Tutor/Mentor, SocialEdge and the internet: a Vision

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Part I: Introduction

If you would be so kind as to imagine a pile of papers with the information I would like to convey to you neatly typed on every page -- the helpful URLs, the idea that social enterprise is a balance of the social and the enterprising, for instance, but that if the enterprise gets to rule the social aspect it will crush it, and all you'll have left is an enterprise, whereas if the social aspect gets to rule the enterprise it will give it depth and insight and flexibility and value -- that sort of idea, and then, with your little stack of papers firmly in mind, you allow a small wind to creep into your imagination and begin to blow the papers, very gently to begin with, so that the first page begins to flutter and lift, and the second, and the first page finally lifts off and billows out like a sail, and the second, and third, fourth and fifth, until you're a galleon, with each page a sail, each word and phrase and idea now belling out with the breeze, with inspiration, with enthusiasm, that galleon is what I would like you to take away with you...

your sails filled with inspiration -- and the information, the URLs and basic ideas in written form, so you can sort them and file them away in memory and somewhere on your desk and find them again if and when you need them...

So there are the facts and the is the passion, and what's really most helpful is to let the passion, the inspiration that the facts are capable of generating when they're appalling, when things are not the way they ought to be, when the earth or some local aspect is way out of balance, blow through the facts and lift them, make them into a force for change.
We look at the world as it is, and sometimes it all seems quite straightforward -- and then something catches our eye, and we know something's wrong, that the earth is out of balance, that it's upside down. We find:

![Image of plastic pollution](image.png)

an albatross chick whose mother, searching for food, found various bits of colorful plastic in the bright swirl of our refuse that covers an area somewhere between the size of Texas and the size of the United States, and fed her child a plastic marker not unlike the ones I brought with me today -- utterly ignorant of how to dispose of them without harming another albatross.

Greenpeace estimates that more than a million seabirds die from eating plastic particles each year.

Now the distance between here and paradise is no more and no less than the distance we must travel for the albatrosses and pelicans of the world to find food for their young that encourages their growth instead of killing so many of them.

And my plastic marker is not the only problem. Still thinking in terms of birds -- which we can see, which we can all appreciate, which are so obviously graceful, so beautiful -- there's also oil, which drives....
so much of my life I can hardly begin to comprehend it...

Breton National Wildlife Refuge, about eight miles from the Louisiana coast, had been fortunate so far in avoiding the worst of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. Then on Thursday morning, workers found a young brown pelican on a sand spit with its neck and one wing matted in oil. Refuge biologist James Harris says the pelican was likely killed by the oil.

An estimated 4,500 pelicans and tens of thousands of terns nest on the dozens of islands that make up the sanctuary. Harris says with each passing day the refuge is "pushing the envelope" in avoiding disaster.

And this distance, between here and paradise, is a distance that passes through some of the murkier swamps and (frankly) garbage patches of the human spirit, because as a species we are so very comfortable, so content, so reluctant to change... to sacrifice the quality of life we enjoy...
But it is also the distance that brings us closer to paradise.

In that sense, every step we take, whether it be to turn around, to notice what saddens or frightens or disgusts us, or to measure the distance in our minds or feel it in our hearts, or finally to revolve it in our minds as if it were a diamond -- the actual and the possible within it, Michelangelo's David in a block of stone -- to see the fault-lines, to pick up one's tools and to begin to chip away at things until the world as we'd prefer it swims into view...

![Michelangelo's David](image)

each step on the way is a step towards paradise, and thus is paradise itself. Or for those who prefer a less religious-sounding way of saying the same thing,

each step towards social justice partakes of the atmosphere of social justice.
Part II: Jeff Skoll

My current field of employment -- and the reason Dan Bassill invited me here today -- is Social Entrepreneurship.

I run events online for SocialEdge, the online arm of the Skoll Foundation, which was set up by Jeff Skoll, eBay's first employee and first President, to facilitate his philanthropic ideas. I don't know Jeff personally, but it's my impression that he has what you might call "network mind" -- the sort of mind that flows naturally from one person via another to a third and fourth, making the sorts of connections along the way that gave us the whole idea of Six Degrees of Separation:

and the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon, and the hyperlink, and the internet, and the social web, and Wikipedia, and ...

![Diagram of network and connections]

THE PROBLEM WITH WIKIPEDIA:

YACONA NARROW BRIDGE
SUPERIOR BRIDGE
STRUCTURAL COLLAPSE

THREE HOURS OF FASCINATED CLICKING

24-HOUR MARATHON
WEARING A T-SHIRT

WET POINT CONTEST
how easily we can start out with a Wikipedia search for a few useful facts and wind up hours later with a smallish but varied subset of the entire universe of knowledge in our heads, and no idea how we got there...

