

My Mentors
The People Who Have Most Influenced My Thinking
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
April 2, 2023

The most recent person to have had a profound impact upon my mindset, by which I mean impacted the way I routinely understand the world, was Peter Diamandis when I read his 2012 book, *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think*. Having one's mind altered in such a way is a life-changing event because it not only causes us to see things differently, but to experience them differently and to change how we live our lives. In my life, very few have altered my consciousness in such a way. I read Diamandis's book more than a decade ago and there has been no one since who has such a profound influence on me. I've read and met many people who have increased my understanding, but here I will only mention those who are always in the background of my mind influencing how I think and perceive the world.

I'll get back to Peter Diamandis later but will take them all in chronological order. The first person to have had a transformative impact on my worldview was Frederick Douglass, the 19th century slave turned abolitionist and statesman. Upon reading his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, published in 1845, I recognized the kind of courage and fortitude I wanted and needed to develop in order to escape the bondage of my childhood and to become a functional human being. Upon reading his narrative, I felt a special kinship with Douglass, not simply because my middle name happens to be Frederick, but because I felt he and I had endured a similar kind of suffering. We both lived under the whip of a cruel master.

Now, I can hear the outrage of my detractors fuming at the suggestion that a 21st century white man would dare compare anything he's had to endure to that of an 18th century slave. If all they see by looking at my gender and the color of my skin is a person of wealth and privilege who cannot possibly empathize with the suffering of others, they are themselves racists and sexists who lack this very ability. I will not share my own story here because they are unworthy of hearing it. By writing his *Narrative*, Douglass himself understood that his story could touch the hearts and minds of men and women of all colors, especially of his white brothers and sisters.

Here I will only say my childhood was filled with brutality and fear and constant danger. This environment made me frightened of everyone and everything. It twisted, stunted, and deformed me. It would take years for my head and heart to clear and for me to have the chance to become fully human and to achieve my full potential. But first, I had to escape the bondage that enslaved my heart, and mind, and body. And Douglass was the first person I'd ever heard of who went through a similar kind of daily fear and suffering and, through the might of his own power, found a way to escape and rise above it.

The section of his *Narrative* that had such a profound and liberating impact on me tells the story of Douglass's fistfight with Edward Covey, a cruel master who was particularly brutal and sadistic toward Douglass. It occurred after he'd been taken to the barn for another whipping by Covey, when Douglass decided, no matter what, he'd had enough. They fought for hours and were both

nearly beaten to exhaustion before it ended. Douglass wasn't fully emancipated after the fight, but he'd gained the respect of Covey, and, more importantly, a new respect for himself.

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.¹

Although it would be some time after this that Douglass would gain the freedom and sovereignty of his own body, it was then and there, in that barn, that he had liberated himself and become truly free. His courage and profound understanding of the importance and true nature of freedom helped shape my own understanding of freedom and the need to work toward a society that is truly free for everyone, and to resist enslavement, sadism, and authoritarianism in all its forms. This is why I am a liberal and why liberty and human dignity are the central tenants of my chosen religion.

I was eighteen in 1982 when Gandhi was brought to life for me by actor Ben Kingsley in director Richard Attenborough's Academy Award winning Best Picture by the same name. Gandhi, the nonviolent activist who liberated India from British tyranny in 1945, became a model for me in many ways. He showed me how powerful one person can be, even a tiny person without the physical strength or desire to ever use brute force against others. He taught me the importance of courageously facing injustice by confronting it directly. It is only through direct confrontation, even if we are beaten and abused in the process, that our opponents will come to recognize their unjust actions. Gandhi also taught me the importance of noncooperation with unjust systems. When they assume they have authority over you, you show them that they don't with acts of Civil Disobedience. When it comes to activism, he showed me the importance of being prophetic by doing things in ways that are outlandish enough to get some attention. This is how we project our voices and extend our power. Finally, he showed me all of these things—courage, direct action, noncooperation, and prophetic activism—must remain nonviolent. Just as soon as we become violent, our opponents justify their violence against us. It is only by remaining peaceful that they and the whole world will come to see who the true perpetrators are.

Shortly after my introduction to Gandhi, I found myself accidentally in college. I won't go much into this story now. Suffice it to say, I had always hated school, was a high school dropout, came from a blue-collar background, and had absolutely no desire to go back to school—ever! Yet, in short, the economy and job market was miserable in 1982 and I, like many, couldn't find work. But I had a minister who saw some potential in me and pulled some serious strings at Howard Payne University, a Southern Baptist College in the center of Texas, and since I had no place else to go, I

decided to give it a try. I figured it would at least provide me with “three hots and a cot” until the economy improved and I could find a job.

