



Relationships The Adlerian Team

“Creating the Practice of Being a Contribution”

By Sue Smarkala

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 back 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 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.”

As we live our lives, we interact with many different people within many different situations. Each of us brings an energy, or attitude, to our relationships and that energy impacts the experience that we create with another person. What energy/attitude do you bring to your interactions with others? Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, in their book *The Art of Possibility*, present the idea of creating a practice in our lives of “Being a Contribution”.

As parents we raise our children to be successful, contributing members of society. We encourage them and ourselves toward success in school, business and our community. We support ourselves and our children by making plans and strategies to achieve that success. Focusing on what we want to achieve can be put aside as we deal with the obstacles and opportunities added to our daily plan. As the Zanders point out, the journey through the obstacles becomes the story, rather than ‘saving the starfish’ or achieving our final goal. They suggest that we consider viewing life as a place to contribute and constantly practice being “contributors.” How might this change the way we live our lives? It certainly changes the energy we bring to the various activities of our lives and creates a consciousness of how we impact other people and how our choices matter in small and large ways.

The Paradigm of Contribution

The Founder of Individual Psychology, Alfred Adler, wrote about individuals being embedded in relationships – that we are in constant connection with others and gain our meaning of life through making a contribution for the welfare of others. He believed that mental health is directly related with “social interest”- our feelings of connection with all fellow beings and their welfare. “Being a contribution” would be a practice which can enhance our sense of wellbeing and increase our sense of being mentally and emotionally healthy.

We are asked to live a story of contribution in our lives and focus on achieving our goals while making a difference. We need to look at the achievement of our life goals as our way of doing our part for society. This can change our energy from survival to the recognition that we have opportunities for growth. The practice is to ask ourselves each day, “How am I a contribution?” and “How have I made a difference?” which focuses our energy away from only production and outcomes:

As the Zanders point out in their first practice of possibility, everything we understand about our life is invented. With all the assumptions and beliefs that each of us holds for our lives, we ‘invent’ our interpretation of the events in our life. We can always redefine an interpretation and reassess our choices from the point of view of “Being a Contribution.” Focusing outward beyond our own personal goals, allows us to explore a variety of possibilities and options and offers a larger scope for ourselves and our participation in the larger world.

The Practice of “Being a Contribution”

Here are the steps to beginning this practice:

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.
3. Trust the process and be open to possibilities.
4. Celebrate the small contributions we make everywhere.

Step into your day with the question, “How will I make a difference today?” We are frequently making important contributions without paying attention. Here are some examples:

- Driving your daughter and her friends to soccer contributes to their health, friendship and increases what you understand about 8 year old girls which enhances communication.
- Letting a car into traffic, you contribute to traffic flow and may reduce the driver’s anxiety about getting to an appointment on time.
- Offering a suggestion in a work discussion, you benefit the team with your experience and you incrementally improve the final product.
- Offering to take on a volunteer job, you lighten others load, you bring friendship and fun to someone who

needs those supports and you experience something new.

As we model contribution through this energy and approach to life, our children begin to see there is a bigger story to understand. It's not all about individual goals – it's also about the path we take to achieve our goals, and the difference we can make in people's lives. Making the world a better place for everyone is our responsibility and our gift.

Naming ourselves and others as *contributors* changes our responses to life. As *contributors*, we can change our lives and impact any situation we experience. Each of us is looking for ways to achieve significant outcomes, not just perform for the sake of performing. The focus is no longer on the obstacles – tens of thousands starfish to save – it becomes making a difference where we are able – one starfish at a time.

Ref: Zander, Rosamund S., Benjamin. *The Art of Possibility*. London, England: Penguin Books, 2002

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