

Great! What's Next?

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Being an intelligent optimist is a discipline that invites us to live in possibility, says Ben Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and co-author of The Art of Possibility.

In 2002, Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, gave a talk for *Ode* readers in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. There were almost 1,000 people in the old church, the only church in the center of the city that had survived the World War II bombardment. With his usual enthusiasm and inspiring energy, Zander was well into his talk about the art of possibility when he suddenly turned to the side of the podium where I was standing. He looked straight at me and said: “*Ode* is not just a magazine. It is a way of life, isn't it?” Surprised, I nodded. I had never really thought about it that way. But at that moment, Ben Zander articulated the core of *Ode*'s mission.

We have used Zander's line many times and in many ways over the past decade. Zander was also the keynote speaker when we launched *Ode* in the U.S. at an event in New York City in 2004. And over the years, we have regularly celebrated the alignment between *Ode*'s editorial mission and Zander's mission to promote the art of possibility.

So when we were considering changing the name of the magazine, I wrote Zander to ask his opinion about our new name: *The Intelligent Optimist*. The email he wrote deserves to be framed in our offices: “Of course! Duh! Yes, I applaud the name change. I have always had to explain the name whenever I talked about the magazine, so I won’t have to do that any more.” I wonder how many 73-year-old grandfathers would write “Duh!” in an email...

Cambridge, Massachusetts, is sweltering in unusual summer heat when we meet in Zander’s home studio to talk about the optimistic “way of life,” to celebrate the first issue of *The Intelligent Optimist*, and plan the special launch event in San Francisco on September 26. The photographer shoots from all around the room as Zander plays Beethoven’s Mondschein Sonata on his grand piano. Moments later, we enjoy a warm quiche and cold white wine for a late lunch. Then Zander settles, dressed in a pink sweater, blue jeans and running shoes, into a chair. “To be an intelligent optimist, you have to master of the art of possibility,” he says. There is no better way to explain that than through stories, and Zander always tells stories.

During a *60 Minutes* broadcast about the tsunami in Japan, Zander saw an interview with a Japanese man who had lost his home and many members of his family. He stood on the remains of his house. Around him were images of ruin. Yet the man kept smiling during the interview. The interviewer asks, “Why are you smiling?” The man points at the rubble beneath his feet. A shoot of a green plant is trying to get to the sun through the broken pieces.

“That’s possibility,” says Zander.

“In every experience there is possibility,” he continues. “It is available to us every moment of the day. Human beings require a spiritual dimension beyond their immediate needs for their health and well-being. They need that to sustain their souls. Possibility provides all of that. It’s the out-of-the-box realm where you live in the unexpected. Possibility is a creative realm. It’s a place of imagination. What that Japanese man saw doesn’t bring back his loss, but it told him that life would grow again.”

Zander precisely formulates what possibility is and what it is not: “It is not the possible. The possible is what you can achieve. Politics is the art of the possible. It is not hope. Hope comes from not being able to deal with the present. It is not positive thinking. I hate that. You can always tell that positive thinkers don’t want to deal with the negative. It is not possibilities, plural. That’s about our options, our choices. Possibility, however, is a domain. It is about one choice: To be in the present, and...”

Zander emphasizes his point with one of his favorite stories. Zhou Enlai, the Chinese leader, was asked in the early 1970s about the impact of the French Revolution. “Too early to tell,” Zhou Enlai is supposed to have answered.

Zander roars with laughter when he tells that story. But there is profound wisdom there: “If we were really smart when something happens to us, we shouldn’t immediately judge and say it’s good or bad. We should say, ‘What’s next?’ That’s intelligent optimism. There was nothing that [Japanese] man could do about the tsunami. So what do you say about it? How do you act in relationship to it?”

“I think of intelligent optimism as a discipline, the rigorous discipline to stay in the state of mind of possibility. The disciplined intelligent optimist says, ‘It’s too early to judge,’ and asks, ‘What’s next?’”

Zander has little patience for what he describes as “silly, mindless optimism. I hate it when people say when someone is very sad about something, ‘It’s going to be all right. You’ll be fine.’ When you lose a loved one or something that is dear to you, grief is the appropriate reaction. A slap on the back is a stupid, actually very offensive and irritating response. That’s undisciplined, unintelligent optimism.”

The life of the disciplined intelligent optimist is a constant test, according to Zander: “I used to be an undisciplined optimist. I was very cheerful. I had a lot of energy and a lot of emotion. My capacity to change moods very easily makes me a great conductor for composers like Mahler, Beethoven and Mozart. But I used to live my life at a very great cost to the people around me, and when my second marriage broke down, 28 years ago, it became clear to me that I had to rethink things.”

He found counsel in his ex-wife, family therapist and executive coach Rosamund Zander: “I was very fortunate. Roz is endlessly available for human growth. She is also a true disciplined optimist—much more than I am—who is always able to reframe a situation to create new life.” Together with Rosamund, he co-authored *The Art of Possibility*, which became a bestseller. (Zander credits Rosamund as the main author of the book.) Together, they set out to spread the word about possibility and, as Zander adds, “intelligent optimism.” The two are still very close, though they recently officially divorced after 28 years of separation.

