

Why It's Important to Have an Optimistic Outlook on Life

Benjamin Zander interviewed by Doug Goldstein

Benjamin Zander, musical director of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and co-author of The Art of Possibility, discusses possibility and how thinking positively affects our lives and makes us more successful.

Douglas Goldstein: We are happy to have back on the show, maestro Benjamin Zander, an American-British conductor who is the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as guest conductor in orchestras around the world.

Benjamin Zander: It's a pleasure to be back. I feel as if I am in Israel, even if just for a brief period. I love being in Israel – it's one of my favorite places in the world. The Israel Philharmonic is my favorite orchestra in the world. I even have a rider in my speaking contracts that if the Israel Philharmonic calls, this contract is null and void.

Are There Limits to Optimism?

Douglas Goldstein: I see that you are an optimist, which is what I want to touch on today. You wrote a book called The Art of Possibility and there's been a lot of talk all over about how Ben Zander thinks about possibility and is so optimistic. Aren't there limits?

Benjamin Zander: It's very easily misunderstood. Optimism is a discipline. It's not just a good feeling. That's something else, and people get very confused about it. To be optimistic is always to look on the bright side, as they say. I consider optimism to be a very rigorous discipline. It's the discipline of distinguishing between the language that we use which pulls us down and the language we use which creates a new opening, a new awareness, and a new set of options and possibilities. It's a discipline that we all can master, but few of us do master it.

The classic story that I always love to tell is of two shoe salesmen who went to Africa in the 1900s to see if they could sell shoes. They both sent telegrams back to Manchester. One of them writes, "Situation hopeless. They don't wear shoes," and the other one sent a telegram back saying, "Glorious opportunity. They don't have any shoes yet." Now, both of them are looking at the same circumstances, but what is different is what they say about it. It's a very disciplined way of looking at the world, which looks for glorious opportunity. That doesn't mean one is silly about it and simply says everything is lovely, because clearly that's not the case, and when you say there are limits, there's no limit to the possibility that one can see.

There's a really lovely story, which is my favorite example of this. My father was a victim of the Holocaust. He lost everything he had, including eight members of his family and his mother, in the Holocaust, in Auschwitz. He came to England having lost his home, his belongings, his money, and his profession. He was a lawyer in Germany, but he couldn't practice that in England. He came to England with four children and a wife - I was born in England - and he had to support all of them, and then he was interned. They were interned what they called "enemy aliens" on the Isle of Man. He was with 2,000 men in similar circumstances. They had devastating losses

in their lives and had tremendous fear. Hitler was in Paris, and the sense of fear and anxiety must have been absolutely overwhelming. In fact, he said that some of the inmates of that internment camp would just stare at the barbed wire fence all day in a kind of catatonic state. He looked around and he said, “There are a lot of intelligent people here. We should have a university.” So they started a university in that camp with 40 classes running regularly with no books, pencils or chalkboards, or any means other than human beings talking to each other. I call that the “rigorous discipline of possibility.” In other words, it’s very easy to fall into this state of mind of looking at how black and hopeless and terrible things are, and that’s very different from positive thinking. If he’d gone around telling everybody how wonderful it was, they would have smashed him in the face. He said, “let’s have a university,” and that became a reality and a possibility for people to live into to a very high degree and the fact was there were 40 classes and that they were running regularly. They weren’t stopped by the fact that there were no books to refer to and no pencils to write on. They were just talking to each other. Now do you see what I mean about a rigorous discipline?

How Can You Develop an Optimistic Outlook?

Douglas Goldstein: How does someone develop that? To develop this discipline requires some work.

Benjamin Zander: It’s a lifetime work, and that’s why our book is called *The Art of Possibility* because to become a very fine violinist, you have to practice and practice and do more practice, and it’s exactly the same with possibility thinking. It doesn’t

happen like a nice day. It is a rigorous discipline. I keep coming back to that because we always have a choice at every moment of every day. We have a choice between, “Situation hopeless. They don’t wear shoes,” and “Glorious opportunity. They don’t have any shoes yet.” That choice or distinction exists in every moment of every day and it’s at the kernel of our existence. We’re constantly faced with that choice, even whether we smile at the person who is walking down the street towards us, or the way we say hello to somebody, or the way we react to news. We always have that choice. We get some news, and here’s another lovely story that your audience will appreciate. This is another of my father’s wonderful stories. This is about the man who goes to the rabbi, and he says, “Rabbi, you told us a prayer, something with praise.” The rabbi says, “Yes, it goes like this: When you have some good news, you thank the Lord, and when you have some bad news, you praise the lord.”

