



Editorial note: The World Business Academy invited Barbara Nussbaum to do this follow-up to her initial article, “African Culture and Ubuntu, Reflections of a South African in America” published in Perspectives, Vol 17, Issue No 1. Feb 12, 2003. Our hope is that this tandem article, focused more fully on business, will serve as a springboard for further dialogue about the issues raised. We would like to invite Fellows and Members to respond to these issues and questions. Barbara Nussbaum, currently based in Ojai, California, is the World Business Academy liaison for Africa. An author, presenter and coach, Ms. Nussbaum is an adjunct faculty member of the Spiritual Leadership Institute, Houston, Texas.

Ubuntu and Business . . . Reflections and Questions

Barbara Nussbaum

BarbaraNu@aol.com



Barbara Nussbaum

The intention of this article is three-fold:

- To articulate some of the lessons learned by the academic and business community in South Africa and to stimulate reflection and dialogue about their relevance to America and other countries.
- To begin to clarify the difference between the old “extractive” capitalist model and the potential of the completely opposite paradigm based on an African world view, known as *Ubuntu*.
- To pose questions about what kinds of changes in language and “cultural grammar” may be helpful in thinking about the creation of a new language for “Business in Community” that may embrace the spirit of our common humanity, or *ubuntu*, more fully.

A. South African Experiences in Integrating African Values into Business Paradigms and Practices

Our book, *Sawubona Africa: Embracing Four Worlds in South African Management*, (1) was a pioneering attempt to investigate and develop new paradigms for effective management in South Africa in the post-*apartheid* era. Five corporations (2) provided sponsorship for the South African Management project at Wits Business School. This research sought to acknowledge Peter Drucker’s suggestion, that while management principles may be universal, the context in which they are implemented is critical to the form and shape they should take in any particular environment. In South Africa, the corporate culture and dominant business paradigms were shaped by approaches developed in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.

After the political changes resulting in the 1994 election of President Mandela, it became increasingly evident that the South African business community needed to transform as well. New paradigms were needed to inform thinking, management and leadership development as well as the education and training of business students.

(1) Ronnie Lessem and Barbara Nussbaum, *Sawubona Africa: Embracing Four Worlds in South African Management* (Zebra Press, Struik Publishers, South Africa, 1996).

(2) The corporate sponsors were: Eskom, Gemini Consulting, Gencor, Murray and Roberts, and Nampak.

The research attempted to clarify how and why *ubuntu* and other dimensions of African culture could become a positive resource for catalyzing the business transformation in South Africa. Such changes were needed to complement the political and social changes occurring at the time. The task was both fascinating and daunting. Part of the reason is that the concepts themselves are vague, difficult to operationalise succinctly, and often in the realm of the intangible.

African people had effectively been excluded from leadership roles and decision making in the corporate sector so that there were few exemplars of managers or business leaders either invited or encouraged to bring African values into the way corporations were run.

African culture has many social technologies which are subtle, profound, and embedded in a deeply communal and spiritual social context. Storytelling, music and dance, praise singing, inclusive decision making and participatory community meetings (*Indabas*) play a central role in traditional rural African communities and continue to have an important, though modified, role in urban contexts. Our challenge lay in understanding the traditional role of African values, how these linked to cosmology, spirituality, and artistic and expressive cultural forms. In addition, we sought to understand leadership and decision-making models and how adaptations had taken place during industrialization and urbanization.

We identified companies which had adapted corporate cultures to include African values, expressive and community building tools in the work place. At the time, there were few pioneers. The notion of *ubuntu* presented internal conflicts for many African business leaders and managers. Africans had been excluded from senior management positions, being forced to live on low salaries for many years. With the political changes in a country with huge disparities in wealth, (South Africa has the highest Gini coefficient in the world), (3) access to good salaries, company cars, and so forth became an understandable and justifiable aspiration. Many believed that because *ubuntu* implied sharing of wealth, it was the antithesis of the model of capitalism that they saw in businesses. And they were right, because during the years of our study (1995 and 1996), the dominant capitalist paradigm was the opposite of the more equitable imperatives and economic justice that *ubuntu* would call for.

The challenge of integrating *ubuntu* values in European or western South African corporate cultures.

Delani Mtembu, one of the contributors to “Sawubona Africa,” outlined some of the challenges of integrating *ubuntu* values into previously European or western South African corporate cultures. He reiterated the point made in a previous World Business Academy article (4), that interconnectedness in community is a key characteristic of the African way of thinking. The slogan, familiar to Africans, “an injury to one is an injury to all” is reflective of the fabric of strong relationships between people and an indicator of the tendency towards protecting our common humanity. **Community is reflected in a binding network of relationships which, in its best way, includes monitoring and accountability among and between people in the networks.**

According to Mtembu, the African way of doing things is typically process oriented and is characterized by communally shared responsibilities. Participation in community life becomes the context for continuous learning. From his perspective, “If we could see organizations and businesses as communities and not as structures of power and positions, it is possible to emerge with a learning organization in the true sense.” (5)

-
- (3) The Gini co-efficient measures the disparity in income, between rich and poor, both within countries and between countries. According to the *World Bank: 2001 World Development Indicators*, South Africa has the highest Gini coefficient, 59.3; Brazil is second, 59.1; Mexico is 51.9. This study was published by Branko Milanovic, a World Bank economist, who estimates that the global income distribution Gini coefficient is 66. This level of inequality is equivalent to a situation in which 66% of people have zero income and 34% divide the entire income of the world among themselves equally.
 - (4) Barbara Nussbaum, “African Culture and Ubuntu, Reflections of a South African in America”, *Perspectives*, World Business Academy, Vol. 17, No. 1, February 12, 2003.
 - (5) Delani Mtembu, “African Values: discovering the indigenous roots of management” in Lessem and Nussbaum, *Sawubona Africa*, p. 221.

