



Nat Damon:

Welcome to another episode of Reach, Teach, Talk. I am beyond through today and I think that you are all in for a really unique and wonderful and immersive experience as we talk about The Art of Possibility. This idea that possibility is something that is broadening. It is a combination of hope and relentless reminder that there is more around us than our cognitive selves believe. Possibility involves the heart, you've heard me say many times in this podcast that learning is cognitive and emotional and social.

Nat Damon:

And I'm brought back to when I was early teaching. I was teaching a seventh grade English class, gosh, over 25 years ago now. And I remember we were leaving the classroom and a student stopped and she said, "you know, Mr. Damon, this class, the way you run this class is different than what I've been used to. I've been used to a classroom being very much... Like the teacher is right in the front of the room and the desks are in rows and teacher has the answer and we have the questions. Yet this reminds me, I was at the symphony a couple nights ago with my parents and this reminds me more like the classroom is like an orchestra."

Nat Damon:

And I was like, "Jane, what do you mean by that? Tell me." And she said, "because instead of just asking questions or giving the answers I feel like you create an energy that allows us, the 13 year old students here, to develop our own relationship with each other, to develop our own energy and a feels very positive and it feels very different." And that's always stuck with me because not just because I took the piano for seven years back when I was a kid and because I'm a singer, I love to sing, 10 or two. But also because there is a musicality to the classroom and to the relational classroom, there is...

Nat Damon:

We clearly strive for harmony and discord arises often and we know as relational teachers that it's not about confronting the discord, it's about trying to find ways to insert ourselves harmoniously, to engage, to lean in, to connect with our students, always. And I remember I talked away that memory for a few years and the memory came out, this memory of Jane came out to me in full relief. When I picked up this book, The Art of Possibility by Rosamond Zander and Ben Zander. And this spoke to me in such a deep way because it reinforced what I intuitively sensed from Jane's comment that there is musicality to the classroom. There is a cognitive and emotional realm that we enter as teachers that goes beyond just the four walls of our classrooms. It is something that is a truly a spiritual connection.

Nat Damon:

So that was years ago that I read The Art of Possibility. It was back for me back in 2007, although the book was published first published in 2000. I am just touched and honored that Ben Zander is with us

today and has agreed to be on this podcast, and in fact, he is, for those who are listening, he is sitting at his piano, so we might even have some special musicality, some little morsels of musical influence on this conversation as we move forward. To talk about the art of possibility and to hear from Ben about his experience as conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, as an incredibly gifted teacher, as one can imagine, if you've read the art of possibility, you'll certainly believe that to be the case.

Nat Damon:

And also as somebody who has worked with people from all different professions in, in the guys of leadership, the idea of being a leader and a leader who is able to communicate that there is possibility around us far beyond what we cognitively discern ourselves. So without much further do Ben welcome. I'm thrilled to have you on Reach Teach Talk.

Benjamin Zander:

Thank you, it's a great pleasure to be involved in this conversation. And it doesn't matter where you enter it, we could enter it with Jane. Jane said your classroom felt more like an orchestra than a traditional classroom. And that's one aspect of an orchestra, which is that everybody has their own voice, everybody has their part to play and they have to make them work together. The thing that she didn't fully explore was, but what is the role of the conductor? Because actually an orchestra can't function without a conductor. So she was not referring to a free-for-all where everybody was sounding off on their own, no, not at all. She had sense that it was a highly directed process leading towards knowledge, towards understanding, towards love, towards interaction, all those things that we care about so much. And the conductor is crucial.

Benjamin Zander:

Now the conductor, interestingly enough, although he's a figure of fun and appropriate because he's on a... He's the absolute epitome of the dominating figure, of the traditional downward spiral. The top down leader stands on a podium and everybody has to obey what he has to say. But of course, what you were doing in your classroom when Jane was responding, was she felt empowered by your role, not diminished by it. Now, interestingly enough, traditionally orchestra players have felt very diminished. And at one point when they did a study of different professions, I think it was, they looked at 28 different professions. And at Harvard, it was at a Harvard business school study in the nineties. And they discovered somewhat to their horror, that orchestra job satisfaction, orchestra players came just below prison guards. And that's a fascinating thing because you would think people go into music because they love it. But being dominated in that hierarchical model, which pervades the orchestra we see, but also the classroom is actually a diminishing experience.

Benjamin Zander:

And what Jane felt and why you came to talk about that first when we started this conversation, the art of possibility, Jane came up because she said, I felt liberated in your classroom. And that was because you are a conductor. I haven't seen you teach, but I know how you teach, which is you're interested in the growth and development and the full expression of your students. You are not interested in domination, in being right, in making people follow the instructions, but that is the old model of leadership, top down hierarchical and male, right thinking also. So what we are talking about in The Art of Possibility and in this conversation is actually a totally different kind of leadership. And it came to me very powerfully one day, it was a kind of a road to Damascus event for me when I suddenly realized that powerful though the conductor is, he actually doesn't make a sound.

