



## Forum

### Adjacent Opportunities: The Emergent Choice

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Is this the right decision for now? Waiting for a direction to emerge when immediate action is required is not just about patience in the face of mounting pressure, it's about being observant. It's the willingness to see. Now, that may sound a little funny. How can we avoid seeing? It's amazing how well-framed our filters are to keep out what appears extraneous. But perhaps in engaging the extraneous what emerges is a perception that extends the boundaries of our normal vision, and allows something never before considered to enter the picture and lead the way.

I recently attended the Social Enterprise Alliance Regional Conference in Los Angeles, and I heard a lot of talk about young people and their growing desire to find meaningful and purposeful work. It was a theme that came up in many of the sessions I intended. Or at least it was something for which I was listening. When I asked Adlai Wertman, USC Marshall School of Business—Society and Business Lab, what percentage of students he thought were leaning in this direction, the answer was suddenly qualified. What happens, he explained, is that when corporate recruiters come on campus and begin offering large signing bonuses amidst the specter of \$10,000s and perhaps \$100,000s of student loans, a palpable reality emerges, and in that instance, finding work that is meaningful and purposeful becomes less of a defining quality.

The problem, Wertman pointed out, was that there were no recruiters from the social sector showing up to talk to these students. And despite the fact that they were demanding courses that taught them about work that had these significant and powerful qualities, many were forced to make a decision against their

vision and values. In this case, they were making a decision that would define a life-course that invariably leads them away from their core beliefs.

What happens when we feel forced to make a decision that compromises our vision and values—our desire for meaning and purpose? The interaction between what we think is reality and what we think is important devolves quickly into a decision that goes against the reality of our belief. What becomes real is our student debt not our desire to do something we feel is right. That decision, of course, has consequences for every other decision that follows. Adjacent opportunities—those opportunities that are just one step away from where we are right now—become accessible, by their very nature, based only on the last step taken. So what happens to living a professional life of meaning and purpose when we consciously transit away from that direction?

The question is not idle speculation. So, what emerges out of a decision like this when some would say our youthful idealism gives way to adult pragmatism? Of course, it might also be framed as a decision of “Me” over “Us”? One emergent list of outcomes might certainly contain such things as cynicism, regret, disappointment and dissatisfaction. Another might be filled with things like financial security, a material life filled with houses, cars and things, a semblance of relief that I’ve got mine and that’s what counts. But what if both lists were right? What emerges after twenty years of decisions based on what originally appeared to be a pragmatic choice? What ultimately wins out?

Making a choice to live a life of principle and consequence doesn’t have to mean taking a vow of poverty, nor does it guarantee that cynicism, regret, disappointment and dissatisfaction won’t surface. However, in creating social innovation, a new economy is developing in which the drive for vast wealth is replaced with a vision of enough wealth. As with any business enterprise, a social entrepreneurial effort can successfully support those employed and running these programs—the difference is that those working within them understand that while they can sustain themselves on these salaries, they won’t become outrageously rich. And that seems to be part of the trade-off for doing this kind of work that is driven by meaning and purpose.

The interesting thing is that the number of those who actually amass vast wealth through means that forsake a focus on their personal meaning and purpose is probably not that much greater than those who become wealthy by adhering to their values. And the 99% will tell you that most people simply do not become vastly wealthy. If that is true, as the numbers seem to convey, then perhaps the dream of making vast wealth is an illusion, and pursuing that unattainable illusion often leads right toward a life of disappointment and dissatisfaction, out of which springs cynicism toward others and ultimately a regret that this life hadn’t been spent better.

Unfortunately, there are few if any college recruiters or high school guidance counselors who would ever be willing to suggest an alternative to an America Dream characterized by anything less than the possibility of obtaining vast wealth. But perhaps Wertman is right in suggesting that the answer is educating social entrepreneurial students in finance and business practice not so that they will become social entrepreneurs, but that they will enter the business world with the values of a social entrepreneur, making decisions that ultimately create shift by applying meaning and purpose in places where they have been absent before. Now that might be idealism of the highest order. Yet when we look at the incredible levels of cynicism, regret, disappointment and dissatisfaction that already exist in our society, our current course of action that sacrifices *Us* for *Me* has not proven to be all that successful... unless, of course you're a psychologist and the choices you have made have set you up to do quite well serving those who are cynical, regretful, disappointed and dissatisfied.

Our current society is making decisions now that broadly divide us along these lines: the illusion of the rugged individualist who perceives that he or she has built it all themselves, or the recognition of the interdependence that says we're all in this together. The adjacent opportunities that emerge from this disparity will radiate out for decades—hopefully we'll make the correct decision.