Zander's penchant for possibility started early. He speaks passionately about his father, who fled Germany with his Jewish family just before World War II. They reached England but had to stay in a refugee camp for months. The circumstances were miserable. They had lost everything; they lived in tents; they had no contacts or resources, and they worried about the family members they left behind in Germany. Most people just stared at the fence around the camp, Zander recalls. But the elder Zander gathered the intellectual talent in the camp and started a kind of university. "Without paper, pens or books, they started teaching each other," Zander says. "Quickly, they had 40 classes."

He tells the story as if it happened yesterday. Then he stares at me and sees I am moved. "Your reaction is the same as from anybody who is in the presence of possibility. Your eyes shine, sometimes with laughter, sometimes with tears. That's essentially the same. But we react. Human beings have a capacity to react."

Why do so few of us live in possibility? We are all born as intelligent optimists. Does anyone know a 5-year-old pessimist? Kids stumble and fall. They bloody their knees. They cry, dry their tears, and try again. They are perfectly disciplined optimists living in possibility. So how do we lose that capacity?

"Around the age of 6, children enter what I call the world of the downward spiral," Zander says. "At school, you start getting compared to other children, and suddenly it matters to parents that one child does better than another. Before school, your family gets excited about everything you do. But then you get grades and with grades come fear and insecurity. There's nothing objective about a grade. It's an invented measurement to decide that one child is better than another. Of course, that's nobody's intention. Everyone will say that education is about opening children's

hearts and minds to new experiences. But grades stand in the way. It is a devastating experience for a child. Unfortunately, from then onward the deck is stacked against the intelligent optimist.”

After school the world of the downward spiral continues. “Most motivational material, images and metaphors are from war or competitive sports, from competitive situations where the aim is to kill or beat the other person. It is extraordinary how many metaphors for war we have in our language.”

In competition, success brings energy and defeat takes energy away. Zander compares pictures of the competing teams after the famous Oxford-Cambridge rowing race. Both teams have accomplished the same thing, “but one team is looking absolutely terrific and the other looks as though they are about to die,” Zander says. “That’s what the downward spiral world does. In possibility there is no success or failure. Energy is produced by possibility. The moment you tap into possibility, energy flows.”

Zander suggests the symphony orchestra is the ultimate metaphor for the future. The aim of the orchestra is not to win; the aim is to make sure that every voice is heard. If both the trumpet and the viola in the orchestra are going to be heard, the trumpet has to listen to the viola because the trumpet is much louder than the viola. This requires great discipline. An orchestra is a conversation about “we.”

“Wouldn’t it be great if instead of only talking about adding more, more and more to the bottom line, companies started a new conversation: ‘We have enough of this; now, let’s have more of that or let’s build this,’” Zander says. “Nowadays, we live in a world where, if Greece falls apart, we all go down. We may begin to understand that we all need to flourish in order for all us to grow. That’s the symphony orchestra

model. And that model can only be built by disciplined intelligent optimists who master the art of possibility for themselves and everybody around them.”

We need new stories, Zander argues: “All we can do is tell different stories. The disciplined intelligent optimist tells stories that enhance his life and the lives of the people around him. We are not sitting here talking about the terrible tsunami that hit Japan; we are talking about the man who saw the green plant through the rubble. Such stories make a difference. When you create a new story, events and people gather around it. That’s the point of *The Intelligent Optimist* as well. It is telling a different story from the ‘undisciplined pessimistic’ stories that there are far too many of in the world.”

Reading *The Intelligent Optimist* can even be good for your health, Zander suggests, quoting a doctor who wrote a testimonial for *The Art of Possibility*: “If you read this book with an open heart and mind, it will improve your health.”

“If you live in possibility, you will have better health,” Zander adds, “because in the world of the downward spiral you get dis-ease, which is why we call it ‘disease’.”

During the past year, Zander’s own intelligent optimism was severely challenged. He was fired, after 45 years, from his job at the New England Conservatory, where he led the youth orchestra, for hiring a convicted criminal as a freelance videographer. The videographer has not been accused of any crimes at the Conservatory. “I had all the reasons to be very upset and I fell into despair and anger,” Zander says. “But ultimately, with the help of Roz, I discovered once more that there are an infinite number of things that one can do with one’s life. At the Conservatory, I would have

retired next year; I now have a new youth orchestra and new opportunities. I may even conduct them when I'm 90!"

His smile radiates into the room, and I have little doubt that that will be case. Zander's enthusiasm and passion are visible in his online TED talk, which has been seen by more than 2.7 million people, a fitting illustration of his power of possibility. We walk into his garden. I realize that "youth" has nothing to do with chronological age. Ben Zander still has an eagerness to learn. Looking back at the difficult months of the past year, he says, "I have become even more disciplined in being an intelligent optimist."

The doorbell rings. A 13-year old girl has arrived for an audition for the new youth orchestra. She shakes the hand of the maestro who, while she unpacks her violin, searches for a conclusion. "I know that disciplined intelligent optimists are not pulled down by circumstances. They are the most attractive people you can meet. They receive anything that might happen—exactly as it is—with that same response: "Great! What's next?"

Jurriaan Kamp