Benjamin Zander:

So the sound is made by the players and that was a huge revelation for me because it took away the attention on me and on my success and on the critics and all the things that people worry about. And the only thing that became interesting was, was I in effect, enabling the players to be the most expressive, the most effective, the most spontaneous, the most expressed that they possibly could be. In other words, the job of the conductor is to awaken possibility in other people. And when I realized that, and you might say, "but isn't that obvious." Well, yes, but unfortunately we forget it'd be leaders. And so when that happened to me, it actually transformed the entire experience of being a conductor and being a leader and a teacher and a parent and everything else. Because the only question is, am I enabling the people who I'm leading to be as fully expressed as possible?

Benjamin Zander:

And the way we know if that's happening is their eyes are shiny. And so I got to read very cleverly, I could tell by looking at people's eyes, whether they were in fact being expressed, being fulfilled. And the funny thing is that I got both very adept at it, at knowing just by looking. But the other thing that I learned and realized was that if they were not shining, the eyes were not shining, I could ask myself a question, "who am I being? That my players eyes are not shining." Instead of blaming them, which the natural instinct, if people don't do what you want them to do, you blame them. You find fault in them or you punish them, whatever. But I realized that wasn't going to get me anywhere so I asked myself the question, "who am I being that the eyes were not shining?"

Benjamin Zander:

So then came the next step in this process, which is, how would you find out the answer if you asked them. And the only way of asking an orchestra for respond because they can't all talk and rehearsal would be chaos. I simply slipped a piece of paper onto the stand of every musician in every single rehearsal that I conducted. And it was true of my youth orchestra where the youngest of 12 or in the Philimonia in London or the Israel Philharmonic in Tel Aviv. It didn't matter what stage they were at, they had the opportunity to write on a white sheet of paper anything that they found would stand in the way of their effectiveness or would improve the venture in some way. And the white sheet, as it came to be called, was the emblem of this new relationship that my job was to awaken possibility in them, not to force them to do what I wanted them to do.

Benjamin Zander:

And so that became then a model of leadership, which is now in The Art of Possibility and the talks that I give and the demonstrations, the most importantly in my teaching and my conducting. And I'm very rigorous about keeping to that, I break down every possible hierarchical wall, so to give the players the feeling that this is their playing, it's their concert, it's their expressiveness that is going to tell on the ears of the audience. And of course it changes their relationship because now they know that if there's something that they're not feeling completely happy about, let's say there's a phrase and they want to...

Benjamin Zander:

Let's say something like this... If the brass bomb, bomb, hee. If they want to take a little time there, but I'm going... I'm going straight through, they and write on their page and say, "Ben, would you take a little time before the G." Or the clarinet might say, "if you move it a little bit faster in this place, I could do it all in one breath." Or whatever it is, or sometimes they just write about how beautiful the music is or something that I'm doing in my conducting that is not aiding them to play the best they can. It's a

wonderful switching transformation, I call that a transformation, of the normal relationship of the hierarchical leader, who's up above. Rather it reduces the... We become eye to eye, working to get other, to produce the best possible result. And the most charming and hilarious and valuable outcome of this was one day I came home from class and I said to my partner, Ross, who's a psychologist and she is a brilliant psychotherapist. And so she always looks through the glass of the psychologist.

Benjamin Zander:

The psychotherapy is about enabling people to move to the next stage. Essentially, it's just opening the next door, breaking down the barrier or whatever it is. And she's very clever noticing what it is that's stopping people from getting to the next stage and then pushing them through. And of course, that's the same job I have in music. And I came home in despair and said the young musicians I was teaching, and these were graduate students, they're not children. They're young professionals at the New England Conservatory. They were in my class and I noticed that when they played for the class physically, they were very tense, because they were nervous, they were anxious about what reputation they had or what impression they were making, they were worried about their grades, because they were going on to the next stage of their careers.

Benjamin Zander:

It was a very tense time in their life. And it was showing up in their body language and therefore Bark and Schubert and Brahms and all the great composers couldn't get through to be fully expressed in their playings. So I came home with that problem and Ross said, "I've got an idea. Give them an A in the first class before they've done anything." So that opens a door for all of them to walk into an arena of possibility. And then we found out that they needed one other thing, which was not enough to say everybody gets an A, because then we were pretending that they were all equal, which of course they aren't some of them more advanced than other. So she came up with this beautiful idea that they should write me a letter describing who they will be by the end of the year.

Benjamin Zander:

So they would write a letter in September with a date September and the... No, they would write in September, but the date on the letter was May the next year. The letter began, "dear Mr. Zander. I got my A, because..." Then they would write me a letter describing who they had become, not who they hoped or they intended, but who they had become. In other words, it was already accomplished, no more, I would like to, or I intend to, or I hope. No, hope didn't come into it. This was a creation, an invention of who they intended to be. And when that letter was completed and it didn't only always take only one try. They had to usually do one or two tries before they got the idea that they could leap into the future and look back and say, how did I do this, what happened?

