

# From Capital I to Capital We

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## Abstract

This essay explores the author's transformation from a traditional capitalist in search of money to a conscious capitalist who eventually creates meaningful work. The process of enlightenment occurs within the context of personal defining moments and external economic challenges. The author is not alone. In the midst of corporate greed and corruption, individual workers are no longer seeking profit for the sake of profit. We are at a tipping point. A grassroots movement has begun. Changing values are colliding with economic necessity. Transformation is taking off. Out of the ashes of this recession, a new type of entrepreneur is emerging.

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I have been on a journey, maneuvering through life in search for meaningful work. It eluded me for many years because I didn't know what to believe with so many good, bad, and even conflicting messages. It seems as though the stork really does drop us off in a strange new world where people shape our ideas about the world in which we are supposed to grow up in and eventually contribute to.

As a young black girl growing up in the upwardly mobile city of Atlanta, Georgia, I was full of hope. My parents grew up in the segregated South, but I felt that we were the first generation to be truly free from the cruel oppression that had haunted them and generations long before. What were we to do with our new found freedom? We were told, and I believed that we could be anything we wanted to be. I was bombarded with the messages of, "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud!" and "Black is beautiful". I believed that, too. Victor Hugo once said, "Greater than the tread of mighty armies is an idea whose time has come". In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. called human dignity that "idea". Former generations fought so that future generations could walk in the dignity attributed to all human beings. We were privileged to be the first to taste a new kind of freedom.

Economically, my family experienced a new freedom, too. Not every family did though. Through education, my parents finally broke the seal of poverty and moved into middle class existence, where I have been hanging out ever since. Both my parents became educators, and as a young girl, I wanted to be one, too. Although I could not express it at the time, I knew that teaching was a noble profession. It was my father who told me to major in accounting in college. "Don't be a teacher. Go make some money." Inherent in those words was choice - not only the choosing to be whatever I wanted, but something more than that. What else would I be choosing? If I chose accounting, I would be choosing

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profit over morality. As far as he or I knew, profits and morality did not co-exist. “The morality of profit?” An oxymoron for sure.

Why would my father give me this advice? We never talked much about money. Nobody had really taught him the principles of wealth. After all, he was one of the first in his family to have a little cash. My folks still struggled, but were able to get my brother, sister, and I everything materially we needed and wanted.

He didn’t have to convince me to pursue profits. I had already thrown away the notion of teaching because of the 80’s messages. It was the “ME” era. I believed in capital “I”. Moment by moment, the fabric of our being was unwoven and re-threaded into people who arrogantly shouted, “What have you done for me lately?” It was as if we had regressed and become immature, self-centered newborns. I didn’t care about contributing to the world. The struggle was over. It was time for the world to contribute to me!

I have had some defining moments since my senior year in high school. One defining moment was the death of my father. At the end of his life, former students came in droves and told how he had impacted their lives. I, already in hot pursuit of profits, first in public accounting, then in private industry, began to feel empty. I had indigestion. I had eaten, but not fully digested the “greed is good” lie. I was uncomfortable and uneasy within the corporate setting. Not only was I conflicted, but my creativity was stifled. There are few things more terrible than stifled creativity.

Another defining moment was the birth of our first child. What would I teach him? How could I help him decipher the messages of his generation? At the depth of my soul was a small seed. As my self-centeredness died, something placed in me by the Creator burst forth. What I had dismissed as a notion, was actually a calling.

In the mid 1990s, I found meaningful work by creating it. I used a combination of business acumen and passion for children to start a school. I provided educational consultations and multi-level educational opportunities primarily to single parent families. The experience permanently ruined me for my good. I loved the academic atmosphere. I liked providing a service for a unique market. I was happy to employ other teachers. And I enjoyed the exchange of money for hard work.

What is meaningful work? *In Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell describes meaningful work as having three characteristics: autonomy, complexity, and a connection between effort and reward. I couldn’t agree more. Meaningful work satisfies man’s quest for financial success. It is a clear sign that we count for something – that we matter to the world. Meaningful work is a major component of human dignity.

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According to a 2009 study by the Conference Board research group, only 45 percent of Americans are satisfied with their work. This is the lowest level ever recorded by the Conference Board in a 22 year history of studying the topic. One of the primary reasons for the discontent is fewer workers consider their jobs to be interesting. Also, due to the recession, jobs have been disappearing at alarming rates causing existing workers to feel trapped because of fewer options. Finally, cynicism is soaring among American workers due to corporate greed and corruption.

Mahatma Gandhi once scribbled a note to his grandson. It contained what Gandhi believed were the seven blunders of the world that lead to destruction. One of the seven “sins” is commerce without morality. We must stop pursuing profits for profits sake. It is too costly to continue regulating the hearts of corporate CEO’s while taxing the souls of the everyday worker. The time has come for us to find or create meaningful work.

