Emergence makes no moral presumption. It simply happens. Evidence the recent financial meltdown that has emerged after years of greed and plunder and is now taking down rich and poor alike. But as with any glacial pullback, the barren crust of existence that has become exposed, offers some new adjacent opportunities that had lain previously unexposed.

During the corporate largesse of the first few years of the new millennium, we also saw the formalization of corporate social responsibility and the corporation’s attendant corporate responsibility officers. These folks were charged with sussing out community needs and divesting a small portion of the organization’s profits back into the community to help support social programs and social action organizations. Invariably, there was funding for lots of 5k runs, as well as for some very important social programs and social entrepreneurial upstarts. All came with the assurance that this wasn’t just about good trying to promote good PR on the part of the corporation.

However, once the financial clouds darkened, many of the first cutbacks corporations made were in their corporate social responsibility programs. This is and was unfortunate, but perhaps they were also inevitable based on the missed opportunity of what CSR, as it has been acronym-ized, developed into and what it might still accomplish if allowed to reform.

While inherently more, CSR has been viewed by the majority of the social sector primarily from the sole perspective of being corporate philanthropy. Of course, that is often how these corporate departments often view themselves. But there is a far more valuable opportunity here which is just one step away from where we are today. And that is for corporations and communities to realize that businesses can be an even greater partner in the community with potentially more wealth to provide them just its dollars and subsequently a higher return on its effort. If I’m right, there might also be more CSR positions still filled as we move further into the effects of this economic decline.

We, in the social sector, have made a serious mistake in positioning corporations as something akin to profitable foundations. And now when our social programs really need the help to both survive and serve, we are losing the corporate resource because, unfortunately, most social programs simply saw corporations as a source of income.

However, this column is about new and adjacent opportunities, and I would like to propose one that could provide a revitalization of the ideal of corporate social responsibility, but in a far more effective package. The opportunity, as I see it, is to create something greater than CSR, and that is what I am calling, Community Social Performance.

Born out of a continuing dialogue I have been engaged in with the University of California at San Diego’s Extension program and its emerging CSR program, and its initial focus on effective philanthropy, I recommended this more interactive approach that takes into account the four aspects of sustainability for social sector organizations. They were not my four quadrants for sustainability, but those of Ashoka: Innovator for the Public founder, Bill Drayton’s. They are 1) Income Generation 2) Volunteers 3) Partnerships and 4) Getting the Word Out. However, the interactive model of Community Social Performance, as applied to these opportunities, emerged from my mouth at a UCSD meeting before I could consider the idea more closely. Those of you who know me also know that I probably wouldn’t have stopped even if it were possible to have considered the thought.

What is Community Social Performance? It is how the institutions—corporate, educational, foundational, and social—together with an emerging segment of social entrepreneurs within our communities—are and will be compelled to form effective partnerships in order to survive the impact of our current economic meltdown and its consequences within the social sector. These are the stakeholders operating within the boundary space of our communities—the citizen base. And by that designation, they all share accountability within and to that bounded community to assure its healthy functioning. Within this space, these operationally different yet critically integrated players in the survival of the system as a whole, will need to work together, interactively, to accomplish what neither of them alone can address. This will be the only way we can effectively channel the energy they all generate, and avoid it becoming dissipated, to bring about and continue real social change within our struggling and suffering neighborhoods and communities. It is not about the individual responsibilities each of these entities feel or with which they must comply, but about the interactions they must undertake with each other, as stakeholders, to keep our communities from falling under the weight of social need.

Within this social context, performance is very different from the notion of responsibility. This is especially evident in our society where responsibility often devolves into compliance and regulations. Performance is about how we act. How we have decided to show up to take action, not because we are being told or have to do so, but because it is what we do and how we intrinsically operate.
When this consortium of interest comes together around the banner we call Community Social Performance, they come to the table, aligned around the common issue before them; sustaining the social sector needs that take into account opportunities that might not include philanthropy. When these interactions are facilitated, real solutions can emerge. Philanthropy alone, even when it is presented as what has come to be called “effective philanthropy,” has always been a band aid and not a cure, and this is why, in many ways, it has failed our communities. We have thought that by applying enough donated dollars, the hurt would go away. Unfortunately, the complexity of the infection spreads when we attempt to apply only one fix. Solving what appear to be intransigent social issues can only be accomplished when the community as a whole, including business, education, foundations, and the social sector, decide to invest more than its dollars and time, and perform in concert, bringing their skills and talents forward, so that something greater can emerge.

Community Social Performance is how communities will need to act to get the work done, and will have to act to address the pressing social issues that affect all interests involved. This will be especially true in light of the inevitable expansion of personal poverty brought on by the collapse of our economic markets.

The good news is that Community Social Performance is how we can access the adjacent opportunities that exist today, and provide answers for the future as the reality of our economic losses get played out in the real world and not just on paper. It’s show time. Curtain up. The rehearsal time is over.