Life-long learning, community learning and development of learning communities are aspects of African culture which resonate deeply with some of Peter Senge's principles. In an interview with Otto Scharmer, Senge asks,

- **“How do you begin to help people collectively, in an organizational or institutional setting, tap into the real reserves that exist for profound learning, for profound change, for facing things which seem insoluble, impossible to alter, *the way things are, and the way things always will be?*”**

He asserts that in the right setting, people confront that and they experience something different. They experience real generosity, generative-ness, and a deep belief that the future is not for eternity.” (6)

- **How do you begin to release generous, generative energy collectively?**

Our work in South Africa found that collective learning, even transformational and highly generative learning is absolutely possible. One case study described an *Indaba* (Nguni word for communal meeting) at a company called Cashbuild. The company was founded by Albert Koopman, an Afrikaans business visionary. He designed a variety of structures in the company which ensured meaningful participation of thousands of employees at every level. (7) Elton Bondi described the complex and inclusive processes undertaken by the company to demonstrate a true commitment to community participation, information sharing, communal learning, and decision making. This culminated in a two-day *Indaba*, a strategic planning meeting, with 300 elected people who represented the views of thousands of employees. Participation of this size was costly in terms of both time and money, and sustaining participation at this level would be expensive. However, one manager commented that **“the time and resources required for participation are direct, immediate and measurable, while the benefits are indirect, long-term, and relatively intangible, but it is worth it because participation in whatever form is the glue that holds this place together.”**(8)

The corporate culture had successfully tapped into the need of African workers for meaningful, communal inclusion. Bondi wrote that the agreement on annual salary increases was settled in 35 minutes, compared to most companies who spend months in wage dispute deadlocks.“ (9)

-
- (6) Peter Senge, *“Closing the Feedback Loop between Matter and Mind”* Interview with Otto Scharmer, May 15, 1966.
 - (7) “The Great Indaba: consultation, consensus and democracy at Cashbuild” in Lessem and Nussbaum, *Sawubona Africa*, p. 180. Bondi explains: “Hundreds of opinions, complaints and problems raised by worker representatives were then categorized into five key areas: the customer, the employee, the company, the competitor, the supplier and motivation. The Cashbuild philosophy was borne out of these five central issues and was aimed at fulfilling two fundamental goals: to provide people with a holistic organizational structure and to integrate the entire company into one participatory team.”
 - (8) Elton Bondi, p. 183. It may be of interest to note the key principles of Cashbuild's company philosophy. Commitment to a policy of joint decision-making and participation at all levels; the responsibility of every individual to play a part in finding solutions to problems; commitment to a corporate culture in which every person in the company has access to any line manager; no racist or sexist discrimination; commitment to training staff at all levels of the hierarchy; commitment to the “extra mile” concept for the organization and the individual, p. 181.
 - (9) Bondi, op cit, p. 184.

The “glue“ Bondi refers to is in the realm of the intangible...the energy that binds, that holds people together, that creates shared meaning and belonging. Senge believes that **“it's possible to release and sustain that kind of energy, and that peoples' lives, in whatever work settings they are operating, could be continually infused with this kind of generative energy.** Because it just comes from us, or it comes from wherever it comes from and comes *through* us. It is clearly an aspect of the human condition. It is not conjecture, and it is not new. It's just that I think our industrial age has worked to create a more and more insidious oppression of that generative capability.” (10)

One of the best-known large scale collaborative processes methods in America was pioneered by Kathy Dannemiller. (11) In an approach similar to that of the Cashbuild *Indaba*, 300 people are brought together in one large room over a one- to two-day period and work through complex change processes together. Verna Allee, like South Africa's Albert Koopman, realises that such large-scale collaborative change processes are enormously effective in getting people “on the same page.” “Working from the philosophy that no one group of people can understand a real system, the goal is to find a way to have the whole system reflect on its behaviour and change itself.” (12) GE's town hall meetings are other examples of large-scale collaborative processes in America.

- **What particular challenges might be faced in implementing large scale collaborative processes in countries which have a more individualistic ethos than South Africa?**
- **What examples of large scale collaborative social technologies have been found to be effective in other parts of the world?**

Our research identified some South African companies who chose to build on African-inclusive, expressive, and social technologies, and with great success. Inevitably, the leaders and pioneers were either African managers and leaders who had not lost touch with their traditional roots and had the guts to be themselves in rather rigid Eurocentric corporate cultures. Or, they were Afrikaans or English business leaders with exceptional understanding and vision. These were few and far between, but these early pioneers started the process of business transformation in South Africa. Our research included ten case studies of such exemplars. (13)

(10) Peter Senge, op cit. (1996).

(11) For further information, refer to Danmiller Tyson Associates, *Whole-Scale Change: Unleashing the Magic in Organizations*, Berret-Koehler, 2000. Also read Verna Allee's comments on Kathy.

(12) Verna Allee (2003) p. 240.

(13) These case studies included: *Nurturing the Cows that Never Die*: The case of Europak, a case study describing how African values regarding responsibility towards machines were harnessed by a visionary production manager; *Cashbuild re-invents itself. The Dulux Story: South Africa's Rainbow Paint Company*: Where story-telling was successfully used for transformation of company values towards affirmative action; *Telling Company Stories Through Industrial Theatre at Brollo Africa*: Another case which describes the use of storytelling through industrial theatre to facilitate transformative changes; *The Great Indaba: consultation; consensus and democracy at Cashbuild*: This case describes in detail the large-scale processes for inclusion and collaborative strategic planning at Cashbuild; *From the mukwerera ritual to a production festival*: A case study describing how a traditional spiritual ritual, which promoted collaborative reflection about the past, present and future was transformed into a production festival; *Turning Swords into Ploughing songs*: The use of song and dance in building team and company.

The book is currently out of print, but for more information about these case studies, and how to get copies, please contact Barbara Nussbaum on BarbaraNu@aol.com.

