

Tom Peters asks... Ben and Roz Zander

Rosamund Stone Zander is a family therapist and a landscape painter. Benjamin Zander is the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra.

Based on the principles developed through the authors' unique partnership, Mr. Zander gives presentations to managers and executives around the world and Ms. Zander conducts workshops for organizations on practicing the art of possibility.

*Their book, *The Art of Possibility*, offers a set of breakthrough practices for creativity in all human enterprises. Infused with the energy of their dynamic partnership, the book joins together Ben's extraordinary talent as a mover and shaker, teacher, and communicator, with Rosamund's genius for creating innovative paradigms for personal and professional fulfillment. In lively counterpoint, the authors provide us with a deep sense of the powerful role that the notion of possibility can play in every aspect of our lives.*

There's a line in your book that says this isn't about improvement. Your publishers have classified this book as leadership/creativity/self help. But you say it's about transformation. Can you talk about that?

Roz: Absolutely. We're talking about a "way of being," in this book. That way of being doesn't need any kind of improvement or fixing. Most of us carry around an underlying assumption there that there's something wrong with us, and that's why we then talk about self-improvement or self help.

What Ben and I do in this first chapter, essentially, is to say that it is possible to invent a new way of being, and in the second chapter we talk about a realm in which there is never any need for improvement whatsoever. We can just work from there. We're in a place of creation. And if we want to see anything different in the world, then we say, "Oh, what would we like to see?" And then we create the conditions to bring it about.

So it's very different than turning backwards and saying, "I need improvement on this; this is what's wrong with me; this is what I've got to fix."

Ben: Roz, why don't you tell the bicycle story? It illustrates the point nicely.

Roz: The Allegory of the Service Station. On an April morning I dusted off my bicycle from its winter hibernation and pedaled toward the Museum of Fine Arts, a route that would take me across the Charles River and along the flowering paths of the Fenway. Finding it hard going over the Boston University Bridge, I stopped to check my tires and saw that the front one was nearly flat. Yet I was in luck, for just ahead, at the foot of the bridge, was a service station whose air pump shone invitingly from across the road. But not up close: it took a couple of quarters to put it into operation, and I, traveling lightly, had only a folded ten-dollar bill in my shirt pocket.

Two big men were in attendance, one at the pumps and one standing idle. I approached them, my ten-dollar bill outstretched. "Do you have change for the air pump?" I asked. They shook their heads. No. It was Sunday, and the till was empty, they explained. I showed them that my tire was flat and that the air pump wouldn't work without two quarters. Again they shook their heads, looking away and down, their hands in their pockets, shuffling their feet like two slow bears.

Three unhappy people, a worthless ten-dollar bill, an air pump standing idle, a bicycle one could not ride, and great art out of reach. "How unnecessary!" I thought. "How

irritating, how petty," I argued as I went down in defeat. But nothing changed—there was the idle air pump, the airless tire, the ten-dollar bill that wasn't worth the paper it was printed on, and there we were, we hapless three With that last thought my perspective lightened, and I felt a shift. I glimpsed, for an instant, that the very people I perceived to be blocking me, their elusive change jingling in their pockets, share my distress. We were *three* unhappy people.

Then a molecular change, a brightening of the day.

"Will you *give* me two quarters?" I asked, cheerfully, intimately, my whole self on the wing.

The man before me looked up slowly as though confronted with an ancient riddle. The onlooker sprung to life. "Yes!" he said, reaching into his pockets, "I can *give* you the quarters," and he stretched out his hand. And then, suddenly, miraculously, it *all* worked: the coins, the air pump, the bicycle, and our partnership. Yet the other gentleman still stood in some confusion. "Do you know a back-roads route to the Museum of Fine Arts?" I asked. He beamed. The directions spilled forth as from a horn of plenty.

Ben: And the question is *how* you ask for the money. If you whine you will get a niggardly response—that's not transformation. If you ask for the money as if you were giving a gift, as a way of opening up possibility, literally unlocking something that otherwise is locked, then it starts to open up in all directions. People who do fund raising might think about that!

Like all transformational stories, the bicycle story is archetypal: it's a model for life, so that you can actually lead a whole life out of that one story. My father used to say:

"There's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing." It's funny, but more than that, it points to a whole way of life.

