

## PART ONE

# BUSINESS

*“All serious daring starts from within.”*

—Eudora Welty

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## CHAPTER 1

# Business without Greed

The telegram was the e-mail of its day. Sent by wire and hand-delivered in yellow envelopes by Western Union messengers, telegrams were yesteryear’s “instant” communication. Many were clever, including one from movie star Cary Grant responding to a telegram sent by a reporter. The scribe wanted to know Grant’s age, but since these wired messages were expensive and the company charged by the word, the reporter stripped his query to its essence:

HOW OLD CARY GRANT?

The reply was quick and equally terse:

OLD CARY GRANT FINE. HOW YOU?

Words matter. After all, they’re the chief way we human types communicate ideas and meanings to one another. Unfortunately, just as words can be used to enlighten, they’re also used by the devious and the self-serving to obfuscate, distort, and narrow. Insidiously, some of our country’s broadest, most vibrant social concepts have been run through the establishment’s word-wringer to squeeze out

the richness and flatten the definition. Such big, juicy, vital, pulsating, essential ideas as “citizen,” “consumer,” and “community” have gotten the shrink treatment, and we’ll get to all of them in subsequent chapters, showing how you can enlarge, elevate, and revitalize them.

But let’s start with one concept that most Americans rarely consider: business.

What is business?

*(Come on, you two, don’t toy with us. What’s to know about business? There’s Wal-Mart, McDonald’s, Exxon, AT&T, Safeway, Nike, and all those other brand names. Look at the logos on the tall buildings and sports arenas, or go to the mall, or just watch TV. Lookie here, I’m wearing a Mickey Mouse T-shirt and headed to Toys ‘R’ Us—now that’s business, amigo.)*

Wrong. Those are merely examples of a particular and constricted form of business called the Corporation. Such branded behemoths don’t represent the breadth and depth of business any more than piranhas represent the many wondrous species of fish. While multinational corporations are the most powerful and recognizable business structures today, they certainly are not the only way to organize commerce—and for both society and individuals, these massive syndicates turn out to be the least desirable way.

That’s because a giant corporation exists solely for itself, operating strictly to enlarge its bottom line and enrich the wealthiest elites who own and run it. Corporations are artificial legal fictions (a scrap of paper, really) that let their owners reap profits without having to be personally responsible for any harm done in pursuit of those profits. The corporation itself has no feelings, no conscience, no heart, no soul, no morality, no shame—no butt to kick and no body to put in jail.

The humans who run these things operate within the confines of a rigid corporate ethos that has a military-like abhorrence of freewheeling ideas (as in, “When I want your opinion, soldier, I’ll give it to you”). The closest one might come to institutional “spirit” can be found at Wal-Mart, where the morning shift is expected to come to work early for a group chant of the daily cheer. “Gimme a W!” shouts the shift manager. “W,” barks the dutiful group. “Gimme an A!” And so on.

Big corporations are purposefully structured to be hierarchical, autocratic, regimented, secretive, antidemocratic, extractive, exploitative, avaricious, self-aggrandizing, absentee organizations that are out to grab as much profit as quickly as possible. Not that their mission is to do *intentional* harm (whether by downsizing workers, polluting our air and water, cheating consumers, crushing competitors, deceiving shareholders, corrupting government, stifling communities, or generally running roughshod over society at large). But such harm is as inevitable as it is prevalent, due to the inherently selfish nature of these giants. If anyone or anything happens to be standing between top executives and an extra dime in profit, the “corporate ethic” commands that the executives bolt for the dime. Tough luck for whoever and whatever gets caught in the stampede.

This profit imperative is never debated where we peons might offer an opinion, but in the boardrooms, think tanks, and corporate conferences, it’s the first consideration in all discussions. No less a light than Milton Friedman, the laissez-faire economic guru and patron saint of self-absorbed CEOs, once asked himself this question: “Do corporate executives, provided they stay within the law, have responsibilities in their business activities other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible?”

I know you’re dying of curiosity to know his answer, so here it is: “No, they do not.”

Such a narrow ethic is a blank check for mischief on a grand scale. And mischief is what we’re getting—there are so many corporate scandals that they no longer scandalize, so many greedheaded abuses that they’re now the norm, with fresh ones in the news daily.

By the way, Friedman was being disingenuous when he tossed in the little prophylactic phrase that CEOs can do just about anything “provided they stay within the law.” Come on, professor—you don’t need a PhD to spell BS! Did he not know that we know that corporate executives and lobbyists buy the law, write the law, bend it, twist it, pervert it, slice-dice-grate-and-grind it finer than a Ronco Veg-O-Matic?

Most laws governing corporate behavior are weaker than Canadian hot sauce and rarely enforced. When the occasional watchdog

agency does attempt enforcement, the punishment is usually nothing but a fine, which then gets reduced on appeal. It's cheaper to pay the fines than to stop the abuses. Companies can simply factor these assessments into their annual budgets as a normal cost of doing business, and (*warning: prepare for infuriating fact*) many of these civil fines for wrongdoing are merely deducted from the corporation's income tax!

Yeah, yeah, some of the Enron honchos got nailed in 2006 for looting the pocketbooks of thousands of shareholders, workers, and retirees. No surprise, since the top dogs, Ken Lay and Jeffrey Skilling, caused the jury to break into a collective fit of disbelieving guffaws when the two claimed innocence on the grounds that even though they were in charge, they had no clue—*no clue at all*—that there was hanky-panky going on. All they knew is that one day the corporation totally collapsed, and they found tens of millions of dollars in unexplained Enron cash in their own pockets. God works His wonders in mysterious ways.