The Central Role of Relationships in an *Ubuntu*- based Company

Verna Allee, well known author, in her newest book, *The Future of Knowledge*, wrote, “Knowledge and intangibles build the critical business relationships and create the environment for business success. We do not so much build a business, but rather grow or ‘weave’ a web of trusted relationships.”(14) She posed the following comments and questions at the recent Academy Fellows’ meeting in Ojai, California, in October 2002.

- **“We are moving away from structure to one of relationship.**
- **How do you, how do we build relationship?**
- **How can we learn to be in relationship together? We in the West have forgotten how to do this.”**

Our research and experience in South Africa demonstrated unequivocally how and why Africans, informed by *ubuntu*, are masterful in the skills, knowledge, consciousness and processes required to build and maintain communal relationships. In American business-speak, these are described as social technologies. In Africa, we would probably simply say relationship, or community building.

Bishop Dandala’s writing in 1996 was an early precursor to Verna Allee’s current work. Our efforts in *Sawubona Africa* were “an attempt at exploring ways of finding one another as human beings, particularly in the workplace. It’s a call for people to work in an atmosphere where they seek to affirm each other as valuable players for the creation of wealth. **Even in our age of our technology, productivity will always be wanting until we learn to affirm each others humanness.** Africa is rich in the heritage of drawing out the best in people by dealing with them as human beings.” (15)

Some leaders in post-*apartheid* South Africa had the vision and courage to incorporate the intellectual and social capital of African relational skills in beneficial and effective ways. They provide powerful illustrations of the positive outcomes that result from the African gift of valuing relationships. Some of our case studies successfully captured the magic and potential of *ubuntu*-based processes for community building, learning, bonding and healing in a corporate setting. The best of these was the case of Dulux Paint Company where story telling was introduced as a way of healing the past and thereby creating the desire and will for a change of heart towards affirmative action.

Example of Relationship Building and Reconciliatory Healing through Storytelling

A South African Case – Dulux Paints

The managing director of Dulux Paints, Trevor Munday, realized that the only way to find a way to make affirmative action acceptable and sustainable was to find a way for white and black people to regard it not just as a company policy, but to find the acceptance for the changes in their hearts and in their minds. Dulux’s affirmative action strategy had been developed by a team representing all the major constituencies in the company, including directors, shop stewards, managers, staff, men and women, black and white. The high level of consultation ensured the total commitment of all team members to the final strategy. Sincere consultation and maximum exclusivity are hall marks of African social processes. If dignity is to be accorded to all members, consultation and **real** inclusion then become essential.

(14) Verna Allee, p. 135. Note: Allee adds that stories are so powerful that knowledge management experts such as Stephen Demming of the World Bank and Dave Snowden of the IBM Institute for Knowledge Management have undertaken research to help people learn this powerful “analogue” approach to creating and sharing context.

(15) Dandala, “*Greeting people, Greeting companies, sanibonani*” in Lessem and Nussbaum, *Sawubona Africa* (*Sanibonani* in Zulu literally means, “We see you, we affirm you.”) p. 71.

Peter Christie, author of the Dulux case study, tells the story. “A decision was made to use story telling as a way to face and deal with the issue head on. Research by the company had shown that storytelling was a communication tool deeply valued in both African and Afrikaans culture.” (16)

During workshops, participants were asked to think about their life experiences where they as individuals had been victims of discrimination and, thereafter, to share these stories with the rest of the group. “All manner of stories were shared, encompassing in many cases a lifetime of discrimination, or in others, incidents that only lasted a few minutes. Most of the stories related, not surprisingly, to racial discrimination in South Africa. However, many other stories related a variety of incidents: women who were victims of their gender or sexual attractiveness; gays who were victims of their sexual orientation; disabled people who were victims of their disabilities and so forth. After sharing these personal stories, participants were asked in groups of six people to identify and then perform short stage plays of incidents of discrimination that had occurred in the company and that they would prefer not to be repeated in the future. They were instructed not to refer to specific personalities during these stage plays.” (17)

The project was highly successful, and it may be interesting to describe what set this organization apart from other similar initiatives in South Africa. Trevor Munday, the company’s managing director, had the courage to embark on a process that was highly threatening. **Why dredge up the past? Why open up the wounds?** According to Peter Christie, “Trevor and the team’s wisdom suggested otherwise. Surely they believed the wounds of the past must be healed before there could be any reasonable chance at a successful affirmative action initiative. This mirrors the thinking encapsulated in the Truth and Reconciliation Bill, which aimed to achieve reconciliation at the national level.

After the first pilot session, Trevor Munday, a white South African male, found himself moved to tears, a rare sight among MDs in South Africa’s corporations. Though a liberal in his political and social attitudes, Trevor had never had contact with anyone whose family had lived through the trials and trauma of two forced removals. (The *apartheid* government from time to time just removed African or so-called Colored people from their homes. These were called forced removals). Munday was not afraid or ashamed to cry to reclaim even more of his humanity. He exemplifies the principle that Mandela referred to in our previous article (18), that all of us are not free until oppressors (or bystanders, as in Trevor Munday’s case) can be freed and liberated from their guilt.

The success of this story relied on the goodwill and intent of all who participated and a business leader with the respect, authority, vision and energy to make it happen. Now widely recognized as a pathfinder, Trevor Munday said, “We were all complicit during *apartheid*, and now is the time we can do something about it.” Dulux recognized that a company’s responsibility does not just rest with shareholders’ interests. A company, however small, is seen as a powerful vehicle for social change (*and for building a connected community*). As a meeting point for all the diverse people of the rainbow nation, the company became an instrument for achieving reconciliation at a very personal level.” Again, this was an expensive and time-consuming process, but the intangible benefit of healing cannot be measured in monetary terms.

