

Have You Broken Your Four-Minute Mile?

by Robert Bengston

What follows is an edited transcript of Robert Bengston's share at a ServiceSpace gathering in 2017.

What a compliment to just be in this room. Thank you, it's a real honor. It really became underscored ever since I arrived, every person I met, every pair of eyes that I look into feels so profound to me. I mean, it reminds me that we are at the edges of ourselves as individuals and we are at the edge of our humanity.

I first became introduced to ServiceSpace through a salon where Nipun was speaking. This was many years ago, right when the project Inspiration Campaign was coming to me. When I heard Nipun speak and talk about ServiceSpace and feel his presence in front of the room, the one word that came to me was just yes. Yes to what I was experiencing, yes to what he was creating, what he had already created. It was not only inspiring but it was validating. It was validating about what has already been created. It's meaningful because it's taking philosophy and making it a reality.

I call it the four minute mile breaker because before Bannister broke the four minute mile it was a huge debate -- is it possible, is it not possible? Is it possible, is it not possible? They were just talking about it and talking about it and talking about it. Once Bannister ran it in 3:59 -- it was over. The conversation was over. It's possible. Every experience I've had of what ServiceSpace is, is the breaking of that four minute mile. It's showing that there is a force called altruism that can create in the world.

It's a paradigm shift embodied in all the choices that everyone here is making. It's the synergy of the individual with a like minded community. I love the theme of your retreat -- intrinsic motivation. Really, I never heard those two words together. When I was pondering the question, I asked myself: what is that within ourselves that moves us to action? I see that as emblematic of a new human story.

I've met so many people tonight that are -- in their own way -- creating, breaking the four minute miles. And why are we doing it? What's the intrinsic motion behind it? For me, intrinsic motivation is our own guiding system. It's almost re-defining what it means to be selfish. I grew up with an idea that selfishness was a bad thing, that left to our own devices we'd be destructive. My experience, however, is that left to our own devices, we can also grow in service to something greater than ourselves and expand our notion of the self. Your impulse to be drawn by what you love guides you and manifests through all these different forms. And ServiceSpace is like the magnet that the metal filings can orient to. It helps inform why we do what we do when we acknowledge that we're at the edge of humanity. It reminds me of a tour guide when you got to another country -- and the tour guide has a little flag which guides people where to go to. Shifting our perception of what it means to be human is, I think, the most powerful we can

do.

When I was thinking about the impact of ServiceSpace's essence of generosity and service, I see it as ripples of kindness. ServiceSpace has encapsulated the fundamental idea that while you can count the number of seeds in an apple you can't count the number of apples in a seed.

It changes our notion of scarcity. There is no scarcity -- a seed can keep going forever and ever. The impact that a ripple of generosity can have, you never know when you use your will to be of service, to do an act or a word or a thought. Yet that word or gesture can live on forever in its impact. You are not trying to create the ripple but the ripple ends up happening and sometimes you will never know it's reach. I think that's beautiful.

I have a personal story about that ripple because it really is one of the main seeds of this whole project that I'm doing. For the last 25 years, I've been a photographer by trade. In 2008, I was about to make an interactive art installation and I kind of felt like Noah. Like, "You want me to do what?" They're like, "Make this thing." It was a series of installations that as a side note lead me to the power of participation and how creativity can create these new kinds of paradigms. My third installation was around beliefs and we assembled a whole collection of beliefs and narrowed them down to 13 that we put on the outside of the art structure. I decided to use all the beliefs because they were really good and printed them on cards to give them out during this week long festival that the art was in.

When I went to pick up the cards at the printer, with whom I had already done a couple prior projects, he looked at me and said, "I made you a couple extra." He had a little twinkle in his eye. Then I looked at the sheets and he had just let the print run 10 more sheets, which was 500 more cards. It was a very simple gesture on his part, but now, I had so many cards that after the festival I still kept giving out the cards. Ever since, I've been carrying this pouch of cards and I've been giving out those inspiring cards.

The apple that the printer gave me not only planted this experience but now has rippled into some of the most gratifying experiences of my life. Giving these cards to strangers -- the UPS driver and my seven year old neighbor. I've printed and given out in one form or another over 100,000 cards since his gesture, his gift.

In 2011, I was down by the water's edge in Tiburon. Beautiful summer, Indian summer day. In a distance, I see an airplane pulling a banner in the sky. On the East Coast where I grew up, in the summer time, people would fly personal messages up and down the beach. I just remember that as being really cool, as a young boy raised outside of Philadelphia. And now here I am in Tiburon, with my dog, on a beautiful day, beautiful blue sky. I see this plane but I can't see what it's pulling. It was like it knew I couldn't see and it was teasing me. Every time I looked, it wasn't quite readable. I keep walking alongside the plane to get a clear view -- and then, finally, I'm lined up. I'm standing there and it's going to come right in front of me and I'm all ready, what is this going to say? It's getting closer and closer. I'm on the edge of my seat.

Then it's here. I can't believe it. I feel like a total chump. It's a Geico ad. A stack of money with the googly eyes on it.

I just stood there like, "You've got to be kidding me." As a visual artist I'm thinking, "This is our humanity, this is now what's happening." I had about 30 seconds of just jadedness, dismay, sadness but I had a pouch of rectangles at my side that I'd been given as a gift from this man who probably never thought twice about it. That ability, because I had the cards I realized, "Wait. You could just pull another rectangle behind that plane. You could do anything you want behind that plane." That was the start of the Inspiration Campaign which is this vision of using people power to change our rectangles of advertising into sources of positive inspiring input that touch the human spirit. In the last three years we've put up 35 billboards around San Francisco that have had 15 million plus media impressions and it tracks back to that printer. I wouldn't maybe have made that connection if I didn't have this pouch of cards which was given to me as this gift. I'm at the kindergarten stage of this project and I think that this project has the potential of helping playing its role of shifting human consciousness and being a four minute mile breaker because this guy let the press run for 10 more seconds.

It's like he gave me an apple and it was enough for him in that moment to give me that apple. That was a delicious, honey crisp apple and that moment was defined and complete in itself. Those seeds have led to hundreds of thousands of cards, meaningful moments, more meaningful than I've ever had with strangers. It led to thousands of dollars of orders for his business. It led to connecting the dots to be inspired to create this vision of transforming advertising to offer a gift of a meaningful moment.

I think that the essence of ServiceSpace is around the choices we make which create ripples of generosity and service whose ultimate outcome no one in this room will ever know. Tapping into the reality of that is an aspect of why it's so satisfying to be of service.

I encourage us that in our gestures of using our lives to give out these proverbial apples, that we know that some of those apples, some of those seeds in those apples are going to take root and they're going to grow, and that, that one gesture could live on forever.

I am honored to be among all these apple givers. Thank you.