



STEPPING INTO A UNIVERSE OF POSSIBILITY

EXCERPT FROM
THE ART OF POSSIBILITY

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It's All Invented

A shoe factory sends two marketing scouts to a region of Africa to study the prospects for expanding business. One sends back a telegram saying,

SITUATION HOPELESS STOP NO ONE WEARS SHOES

The other writes back triumphantly,

GLORIOUS BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY STOP THEY HAVE NO SHOES

TO THE MARKETING EXPERT who sees no shoes, all the evidence points to hopelessness. To his colleague, the same conditions point to abundance and possibility. Each scout comes to the scene with his own perspective; each returns telling a different tale. Indeed, all of life comes to us in narrative form; it's a story we tell.

The roots of this phenomenon go much deeper than just attitude or personality. Experiments in neuroscience have demonstrated that we reach an understanding of the world in roughly this sequence: first, our senses bring us selective information about what is out there; second, the brain constructs its own simulation of the sensations; and only then, third, do we have our first conscious experience of our milieu. The world comes into our consciousness in the form of a map already drawn, a story already told, a hypothesis, a construction of our own making.

A now-classic 1953 experiment revealed to stunned researchers that a frog's eye is capable of perceiving only four types of phenomena¹:

- Clear lines of contrast
- Sudden changes in illumination
- Outlines in motion
- Curves of outlines of small, dark objects

A frog does not “see” its mother’s face, it cannot appreciate a sunset, nor even the nuances of color. It “sees” only what it needs to see in order to eat and to avoid being eaten: small tasty bugs, or the sudden movement of a stork coming in its direction. The frog’s eye delivers extremely selective information to the frog’s brain. The frog perceives only that which fits into its hardwired categories of perception.

Human eyes are selective, too, though magnitudes more complex than those of the frog. We think we can see “everything,” until we remember that bees make out patterns written in ultraviolet light on flowers, and owls see in the dark. The senses of every species are fine-tuned to perceive information critical to their survival—dogs hear sounds above our range of hearing, insects pick up molecular traces emitted from potential mates across away.

We *perceive* only the sensations we are programmed to receive, and our awareness is further restricted by the fact that we *recognize* only those for which we have mental maps or categories.

The British neuropsychologist Richard Gregory wrote, “The senses do not give us a picture of the world directly; rather they provide evidence for the checking of hypotheses about what lies before us.”² And neurophysiologist Donald O. Hebb says, “The ‘real world’ is a construct, and some of the peculiarities of scientific thought become more intelligible when this fact is recognized . . . Einstein himself in 1926 told Heisenberg it was nonsense to found a theory on observable facts alone: ‘In reality the very opposite happens. It is theory which decides what we can observe.’”³

We see a map of the world, not the world itself. But what kind of map is the brain inclined to draw? The answer comes from one of the realities of biology, the survival of the fittest. Fundamentally, it is a map that has to do with our very survival; it is designed to provide, as a first priority, information on immediate dangers to life and limb, the ability to distinguish friends and foes, the wherewithal to find food and resources and opportunities for procreation. The world appears to us sorted and pack-

aged in this way, substantially enriched by the categories of culture we live in, by learning, and by the meanings we form out of the unique journey each of us travels.

See how thoroughly the map and its categories govern our perception. In a famous experiment, the Me'en people of Ethiopia were presented for the first time with photographs of people and animals, but were unable to "read" the two-dimensional image. "They felt the paper, sniffed it, crumpled it, and listened to the crackling noise it made; they nipped off little bits and chewed them to taste it."⁴ Yet people in our modern world easily equate the photographic image with the object photographed—even though the two resemble each other only in a very abstract sense. Recognizing Pablo Picasso in a train compartment, a man inquired of the artist why he did not paint people "the way they really are." Picasso asked what he meant by that expression. The man opened his wallet and took out a snapshot of his wife, saying, "That's my wife." Picasso responded, "Isn't she rather small and flat?"⁵

For the Me'en people there were no "photographs," although they lay in their hands as plain as day. They saw nothing but shiny paper. Only through the conventions of modern life do we see the image in a photograph. As for Picasso, he was able to see the snapshot as an artifact, distinct from what it represented.