- **If one assumes that South Africa is a microcosm of the world economy, and that it has had to face head-on the challenges that occur as a result of huge gaps between rich and poor, what relevance, if any, does the Dulux case have for companies/countries in wealthier nations?**

(16) In fact, don’t all of us, all human beings from all cultures love stories, and as Verna Allee, among others, says, “The most natural and effective vehicle for communal learning is ‘the story’.”

(17) Peter Christie, “The Dulux Story: The South Africa’s rainbow paint company” (in Lessem and Nussbaum, *Sawubona Africa*, 1996). Peter Christie is now Director of the Leadership Development Centre and Professor of Management at De Chazal De Mee Business School, Quatre Bornes, Mauritius.

(18) Barbara Nussbaum, op. cit., *Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Feb. 12, 2003.

- **What relevance might this approach have in thinking about how business and trade-relationships between the north and south might be improved?**

The Spiritual and Emotional Losses of Industrialized Nations

One of the characteristics of progressive South African business leaders, black and white, is their continuing courage to face the tough human issues, racism, the pain and legacy of *apartheid*, and then move through the pain to mutual discovery and increasing ranges of partnerships. One of the challenges faced by traditional American companies is what appears to be a culture of denial. "Let's not feel the pain of the past or talk about it, just get back on your horse, keep busy, and keep riding." And then there is the "get over it" aspect. Don't dwell on anything too painful or hard or negative, **"Get over it." This is perhaps a pathway to productivity, but as a form of consciousness, does this in any way allow our common humanity to be felt, healed and honored?**

Increasingly, business thinkers articulate the need to honor and recognize our common humanity. Verna Allee writes: "We are beginning to redefine ourselves not as masters of the universe, but as global citizens sailing a precious blue planet through the cosmos together. This...awareness of interdependence, of our common humanity is experienced" in the business context with greater frequency. And yet, **we are just beginning to acknowledge the emotional and spiritual losses associated with our inattention to unconscious shared inhumanity.** (19)

In a similar vein, Peter Senge reflects about the emotional poverty and loss in more industrialized countries as compared with indigenous cultures. "We really have no idea what we have lost in the industrial age. I think that the profound unhappiness of the industrial age is invisible to us. When you spend time with people in Africa, there is a different energy..." Every year about four or five Africans would come to the United States for four to six weeks of intensive training and then go back to Uganda. **We always used to compete, those of us who taught Leadership and Mastery, for getting to teach the courses with the Ugandans, because we had a saying that when the Ugandans were there, there was a light in the room, and you could see it in the way they smiled.** It was the darnedest thing. You see, they *smiled* differently. The first time I met Louis van der Merwe, from South Africa, I told him about the Ugandans. I said, "They smiled differently. It's like they smile fully. It's like all of them smiles!" (20)

One of the implications of living a new business paradigm truly infused with *ubuntu* is to free workplaces in the West from the tyranny of soulless technical professionalism and the culture of emotional denial at work. Bishop Dandala and Humphrey Khoza, both contributors to the Sawubona Africa book, expressed their absolute horror that in Eurocentric corporate cultures, people were expected "to leave their feelings and their spirituality at home." Unheard of in Africa, if a community has real substance, feelings and spirituality would naturally be a necessary part of the work context. In recent years Daniel Goleman's writings on emotional intelligence and Verna Allee's work on "intangible cognitive and emotive exchanges" are testimony to an emerging new paradigm which underscores the importance of feelings. In fact, recent research even points to the strong connection between emotional intelligence and profitability. Allee refers to the Levering and Moskowitz studies of the most satisfying places to work, which found that "companies with excellent employee relationships and social harmony enjoy greater financial success than others in their industry." (21)

Clearly, the gradual expansion of organizations committed to acknowledging the role of "soul or spirit in the workplace" is creating the conditions for the liberation of corporate America from rigid and alienating corporate cultures.

(19) Verna Allee, op cit.

(20) Peter Senge, op cit.

(21) Allee, Verna (2003) p. 236.

Umsebenzi – Work as Service

It is interesting to note that the culture of reciprocity within a work and community context is deeply embedded in African culture. This is known as “*Ilima*.” According to Luli Callinicos, a well known South African historian, the Nguni word *umsebenzi* (work) itself strictly means “service” and bears more than simply the meaning of physical labor. The fulfillment of familial or communal obligation is simply embedded in the notion.(22)

Brian Chossek , World Business Academy Board member, had this insight. “*Ubuntu* would mean embracing spirituality in the business context. **Business did not begin by having as its goal to increase shareholder value, but used to be interconnected with society and was there to serve local communities.** People now ask how high you can get the share price. The original focus of business, which was about helping a local community to grow and prosper, has shifted to helping a few investors prosper.”

For Chossek, “the fundamental purpose of business has changed dramatically over time, and that’s why we need to introduce something like *ubuntu* so that people can begin to see again what the true purpose of business really is -- a vehicle for societal betterment. This is a grander picture rather than just ‘doing business.’ Everything that *ubuntu* implies is seeing customers as unique individuals and unique organizations and truly serving them in the interests of building a sustainable community.”(23)

Madiba Clothing Manufacturing - An Imaginary Company

Our book, *Sawubona Africa*, was written in the early years of the transition to post-*apartheid* South Africa. At the time of writing, Bishop Dandala was clear that the application of *ubuntu* would require new ethics as well as the transformation and realignment of deeply held beliefs in the corporate sector. Deliberate efforts would be required to bring about “spiritual reconciliation” between workplaces as they were and the values and behaviors of African people. This reconciliation was just beginning during the mid-nineties and still continues.

