

Chapter One – Excerpt

Chapter 1 – The Epiphany

Better than Gold

“Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.” John Milton

“Everything you need to learn about business, you can learn in the rainforest.”

Those words landed on my soul like distant thunder with an authority only a father can bring, yet I was alone. They were at once reassuring and at the same time, seemingly preposterous. How could anyone learn anything about business from observing an ecosystem as yet untouched by man? My own question contained the seeds of the answer... It was a system. An “eco” system.

The night before that thunderous idea hit my soul, my wife and I were enjoying some fresh Ceviche, a local favorite consisting of tropical fish marinated in citrus and served with lightly salted chips that made our arduous journey to the mountain village of Boquette, Panama well worth the effort. It’s a top retirement choice for many Americans due to its eternal “Spring like” climate where temperatures seldom get above the mid 80’s by day or below the mid 50’s by

night. The air was thick with the fragrance of orchids, and the sounds of exotic birds enchanted our every moment.

As we dined in an open air café under the slowly turning ceiling fan watching the sun kiss the mountains goodnight, I overheard two women discussing their travel that day into the rainforest. Their voices were filled with wonder and utter amazement at what they had seen. They described another world. A world I had never seen. It was Jurassic Park but not as dangerous. I knew I had to see it as soon as possible. It wasn't their description of beauty and exotic life forms that grabbed my attention, but rather it was their observation of cooperation and relationship between species that piqued my interest.

They spoke in hushed, reverential tones about the symbiotic relationships between various insect species and how when you get about 100 feet inside the forest, you are enveloped by peace and quickly lose track of not only your sense of time, but as I later discovered, of every worry, concern and stress that so easily plagues us in our day-to-day lives. I was hooked! I had to get to the rainforest and experience this for myself. For that to occur, we would have to return as our time there had come to an end.

Upon returning home, one of the first things I did was look on the internet to see if anyone else had ever considered the notion of the rainforest as a

business model. Immediately I found, “What We Learned in the Rainforest – Business Lessons from Nature” by Tachi Kiuchi, Chairman and CEO Emeritus of Mitsubishi Electric America and Bill Shireman, Chairman and CEO of the Future 500. These guys had parachuted into Costa Rican and other rainforests and what they observed changed the way they ran their businesses. They maintain that “by gleaning information from nature – the very system it once sought to conquer – business can learn how to adapt rapidly to changing market conditions and attain greater and more sustainable profits.” Wow! Maybe that thunderous thought I heard in Panama wasn’t so far fetched after all! Maybe the answers to my business challenges could be found in the rainforest. Like many of you, I wanted to know how to survive and even thrive in the jungle-like environment we compete in every day. I wanted to know how to succeed using the most time proven principles of all, the principles built into nature itself. And like many of you, I was constrained by lack of resources. My vision outstripped provision and I needed to find a solution.

Eco – system... Eco – logic... Eco – nomics

Interestingly enough, the word “ecosystem” is derived from the Greek word “oikos”, (which means the home or household) and “system” (which is a set of interacting or interdependent entities forming an integrated whole). In other words, an ecosystem is a model of a complex system with multiple components executing varied processes to achieve a unified purpose. That sounds like

business to me! In one very real sense, the rainforest is a business. It manufactures pure breathable air for everyone on the planet to enjoy. Acting like lungs, the rainforest converts vast quantities of carbon dioxide (a poisonous gas that mammals exhale) into cool, refreshing, life sustaining air through the process of photosynthesis.

In the rainforest, energy flows through various levels, ensuring the transformation of materials from one state to another. It begins with nonliving matter like gas or water or minerals and turns them into living tissue in the form of plants. These are consumed by animals producing more tissue and ultimately waste as it's recycled through the system over and over again, teaching us among other things a great deal about efficiency. Just studying the processes that make this possible can revolutionize manufacturing alone as Kiuchi and Shireman attest.

The word "economics" combines the Greek word "oikos" (household) with "nomos" (custom or law) to give us "the rules (or laws) of household management". Ecology goes one step further by studying the science, the "logic", the source code if you will, of what makes household management really work. When we look at economics, we explore the relationship between supply and demand, between producers and consumers, between spending and earning, between giving and receiving and what people can do to maximize

their goals within that framework. The rainforest provides an excellent model for observation of these relationships.

What's interesting about ecology is that it goes beyond observing laws and interactions to arrive at the discovery of "ways" or principles that transcend time and place and can be applied anywhere. It's more than rules. It gives life and animates whatever is touched by it, be that business or family or government. When we study ecology, we peer into a higher form of learning, complex yet simple, dynamic and at the same time constant, lush with principles, models and even strategies waiting to be discovered. It gives us a glimpse into the mind of infinite wisdom, expressed in a myriad of ways through the things that are created.