Benjamin Zander:

When I came into the class, I was faced with 45 A students, which makes me feel great, because I'm surrounded by stars. But the beauty is that they had also transformed their relationship to the learning experience. And one of the students through it, as I come towards the class, I find a spring in my heels and I find the lightness of spirit because I'm walking into an A situation. And the person I teach is the person who is they've described in the letter. See, I only take A student. So when I go to a new orchestra, I do the same thing and I give everybody an A and everybody feels it. They feel respected and they feel loved. When I look at them before they play, I'm excited to hear what they're going to play rather than, "oh, I hope you can do this, it's difficult."

Benjamin Zander:

The body language and the face and the way... Everything we do is visible. And orchestra players are like babies, they pick up everything. If they sense a slight sense of sarcasm or any kind of negative vibration, they pick that up and it shows up in the music. So I always tell my conducting students that everything they do from the raised eyebrow has an impact. And once we, as teachers and leaders and parents, every young mother knows this, that if they are in a bad mood, their child is going to cry and it's a very simple thing. And I remember a lovely conversation I had with... Just before rehearsal, I said to my personnel manager, I said, "gosh, I hope it's a good rehearsal." And she said, "well, it's entirely up to you." And of course she was right.

Benjamin Zander:

So I think once we get that everything emanates from the leader, but it shows up in the people who are being led. Once that is understood, then rule number six comes into play. Rule number six, you remember from the book, rule number six is the wonderful story of the two... And this is really now essential, I hope everyone's paying attention. I love this wonderful Russian conductor. He told the two prime ministers sitting in Roman, they're having a conversation about affairs of state. The door bursts open, man comes in a state of apoplectic upset and he's shouting and banging his fist. And he completely disrupts the conversation of the two prime ministers. And then the local prime minister says to him, "Peter, please remember rule number six." Immediate Peter's restored to calm, he bows, he apologizes and he walks out of the run.

Benjamin Zander:

And now they go back to their conversation, 20 minutes later, the door bursts open, a woman comes in, hysterical, hair flying, mascara running, she's out of control again, shouting and screaming. And again, he says, "Maria, please remember rule number six." "Oh yeah, so sorry." And she bows and she apologizes, she walks out of the room and then they go back to their conversation. And of course, 20 minutes later, it happens for the third time, because it always happens for three times.

Benjamin Zander:

Well, the third time the visiting prime minister says my dear colleague, this is extraordinary said I've seen many things in my life, but I don't think I've ever seen anything like this. Three people walked into this room out of control and you just said, rule number six, and they were immediately restored to come. Would you be willing to tell me what rule number six is? "Oh yes." Said the other prime minister, he said, "very simple. Rule number six, don't take yourself so God damn seriously. So the other prime minister said, "well, that's a great rule. What may I ask are the other rules. And the other fellow says, "there aren't any."

Benjamin Zander:

Now the thing about that story, and this is very important because you told me in your letter, when you wrote to me to be here today, you said you came across this work or whatever we call it 15 years ago and it stayed with you. Now, the reason it stayed with you is because it's transformational. That story is a transformational story because the usual posture of the conductor, the conductor's version of rule number six, don't take yourself so God damn seriously, take me God damn seriously. That's the other one. And there's a famous story of carry on the great, [inaudible 00:21:06] from carry and got into his limousine up to the rehearsal and said to the driver, "quick, go hurry, drive. The driver said, "very good, so where to?" "Doesn't matter, they need me everywhere." And that's the other model.

Benjamin Zander:

So once you understand, and I have a diagram here, the people who watching on a podcast can't see it, but this diagram, this is the downward spiral. This is radiating possibility. In the model it's literally a downward spiral. And in the downward spiral model, the conductor dominates and is right and is male. In the other model with the arrows going out in all directions, the model of possibility, the power and the influence and the domination of the leader has become diffused and become the power of every person in the orchestra. That's what Jane was feeling in your class. She was telling you in her lovely 13 year old way, "thank you, Nat." Or whatever she called you. "Thank you, sir, for being such effective teacher, because I feel great in your class."

Benjamin Zander:

And that's the test, is how do they feel? Do they feel enliven? Do they feel joyful? Is there a lot of laughter? Is there an open heart in spiritually, rehearsal? The other day we were rehearsing a Bruckner symphony and a student, one of the members of the orchestra, came and said, "I'm not feeling very well, I think I'll have to leave at the intermission." I said, "well just play for a while." And he came into the rehearsal and said, "I'm cured." Well, he was cured because Bruckner's music is very uplifting and apparently I didn't do anything to stifle his natural love and outgoing nature and his desire to contribute and all the things that draw us to art and to music and to human communication. So I think we have to be very mindful, very vigilant of the things that pull people down.

Benjamin Zander:

So any kind of sarcasm or putting negative speaking or even negative gestures, physical gestures, it can have a devastating effect on young people. So if nothing else came out of this conversation for the people who were listening, but an awareness of what it means to give an A to people, because it has an effect on everything, body language, voice, health. It's a lovely thing at the front of this book, which I love, by Christiane Northrup, who's a doctor, famous TV doctor. And she said one of the most inspiring, practical and uplifting books I ever read, that's very nice endorsement. But then she said something very interesting. "The very act of reading it with an open heart and mind will improve your health." Now just think about that because what she's saying, it's not the book that she's talking about. It's a way of being, an attitude to life, a style of leadership that will actually improve the health, your health as a leader and the health of the people you are leading.

