Being a Contribution

Redefining Success as Contribution and Practicing the Art of Possibility

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The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life

BY

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Being a
Strolling along the edge of the sea, a man catches sight of a young woman who appears to be engaged in a ritual dance. She stoops down, then straightens to her full height, casting her arm out in an arc. Drawing closer, he sees that the beach around her is littered with starfish, and she is throwing them one by one into the sea. He lightly mocks her: “There are stranded starfish as far as the eye can see, for miles up the beach. What difference can saving a few of them possibly make?” Smiling, she bends down and once more tosses a starfish out over the water, saying serenely, “It certainly makes a difference to this one.”

From our earliest days, we understand that there are tasks ahead of us to accomplish and landmarks to achieve. Life often looks like an obstacle course. In order to maximize success, we spend a good deal of time discussing what stands in the way of it. The man in the story sees only obstacles when he speaks of the countless starfish. He warns the young woman that her gestures...
are futile. Too many starfish, not enough time, not enough staff or resources, results too difficult to track . . .

The story as told, however, reveals nothing about the “success” or “failure” of the rescue mission, or what proportion of the starfish survived or perished. It does not describe the past, nor foretell the future. All we hear is that the young woman was smiling and serene, and that she moved in the pattern of a dance. Absent are the familiar measurements of progress. Instead, life is revealed as a place to contribute and we as contributors. Not because we have done a measurable amount of good, but because that is the story we tell.

**The Dinner Table Game**

**BEN:** I grew up in a traditional Jewish household, which meant, apart from much warmth and chicken soup, an assumption that all the children would be “successful.” It was never openly articulated, but it was implied in many family interactions.

Each evening at the dinner table, for instance, with my parents seated at either end, and we four children between, my father would turn to my eldest brother and say, “What did you do today?” And my brother would describe, at what seemed to me considerable length, all the things he’d accomplished. Then my second brother would be asked the same question, and then my sister. By the time it came to me, I would be a nervous wreck, because usually I didn’t think what I had done that day was very significant. Moreover, I realized that the question being asked was not really, “What did you do today?” but “What did you achieve today?” And I thought I hadn’t achieved nearly as much as my very accomplished siblings. So I grew up with an undertow of anxiety that lasted into my middle age.

The drive to be successful and the fear of failure are, like the head and tail of a coin, inseparably linked. They goaded me on to unusual efforts and caused me, and those around me, considerable suffering. Of course, the surprising thing was that my increasing success did little to lessen the tension.
Until the splash of cold water. My second wife walked away from the marriage midstream.

At the same time she asserted—though at first I did not listen—that we would always be in relationship, and that it was up to us to invent the form. Clearly the family had not been thriving under the arrangement we’d had. “Let’s invent a form,” she said, “that allows us to contribute to each other, and let’s set a distance that supports us to be fully ourselves.” Going down for the second time, I understood and grabbed hold. I saw the whole thing was made up and that the game of success was just that, a game. I realized I could invent another game.

I settled on a game called *I am a contribution*. Unlike success and failure, *contribution* has no other side. It is not arrived at by comparison. All at once I found that the fearful question, “Is it enough?” and the even more fearful question, “Am I loved for who I am, or for what I have accomplished?” could both be replaced by the joyful question, “How will I be a contribution today?”

When I was a boy playing the dinner table game, and later an adult playing the success/failure game, I constantly judged myself by what I believed to be other people’s standards. Nothing was ever quite good enough. There was always another orchestra—aside from the one I was conducting—that I suspected would bring me more success, and so I was never really present when I was on the podium. When I used to go out on dates, I would find myself looking over my shoulder for someone better. Too much of what I did was measured by the success that I might gain, so I rarely had peace, either professionally or in my private life.

As a conductor, I often drove the players and the administrators to realize my ambition, and no matter how much support I received, I still found myself distrustful. The game I was in was a competitive one, and in this game you can make alliances with people who are on your side, whose objectives are the same as yours; but you cannot rely on anyone who is aiming toward anything else, lest it detract from what you want for yourself.

