

# Pathways

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**Doing, is a quantum leap from  
imagining**

[Barbara Sher](#)

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## Context

Things are not necessarily good or bad, so much as the context that we give them, makes them so.

Think about the toughest times of your life. Think about the challenges that you have faced.

At the time of some challenging event, we tend to label things as either good or bad, and it is only with the perspective of time that we can look back on the event and see a benefit that we did not see before.

Partly, it is a function of attitude; partly, it is a function of the fact that we are not clairvoyants; partly, it is fear in the moment; and partly, it is our desire to label everything.

Let's take them in reverse order. Humans label stuff. We label everything we experience. By giving stuff a label we think that we understand, and therefore, by extension, can control a thing. In some ways, life is a giant labeling exercise because we are always experiencing new things: That was England, this is America, that was a degree, this is a job. Change brings labels.

Change also brings fear. A new experience, by default is a step into the unknown and the unknown can be a scary place to be. It's not some known monster that we fear; it is some unknown danger, something we haven't experienced...the *possibility* of danger. For some people the possibility of danger is the thrill, for some people the possibility of danger will hold them back. I like the acronym for fear: FALSE expectations APPEARING real. We fear what has not yet happened, not what is happening or has already happened.

Which brings us to clairvoyance. Very few of us can see into the future with certainty. We cannot see where the ripples of an event will go. We can't see the effects of our actions. Sometimes I can get a fairly good impression of what will happen if I take a particular path, but I cannot possibly see all the ramifications of that path as I take my first steps. When my parents asked me forty years ago if I wanted to take Judo, they could not possibly have seen everything that has rippled out of that question.

So let's go to the starting condition. I was small and got bullied a lot in school. We could label that a 'bad' thing. I certainly didn't enjoy it. I felt small, weak, and powerless. I was also alone. We could label these 'bad' as well; if we want. But....would my parents have asked me if I wanted to start Judo if I wasn't getting bullied?

Just a cursory glance at the testimonials that I have received over the years from all the students that have passed through the clubs and schools that I have either worked with or led, will tell you that starting down the martial road was one of the most important events of my life....and it grew from something 'bad.'

Almost every challenge or 'bad' thing that I can think of that has ever happened in my life has had positive consequences in the long run....which brings us to attitude.

Things aren't good or bad....they just are. It's our attitude towards them, and our inability to place single events in the larger context of living a whole life that makes them 'good' or 'bad'.



## What: Hope again?

Hope is a good thing...if you see it in the right context. Conversely, hope can actually undermine us if we allow it to do so. My main point here is this: Do not give away today in the hope of a better tomorrow.

It's one thing to be experiencing difficulty in life, we all do...from time to time. But if we live in the hope of things getting better are we missing something?

I think that we have a tendency to get hope a bit out of context. I do not think that hope is about looking *forward*, so much as it is about living...now.

It didn't dawn on me until I was writing last month's newsletter that I tend to see hope as an undercurrent of active living. Hope isn't something that I think about in the future...it's the reason that I make the decisions today, in the here and now.

Hope in actuality is within each moment that we take for granted.

Try this thought: How many of us ever stop to hope that we will take our next breath or hope that our hearts will beat again? We simply take such things for granted. But should we? Does any one of us have any guarantee that our next breath or our next heartbeat will actually occur?

There are no guarantees. There is only possibility. Since I haven't missed a heartbeat or a breath in fifty years, I tend to assume that I'll keep getting them, but there are no guarantees.....I just live on the as-

sumption. Since we're all about labeling things....let's give the assumption a label...Hope.

So this is my jumping off point for the article, so let's dive in.

Let's start with my first point in this article: That we do not give away today in the hope of a better tomorrow. How can we live with hope as an undercurrent of active living?

For the purposes of discussion, let's say that today is pretty miserable. Let's go further and say that your world is collapsing around you....everything that can go wrong IS going wrong. How do you feel? I'm thinking that you are probably not too light of spirit.