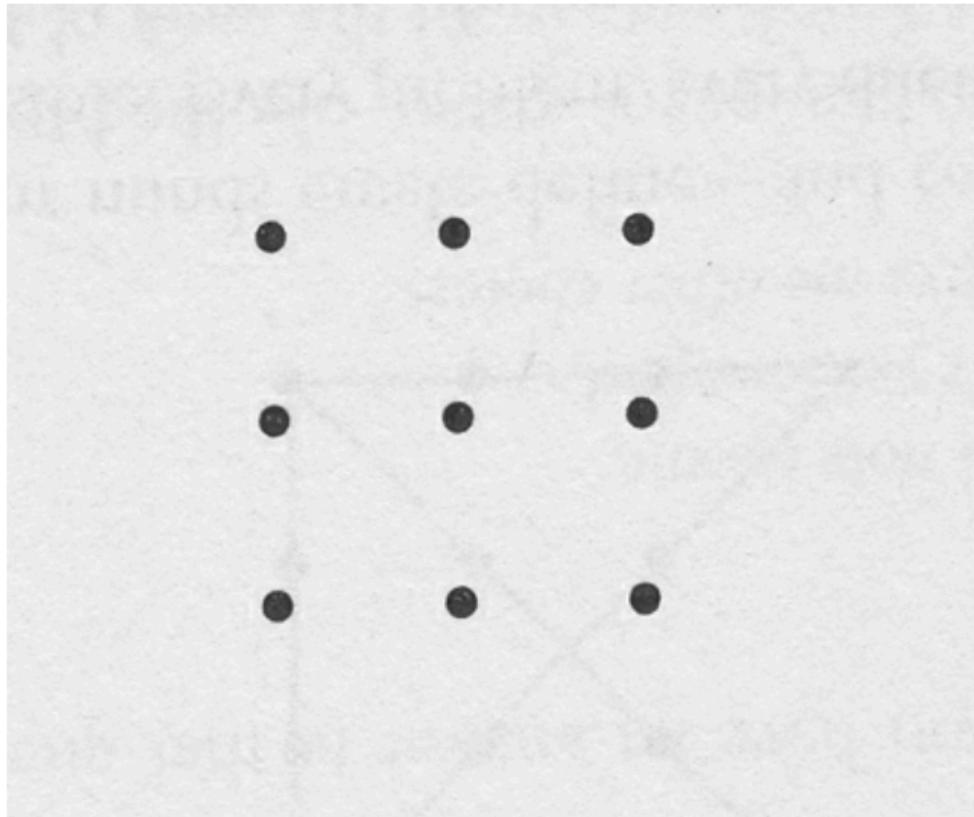
Our minds are also designed to string events into story lines, whether or not there is any connection between the parts. In dreams, we regularly weave sensations gathered from disparate parts of our lives into narratives. In full wakefulness, we produce reasons for our actions that are rational, plausible, and guided by the logic of cause and effect, whether or not these "reasons" accurately portray any of the real motivational forces at work. Experiments with people who have suffered a lesion between the two halves of the brain have shown that when the right side is prompted, say, to close a door, the left side, unaware of the experimenter's instruction, will produce a "reason" as to why he has just performed the action, such as, "Oh, I felt a draft."⁶

It is these sorts of phenomena that we are referring to when we use the catchphrase for this chapter *it's all invented*. What we mean is, "It's all invented anyway, so we might as well invent a story or a framework of meaning that enhances our quality of life and the life of those around us."