We live in a wild webbed world, and whether your specialty is computer networks or business networking or what the CIA calls 'connecting the dots' or graph theory or conceptual mapping or flow charting or explaining how a washing machine works, we're all living in a world where it's useful not just to be able to get from A to B in a linear fashion, but to be able to understand the myriad branching pathways between the two places, and the different challenges and opportunities each path affords, the landscape, the watering holes, the breathtaking vistas, the inhabitants --

to glimpse in even a small way the brilliant interconnectedness, indeed what the Buddhists might call the interwovenness of all the world...

To see with the eyes of compassion, to see each part and person within the whole, the rich interdependence of all that is alive...

It is no mistake, I think, that as we move out of an age of reason and linear logic and into an age of networked logic and complex systems, we are also moving from a world where personal interest goes ahead on its own steam into one where empathy and compassion move us to reach out to others...

and in Jeff Skoll's case, from extraordinary business success to philanthropy.
Part III: Social Enterprise

Social Enterprise is a double-barreled business, if you'll allow me to say so.

And that is only fitting, since this business of being human is a double-barreled business, too. Half-angel, half-beast -- blindingly selfish, yet capable of extraordinary acts of unselfishness, generosity and compassion -- we seem to live out our lives in a state of continual tension between what is and what would be possible, what we can get and what we might give.

And then there's the bottom line.

Here's where my own theory clicks in. I suspect that the world is upside down because our values are so often pegged to the bottom line.

Social enterprise, it seems to me, shoots for the horizon. It may aim higher than that, all the way up to the highest levels of self-sacrifice, but it doesn't expect to change the world in an instant, in all respects, into perfection. It hopes and prays and grunts and sweats to make a start, to get the ball rolling.
It works for a balance between ideals and practice: but there's a trick here --

the ideas need to set the tone for the practice. If you let practical considerations run the show, if you put practice over ideals,

practical considerations will squash the ideals out of existence: because they're heavier, thicker, more massive, more gravitational.


And I happen to think she's right.
Simone Weil uses religious language -- both scientific and religious terms, in fact -- but the ideas don't have to be religious. She taught that:

Two forces rule the universe: light and gravity.

We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity, unless there is supernatural intervention.

All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.

Creation is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace.

Again, I know that's partly stated in religious terminology -- but it doesn't have to be. Let's translate it:

Two forces rule the universe: the light and the heavy.

For practical purposes, let's call them "uplift" and "dead weight".

Uplift is the inspiration, the enthusiasm, the passion, the compassion -- and it comes from the view that we are greater than ourselves, that we are parts of a greater whole, and that what happens to others in some way happens to us.

And "dead weight" is inertia, is what we must push against to get the ball rolling, the globe rolling, the whole world rolling...

And we make that effort, we lean into that task, whenever we put uplift and inspiration in charge of gravity and inertia.
Social enterprise involves both enterprise -- the practical part that highly competitive entrepreneurs are good at -- and a social component -- the part that cares, that's collaborative as well as competitive, that knows there's more to life than just the bottom line.

But let's not leave it there. Bill Drayton, CEO, chair and founder of Ashoka, a global organization that fosters social entrepreneurs, and a friend and partner of the Skoll Foundation, puts it like this:

Social entrepreneurs are not content just to give a fish or teach how to fish. They will not rest until they have revolutionized the fishing industry.

He's definitely shooting above the horizon -- he's aiming for the best of all possible worlds, for the world that could be, if we could be both social and enterprising enough to make it so. And here's the Skoll Foundation's basic vision

The Skoll Foundation drives large-scale change by investing in, connecting and celebrating social entrepreneurs and other innovators dedicated to solving the world’s most pressing problems. Social entrepreneurs are proven leaders whose approaches and solutions to social problems are helping to better the lives and circumstances of countless underserved or disadvantaged individuals.
What interests me here is that little string of words, *investing in, connecting and celebrating*.

My part of the work of the Skoll Foundation, as someone who suggests and monitors conversations on our SocialEdge website, doesn’t have much to do with the *investing* part: it's pretty much focused on *connecting*.

And the great delight of the job is that when we really connect, when one of the conversations on SocialEdge takes off -- we *celebrate*!
Part IV: Connecting.

So here's how we connect.

I host an event on SocialEdge -- over the last half dozen years, I've hosted about fifty of the things. Someone suggests a topic, or my boss has an idea, or I propose something that occurs to me, and we line up a 300-500 word outline of what we'd like to discuss, and at noon, California time, on a Tuesday, we open shop.

That's at http://www.socialedge.org/

We've talked about Problems and Fixes, which covers a pretty extensive territory. We've discussed The Most Powerful Motivators, we've talked of Creativity Pure and Applied. We've hosted events on Spirituality and Social Entrepreneurship, and on Games Worth Playing -- because there's a whole industry now, building really game-changing, life-changing games.