When I began playing the game of *contribution*, on the other hand, I found there was no better orchestra than the one I was
conducting, no better person to be with than the one I was with; in fact, there was no “better.” In the game of *contribution* you wake up each day and bask in the notion that you are a gift to others.

In this new game, it is not as though the question of where you stand disappears, or how important you are, or how much money you hope to make. However, just for the moment, those concerns are packed away in a box of another name, where life operates under a different set of rules.

When, in this book, we refer to various activities of life as “games,” we do not mean to imply that these activities are frivolous or make no difference. We are simply pointing to the fact that any accepted model for doing things comes with an implicit set of rules, and that these rules govern our behavior just as surely as the rules of baseball govern the movements of the players on the field.

When people play a game, they agree to a certain set of limitations to create a challenge. In baseball, a batter tries to hit the ball, but it only *counts* as a hit if the ball lands within the 90-degree angle formed by the first and third baselines, is not caught in the air, is not fielded and thrown to first base before the batter gets there, is not used to tag the batter out or get a third out elsewhere on the field, and on and on. In *Scrabble*, a player seeks to attach a word at the spot on the board that will bring him the most points, but he can use only the seven letters in his hand and the words he spells must appear in the dictionary.

Half the fun of playing games like baseball—or the kind that come in a box—is that they challenge us to adapt and hone our skills to win in a distinctive environment that itself can be packed away, or left, once the game is over. Then we can shake hands, set up a rematch, or move on to the next event. It is the nature of games to provide alternative frameworks for engagement and expression and growth, whisking us away from the grimmer context in which we hold the everyday.
The purpose of describing, say, your professional life or your family traditions as a game is twofold. You instantly shift the context from one of survival to one of opportunity for growth. You also have the choice of imagining other games you might prefer to play in these realms. Naming your activities as a game breaks their hold on you and puts you in charge.

Just look carefully at the cover of the box, and if the rules do not light up your life, put it away, take out another one you like better, and play the new game wholeheartedly. Remember, it's all invented.

**The Practice**

The practice of this chapter is inventing oneself as a *contribution*, and others as well. The steps to the practice are these:

1. Declare yourself to be a *contribution*.

2. Throw yourself into life as someone who makes a difference, accepting that you may not understand how or why.

The *contribution* game appears to have remarkable powers for transforming conflicts into rewarding experiences.

**Two Generations of Generosity**

**ROZ:** One couple I counseled played a very dreary game for years, until they discovered the game of *contribution*. Robert and Marianne were both in academic fields, and money, or rather the lack of it, was a nagging problem for them. They had one child already in college and one on her way, and even with the best planning, they always seemed to come up short when tax time rolled around.
Marianne’s mother was quite well-to-do, but leaned toward a Calvinist philosophy of frugality and financial independence. Each April, Marianne would find herself, as she put it, “crawling home” to her mother to ask for enough money to make up the shortfall. And every year, her mother would lecture her on her failure in planning, before grudgingly giving Marianne what she had asked for.

I had been working with Marianne for about six months when her taxes came due. She arrived at our session dreading the annual visit to her mother, this time to ask for two thousand dollars. That was the very least she and her husband had calculated they would need in order to get by. She was angry with herself for being in this situation, and angry with her mother for making it so difficult to ask for help. She found it hard not to resent the fact that her mother lived in leisure with such wealth, while each of her daughters struggled to make ends meet. I thought about her predicament from the point of view of the *contribution* game.

“Do you suppose your mother *likes* to see you whining and groveling for money?” I asked Marianne. “Do you think it will be satisfying to her to hand out two thousand dollars, and still leave you miserable, and battling to pay your bills?”

Marianne shook her head and looked up, holding back tears.

“What is the sum of money that would make a real difference, that would give you and your family ease in your lives and in planning for the future?” I watched her face struggle to address the question. The sum that eventually lit up her countenance was twenty times the amount she had been prepared to request.

