ON ENTREPRENEURSHIP - THE ART OF KNOWING YOURSELF
AND UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMMUNITY

By Bao Tran Tran

I am fortunate enough to have two types of friends:

One are hard-core Math/Econs/ Finance/ Economics/ Science majors, who always gear up in full speed on the rat race to apply for top consulting firms or investment banks. They are goal-oriented and productivity-obssessed individuals. They breathe case studies and sleep on endless job search. Their formula of making change equals capital, power and connection. "I will make my way into this cut-throat industry for a few years, get the big bucks and experiences, build my network, and then move on to actually do good to the world.", says a typical narrative these friends would give me, as they try to rationalize their unwavering determination to thrive in the competitive corporate or finance world.

The other type are hard-core Sociology/ Ethnic Studies (i.e. Black Studies, Asian Studies) majors, who dine on discussions about systematic oppression, sleep on liberation theories and dream about making the next radical move for justice. They are the ones who organized Blacklivesmatter week, led the mic in a sit-in, or declared hunger strikes to pressure more action from the administrators. Cal them idealistic, rebellious, radical souls who yearn to push for change from outside of the system. "I gonna be poor, but I gonna flip the system and do justice" here goes the typical conclusion that we reach whenever these friends share about their future plans as activists, community organizers or educators.

If you ask me who between these two types of friends, who are the entrepreneurs, I will say "both and none". If you ask me who will shake and move society, I will say "both and none" as well. The four questions Peter Drucker asks the individual (What are my strenghts? How do I perform? What are my values? Where do I belong?) guide me to such conclusions.

Drucker's four questions lay the path towards building connection with one's inner self and one's community, on which ground entrepreneurial spirit grows. Be it activists, government officials, corporate members or start-up CEOs, I believe anyone can initiate change if they come from an angle of passion, willingness and strenghths. What matters is not which path is the right one, but which one allows you to stray true to your core values, minimize your contradictions and maximize your potentials. I have seen friends of both types suffer because they are confined to roles they are not happy with, after a journey of following societal norm, living up to parents' expectations, running along popular choices rather than listening to themselves and identifying their own aspirations. At the same time, I have seen friends from both types who, despite inevitable moments of exhaustion, always feel grounded in themselves, thus being able to play an active role and feeling motivated with new ideas in their career or educational choice. From witnessing the tears and laughters on both sides, I realized only when the inner values are aligned with the surrounding environment can one start exploring their entrepreneurial role in taking initiatives, gathering resources and taking risks to do things differently. Peter Drucker says

entrepreneurship is a discipline. To me, this discipline starts with learning and practicing how to know yourself, using the four questions Drucker asks as guiding light.

Understanding oneself, however, is easier said than done. As an individual, we are each constructed by the fibres of different societies we are a part of, which inevitably affects how we can connect with ourselves. These various segments of our identities can buzz us with so many noises that it is hard to listen to what our inner voice is trying to say. As a Vietnamese, I hear voices of my parents expecting me to spend a few years in the States after college, earn a stable income that at least can finance their frequent visits to this land of dreams they have always wanted to set foot on. As an international student at a top liberal arts college, I hear expectations from relatives that I should find a way to become a U.S. citizen(or any other developed countries but Vietnam), and from friends that I should come home with the big bucks from an enviable salary. I also hear the loud steps of my Amherst peers rushing for the limited tickets to big banks, top consulting firm, or prestitious grad/ law/ medical schools. Somewhere in this race, I hear whispers and silenced voices that assume it is a waste of Amherst education to become a teacher or go straight into nonprofit world or take a gap year. In this chaos of noises, listening to my own voice becomes a dauting task, while following it arises fear, self-doubt and uncertainty.

The increased pressure to compete and succeed is turning society from what could be a vast land of exploration to a web of criss-crossing pipelines. As over-achievers, I and my peers are trained to go to the best high schools, get the highest awards in any competition, be admitted to top universities and now hunt for the most high-paying jobs. We are taught to believe that these institutional environments will help hone our skills and prepare us for success in life. Little do we slow down to ask ourselves what skills we are learning, what success we are told to aim for, and overall, the critical question "why am I doing this?" As a result, we live through one institutional pipeline to another, from schooling to working life, being too constrained to reflect on our strengths as well as our performance, and too caught up with the mass to (re)define our core values and sense of belonging. Unsurprisingly, we end up becoming a product our society wants, but rarely what we want. The entrepreneurial spirit thus dies the moment we lose connection with our own self.

In my opinion, an Entrepreneurial Society must be built, first and foremost, around the "I". It has to institutionalize spaces of self-reflection and conversations that allow each individual to understand who they are and why they are leading their life the way they do. Insteading of tying a person's life to continous institutional pipelines, an Entrepreneurial Society teaches people to constantly reflect on their values, as well as motivate them to explore new trails of life and become their own ideals. It is important to remember that frustration, vulnerability, mistakes, fear are all inescapable elements of this process to learn and unlearn oneself. Accordingly, an Entrepreneurial Society needs to structure strong supporting networks, from family to school to workplace, to facilitate this first step of nurturing an entrepreneurial spirit. We need parents who are willing to sit down and reflect with their children for a mistake or failure, teachers who do not just give grades but encourage students to think about what their take-aways are after a lesson, bosses who spare time to give their staff feedback and suggestions for improvement. Only when people

are guided to understand the values and purpose of their being can they be anchored enough to go on transforming their community.

Understanding a community is the next important step of fostering the entrepreneurial spirit and more importantly, putting it to good use. To an activist it means hearing the voices of the disadvantaged group they are fighting for rather than assuming their voiceless position. To a social entrepreneur it means figuring out the real needs and local resources of their targeted beneficiaries rather than imposing their own solutions on the community. To a businessman it means spotting out untapped markets where customers' desires are unmet yet. To a teacher it means recognizing the social and human capital, and the lack thereof, of their students and making them owners of their learning process rather than simply passing down knowledge through a top-down curriculum. The key is to understand a community as much as we try to understand ourselves.

In fact, Drucker's framework of questions to facilitate knowing oneself can be used to unpack the potentials of a community as well. "What are the strengths of a community?" provides insights into the local assets on which innovation can grow. "How is the community performing?"   looks at the the operations of a community to identify opportunities and challenges in making it better. "What are the core values of a community?" draws attention to the heritage values that bring people together across different generations. Last but not least, "where does a community belong?" maps out the bigger picture of social, political and historical forces that shape the current position of the targeted community. Together, these four questions allow an entrepreneur to identify what are already in place and where their own values and talents can come in to improve on current conditions.

Drucker says the role of entrepreneurship is to "upset and disorganize". The capacity to do so, however, must start with the ability to connect first with oneself and second, with the community one is trying to transform. These, to me, are the two core pillars of an entrepreneurial spirit. They guide entrepreneurs to build their innovations on the ground of passion, strengths and empathy. As Drucker emphasizes, it is irresponsible to work in a field of incompetence and ignorance. In an Entrepreneurial Society, people know themselves and their community, from there matching what they can offer with what society needs.

Entrepreneurship based on the core of understanding oneself and one's society means that entrepreneurship is not restricted to business. Society needs entrepreneurial spirits to grow in different forms, in both my friends who aspire to succeed in the corporate world and those who dedicate their lives to social activism. As long as we are committed to a path where we can feel at ease with ourselves and belonged to our community, the motivation to engineer changes will emerge and roll into action.