The Business of Life

By

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When Corporations Rule the World, is a 1995 bestseller written by Harvard Business professor David Korten, about the many ways that multinational corporations and global financial systems have concentrated power at the expense of democracy, local communities, and the environment. It's eye-opening and well-substantiated by the author's own experiences and expertise. I once had the good fortune of hearing Korten lecture during a class I took in Oakland, California many years ago.

His book, however, did not alter the beliefs I already held about corporations at the time, but only reinforced my pessimistic view that most corporations are profit driven entities that will stop at nothing to take as much for themselves as possible, even at the expense of everyone and everything else. And why wouldn't I hold such an opinion? Why wouldn't anyone? Since the 1970's corporate leaders have been taught the doctrine of economist Milton Friedman, that their social, ethical, and, often, legal priority must be to increase company profits.

That was the business ethic I believed had led to an economy of a few haves at the top and to many have nots at the bottom. There's much truth to this view, but it has also been so of our societies throughout human history, not just those that have engaged in capitalism. It is Democracy that was supposed to be the system that could promote a free economy while preventing such excesses and inequality. It hasn't, especially in recent years, which could be why, for the past two decades in the U.S., including this past week, Americans have consistently voted, almost desperately, for change—not the experienced leadership Hillary Clinton ran on in 2008, nor just getting back to normal that Kamala Harris reassured us she'd bring in 2024. Voters want radical change, which is why Obama was elected in 2008, Trump in 2016 and 2024, and why there was a blue wave this week that included the election of many nontraditional candidates.

So, I'm not an apologist for corporations, crony capitalism, or government corruption, but over the years, because of my study of philosophy and psychology, I also continue to ask myself how my own assumptions might be wrong. This has led me to accept a few uncommon premises that shape how I think about the business of life and the businesses of our lives.

1. There are many good reasons to have hope and to be optimistic about the future.
2. I believe most people are good; by which I mean they care about the welfare of others.
3. Individuals are also multifaceted and we do our best to be good while contending with ethically ambiguous circumstances, personal and cultural biases, and our own psychological and emotional hangups.
4. Our purpose in life is to fully unfold as individuals, by which I mean to become our best selves, and to help others do the same, or, at least, to not get in their way of doing so.

5. Corporations, being human enterprises, and their leaders, being human beings, are essentially good and exist to promote human welfare.
6. Capitalism and socialism are not theories or beliefs we can choose or reject but the normal means by which people everywhere are able to peacefully trade and share with each other.
7. People are not poor because others are wealthy, any more than some are sick because others are healthy.
8. Achieving fairness, justice, and equality does not mean everyone is the same or must have the same.

I won't go into depth about any of these, but, together, they lead me to think differently, perhaps more tolerantly, forgivingly, and appreciatively of those in the corporate world. Over the years these premises have led me to believe in the fundamental goodness of most human beings, the poor ones, the rich ones, and the powerful ones. This doesn't mean there aren't any companies and CEOs that are purely profit driven. Clearly there are. But it does mean, in my opinion, that the majority conduct their businesses ethically and with the welfare of others in mind. As I often say, corporations are not persons and should not have the same rights as persons, but they are owned by persons, run by persons, employed by persons, all of whom work in the service of persons.

Like any of us, as human enterprises, the corporations, companies, and businesses we establish are nuanced, multifaceted, and complex. Few always do the right thing and, like any of us, sometimes struggle to know what the right thing is. And life is full of risks, ambiguity, and unintended consequences as we struggle to make the best decisions we can.

Let's consider Elon Musk, for example. He's a very controversial and complicated figure. Some loathe him. Others admire him. To me, he is a multifaceted person with his personal issues and shortcomings, like all of us, who mostly attempts to do what he believes is right. As the wealthiest person on Earth, and one of its most powerful, we can all witness and judge the impacts of his attempts in real time because they often have tremendous consequences.

As someone who also had a hard childhood, I empathize a lot with Elon Musk. Still, there are some things he has done, especially in recent months, that trouble me. To be clear, however, I am not troubled because his politics are different than mine. His beliefs are his own and he has every right to them. I am troubled, rather, because of the negative consequences the decisions of such an influential and powerful individual can have in the lives of so many people. I also believe he makes such decisions convinced he is doing the right thing, just as any of us do, right or wrong.

I'm troubled, for instance, by his involvement and actions in the Department of Government Efficiency and the metaphorical chainsaw he took to many of the jobs and programs millions of Americans depended on. This action did not promote human welfare or the common good. I'm troubled, after having left DOGE, agreeing to concentrate his efforts on his company, and becoming the world's first trillionaire in the process, he is once again a "special government employee" as the

co-leader of the Pentagon's Project Meridian on the future of warfare. And I am troubled that most recently, after first denying any involvement, he has admitted to ordering the disruption of Ukraine's access to satellite services while they are defending themselves in an unprovoked war with Russia. But I am even more troubled that our system of government, mainly because Republican legislators neglected to do their jobs, has allowed such a powerful figure, who has not been democratically elected, the ability to makes such major choices on our behalf.

I'm also troubled that our system continues to allow big money to shape our election processes. We can't blame Musk for that, but the U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision allowing the wealthiest Americans to contribute billions to political causes and candidates. As unfair as that seems, however, as we witnessed again this week, vastly outspending a political opponent is no guarantee they will lose.

