosenbaum, Host of [The Livelihood Show](#)

Marcy Rosenbaum uses her senior consultant experience to provide inspirational and practical advice to help listeners connect the dots among their passions, skill sets and market opportunities.

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