In a 1960 Founder’s Day address at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, Martin Luther King, Jr. described the mountain of practical materialism that must be abandoned:

One of the dangers we must always watch in our nation and in the system under which we live is known as capitalism. As you know, capitalism stresses the profit motive. Of course capitalism has done some marvelous things for our nation and the world. Through this economic system we have been able to build up the greatest system of production that the world has ever known, and we have become the richest nation in the world. All of this is marvelous. But the danger point is that we will become so involved in the profit-making and profit-getting aspects of capitalism that we will forget certain ends of life. There is always the danger that we will become more concerned about making a living than making a life that we will not keep that line of division between life and one’s livelihood. And there is also the danger that our system can lead to tragic exploitation. We must come out of the mountain and be concerned about a more humane and just economic order. And I say, this afternoon, that we cannot solve this problem by turning to Communism. Communism is based on an ethical relativism and a metaphysical materialism that no Christian can accept. I do believe that in America we must use our vast resources of wealth to bridge the gulf between abject, deadening poverty and superfluous, inordinate wealth. God has left enough space in this universe for all of his children to have the basic necessities of life.

About 50 years later, we remain on the same mountain. However, we are positioned at what Malcolm Gladwell calls a “tipping point”. As Gladwell describes in the fascinating book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, a tipping point is the boiling point. It is the moment in an epidemic when a virus reaches critical mass.

In *Megatrends 2010: The Rise of Conscious Capitalism*, Patricia Aburdene describes it this way: A social epidemic might simmer along – or roaring new megatrend – might simmer along, just out of official view, until one day it’s ready to explode. That’s the case with Conscious Capitalism which grows

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out of millions of transformed individuals and economic necessity. Why are values changing? In times of great uncertainty, individuals search their hearts and souls for new directions. Because of the external economic climate, such as the recession, rising deficits, corporate, and other factors, capitalism must change. Aburdene states that when changing values meet economic necessity, transformation takes off.

Conflicting messages still abound in 2010. We are currently in the midst of a political and an ideological civil war in the United States. What are our choices? Must we be the traditional, free market capitalist or hold onto the pendulum as it swings to the other extreme toward those accused of socialism? I choose neither. We hear new terms emerging, like hybrid cars and hybrid organizations, corporate responsibility, low-profit limited liability corporations or L3C's, green jobs, and social enterprises.

President Barack Obama indicated in a radio address on Saturday, October 24, 2009, and again in the State of the Union address on Wednesday, January 27, 2010, that small businesses have created nearly two-thirds of the nation's new jobs over the past decade and a half and must be at the forefront of economic recovery. Who will use Conscious Capitalism to make the greatest social and economic impact? There is a movement happening at the grassroots level. Many are still pursuing profits. This time, profits are not the end, but a means to an end. Much is changing. Right before our eyes, corporate giants are falling. Corporate jobs are leaving. Even nonprofit donations are drying up, too. However, out of the ashes, a new entrepreneurial type is arising.

The Skoll Foundation describes social entrepreneurs as society's change agents. Ashoka, an organization committed to helping social entrepreneurs thrive, defines social entrepreneurs as individuals with innovative solutions to society's most pressing social problems.

A new kind of generosity is woven into the character of the social entrepreneur. Social entrepreneurs understand that it is not enough to give the impoverished relief. In crisis this may be necessary, but over time it robs men and women of human dignity. Social entrepreneurs help people and communities help themselves.

An outlier is something that is situated away from or classed differently from a main or related body. I believe that today's social entrepreneurs are the "outliers" of tomorrow. They are men and women who will do things that are out of the ordinary. I guess it was the accountant in me who saw a formula to success while reading *Outliers*.

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**Success = Passion + Talent + Hardwork (10,000 hours) + Opportunity (includes when, where, and to whom you were born)**

Each one of the ingredients to success are either innate or within the individual's control with the exception of opportunity. Opportunity seems mysterious and obscure. While others are complaining about or numb to today's pressing issues, common men and women are performing uncommon feats to transform the communities in which they live and work. They are innovative in creating meaningful work for themselves and for others.

Capitalism is changing because capitalists are changing. Through observing and learning from current or previous business leaders, we can conclude that profit is neither moral nor immoral. Profit mirrors the character of its owners.

Therefore, I believe that social entrepreneurship is the answer to today's economic woes. Social entrepreneurs solidify human dignity because they seek to use the markets for the betterment of human beings. Simply speaking – they care. Let's join the efforts of social entrepreneurs and make a profit and make a difference.

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## Bio

Audrey Wyatt is a Consultant to startup businesses, ministries, and social enterprises. She brings more than 20 years accounting and management expertise in public accounting, growing businesses and leading companies. Immediately prior to starting [Business Write Now!](#), Mrs. Wyatt was Controller at a software company in Dallas, Texas. While there, she led the accounting and human resources departments. Mrs. Wyatt has also successfully started and run two hybrid organizations. In addition, she has consulted families on alternatives in traditional education.

She holds both a BS in Accounting and an MBA in Accounting. She is also certified as a Master Nonprofit Consultant through Faith and Philanthropy Institute, as well as a Certified Professional Business Writer through the Association of Professional Business Writers. Mrs. Wyatt is a wife and mother of five children.

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