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a letter to a friend

Positive Possibilities for a World in Crisis

Tom Atlee

We join with everyone and everything—past, present and future—in sharing our influence on what happens. We are neither guilty nor innocent. Rather, we are consciously or unconsciously involved in everything. Right here and right now. Our actions matter. Our awareness matters. Because we are a factor in the Life of Everything.

This ultimate application of the admonition “Think Globally, Act Locally” points toward what we might call ‘participatory responsibility.’ Are we playing the best role we can imagine, given the limits of (our infinitely expandable) awareness?

I think this is what I am asked to do: To care about the larger whole and all the Life within it, and to act in my own life with the purest awareness and intention that I can muster toward being a worthy participant in the unfolding of positive possibilities for all, for the whole. Of course, I fail at this, over and over. And within those failures are more positive possibilities for me to find and engage...

So I look for the positive possibilities in the crises we face. I realize how much we often undermine our chances by losing touch with our intrinsically co-creative role in the unfolding of every one of these potential crises—in the fate of the possibilities that are there. That role includes inspiring each other, evoking our best selves, calling forth the best possibilities no matter how small. That is the essence of participatory leadership. We can each do that—for ourselves, for each other, for the world....

We are the faces and fingers and feet of the God of Possibility. It is through our participation—although not only through our participation—that God (or the Goddess, or the Tao, or Life) works wonders.

Our efforts and caring—even when we ‘fail’—provide a changed context for the efforts and caring of others elsewhere, tomorrow. The Whole evolves through our roles, through the active Being of each and every one of us.

This is bigger than taking personal responsibility; bigger than letting others take care of us; bigger than taking care of each other; bigger than setting up institutions to care for people; bigger than realizing the role of history and environment and culture in how we all behave; bigger than knowing that inaction and action are both forms of participation; bigger than being aware of the upside and downside of every form of participation—and taking action anyway.

It is each and every one of these things, and more. It is all true. It is all real. But it is only possible to enter this Reality to the extent that we let go of outcomes and become more compassionate, eager, aware agents of Positive Possibility.

So what is possible here in these emerging crises for us, for those we love, for our communities, our societies, our world? Do the chances look slim? Do the outcomes seem impossible to grasp? Often they do. But isn't that what makes life an adventure?

Some people say that's why we stay alive, from day to day: to find out what happens next. All games and adventures are built out of uncertainty. If we knew what would happen, we'd soon lose interest. Humans thrive on challenge—thrive on the unknown.

True, we can have too much challenge—too much uncertainty. However, if we look closely, we'll find that that only happens when we've become too attached to outcomes. To be alive is to find out what's possible, to see how far we can push/cajole/invite the flow of reality into the channels of positive possibility, which is often very difficult.

I want to see a better, more sustainable, more humane, more meaningful culture. I have often felt that we don't have much of a chance of getting it. Too often, the more I learn, the more the social and psychological dynamics seem stacked against me. And then I'd encounter a new innovation, some unexpected allies or a sudden turn of events that opened doors I didn't even know existed.

I've come to believe that things are getting better and better, worse and worse, faster and faster, simultaneously. And so I've found myself bouncing back and forth between optimism and pessimism. “Things are going to work out well.” Or: “There's going to be real disaster!” It's been really exhausting.

But lately something's changing about all this. I've begun to notice how the whole optimism/pessimism dichotomy is a death trap for my aliveness and attention. I watch myself acting as if my sense of what might happen is a description of reality. And what I notice is this: whether I expect the best or the worst, my expectations interfere with my will to act. That's so important I'm going to repeat it. *Whether I expect the best or the worst, my expectations interfere with my will to act.*

I've started viewing both optimism and pessimism as spectator sports, as forms of disengagement masquerading as involvement. Both optimism and pessimism trick me into judging life and betting on the odds, rather than diving into life with my whole self, with my full co-creative energy. I think the emerging crises call us to transcend such false end-games. I think they call us to act like a spiritually healthy person who has just learned they have heart disease: We can use each dire prognosis as a stimulant for reaching more deeply into life and co-creating positive change.

And so I've come to conclude that all the predictions—both good and bad—tell us absolutely nothing about what is possible. Trends and events only relate to what is probable. Probabilities are abstractions. Possibilities are the stuff of life, visions to act upon, doors to walk through. Pessimism and optimism are both distractions from living life fully.

More and more, I'm seeing myself as an ally or midwife of positive possibilities. Those possibilities need me to help them move towards becoming real. True, we often need miracles, but miracles can only go so far. Miracles need us to meet them halfway. I'm trying to move as far towards the miracles as I can, and draw them out.

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