But what's the big deal about asking someone for two quarters?

Roz: I like the use of the two quarters because it illustrates that people can come to a complete halt over the most trivial amount. It is their way of thinking that stops them. The usual way of thinking is: this money's not mine, and I don't know these people, and I can't ask for anything.

After that, I talk about why we don't get out of our cars and put the quarter in the bin, on the turnpike, when people don't have the correct change. We could do that instead of honking our car horns at them.

Well, it reminds me of friends who've driven through a tollbooth and paid for themselves and the car behind them. Just to flip them out. The people in the following car put their money out to pay and the toll taker says 'the guy in front paid for you.'

Roz: Exactly. And that presents the same thing, because it flips the person out.

Ben: The main thing is that it is the opposite of "business as usual," the opposite of what you expect.

Roz: This is a new way of being that assumes that asking and giving are the same thing. It has a physical presence and a posture attached to it; it means that you're leaning in towards the other person, instead of asking like this, in a defensive,

recoiling posture. Everything about you has changed in the new world, in which your being is about possibility rather than about what we call the downward spiral, or the race to get ahead in the competitive world.

Ben: In my presentations, my own physical engagement actually shifts the way people are physically. It helps to engage people, breaking down barriers and enabling them to experience the ideas more fully. And music, as it happens, is one of the most powerful forces for doing that.

I've heard that you ask people sitting in the back row at your presentations to come sit in the front?

Ben: It's not so much that I say they should come to the front. That would be in the measurement world—i.e., "it's better to be in the front." What I do is I distinguish something. When people go into a room their tendency, without really realizing it, is to take themselves away from the action. Either they want to observe, or they want to hide, to escape, or to avoid participating in some way. Once it's apparent to them that's what they've been doing, they can more easily accept my invitation to move down to the front, to participate fully. Not as in "you have to do this," but imagine what it would be like in a world in which people didn't hold back, that they really just 'came down to the front.' Even if they didn't have any idea what was going to happen, and yet they were willing to really risk something. You never know, I might ask them to sing out loud!

If we all lived our life that way, what a different world we would be living in. So really it's about distinguishing something. Not at all about pushing people down to the front to force them to participate.

Roz: That's right, it's not about pushing or forcing people to participate, but it's about distinguishing something—"the front row of your life" from the position of holding back. Once that has been clarified, you can choose to sit in the back row, and still be in the front row, to be fully engaged.

Ben: So, I may actually attack somebody in the front row on behalf of Beethoven, saying, "It's very dangerous in the front row of your life." You can't keep it at bay. But it turns out you don't have to be in the front in order to be attacked by Beethoven even if you see yourself in an unimportant position in an organization, or in the family, or in the orchestra; you can still feel that you're leading from a chair way back in the back.

Right. But you probably need to go and sit in this metaphorical front row and get hit, or get washed over, before you can go back and—

Ben: No, all you need is to have it distinguished so that you see that the front row exists and is a different way of "being" than a back row hiding position. Because you obviously can't have everybody in the front row. But, the people who come up from the last row to the front row, are metaphorically shifting from one posture to another, on behalf of everybody in the room.

Roz: And they're also experiencing the reluctance to move forward, which helps to distinguish the back row of their life and the front row. Then when Ben asks them to move up they experience that physically.

Ben: And then, of course, they find they have a tremendous amount of fun, because so much is going on in the front row. I talk to them and I spit on them and I fall over them and I might even hit them. And people say, "God, that was fun." Also, they

discover that they change their whole experience of music. Lots of people think they can't "do" music. They even say they are tone-deaf, which, I demonstrate, is an impossibility. You can't be tone-deaf. Just think, your mother calls you—and keep in mind that the average phone has the most primitive kind of microphone and speaker. "Hello," she says and you say, "Are you all right? Did anything happen?" Because by the way she says the single word "hello," you can pick up the tiny resonance of sound which tell you that she's not very happy.

And so you've got the most refined imaginable ear. But to say, "I'm tone deaf," saves you from all the bother of having to sit in the front row with some conductor telling you to sing and to participate in life. So it's a wonderful mechanism that we have for taking ourselves into the back row of our lives.