Benjamin Zander:

Well, that's a pretty extraordinary thing to be able to say. And of course it would be true of all the best spiritual activities. I would think Woodes would say the same, and as long as you're not making other people wrong for their beliefs, anything that leads to a greater understanding and sense of purpose is going to be valuable. And I think rather than stuffing our children with more and more knowledge and information and facts, if we can give them this wonderful story, that... What's his name, the wonderful English speaker, you'll remember who I mean. He tells the story of a little girl who's, I think she's seven or eight, drawing in a class. And the teacher said, "it's time to stop." And she said, "but I haven't finished." And the teacher said, "but it's the end of the lesson, you've got to stop." And she said, "but I haven't finished." And she sounded so emphatic and the teachers said, "well, what are you drawing." She said, "I'm drawing God." The teacher said, "well, nobody knows what God looks like." Little girl said, "they will in a minute."

Nat Damon:

That is the leaning in, that is the connecting of the student there. And reminds me very much of a story that another friend of mine shared with me when she was in her doctoral program and she was working with kindergartners. And she comes up to a kid, let's just call him Sam. Sam was standing on a book, literally standing on a book. And she took a beat and she's like, instead of walking up to Sam and saying, "we don't stand on books in this school that's disrespectful." She instead asked him, she said, "Sam, why are you standing on that book?" And Sam looks right at her, eye to eye, shining eyes. And he says, "because I want to go inside."

Benjamin Zander:

Oh, that's beautiful, that's great.

Nat Damon:

Right, so often if you just take that beat. I was thinking on overdrive, this entire conversation so far and the white paper. The white paper being physical symbol of openness, it's tabula rasa. It's, it's a clean slate, it's not a form. It's not like, rate my teacher.

Benjamin Zander:

I don't give them question and answer. There's only one condition with the... We call it a white sheet, the white sheet has only one condition, they have to sign it. And the reason for that, it's pretty obvious what the reason is. For one thing, I know who it is so I can continue the conversation. Because let's say they ask a question or they make a [inaudible 00:27:35] and I want to call them up or write them an email or something, I have to know who it is. But there's another reason which is, when they sign, their name are not likely to be careless or abusive or rude or anything. Not that I think they would do that, I've never had anybody respond in a negative way, but it's a nice thing, it's a nice process and it's a practice.

Benjamin Zander:

All these things, Nat, are practices. Like one of the great practices that I've developed, because in the world of music and it's true in other worlds too, if you make a mistake, it can be pretty devastating for the person who's made the mistake. For one thing, everybody can hear it, it's not like you make a mistake in an office or some impersonal thing, you play a mistake on the trumpet and everybody can hear it. So I developed a way of dealing with the mistake, because the usual reaction of the conductor is to be angry, like you make a face. Then the person feels even worse, he's becomes even more self critical and then he's more likely to make another mistake. So I say the correct response for a mistake is to say, how fascinating.

Nat Damon:

How fascinating! Like this?

Benjamin Zander:

Right. My hands go up and there's a lightness of spirit. And instead of pulling down, you allow the spirit to go up. And then the, how fascinating is, "ah, what did I do? How did it happen? How can I avoid it in future?" So it has a creative growing aspect, but mostly it's a lightening up and a lot of the art possibility is about lightening up.

Nat Damon:

That's absolutely true.

Benjamin Zander:

We take ourselves too seriously. We take situation too seriously. There's a beautiful section of the book which Rose wrote into. And it's kind of lovely to think of her, she's a very unusual human being. I adore her and respect her beyond belief, she's my wife. But she wrote that chapter in Maine on a plot of land that had nothing on it, no building and no bathroom or anything. And she lived on it for six weeks in a tent and had her computer tied in with the car battery. So she would boot the computer and she would write this chapter on rule number six. And then what she discovered there because of course it's not that you shouldn't take anything seriously. There are two parts of the human psyche she discovered, one is what she calls the calculating self. That's the self that's on the make, strategizing, trying to get the best of other people, maneuvering, comparing, measuring success, failure, all that stuff that's the calculating self.

Benjamin Zander:

And we spend most of our life in that way. The voice in the head, looking around wondering whether other people are doing better, that is the one that one shouldn't take seriously. Don't take yourself so God damn seriously. There's another part however, of the human psyche, which is the contributory self, and she calls that the central self and she describes it beautifully as the natural tendency of human beings to want to contribute, to want to be part of an inclusive community of creating something of value and that self... On that actually doesn't have to take seriously because for instance, the mother, I always tell the story of the mother who has a child in a burning building. What does the mother do? She runs into the burning building and what gets her into the building is love, it's not courage. It's not fear, it's the love.