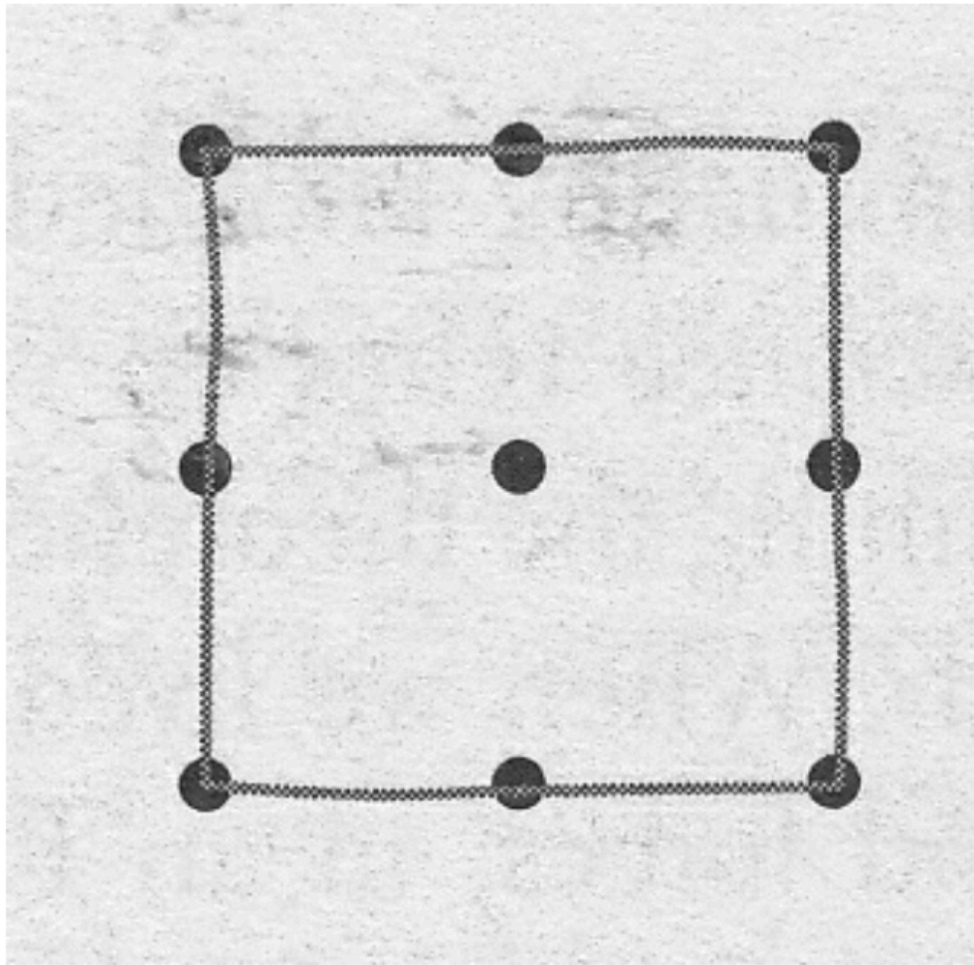
Most people already understand that, as with cultural differences, interpretations of the world vary from individual to individual and from group to group. This understanding may persuade us that by factoring out our own interpretations of reality, we can reach a solid truth. However, the term *it's all invented* points to a more fundamental notion—that no matter how objective we try to be, it is still through the structure of the brain that we perceive the world. So, if there are absolutes, we have no direct access to their existence. The mind *constructs*. The meanings our minds construct may be widely shared and sustaining for us, but they may have little to do with the world itself. Furthermore, how would we know?

Even science—which is often too simply described as an orderly process of accumulating knowledge based on previously acquired truths—even *science* relies on our capacity to adapt to new facts by radically shifting the theoretical constructions we previously accepted as truth. When we lived in a Newtonian world, we saw straight lines and forces; in an Einsteinian universe, we noticed curved space/time, relativity, and indeterminacy. The Newtonian view is still as valid—only now we see it as a special case, valid within a particular set of conditions. Each new paradigm gives us the opportunity to “see” phenomena that were before as invisible to us as the colors of the sunset to the frog.

To gain greater insight into what we mean by a map, a framework, or a paradigm, let's revisit the famous nine-dot puzzle, which will be familiar to many readers. As you may or may not know, the puzzle asks us to *join all nine dots with four straight lines, without taking pen from paper*. If you have never seen this puzzle before, go ahead and try it . . . before you turn the page!