Your book has as a structure twelve practices. By which you mean these are ways of thinking, ways of dealing with your life that may be new to you, and so they need to be practiced, just as a musician practices playing her instrument. Your first chapter, titled, "It's All Invented" has a practice at the end that asks your readers to understand the assumptions they are laboring under. How do I answer that question? How do I understand the assumptions that I'm working under that are making my life less than perfect?

Roz: You're not likely to look for assumptions until you hit a barrier. Most people wouldn't be able to sit back in a chair and just say, "Okay, what assumptions am I laboring under in life?" No. It's when you hit some kind of barrier that you take on the practice that says it is an assumption that I'm making, a category that I have for this

experience that makes me feel obstructed. So, what assumption is obstructing me at this moment? Then you can get a little closer.

And there are a lot of examples of that kind of thing in the book. I have a long story about my father and what assumptions I'd made about how he felt about me, that had colored all of my relationships.

Ben: With other men.

Roz: With other men, yes. In all intimate relationships. And so I did sit down in a chair, and I said, "Okay, how would I define how he felt about me?" It couldn't be a dialogue between us because he was dead by that time. So I just started to do that. Well, fathers are supposed to love their kids. Do I think that he loved me? Well, no I don't. There's an assumption there: he didn't love me. So it's coming up against something that you want to change, and instead of trying to change it out there, in the world, you shift the definition you have in your mind. So you have to find how you're defining it to begin with. We all make a lot of assumptions—every one of us has in our life, at different stages, different ages, and those are the ones you're going to undo when you hit a barrier. And they may have to do with business and they may have to do with competition. It may be something about whether you're tone deaf or whether you can speak publicly. All those.

Any assumption is going to limit something, an assumption that women can do this, or you can't expect a child to do that.

Any other examples of changing assumptions about a situation?

Ben: Let me give you an example of something that happened just yesterday. Somebody called me up and asked if I would give a talk at a school for dyslexic children, and I said, "Yes, I'd be delighted to," and so we planned the day and so on. I asked him what the ages of the children were and he said six to eighteen. "That's a very difficult age range to deal with," I said, and so I suggested another approach. We ended up agreeing that we'd take the 11 to 18-year olds.

Then I said: "What I'd like to suggest is that you invite not only the teachers and the parents and the families, but also everyone else in the community with whom these children are likely to connect. And the woman in the library, the head of the police, some doctors, shopkeepers, the people who run the pizza parlor. Get them all together in one place and let's have an afternoon exploring possibility for handicapped children."

Because these children are in a special needs school, it's assumed they're not fully functional. That they can't be as good and effective as other people—do you see how the whole thing unfolds? And it's not only in *their* minds and in the minds of the people who need to be around them every day, it actually spreads out into the entire community.

So, if you took that entire community and turned the whole thing around, what effect might that have on everybody's lives? At the end of this conversation, the man who had invited me to speak was just "zinging" with ideas. He said, "I cannot wait. I'm going to call up everybody and get this going right now." He was so excited.

When he invited me, he thought he could make the kids feel better about themselves. But now he realized we can transform an entire community's attitude to limitation and transform their attitude to what the contribution of kids like this could be. I'm thrilled.

This isn't even a paying gig, but I can't wait. Nothing would make me change my mind about doing it.

But how did you come to that? Your book is about achieving greatness with others. And you seem to achieve a great deal together. In the book you write that Ben will run into some problem out there in the world and then calls Roz from Brazil and says, "I've got a problem." And then, Roz, you come up with an answer to Ben's dilemma. That seems remarkable to me. How does that work?

Roz: It works because I follow our practices. If it's all invented, then the thing to do is to invent something new. If you want to get beyond conflict, then you'd better invent something that takes you beyond the conflict.

Ben: We all go through life with an underlying assumption that there's a problem, that somebody has to win and somebody has to lose. So if I'm with my youth orchestra and the kids misbehave, somebody's got to suffer, right? Either the chaperones are going to feel cheated if the kids are let off, or the people in the hotel are going to feel brushed off, or the kids are going to be punished. In any event, somebody's got to lose.