Benjamin Zander:

And so Laozi, the Chinese philosopher has a beautiful thing, he said, "because of deep love, we are courageous." And that's a beautiful illustration of that mantra, which is, because of deep love, we become courageous. So if you are fearful of something, don't look for courage, look for love and the fear will go away. Now that, if we could be that in our own being, in our own way of approaching the world and people could see us that way, whether it's people in an orchestra or children in a classroom, they would start to discover the central self to guide their own lives and give up their obsession with comparisons and measurement and failure and success and all of that downward spiral stuff, which causes illness, causes dis-ease, that's why it's called disease.

Nat Damon:

There's a wonderful opening, actually, your Ted talk, which if you haven't heard or seen Ben's Ted talk, it is absolutely brilliant and it's been seen by over, gosh, 25 million people, it is just incredible. And it opens, and I'm thinking about how it opens Ben with what you're saying right now. Which is you explain so brilliantly the stages of mastery on the piano and you... Do you want to actually reteach it to all of us?

Benjamin Zander:

Yes, principal, all right. So everybody who has a seven year old child, if you have a seven year old child and the seven year old child plays the piano, you know exactly what I'm saying, it sounds like this...

Nat Damon:



Lovely Julia, lovely.

Benjamin Zander:

Right, now the eight year old who's studied now for a whole year taking lessons, sounds like this...

Benjamin Zander:

The nine year old having studied for another year and taken lessons sounds like this...

Benjamin Zander:

The 10 year old who studied for another year and taken lessons, sounds like this... Unfortunately, that's the point which they usually give up.

Nat Damon:

That's the tragedy of the human condition.

Benjamin Zander:

Father, they gave up, but if they'd waited one more year, you would've heard this...

Benjamin Zander:

And here's the secret, the seven year old puts an emphasis on every note, my head, you see. The eight year old reduces them and puts an accent on every other note. The nine year old puts an emphasis on it before notes. The 10 year old puts an emphasis on every eight notes. And the 11 year old puts one impulse on the whole phrase. Now, look what's happened to my body.

Nat Damon:

You're on one side,

Benjamin Zander:

I call that a one buttock place, all right. One buttock and it can be the other buttock.

Nat Damon:

Alternating buttocks.

Benjamin Zander:

One buttock place, and the beauty of that, and of course it's universal, it's not just in music. And I had a wonderful, true story, everything I'm telling is true story. A man came and I was demonstrating this, I love to demonstrate this gradual reduction. And he wrote me a letter, he was the president of a company in Ohio and he was at my talk and I demonstrated that. And he said, "I was so moved." He said, "I went back and I transformed my entire company into a one buttock company.

Benjamin Zander:

But the idea of a one butter company, that's what I mean by transformation. Everybody knows what it feels like when it's stuck. When you are going like this with your head up and down and so on. Once you understand the length of the phrase, the sense that you are launching a phrase that there's an arc of

sound that it's point in a great musician Leon Fleisher, for the piano. He said, "classical music is an act of antigravity." Now, is that a more beautiful thing you can imagine? Because when I... You feel lifted up, you feel buoyant, you feel joyous and you are smiling and your eyes are shining. And I suspect that everybody's eyes are shining, whether they're looking or not, because that's what classical music does for us.

Nat Damon:

It's illuminating and levitating and I'm thinking about my favorite seat in Symphony Hall in Boston. Then my favorite location to sit is up in the... It's when you're walking in and I'm looking at the stage and you're in the balcony on the left hand side, because I'm able to look at the pianist back and now I'll look at his or her buttocks to watch the weight distribution as they become the bendy, beautiful, just... Martha Argerich, right, she's somebody who I had the fortune of seeing, she has that.

Benjamin Zander:

Since you asked about music, let me give you an example. There's a very beautiful piece of music, which I love deeply, which is by Gustav Mahler. And it's the Adagietto from the fifth symphony. And it's usually played very slowly and actually turned into a funeral march. But I happen to know that it was intended as the love song that Mahler wrote to his fiancée and sent it without any explanation. And she looked at it, she was a musician. She could read it like a poem. And she said, "oh, he loves me, great." And she went to see him. Now how do you make that happen? So it begins like this with a viola and then a harp... Imagine somebody wrote that to you and sent it, how could you resist the love that's in that music that it's incredible... Talk about one buttock playing. Listen to that.

Benjamin Zander:

It's indescribably beautiful and there's no words that can possibly contain what's in that music, the emotion, the tenderness, the star sorrow, the yearning, the longing, the both hopelessness and the hope. It's just all of human experience, those heavenly intervals. And it's our privilege as musicians to bring that out and to share it and give it as a gift to other people who may not have access to that range of emotional life. That's a beautiful thing.

Nat Damon:

Doesn't Mahler say something like a symphony must be like the world, it must contain exactly everything.

Benjamin Zander:

Exactly, encompass everything. We just about to do... I'll tell people about it because it's interesting, on the 8th of April, is the next Boston Philharmonic concert and it's the third symphony Gustav Mahler, which was the piece about which he said, those very words, "the symphony has to contain the whole world." And it's going to be in Symphony Hall in Boston on the eighth, at three o'clock, it's Sunday afternoon, three o'clock in the afternoon, and it's going to be live streamed around the world.

