

A CLOUD OF POSSIBILITIES  
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton  
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NFL quarterback superstar Aaron Rodgers recently emerged from a “darkness retreat” during which he spent several days in an underground cave in Southern Oregon. Darkness retreats are an ancient spiritual practice for developing a deeper awareness of the vastness of our minds by merging with the darkness and dissolving the boundaries of our sensory and ego experience. This practice is traditionally done with years of preparation and guidance from a spiritual teacher.

It’s not clear how Rodgers prepared for the retreat, though he did explain that his intention was to reflect on his future. It’s been reported that he was contemplating whether he should continue with his \$59 million contract with the Green Bay Packers, join another team, or retire. It’s easy to dismiss his retreat as celebrity nonsense. But I give him credit.

Good for him for his curiosity about his own mind. \$59 million is pretty irresistible even if you’re already wealthy, and maybe he wants to see beyond the obvious allure of the money. We all have trouble seeing our own attachments, and we get fixated on challenging decisions or emotional reactions or the injustice of tragic news in the world. We clench and ruminate on our struggles and the world’s demise. How often do you hear someone say (or do you say): “these are extremely difficult times.” Yes, there is a great deal of work to do to care for ourselves, for each other, and for our planet. By constricting our minds and focusing completely on these problems, we shut out so much possibility.

The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche once opened a class by drawing a V on a large white sheet of poster paper. He then asked his

students what he had drawn. Most responded that it was a bird. “No,” he told them. “It’s the sky with a bird flying through it.”

What the students had seen on the poster paper was a reflection of what they were paying attention to. We don’t see the sky because the bird dominates the foreground of our view. Our concerns and struggles are always in the foreground for us and we get stuck in what David Foster Wallace referred to “our tiny skull sized kingdoms.” When we expand our view from the bird to the vast sky, we can transform our emotional and spiritual suffering.

Hans Rosling, TED Talk star and author of *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World—and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*, was a physician, professor of international health, and an advisor to the World Health Organization and UNICEF. He dedicated his life to help us see the distortion caused by our negative perspective on the state of the world. For example, he asked “Do you think the world is getting better, getting worse, or staying about the same?” in large sample sizes in 30 countries and territories. A majority of people in every country, responded that things are getting worse—ranging from 85% to 55%. In *Factfulness* Rosling presents a huge array of global data and images—most of which are derived from official UN data—that display promising trends like the decrease in countries with the death penalty, the decrease in deaths from disaster, the increase in the share of people with some access to electricity, and even the increase in guitars per capita. In the last 20 years, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has almost halved. The life expectancy worldwide was 60 in 1973, and it was 72 in 2017 (these figures account for data such as infant deaths and premature deaths from natural disasters). Rosling calls this statistics therapy.

There are some good reasons why feel the world is getting worse. 1) we share a negativity bias 2) we are subject to selective reporting in the news 3)

moreover, we feel that it's heartless to feel that things are getting better when still there is so much suffering in the world.

Negativity bias is a function of evolutionary psychology. Throughout human history we've survived by reacting quickly and powerfully to our own fear and anger as well as news that indicates a threat. Paying attention to negative stimuli enabled us to survive. In our modern society, this bias isn't nearly as important for most of us, but still it's hardwired. We have to actively pay attention to our minds to see how easily we fall into negative concerns.

Given our negativity bias, it's no wonder we gravitate to the selective reporting in the news that appeals to it. We have a habit, maybe even an addiction for some of us, of constantly watching or reading disturbing news. A steady diet of famine, corruption, destruction of habitat, and terrorism is bound to make us cynical. There are many newsletters that can help us balance what we read and watch. For example, Tangle's mission is to report across the political spectrum, and when you read the stories you're reminded of the array of perspectives on events. I read it because it reminds me of possibility and that my views can be tightly wound. Another newsletter out of Australia, Future Crunch has a mission of celebrating progress for people and our planet. They too refer to a wide range of news sources. This kind of news can help balance our minds, free us up a bit.

The third reason we think the world is getting worse is that it feels heartless not to keep our focus on justice and war and all our fellow humans and animals who are in distress. Rosling writes,

“Yes, we should still be very concerned. As long as there are plane crashes, preventable child deaths, endangered species, climate change deniers, male chauvinists, crazy dictators, toxic waste, journalists in prison, and girls not getting an education because of their gender, as long as such terrible things exist, we cannot relax. But

it is just as ridiculous, and just as stressful to look away from the progress that has been made. People often call me an optimist, because I show them the enormous progress they didn't know about. That makes me angry. I'm not an optimist. That makes me sound naïve. I'm a very serious possibilist...It means someone who neither hopes without reason, nor fears without reason, someone who constantly resists the overdramatic worldview. As a possibilist, I see all this progress and it fills me with conviction and hope that further progress is possible...this is a worldview that is constructive and useful."