We were able to identify business leaders who integrated aspects of African culture and *ubuntu* into corporate culture, governance systems or production and marketing strategies. However, if the truth be told, at the time of writing in 1995, we had to “invent” an introductory chapter that would give the reader a practical sense of what to imagine if a company embraced *ubuntu*. To help the readers, we wove together the initiatives of different companies, took an imaginary leap of faith, filled in certain gaps and created a fictitious South African Company called “Madiba Shirt Manufacturers” because no company truly exemplified the comprehensive, generative wholeness of *ubuntu*. (24) The experience of reading the chapter again in America in December of 2002 was quite remarkable. Undoubtedly, the chapter had a particularly African cultural spin on it – praise singers, music and dancing. But we also had to “invent” stories of mutually affirming and generative relationships between companies and suppliers and other stakeholders. What had to be imagined at the time of writing in 1995 has now started to happen both in South Africa and in America. Brian Chossek describes some of the win/win generative stakeholder relationships that his company, Green Village in Norristown Pennsylvania, has developed with workers and vendors. These are remarkably similar to the “invented” generative relationships in Madiba’s company.

According to Chossek, Chatham College (home of the Rachel Carson Institute) wanted to implement the legacy of their namesake, Rachel Carson, and achieve greater environmental prowess. He summarized the steps and mutually generative relationships between stakeholders as follows:

(22) Luli Callinicos, “The Multiple Worlds of South Africa’s Historiography” (in Lessem and Nussbaum, *Sawubona Africa*) p. 103.

(23) Interview, Ojai, California, December 2002.

(24) Barbara Nussbaum, *Madiba Clothing Manufacturers: A Company for the New Millenium* (in *Sawubona Africa*, Chapter 1).

- The Rachel Carson Institute contacted the National Wildlife Federation, which, through its Campus Ecology Network, was helping corporations and universities to green their facilities.
- National Wildlife Federation partnered with Green Village to provide green cleaners to the Industrial and Institutional marketplace and introduced Green Village to Chatham College.
- After an in-depth analysis of Chatham's needs, Green Village and Chatham College, in collaboration, determined that Chatham College could save \$10,000 per year by using Green Village cleaners.
- Chatham College utilized their cost savings to purchase renewable energy (i.e., solar energy).
- Chatham College held a press conference on Earth Day 2002. After announcing the partnership between NWF, Chatham and Green Village, significant press coverage followed.
- Press coverage allowed a virtuous cycle to begin. Chatham College became better associated with the environmental movement. NWF received additional requests from corporations and universities to green their facilities. Green Village received numerous requests for their services from businesses and universities.

Relationships were not only mutually beneficial, but mutually generative. Each action by one partner led to greater value for another partner, which in turn created opportunities for that partner. “To me, this was a function of working to completely align needs and solutions towards a common, shared goal. environmental improvement.” (25)

Corporate Governance in South Africa – The King Report

More recently, the King Report on Corporate Governance in South Africa articulated how the African worldview could have an influence on corporate culture and governance. As a general principle, this report formally stated that “governance in any context reflects the value system of the society in which it operates. Accordingly, it would be pertinent to observe and to take account of the African worldview and culture in the context of governance of companies in South Africa. These included the following:

“Spiritual collectiveness is prized over individualism. This determines the communal nature of life where households live as an interdependent neighbourhood.

An inclination towards consensus rather than dissension helps to explain the loyalty of Africans to their leadership.

Humility and helpfulness to others is more important than criticism of them.

In the main, African culture is non-discriminatory and does not promote prejudice. This explains the readiness with which Africans embrace reconciliation at political and business levels.

Co-existence with other people is highly valued. The essence of ubuntu (humanity) that cuts across Africa is based on the premise that you can be respected only because of your cordial co-existence with others.

There is also an inherent trust and belief in the fairness of all human beings. This manifests itself in the predisposition towards universal brotherhood, even shared by African-Americans.

High standards of morality are based on historical precedent. These are bolstered by the close kinship observed through totem or clan names and the extended family system.

A hierarchical political ideology is based on a inclusive system of consultation at various levels. The tradition of consultation as practised by the chiefs since time immemorial should form the basis of modern labour relations and people and management practices.

(25) Interview, Ojai, December 2002.

Perpetual optimism is due to strong belief in the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent superior being in the form of the creator of mankind.” (26)

While the recommendations of this report have not all been converted into legislation, the fact that only eight years after the transition to democracy, the inclusion of such principles in a major report is testimony to the openness of the South African business community to transform and broaden their consciousness. According to Richard Wilkinson,(27) **if one looks at the entire report carefully, ubuntu has been integrated with the triple bottom line and in his view, South Africa is one of the first countries in the world to articulate and integrate concerns for our common humanity with economic and environmental sustainability.**

B. Ubuntu as a Counterpoint to the Extractive Capitalist Model

If we shift focus from *ubuntu* in the South African context and imagine what it might mean for the West and for America in particular, how might capitalism infused with ubuntu look? Some initial general reflections developed in discussion with Peter Christie are:

- **Ubuntu would help to foster in the American business community the human qualities of humility over arrogance, cooperation over domination and generosity over greed, not only within companies, but between companies and their relationships with stakeholders in other countries.**
- **Ubuntu would help to place inclusive dialogue and conversation at the heart of the strategic agenda, political, economic or otherwise.** According to *ubuntu*, “The process is the product.” Again, inclusive dialogue would occur within companies and between companies, governments, and in their relations with less wealthy countries. World Business Academy Fellow, Terry Mollner, believes that a mature form of capitalism “*must loosen the straitjacket of capriciousness and provide the survival kit for a mature and humane future for the good of all.*”
- Capitalism infused with *ubuntu* would help to foster nations that are truly united through a generous, cooperative consciousness, which recognizes as much the commonality of groups as the sovereignty of the individual. Mark Luyckx said at the World Business Academy meeting in October 2002, “There needs to be an evolution away from entity and structure and a move towards a focus on individuals, groups and people as the primary focus.”(28). He called for business leaders to connect, not just individuals, but to foster the connection among groups and to link connection to our shared purpose. “We’ve been moving this way for thousands of years, but have not noticed.”

