

# Thinking Like Cathedral Builders: Workplace Democracy, Local Commitment, and Long Haul Business Success.

**K**EVIN KELLY, THE FORMER EDITOR OF *Wired*, tells us that in just the first 4,000 days after the World Wide Web was born, the people of the world built some half a trillion Web pages readily available to the public. The total is growing exponentially. This is a construction feat that would impress the pharaohs. If some government had tried to order this vast project into existence, what would it have cost? Says Kelly, "There is not enough money in the world to do this. It's an impossible thing that we've done, a remarkable human achievement of Renaissance proportions. This is transformative, the scale and speed with which we have made this. It is socializing us to a degree not seen before."

This is an example of what we can do. If we can do that we can do anything. So, the question, as artist Bruce Mau so succinctly says, is "Now that we can do anything, what will we do?" What will we do?

A friend of mine tells a story about her youth. Drunk and crazy, she and her friends were driving around on Cape Cod late at night. They were driving around a rotary and they just kept driving around and around. Someone said, "Let's go backwards." They did, several times around and then—sure enough, slammed into a car coming the other way. They were going slow, so was the other car, and it was just a minor fender bender. Both cars pulled off to the side, but the kids sobered up quick and gravely considered their predicament. A Cop immediately showed up, and went to the rear car first. Another cop showed up and the first one came forward to their car. He says, "Everybody okay? Have you been drinking?" "No sir." "That's lucky," he said, "the guy behind you is so drunk he says you were going backwards."

I didn't come here today to suggest that we should all drive drunkenly, backwards, on rotaries. But I am here to suggest that, sometimes, if we're outrageous enough, nobody can believe it. And these are times, I think, that call for outrageous behavior. That is the first theme of this talk. These are times that call for outrageous behavior. When we think about what we will do, we may wish to keep this in mind. "A ship in harbor is safe," someone once said, "but that is not what ships are for."

**Danny Hillis, the inventor of massive parallel computing**, recently designed an immense clock which will tick once a year, bong once a century, and chime once a millennium. The clock is being built in the California mountains; its purpose is to illustrate a different way to think about time. It is designed to work for 10,000 years, the span of human civilization to date. This ambitious project is intended to inspire a different way of thinking about time. In Stewart Brand's book about the project, called *The Clock of the Long Now* he says,

"Civilization is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span. The trend might be coming from the acceleration of technology, the short-horizon perspective of market driven economics, the next election perspective of democracies, or the distractions of personal multitasking. All are on the increase. Some sort of balancing corrective to the short-sightedness is needed—some mechanism or myth that encourages the long view and the taking of long-term responsibility, where "the long term" is measured at least in centuries.

**This view of time is squarely at odds with short-term business thinking**, as is our view of time at South Mountain Company, the company I co-founded thirty years ago and share ownership of. The work of South Mountain will not be finished in our lifetimes; it will continue for generations. British business philosopher Charles Handy gives perspective:

*"Cathedrals inspire. It is not only their grandeur or splendor, but the thought that they often took more than fifty years to build. Those who designed them, those who first worked on them, knew for certain that they would never see them finished. They knew only that they were creating something glorious which would stand for centuries, long after their own names had been forgotten."*

*They had their own dream of the sublime and of immortality. We may not need any more cathedrals but we do need cathedral thinkers, people who can think beyond their own lifetimes.”*

Some ancient cathedrals took centuries to build. Their builders had endless social, political, economic, technical, and climatological factors to contend with. The work continued as the cast of characters shifted, the master builder died, wars were fought, and regimes changed. These remarkably complex undertakings somehow endured. The perceived rewards must have been great. Whatever the rewards, cathedrals stand as important community anchors. The great ones evoke a sense of permanence and architectural grandeur, reminding us of a vision so strong it could be maintained over time.

That is a second theme of this talk, that we need to think like cathedral builders if we are to have the ability to overcome the problems and tackle the opportunities we are faced with.