(*Startling postscript*: After their convictions, Lay piously declared to the assembled media outside the courthouse, "We believe that God, in fact, is in control." I guess so! Only six weeks later, Lay was struck down by a sudden heart attack and died. Apparently God-Who-Is-In-Control called him home. Or . . . sent him elsewhere.)

Even more startling—at least to the hard-hit victims of Ken's finagling—is that after Lay croaked, a federal judge abruptly threw out the entire case against him! Citing a little-known and highly questionable judicial precedent called "abatement," the judge ruled that since the dearly departed could no longer pursue the appeals in his case, he must be deemed "innocent." So here's a guy who crashed his company and vaporized more than five thousand jobs and a billion dollars in employee pensions, a guy who walked away from the debacle with an ill-gotten \$99 million in his pockets, a guy who was *found guilty* of six counts of fraud and conspiracy—and he gets his criminal conviction vacated, his trial record erased, and his indictment dismissed, as though nothing had ever happened.

Also, because Ken-the-dead-man is now officially innocent, the millions of dollars' worth of Enron cash that he stashed in his family

estate stays there, rather than going toward restitution for the families he harmed. Even in death, the corporate honchos benefit from the law.

This bias is systemic, with corporate tentacles now tightly wrapped around our economy, government, environment, and culture. They're squeezing ever harder, strangling our society, choking the enormous grassroots potential of this great country. By defining business in the narrowest terms of global corporate interests, we sublimate all else to their bottom line, leaving only incidental room for the *multiple goals* of our community, including:

Time for family and friends

Personal satisfaction of workers

Encouragement of creativity

Promotion of discourse

Welcoming of dissent

Building of strong, local relationships

Good stewardship

. . . and, dare we add,

Fun

Laughter

The pursuit of happiness

A sense of shared purpose and belonging

A feeling of being respected and valued

The common good

Why should we give up all that? As individuals and as citizens of a country, why should we let a cabal of greedheads and boneheads define society's goals, reducing us to worker cogs and consumer ciphers in their lifeless machine?

*(And away we go, Hightower, with another of your leftie, hate-America screeds, trying to rouse the rabble with all that pursuit of happiness crap. You know what your problems is, doncha, Jimbo? You're just antibusiness, that's what! Hey, that*

*old president, Calvin Coolidge, got it right years ago: “The chief business of the American people is business.” Get over it.)*

Me, antibusiness? Hardly. I grew up in business. My parents, “High” and Lillie Hightower, owned and ran a small wholesale magazine business, along with the Main Street Newsstand, in Denison, Texas. My first job was wrangling bundles of magazines into my daddy’s delivery truck. (*Odd personal tidbit:* At twelve years old, I was entrusted with backing the truck down an alley and into position at the loading dock. Thus, I first learned to drive by going backward. Let the psychoanalysts make of that what they will.)

Antibusiness? I saw and deeply admired the entrepreneurial gumption and the hard, hard work my parents put into their business. I saw them respect and fairly reward the employees who worked with them. I saw how much they enjoyed their customers, always shooting the breeze and joshing with them, thereby making a visit to their store much more than a mere commercial transaction. I saw them under strain from time to time—they regularly had to wrestle with the bankers, needed to fight the chain stores, and ultimately had to survive a Wal-Mart. I saw them make a go of the business for some forty years, enabling them to provide a modest but happy middle-class upbringing for me and my brothers, Jerry and Larry.

Antibusiness? I worked my way through college as assistant manager of the chamber of commerce in Denton, Texas.

Antibusiness? As George W. might put it: “Not only am I in favor of business, *I are one!*” Since 1991, I’ve been the proprietor and “chief of stuff” at Saddle-Burr Productions, where I work with a small staff of smart, energetic people who handle the business of running my mouth—daily radio commentaries, weekly newspaper columns, monthly newsletter, frequent speeches, the occasional book, and so forth. I know both the joys and the tribulations of having to deliver a product in the marketplace, meet a payroll, cover the rent and the health care . . . and generally do business.

The essential question to ask is this: What kind of business? Today’s corporations like to cite old Cal Coolidge’s business-of-America line, but they conveniently leave out his follow-up thought, which came only three lines later: “Of course, the accumulation of wealth cannot be



“The idea of reinventing American capitalism sounds far-fetched, I know, and especially improbable considering the market-centered orthodoxy that reigns in conventional thinking. I can report, nevertheless, that many Americans are already at work on the idea in various scattered ways (though usually not with such sweeping declarations of intent). They are experimenting in localized settings—tinkering with the ways in which the system operates—and are convinced that alternatives are possible, not utopian schemes but self-interested and practical changes that can serve broader purposes. This approach seems quite remote from the current preoccupations of big politics and big business, but this is where the society’s deepest reforms usually have originated in the American past. The future may begin among ordinary people, far distant from established power, who are brave enough to see themselves as pioneers.”

—William Greider, *The Soul of Capitalism*

justified as the chief end of existence.” Coolidge continued with “It’s only natural that people seek some level of wealth, but there are many other things we want very much more.” Then he garnished his point with this flourish: “The chief ideal of the American people is idealism.”

You don’t hear that uplifting thought quoted very much, do you? Yet in terms of business alone, there are many ways to organize commerce—so unleash your idealism! Business can be designed around goals more worthwhile than merely funneling the mass of commercial wealth to a royal elite of CEOs and über-rich financial speculators. Among the structural possibilities are family enterprises, co-ops, partnerships, sole proprietorships, local markets, supply associations, bartering, buying clubs, and . . . (use your imagination).

The knee-jerk reaction is to dismiss alternatives out of hand as being small stuff, un-American, nonglobal, unworkable. But try telling that to the millions of Americans who’re making smaller-scale, independent businesses work for them, their communities, and people around the world.