

The Other Half of the Dialogue

by *Adrienne Rosen*

Même si l'auteure croit que certaines connaissances de l'entreprise peuvent être enseignées, elle dit cependant que ces connaissances ont peu à voir avec curiosité, imagination, créativité et spontanéité, les éléments essentiels de l'esprit d'entreprise.

My business partner and I have a running feud around the question of whether or not entrepreneurship can be taught. My reply is cut-and-dried, clear and distinct, not negotiable, and simply put: no! It is this irascible response, coupled with the set of my jaw and the angle of my head that conveys my own entrepreneurial zeal. Others might call it arrogance, still others might call it mania, somewhat kinder people call it the distinct markings of a creative genius—I call it the irrepressible (and sometimes obnoxious) hallmark of entrepreneurial spirit. This argument between what really amounts to the nurture/nature debate has been done many times. Socrates put the boy, Meno, on the ropes in much the same way when he asked: can virtue be taught? In most Socratic works there had to be a fall guy and that guy was never Socrates. Socrates always formed and shaped the nature and course of each dialogue while the other tied himself into knots from which he would never escape. Socrates was truly an entrepreneur. Helen, my business partner, refused the role of Meno so instead of a Socratic dialogue (where I would basically win), we opted for a parallel dialogue (being feminists and all).

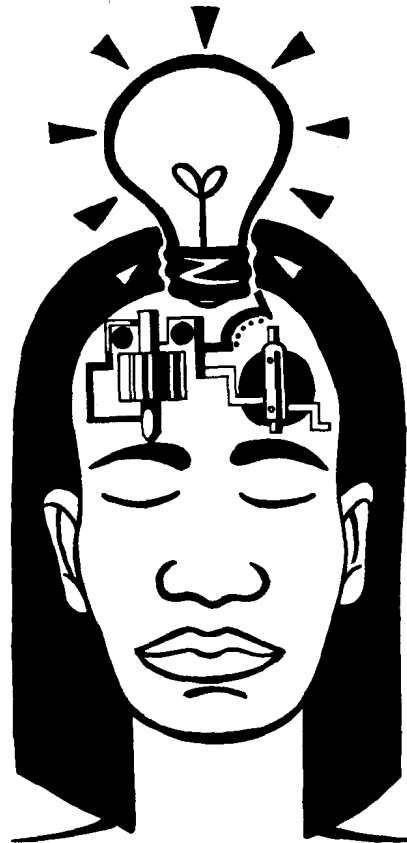
Helen has a bee in her bonnet about teaching and learning entrepreneurship that stems from her experience in the world as a self confessed "middle class, white, daughter of an academic." Out of this experience she believes that "people learn about what moves them and is interesting to them and is important for them to get by in the world." She goes on to say that: "How we decide on what to learn, what is important, and how we develop interests, let alone consuming interests, is very much a function of the culture we live in." I would say that what

we learn and how we decide what is important to learn or develop interests about has more to do with situation and necessity. The working class woman who has not completed high school has very little free choice. Add children to the picture and the choice is further reduced. Interests are no longer developed in this picture unless these

interests include eluding joblessness, homelessness, and hunger. Helen seems to look at culture in a broad based sense, i.e. the public sense of North American culture, while I use the term in a smaller more immediate sense. The experience of the impoverished woman is not of the broader based culture but is more limited to a direct hands-on culture of hopelessness and angst. It is a culture that is both public and private, cognitive and emotional. The only connection someone like this might have to the broader based concept of culture is as a model or construct of power that is beyond her reach.

I am reminded of my own life and how I got from there to here. I left high school in grade nine. In fact, I was expelled on several occasions. I moved out of the house at the age of 15, collected welfare, and worked part time as an organist in a church. I took far too many drugs and had no sense of direction. Then, happily for me, the women's movement came along and I jumped on the band wagon. It gave me a real opportunity to express my rage with my lot in life and provided me

with love and support that I don't think any other group could have paralleled. If you look back to the early seventies and the whole 'sisterhood is powerful movement' you might remember the all-encompassing love that enveloped all the hungry female souls who turned up at its doors. Women's centres, self-defence centres and the like were hands-on, user-friendly nests of safety. These pre-politically correct institutions provided guidance and assistance, love and acceptance that welcomed all classes. More importantly, the women's movement of yesteryear was upwardly mobile. Skills were exchanged, introductions were arranged, and government grants were procured. Rather than wanting to join the congealed masses of snivelling bureaucracy, women in the movement sought to escape and subvert it.