That's at http://www.gamesforchange.org/

Like Peacemaker, a game in which you play an Israeli or Palestinian leader and work for peace in the Middle East, making moves triggered by news events -- and witnessing the repercussions, as forces arrayed on both sides work towards their own objectives, which are not necessarily peaceable...

That's at http://www.peacemakergame.com/

We've explored Open Source Social Entrepreneurship, Co-preneurs and Power Couples, and Serial Social Entrepreneurs, we've delved into The Cultural Anthropology of Social Entrepreneurship and The Tao of Social Entrepreneurship,
We've considered *The Perils of Size and Success*, we've asked ourselves: *Gates & Buffett: Is Bigger Necessarily Better?* We've discussed *The Fetishization of Metrics* and *The Fetishization of Scaling Up*, we've suggested *Why you shouldn't scale up (small is beautiful)*, and *Why (And How) You Should Scale Up*.

We've looked at *Productivity vs. creativity: Does the culture war impact social entrepreneurs?* And we've asked -- this was a question that got a terrific response -- *What keeps you up at night?* We even had an event entitled: *Stop following your dreams (so that you can succeed)*!

We've looked at *Alternative Economic Structures* and *Theory of Change: A Collaborative Tool?* We've asked *What the Community Sector can Teach the Corporate World* and explored the *Impact of the Financial Crisis on Global Ecology*

We held an event recently focusing on *Maximizing Volunteer Impact*. We've hosted *Reflections on Beginnings*, and an item on *When to Quit*.

And believe me, we're not about to quit -- in fact, we're just beginning.

So we're talking -- have been talking for half a dozen years now -- about all these things, and quite a while back, someone called Dan turns up.

Daniel Bassill, whom I have never met in person. And we connect
Part V: Tutor/Mentor Connection

Dan's work I'm confident you all know a great deal better than I do. But this much I can tell you -- **he's not content just to give a fish or teach how to fish. He will not rest until he has revolutionized the fishing industry.**

We connect because, although Dan has a sizeable website of his own to keep up, he's also busy across the web, networking: he's a webbed, netted fellow. So he posts on SocialEdge, and begins to create a series of links between our various events and topics *and people* on SocialEdge ad his own Tutor/Mentor site. And I'm sure he does the same thing elsewhere, at many elsewheres in fact.

I begin to warm to Daniel. He's a regular, and that alone is a connection. And he's lucid and to the point: that helps, too. And then I begin to notice that he's very interested in some things that I'm also interested in: the use of visual tools in thinking through complex situations and communicating complex insights, and various forms of mapping.

I visit his website, I read his posts, and there are *aha!s* of recognition...

I said that Dan is not content just to give a fish or teach how to fish. He will not rest until he has revolutionized the fishing industry, and he's how that works. What I discovered is that Dan has a ruling focus or passion that is heart-felt, clear and local.

Dan's local focus is on "providing a comprehensive, volunteer-based tutoring/mentoring program for 7th to 12th grade teens in the Cabrini Green neighborhood", and to address it, he founded Cabrini Connections.

![Cabrini Connections](http://www.cabriniconnections.net/)

Read about it at: [http://www.cabriniconnections.net/](http://www.cabriniconnections.net/)

But that wasn't enough. His local drive opened up analogical possibilities. And that's where, as I understand it, Tutor/Mentor Connection comes into play: "an organization dedicated to connecting all tutoring/mentoring programs in the
city of Chicago, generating a flow of money, visibility, and volunteers to help each program grow to its full potential."

Dan's work for Cabrini Connections naturally involved research, and research meant that he was gathering resources, and there was no apparent reason why the resources he found shouldn't also be of use to others doing similar work in other local environments. So Dan began a library -- and a series of maps -- and conversations.

All this via his "parallel" organization, Tutor/Mentor Connection, and its website: http://www.tutormentorconnection.org/.

So whatever he learned that might be useful to others who were undertaking similar work anywhere in Chicago would be freely available for them to use.

Now double that up with the mapping, which allows you to see at a glance where there are Tutoring and Mentoring programs in Chicago, and where there are none, and how that distinction maps to the availability of schools, and prevalence of certain forms of crime, and presence of potential funders, large corporations, universities... you get it.

Invite others to contribute their research, their maps, their findings...

And now show how it's all done -- make the process and the site a model for how others doing tutor/mentor projects in other cities, or even doing other social projects -- projects related to education, or hunger, or health, whatever can benefit from the model -- can go about the task more efficiently and effectively., building on the work that Dan and his colleagues are doing.

Now that's revolutionary!

There's a kind of "zoom lens" operating in that phrase I quoted from Bill Drayton of Ashoka, isn't there? Giving someone a fish is first stage, teaching them how to fish is stage two, and it's a much bigger and more impactful
enterprise, and revolutionizing the fishing industry is even larger and more ambitious.