Ubuntu would help to foster the development of a new, humane political and business leadership, which would heal the divide between the north and the south, between the rich and poor. Wealth would be redefined and shared in a more equitable, compassionate way. According to Delani Mtembu, now the CEO of South Africa’s National Development Agency, “There are many more returns for the giving of compassion, such as the elimination of criminality, terrorism, poverty and greed. *Ubuntu* could become one of the best methods for creating sustainability and social security. **Africans believe that the only wealth is that which is shared and rendered visible to the community.**” So, if economies and societies were to harness *ubuntu* values more intentionally, there would be more formal and informal mechanisms to create social and economic policies and institutional strategies. Wealth could then be shared in a visible way that ensured that all people had access, at the very least, to basic services. The criterion for respect in a world which embodies *ubuntu* values would be about how much wealth was shared in a world that works for all, and not how impressive one’s individual stock portfolio was.

(26) Noted in the King Report (Institute of Directors, March 2002) pp. 18-19. These principles and philosophies were taken from an article that appeared in *Directorship* (March 2001) titled “African Imperatives and Transformation Leadership” by Shepherd Shoniwa, a Fellow and Vice-Chairperson of the Institute of Directors in Southern Africa.

(27) Executive Director of the Institute of Directors in Southern Africa and sponsors of the King Report.

(28) Marc Luyckx,, Director of Vision 20/20 in Belgium.

- *Ubuntu* would help to provide an integrating philosophy/mechanism which could inform and transform business relationships between the seemingly separate categories of profit and people, the political and economic, the material and the spiritual.
- *Ubuntu* would seek to create the conditions for relationships to be mutually reinforcing, generative, fair and cooperative within companies and between companies and their links with national and global networks.

If one imagined *ubuntu* becoming an acceptable paradigm worldwide, corporate leaders and consumers would live by a completely transformed consciousness and code of ethics. The *raison d'être* for business, the way trade and investment are conducted, the nature of profit, relationships with employees and shareholders, and the entire role of business would be totally different.

The reflections of Rinaldo Brutoco, Founder and President of the World Business Academy, and Brian Chossek, World Business Academy board member, have helped to clarify the potential links between *ubuntu* as it is practiced in South Africa and the relevance it could have for business in America in the future.

For Rinaldo Brutoco, the traditional capitalist paradigm as we know it is based on the model of extraction. **“Business came to be about extracting oil or coal from the ground, labor from employees, capital from the local community, sales from customers, or market share from the market. Over time, the cumulative result of the old paradigm, writ large, is depletion of natural resources and of human resources,”** (29) and for developing countries, depletion of financial resources as a result of servicing loans to more industrialized countries. In his view, *ubuntu* is other-oriented, process-oriented and, with its stress on communal responsiveness and communal responsibility, is the complete opposite of everything the traditional extractive business paradigm stands for.

Brian Chossek elaborates: “Extracting capital from the local community means that companies will come in and hire the cheapest labor that they possibly can. They are not looking to build the communities they enter, but rather looking to build the cheapest factories and get the cheapest labor possible. They pay low wages, marking up the cost and marking up the margins in between, so that they get the maximum profit for their products and take the profit to wherever they like to reinvest (typically not the community). Then the company will leave the area. That community is left with nothing, and often the company will leave that area for cheaper labor elsewhere.”

Rinaldo Brutoco believes that extraction became an underlying business concept. “The extraction economy means that the company extracts something and when they’re finished it’s no longer there. They extract the material, the extracted is gone forever, so it is a win/lose situation. Somehow businesses evolved or, rather, retrograded or went backwards like this, and this concept became more common and we began to think about win/lose even though we weren’t all that extractive in the first place.”

With the *ubuntu* model, all stakeholders, and ideally the community, are enriched by business exchanges, so that then business transactions become a mutually affirming and generative win/win situation. Accordingly, Brutoco explains, “If we look at sales with the potentially new model...the sale to the customer...is governed by our desire to serve the customer and hence **the sales process serves the customer**, not just the business. We aren’t just selling to extract a profit. We sell the customers something that they want and that they need.”

For Brian Chossek, **“Ideally, need is defined from the point of view of fulfillment and spiritual evolution. This is very idealistic, but I think this is one of the ultimate goals of business -- to serve needs that are connected to a higher humanity --** rather than ‘I want to be popular and wear the latest designer jeans’ needs.” The other twist is that business ideally should not just be about serving individuals but also about serving other organizations. So if you’re doing business-to-business transactions...you’re really helping them do what they do best rather than just selling them something.”

The horrifying result of the extractive model is the scandalous situation in America right now where rampant corporate greed and excesses, together with unprecedented societal consumerism, are expanding right alongside tragic poverty in less developed countries.

(29) Interview, Ojai, California, December 2002.

Beyond Sustainable Greed: *Ubuntu* and Sustainability

A recent book published in South Africa contrasts the difference between the extractive model of capitalism versus a more sustainable model based on long-term collaboration.

Clem Sunter, a business leader and writer in South Africa, co-authored a book, released just prior to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in August, 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Written in collaboration with Wayne Visser, the director of sustainability services at KPMG, the book is entitled *Beyond Reasonable Greed. Why Sustainable Business Is a Much Better Idea.* (30)

Sunter refers to the very strong capitalist, lion-like predator extractive model as “short-termism.” “I need to grab as much as I can before things fall apart, and damn the consequences.” Sunter and Visser urge companies to develop internal value systems that voluntarily produce a better balance, one that focuses on social sustainability. The lack of concern for social sustainability is a great cause for concern, because of the huge gap between the richest nations, like America and Europe, and the rest of the world. They argue that “such vast gaps result in events like 9/11 last year, which really put the whole world out of balance, and so in the end we all lose.” (31)

Sunter and Visser distinguish between extractive capitalists as lions and new paradigm business leaders as the wiser, more caring, collaborative elephants. “We’ve been brought up as company executives to behave like lions and to go and hunt down the customers. You either are lunch or you go and eat somebody else for lunch, in terms of mergers and acquisitions. There’s very much a tooth-and-claw logic about business, and we’re basically saying it’s better nowadays to think of the more compassionate, caring elephant and the more holistic philosophy that is associated with compassion, which means that you’ve got to seek a balance.”

