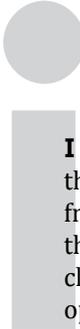


Possible

by Paul Born

“But we know for sure that these are days when the improbable can become the inevitable.” – The New York Times



I have some wonderful Facebook friends, though they can, at times, really depress me. Most recently a friend posted, “I am struck by people who still think that all the good efforts we engage in today to fight climate change will matter. We are past the place of optimism. When will we realize it is too late?” The post went on to suggest that knowing it is too late can be a wake-up call similar, I suppose, to realizing the Titanic is sinking. There’s simply no time to waste, it’s time to act if we want to survive.

What happens when we give up or admit that there are no possibilities of making things better? What happens when we give up on the possible?

I am an optimist – an unequivocal, over the top, believer in good. My wife sometimes tells friends, “Some people see the cup as half-empty or half-full. Paul sees the cup as overflowing and most days that just pisses me off.” I get it, optimism is not for everyone. A yoga instructor once challenged me by asking if I thought my optimism was getting in the way of embracing reality. “How might you accept things as they are, in the moment?” he asked.

For those of us concerned about social change and making the world a better place there is a definitive place for optimism, for a belief in the possible and hope for a better future. It drives us to work harder and it helps us to stay motivated.

But does our belief in the possible actually distract us from reality? Does it keep us from seeing things

the way they really are?

At Tamarack we believe in systems change and our work assumes that we can change “things”, whole systems, for the better. We look for evidence of change in our communities – like improvements in individual or family outcomes, increased capacity of a community to address social issues, or new policies and programs that improve people’s lives.

In other words, we embrace possible.

Is the world getting better?

In a search to determine if the idea that systems change is possible or just a dream, I began to look for evidence of real positive change in the world.

I found it in the article, “26 charts and maps that show the world is getting much, much better,” by Dylan Mathews.

With global information on indicators, including economic progress, health care, peace and security, government and social services, and technology, the charts provide evidence for optimists like me that we should have hope in a better world.

For instance, extreme global poverty has declined,

There is a definitive place for optimism, for a belief in the possible and hope for a better future.

wars are less prevalent, infant deaths have decreased, and literacy levels have improved. Most of these substantial improvements have been made in the last decade.

Extreme poverty has fallen: Economic growth in India and China – as well as in other developing countries – has led to a huge decline in the share of the world population living on less than \$1.25 a day, from 53 percent in 1981 to 17 percent in 2011. (See “26 charts and maps that show the world is getting much, much better,” by Dylan Mathews, March 20, 2015, at vox.com.) While we can argue about what a decent and fair poverty line should be, we cannot debate that there has been significant progress on this indicator over the last few decades.

Life expectancy is rising: Globally, both male and female life expectancy increased by six years from 1990 to 2012, but the gains were highest in low-income countries, which saw an increase of about nine years for both men and women.

War is on the decline: It can be hard for people to believe that war is on the decline, but the number of overall deaths from organized political violence are falling and analysts have argued that the end of war is in sight. Indeed, in his article in *The Wall Street Journal*, “Violence Vanquished,” Steven Pinker argues we may be living in the most peaceable era in human existence (September 24, 2011).

Solar power is getting cheaper: Climate change is one area where we are not making progress, but

We may be living in the most peaceable era in human existence.

a bright spot is the declining price of solar power, which is fuelling a rapid increase in adoption.

Does the data here tell me to stop fighting for an end to poverty or to create peace in the world, or does it fuel me to believe in the possible? Can more be done? Maybe, if we just keep working, could we end poverty in Canada and ensure our children grow up in a peaceful country that welcomes people from all nations?

If we can reduce global poverty, increase life expectancy, and end wars, surely there is room for optimism.

Possible Canadas

In Canada we are on the cusp of massive change. Some days it can be difficult to believe things are getting better, and I have to admit when I follow

politics it is easy to get cynical, but for the most part we have a lot to look forward to.

A recent study released by Adam Kahane and the team at Reos Partners – with the support of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, Maytree, and others – considered the approaches that Canada requires to create a good future. They interviewed 56 diverse Canadians from government, business, and civil society, asking them each 10 questions on what it will take for the country to be able to address its challenges and realize its potential. And while there is concern about the future of Canada, what struck me most was the keen insight these 56 Canadians shared as to what it might take for us to realize a better future, to reach what is possible.

People were energized by the determination of our young people, the creativity in our cities, and the way we are making diversity work. When I think of possibilities for our future as a country, I cannot think of three assets I would rather bank on.

Asked what would happen if things turn out well, the interviewees replied: We would become more ambitious, we would transform our economy, and we would restore our connections to one another and the land. These people are singing my song! Tamarack’s three key priorities are to build a connected force for change, end poverty, and build a sense of community in Canada and beyond.

When asked what it would take to succeed in creating a good future, respondents had two simple responses: We need the courage to acknowledge our challenges, and we need to engage and act in partnership to address these challenges. Key insights for sure in realizing the possible.

When asked how our situation is changing and what risks we are facing in Canada, respondents sounded a clear warning of what might happen if things turn out badly: We will fail to adapt to a changing world, our education and health systems will fail, and our society will fall apart.

Possible is a call to action and an act of faith

To make the changes required to reach our possible future, we need the knowledge and skills to deepen community, collaborate across sectors, measure and evaluate community change, foster citizen engagement, and support place-based innovation. We need to learn to change together.

We believe that true community change occurs when citizens and organizations adopt a new way

Community change occurs when citizens adopt a new way of thinking and working together.

The very “prospect of the possible” is the actual miracle: Our collective belief in the possible is the force that drives us to work with others to innovate,

of thinking and working together; at the core is adopting an asset-based approach to change and thinking together about what is possible if we work in collaboration.

release, accept, and make things better for each other.

This is how the improbable becomes the inevitable.

Paul Born is the president and co-founder of the Tamarack Institute. He has a passion for big messy conversations, engaged citizens that deepen their community, and collaborative leadership that leads to collective impact. Possible is what happens when people are engaged, their collective altruism is evoked, and they work toward the common good. Reach Paul at paul@tamarackcommunity.ca. //



© Photo: Don Shall, flickr.com/donshall