Dan has, it seems to me, that kind of ambition.

Okay?
Part VI: Across the Web, Across the World

So we begin to know and trust one another.

Now I have a bee in my own bonnet -- my bee is that isolated conversations on individual websites often cover similar ground -- but in isolation. I'd like to change that.

I like community: I've spent four years in one of the world's great universities, I've lived and worked on common projects with my fellow meditators, I've hung out with the folks who gathered around a Lakota Sioux medicine man, and I've found an online home in Howard Rheingold's Brainstorms gathering.

Howard's a delightful fellow -- some of you may know him, he wrote the book on Virtual Communities -- and Brainstorms is a place where he and a couple of hundred of us gather online to discuss pretty much anything under the sun -- or moon. And my time there has given me the sense that deep friendship is possible online.

My connection with Howard and my enthusiasm for online conversation and community building no doubt had something to do with my interest in SocialEdge, and my getting work as an event coordinator there in the first place.

And my experience with SocialEdge, in turn, set me up for the idea of cross-site communications.
The people who gather for the SocialEdge events are people of heart, mind and body. They have strongly held, generous values. They are clear about them, and able to articulate them in ways that inspire and persuade others to join them. And they act on their insights, they're invested in building the world they'd like to see.

And there are more like them, people who are generous, clear and active, who never come to SocialEdge, but hang out online in other "neighborhoods of the likeminded" -- on other sites.

That thought excites me: I want to connect with them.

And then an opportunity arose.

That's: [http://www.publicinnovators.com](http://www.publicinnovators.com)

Public Innovators is a parallel organization to SocialEdge, working at the interface between social enterprise and government. We have common interests, and each site has its followers -- with some overlap, no doubt.

Long story short: we set up a joint PublicInnovators/SocialEdge event, where discussions would take place on both platforms, both our websites. We were talking about the incoming President Obama's Social Innovation Agenda. And wouldn't you know it, Dan Bassill turned up with a comment on the PI site.

Folks, we're in the territory of cross-web communications here, we're talking from website to website.

So I'd like to make a pitch here for the idea of global, multi-site, cross-web conversation on bringing the world closer to the way it could and should be...
Part VII: Depth.

My time with SocialEdge, and on Brainstorms and other sites, has taught me that the friendships formed online can be powerful and deep.

People often feel that online communication can't possibly be as profound as face-to-face communication, that it lacks the intimacy of facial gestures and tones of voice that being in a room with someone allows -- raising a quizzical eyebrow or giving them a smile, touching an elbow, speaking in a confidential whisper, or with passion, or calm authority.

But think about books for a moment. They go on longer than a face to face conversation, and they can have a profound impact, they can change our lives.

Building online community means holding conversations that go on for months, years even. We get to know the "regulars". We get a sense of where they're coming from, what their priorities are. And as we do that, we grow in trust. We bond. We become friends.

I spent two years as Senior Analyst in a small Beltway think-tank once, and I got the job because I'd been in email correspondence with two people with whom I had a common interest, sharing my research with them.

I have seen online friendships so strong that someone in need has received a thousand dollars or more by way of help, not once, but so often I can no longer count the times.

I have seen miracles of fundraising on Twitter alone, 140-character limit and all.

I have seen a group of bloggers, again with shared interests, come together to discuss a common theme, writing it up from enough different angles and with enough acumen and research that they made a book out of it, writing up longer versions of their various contributions, commenting on each others views...

and one of them, my friend Mark Safranski, then edited the volume, and you can purchase it today on Amazon...

And I have played an online game I designed, in which a small group of people under the guidance of a trained psychotherapist "played" images of their dreams on a graphical, online board and made connections between them, amplifying each other's sense of where the dreams might be leading them.

You can read about it at: [http://www.beadgaming.com/Logeman.html](http://www.beadgaming.com/Logeman.html)

And I received an email from one of the participants -- a fellow who was dying of cancer, and knew it -- telling me that the reason he was so passionately involved in the group and the game was that he could *imagine playing it when he no longer had a body*.

He was posting from New Zealand.

That's how deep the online connection can be.

There is no limit.
Part VIII: Trust, Friendship, Collaboration, Impact

Where do we go from here?

I'm saying that reading brings posting, posting brings acquaintance, repeated acquaintance brings recognition, mutual recognition is the beginning of trust, trust engenders friendship, and with friendship come all the possibilities of rich collaboration.

We can work the net as though it's just a research library, dipping in for a quick hit on information and then escaping -- or we can begin to talk, to share, to get to know each other, to build cross-web conversations and friendships, to pool our readers as well as our thoughts, to watch out for those places where some kind of mutual aid might be possible, to collaborate to build that better world.

There's no limit to the impact that would have....

Let's talk. Let's get to know one another. And then let's act.