In *The Art of Possibility* authors Roz and Ben Zander introduce themselves by stating "the objective of this book is to provide the reader a means to lift off from the world of struggle and sail into a vast universe of possibility." Not exactly a humble mission, but they are well equipped—Roz is a family therapist and a landscape painter and Ben is the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic and a teacher. One of the twelve practices they recommend in the book is to be present to whatever is happening without resistance. Ben describes a performance of a Mahler symphony, after which the first horn player approached him to apologize. Ben couldn't understand what he was apologizing for. The horn player explained that he had botched a very noticeable high note during his solo. Ben responded, your "all-out ardor, which is what caused the mistake, is what made the performance impassioned." Zander suggests to his performers that when they make a mistake in rehearsal they lift their arms in the air and exclaim "how fascinating!" He says that this practice cultivates possibility because it encourages risk taking and allows the musicians to discover what needs attention in their expression of the music.

The benefits of being present without resistance can apply also to our personal struggles. Recently in one of the sessions I lead for Buddhism & Mindfulness, a member of the community shared his experience of a precipitous medical issue which was extremely painful, kept him in the hospital for three weeks, and from which he'll be recovering for a long time. He was the picture of health up to that point, he had no warning that his life would take a turn like this. He described adjusting to his situation by saying "it happened," he pointed out that he wasn't saying "it happened for a reason," just that "it happened." Last week I was talking with another member of our All Souls community after a sudden hospitalization, and she said "you never know when a trap door will open beneath you and your life will be disrupted." This too is possibilism, awareness that life can be disrupted at any time. Though both of these people are struggling with the aftermath of fear and discomfort from their situations, their prevailing feeling now is acceptance, not resignation or cynicism. Possibilism allows for a sense of trust that we will have the strength to navigate whatever happens.

Another *Art of Possibility* practice described by the Zanders is "Giving an A." Ben teaches a graduate level musical performance class at the New England Conservatory. His students are extraordinary instrumentalists and singers from all over the world. For 25 years he grappled with the challenge of how to help the students loosen their focus on showcasing their technical skills which inhibited risk taking. He was determined to find a way to break through their anxiety, so he and Roz came up with the idea of promising all the students an A. Their first assignment was to write a letter describing how they imagined themselves performing at the end of the semester, they had to describe the progress that made them deserve an A. A few weeks after they handed in the assignment, Ben asked the class how it felt to already have an A. A Taiwanese student answered: "I was number 68 out of 70 students in Taiwan. I came to Boston and Mr. Zander said I'm

an A. Very confusing. I walked around for three weeks, very confused. I am number 68, but Mr. Zander says I'm an A student. I'm number 68, but Mr. Zander says I'm an A. One day I discovered I'm much happier being an A than number 68. So I decided I'm an A." Imagine what this shift in his mindset made possible for him.

I'll close with a story I heard from the American Buddhist teacher and author, Tara Brach:

In the clouds of the distant past there was a monastery that had fallen upon difficult times. There were conflicts and power struggles between the monks and nuns, there was disrespect and tension between them. Due to a drought the vegetable garden was shriveling up, and there was no effort to revive it. The monks and nuns weren't taking care of each other or their land, and many of them were elderly. It was a dying order.

Very dispirited the abbot went to seek guidance from a well-known sage, a wise woman who practiced and lived in solitude in the deep woods. He asked her what might save the monastery. They meditated together. She said well I don't have any advice to give you but what I can say is that a bodhisattva lives amongst you. A bodhisattva is a being with an awakened heart who is thoroughly compassionate and wise.

The abbot returned and told the monks and the nuns and there was no solution but just that she had said that a bodhisattva is among us. Interestingly in the days and weeks that followed, they started wondering about this and their spirits started lifting with fresh perspective. The way they related to each other changed. (Wow, maybe you're the bodhisattva.) So they became more respectful and caring and curious. (Maybe there is something I can learn from you.)

They started treating the animals, the garden, and the land with increasing care. People that came by started noticing the changing atmosphere and noticed the

radiance that was emanating from the monastery. More and more people wanted to be a part of it and join. Within a few years the monastery became a thriving order full of a sense of community, celebration, and love.

Possibilism helps us resist an overdramatic worldview and a focus on our own suffering. We can imagine who we are at our best individually and in community.

Looking up can help us remember: “it’s the sky with a bird flying through it.”