



Purposeful Wanderings

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How We Encourage Failure in Others

“A leader is the relentless architect of the possibility inside all of us.” – Ben & Roz Zander, in *The Art of Possibility*

Over 50 years ago now, in 1961, John F. Kennedy made a powerful declaration: “Put a man on the moon by the end of the decade.” In 1963, Martin Luther King made another powerful declaration: “I have a dream.” Neither one knew just *how* their dreams would come into being, yet the *clarity* of their visions brought their words to life. Can you imagine NASA laughing at JFK, or a million people in D.C. yawning at MLK, responding with, “Yeah, right.” instead? Both King and Kennedy knew the power of big visions and big requests. To both, it was about the *what*, not the *how*.

Looking around our world today, examples are tough to find ... although Steve Jobs and the iPhone no doubt fits, albeit 10 years ago. In general, however, it seems we live and work in a “sea of mediocrity.” Politicians argue over issues instead of leading from values. Managers referee employee excuses and blame instead of being stewards of corporate visions. Adults live in resignation about the unacceptable behavior of their children or spouses. What’s up? Why the big difference? What do we really *want* to happen? How do we get there?

When I trace the environment that has surrounded *my* life for the past many decades, I see a collapse in both personal responsibility and critical thinking, and a society delineated more by its fears than by its potential. We don’t want to offend anyone, we worry about being liked, we don’t want to interfere with kids’ “natural expression,” we don’t want anyone left behind. Not “bad” things on their own, but when coupled with an unwillingness or inability to declare our own personal truth, we become feathers in the wind of a society lost in its own quiet desperation.

How does this lead to “encouraging failure in others,” as the title suggests? When we’re afraid to think for ourselves, afraid to ask for what we want and need (whether at work or at home), and assume that others wouldn’t know what to do even if we *did* ask, we set an example, if unconsciously, that everything is ok just the way it is (the issues, the bad behavior, the poor performance). Here’s an example from the workplace, but you can recast the players for any situation. You manage an organization. Your team is underperforming, and gets lost in gossip, complaint and blame. You want and need better in order that the company thrive, yet you see people functioning so far below that level you’re afraid to make ‘big requests,’ fearing they wouldn’t know what to do. My response: So what if they don’t know how? What if part of their job is to *figure that out*? What if you set a standard of excellence by continually, relentlessly and purposefully requesting one step beyond what you see as possible today? (Remember JFK, MLK?) If that were your employees’ experience of you, then at some point, each of them would quit, get fired, or ask for the help they’d need so as to learn, grow and perform. Big things happen when you *ask* for them, not when you *wish* for them. By not asking, *you* may end up doing the work of others, simply because you see them as incapable of doing it themselves. But when your *over*-functioning supports their continued *under*-functioning, guess what; they continue to under-function.

Making “big requests” is not a way to be mean to others, nor does it imply holding them accountable to the impossible. It means *holding them to the kind of conversations and behavior that make the impossible possible*. As humans, we are capable of so much more than we “assume.” Although it may seem like “negative management,” I once told a manager who worked for me that if he continued to depend on *me* to do his job, then I didn’t need *him* to do his job. He shifted overnight. Far from being mean, I knew he had it in him, and perhaps just needed a little “push.”

Exercise: *Toward moving things forward.* Pick a scenario where you’d like to see some major changes. In personal quiet time, separate yourself from the drain of today’s issues and *imagine* the world the way you’d love it to be. Absorb the energy of the potential here. From this place of freedom and clarity, ponder two big questions, answering as clearly as you can. (1) What do I see as *possible* (in my work, company, or relationships)? This is your vision, a picture of a future you’d love (even if you don’t know now *how* to achieve it). (2) What request, if I were to make it, and if it were to be honored, would create the person/company/environment/results I envision? Then go make the request. When people get off track, as they will, or when they revert to old behaviors, as they will, simply bring them back to the same [big] question: “OK, and help me again understand how we’re going to create this new world.”