At times of great stress, we tend to look to the future...to when it "will all be behind me." We hope that things either won't get worse, or that they'll get better somehow. But we can't see the future, so we have no assurances.

Some of us collapse in these moments of stress and our worlds implode on us. Some of us become doers...we take action to make change. Some of us become thinkers and wonder why it is that such things happen. Some of us become bitter and resentful. Some of us become depressed and inconsolable. Some of us complain and whine about the unfairness of life. Some of us become very patient. In truth, maybe some of us go through a bit of all of these choices...but I'll be willing to wager that few of us say: "Oh goody, my life is falling apart. Bring

it on, I can hardly wait to see what comes next!"

Oddly enough though, there are lessons here. Today, lived in an undercurrent of hope, allows us to put the next foot forward as we step into the unknown. That's powerful stuff. Hope is an incredible thing if we live with it as an undercurrent of doing and being.

Hope isn't about the future, it's about the choices that we make here, today, in the midst of our turmoil. If we give away today in the hope of a better tomorrow we are robbing ourselves of the ability to learn all that today has to teach us. If we can live today, complete with all its uncertainties and accept what it offers to teach us, then we can do so with an attitude of learning.

So why do we learn stuff? Surely we learn something in the hope of one day putting it to good use. O.K. maybe that doesn't apply to calculus (I'm kidding), but my point is this: I must invest myself in learning today, if I am going to have any hope of the lesson being useful tomorrow. I have to show up for the lesson, I have to be present in the here and the now, if the learning is going to have any value in the future.

Hence my starting point: Don't give away today in the hope of a better tomorrow...it won't work.

What is today attempting to teach you? Do you have the wisdom and humility to learn? Do you live with an undercurrent of hope in today?



*We don't see things the way they are; we see things the way we are.*

*Unknown author.*

## Concentration

"Concentration is a restraint that confers the power to hold the mind to the pursuit of truth with an infinite patience."

I was recently sent this quote by one of my friends and asked for my thoughts. Specifically we were discussing the process of meditation...what happens when we meditate upon something. We can take the word 'meditation' in this instance to mean either the spiritual pursuit of meditation or prayer, or we can look at meditation as bringing the mind to bear upon a specific subject matter like a problem in life or a pond in the woods.

When the mind moves into a meditative state, all extraneous 'noise' gets filtered out...whether it is still there or not is irrelevant...we pay it no heed. So from that perspective then, in such states of attention, we can be said to have a one-pointed concentration. Nothing else matters in that moment. Our minds are fully occupied in the study of a particular thing.

By way of example: Children aren't deaf to their parents, they are simply concentrating on the matter at hand...they live in a world of total possibility and wonder and it is easy for them to drift into a state of complete absorption and concentration.

As we grow up, we somehow lose that ability and have to learn it all over again.

When we get engrossed in something that we love doing, the world can drift away and we are like children again...fully present in the moment of the experience.

This is what we call being truly mindful of an event.

Try this as a seemingly silly exercise: When was the last time you were **fully** present when you were eating? When was the last time you **truly** chewed a bite of food? Eating is a group consumption activity and food actually has to capture our attention if we are to pay it any attention. Try it sometime; try **really** eating and see how long it lasts.

If you are up for it, try doing the same thing with breathing. **Really** breathe. Bring your whole mind to just the breath, nothing but the breath...now that's tough.

In the martial arts we use technical repetition as a way of bringing us into a state of total, one-pointed concentration in a task. We hold the mind in pursuit of the truth that is embedded within the technique that we are practicing in the moment. This is not easy. We get distracted, we get bored...repetition is boring. So? ...Keep doing it. Eventually the lessons appear...so what if it takes decades? Does that really matter?

Concentration is the restraint that allows us to persist when other things might call us aside. When we truly concentrate, 'here and now' is

of greater importance than 'there and then' and so we keep the mind present and focused: I'll do my homework now rather than get called aside by my friends and the opportunity to play.

When I'm in the woods taking photographs I can get totally absorbed in the composition of the image or the aspect of nature that I am studying through the lens at the moment. It is only the following day when the insect bites show up that I realize how much I got chewed on. I was concentrating and unwilling to let anything else interfere with the experience.