Nancy Reid

I started my first business with a welfare cheque. Now here is where the entrepreneurship starts: I was a brash, angry, impatient, and ignorant woman who was in many ways alienated from standard heterosexual, middle class culture. Looks pretty bad on paper, doesn't it? Now add to the hopper loving support in the form of hugs, suggestions, hand holding, and a little cash to invest (let's not forget the welfare cheque) and a distinct wish to remain as free as possible from any form of authority. There you have it—prime entrepreneurial potential. Necessity, a lack of anything to lose, and lots of caring support is a perfect incubator for a business start up.

Since then I have witnessed scores of middle class women suffering horrible crises of confidence and lacking the sort of motivation necessary to take the plunge into business. They simply worry too much that they might fail, not succeed, harm the family, etc. The upshot is—they have too much to lose. How do you teach someone to be desperate? How do you teach nice women with children and mortgages that they should forget about all

that and jump in with both feet? Don't be stupid, you say—teach them business skills so they can minimize their failure. Teach them how to keep accounts, market, do a damned business plan, you say. What you are really saying is: tame them. I am of course not stupid enough to think that those things are not important but they are not the qualities that facilitate discovery, imagination, creativity, and impulse. They are, however, crucial qualities that every entrepreneur should work in *partnership* with.

Most people think that my enumeration of entrepreneurial qualities sounds more like a pathological diagnosis. Maybe it is—but we don't care. I love working with Helen and my other partner, Myra, because they help me focus and stay on target. In place of the women's movement of yesteryear, they provide the love and support that foster my creativity. They also keep me away from the bank because I am openly hostile to bankers. I am eternally grateful to women like them because if it were not for them I probably would have ended up in jail rather than as an entrepreneur. I once wondered why feminists should have anything to do with the capitalist system. I thought we were being co-opted and that our principles would be somehow compromised. I remember mentioning this to a woman who replied that she thought the most subversive thing you could do today with women is to assist them in the creation of a dream that will feed and clothe them both physically and spiritually. I now see that she is right. Entrepreneurship is nothing new to women in the developing countries—they have been running micro-businesses from carts and kitchens for years.

In the *Meno*, Socrates is attempting to discover why the ignorant, illiterate slave boy knows math. Socrates, coming from his position of privilege, can't explain it so he takes a great logical leap and makes the claim that his knowledge comes from a past life with the deities. My reading of the *Meno* is that the slave boy was bluffing and fed back the information that Socrates wanted to hear based on the signals that Socrates was putting out. Well, perhaps the slave boy and female entrepreneurs have something in common: I believe that we are motivated to perform well based on our necessity to survive. We do so with great flair and imagination, changing hats frequently and creating smoke and mirror illusions. We do this not only to cover our lack of business skills but to mimic what seems to be out of our reach. The ability to manipulate one's environment is crucial to survival. Can entrepreneurship be taught? Only if the teacher's experience is trans migratory.

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References

Plato. *Meno*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. Indiana: Bobbs Merrill Educational Publishing, 1949.

CHRIS WIND

To My Philosophy Professors

Why didn't you tell me?
When I was all set to achieve *Eudamonia*
through the exercise of Right Reason,
When I was eager to fulfill my part
of the Social Contract,
When I was willing, as my moral duty,
to abide by the Categorical Imperative
When I was focussed on Becoming,
through Thesis and Antithesis to Synthesis—

Why didn't you correct me?
Tell me that Aristotle didn't think I had any reason,
That according to Rousseau,
I couldn't be party to the contract,
That Kierkegaard believes I have no sense of duty
because I live by feeling alone,
That Hegel says I should spend my life
in self-sacrifice, not self-development,
That Nietzsche thinks I'm good for pregnancy
and that's about it—

Why didn't you tell me I wasn't included?

(Perhaps because you too had excluded me
from serious consideration;
Or did you think I wouldn't understand?)

(I do. I do understand.)

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