Benjamin Zander:

Now this is one of the things, one of the many extraordinary things that have come out of the ghastly experience of COVID, which is that now we live stream all our concerts because for a while, there were no people in the whole concert at all so we just live streamed. But we've continued to do that. Last Sunday, we had 2000 people in the hall and I'll tell you something very amazing there. There was a

silence in that hall that I'd never experienced before COVID. For one thing, nobody wants to cough in public, so there's no coughing in the concert, but also people are so relieved to be back in a real concert or with live musicians and live music that they've discovered a new kind of awe, which keeps them quiet, not only during the music, but even in the spaces between the music, when movements end usually there's a lot of chattering and coughing and... No, not nothing, no, it's absolutely quiet.

Benjamin Zander:

So anyway, we live stream it, now it's all over the world. And the first concert of the year, this was the first time we played for 20 months and we played a brokenness symphony, which is not very popular. Most people don't know the brokenness symphony and they're not well liked, but 16,000 people have watched that on livestream and now that's exciting that's a new audience. So classical music audience is actually growing and growing rather than diminishing, which is what people assume without thinking. It's just a different view.

Benjamin Zander:

I say you ain't see nothing yet, we're just getting started. That's different than hope, problem with hope is that it's not a strong position, like a very overweight person who hopes to be thin,, doesn't get very far. It's not about hope, it's about persevering and creating something. I'll tell you another lovely story, I love talking with you because you're so enthusiastic. During the COVID my youth orchestra, we couldn't function because... They had to function because they had to meet on Saturday afternoon, but we couldn't meet and we couldn't make music. So what I did was very lovely, I invited them all to become conductors by which I meant they could study the score. They could learn about the orchestra, they could learn about interpretation, they could learn about leadership, they could study a great work.

Benjamin Zander:

We studied the fourth symphony of Gustav Mahler, all online, every Saturday afternoon, right the way through COVID and we put it all into a film. Now they've been reduced to 20 films. It's going to go into my new website's coming out very shortly, so it'll be available to everybody, so that's number one. But then when we gathered together this year to play again, piece we did was the Mahler Symphony number four of Gustav Mahler. And they played it as if they were conductors. Now they suddenly had an interest in every instrument, what people were doing. And they were listening in a way that they never did when they were just playing their own part. So that was a new dimension of experience and expression that had not occurred because we didn't have COVID to teach us that. So every difficult situation, not the one welcomes difficult situations, but I think in a way, sometimes we work too hard to avoid difficulties rather than saying, "now what is there here to learn."

Benjamin Zander:

The classic story that my father told when he was in turn during the war as a German refugee from Nazi Germany in Berlin, he was interned in a camp as the Japanese were here in America. So he was with 2000 Jewish refugees, all of whom had suffered. He lost everything, he lost his mother in Auschwitz, eight members of his family were killed in the concentration camps. He lost his home, his money, his profession, everything. And now he was with 2000 other people who had lost similar things. So the level of depression and fear was extraordinary. And he looked around that place and he said, "my goodness, there are a lot of intelligent people in year, we should have a university." And so they started a university in that camp and they had 46 classes a week without a single book or paper or chalk or blackboard or anything, just people talking to each other.

Benjamin Zander:

Now that is a possibility story. There's no hope in it, it's action. It's seeing a need, seeing an opening, seeing a pathway. And as I mentioned to the pathway, I want to mention Rosa's new book, which she wrote on her own and it's deep psychological for those interested in the human mind and heart. It's a great book, it's called Pathways to Possibility. And she explores from the perspective of a psychotherapist, what is it actually that stops us from being fully effective adults. And that's what the book is about. And I think it's something that we all work on and to create your greater or lesser extent succeed.

Nat Damon:

I look forward to reading her book Pathways to Possibility. And I am returning to an original concept from the beginning of this conversation, Ben, which is about empowerment. And it's that notion... Actually, I had my own white sheet here, that you mentioned empowerment and then you also about a few minutes later, you mentioned the word diffusion and you held up that chart of leadership... And yeah, if you don't mind holding it up again, you had the downward spiral on the one side, and then you had this...

Benjamin Zander:

Radiating possibility.

Nat Damon:

Say again, this what?

Benjamin Zander:

Radiating possibility.

Nat Damon:

Radiating possibility. And I was looking at that from the conductor to his or her orchestra. I was wondering about the term diffusion because diffusion to me connotes a weakening over... Like the more something spreads, the more it diffuses and therefore the more... In my mind I was thinking, the more it weakens, which is not the point. So I was wondering about with diffusion, if it's something, I don't know if this is even coming out, but I've got my imitation of your chart there. But with every member of the orchestra that you touch, as it diffuses, they then feel empowered to then radiate. And it becomes this quilt, this molecular diffusion where nothing is weakened it's all strength, it builds almost.

Benjamin Zander:

Well, good. And I actually don't use the word diffusion, because I don't think it's specific enough. I think language has to be used very precisely. And I don't see the value in that word because it's diffuse, right. But I tell you what I do feel about this way of thinking of empowerment. When I conduct an orchestra, let's say I have 62 string players as I did this weekend in the concert. 62 string players, now each one of them has an enormous amount of physical power to produce a rich, gorgeous, full sound, every one of them. That's 62 times the full expressive power of each of those players. Now, if you imagine joining that altogether and the way I release that power is by making gestures that cause them to push the sound out.

