Adjacent opportunities (9.1-2)

Applied chutzpah

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I was looking for a job. A friend had suggested I contact the local economic development corporation and see what I could rouse. Since I've been working in the world of social entrepreneurs and social enterprise, I looked at the EDC web site with an eye to this particular form of social business making. Not too surprisingly, I found nothing approaching the idea of social interactions outside of an upcoming party. So, as a way to engage the CEO of the EDC so she might consider hiring me, I created a scenario about social enterprise, economic development and San Diego. To make it particularly San Diego-centric, I turned the scenario into a civic model. Since, in my mind, I was explaining this model to her with the sole intention of enticing her to consider making me her director of social enterprise, a position she neither had nor had ever considered, I needed nothing more than a brief elevator pitch and a few possible details to make my point.

As it turned out, this point was quite compelling. So compelling, that in the telling, as is wont to happen, I blurted out the possibility of creating a social enterprise zone in San Diego that would be a truly unique concept in the US and would make San Diego a model of progressive social action. The concept caught her off guard, and she immediately suggested I take the program to the City Council President Pro Tem and she gave me his number and told me to call him at her suggestion. I didn't get a job, but the next day, I went to visit the Council President Pro Tem on one of his open door days, and told him what I had in mind. He asked about a dozen questions, which being in the field, I was able to address, and he began nodding his head. "I like this," he said and repeated the phrase a second time. He then requested a more in depth meeting in a couple of weeks with more players at the table.

Now about three months down the line, after numerous meetings with the Councilman and many others, I find myself putting forward a new way of addressing the interaction of peer-to-peer lending, what we're calling community-based financing using neighbor-to-neighbor partner lending, micro-finance and the work of social entrepreneurs in the under-served areas of San Diego. Prominent people in the city have been taking my phone calls and agreeing to meetings and a new way of thinking about how we support social issues is developing.

Having mixed with you academics for a number of years now, I immediately started looking at process. I knew I was engaged in a series of interactions, initiated and furthered by a narrative out of which emerged a whole new realm of adjacent opportunities. But there was something that predated all of this that caught my attention. And that was the driving force to put the idea forward in the first place. For lack of a better term, I chose to call this force, Applied Chutzpah.

For those of you schooled in the finer delicacies of the Yiddish language, the way I am using the word chutzpah, or more correctly khutspe, might cause some affront. As pointed out in the book, Born To Kvetch, by Michael Wex (Harper Perennial, 2006) this word has come to mean a "laudable audacity or apparent effrontery that actually conceals a brave and often new approach to a subject or endeavor." Given what transpired with my series of phone calls in San Diego, I thought that an apt description. But Wex goes on to explain that khutzpe is actually something "both stupid and mannerless, lacking in class and unpleasent," and he provides the example of propositioning a woman at her husband's funeral.

Whichever definition you choose, the point I wish to make holds true. And that is that this bit of applied chutzpah, I suggest, invariably leads to an emergent opportunity — chutzpah in either case implies an interaction of some sort — out of which a new way of thinking emerges — either an elevated conceptual possibility or utter amazement at the depth of human debasement. This new way of thinking promotes taking action — launching a unique civic model for social enterprise in one case or a well-deserved slap across the face in the other.

The case for applied chutzpah — while an argument could easily be made for its proximity to the latter definition of khutspe than the more popular laudable audacity — is worth considering. The important factor is that in audaciously engaging in an interaction with specific personal intention what emerges is a new way of thinking that initiates action, either good or bad. These audacious interactions differ from their less-in-your-face brethren, because as we all are well aware, what emerges from the majority of interactions does not create a new way of thinking. And without any evidence other than anecdote to support my contention, those precipitated by applied chutzpah, do.

If I were wiser I would leave this living example of that which I speak at that. Unfortunately, I am not. The program I am furthering to support social enterprise and social entrepreneurs demands continued applications of this 'Chutzpahtic' approach. Taking the audacious leap may produce moments that my colleague and friend Steve Farber refers to as OSIMs (Oh Shit! Moments) when one finds oneself with nothing below and nothing above to grasp onto but one's awareness that something new and unexpected is about to happen that will radically change one's thinking no matter the eventual landing place. That's what it takes to change the world and create a new way of thinking about how to do so. And while there are no applications being taken
for a course in applied chutzpah, it would be safe to say that this fact will not limit the variety of new ways of thinking, either laudable or mannerless, that will emerge because someone has exhibited their master status in applied chutzpah. Who knows, with a little applied chutzpah a new model might just emerge that could truly make a difference in how we operate in relationship to each other. How much chutzpah do you think it would take?