

Creating a Sense of Purpose: Bringing People Together to Build Community in a Worldwide Web of Intentions, Stakeholders & Results

Owen Ambur, June 22, 2017

In his [commencement address](#) at Harvard University, Mark Zuckerberg told graduates finding their own purpose isn't enough. He challenged them to create a world in which *everyone* has not merely a job but also a sense of purpose. His remarks are highly supportive of the purposes of the Strategy Markup Language (StratML) standard (ISO 17469-1), whose vision is: ***A worldwide web of intentions, stakeholders, and results.***

With reference to the first part of Zuckerberg's challenge, job loss due to automation has been widely discussed. Whether technology causes a net loss is debatable. However, there's no doubt many jobs are eliminated, and in many cases, that is a good thing – because jobs readily subject to automation may be dangerous as well as personally demeaning. Indeed, in “modern” social welfare democracies, increasing numbers of citizens seem to believe any available job is beneath their dignity.

On the other hand, a case might be made that any job is better than no job. In *The Welfare of Nations*, James Bartholomew notes many studies have linked unemployment to unhappiness. (p. 382) At least a job provides a sense of purpose, however mundane it might be, but, of course, no job has ever been perfect. Improvement should be pursued continuously and creation of a renewed sense of purpose is a worthy quest, even if expressed in terms like “making America great again”.

In *Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis*, Nicholas Eberstadt says the math now suggests “un-working men in modern America simply do not prioritize care for children or other family members.” (p. 82) Moreover, such men spend little of their “enormous free-time” helping others in their families or communities. (p. 86) Thus, Eberstadt observes:

... these men appear to have relinquished what we think of ordinarily as adult responsibilities, not only as breadwinners but as parents, family members, community members, and citizens. Having largely freed themselves of such obligations, they fill their days in the pursuit of more immediate sources of gratification... something like infantilization besets some un-working men. (p. 93)

With respect to his own purpose, Zuckerberg said he was initially excited to connect the Harvard community. He also says he knew somebody would link the entire world someday but it hadn't occurred to him that it might be him and his colleagues. With more than a billion users, he's well on his way to doing so, at least for the limited purpose of sharing photos with friends and family members. As recently as November 2014, for example, he was [quoted](#) as forecasting five years into the future Facebook would be mostly about sharing videos.

Bolstered by a couple more years of experience in his youthful life, he charted a more expansive vision for Harvard graduates, comprised of three ways to create a more purposeful world:

- 1) Take on big meaningful projects together;
- 2) Redefine equality so everyone has the freedom to pursue purpose; and
- 3) Build community across the world.

Addressing obstacles graduates may face, Zuckerberg suggests anyone pursuing an expansive cause will be viewed as crazy, even if their vision is ultimately validated. Moreover, he counsels initiative will inevitably draw criticism because some will always fear change. Nevertheless, he asserts now is the time for his generation to define its “public works” and he proposed two possibilities: a) modernizing democracy so everyone can vote online, and b) personalizing education so everyone can learn.

Both of Zuckerberg’s proposed generational public works have merit on their face and perhaps also on Facebook. More education for more people seems worthwhile – if it is truly personalized and not imposed from the top-down by an omniscient, philosophically biased, highly one-sided, and politically motivated oligarchy, with the cost shifted to others without regard to practical benefits.

There is also the issue of how to address the deferred costs of the “public works” of previous generations, including whether to retire or at least restrain some of those “works” to free up resources for new initiatives. Indeed, Bruce Cannon Gibney argues the magnitude of those costs is indicative of a baby boomer generation of sociopaths. It will be interesting to see whether the psycho/socio-dynamics of the millennial generation prompts them to be less self-serving and more fiscally responsible.

Likewise, voting is universally accepted as good practice, particularly as an alternative to physical force. However, voting is still about imposing our will upon others, even if it is under the high-minded guise of “democracy”. Thus, the broader issue is under what circumstances and limitations we should be empowered to apply coercion to others, including voting to spend their money on “public works” with which they disagree.

To those being coerced the only difference between an acknowledged dictatorship and a purportedly “fairer” democracy may be the number of dictators empowered to exercise dominion over them, ranging from one to a plurality of those taking time to vote or perhaps, in the best case, a simple majority ([majoritarianism](#)) comprising at least one more voter than the multitude in the minority.

