

give yourself an a

picture provided by ms. cotter



One of my favorite books is *The Art of Possibility* by Benjamin Zander and Rosamund Stone-Zander, a husband and wife. Benjamin Zander is the conductor for the Boston Philharmonic and Rosamund is an executive coach, therapist and teacher. They share 12 practices to help bring creativity into everything we do. One that I like best is “Giving an A,” and I’ll tell you why.

We all tend to be pretty hard on ourselves. We look in the mirror and critique our hair, our shape, our clothes. We dwell on the mistakes we make and the risks we do or don’t take. We frown on ourselves a lot. With all this self-criticism, if we were asked to give ourselves a grade, most of us would humbly offer a D or a C—certainly not an A. We are not our own best friends by a long stretch.

The Zanders do an exercise with their students called “Give Yourself an A.” It’s one that I have used with my own students at NYU to some degree of success. The students start the term by writing me a letter as if the term were already ended and they had received their grade. They build an outline for the things they will do to receive an A but they write the letter in the assumptive using phrases such as “I received an A in this course because...” They tell me all the reasons—they did outside readings so they could better participate in class discussions; they got their assignments completed in time and slept more. Just the concept of being considered an A student in the mind of their professor causes them to sit up, smile and believe in themselves. They write eloquent, creative letters about their capabilities.

Consider the possibility of writing a letter to give ourselves an A in life and to celebrate our capabilities. What might some of the parts of that letter be? Would we be thinking about our parents, children, or friends—relationships that are both challenging and rewarding? Would we consider not passing self-defeating judgment on the mistakes that are made in our relationships? We have the power to do that for ourselves.

What if we assumed that none of our friends and loved ones are in-

tionally trying to hurt us? Rather, most people are intentionally doing the best they can. Whether this is true or not, you are creating *your A*, not theirs. In *your A* there is no criticism, only positive thoughts and actions that can improve your interactions with others.

I recently read an interview of a 40-something actress who has a young daughter. She was asked, “What would you say to your younger self?” and answered, “I would say to go easy on yourself.” She continued that she wants her daughter to be able to feel good about herself and not be so self-critical. Being able to forgive your mistakes and “go easy” with yourself will help your children or anyone you mentor to learn how to “go easy” too.

Write this letter or journal it every day. When you wake up tomorrow start by looking in the mirror, smile at your beautiful self, forget yesterday, turn any mistakes into learning (there’s so much to learn—we’re never done!) and think about what an A looks like at the end of the day. Your letter may say: “I had fun, supportive conversations with friends and family. I honored myself by walking away from any negative interaction even while I assumed the best intent of others. I did not measure myself by anyone’s yardstick but my own and I received an A.”

You deserve it! We deserve it! Have fun creating your A. **HLM**

Andrea Cotter is senior advisor at Allegory Studios, Saratoga Springs, NY, and adjunct professor of strategic communication at NYU School of Professional Studies. Some believe respect is earned; others that it is granted. Andrea Cotter understands that both are true. She mastered senior roles at major US corporations and institutions; building teams, launching products and unveiling innovations in technology and healthcare globally. Today, Andrea coaches executives and students who are ready to embrace their own success, helping them to put in place strategies and tactics that will take them to the next level as they learn to overcome the obstacles that may hold them back.