

Introduction

As children, many of us are taught to be realists. We are told that we should stop dreaming, and to keep our heads out of the clouds. We are told that we shouldn't bite off more than we can chew or meddle with things out of our depth. Instead, we are cautioned to cut our coats according to their cloth and hedge our bets.

This book proposes another way to be. It shows that dreaming can be constructive, and that by following our dreams, we can erase the boundaries between what's "realistic" and what's "unrealistic." In her hit song "Impossible," Kelly Clarkson challenges those who would dissuade her from pursuing her dreams and prays to be able to "do the impossible." She sings:¹

Can't change the winds, you say
 Won't matter anyway
 Can't reach that far 'cause it's impossible
 It's impossible
 Can't rise above this place
 Won't change your mind so I pray
 Breakin' down the walls
 Do the impossible.

Against all odds, she chooses a "lonely road" to realize her dream:

Walkin' by myself I know
 This lonely road's becomin' my new home
 But I don't stop, I just keep movin' on.

And finds that what others see as impossible is possible for her:

It's impossible to you
 Not impossible for me
 Not impossible for me

¹ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQOnBqycX1c (retrieved March 16, 2019).

Spoke up and thought I'd try
 Try to step across the line.

Actually, I could stop right there, as the message of that song and this book are essentially the same. But I want to go deeper. I want to take a closer look at what makes us believe that something's impossible and how to change that belief and make it seem possible.

Of course, many things really are impossible. No one will ever move faster than the speed of light, for example. But our challenge as humans is to distinguish between the two. Hence the Serenity Prayer:²

God, grant me the serenity
 to accept the things I cannot change,
 courage to change the things I can,
 and wisdom to know the difference.

This book will help you to identify the difference between the truly impossible and the possible, and to learn how to swim between the two. Why the latter? Because between “truly impossible” and “obviously possible” lies a gray area where something that strikes most people as impossible seems possible for a few.

How we navigate this nebulous space is determined by the mind. Our minds build entrenched and well-fortified fortresses of belief as a form of protection, to safeguard their territory and ward off change. The “magic” of making the impossible possible comes when we transcend the mind's self-imposed limits. Inside the well-protected bastions of our minds are gems of potential waiting to be discovered. My purpose here is to show you what holds us back from achieving big things in life and how you can become one of those “magicians” who make the impossible possible.

Fortunately, we have wonderful examples of individuals who've successfully broken through the fortress walls of the mind and achieved astounding things. Take, for example, Muhammad Yunus, the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner who introduced banking for the poor (see Figure 1).³ To many, the idea that rural Bangladeshi women – the poorest of the poor – could get bank loans and invest in their own businesses sounded silly and naïve.

“Muhammad,” everyone said, “are you crazy? How can a bank give loans to people who can't guarantee repayment?” But Yunus ignored his critics and launched a program to provide small loans to groups of five women

² Written by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

³ See www.grameen.com (retrieved March 16, 2019); also Muhammad Yunus's book (2003).

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Figure 1 Muhammad Yunus receiving the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize.
Received from the Yunus Center.

each. The group guaranteed the loans, which revolved annually, so that each woman had the opportunity to invest the money in her business for a year and then forward it to the next group member.⁴ Within five years, five new businesses would emerge, and the bank would be repaid with interest. Yunus's brilliant idea spread throughout the world and is now commonly known as a micro-loan program.

Yunus is just one example of someone determined to do the “impossible” in order to create opportunity and improve lives. We'll look at several diverse cases of people who, in business, in the social sector, and in their personal lives, overcame the prevailing belief that their dreams were impossible and made those dreams happen.

We'll also look at the “dark” tapestry of forces that reinforces the fortress of the mind. We'll consider the neuroscience involved, including factors that inhibit the brain's natural plasticity. We'll look at powerful psychosocial influences, such as the perceived need to maintain consistency in our thinking by any means necessary and the tendency to give in to the opinion of the majority. And we'll look at the influence of networks on our ability to incorporate new information and ideas.

⁴ You can see a micro-loan group at www.results.org.au/protect-role-women-in-grameen-bank (retrieved March 16, 2019).

These are the patchwork pieces we stitch together to “protect” ourselves from things we haven’t considered, to curb our potential, and to inhibit achievement. With an understanding of these dark forces, we’ll turn our attention to the “light” tapestry of forces that helps us overcome the mind’s limitations. The basic elements are similar, but they work in opposition. There is the neuroscience component (increasing the brain’s plasticity); the psycho-social component (how the minority can influence the majority, and the positive influence of networks through expanded connectivity).

These two tapestries – the dark and the light – continuously operate at cross-purposes within us. Sadly, the dark one typically wins. The fortress of the mind grows over time, making it harder to see opportunities outside of the mainstream. To stay open to possibility and work our magic in the world, we need counter-spells that conjure the light tapestry’s magic and break the spell of impossibility. In the final chapters of this book, we’ll introduce an array of these “counter-spells.” Some involve emotion, some relate to thinking, and some call for physical action. We will even delve into how to use the hidden world of imagination to defeat the dark forces of limitation.

The ground covered in these pages is familiar territory to me. While writing my previous books, *Social Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice* and *Empowering Leadership of Tomorrow*,⁵ I became convinced of the existence of a certain kind of “magic” that controls our beliefs about what is possible and what isn’t. As an academician I kept these thoughts in the back of my mind, blending them with my practical experience as a second-opinion reviewer for the Fellowship of Ashoka, Innovators for the Public,⁶ a global association that empowers social innovators and entrepreneurs. I’ve travelled around the world interviewing very special individuals who tackle pressing, though seemingly insurmountable and intractable, social problems. Their work reverses established patterns and introduces systemic, durable change. Each encounter with an Ashoka candidate reminds me that there is something very special happening in the world. Against all odds, and often against the authorities and even their friends and families, these individuals have attempted the “impossible” and “magically” made it possible. You will find in this book many stories of these remarkable people and their astonishing achievements.

It was as an academician, a practitioner, and a writer that I decided to write this book. However, this is not solely an academic endeavor. My aim

⁵ Praszkiar and Nowak (2012); Praszkiar (2018).

⁶ See www.ashoka.org (retrieved March 16, 2019).

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here is to provide a simple and straightforward exploration of the potential each of us has and to provide tips and methods for peeling away self-imposed limitations and unlocking that potential. This book is my way of sharing my fascination with the magic of the mind and my profound belief that this magic is available to all.

Our departure point is a collection of three stories from the business and social sectors. Next, we'll look at the "dark tapestry," followed by mechanisms for overcoming the mind's defenses. Finally, we'll cover a handful of hints and techniques to unleash the mind's creative potential.

One final comment before we take off: The mission of Ashoka, Innovators for the Public is "EACH: Everyone A CHangemaker." My objective here is to make this vision accessible to all and help empower you to pursue your dreams. I remember when I worked with business students, how important this discovery was for them. They believed that choosing a business career meant postponing their youthful dreams. How surprised they were to learn that by revealing and pursuing those dreams, they actually became more effective in business.

I hope that this book will help you make the impossible possible and fulfill your greatest dreams.