Benjamin Zander:

So if you take that opening that I played now already... And the joy of that... Every one of the players wants to play as much as they can. So if every gesture I make is one of encouragement, of energy, of direction, of shape, of just... Mainly of shape and direction. Ba ba bapara babapara bababim! Ba ba bapara babapara bababim! And now the third one, you remember I said the third one, like the third one in the story is always the begin... Ba ba bapara babapara babapara bababim bam bim, barampa barampa! And by making these gestures, instead of just going like this, I'm saying, "more, lift it, give everything you have. Please more! And because everybody responds. So I don't think that is diffusion, I think of that is trust because I know it's in them. I know the power is there all I have to do is to release it and give them permission to play with all that beauty and that energy and that power. And it's a beautiful thing to be doing. And the conductor is silent, doesn't make a sound.

Nat Damon:

The conductor is silent, doesn't make a sound. The trust is there because you write that letter to yourself. I got the A I'm writing the letter, not as aspirational or hopeful, but this is who I am. And I am going to boom, I'm going to release that out of me and be that person.

Benjamin Zander:

That's a wonderful thing. And one of the students did a wonderful thing because I try to keep a light humorous atmosphere. One of the students wrote on her A letter that she couldn't wait for her baby to arrive. And I said, "oh Anne, I didn't know, you were married. You should bring your husband to the class." And she said, "oh, I haven't met him yet." She understood that what I was inviting them to do was to play a game. The game of the A it's all a game, you can either play the game with the downward spiral and compete and be all into measurement and control and all of those things. Or we can say, let's play the game, the game that I now play, because I used to play the game of success and failure, that was the game I was brought up in.

Benjamin Zander:

And the thing that really hit me when I was a child or a young person, we played a game at home called... Well, he didn't have a name, but it was my father saying to my elder brother at the beginning of each evening meal, "what did you do today?" That was the question, it's a harmless question. And he didn't say, "oh, what did you do today?" He said, "what did you do today?" And my brother taking the Q would then tell all the important things that he'd done during the day and he was very intellectual and high powered and went on to be a major lawyer and so on. Then he would ask my second brother and then he would ask my sister by the time came to my turn I was a nervous wreck because I was comparing myself, "oh my God, I didn't do... I didn't."

Benjamin Zander:

So by the time he came to my turn, I was a nervous wreck, because I was comparing all the time and it cost me heavily, it cost me two marriages because I couldn't ever relax and stop worrying and comparing. And it's a strain to me, around somebody who's constantly competing. So I have a new game, I invented a new game to... Once I realized it was a game, I could invent a new one, and the new one is called, I am a contribution, that's a different game. That means everything you do is part of the game. So I'd wake up in the morning, remind myself, I'm a contribution and bang off, I go.

Nat Damon:

I am a contribution, I love that. That is the opposite of a deficit mentality, it's the opposite of, what I don't have. It's what I do have, I have a contribution, I am a contribution.

Benjamin Zander:

And there's nothing, and you never know... This concert last Sunday is so adorable. One of the violins, one of our assistant concert master, has two adorable, Japanese daughters, twins, they're six, and they came to the concert. Well, you would think six year olds at a concert like that. The place was full of children, but these six year olds, it's a two hour, two and a quarter hour concert and Beethoven and Chester Covington. And I got very involved in them about what dresses they were going to wear with, they sent me several dresses and I chose the ones that, and then they came to see me before the concert, and then they came to see me after the concert. Now, is that relevant to my job as conductor and... Not really, but what an opportunity to make a connection with these two six year olds who won't forget that.

Nat Damon:

They won't forget. I'm wondering if we can sadly conclude this conversation, but not sadly, because I would love to conclude this conversation with this story about Katrin, because it made me think these twin, six year olds makes me think about this very, very special five year old. And we've mentioned Gustav Mahler several times in our conversation. So I'm wondering if you might mind wrapping this conversation up with that story of Katrina.

Benjamin Zander:

It's a very beautiful story, and it's again, a child belonging to one of our orchestra players, we were doing the ninth mile symphony and which is very dark and long and difficult. And so because it's so difficult, I sent a cassette to all the members of the orchestra over the summer because they never played a piece as complicated as this, and would they please get to know it? And so she played it on her boombox. She was up in Maine at one of the islands of Maine and her niece who was five, listened to this piece with aunt and the next day she said, "auntie Anne, what is this piece about?" Which is a very interesting thing that a five year old would say, and auntie Anne being very resourceful and imaginative told the story about a princess and a prince and an ogre, all the paraphernalia of the fantasy world and told the story. And then the next day, the little girl said, "auntie Anne, let's listen to the piece again." And then halfway through it. She said, "auntie Anne, what is this piece really about?"