Delving more deeply into the first aspect of his broader, three-faceted vision, Zuckerberg argues our society rewards success excessively and doesn’t make it easy enough for everyone to pursue big, meaningful projects. He says he knows a lot of entrepreneurs but not a single person who decided not to start a business for fear of not making enough money. On other hand, he says he knows many who haven't pursued their dreams because they didn't have a cushion to fall back on if they failed.

Beyond the selection bias associated with a billionaire’s circle of acquaintances and the fact his latter assertion belies the former, there are at least two aspects of the cost of failure – the cost of the project itself and the opportunity cost of not having devoted one’s time, effort, and money to something else.

The latter will always be a risk because time can only be used once. We cannot get it back for a do-over. Nor can we scientifically test how best to use our own time. However, we can learn from the mistakes of others, if we are open to doing so and the causes of failure are fairly and openly aired.

Moreover, if entrepreneurs weren’t concerned about making enough money, they wouldn’t worry about the costs associated with starting an enterprise. Indeed, since most new businesses fail in relatively short order, entrepreneurship is largely irrational. Fear of not making enough money is highly justified. So, in that sense, it is good there are so many people who are as crazy (and willing to defy failure) as Zuckerberg suggests they should be. Otherwise fewer would try to start new businesses; there would be less innovation and, over time, the population of the world would be poorer.

However, relevant questions include: Why is it so costly to start a business? To what degree might the cost of governmental regulation – much of which is designed to protect incumbents from competition – outweigh the intended benefits? How much failure might be too much? How much of the cost of failure can be shifted to others without reaching the point of diminishing and, ultimately, creating highly negative returns? If some institutions are deemed too big to fail, does that imply the bigger the failure the better – at least for those institutions, whose bigness makes them politically powerful, if for no other reason than they employ a lot of potential voters? Might publicly imposed (“governmental”) efforts to encourage creativity backfire and cause less of it?

As an example of government-supported initiatives, the relatively simple technical standards undergirding the Internet and the Web vastly reduced the cost of starting an E-business, leading to the overly exuberant [.com bubble](#). However, large, practically monopolistic proprietary “social” networking services like Facebook do not yet support the kinds of data standards required for more efficient and effective business networking services. Thus, such services are immature for business-quality usage, meaning they do not yet reduce the cost and risk associated with entrepreneurial creativity as much as Zuckerberg suggests should be the case.

Does that imply government should regulate large, potentially monopolistic enterprises like Facebook as utilities and require them to comply with applicable standards for interoperability? Might that be the sort of big, meaningful “public work” project millennials should take on?

While there’s no doubt some degree of public funding for basic research can generate a high rate of return, at some point politically motivated support for economic activity begins to crowd out resources for more agile, responsive, and economically justified entrepreneurial creativity.

For example, it seems doubtful that Zuckerberg would support turning Facebook into a highly regulated utility or imposing a special excise tax on its advertising revenue to pay for improvements to its competitors. Indeed, beyond the basic technical standards of the Internet and the Web, it is unclear whether Facebook supports any data standards to facilitate openness and interoperability, which could reduce the cost of starting competitive and complementary enterprises. Jeff Bezos seems more attuned to enabling other enterprises as parts of Amazon’s commercially focused, Cloud-based ecosystem.

Addressing the second facet of his broader vision, Zuckerberg suggests the definition of equality has expanded over every generation. For example, he notes previous generations fought for the right to vote as well as other civil rights and political leaders overwhelmed the opposition to push through the New Deal and Great Society programs. Some have argued those “big idea” programs had large, negative unintended and under-reported consequences, despite their political popularity – which depends in large measure upon how much of other people’s money politicians are willing and able to spend.

In any event, Zuckerberg says it's his generation’s turn to define a new social contract in which progress is measured not just by economic metrics but by how many people have roles they find meaningful.