That's an assumption. And so, when a problem like this arises, who's side do you choose to be on? What Roz does is she invents something new which none of us had been thinking about.

Do you say that to yourself when you come up against the problem? Do you say, "What can I invent here?"

Ben: Right. That's actually a practice: what can I invent that can give me something new?

Roz: Take the time I was discovering or "distinguishing" the calculating self and the central self. I spent six weeks working in a tent with my computer hooked up to a car battery for power. All alone. I was working on the chapter about Rule #6, which says "Don't take yourself so g-----d seriously." I'm thinking, "What self?" And, how could I define selves? You can make five parts out of anything, or make a new thing. How will I do that so that we each of us have the power to override some of the things that are getting in our way?

So I came up with these two selves, the central self and the calculating self.

Ben: Because there is a part of ourselves that we do want to take seriously, and there's a part of ourselves that we do not want to take too seriously, and Roz distinguished the two.

So, you have the calculating self and the central self, but that's not an easy concept to jump on, it seems to me.

Roz: I used two different terms so that you wouldn't think one was the other side of the other. Calculating has to do with the measurement world, and central is just radiating, like radiating possibility. But, you see, you can make up anything, not without design, but make up something to help you deal with a difficult situation. It's not about avoidance, it's about attacking a problem from a positive viewpoint.

Ben: What that invention translated into for me, when I was stuck there in Brazil, with these angry chaperones and angry hotel people and my dejected kids, was

something new, which was to ask the question: what are we here for? What is the "vision"? You get everybody aligned in that by having them speak it. You don't give them a lecture about contribution. They'll sink even further into their chairs! You ask them to articulate who they are, what they're up to in life, and you find that if you invite them in the right way they'll start singing *that* song. And everybody's singing the song and you suddenly notice that everybody's transformed and they're happy and effective and they've gotten **back on track** and they've come up with ideas for solving the problems.

And then somebody said, "But you didn't punish anybody." And then they suddenly realize, no, of course you didn't punish anybody, because you're trying to play a Mahler symphony all together. How can you play a Mahler symphony with an orchestra, half of which has been punished?

Roz: But the main thing is you don't try to fix anything. You step into what's missing, a possibility that's missing.

You write about what you call a downward spiral, which is our tendency to get caught up in negative thoughts about ourselves, about others. Your book suggests that we can live our lives without getting caught up in this negative world. But where did humans go wrong that you have to be writing a book about releasing that wonderful, radiant, fabulous, joyous, ebullient person inside? Why is the downward spiral the norm?

Ben: Gravity.

Roz: We don't realize that we only see things in a certain way. We're given categories of perception so that we will survive. And of course that makes us the competitive

people who are looking out for an enemy. That's just hard-wired. And yet, we as a species have come to dominate the earth entirely. We don't have to look around for enemies anymore. And the fact that we still do invariably creates enemies. We can create enemies out of our best friends.

What we don't see is that we don't need to be operating in that competitive mode. We have everything we need to survive, and more, obviously. But this genetic component of ours wants to operate in a primitive fashion. And we have to work to overcome that. And the fact is, we can, but it takes work, or practice, as we like to say in our book.

But the thing is, we've been given the capacity to create new categories, because we have language. And we have to create them along the same lines that our minds are structured. After reading Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works*, I got into a terrible depression, because changing ourselves seems so hopeless. And then, after two days of that, I said, "Oh my God, you don't have to have a different mind." We simply need to redraw the lines around something and we can create a world of abundance, where we can operate in a collaborative and creative sense rather than one where we compete and try to be dominant.

If we can do that, we can actually see the world differently, with the same minds we're given. And for me, that was an incredible epiphany—hope, possibility is restored.

Ben: But it is true. This then takes us into the spiritual realm. These are the issues that people have been wrestling with for centuries, the ontological issues of who we are.

Ro: It's a dualism of the mind that's hard-wired in our brain, that gives us this right and wrong thing, so, there's something wrong with us or right with us.

Ben: We're looking at something else. People say, "I love your positive thinking," and I say, "It's not actually positive thinking at all, because positive thinking is always an accommodation to negative thinking. So, it's not positive/negative; it's *possibility* and that doesn't have any other side to it. There is nothing else. It's just itself. And all it generates is more possibility. That's all there is, in that model.

