The Other Half of the Dialogue

by Adrienne Rosen

Même si l'auteure croit que certaines connaissances de l'entreprise peuvent être enseignées, elle dit cependant que ces connaissances ont peu à voir avec curiosité, imagination, créativité et spontanéité, les éléments essentiels de l'esprit d'entreprise.

My business partner and I have a running feud around the question of whether or not entrepreneurship can be taught. My reply is cut-and-dried, clear and distinct, not negotiable, and simply put: no! It is this irascible response, coupled with the set of my jaw and the angle of my head that conveys my angst. It is a culture that is both public and private, cognitive and emotional. The only connection someone like this might have to the broader based concept of culture is as a model or construct of power that is beyond her reach.

I am reminded of my own life and how I got from there to here. I left high school in grade nine. In fact, I was expelled on several occasions. I moved out of the house at the age of 15, collected welfare, and worked part time as an organist in a church. I took far too many drugs and had no sense of direction. Then, happily for me, the women's movement came along and I jumped on the band wagon. It gave me a real opportunity to express my rage with my lot in life and provided me with love and support that I don't think any other group could have paralleled. If you look back to the early seventies and the whole "sisterhood is powerful movement" you might remember the all-encompassing love that enveloped all the hungry female souls who turned up at its doors. Women's centres, self-defence centres and the like were hands-on, user-friendly nests of safety. These pre-politically correct institutions provided guidance and assistance, love and acceptance that welcomed all classes. More importantly, the women's movement of yesteryear was upwardly mobile. Skills were exchanged, introductions were arranged, and government grants were procured. Rather than wanting to join the concealed masses of snivelling bureaucracy, women in the movement sought to escape and subvert it.
I started my first business with a welfare cheque. Now here is where the entrepreneurship starts: I was a brash, angry, impatient, and ignorant woman who was in many ways alienated from standard heterosexual, middle class culture. Looks pretty bad on paper, doesn’t it? Now add to the hopper loving support in the form of hugs, suggestions, hand holding, and a little cash to invest (let’s not forget the welfare cheque) and a distinct wish to remain as free as possible from any form of authority. There you have it—prime entrepreneurial potential. Necessity, a lack of anything to lose, and lots of caring support is a perfect incubator for a business start up.

Since then I have witnessed scores of middle class women suffering horrible crises of confidence and lacking the sort of motivation necessary to take the plunge into business. They simply worry too much that they might fail, not succeed, harm the family, etc. The upshot is—they have too much to lose. How do you teach someone to be desperate? How do you teach nice women with children and mortgages that they should forget about all that and jump in with both feet? Don’t be stupid, you say—teach them business skills so they can minimize their failure. Teach them how to keep accounts, market, do a damned business plan, you say. What you are really saying is: tame them. I am of course not stupid enough to think that those things are not important but they are not the qualities that facilitate discovery, imagination, creativity, and impulse. They are, however, crucial qualities that every entrepreneur should work in partnership with.

Most people think that my enumeration of entrepreneurial qualities sounds more like a pathological diagnosis. Maybe it is—but we don’t care. I love working with Helen and my other partner, Myra, because they help me focus and stay on target. In place of the women’s movement of yesteryear, they provide the love and support that foster my creativity. They also keep me away from the bank because I am openly hostile to bankers. I am eternally grateful to women like them because if it were not for them I probably would have ended up in jail rather than as an entrepreneur. I once wondered why feminists should have anything to do with the capitalist system. I thought we were being co-opted and that our principles would be somehow compromised. I remember mentioning this to a woman who replied that she thought the most subversive thing you could do today with women is to assist them in the creation of a dream that will feed and clothe them both in free as possible from any form of authority.

Entrepreneurship is nothing new to women in the developing countries—they have been running micro-businesses from carts and kitchens for years.

In the Meno, Socrates is attempting to discover why the ignorant, illiterate slave boy knows math. Socrates, coming from his position of privilege, can’t explain it so he takes a great logical leap and makes the claim that his knowledge comes from a past life with the deities. My reading of the Meno is that the slave boy was bluffing and fed back the information that Socrates wanted to hear based on the signals that Socrates was putting out. Well, perhaps the slave boy and female entrepreneurs have something in common: I believe that we are motivated to perform well based on our necessity to survive. We do so with great flair and imagination, changing hats frequently and creating smoke and mirror illusions. We do this not only to cover our lack of business skills but to mimic what seems to be out of our reach. The ability to manipulate one’s environment is crucial to survival. Can entrepreneurship be taught? Only if the teacher’s experience is transmigratory.

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References