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Vision of a Better World: *An Optimistic View*

Michele Hunt
DreamMakers

It is time for a new story for the future of humankind. People yearn for a vision that is inclusive and born out of our universally shared human values. Now more than ever we need a vision that inspires us to overcome our fears and compels us to recreate our institutions, businesses, organizations, and communities, into places that enable people and the planet to flourish. I believe the plethora of conflicts, chaos, confusion, and environmental degradation we witness today are symptoms of obsolete thinking and old systems breaking down under the weight of a growing awareness that radical, fundamental change is needed. The assumptions and archetypes on which we have built our societies are not sustainable. People are yearning for a new and better world. We are ready for a vision that transcends the artificial boundaries, classifications, and divisions we have constructed throughout history. On a very deep level people are beginning to understand that human beings have far more in common than they differ. We are discovering that there are deeply held values that resonate with most of us. I believe the technological innovations we are creating at a dizzying speed are driven by our hunger to:

- Connect with others
- Be heard
- Participate—contribute our talents and gifts towards something that matters to us
- Be recognized
- Learn and grow
- Live in harmony with each other and the planet
- Love and be loved

This profound shift in consciousness is rippling across our world, resulting in people creating new visions of how we can live, work, learn, and play together and how we view life. Unprecedented numbers of people are collaborating together to address global issues like poverty, AIDS, clean water, and education. The number of social networking groups innovating to solve big problems and create value in our world is astounding. The rapidly evolving

social networking technology has enabled a movement that has become a powerful force for social, environmental, and political transformation, and it is unstoppable!

This new culture is most evident in young people. They are fundamentally different than past generations. Technology has given them easy access to a vast amount of information, the opportunity to learn and grow unfiltered and unencumbered by gatekeepers and boundaries, and the ability to connect and communicate numerous times a day with people all over the world. They understand the power of connections; they are linking with likeminded people to make change happen. Several months ago I had the privilege to give a keynote address at the Junior Enterprise Worldwide Conference in Brazil. There were over two thousand twentysomething entrepreneurs from Brazil and Europe in attendance. The theme of their conference was *One World One Network*. They are a part of a network of young people who have entrepreneurial enterprises working to solve real world problems. This generation shares a 'can do' attitude and are not afraid to take risks. They are not seeking or following the norm, they are creating it. They are redefining the definition of success. Profit is not their single aim; quality of life, social justice, environmental justice, and creating economic value appears to fuel this generation's passion. They see making a difference in the world and making money as inextricably connected.

There are compelling reasons for leaders of businesses, organizations, and institutions to catch up with this movement. Businesses in particular have a critical need to attract and retain the best and the brightest people to be successful. This requires businesses leaders to create environments that value people, foster participation and collaboration, and create a mission that is worthy of peoples' commitment. This will also require a different business model, one that does not fit neatly within our current interpretation of capitalism. Simon Mainwaring's book *We First* proposes a compelling argument why we must alter the current free market system from destructive capitalism to sustainable capitalism. He offers a new vision and specific ideas to "transform the entire private sector, corporations and consumers alike, into a force for global renewal." Mainwaring believes that "*We First* is neither anti-capitalist nor anti-wealth. It is pro-prosperity." He defines prosperity as "well-being for all" and believes that in the long view serving everyone's interest also serves our own (Mainwaring 2011, 5).

There are a growing number of companies and consumers that share this vision of prosperity. One powerful example is Patagonia, founded and led by

Yvon Chouinard, the 2013 recipient of the Inamori Ethics Prize. Patagonia exemplifies the business model of “doing well by doing good.” In the book *The Responsible Company*, co-authored by Yvon Chouinard and his nephew Vincent Stanley, Vice President of Patagonia’s wholesale division, they share their philosophy and practices. Patagonia is known for their commitment to the environment and they understand the need to create positive places for people to work. Another example is GOJO Industries, the inventors of Purell hand sanitizer and the leader in hand hygiene products. GOJO is in the business of “Saving lives and making life better through well-being solutions.” They are committed to social and environment sustainability. “Sustainability is a purpose-driven commitment for GOJO,” according to Joe Kanfer, CEO and Chairman. In addition to delivering both social and environmental benefits, GOJO’s sustainability practices are contributing to its economic success via greater efficiencies, reduced costs, product innovation, and sustained growth, as illustrated by the company’s annual double-digit growth over the last several years—all proof that integrating sustainability into a company’s business strategy can deliver bottom-line benefits. To learn more see GOJO’s Sustainability Report.¹