I come to my conclusions 30 years into my business career, as the co-founder of a small employee owned design/build company that now has \$6 million in sales, 16 owners among its 32 employees, and a dedication to the kind of enduring connection to community and place that we hope will survive us, and, even, our children. We are still very much a work in progress, but we have set out—briskly although not unerringly—along a path to a more democratic, more responsible, more permanent kind of company.

South Mountain Company is one big collaboration. It’s not about somebody; it’s about everybody: our co-owners, employees, clients, subcontractors, suppliers, and community. By engaging as many participants as possible in our work, the occasionally cumbersome process that results produces consistently rewarding results. We are all acutely aware that what we do we couldn’t possibly do alone; we are utterly dependent on the good will, great craftsmanship, and shared ideas of a large cast of characters.

**We celebrate diversity in our work:** different kinds of undertakings, different kinds of people. We are at home with the high-end custom work we do, the affordable housing work we pursue, the community projects, and some blossoming new endeavors that have recently begun to emerge.

We’re in this for the long haul. After 30 years, we’ve become convinced that this endeavor, this work community we’ve begun, will endure for generations. We are building a cathedral.

Our business model is based on shared ownership, limited growth, craftsmanship and service of the highest quality, and long term cathedral thinking, and we hope it prods others to think beyond the short term, bigger is better ethos of our economy.

**Some of what I am saying comes from my book, *The Company We Keep, Reinventing Small Business for People, Community, and Place*, which was released in May by Chelsea Green Publishing. The book is about business, but rather than concentrating on the troubles and injustices of globalization and corporate excess (others are doing that well), I focus on eight cornerstone principles we have discovered, and how they indicate the promise of small business as a counterforce to the conventional “bigger is better, profits come first, and location is incidental” message. For the sake of good work and good community I question some cherished assumptions about business, argue for broader and deeper measures of success, and tender alternatives that have worked for us—so far— and may work for others.**

Author William Greider is one of those who speaks well about the troubles of our economic system. In *The Soul of Capitalism* he proposes that our economic system is most likely to be transformed, over time, by a variety of small-scale reformers working from within, experimenting with new forms of business in which Americans own their work, their voice, and their self-expression. He believes that this change is already underway. I like to think that my colleagues and I are among those sharing this adventure. If a lack of believable models is part of what inhibits change, perhaps the story of South Mountain Company—and small, democratic, community-based companies like it—can provide inspiration, or at least information, for those looking for a more desirable approach to business success. Ours is not a cry for help or recognition from a lonely wilderness, but rather one optimistic voice in a far-flung choir. There are many others on this journey. Like all of you.

The story of the emergence of this particular design for business is built on these underpinnings:

*cultivating workplace democracy;*  
*challenging the gospel of growth;*  
*balancing multiple bottom lines;*  
*celebrating the spirit of craft;*  
*committing to the business of place;*  
*advancing “people conservation;”*  
*practicing community entrepreneurship; and*  
*thinking like cathedral builders.*

My book is the exploration of these eight cornerstones.

***The principles are interdependent and often intersect***, and they are therefore woven into the fabric of the whole. They have driven how we came, with our share of fumbling and bumbling, but with growing confidence, to be who we are today.

The question is: Can small business, supported by strong underlying principles, help make better lives and better communities? To go further, and perhaps too far, can business conducted this way help us be kinder to ourselves and to one another, to the planet, and especially to our children? Is it a stretch to say that the more fully we are fulfilled in our work, the more fully we can love both our children and our community? And that the more fulfilled, the more we can help to build a future that’s sane and just? If I overreach, it is only my enthusiasm for the possibility that is at fault.

***Author Jeff Gates writes in his book***, *Democracy at Risk*, about what a really democratic society would be, “Democracy is not a destination; it’s our manner of traveling. It’s not so much something we do as the way we are. And the way we are in relation to others. Therein lies its sweetness.” 18

It’s an apt description of the sweetness I sense at South Mountain Company as well. It’s the way we have come to be. Employee ownership has become a part of our identity, as individuals and as a company. The searching-for-democracy journey we’ve taken has stimulated us to articulate and understand our common purpose. It has brought a sense of completeness to the company.