Benjamin Zander:

And then auntie Anne told her about Mahler and about the suffering of his life and the antisemitism and the loss of his four year old daughter and the loss of his job and the persecution and all of the suffering, but also the tremendous energies he had as a sports person and walking. He walked so fast, people had to run, to keep up with him, and he was just a tremendous personality. Anyway, she told about Mahler. The next day, she said, "can we listen to the piece about that, man again." Now it had transferred from being a piece about the princess to being a piece about the man. And then she listened to it every day that week, and then Anne gave her this cassette and she listened to it a hundred times. And then she wrote me a piece of a letter, which I have on my wall in my study next to... And all these years, she wrote, Ben Zander with the R going the wrong way, like Toys-R-Us.

Benjamin Zander:

And then she said, "thank you for Mahler Nine, I loved it," Signed Katrina. And then she persuaded her parents drive from Northern New York state, the top of New York state to Boston for the concert and sat through that concert. So the reason I keep that on my wall is to remind me that the barriers we assume are not necessarily barriers. And that's a very useful thing for teachers to remember. We keep on saying, "oh, they're too young for that." Or, "it's not possible." With my youth orchestra, I do outrageous programs. And when my web site comes out, people are going to... It's very soon now. People are going to be able to hear this orchestra playing Mahler Nine, playing Mahler's Second and The Rite of Spring and all the most difficult and complicated pieces because I assume they can do it. I give them an A and they always measure up.

Nat Damon:

And I'm just so grateful for this conversation. I feel like you've given us an A and a gold standard, a platinum standard to really work with, as we view the world around us, in our relationship with it as individuals. And if we can give ourselves individually an A, and if we can let the music of life around us illuminate and levitate us, the way that beautiful classical music does, if we can rotate... If we can alternate our buttocks on the... Whether it's our desk chair or the symbolic or...

Benjamin Zander:

In the car.

Nat Damon:

Without it being dangerous, move with the music of our lives and listen to the children, really listen to them. They're so deeply in touch with their world around us in ways that perhaps flake off as we get older and something that you do, which I view as heroic frankly, is with your work with youth and your work with the Philharmonic is, you help people to maintain that broaden sense of what life is and to try to resist that stripping away of our senses as we grow into adulthood and further. We don't become stilted, there's so much life to be loved and lived.

Benjamin Zander:

I have one last beautiful story, which I never get tired of telling because it made such an impact on me when I first heard of this story, you've probably heard me tell this story. There was a woman whose name... Oh, God, I'll think of it in a moment. She survived Auschwitz, she went to Auschwitz. I think I'd told the story, but she went to Auschwitz as a 15 year old and her brother was eight. So these two children became detached from their parents going to Auschwitz in the cattle train, going to Berlin. And I think been going to Poland from Berlin. And so she was in charge, the parents had got lost. And so here are these two children surrounded by other Jewish refugees and it's awful scene in and whenever I think about it.

Benjamin Zander:

And then she looks down and sees that her brothers lost one of his shoes. And she says, "why are you so stupid you always do these things for goodness sake. Can't you keep your things together?" Which of course is a natural thing for a young girl who's in charge to say, and in a turn of voice, that was completely understandable. The trouble was, it was the last thing she ever said to him, because she never saw him again because he didn't survive. And so when she came out of Auschwitz, I'll never forget when she told me this herself, she said I made a vow, and the vow was, "I will never say anything that couldn't stand as the last thing I ever say." And of course we can't really do that and we will keep making

ourselves wrong, but it is a possibility to live into. And that's how possibility works, it's a possibility to live into. It's not about right thinking and doing correct things, no, it's just always knowing there's a possibility to live into, which guides us and inspires us. So thank you for the conversation.

Nat Damon:

Thank you for guiding and inspiring Ben, so thrilled. Benjaminzander.org will remain the name of your website, I'll put it as Chiron at the bottom here of the video feed, so people can jump to you, the website. Because as it is, it is an incredible treasure trove of beautiful audio and video and lessons and spirit and I can't imagine building on that, but I can't wait for you [inaudible 01:03:59] website.

Benjamin Zander:

Well, I'll tell you what were doing now, what we're doing to build on it, which is decided to make me the guide, so you can wonder about, but if you want a guided tour, I will be the guide. And that's what we're working on, showing people what to listen for and where to go. So people will have a guided tour.

Nat Damon:

Well, if this podcast reflects anything, it is that you are an incredibly beautiful and spirited and thoughtful and just wonderful guide. And I cannot wait to be guided again by you through the new website and everything you've shared with us in the past hour. Thank you, Ben Zander.

Benjamin Zander:

Dustyesky said, "with an intelligent person, even conversation is a pleasure.

Nat Damon:

Well in that way, it's definitely unidirectional.

Benjamin Zander:

Great to see you.

Nat Damon:

Great to see you. Yes, keep that in mind. Thank you, Ben.

Benjamin Zander:

Pleasure.

Speaker 5:

You've been listening to Reach, Teach, Talk with Nat Damon. If you'd like to recommend a guest for a future episode, you can send your suggestion or questions to [nat@reachacademics.com](mailto:nat@reachacademics.com).