I asked Marianne to consider not only the *contribution* her mother would be making to the well-being of her family by giving her that amount of money, but more important, the *contribution* Marianne herself might be in her mother’s life, as a daughter whose family was no longer at the brink of financial disaster. It wasn’t easy for her to change her viewpoint, to think of herself as a contributory member of her extended family instead of a failure. But that was the challenge.
She took the risk. She went to see her mother that weekend, determined to show her enthusiasm over the life she envisioned for herself and her family, and alive to a possibility for all the generations in offering her mother the chance to help her realize it.

“How did it go?” I asked when I saw Marianne next, but I knew the answer from the way she carried herself. She’d had the best visit of her adult life. Her mother had leapt at the opportunity to do something demonstrably positive for her daughter.

“But that’s only half the story,” Marianne said, laughing, “When I got back home, there were messages on my answering machine from both of my sisters, wanting to know what had gotten into our mother—she had given each of them an equal sum of money out of the blue!”

When you play the contribution game, it is never a single individual who is transformed. Transformation overrides the divisions of identity and possession that are the architecture of the measurement model, recasting the tight pattern of scarcity into a widespread array of abundance.

**Like Ripples in a Pond**

**BEN:** After I experienced the joy of redefining my work as a place of contribution rather than an arena for my success, I began to think about a way of introducing my students at the Conservatory to the game. I decided to give them another assignment during the first class of the year, in addition to writing the A letter. I now ask them to take a moment in that class to write down how they have “contributed” over the past week. They naturally assume that I mean musically, how have they contributed musically, but I explain that they should jot down anything they said or did that they are willing to call a contribution—from helping an old lady cross the street to setting their boyfriends straight.
This exercise has a startling effect on how the students think of themselves. There is no place in it for them to talk about how little they practice, or to tell a story of how irresponsible or unkind they have been. They are only to describe themselves in the light of contribution. The assignment for the week after is to notice how they are a contribution as the week goes by—they are just to notice, not to do anything about it—and then come back and share what they saw with the class. The third assignment is to cast themselves as a contribution into the week ahead, like a pebble into a pond, and imagine that everything they do sends ripples out beyond the horizon.

There is an aspect of psychological practicing in these exercises parallel to the technical practicing my students do on their instruments. It is a discipline of the spirit. In order to be a great performer, you have to be unfettered by stage nerves. These exercises in contribution are a way of oiling the machinery to make one a more effective vehicle to convey the message of Brahms or Beethoven.

I tell my students, “Imagine you are pianist and you meet someone who has no familiarity with—perhaps has never even heard—the E-Minor Prelude of Chopin. You might want to sit down next to him at the piano and say, ‘Listen to the theme in the right hand. See how it holds together over the arch of four bars, and then the melody goes down one step? Listen to the constantly changing harmonies in the left hand, how they ring every possible change on the melody note . . . and so on.’ As you get caught up in the excitement of explaining and sharing the music with your companion, would you have time to be nervous? Of course not! It wouldn’t occur to you. But this is exactly what you are doing when you perform—you are pointing to the beauty and artistry of the music.”

Rachel Mercer, a student in my class at the New England Conservatory, wrote this letter at the end of the semester:

*I am now able to use the possibility that my every act can affect the world to communicate with people in such a way so that a wave of inspiration and happiness can flow throughout the*
world. I know now that music is not about fingers or bows or strings, but rather a connective vibration flowing through all human beings, like a heartbeat. It is my job and ambition to keep that invisible and easily cut lifeline free and supported in all parts of life . . .

Naming oneself and others as a contribution produces a shift away from self-concern and engages us in a relationship with others that is an arena for making a difference. Rewards in the contribution game are of a deep and enduring kind, though less predictable than the trio of money, fame, and power that accrue to the winner in the success game. You never know what they will be, or from whence they will come.

Sarah’s Move

BEN: A young woman who had heard me give a talk, rang me up to ask if I would come to speak to the residents at a nearby Jewish home for the elderly. I saw in my diary that I was free on the afternoon of the date she mentioned, but I was engaged with so many other projects, including a concert on the weekend, that I knew it was foolish to add one more thing. However, the memory of my father living out the end of his life in an institution like this one overrode my common sense, and I accepted the invitation.