Together we’ve become, at once, better problem solvers and better dreamers. There’s a lot to be said for ownership and the responsibility it encourages. Like Tom Friedman once observed, “In the history of mankind, nobody has ever washed a rented car.”

***James Kunstler, in his new book*** *The Long Emergency*, says that “The future is...telling us very loudly that we will have to change the way we live in this country. The implications are clear: we will have to downscale and rescale virtually everything we do.

He says that “the downscaling of America is a tremendous and inescapable project. It is the master ecological project of our time. We will have to do it whether we like it or not. Downscaling America does not mean we become a lesser people. It means that the scale at which we conduct the work of American daily life will have to be adjusted to fit the requirements of a post-globalist, post cheap-oil age. We are going to have to live a lot more locally, and a lot more intensively on the local level. It will be a project not unlike the rebuilding of New Orleans, but rather than making houses, roads, and schools we will need to rebuild connections, and restore a knowledge base that has been crushed by the wheels of homogenization.”

***This move toward localization and re-scaling is not the prevailing path.*** But it is ascendant. And I am among those who believe, and have believed for a long time, that his words—those words, at least

—are true and that, in fact, many of us will find this very rewarding. Building this cathedral—and it will certainly be a monumental, multi-generational effort—will be about rebuilding community. It’s a project many of us here today are working on, right now. We live in a smaller and smaller world, but we may find that it will begin to get bigger again as energy scarcity leads us to concentrate on the local and close to home.

***I want to tell now about a project, and two years, that changed me,*** and changed the company that I am a part of. During the winters of 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 I took two six month sabbaticals from work, to write a book, but also to be away from South Mountain Company and to see if the company could get out from under me. Until December of 2002 never, for 28 years, had I been away from SMC for more than three weeks (and even that only once), a bill never left our office that I didn’t see, there was never any meeting of substance that I wasn’t at. For 28 years I did some work at SMC most every day of every week, except when I was away on vacation. So six months away, and then another six—it was very very different. Before I tell you what it was like, for the company and for me, let me tell you how it happened.

I had been thinking about this project for years. When my youngest, my daughter Sophie, began high school, my wife Chris and I began to think about this sabbatical when she finished high school and left for college. I doubt we really thought we’d do it, but you know how it is—if you talk about something enough it begins to have a life of its own, and instead of driving the idea, the idea begins to pull you along. That’s what happened. But in Sophie’s junior year, she took the winter semester at a school in Vermont, and loved it, and decided to go back again the following year. So we thought—let’s change this scheme, let’s do two winters instead of one year, and take the winter in Vermont, so we could be close to our daughter in her senior year. The plan developed, we rented a house, and all was set, until two weeks before school started, when Sophie came to us and said, “You know, I really don’t want to miss half my senior year here, I don’t want to go back to Vermont.” Kids sometimes do things like that. You’ve noticed, right? We couldn’t really change our plans at this point—they were too advanced—so we called our friend Netti, in Germany, who had always wanted to come to the U.S., and was doing some writing, and we asked her if she wanted to come to the Vineyard and stay with Sophie while we were gone. The timing was right; she agreed. Our friends said to us, “That Sophie, smart girl. She managed to figure out how to get her parents out of the house for half her senior year.”

***I knew I wanted to write this book,*** but there were two big unknowns: could I do it and what would it be? I tend to thrive on clamor. Many things happening at once. Juggling. Maneuvering. Shuffling. Fixing. So...could I sit? And think? Could I quiet myself? And write. Who knew? At times I felt like Charlie Brown when he said, “Sometimes I lie awake at night and ask, ‘Where have I gone wrong?’ Then a voice says to me, ‘Ummm...This is going to take more than one night.’”