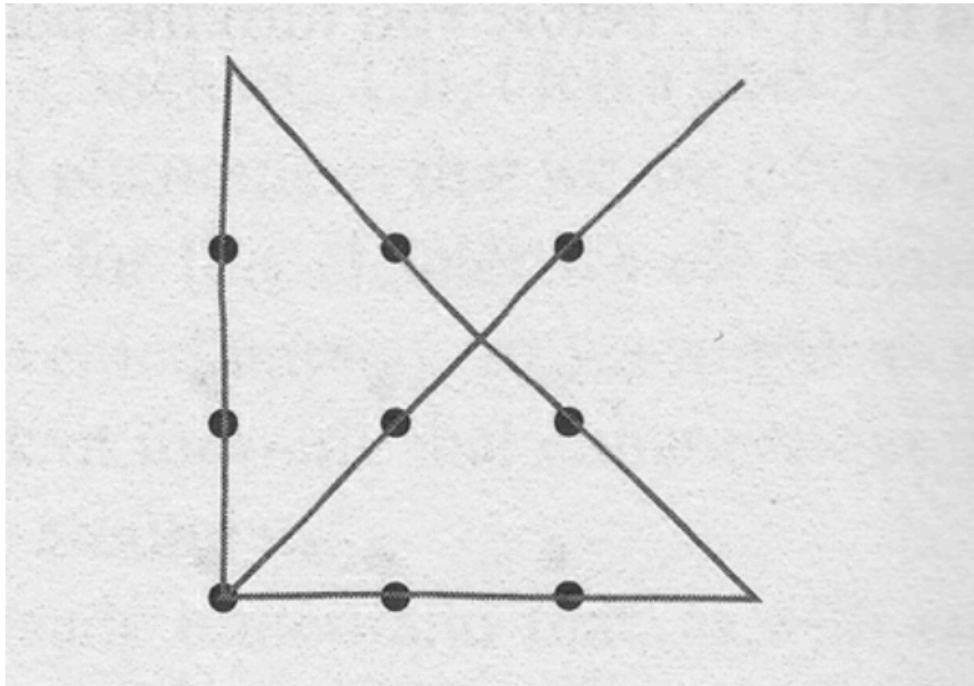


If you have never played this game before, you will most likely find yourself struggling to solve the puzzle inside the space of the dots, as though the outer dots constituted the outer limit of the puzzle. The puzzle illustrates a universal phenomenon of the human mind, the necessity to sort data into categories in order to perceive it. Your brain instantly classifies the nine dots as a two-dimensional square. And there they rest, like nails in the coffin of any further possibility, establishing a box with a dot in each of the four corners, even though no box in fact exists on the page.



Nearly everybody adds that context to the instructions, nearly everybody *hears*: “Connect the dots with four straight lines without taking pen from paper, *within the square formed by the outer dots.*” And within that framework, there is no solution. If, however, we were to amend the original set of instructions by adding the phrase, “*Feel free to use the whole sheet of paper,*” it is likely that a new possibility would suddenly appear to you.

It might seem that the space outside the dots was crying out, “*Hey, bring some lines out here!*”



The frames our minds create define—and *confine*—what we perceive to be possible. Every problem, every dilemma, every dead end we find ourselves facing in life, only appears unsolvable inside a particular frame or point of view. Enlarge the box, or create another frame around the data, and problems vanish, while new opportunities appear.

This practice we refer to by the catchphrase, *it's all invented*, is the most fundamental of all the practices we present in this book. When you bring to mind *it's all invented*, you remember that it's all a story you tell—not just some of it, but all of it. And remember, too, that every story you tell is founded on a network of hidden assumptions. If you learn to notice and distinguish these stories, you will be able to break through the barriers of any “box” that contains unwanted conditions and create other conditions or narratives that support the life you envision for yourself and those around you. We do not mean that you can just make anything up and have it magically appear. We mean that you can shift the framework to one whose underlying assumptions allow for the conditions you desire. Let your thoughts and actions spring from the new framework and see what happens.

THE PRACTICE

A simple way to practice *it's all invented* is to ask yourself this question:

*What assumption am I making,
That I'm not aware I'm making,
That gives me what I see?*

And when you have an answer to that question, ask yourself this one:

*What might I now invent,
That I haven't yet invented,
That would give me other choices?*

And then you can invent spaces, like the paper surrounding the nine dots, where four lines can do the work of five.

We now move on to the second practice, which entails inventing a new universe to live in, a universe of possibility.

THE SECOND PRACTICE

STEPPING INTO A

Universe of Possibility

ONCE YOU HAVE BEGUN to distinguish that *it's all invented*, you can create a place to dwell where new inventions are the order of the day. Such a place we call “the universe of possibility,” and stepping into it is our second practice. This universe—like the page that holds the nine dots—extends beyond the borders that confine us to our everyday reality.