The book talks about shape-shifting from lions into elephants as well as multi-level shape-shifting. In other words, “it can’t just be the odd company that changes its value system. It’s got to be right throughout the whole system, and that means part of it is the investment community.” (32) Anita Roddick and the innovations at The Body Shop are truly very pioneering and typical of elephant companies.

”If you want to start becoming more like an elephant, when you have your strategic planning sessions you must invite people who you probably would never think of inviting – such as members of Greenpeace, or people involved in social sustainability and NGOs, who will give you a completely different view of the world – and discuss the rules of the game with these stakeholders.”

It is clear that some companies in America are beginning to do this. Brian Chossek’s earlier description of the relationships between Green Village, the Rachel Carson Institute, Chatham College, and the National Wildlife Fund is one example of how *ubuntu* and sustainability might interface. No doubt there are many more examples like this emerging, both in America and worldwide.

(30) Clem Sunter and Wayne Visser, *Beyond Sustainable Greed: Why Sustainable Business is a much better idea.* (Cape Town, South Africa. Human & Rousseau; Tafelburg)

(31) Apparently elephants live about seven or eight times longer than lions, and like dolphins and apes, are the three most intelligent of the animal species. They exhibit higher levels of behavior amongst themselves. According to Sunter and Visser, elephants mourn the death of their own and they actually carry the bones around. Elephants teach us that if you really want to survive, you’ve got to balance the short term against the long term. Elephants actually survived the Ice Age. They’re very adaptable animals. The qualities needed to survive a bear market and the kind of very volatile conditions we’re going through are more akin to the characteristics of an elephant than a lion. (Mweb Radio Interview, September 2002).

(32) The Dow Jones Sustainability Index now measures companies which are felt to be sustainable businesses – and that have actually outperformed the Dow itself. There are several indicators in the UK of companies that follow elephant paths, and similarly they’ve done very well. We’re not saying that you cannot actually invest in elephant-like companies. In fact, right now their performance is probably outperforming a lot of the lions who’ve actually crashed because they’ve had very short-term thinking and they’ve had reward systems which make the top executives behave either fraudulently or rashly. (Mweb Radio Interview, Sunter and Visser, September 2002).

Ubuntu as Economic Maturity?

Terry Mollner, World Business Academy Fellow, expresses some of the same sentiments as Sunter and Visser. He begins his article with a statement that exemplifies the *ubuntu*-like consciousness of elephants. “*To assure continuity and its contribution to human welfare in the rapidly changing socio-politico-techno-economic environment, capitalism must raise its own level of consciousness. It must loosen the straitjacket of capriciousness and provide the survival kit for a mature and humane future for the good of all.*” He asks: “What will be the next stage of economic maturity after capitalism?” In the context of this line of questioning, it becomes clear that the distinguishing characteristic of the next stage of economic maturity after capitalism, whatever its name may be, will be that the most powerful economic organizations will *give priority to the good of all in all they do*, instead of the good of a few in mainly one way — financial profit.” (33)

According to Mollner, whose article discusses seven stages of economic maturity, most capitalist systems have been operating at the lower stages of maturity, “At the highest levels of maturity, the sixth and seventh, is ‘trusteeship.’ Its proponent was Mahatma Gandhi who believed we are all part of one indivisible universe. Therefore, he believed we are each the ‘trustees’ of the wealth, power and skills that we possess. We are not the ‘owners’ of them. As trustees, it was our responsibility to use them primarily for the good of all, not primarily for our own self-interest. Gandhi emphasized that this must be the result of free choice, not mandated by some authority. He believed it could truly come into existence only as the result of the maturation of the individual into understanding that this was a more mature way to be in the world. Therefore, it was more personally fulfilling as well. It had to be built on and made an extension of freedom; otherwise it would not be genuine. In his own way, he sensed that it was a stage of maturity, even though I am unaware of his ever discussing it in those terms.”

Mollner concludes his article saying, “For this reason, ‘trusteeship’ is my favorite word for the next stage of maturity after capitalism. Gandhi’s theory of trusteeship assumed that the highest priority would be the good of all, and this would come to dominate the economic sector as the result of a more mature free choice within the marketplace, plus it would engender customer loyalty. If it is indeed the natural next stage of maturity after capitalism, I suspect we are already evolving into it and it will gain momentum as we go forward.” (34)

It seems that Gandhi’s vision of trusteeship seems to mirror closely the kind of model implied by *ubuntu*.

Ubuntu – Ethical and Moral Imperatives for Companies and Consumers

Taking our lead from Gandhi and Terry Mollner, if we extend the moral and ethical imperatives of *ubuntu* to the web of interdependence in the global context in which we now find ourselves, what are some of the implications for corporate leaders as well as individual consumers?

- **If we take seriously the vision that *ubuntu* may be an inspiring framework for the future, what forms, what practical moral and ethical actions might business leaders and consumers take in creating a Business Community with a higher order consciousness?**

For example, there is a product called the Feline Drinking Fountain (35). This product costs \$60 US (\$80 if one orders a reservoir, which is recommended by the manufacturer) and provides one cat (perhaps several in a private home) with fresh drinking water everyday. If one takes a moment to think that \$80 would cover the cost of a subsidy to give an African family the capital injection they need for a drinking water and sanitation service which would last them approximately 20 years, the mind boggles. (36)

(33) Terry Mollner, “Economic Maturity Beyond Capitalism: What will define the next stage?” World Business Academy, Perspectives, Vol. 16, No. 3, Dec. 16, 2002.

(34) Terry Mollner, op cit.