Toward that end, he suggests ideas like [universal basic income](#) should be explored, to give everyone a “cushion” to try new things. Moreover, he asserts people like him, who have done well economically speaking, should pay the cost. If he truly believes that, a common retort has been he should just give his money to the poor. However, a more balanced interpretation is that he may merely be suggesting ideas like UBI should be tested in pilot projects – by entrepreneurs like him, in relatively small communities –

and not imposed upon the entire nation at once, through the sheer force of brute political power, as the so-called New Deal and Great Society programs (as well as Obamacare) were.

Indeed, he says that's why his wife Priscilla and he started the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI) and have committed some of their wealth to promoting equal opportunity. Note that he did not commit to giving all his money to provide a UBI for those who have been unable or unwilling to earn enough of it to provide comfortably for themselves and their families. Nor are CZI and Facebook one and the same. In short, Zuckerberg is reserving to himself and his FB associates the right to strive to accumulate even more wealth – rather than turning Facebook into a socialistic or cooperative nonprofit operation in which the proceeds are shared equally among its users, regardless of the quantities of their investments or the quality of their contributions.

If Zuckerberg were to transform himself into America's [Mother Teresa](#), he could make each U.S. adult about \$264 richer, at least on paper ... until their Facebook stock tanked and became worthless, i.e., "free". ($\$63.3 \text{ billion} / 240 \text{ million adults} = \263.75) While Zuckerberg asserts millennials are among the most charitable generations in history, apparently not even he is that "generous" or committed to economic "equality," i.e., everyone being equally poor.

Nor does he say how large a "cushion" he believes everyone should have and, thus, how much wealth should be taken from others to provide the desirable level of comfort. However, if he were endowed with dictatorial powers to reallocate the world's wealth, he could bequeath to everyone on earth about \$3,257 in U.S. dollar value. ($\$241 \text{ trillion} / 7.4 \text{ billion people} = \$3,256.76$)

Furthermore, he doesn't note of how much money is already being transferred to the poor via taxation, deficit spending, and politically popular social welfare programs. For example, in 2011 transfers via means-tested programs amounted to more than \$47,000 for every person in the U.S. with (pre-transfer) income below the poverty level. ($\$2,287,133 \text{ million} / 48,452,035 \text{ people} = \$47,204.06$)

In international terms, that essentially means no one in the U.S. should be considered impoverished. On the other hand, of course, much of that money goes to feed the social welfare bureaucracy as well as a substantial amount of waste, fraud, and abuse. Cutting the cost of bureaucracy may be the best economic justification for a UBI.

More importantly, Zuckerberg does not address how the generation of wealth will continue to be incentivized if it is only to be confiscated for transfer to others based upon political considerations. History suggests such incentives were largely lacking prior to the establishment of capitalism and supportive governmental policies. Such policies include the rule of law, private property rights and, by definition, some degree of tolerance for inequality of outcomes, which is conceptually distinct from inequality of opportunity. At least until recently, the [American Dream](#) has been about building a better future for one's self and one's children – not about taking money from those who have been successful to give to those who have not, without regard to effort or productivity.

Finally, with reference to the third facet of his vision, Zuckerberg observes work is not the sole source of purpose. He suggests another way to create a sense of universal purpose is by building community. In support of that thought, he cites a survey in which more millennials defined their identity as "citizen of the world" rather than in terms of nationality, religion or ethnicity. He suggests, "the great arc of human

history bends towards people coming together in ever greater numbers — from tribes to cities to nations — to achieve things we couldn't on our own.”

Unfortunately, his observation applies not merely to results commonly viewed to be good (politically popular or “progressive”) but also those almost universally perceived to be bad (regressive) – like political polarization, increasingly potent weaponry, and more effective oligarchy and dictatorship.

Countervailing against centralization of power on a state, regional, national or transnational governmental scale, however, Zuckerberg argues “the forces of freedom, openness and global community” will prevail “at the local level, when enough of us feel a sense of purpose and stability in our own lives that we can open up and start caring about everyone. The best way to do that” he says, “is to start building local communities right now.”

On the other hand, he notes membership in all kinds of (non-online) groups has declined by as much as a fourth in recent decades. He does not discuss the causes of the trend but it would be logical to assume those groups no longer serve particularly well the interests of their missing stakeholders. At least, they have found other means of occupying their time and attention in ways they apparently find more gratifying, if perhaps not as infantizing as Eberstadt might suggest or sociopathic as Gibney might fear, e.g., sharing photos and videos on Facebook or engaging in techno-bullying and bombast on Twitter.

