

# The Bottom Line: Our Creations of Self and the Delicate Art of Being

AL BARRENTINE

**A**t the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge one starry night, I remember having my first very serious doubts about the nature of a professional career. Staring at me across the river is my beautiful Manhattan, the skyline so perfectly formed, each downtown building with its own shape and character, each one glowing in the night sky. But the companies who own these buildings don't just keep their lights on so that I can have a nice view. There must be people still working here...and it's a quarter to 10. Who honestly works that late? Sure, my mother did when I was a child, but she was also working three jobs at minimum wage. These workers are investment bankers, marketing managers, "corporate men" making \$100,000 a year and more. They have spent more than 12 hours in the same building, the same cubicle, maybe even the same chair. At that point, it seems that the corporate worker could have no outside life, no outside antics, no outside self! Throughout history, there have been a number of us who have voiced a resounding "No!" to the downtown arena, who have decided that it is better to strike out on our own. We are America's entrepreneurs.

Yet it is almost impossible to ignore the increasing distance between the corporate business climate and the entrepreneurial mindset. More and more professionals are attracted to the Goldman Sachs Groups, the Mercks, and the Citigroups of the world. Such corporations turn gargantuan profits, pay high salaries, and have established names and cultures. Even the entrepreneurial companies of yesterday (i.e. Microsoft, Wal-Mart) have become huge conglomerates with massive and impersonal cultures. Most people will find that once they start working for the large company, they get stuck in a certain hierarchical lifestyle: getting that next promotion, hitting the numbers this quarter, earning this year's bonus...and it's difficult to get out. Such a lifestyle promotes the corporation, not the businesspeople. In our 21st century push to incorporate and acquire and merge how does each individual worker, and

each entrepreneur for that matter, keep himself from being engulfed and swept away by the vast sea of our commercial milieu?

Theologian-philosopher Paul Tillich may be able to shed some light on the loss of self in the midst of a corporate group. He begins his essay "Courage and Participation" with the interesting statement: "Man's self-affirmation has two sides which are distinguishable but not separable" (139). The notion of a dichotomy is fascinating, considering the traditional view of self-affirmation as simply stepping back and saying "I am me." Indeed, Tillich does define "the courage to be as oneself" as almost exactly that: "ontological self-affirmation as an indivisible, unexchangeable self" (140). The introduction of courage is important because it implies that *being* itself is a constant struggle with the loss of self or "nonbeing" (139). Considering that struggle, I wonder whether the state of being is actually possible for an individual within a corporation? The answers may be hidden in Tillich's mysterious other side of self-affirmation, "the courage to be as a part":

Not courage but weakness seems to induce us to affirm ourselves as a part. But being as a part points to the fact that self-affirmation necessarily includes the affirmation of oneself as "participant," and that this side of our self-affirmation is threatened by nonbeing as much as the other side, the affirmation of self as an individual self. We are threatened not only with losing our individual selves but also with losing participation in the world. (142)

By participating in an organization or a group, people are taking on an increased threat of losing themselves, thus displaying more courage and greater self-affirmation. It's almost as if the workers up in those corporate office buildings late at night are really being themselves in a greater way by participating in the corporate world. Being as participation puts entrepreneurs in a tough spot because one usually becomes an entrepreneur in order to ground oneself in individuality ("be one's own boss") rather than wither away in a large corporation. Under the influence of Tillich, one would not have to compromise one's individuality even within a huge company. After all, he says that "there is no entity 'we-self' as the subject of courage [...] The courage to be as a part is like all forms of courage, a quality of individual selves" (145). So even the cubicle workers are not in fact mindless drones; they are individuals, and they are being individuals through their participation. So where does that leave aspiring small businesspeople? Something about "the corporate life" vs. entrepreneurship, which should be tantalizing-

ly obvious, still seems quite elusive. Let us then take a look at how the concept of owning a business relates to participation and being.

Entrepreneurship has often been thought of as a completely individual activity, opposite to all organizational activities, and therefore in some way more true to the individual as she fits into society (the person she wants to be), not simply the individual as she fits into business (the professional she wants to be). But maybe it's both. As an entrepreneur, a person must still take on the basic task of an organization: the production of goods and services, and in that production, she forges relationships with society (the customers) through business. The relationship cannot be only with the individual, but with self as it is affirmed through participating in the business world. Entrepreneurs are affirmed in business through a process of synergy: we in part shape our businesses in terms of our personality and culture, and the businesses in part shape us. Neither part is complete without the other. But participation is not only limited to self within society; it in fact necessitates *cooperation* with other businesses, perhaps even the very same large firms with whom we are concerned. Even if a company is not to be publicly traded, what if it needs venture capital funding? How about suppliers? One must not only affirm one's business within society, but must also affirm one's business in the business world. Such affirmations, which in fact occur simultaneously as one needs both customers and suppliers, extend beyond individualized activity. The entrepreneur it turns out performs essentially the same participating role in society and business as any other worker.