The truly difficult part of this quote though, is contained within the last two words: Infinite patience. Wow! That's just asking too much. But think about it for a moment. When you are truly engrossed in something, so much so that the world falls away, noise stops and you are truly, fully, completely present...does time really have any meaning to you? Ta dah! You have experienced infinite patience. That wasn't so difficult was it now?

So what is difficult? Living it. Everyday. It'll require a good deal of concentration. Think about it while you're doing it. You might just surprise yourself.



**Mistakes are a fact of life: It is the response to the error that counts.**

**Nikki Giovanni**

## Goals and Dreams

At this time of year I do a lot of life goals counseling on campus. I deal with students who are at the beginning university life as well as those who are contemplating going on to graduate work and I also talk with those who are at the end of their formal education and who are about to enter the workforce. Invariably, the discussions come down to personal goals and dreams or a lack thereof.

When you build life goals and dreams, you only really need to ask yourself one question: How much do you *really* want it?

We are often told that at the end of life, the main regrets people have are the things they did not do, rather than the things they did do. So, from that perspective, let's bring it forward a little through time: When you look back twenty years from now, will you regret having not done a particular thing, or would you be just as happy having taken a different path.

I understand that the question is, to some degree, rhetorical, but there are people in life who have a passion and will follow their dreams no matter what obstacles occur along the way, and then there are people who let the currents of life take them along and they find their dreams along the way.

I'm not saying that one is better than the other, I'm saying it is important for you to know the group to which you belong and act accordingly.

When I was young I decided was that I was going to become a university professor. After nearly losing my dream due to some poor choices on my part, I knew by the time I was twenty-one that I was willing to sacrifice anything; family, home, security....anything to reach that goal. The price was far higher than I ever imagined, but I'd pay it again in an

instant.

What I did not know as a child, was the real reason why I wanted to become a college professor. That came later. The child in me wanted to see and study as much of the world as was possible to do in one lifetime. I wanted to remain a student all my life...to keep learning and to keep seeing new things. As I grew up, I reasoned that being a college professor would keep that desire young in me...and so it has.

The other reason I wanted to become a professor was to infect people with a similar desire to learn and to see the universe. In some ways, these two aspects of my overarching goal are complimentary and at the same time oppositional, but that's O.K., because it is the resolution of the paradox that has given me some of the greatest insights in my life. Learning isn't about what I get or what I understand; it is about my place in the world, my *raison d'être*, if you wish.

For me, learning is an imperative of positive change, a community event, and a societal statement. So therein lies the source of my passion. Therein lies the reason why I was willing to accept the price tag.

Life is full of dreams and goals, some large, some small. Some are overarching, life-changing goals, and some are much smaller steps along the way. Some of us have a very clear view of what we think we want and some of us do not. For some of us the view may change along road and we will need new goals and new directions. For some of us, the view will never change.

As I said; it is not a matter of which path is 'right' or 'wrong', it is a matter of knowing which path you are on. It is also a matter of knowing when the path changes and when

## SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

- ◆ **AKAYAMA SUMMER CAMP, NEW ORLEANS, LA, JULY 12-14TH, 2008.**

new insights require a re-evaluation of the path.

Neither is it a matter for comparison. Do not compare yourself to someone else, regardless of how you see your life.

If you feel driven towards a particular path and are willing to do the necessary work, no matter what it will require of you, do not compare what you feel compelled to do with what others think you should do. Equally, if you do not feel compelled to follow a particular path, do not get pushed into one by well-meaning people...be patient and follow the promptings of your heart, your abilities and your talents as they reveal themselves to you.

There will always be people who can give you advice and counsel, but any advice or counsel that you accept must be congruent with your world view.

It is your life and only you can live it. In so far as our life goals go, we are each responsible for walking our own lives with integrity of purpose. Nothing more.

Whether you reach for your dreams or not, the choice will come with a price tag and exact a cost....what are you willing to pay? ☺

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