There are numerous small businesses and entrepreneurs developing products and applications to engage consumers in this movement. Some Internet gaming developers are beginning to use social gaming to solve real-world problems. Zynga, the world’s largest social gaming company, is developing games for the greater good. Zynga’s 2012 revenues were \$1.28 billion, with more than approximately 311 million monthly active users playing its games. In 2012 Zynga launched Zynga.org, the social impact arm of Zynga. The mission of Zynga.org is to help make the world a better place through games. They recently formed a partnership with Water.org to bring fresh water to real communities worldwide. They also inspired 1 million of their players to contribute more than \$13 million through Zynga games. The money went to several non-profit organizations, including Direct Relief International, Save the Children, Habitat for Humanity, St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, Water.org, Wildlife Conservation Society, and World Food Programme.² There are also innovative mobile phone applications that enable consumers to become ethical shoppers. Barcoo, developed by a group of young Germans, is a free application that allows customers to point their mobile phones at the barcode on products while shopping to check prices, test reports, health,

1. The report is available at <http://www.gojo.com/sustainability>.

2. See <http://www.zynga.org>.

green, and sustainability information. They even make information available on the companies' social responsibility and the treatment of their employees.³

This evolved idea of making money by doing good is infectious and rapidly spreading to people of all ages and nations. We are seeing the emergence of conscious consumers, conscious employees, and conscious communities. People are making deliberate choices about the kind of businesses they want to work for. A growing number of consumers are using their purchase power to support ethical companies. Local governments and communities are becoming selective about the kind of companies they allow into their communities. We are seeing new constructs emerging: social businesses and social entrepreneurs are blurring the definition of for-profit and non-profit organizations. These examples are only the tip of the iceberg.

It probably has become apparent that I am an unapologetic optimist. My optimism does not come from idealistic notions of utopia or Pollyannaish sensibilities—it comes from my experience. I started my career as one of two of Michigan's first female probation officers to supervise adult male felons on probation in Detroit. I served as director of Michigan's only halfway house for female felons, and later became Michigan's first female deputy warden, leading programs for rehabilitation in an adult male prison. I served on the leadership team of a Fortune 500 company, served in President Clinton's administration, and I have owned my consulting company since 1995. In all of these experiences I have seen people transform their visions of hope into reality against tremendous obstacles. I have come to understand that people are extraordinary and capable of achieving the seemingly impossible.

Let me share a personal story. I worked for Herman Miller, a Fortune 500 global office furniture company, for thirteen years. This experience powerfully shaped my belief that when people mobilize around a compelling shared vision that is born out of their deeply held shared values and they are liberated to contribute their gifts, amazing things can happen. Herman Miller was ahead of its time—under the visionary leadership of Max De Pree, CEO and Chairman, we discovered it was possible to innovate for the greater good and be profitable. This bedrock principle led Herman Miller to phenomenal success. I had the privilege of serving on Herman Miller's senior leadership team for eight years as the Corporate Vice President for People. When Max first gave me this title I objected; I felt it was frivolous and a little corny. When I expressed my concerns, Max told me "People ought not to be regarded as human resources; money, facilities and equipment are resources—people are

3. See <http://www.barcoo.com/en/w>.

the heart and soul of this company.” It took time for me to understand the deep meaning and awesome responsibility inferred by that title.