In *Connected: How Your Friends' Friends' Friends Affect Everything You Feel, Think, and Do*, Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler assert: “To reduce poverty, we should focus not merely on monetary transfers or even technical training; **we should help the poor form new relationships with other members of society.**” (p. 302, emphasis added) Unfortunately, the trend in America seems to be in the opposite direction – toward self-segregation, which is not merely [allegedly supported by Facebook](#) but most certainly is, by definition, because users are free to choose their own friends.

Being forced to associate with those whose values seriously conflict with our own might be deemed to be “cruel and unusual punishment”. While the Constitution protects the right of free association, forced association surely would not pass Constitutional muster.

Zuckerberg sidesteps that issue, neither directly challenging the highly self-segregated Harvard elite nor indicating how he himself intends to try to address it. Nor does he explain the meaning of the concept of “purpose” – other than to suggest, “It’s up to us to create [a sense of higher purpose] so we can all keep moving forward together.”

Presumably, “higher” means bigger than and meaningful beyond ourselves but, surely, “purpose” must also mean consistent with our own deeply held personal values. Otherwise practically any old goal might suffice, so long as we are pursuing it in group-thinking lockstep with others. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine anyone more committed to such a purpose than: a) the members of ISIS, who are eager to torture and kill others while sacrificing their own lives in service to their shared, grotesquely misguided convictions, or b) the followers of the [Dear Leader](#) in North Korea, where kidnapping and cruelty are apparently considered to be in the rightful interest of a sovereign nation. However, Zuckerberg’s reference to the *mass* movement of “all” of us is inconsistent with his conclusion, which emphasizes self-activation, smallness, and community:

Change starts local. Even global changes start small — with people like us. In our generation, the struggle of whether we connect more, whether we achieve our biggest opportunities, comes

down to this — your ability to build communities and create a world where every single person has a sense of purpose.

And that, ladies and gentlemen (as well as those in transition), is an apt description of the purpose of the StratML standard. Rather than waiting for Zuckerberg to do it for us, perhaps we should do as he says, leveraging the standard to build our own open, truly connected, and highly meaningful communities, based upon shared values supported by common and complementary objectives.

Can you think of a bigger, better, more meaningful “public work” project by which millennials might simultaneously pursue all three of Zuckerberg’s proposed means of enabling everyone to have the opportunity to create a sense of purpose for themselves?

By the way, it appears Zuckerberg may be gaining greater understanding of that potential. He just [changed Facebook’s mission statement](#) to parallel that of the StratML standard: ***To give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.***

However, it remains to be seen whether [Facebook Groups](#) will become the best possible means of doing so. If they fail to support an open standard like StratML, that seems doubtful – particularly to users of similar [online group](#) capabilities provided by Microsoft/[LinkedIn](#), Verizon/[Yahoo](#), [Google](#), and others.

Community is not about Facebook or any other proprietary social networking service. Nor is it about “closeness” for its own sake. That notion conjures up visions of over-crowding and noise, as in a low signal-to-noise ratio, characterized in the cyberage by spam. Worse yet, it might become a self-fulfilling prophesy that “[familiarity breeds contempt](#),” as evidenced by what commonly happens in [politically polarized](#) online discussion groups.

Community is about shared values supported by common and complementary objectives – of the members of the communities themselves, using whatever tools, apps, and services *they* prefer. If tech titans like Mark Zuckerberg truly care about communities, they will implement an open, machine-readable data standard for services supporting them.

Watch what the proprietors of social networking services do, not merely what they say ... which would be much easier if they were publishing their performance reports in StratML Part 2, Performance Plan/Report, format ([ANSI/AIIM 22:2017](#)), as U.S. federal public agencies are [required by law](#) to do.

See also:

- [ConnectedCommunity.net](#)
- [Connected in a Worldwide Web of Intentions, Stakeholders, and Results](#)
- [Liberation Revisited: Beyond Democracy to the Apolitical StratML-Enabled Performance Web](#)
- [Cutting to the Chase: Skip the Nonsense and Proceed Directly to Doing Good Better](#)