“Oh yes, that’s right, Rabbi. I remember, but how actually do you know which is the good news and which is the bad news?”

The rabbi says, “You’re wise, my son. So just to be on the safe side, always thank the Lord.”

It’s a great story because we always make up our mind in the 24-hour news cycle that we know immediately whether something is good news or bad news, but actually we don’t know. It’s too early to judge whether it’s good news or bad news, so the idea of always thanking the Lord is a wise mode because what one does in that state of mind, whether one believes in the Lord or not, is to be open to the possibility that is available at that moment, which one might not see. The more energy one puts into despair, anxiety, pressure or fear, the less likely the brain will be able to come up with the idea of a new university. In order to be able to live fully in possibility, the brain

has to be clear of all those detrimental forces that pull us down like fear, anxiety, pressure, competition, and all the things that occupy our minds.

What Gets You Up in the Morning?

Douglas Goldstein: Another thing that you talk about a great deal is success and the concern that people have with grading, such as grading students. Everything has to be measured. Perhaps we will talk about this topic in my field. In the financial field, there's a bottom line here which is either you can pay the bills every month or you can't. That's the measure of success. How do you tell people not to measure it that way?

Benjamin Zander: Your job is not to make money. Your job is to create safety and freedom of mind, and possibility for people in their old age so that they have the freedom to enjoy their life, to fulfill their dreams, to look after their grandchildren, and all those things. So that's the vision of your work. The means that you have towards it is you come up with strategies for enabling people to fulfill that dream. That's very worthy and very uplifting visionary work, and that gets you up in the morning because you know that you feel effective in doing what you do. You will provide that sense of peace of mind, which is essential for people particularly if they get old and face illness and other limitations. The thing that gets you up in the morning and gets you active is that vision that pulls you forward. You live into the vision of it providing that safety and that joy to people in their later years, and that's a wonderful vision to have for your life. You then come up with competencies and

strategies, and methods of doing that effectively. You get as good as you can at that and you become an expert. You're very good at it, and you have an understanding of the market and how money works and so on. People will come to you more frequently because of your effectiveness in the strategies that lead to the fulfillment of your vision.

How to Deal With Failure

Now there's a lot of failure, inevitably, in that model because the moment you have success, you also have failure. They go together like the front of the hand and the back of the hand. The trick for you is to be lighthearted about the failures so that you can focus your attention on having more successes. The way to be lighthearted, as I always teach my students when they make a mistake, is to throw your hands up in the air and say, "how fascinating." This has more value than the usual despair we get into because despair, like all these other forces that bring us down, the downward-spiral thinking, clutters the mind and disables our capacities. What we need is our full capacity, or as close to our full capacities as we human beings can get.

So if you have a failure and you throw your hands up and say, "how fascinating," the next question is, "What went wrong? What did I do? What can I do better the next time, and how can I learn from this experience?" The secret is enthusiasm, and if I may remind you, the very word "enthusiasm" contains the word "Theo," which means God. To be enthusiastic means to be "full of God," whatever that means to you, I'm not a believer myself, so I don't think in terms of an old man with a beard. I think of the life force, which we say in our book called *The Art of Possibility*, is to be full of

possibility. It is that sacred state of being fully available to whatever life offers, without the detriment in the pull of despair, anguish, fear, and the fear of failure, which is so much in people's hearts. I diminish that element in the students that I work with by giving them an A grade in the very first class before they get started. Then what I do is I ask them to write a letter in the very first two weeks of the year in which they describe who they will become by the following day when the class ends. Then the person I teach is the person that they describe in that letter, rather than the fearful, anxious, competitive person who I have sitting in front of me. Then the conversation between us changes, and that is something we can do to anybody. I dream of the time when instead of giving your next-door neighbors an F, and the next-door neighbors give the Israelis an F, there's a conversation between your neighbors that says, "It's a privilege to share this land."

Douglas Goldstein: How can people follow your work?

Benjamin Zander: I'm very involved in Facebook with all my students. They write in and share their thoughts and their white sheets as I call them. On the stand of every musician, I leave a white sheet for them to communicate, and I put some of that on Facebook. You can just go on that directly by going on www.benjaminzander.com. I have CDs, in which I explain the music, and those are all available on Amazon.

Douglas Goldstein: And of course, your book *The Art of Possibility*, which you wrote with Rosamund Zander. Thanks again for taking the time.

Benjamin Zander: It was a pleasure.