How then does the entrepreneurial life stand out in any way from the corporate one? Right now the difference doesn't appear to be much, but let us turn for clarification to George Simmel, whose essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" may add a spatial dimension to participation. Simmel is very interested in the crowding of people in the cities and how their psychology differs from those in more rural environments. He says "Such an inquiry must answer the question of how the personality accommodates itself in the adjustments to external forces" (259). According to Simmel, external forces such as crowding create a sort of severance of deeper, more emotional ties to other individuals in favor of what is practical: money, quantity, and brief contacts. Because somewhere like New York is so competitive, it is necessary for an individual to distinguish himself to the fullest extent. Yet it is also possible for a person to get caught up in the many interests that the city offers: the cafés, the shopping, the parades, all of which may "carry the person as if in a stream, and one needs hardly to swim for oneself" (264). Simmel wants us to be aware of the outside influences, the possibility of belonging only as a part, but also

to realize that the city is the only place which allows for the fullest individualism. While the city seems to be an environment in which self and participation exist in two distinct states, Simmel may actually consider it a combination of both. He says that man is “the range of the person constituted by the sum of effects emanating from him temporally and spatially” (263). The same is true for the metropolis. The city is then made up of and pushed forward by all the effects which the various individuals of the city produce. In turn, the city becomes the sum of those effects and produces the stimulations and interests which carry individuals along.

In this city, every self is amplified, every group is amplified, and participation is put to the extreme. The corporate worker, through the perks of his or her company, seems to participate more in the major events of the city (Yankees games, Broadway shows). But to what extent is she really participating? I mean, going to a show or a game with coworkers, sitting in a secluded press-box or a designated “corporate” section is not exactly my idea of a good time. For one, it’s unhealthy only to see the same business colleagues that you normally deal with 8-12 hours a day...you never leave work! More important, you miss out on the powerful spirit and spontaneity of city events. The cheering crowds are hardly audible in a press-box, and there are certainly no new and exciting people to be met in a group of the already familiar. The corporate world’s participation through business and only through business is artificial somehow, even though it may entail some brief interlude with the societal world. Even an entrepreneur cannot completely escape participation, but in our profession, is it still possible to *live*?

Concerned very heavily with the tension between work and life is Robert Louis Stevenson’s essay “An Apology for Idlers.” He says from the beginning that “Idleness so called, which does not consist of doing nothing, but in doing a great deal not recognized in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class, has as good a right to state its position as industry itself” (215). We typically associate idleness in America, as in Stevenson’s England, with unemployment, laziness, even the Biblical sin of sloth. To Stevenson writing in the 19th century, there is already a growing cultural obsession with diligence and industry and “success” at the expense of living. There is a certain temporality to the various industries of the world, the markets, the pages in a history book, all of which the corporate diligence culture has come to value. Stevenson says:

The shadows and the generations, the shrill doctors and the plangent wars,  
go by into the ultimate silence and emptiness; but underneath all this [...  
you will see] much green and peaceful landscape; many firelit parlours;

good people laughing, drinking, and making love as they did before the Flood or the French Revolution (218).

In some sense or other, none of what the corporate world values really matters in the cosmic scheme of things, and life goes on regardless. Yet both business and society increasingly enforce our tradition and culture of diligence. It is a tradition that only the individual as himself can break. Does that mean that we should all quit work and lie on the grass? Of course not. Stevenson wants us to know that for as long as diligence makes us happy, it is good, but too much of it eventually leads to what he calls “deficient vitality” (218). There is no substitute of course for idleness once in a while, because it gives us wisdom, common sense, and true life. And Stevenson brings up another often-forgotten point, that “the services of no single individual are indispensable” (221). That means that the I-have-to-work-because-the-company-needs-me attitude cannot possibly be correct, even for the person running the company. Finally, this illustrates the core difference between the entrepreneurial lifestyle and the corporate one. Whereas corporate workers are often shackled to the diligence system, the entrepreneur is free to create his very own system, his own hours, and his own business life. In fact, it is the entrepreneur’s duty to create a culture of occasional idleness for his company so that he, his partners, and his employees can be happy. The key to this culture is not to calculate success in monetary values, not to let the entrepreneurial company become the corporate system. Only then can all the members associated with the business freely enjoy those interests and stimulations of the city purely for their own sake, and take part in the joy of just living completely, *as individuals*. For when one gets caught up in affirming oneself as a part all the time, through a business, through the city events, then one is in grave danger of becoming one of Stevenson’s “dead-alive hackneyed people [...] scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation” (218).

There needs to be a distinction between when being as part makes one happy and when it does not. That distinction, that deciding factor, should in the end be something that I like to call Drive: the inexplicable happiness and curiosity and fulfillment with life that causes us to spring forth from bed each and every day. When this drive runs out, we stop growing, stop being happy, and begin to wither. The idleness of which Stevenson speaks, the time to step back from the numerous interactions of the city, from being through society and being through organizations, *may* be precisely the perspective-generating, life-renewing force we need to replenish that drive. However, in the

entrepreneurial profession, we must have faith that a kind of opportunistic freedom exists which allows the individual actually to create happiness through drive. Especially in New York, because of extreme specialization and competition, the metropolitan entrepreneur must find exactly what he or she is truly passionate about in order to be successful in such a competitive environment. Participation with entrepreneurial drive takes on a new meaning: a business can act not as an institution, but as a creation of self. The individual (idle) self can flow into every aspect of the entrepreneur's work and every aspect of the work (created from self) back into him, which actually makes the business a truer form of self-expression than even idleness. This is not by any means to say that an entrepreneur never needs a day off, for drive is not sustainable by work alone. Self takes precedence in life when it needs to, likewise with business and likewise with society, but none of these activities or concerns should *ever* deter our happiness, our drive to grow, to understand, and most important, to live. The relationship of business, society, and self should be dialectical: we must at times let their demands openly conflict with each other, and through their interaction, we discover the truth, the bottom line, which is and should always be fulfillment in our lives and the lives of others.

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