You may ask, “What are these borders, and what is this everyday reality?”

THE WORLD OF MEASUREMENT

We propose to call our familiar everyday world the “world of measurement” in order to highlight the central position held by assessments, scales, standards, grades, and comparisons. In this story of the everyday, each of us strives for success, hoping to arrive at a better place than where we are. On our path to achieving a goal we inevitably encounter obstacles. Some of the more familiar ones, aside from other people, are scarcities of time, money, power, love, resources, and inner strength.

All the manifestations of the world of measurement—the winning and losing, the gaining of acceptance and the threatened rejection, the raised hopes and the dash into despair—all are based on a single assumption that is hidden from our awareness. The assumption is that life is about staying alive and making it through—*surviving* in a world of scarcity and peril. Even when life is at its best in the measurement world, this assumption is the backdrop for the play, and, like the invisible box around the nine dots, it keeps the universe of possibility out of view.

Certain responses are better suited than others to an environment where survival is the issue, all of which are prevalent in the world of measurement. Alertness to danger, a clever strategic mind, an eye for assessing friend and foe, a knack for judging strength and weakness, the know-how to take possession of resources, a measure of mistrust, and a good dollop of fear are some of the qualities that will safeguard us. Keeping our armor intact is of critical importance as well, which means resisting any challenge to our personal viewpoint.

We also feel more secure when we can identify objects and determine their location. An indication of this is that the term *minefield* stands as a universally appreciated metaphor for danger. It feels safer to deal with reality as though it were fixed, as though people, ideas, and situations can be fully known and measured.

We grow up in a world of measurement, and in this world, we get to know each other and things by measuring them, and by comparing and contrasting them. We know a child as compared to other children, a performance of a Puccini aria by a local tenor as contrasted to one sung by Pavarotti, or a company's year-end statement as it stacks up to earlier projections. In order to be in a position to assess, judge, and report on circumstances, the individual stands back, identifying himself, and by extension his group, as separate from others. That opinionated "little voice in the head" is almost always speaking from Measurement Central. Life in the measurement world seems to be arranged in hierarchies: some groups, people, bodies, places, and ideas seem better or more powerful than others. Lines appear, dividing an inside from an outside: some people, races, and organizations are safer and more desirable to belong to than others. There are only so many pieces of the pie.

The dramatic action in this world of success and failure has to do with overcoming odds and prevailing, or being acknowledged and included. Virtually every

children's book, every made-for-television special follows the pattern. Competition is the vehicle to success, and metaphors based on competitive sports and war are applied to almost any situation. Conversations among friends chronicle personal trials and triumphs. Certain feelings mirror the ups and downs of fortune in the world of measurement: love for our own, for instance, and sympathy for those weaker than we are; fear, anger, and despair at losing; and, of course, the exhilaration of having come out on top.

Just as virtually everybody adds the clause *within the square formed by the outer dots* to the instructions for the nine-dot puzzle; virtually everybody, whether living in the lap of luxury or in diminished circumstances, wakes up in the morning with the unseen assumption that life is about the struggle to survive and get ahead in a world of limited resources.

"Hey, bring some lines out here!"

A UNIVERSE OF POSSIBILITY

Let us suppose, now, that a universe of possibility stretches beyond the world of measurement to include all worlds: infinite, generative, and abundant. Unimpeded on a daily basis by the concern for survival, free from the generalized assumption of scarcity, a person stands in the great space of possibility in a posture of openness, with an unfettered imagination for what can be.

In the realm of possibility, we gain our knowledge by invention. We decide that the essence of a child is joy, and joy she is. Our small business attracts the label, "The Can-Do Company," and that is exactly who we are. We speak with the awareness that language creates categories of meaning that open up new worlds to explore. Life appears as variety, pattern, and shimmering movement, inviting us in every moment to engage. The pie is enormous, and if you take a slice, the pie is whole again.

The action in a universe of possibility may be characterized as generative, or giving, in all senses of that word—producing new life, creating new ideas, consciously endowing with meaning, contributing, yielding to the power of contexts. The rela-

tionship *between* people and environments is highlighted, not the people and things themselves. Emotions that are often relegated to the special category of spirituality are abundant here: joy, grace, awe, wholeness, passion, and compassion.