But what if I could? What would this book be? I had a vague feeling, a gnawing sense, but no concrete image. I arrived in Vermont with a bunch of milk crates filled with books. For six or eight weeks I just read, and read, and read. It felt like unrestrained luxury, like floating in a steamy hot tub, endlessly, timelessly, extravagantly. When I tired of my books, I’d roll out the door and ski for a few hours. If you think that sounds okay, you’ve got the picture. It was heavenly. It was different. Time to think. A rare thing.

At some point, seamlessly, I began to write. I stumbled down unmarked blind alleys, over and over, but in each I’d find some salvage and haul it back out with me. At the end of our time there, I had a book proposal and a few draft chapters.

Returning to South Mountain, I found that things had gone well—no disasters at all—but there had been a variety of stresses. Some felt they had shouldered unfair parts of the load. There was too little accountability. The management system we had put in place was ill-conceived. It felt slippery, like things were falling through cracks. Between my return and my second departure, we worked on it, adjusted, tinkered, re-rigged and re-aligned.

Also, during that time, I looked for a publisher. A friend of mine helped me identify three agents. I sent the proposal to them. While I was anxiously waiting for response, I had a sudden realization. It was one of those moments.

***It was a realization that I knew***, already, who I hoped would publish this book, a company called Chelsea Green, right here in Vermont, whose work I had followed for years, and whose values and company culture seemed to have some congruences with ours. That's the place this book should be! So I forgot about the agents, packaged up the proposal and sent it to Margo Baldwin, the publisher of Chelsea Green, with a brief note. Less than a week later I got a phone call from her. She had read my proposal, she said. The material was precisely the stuff they were thinking about in their company, right then. She said she wanted the book. I said you got it. No agent necessary. She sent me a contract. Done! It was like pushing on an open door.

The stories about the troubles between authors and publishers are every bit as common as those of clients and contractors. Everyone's got their nightmare story. But my collaboration with Chelsea Green was a grand excursion. What did I know about making a book, and publishing one? Nothing. They taught me about bookmaking, they absorbed my stubbornness, and they never seemed perturbed by the constant flow of my ignorant, pain-in-the-butt questions. The best moment in the whole exchange, perhaps, was when I received an e-mail from Woody Tasch, the chairman of their board. There was no greeting. It simply said, "OK. You have infected us. Are you around next week for a chat or visit: we want to explore the steps involved in transitioning Chelsea Green Press to employee ownership. Damn you, Abrams." That was the whole message.

***As I said, there were two parts to the sabbatical:*** to write a book and to give the company some space. As far as the second goes, the thrilling part—the part that the book doesn't cover—was to come back to a far better company than the one I left. It's a different company, a new company.

Managing the company in my absence gave people in the company a new sense of legacy. It brought visceral meaning to the idea that this company will endure far beyond my tenure, and the people that truly stepped up, and took the reins, realized, especially the younger ones, about themselves, that they are the people who will take on this task.

We are still, quite clearly, a work-in-progress. In fact, we are only at the beginning of a long journey. There is so much room and need for improvement and growth that it is bound to fill lifetimes. A new company is under construction. A cathedral is rising. To make a durable, robust, and flexible business community that outlasts its original owners, we are planning for succession, so that as we age we can gracefully depart and leave the company—vibrant, stable, learning—in the hands of others. Thanks to this remarkably dedicated and competent group of co-owners, I have been able to do something I've wanted to do for a long time—I have been able to live a dream.

It was exciting to return and lend a hand.

***But what about this notion of durable companies*** and planning for succession? It's fair to ask why longevity and survival matter. Why not let the company die when it seems that it no longer has a purpose? To arrive at an answer we must ask other questions: What is our company? What is its purpose?