It was only there and then, while on academic probation, that I discovered Philosophy and, for the first time in my life, fell in love with learning, became a good student, and have been a lifelong learner ever since. Howard Payne was a small university with around 2,000 students and had but one Philosophy professor, Dr. Wallace Roark. It was Dr. Roark who, more than anyone else I’ll speak of today, has had the strongest and most lasting impact upon my mind. For it was he who taught me not what but *how* to think.

When I was his student, given we were both part of the Bible School, which required us to take at least two philosophy courses, Dr. Roark often used the Biblical Greek particles *men de* to epitomize his philosophy. Translated into English, it means “on the one hand, but on the other hand.” He also used to frequently say, “No human statement is ever adequate.” What he was trying to instill in his students was the understanding that none of can know the whole truth and that nothing we believe can be held with certainty. There’s always more to be understood and we should always consider things from different perspectives. Long after I’d graduated and shortly after his retirement, Dr. Roark published his book, *Think Like An Octopus: The Key to Becoming a Good Thinker, Think on the Other Hand*. He hadn’t used the octopus-analogy when I was his student, but I recognized its meaning immediately. It wasn’t enough to simply think on the other hand, but also on the other hand, and the other hand, and the other hand, and on and on.

I also studied logic under Dr. Roark, during which I learned the importance of sound thinking. It isn’t enough for us to simply give any reasons we can come up with to support our ideas, be they kneejerk opinions or deeply entrenched beliefs. Our thinking must be sound, meaning the reasons we give must support the ideas we espouse. “Becoming a good thinker” isn’t easy because we are emotionally prone to protect our beliefs, no matter how illogical and unsound they are. On my first day of logic class, Dr. Roark offered a disclaimer; “People think psychologically, not logically.” If we want to have intellectual integrity and be honest with ourselves (and many people don’t), we have to regularly question or most strongly held ideas and beliefs by considering how the opposite of what we think my also be true. Above all, Dr. Roark taught me that I cannot know anything with certainty and that I had to learn to appreciate (not merely tolerate) the uncertainty of life and of truth.

After graduating from HPU in 1986, moving to Louisville, Kentucky, and becoming a dropout again, this time from the Southern Baptist seminary, after just one semester, I renounced Christianity altogether. It wasn’t a hard or dramatic or resentful decision. I just grew out of it thanks to the excellent education I’d received at Howard Payne. Although my professors were all Baptist ministers, including Roark, they educated the Baptist out of me thanks to their use of the higher critical method and critical thinking. I could simply no longer believe the Bible was the inerrant word of God, that Jesus was divine, or that he was born of a virgin, walked on water, and rose from the dead.

My Mentors

One good thing about my brief seminary experience is that's where I met Peggy. We married in 1988 and became Unitarians in 1989. Rev. Phillip Ashely Smith was the guest speaker at First Unitarian Church in Louisville during our first visit there. All I'd ever heard prior to this were Christian sermons. If the soul was ever mentioned, it was something that needed to be saved for the afterlife. But Phil, a retired Unitarian minister turned Jungian psychotherapist, spoke of the soul as if were something present in this life that badly needs our attention.

After the service, shy as I was, I was compelled to introduce myself. We had lunch later that week, which was the beginning of a long and loving friendship that lasted until Phil passed away a few years ago. In addition to taking me under his wing, Phil turned me on to the work of psychologist Carl Jung. Between consuming almost everything Jung had ever written, and Phil, who tutored me in dream and inner-child work, I spent the next many years using psychology to better understand myself and the world.

I was still only 24-years-old when I met Phil and didn't realize how much I needed to work through my traumatic childhood, nor how badly it had impacted and twisted me up. When born and raised in any environment, no matter how horrible, it seems normal. It took getting away from it all to realize it wasn't supposed to be that way and that I needed deal with its ramifications. In this sense, Phil was one of my greatest mentors and friends in life. And, through his writings, Carl Jung was as much a spiritual mentor.

Yet, about a decade later I began to realize I would waste my life if I continued focusing on my own inner life. I had come to understand psychology enough to realize and accept that, like all of us, I would always be a little broken and that my past is what it was, unchangeable and in the past. I couldn't let my imperfections and hangups prevent me from being a productive member of society and a force for good in the world. It was time to turn my focus outward into the world in service of mankind. In 1999 I reentered the ministry as a Unitarian Universalist. Prior to this, even though I'd spent a decade of my life as a devout Christian, culminating in my ordination as a Southern Baptist Minister, there were no Christian thinkers ever to have become a strong or permanent influence on my worldview, not even Jesus.

It wasn't until I became a UU and began studying people like biologist Rupert Sheldrake, cosmologist Brian Swimme, theologian Andrew Harvey, and the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, that I discovered theologian Matthew Fox. Fox is a Catholic priest who was silenced and excommunicated after publishing *Original Blessing* in 2000, which was contrary to the Catholic doctrine of Original Sin. I knew of Fox at the time but hadn't read his books. But when I learned he founded a graduate school where all these other thinkers I had read were teaching, I knew I had to go. So, I became a student at *The University of Creation Spirituality* in Oakland, California.