There are moments in everyone's life when an experience of integration with the world transcends the business of survival—like seeing a grandchild for the first time, witnessing an Olympic record broken or the uncommon bravery of an ordinary citizen. For many, the experience of attending the dismantling of the Berlin Wall or of witnessing the emergence of Nelson Mandela from twenty-seven years of imprisonment may have been such a moment. Some find admission to the realm of possibility at a religious gathering, some in meditation, some by listening to great music. Often people enter this state in the presence of natural beauty or at the sight of something of infinite magnitude, an expanse of ocean or a towering sky. These are moments when we forget *ourselves* and seem to become part of all being.

DOWN TO EARTH IN A UNIVERSE OF POSSIBILITY

It may seem that this chapter sets up a simplistic dichotomy between being successful and living a kind-hearted, feel-good life. Nothing could be further from our conviction. In fact, we are saying that, *on the whole*, you are more likely to extend your business *and* have a fulfilled life if you have the attitude that there are always new customers out there waiting to be enrolled rather than that money, customers, and ideas are in short supply. You are more likely to be successful, *overall*, if you participate joyfully with projects and goals and do not think your life depends on achieving the mark because then you will be better able to connect to people all around you. On the whole, resources are likely to come to you in greater abundance when you are generous and inclusive and engage people in your passion for life. There aren't any guarantees, of course. When you are oriented to abundance, you care less about being in control, and you take more risks. You may give away short-term profits in pursuit of a bigger dream; you may take a long view without being able to predict the

outcome. In the measurement world, you set a goal and strive for it. In the universe of possibility, you set the context and let life unfold.

SURVIVAL AND SURVIVAL-THINKING

Many people's lives are in daily jeopardy, and they must and do concentrate on staying alive, as any one of us would if held up on the street or lost at sea. That is not the same as survival-*thinking*, which is the indiscriminating, ongoing attitude that life is dangerous and that one must put one's energy into looking out for Number One.

True scarcity and scarcity-*thinking* are different phenomena as well. There are regions of the world where resources are locally scarce, where people lack for their most fundamental needs. However, scarcity-*thinking* is an attitude as prevalent among the well-heeled as among the down-at-heel, and remains unaltered by a change in circumstances. It is a fatalistic outlook, as profiled by the English economist Thomas Malthus in his 1798 "Essay on the Principle of Population" that predicts that supplies—which appear fixed and limited—will eventually run out. This attitude prompts us to seek to acquire more for ourselves no matter how much we have and to treat others as competitors no matter how little they have. Scarcity-thinking and real scarcity are interactive in the simple sense that the frenzied accumulation of resources by some leaves others without enough, in a world that has the means to supply the basic needs of everyone. They are correlated in that the indiscriminate use of the earth's resources, at a rate faster than the earth can regenerate, leaves the next generation with shrinking reserves.

HOW TO STEP THERE

Now we come to the heart of the matter. What is the practice that orients you to a universe of possibility? It is a practice for revealing the hidden framework from

which the world of measurement springs. When you see how thoroughly that framework, like the box around the nine dots, rules your life, you will have located yourself in the realm of possibility beyond it. So, first, ask yourself:

How are my thoughts and actions, in this moment, reflections of the measurement world?

You look for thoughts and actions that reflect survival and scarcity, comparison and competition, attachment and anxiety. Notice that the question is not, “Are my thoughts . . .” which is a question of assessment, but, “How are my thoughts . . .” which is a true inquiry. See how easy it is to argue that you are an exception, that you personally are not governed by any such set of assumptions. This, of course, is another example of the measurement world at work.

So when you notice yourself thinking, for instance, that this line of inquiry must apply to men more than to women because men are so competitive, and you recognize *that* thought as your first bit of evidence that your measurement mind is at work, you ask yourself again:

How are my thoughts and actions, in this new moment, a reflection of the measurement world?

And how now?

You keep asking the question until you finally appreciate how hopeless it is to escape being shaped by the assumptions that underlie all of life. And then you may begin to laugh. And when someone asks, “How are you?” it may appear to you utterly ridiculous to try to assess yourself, or to express life as a struggle and a burden, and before you know it, the word “perfect” may just pop out. And you will be smiling. For you will have stepped into a universe of possibility.

Of course, you won’t have *arrived*.