Back to Musk. I admire and appreciate him for all the good things he has done for humanity and the environment. It was Musk who invented a successful electric vehicle industry, not to get rich, but to help solve the environmental catastrophe we are facing because of fossil fuels. It was Musk who singlehandedly took on NASA and the Government to open the space program to private companies in his wish to make ours an interplanetary species should any kind of calamity ever strike the Earth. It is Musk who funded the largest incentive prize in history, the $100 million XPRIZE Carbon Removal contest announced on Earth Day in 2021, for the person or team that invented a scalable solution that would remove no less than 1,000 tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and oceans per year with a clear path to a gigatons per year. The prize was awarded in 2025. Additionally, his Neuralink company is giving agency back to people who have been locked into their bodies after debilitating accidents and illnesses, enabling them to speak, operate computers, and reengage with their friends and family. His Starlink company, launched in 2018, again, not to make him wealthy, but to solve a problem by providing internet services to billions of people living in rural, remote, and indigenous communities. It now provides such services to over 160 countries, connecting off-grid schools and rural health clinics in places like Kenya, Armenia, and remote mountain villages in Bolivia, enabling online education and telehealth services for the first time. Most recently, he committed to giving every kid in America a share of SpaceX beginning next year, which may represent something even bigger, a new way of figuring out how to more equitably distribute the wealth generated by the many benefits of living in the U.S. We'll see.

My point here is that as much as some may disagree with Elon Musk about his political involvement, and the harm they have caused millions, he has also created a lot of good for millions more. We all do this. Musk just does so at scale. But, like all of us, he is in the continuing process of becoming, hopefully becoming better, even as he sometimes stumbles along the way. And when he does stumble, whether we agree with him or not, it is because, like all of us, be believes he is doing the right thing.

Having said all of this, and using Musk as an example of the struggles, complexities, and contradictions in all of us, my point here is the business of business ought to be the same as the business of life, to become our best while working to promote human welfare and the common good.

Social psychologist Erich Fromm believed that each individual is unique, differing from one another in our "particular blending of character, temperament, talents, [and] dispositions," as we do at our "fingertips."[1] He also said, "The duty to be alive is the same as the duty to become oneself, to develop into the individual one potentially is."[2] That's hard, given how much we also want to belong and how much social pressure there is to conform to the expectations of others. We should consider this when we are quick to judge others who act and think differently than ourselves, or when we see their folly without also recognizing their good.

For unfolding as individuals means more fully developing our capacity to love. Fromm said, "[human] purpose cannot be fulfilled in a state of unrelatedness to the world…"[3] And that love is the "power by which [we relate ourselves] to the world and make it truly [ours]."[4] He also outlined a detailed definition of what love is, not a mood, not a feeling, but, "*the sense of responsibility, care, respect, knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further [that person's] life.*"[5] It is "the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love."[6] That's a bit of a dichotomy, isn't it? Becoming more fully human, more fully ourselves, by looking out for the welfare and growth of others?

But this is the humanistic approach to the problem of ethics, to knowing the difference between right and wrong; to knowing what we ought to do when life and its many moral dilemmas pull us in different directions. As I often repeat, Fromm also wrote that "*the sole criterion of ethical value 'must be human welfare'*"[7] and that *"the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities."*[8]

So that's the business of life, fulfilling the duty to become ourselves by realizing our fullest capacity to love, expressed in our service to human welfare and the development of every person.

And since, as I have said, businesses, from the small family owned to gigantic corporations, are human enterprises, it is also their business. That is to say, the business of every business ought to be service to human welfare and individual unfolding. In some industries, achieving this is straightforward. Farmers grow food in service of humanity since it is obvious we all must eat. Grocery stores provide easy access to consumers, keeping prices competitive while as affordable as possible. Teachers, nurses, social workers, social servants; they are fulfilling this criterion in spades!

It's going to be harder for those in the fossil fuel industry to figure out how they can continue to serve human welfare, but they can if they put their humanity and the humanity of others before

any other priority. In our age of climate related disasters, it's becoming increasingly difficult for insurance companies to remember what they are about and to know how they will afford to remain ethical while dealing with extraordinarily expensive losses. But they will figure it out so long as they keep returning to the humanistic ethic rooted in human welfare and individual unfolding. For doing business provides us the opportunity to both grow our individual capacity to love while also working toward greater human welfare. That's fundamentally what doing business is about, even if many have forgotten it, or have been taught otherwise.

Yet, as a humanist and Unitarian who believes in the fundamental goodness of humanity, I think it is the business of most businesses. There are some, perhaps many—the ones we hear about in the news, like Enron, or the Tabacco industry—that are only in it for themselves. But most begin and exist to provide a simple human service, or, like Tesla, to solve a major human challenge, like global warming. And, like all of us, most of them sometimes get lost along the way, confused about what to do when facing a damned if you do, damned if you don't decision, or when succumbing to the self-deception of their own psychological hangups and shortcomings.

When this happens, also like us as individuals, business leaders ought to recalibrate and move forward with their fundamental duty to make the world a more loving place by working in service of human welfare. This is so whether we are owners or employees. The duty to become the one person we are meant to be by developing our capacity to love in service of human welfare is always our main job. For the business of business is the same as the business of life and it is that business that will always point us in the right direction.

[1] Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 20.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 14.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Fromm, Erich. *The Art of Loving (p. 37).* Open Road Media. Kindle Edition

[6] Ibid., p. 21.

[7] Ibid., p. 13.

[8] Ibid., p. 229