During its student orientation, a faculty member guaranteed it would be a transformative experience. Inwardly, I scoffed, "That's a hell of a promise to make." But, for me, it was, indeed,

transformative, inasmuch as it fundamentally altered my mindset. Creation Spirituality has nothing to do with *Creationism*. It's about our connection to everything, beginning with the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago: to nature, the environment, the planet, to all people and all living beings, and to the entire Cosmos. Creation spirituality is also deeply ecumenical, meaning it includes inspiration from all the world's religions, as well as science, philosophy, and other disciplines, the same as Unitarian Universalism does. To this day I consider this my spirituality—a down to Earth, tangible, substantive spirituality—and I count Matthew Fox among my life's great mentors.

For those who know me, I would be entirely remiss if I fail to mention social psychologist Erich Fromm who, more than anyone else, has informed and shaped the way I have come to understand the human condition and my purpose as a human being. In trying to comprehend how entire societies can become authoritarian, Fromm realized it stems from our conflicting need for both freedom and belonging, to be authentic individuals while also part of community. Too much freedom and we become sadistic. Too much belonging and we become masochistic. And it is this sadomasochistic response to the conflict between freedom and belonging that results in authoritarian societies, communities, and families like the one I grew up in.

The healthy response to this dilemma is to learn to love ourselves and others. Love, however, is not an emotion but a way of treating ourselves and others with respect, and care, and the wish to help those we love to grow and achieve their fullest potential. In society, this means everything we do, all of our institutions and tasks, must be for the benefit of human welfare and individual unfolding. This, in brief, is my categorical imperative, the fundamental ethic I have come to live by, thanks to another of my spiritual mentors, Erich Fromm.

I want to begin to close by mentioning three other ideological mentors: physicist Frank Tipler, scientist, inventor, and futurist, Ray Kurzweil, and the fellow I began with, entrepreneur and philanthropist Perter Diamandis.

I've read only one book by Frank Tipler, but it was enough to be a mind-altering experience. In *The Physics of Immortality*, published in 1995, Tipler explores the physical possibility of resurrection. He dismisses the supernatural resurrection of Jesus as having been impossible. But given the exponential advances of technology, he also predicts it will not only become possible but is most likely inevitable. But what really blew me away was his reference to the beings of the future who will be nonorganic machines as "people." They are the beings we will evolve into, or that will evolve from us. This thought jives well with Creation Spirituality and its understanding that the Universe has been evolving a lot longer than humans have been around and will continue to do so long after we're gone. This gave me a new appreciation for the emergence of machines and their important place in the evolving and emerging intelligence of the Universe.

Ray Kurzweil expanded upon this in his more recent 2005 bestseller, *The Singularity is Near*, the point at which machine intelligence will exceed human intelligence. By then, however, we will

likely be the machines, having merged with them through the normal processes of coevolution. They will be human machines, Tipler's "people" of the future. Kurzweil's mind-altering explanation of this, which has given me a framework for understanding and coping with the epoch of exponential change we are now in, makes him another ideological mentor.

Finally, it was Peter Diamandis's 2012 book *Abundance* that turned me into a lover of technology and an optimist about the future. Much of the negativity we see in the news, and because we are neurologically wired to look for danger, blinds us to the abundance of good things happening around us. We feel pessimistic about the world even though the evidence proves most things are better than ever. Global Warming has to be our greatest challenge and is something all of us should be worrying about. But the good news is most of us are, and there are many individuals and organizations with the knowledge and resources working hard to resolve this crisis. We just don't often hear about them.

I'm such a devotee that in 2018 I attended Diamandis's and Kurzweil's Singularity University in Palo Alto, California, received a certificate from its executive program, and have been a member of the Abundance Digital Community ever since. As a result, I'm more optimistic about life and the future than I've ever been. Although realistic about the work and challenges before us, I'm confident we're going to overcome them.

These are the individuals who have most influenced my mindset over the years and remain with me always in the background of my thinking processes. You may have noticed none of them are female. This is so, I believe, because my education, like most my age, was shortchanged by the "hidden figures syndrome," which has prevented most of us from knowing the great female thinkers in history. There are some contemporary female thinkers who have greatly increased my understanding of certain topics, like Jungian psychologist Marie Louise von Franz, child psychologist Alice Miller, developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan, theologian Karen Armstrong, and, most recently, actress/activist Candace Bergen. But they, again, have only increased my understanding, not permanently altered my perspective. What's important to me is to understand my worldview and where it came from and why I think and act the way I do. Be they male or female, gay or straight, white or nonwhite, or any other identity is of no consequence to me. It matters only that their brilliance can better my ever-evolving curious mind.

¹ Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (p. 21). Digireads.com. Kindle Edition.