

# Civilization and Nature

*Healing the imbalance of modern life*

By Marjorie Kelly

I took a break from editing a story one afternoon last week and walked down to the lake near my office—to a marshy corner of the lake, shallow and reedy, where the water was green and thick with algae, and the air was thick with gnats. Framed in a stand of cattails, I could see across the water a glistening glass office building, pristine in its polished surfaces and right-angled walls. How different these two worlds are, I thought, and how intriguing that one has emerged from the other—that the orderly structure of civilization has emerged from the teeming mud of life. The two impulses of civilization and nature seem so much at odds, and yet in fact are so intertwined.

Certainly I find both impulses intertwined in my own life, when the need for order and control conflicts with the urge to relax and let things go. Or when the wisdom of following the flow at work seems to contradict the need to set goals and monitor performance. Much as I'd like to say I move easily between the two, it may be more accurate to say I leap from one to the other in irritation. When my desk is a disaster area at work and my laundry is piled high at home, I sympathize with the civilized impulse: the impulse that allows me to enjoy streets free of potholes and phones that work and white cotton shirts fresh from the dryer. But on days with long meetings in formal conference rooms, I long to escape into the summer afternoon and throw aside professional restraint.

What is at work here is not a simple swing of the pendulum, but a movement toward a higher synthesis: finding that meetings are in fact more productive when they're less formal, that goals are more apt to be reached when they harmonize with the natural growth curve of a business, realizing that organization itself can be relaxing.

What is true on an individual level is equally true on a cultural level: Leaning too far in one direction makes us long for its opposite, and heeding this impulse leads us to a higher synthesis. While our ancestors struggled and fought for the civilized society we enjoy today, we feel beset by the pollution and bureaucracy and multiple evils of the modern industrial state. Constraint breeds the urge to loosen. This doesn't mean that our civilization is evil, but that we are ready for a new level. We are ready to move forward

to a culture both technologically sophisticated and ecologically sensitive, both ordered and humane. Indeed, I believe this movement has begun.

In our time, we are seeing bureaucracy give way to participative management. The era of the Organization Man is being followed by the era of the flattened hierarchy. Nine to five is maturing into flextime. White male executives are launching programs on accommodating diversity. Mandatory overtime is giving way to family-friendly policies.

If these more humane styles of business are not yet dominant today, they may well represent the organization of the future. The longing to correct a felt imbalance in our world is surfacing in many of us today, in many different ways. It is not an awareness exclusive to social activists, but is welling up in the hearts of many of us in business: real estate developers, automobile manufacturers, chemical makers, fast-food vendors.

In the contemporary morality play that might be titled "Technology Versus Nature," environmental advocates have tended to frame the issues in confrontational terms: the snail darter versus the dam, the spotted owl versus the lumber company. While such tactics might be effective in a legal sense, they obscure the more fundamental matter of how all of us might work together—how we might build a world with both owls and lumber companies, both snail darters and dams.

I am offended when businesspeople are cast as the enemy, because we too are groping for answers—in our own businesslike way. And this is a key point. If the voices of complaint and the cries for change come mostly from outside business, from environmentalists or social activists, it is because that is their role—to be gadflies, to goad others into change, to be dreamers of what might be. The role of business is very different. It is on the receiving end of that clamoring for change, and has the job of putting it into action—a role that is inherently more conservative. Business is by its nature pragmatic, not given to rhetoric and hyperbole, but it is not therefore indifferent to social concerns. In fact, its market orientation makes it naturally responsive.

Take pesticides, for example. It was the fiery rhetoric of author and activist Rachel Carson that first raised the alarm on the hazards of chemical use in 1962, with the publication of *Silent Spring*. The picture she painted of a world where no birds

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sing and grasses fail to grow was an alarmist vision intended to incite the world to action, and it succeeded. Today, nearly twenty years later, concern over pesticides has found its way into the very heart of agribusiness—with, for example, the launching of a new line of chemical-free grains grown by Pioneer, the world's largest seed company (page 13). We would be surprised, of course, if Pioneer Chairman Tom Urban spoke with the same hyperbole as Rachel Carson. That's not his role. His job is to respond to consumer demand for safer foods, and to find ways to meet that demand with new farming methods that are both technically feasible and financially rewarding. Pioneer has done so by paying farmers a bonus to grow grains without chemicals, by sending agronomists into the fields to coach farmers in pesticide-free growing techniques, and by perfecting a carbon-dioxide storage technique that stops insect infestation in storage bins.

It was not a project Pioneer was likely to leap into the moment *Silent Spring* was published. New technologies had to be perfected, new ideas had to be accepted by farmers, and consumer demand had to grow. But when the pieces were in place, Pioneer acted. And when its leadership demonstrates that sustainable agriculture can work, other companies will follow.

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Progress in business moves forward not by rhetoric but by necessity, by market opportunity, and by technological advance. Interest in diversity training is driven by the fact that minorities and women are a growing presence in the workforce and must be accommodated. New developments in the family-friendly workplace are emerging because

business needs the skills of working parents.

More than any other institution in modern society, business is reality-based. Religion, the arts, education, the nonprofit sector, even government to some extent, are all lofty endeavors, driven by ideals. Their feet, so to speak, are planted firmly in the air. Which is needed and civilizing and uplifting, and god forbid we should ever lose those parts of society. But business, as conceived under the capitalist system, has one fundamental rule that no other institution must face: Business must pay its own way. It must make a profit, or at the very least break even. Of all the sectors of society, business is the only one that generates wealth. The rest in a sense eat money: They take more money to survive than they generate on their own.

A business that spends more than it generates, year after year, is an ex-business. Profit is not a piece of wickedness concocted by capitalists to line their own pockets. It is the first law of financial life: Survival requires more money coming in than going out.

This is a lesson the Soviet Union and other centrally planned socialist countries have been slow to learn, that however fair and just an idea might be in theory, if it isn't working economically it isn't working. The shambles of the Soviet economy attest to how far off track business can go when not subjected to the discipline of making a profit in the marketplace.

Concern for social welfare does belong in business, and is finding a growing place there, but it is a concern subject to the discipline of economics. It falls to business to mediate lofty dreams with the demands of reality, yet this does not mean business is the villain on the wrong side of the fight. Businesspeople too are moving to make change. The imbalance of the modern world is felt not only by those who stand on the side of nature, but by those inside the glass building as well. ☞

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