(35) Feline Drinking Fountain (from an advertisement): These fun cat drinking fountains help prevent feline urinary tract infections and maintain cat health because the continuously running water encourages them to drink more. Created by a veterinarian to combat urinary tract infections, common cat health problems, the drinkwell gives kitties fun along with freshened water at all times.

(36) Interview, Piers Cross, World Bank Representative, Director, Water and Sanitation Division, Nairobi, Kenya.

Voices like Rinaldo Brutoco, Clem Sunter, Brian Chossek and venture capitalists like Terry Mollner and Ben Cohen of Ben and Jerry's see the potential role of business as a force for social responsibility and for re-kindling the human spirit in business. They give consumers, companies and investors a long-term vision of what mature business consciousness, informed by *ubuntu* could look like – a world beyond sustainable greed.

And finally, during this period of corporate greed and war talk, I seek solace in America's best exemplar of *ubuntu*, Martin Luther King, whose speech at Riverside Church 35 years ago, is as relevant today, for me as a global citizen, as it was thirty years ago.

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

"A true revolution of values will lay its hand on the world order and say of war, "This way of settling differences is not just." A nation that continues year and year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

"This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, clan, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind."
(37)

C. A New Language for "Business In Community"

I would like to conclude with a few comments and questions developed for the reader's consideration.

During a recent telephone interview discussion with World Business Academy Fellow Verna Allee, she lamented the fact that our business language for capturing the most deeply experienced human contact and enrichment in business settings is woefully inadequate. Words like "network" and "web" are mechanistic and overused. We are beginning to recognize more and more that the most powerful aspects of human connection are at the level of the intangible, yet we do not have the vocabulary to express these.

If indeed some of us believe that *ubuntu* may be able to provide us with new pathways of understanding and **living** our common humanity and our inter-connectedness as a business community, we need to begin to dialogue about how we may label, learn and integrate some of the concepts more fully.

- **What new words, new concepts might be necessary then to stimulate our thinking about how we can BE more connected as Business in Community?**
- **What will it take to produce not only the shift in consciousness, but the change of heart that will be needed to begin to think about the idea and practice of Business in Community?**

As we move to a more complex and interconnected world, as Verna Allee suggests, "we are most truly challenged to develop the inner technologies of the mind that shape our social systems, our relationships, the businesses we create – and in a very real sense, the very world we live in." She mentions that a group of respected thinkers and commentators met recently to discuss key issues of organizational knowledge, learning and leadership. They included very distinguished people such as: Brian Arthur, Ikujiro Nonaka, Peter Senge, Joe Jaworski, Otto Sharmer, Aries de Geus, Eleanor Rosch and Francisco Varela. "The overwhelming consensus of the group is **that awareness of how we create our shared social reality is the most important aspect of business life we will need to learn for the future.**" (38)

(37) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (from a speech at Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967).

(38) Verna Allee (2003) p. 143.

- **How can we create our shared social reality, our collective knowledge?**
- **What new words, rituals, and processes do we need to develop in order to more effectively create and describe our shared reality in the business context?**
- **In what ways can African culture and *ubuntu* inform our thinking?**
- **In what other cultures in different parts of the world are there words and concepts similar to *ubuntu*, and how may we begin to integrate such words into our business practices and business community?**
- **How can our collective knowledge become a more vibrant and essential part of business life?**

This article, very much an embryonic work in progress, may raise more questions than it answers. *Ubuntu* is a difficult concept to discuss because it embodies so much that is intangible and yet taps into intrinsic aspects of our common humanity that we can feel and that must be released. Hopefully, it can be a useful concept to help us identify new ways of thinking for business that challenge us to become mature, generous and caring. If businesses, like selfhood, could be understood in terms of what we do for others and how we can serve humanity, perhaps we can begin to come closer to the kind of world that works for all.

In the words of Martin Luther King,

“Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves in the long and bitter, but beautiful struggle for a new world. If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day all over America and all over the world when justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a stream.” (39)

(39) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (from a speech at Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967).

REFERENCES

Allee, Verna, *The Future of Knowledge: Increasing Prosperity Through Value Networks*, Butterworth Heinemann (2003).

Danmiller Tyson Associates, *Whole-Scale Change: Unleashing the Magic in Organizations*, Berrett-Koehler, (2000).

Denning, Stephen, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*, Butterworth-Heinemann (2001).

King Report on Corporate Governance in South Africa, Institute of Directors, Johannesburg, South Africa (March 2002).

Lessem, Ronnie and Nussbaum, Barbara: *Sawubona Africa: Embracing Four Worlds in South African Management*, Zebra Press, Struik Publishers, South Africa (1996)

Levering, Robert and Moskowitz, Milton, "The 100 Best Companies to Work For", *Fortune* (February 4, 2000).

Mollner, Terry: "Economic Maturity Beyond Capitalism: What will define the next stage?" *World Business Academy, Perspectives*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Dec. 16, 2002).

Nussbaum, Barbara "African Culture and Ubuntu: A South African's Reflections in America" *World Business Academy, Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Feb. 12, 2003).

Senge, Peter: Peter Senge "Closing the Feedback Loop between Matter and Mind", Interview with Otto Scharmer (May 15, 1966).

Shoniwa, Shepherd, *African Imperatives and Transformation Leadership Directorship*, Institute of Directors, Johannesburg, South Africa (March 2001).

Snowden, Dave, "The Art and Science of Story or Are you sitting clearly?", *Business Information Review* (December 2000).

Sunter, Clem and Visser, Wayne, *Beyond Sustainable Greed: Why Sustainable Business is a much better idea*, Cape Town, South Africa. Human & Rousseau; Tafelburg (2002)

Copyright © 2003 World Business Academy, 428 Bryant Circle, Suite 109, Ojai, CA 93023

Academy Phone 805 640-3713 Fax 805 640-9914 Website www.worldbusiness.org

Editor, Joe Simonetta jrsimonetta@comcast.net Phone 941 378-8407 Fax 941 378-9348