But how do you take the first step of getting there? You've set up this construct where you've got a chapter, you've got an idea, you've got a story that illustrates the idea, and then you've got something called a practice at the end. Now, how do you expect people to deal with that?

Ben: It's the first step that's the crucial one. If you take a step which takes you into fear or competition or into measurement and judgment, you'll never get access to the world of possibility. A fellow conductor once said to me, "I don't like to read a good review of another conductor in the newspaper, because it means there's one less good review for me out there."

He didn't mean it as a joke, either. He saw the world as divided up into good reviews and bad reviews with a certain number of available good reviews. If somebody else got a good review, that simply left fewer good reviews for him! That is a world that is absolutely guaranteed to drive you crazy.

Well, that's a zero sum game that most of us live.

Ben: Right. If you take a step into that, you'll be cut off from the source of passion. But if you take the other step, which is usually one of not knowing, of simply saying,

"Here we are. It's open-hearted, the arms are open, the eyes are up, and we're open to possibility."

I've read where someone suggests 'scaring yourself every day.' Do something that scares you every day, by way of opening up yourself. Do you subscribe to this theory?

Ben: I would say, surprise yourself every day, or perhaps, take a chance. Or perhaps, take a step every day where you don't know what the outcome will be. Some people call that risk taking, and then talk about risk management, as if you could manage risk! But you can't. We have found you can keep possibility alive by practicing it.

Roz: I give myself games to play. I once gave myself a game to play, to do everything, for the next three days, in a courageous manner, rather than any other kind of manner. And I went off skiing, by myself. And it wasn't just on the ski slope that I did that. I did it when I went to restaurants and I ordered the food that took the most courage to order.

And I had a goal at the end of it, which was to move myself from being an advanced beginner skier to being able to go down black diamond slopes without resistance. And I did that in the three days, by the game of courage. And so, for instance, I would get on the ski lift with a stranger. I'd ask the person what kind of skier they were, hoping they would ask me. And I would up the level one slot. In other words, I'd say, "Well, I'm an intermediate." Instead of an advanced beginner, which is closer to what I was at the time.

You have a chapter called "Being the Board" in which you suggest, as an example, that if somebody rear-ends your car at a stoplight, rather than getting angry about everything that's wrong with the world, just think to yourself, "Okay, this is not an inevitability, but it's a possibility, and you're out there and you're part of that." And just accept—

Roz: No, I didn't say "just" say anything. What I'm suggesting is that you enlarge the frame to include your action in it, which is you got into your car and you do know that there's a risk. So don't take yourself out of the situation. Claim your life and what happens in it as yours. That's all it is. It's not as though it's your fault or not your fault. It's about enlarging the frame. It's the most simple thing. I'm saying that if you do that in the very broadest frame, which is to say, life is a risk, then you're going to be really much freer to move on in situations as they come at you. All of us have bad news in our lives, and most, if you ask somebody what they're looking forward to, they don't tell you that they're looking forward to the good and the bad. I always say I'm looking forward to the good and the bad that's coming down the road, because that's what's going to come.

Ben: It's all of life.

Roz: It's all of life, and it's fascinating. But if you think you get cheated every time it doesn't go your way, you do spend a lot of time and energy—

Ben: —complaining.

Why 12 practices?

Roz: It just came out that way; it has no other meaning.

Is there one you would suggest people try to tackle first?

Roz: Well, I put them in an order for just that reason. They build on each other.

Ben: We're at the beginning. This is Day One. I always say, only half-jokingly, when I'm talking to people about this book, that I won't be satisfied until you open the drawer in a hotel room and find two books. *The Art of Possibility* is a book about life. It took a long time for that "other" book to seep into people's consciousness so that they could change their life around it. And one of the problems with that other book and why so many of us don't open that drawer is because it actually is a set of rules of behavior, about right and wrong. Its stories talk about how one religion is bad and ours is right, which divides people, and people get fed up with that. They're fed up with politics. They're fed up with fighting.

The thing that is good about this book, and it's one of probably many books written about possibility thinking, is that it's an open subject in which nobody is made wrong.