South Mountain Company, has become, for us, over 30 years, as much a community as a company. Our purpose will never be fully realized, because the people who are part of it and the people who it affects have on-going relationships that overlap and extend into the future. I don't imagine, for instance, that there will ever be a particular day when everyone in the company is ready to retire. There will never be a moment when all our clients' homes cease to need maintenance, alteration, or addition. We will never complete our learning. We will never complete our service to the community that sustains us. We'll never look around and suddenly say, "All set here. We committed to each other, and to this island, and now everything is just fine and the job is done." Because these things won't happen, we are organized around the idea of maintaining and perpetuating an ongoing business community for one another and for future generations. . Once we have succeeded at the job of creating community, our new job becomes its maintenance, enhancement, and perpetuation. When we build a business, we are building a legacy.

***It has now been 18 months since I came back.***

My fear, upon returning, is described beautifully by a story I read in the book *Presence*, which was written by Peter Senge and several collaborators: A Jamaican man told a story about being diagnosed with a terminal disease. After consulting a number of doctors, all of whom concurred with the diagnosis, he went through what everyone does in that situation: for weeks he denied it. But gradually, with the help of friends, he came to grips with the fact that he would only live a few more months. “Then something amazing happened,” he said. “I simply stopped doing everything that wasn’t essential, that didn’t matter. I started working on projects with kids that I’d always wanted to do. I stopped arguing with my mother. When someone cut me off in traffic, or something happened that would have upset me in the past, I didn’t get upset. I just didn’t have the time to waste on any of that.” Near the end of this period, he began a wonderful new relationship with a woman who thought he should get more opinions about his condition. He consulted some doctors in the U.S. Soon after he got a phone call saying, “We have a different diagnosis.” The doctors told him he had a rare form of an entirely curable disease.

Now here’s the amazing part of the story.

He said, “When I heard this over the telephone I cried like a baby—because I was terrified that my life would go back to being like it was before.”

I was afraid we would go back to being like we were before. We haven’t. Not yet anyway.

***We continue to decentralize management,*** and we sense new urgency and see new activity and promise in a difficult arena we had been talking about for years—creating new endeavors that could serve our aging carpenters who want to remain with the company but don’t want to run around on roofs for their whole life. We seem to have new determination to honor our long term commitment to restoration and improvement of the community and place where we all work and live. At this point in our ragged and thorny history we seem to be more willing to take risks, to venture out onto limbs we may previously not have, to behave, on occasion, outrageously, and we are beginning to be able to see the form of the cathedral emerging.

For many years we have examined growth rigorously and evaluated the benefits and detriments. We have been cautious and carefully scrutinized each opportunity for growth. We have suspected that we could not retain many of the qualities we value if we were significantly larger. We grow to achieve specific goals, but we are aware that when we choose to increase in size, we may disrupt and endanger treasured attributes.

There are no outside investors and no nonemployee board members at South Mountain. Each owner is an employee. We decide what kind of business ours will be. The decisions are partly economic and partly philosophical, and the people making them have well-aligned interests.

For the last decade we have mostly agreed that growth at a snail’s pace is appropriate. We have aimed to be steady but deliberate. Four years ago, however, when the company met, a new consensus emerged. We agreed, at that time, that we had reached an optimum size for us. No new growth until further notice.

To forego opportunities for growth means the employees of this company chose to value the quality of their work life over the size of the potential compensation that might come with more growth. We struggle with our values.

***There’s a story about Abe Lincoln that goes like this:***

When he was still a lawyer practicing in Springfield, Illinois, he represented a client who was fighting the railroad. A friend approaching Lincoln’s office saw a man come flying out of the window, hit the ground, brush himself off, and run away. The friend rushed in to see what had happened.

“I threw him out the window,” Lincoln said.

“Why? What did he do?” asked the friend.

“He’s the lawyer for the railroad, and he offered me \$5,000 to betray my client, but I turned him down. Then he offered me \$10,000, and I turned him down again and finally, he offered me \$15,000 and I tossed him out the window.” The friend asked why he had chosen that moment to throw him out.