The day arrived without my having given it further thought, and now the pressure was even greater than I had feared. I had just flown into Boston from Washington that morning, and with talks, lectures, classes, and a concert to prepare, the last thing in the world I thought I needed was to waste a precious afternoon with a bunch of old people. I made an attempt to cancel the engagement, but the young woman expressed such disappointment on behalf of the residents that, once again, remembering my father, I agreed to come . . . on the condition that I be allowed to leave at three o’clock sharp. The talk was to begin at two.
Only one person was sitting in the fifth row of a bank of folding chairs when I walked into the rather dingy hall at ten minutes to two. She identified herself as Sarah. I chatted with her a moment and then asked her to move up to a seat nearer the front. Sarah stood her ground. “I always sit here,” she said. I challenged her good-naturedly, “Who knows, Sarah, if you change your seat maybe something new will happen today.”

Sarah took up the gauntlet. “Are you crazy? At my age? I’m eighty-three!” By now she was standing, and, as if to prove me wrong, she moved, from the fifth row to the fourth. I briefly considered the odds that no one else would arrive, and that I had put aside so many pressing affairs to talk only to Sarah, but gradually, the remaining chairs filled. By shortly after two o’clock, a sizable group was ready to begin. Sarah, it turned out, was by no means the oldest; one member of the audience was 103. The topic was “New Possibilities.”

I told numerous stories, many of them about my father, who maintained Old World grace and values to the end of his life, though completely blind. My father had endured devastating experiences in his life—as a foot soldier in World War I, and as a man who in 1938 made the agonizing decision to move his own family from Germany to England, leaving his reluctant mother and aunts behind. The women who refused to leave were killed in the camps. I once asked him why he wasn’t angry. He said, “I discovered a person cannot live a full life under the shadow of bitterness.” Indeed, he won the affection of the residents and staff of his own senior center, Croham Leigh, because of his ability to throw a new light on any situation. “There is no such thing as bad weather,” he used to say, “only inappropriate clothing.” Even on his final day, Dad managed to make a paradigm-shifting joke. He was lying on his bed, devoid of all capacities except his ability to hear and to speak and his sense of humor. My brother Luke, who was his doctor, entered the room and announced his presence. The dying patient said to his physician: “Is there anything I can do to help?” and faintly chuckled. Those may well have been his last words. He died that evening.
We talked of many things that afternoon in the home for the elderly in Boston. Our laughter and singing, fifty strong, ignited the air in the once-dingy room. We challenged assumptions about old age and pointed toward some new beginnings.

At half past three, I opened the floor to questions. There were many. One lady asked in a heavy German Jewish accent, “Vy do you bother to come here? You’re a talented young man. Vy do you vaste your time vit a bunch of old people like us?”

Quite taken aback, I confessed that earlier in the day, I had asked myself exactly the same question. “But so much has happened since then . . . ,” I began. I searched for words to explain the intense involvement, the excitement, and the peace I felt at that moment. My eyes lit on Sarah. “When I walked in here, Sarah was in the fifth row, and now she is in the fourth!” And Sarah stood, raised her fist, and cried, “You ain’t seen nothing yet! I just got started!” Then all of us began to clap, and we clapped and clapped and clapped. The applause went far beyond the point of clapping for Sarah. We were clapping for the joy of being alive.

As I walked out of that room, the clock said ten minutes to four. I was walking on air, and I had time for everything. The whole experience was one of radiating possibility.

Later, I remembered a parable my father used to tell that speaks of our limited understanding of the nature of the gifts the universe holds in store for us.

Four young men sit by the bedside of their dying father. The old man, with his last breath, tells them there is a huge treasure buried in the family fields. The sons crowd around him crying, “Where, where?” but it is too late. The day after the funeral and for many days to come, the young men go out with their picks and shovels and turn the soil, digging deeply into the ground from one end of each field to the other. They find nothing and, bitterly disappointed, abandon the search.

The next season the farm has its best harvest ever.
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