After many years of success, Herman Miller was challenged with an alarming number of global competitors, who were making our products faster, cheaper, and better. The world had changed but we had not; we learned the hard way that nothing fails like success. We had become arrogant and complacent—a sure sign of atrophy. Max De Pree was a wise, insightful leader and he called for a total company renewal that engaged every team in the company to help define the company’s vision and values. The results were surprising and challenging. The people of Herman Miller wanted “to be a reference point for quality and excellence” in the world. The values they identified were:

- **Participation & Teamwork:** People had the right and responsibility to contribute their gifts to achieve the vision, and business goals, within the boundaries of our values.
- **Shared Ownership:** Employees had right to share in the risk and rewards of the business.
- **Valuing Uniqueness:** People were encouraged to bring their whole self to work and to contribute their uniqueness to help achieve the company’s goals.
- **Family Social and Environmental Responsibility:** Work, family, and communities are inextricably connected. Our goal was to develop innovative solutions to support these important stakeholders.
- **Learning Organization:** Continual learning was a shared commitment.
- **Financial Soundness:** While essential, however, it was not the single aim of our work. It is the result of our commitment to our vision, values, and goals and our collective efforts.

Max then challenged us to change and align everything to serve the company’s vision, values, and goals. We again engaged every team in the organization in a highly participative process to meet this challenge. We listened, learned, and we changed. After eighteen months Herman Miller was prospering again. The people in our organization were our greatest innovators and collaborators. The results were amazing; the people of Herman Miller collectively achieved the following:

- *Fortune’s* Most Admired Company
- Best Products by *BusinessWeek*

- One of *Fortune's* top 10 Best Companies to Work For
- Best Company for Women
- Best Company for Working Mothers
- The Best Managed Company in the World—by the Bertelsmann Foundation.
- Most Environmentally Responsible Corporation—from *Fortune* and The White House
- A return to double-digit growth; we even enjoyed two stock splits in the following three years

Having the courage to include family, social, and environmental responsibility in our values brought out the good in us—and the best in us. These sets of values helped us to see the connections between the products and services we provided, and families, communities, and the environment. It helped us understand our responsibilities beyond profits. We became acutely aware that we were a part of a greater chain of events and a part of greater whole. Personally, it was an exciting, beautiful, and deeply fulfilling way to work.

Our commitment to our vision and values resulted in great benefits to everyone who was a part of the Herman Miller family. We attracted the best and the brightest people—not because we paid the most, but because of our commitment to the quality of life for all our stakeholders and our communities. People were proud to work at Herman Miller and like Peter Ducker always reminded us, “Your people are your greatest recruiters and public relations.” Local governments and communities were constantly in pursuit of Herman Miller, wanting the company to expand into their communities. In the long view, we learned that leading with vision and values was not only the right thing to do, it made good business sense.

I was blessed to have worked at Herman Miller. Max De Pree believed “we must become, for all involved, a place of realized potential” (1989, 74). I experienced a very evolved form of leadership and saw the tremendous benefits of true inclusive capitalism at work. It helped to prepare me for the transformative times we are living through today. In the face of all the chaos, confusion, and ambiguity, I feel hopeful.

The growing number of people connecting to solve problems and create value in our world is becoming a global movement that is driving deep fundamental positive change. It is impossible to calibrate the impact this emerging mindset and the rapidly increasing technological developments will have on governments, businesses, and civil societies in three to five years; I

believe it will be enormous. This is a historical game-changer never before realized in the history of humankind.

I used to think that the issues in our world were of such enormous magnitude that only the most optimistic, visionary people could even dream of tackling them; issues like grinding poverty, hate, prejudice, environmental degradation, and pervasive conflicts. But the ‘pockets of hope’ that I have seen have taught me a great deal about what is possible. One young man in a Puerto Rico community in Chicago expressed his view of the future.

There are all of these pockets of hope developing all over the world; pretty soon there will be so many pockets of hope, that there will no longer be pockets—it will just be.

I believe most people feel on some level that the timing is right for the next stage of the evolution of humankind. We now have the tools to help us to see that we are all connected, interdependent, and part of a greater awesome system.

A human being is a part of a whole, called by us the universe, a part limited in time and space.

He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.

Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein (1950)

These hopeful visions of our future are not impossible dreams—they are insights into the capacity of human potential. If we look around at the amazing things we have created, they were all considered impossible by the status quo at some time in their development. I believe the seeds that hold a vision for better world lie within each of us—waiting for the right time and conditions to germinate, grow, and flourish. I believe this is our time to create a better world.

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