“Because,” Lincoln answered, “he was getting close to my price.”

The lure of greater financial success is strong. Hard to forego. Sometimes it gets close to our price.

**Each time we determine it makes sense to grow**, as we have again, recently, for very specific new reasons, it's with the understanding that people who come to work at South Mountain tend to stay, so we must ask, “Are we hiring this person because he or she solves an immediate problem or need, or are we hiring because this is the kind of person with whom we'd eventually wish to share ownership?” One of the key principles at South Mountain is our policy of hiring “future owners” as opposed to employees. We envision people who enter the company staying in the company and becoming owners. So we don't look for neatly wrapped packages of skills, but rather for individuals with character.

To do business this way depends on a deeply embedded sense that we can craft a future that's safe and worthwhile. Although optimism is not the currency of the day, I look around me and I see wonderful ideas and forces stewing at the edges of our society, a mosaic of new institutions and approaches emerging. As we unpack the tools and concepts and unwrap all the mystery, we may, ultimately, change the chemistry of our culture. I believe in the essential goodness of people, and that if we are encouraged sufficiently, we will choose to care about the common good.

In 1890 my grandfather's mother died as he was born in Kiev. A neighborhood family, the Borshaws, who had just lost a baby, offered to raise my grandfather because the mourning mother was able to wetnurse him. He spent his early years with this cultured and educated family, while sometime during that decade his father left for America to seek new opportunity. In 1899 the father sent for the son and it was arranged for him to leave Russia and board a ship bound for the U.S. It so happened that his vessel entered New York harbor on New Year's Eve of 1899. It was the turning of the century, and the vibrant capital of new world commerce was decked out and lit up. As the ship edged into the harbor, nine year old Morris Abrams was perched in the bow, spellbound by the spectacle before him. Fireworks blazed across the night sky and touched his heart. It was like it was all for him. He fell in love with America.

The flames of his lifelong passion were never doused by his hard childhood, two World Wars, the Great Depression, and several recessions. I think his optimism somehow found its way into his DNA and was passed on to my father, and then to me. My parents taught me that to live is to think critically, openly, and fearlessly. For a time I think they may have regretted this teaching when, in my late teens I renounced, for a time, most of what they stood for. But that faded over time, and their optimism continued unabated, as has my own.

**Two young thinkers and activists**, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, recently wrote a hard-hitting essay called *The Death of Environmentalism* in 2004. You can find it at [www.thebreakthrough.com](http://www.thebreakthrough.com) <http://www.thebreakthrough.com>. In it they condemn the cynicism, ineffectiveness, gloominess, and narrow thinking of the environment movement.

They compare it to the movement built by Martin Luther King that was broad, inclusive, non-threatening, and effective. They say, “Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ‘I have a dream speech’ is famous because it put forward an inspiring, positive vision that carried a critique of the current moment within it. Imagine how history would have turned out had King given an ‘I have a nightmare’ speech instead.

There's no reason not to build our own dreams, our own cathedrals, *whichever* ones we're inclined to build. We only need to be certain where we're headed, so we don't climb the ladder and find that it's leaning against the wrong building.

**In a book called *The HP Way***, published in 1995, David Packard tells the tale of a Hewlett Packard researcher named Chuck House who refused to stop working on a display monitor after Packard and others ordered him to drop the idea. Without telling his bosses, House got some friends in manufacturing to produce the monitors, and he found a market for them; they went on to generate immense sales. Packard subsequently presented him with a medal for “extraordinary contempt and defiance beyond the normal call of engineering duty.”

Outrageous behavior can lead to successful undertakings. Taking the bull by the horns. Honoring the Chinese saying that goes, “Man stands for long time with mouth open before roast duck flies in.”

If we take big risks, and couple them with the patience of the cathedral builders, it may be a uniquely potent coupling that will lead us to find that Mahatma Gandhi’s words were true when he said, “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they attack you. Then you win.”

Thank you.