A River Runs Through It [Life lessons offered by nature]

Nature's Story: Between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago, the latest glacial cycle drew to a close. As the up-to-9000-foot-thick ice cover receded, it exposed a landscape scraped clean of life. From places to the south came lichen, pioneers that colonize newly exposed rock. A combination of *algae* and *fungus*, lichen is a community, an association built around common purpose. The algae provides a food source through photosynthesis; the fungus provides structure, a place in which to live. Lichen colonize bare rock, and over hundreds of years, work their way into cracks, breaking rocks apart, the first step in the formation of soil. In time, there's enough soil to support plants unable to live on bare rock, yet now at home in a newly emerging landscape. Millennia pass, and as more plants grow and die, decaying plant matter returns nutrients, creating more soil. Eventually forest covers the land, as we see today across central Canada, for example. This becomes home to more plants, birds and animals, suited to an ever-changing landscape. Nature's creative expression drove the process, with each species matched perfectly to the conditions at the time. A single tree in this forest never stands alone. It's part of, and inextricably tied to, soil, nutrients, water, and ultimately to the sun's energy that powers the process. Trees themselves come and go, with rhythm that never stops, with only the process creating them sustained. The forest we see today is both the same forest and a very different forest from the one we'd see hundreds of years hence. A great-horned owl on a spruce branch is, both at the same time, a single organism and nothing at all without the entire forest upon which it depends. Connectedness. All is one.

Brad's Story: When I'm immersed in nature, I find I hold life more sacred. In that space, I notice more. When I notice more, I experience more fully. I once had the opportunity to be part of a sacred Native American tradition. The premise: personal culture, the carrier of life meaning, is an invisible container, a "basket" woven of the threads of experience – connectedness to the land, family history, sense of self and place in the world. It's up to each of us to weave our own story by making *conscious* the threads from which we derive our sense of meaning. I learned about cultural baskets in a deeply personal way – a high-desert wilderness retreat, sleeping under a blanket of stars breathtaking beyond compare, waking to the howl of a coyote at dawn, and to sunrise that slowly painted the canyon walls with a soft red glow. As I sat one morning near the remains of the previous night's campfire, warmed by the sun now piercing the desert's cold morning air, a teenager in the group walked quietly toward the fire pit and sat at its edge. Without a sound, yet with clearest intention, he gathered twigs of sagebrush, bits of straw, a few bark peelings, and assembled them into a ball, which he cradled in the palm of his hand. He then coaxed a single ember from last night's coals into the ball and blew on it lightly until smoke, then a spark, appeared. As he deftly set the glowing ball into the fire pit, we watched together; a fire was burning. It took perhaps 15 minutes; done in silence, in peace, with reverence and love. Yet it loudly declared his intention, belief in self, trust in the unknown, and deep connection with the land – no doubt threads of *his* cultural basket. And in that moment, of my basket too. All connected.

Openings to New Possibility

Available for you:

- *The Road Not Taken Community*, a no-cost subscription that offers you connection, interaction, challenge, and learning. See articles, newsletters and blogs; you'll find "new stuff" [here](#) regularly. I welcome comments and conversation; this kind of dialogue is an example of how we may all learn together.
- "[In Nature's Image](#)" -- 100 of my nature images, each offering a simple idea to help experience life's meaning.
- *The Road Not Taken* newsletters (12 years, 144 issues of *Purposeful Wanderings*) available [here](#) as a pdf file.
- Photo images from my travels available [here](#) on fun products – note cards, coffee mugs – great gift ideas.

An invitation to possibility: If you have the courage and determination to step apart from the crowd and *challenge conventional thinking* ... so you can live instead with *authenticity and freedom*, contact me for a conversation that can energize your dream. I will help you reach a level of *clarity and perspective* – about yourself, others, your life, your work and the world – that allows you to live your truth, every day. Trade the *way it is* for the *way it could be*.

Book of the month – *Thinking Body, Dancing Mind*, by Chungliang Al Huang and Jerry Lynch. Ancient wisdom, modern application. A practical and insightful guide to regaining personal clarity, setting powerful visions, and bringing awareness to the power of your thoughts. Also: ideas and practices on overcoming self-doubt and fear of failure. ... And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons – 508-539-6985.