

Taking Back Our Lives

IN THE AGE OF
CORPORATE
DOMINANCE

"A wonderfully subversive book. A must-read for everyone who cares."

DAVID C. KORTEN author of *When Corporations Rule the World*

Ellen Schwartz and Suzanne Stoddard

An Excerpt From

Taking Back Our Lives in the Age of Corporate Dominance:

By Ellen Schwartz & Suzanne Stoddard
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Foreword

Socrates reminded us almost 2400 years ago that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Even though the examination is essential, it can be uncomfortable. Socrates himself found out how true this could be. When it seems that things are “on a roll,” we don’t always want to ask questions that might expose any undesirable consequences.

There is no denying that the technological advances made by large corporations in the twentieth century have brought many benefits to all of us. Diseases that used to kill millions of people have been almost eradicated. Modern transportation not only makes travel easy and comfortable, but it can also bring help within hours when disaster strikes anywhere in the world. Media developments like the Internet, digital TV, and electronic games provide entertainment and information while linking billions of people globally. Many of us who enjoy these developments do not want to confront the troubling questions about whether this progress comes with a price.

To ask the difficult questions does not negate the positives. In fact, the *examined* life can turn out to be much more worth living. It is helpful, of course, if the problems that are uncovered are accompanied by

solutions. The book you are about to read accomplishes this very difficult task.

Taking Back Our Lives challenges and inspires. The authors present information about the modern corporate world that is deeply troubling. But they don't stop there. These two women combine the hard-hitting facts with readily available tools for reclaiming our democracy, our work lives, our children, and our time. *Taking Back Our Lives* is a guidebook for finding and creating meaning at home and at work. Ellen Schwartz and Suzanne Stoddard remind us there is no one out there who will do it for us. We are the ones we've been waiting for. The 75 action items for inner exploration and effective actions in the outer world light the way.

The two women who wrote this book have amassed solid information from their years of research. But they also learned many of these lessons firsthand. Fortunately for us, they are not reluctant to share their journeys—the mistakes along with the discoveries. The result is that we get a sense that we are not alone and that there is a way to maximize the benefits of modern society while minimizing the harm.

We sometimes forget that the real meaning of responsibility is the “ability to respond.” The only way for society to improve is for individual members to stand up, speak out, and offer constructive suggestions. I, for one, am grateful that Ellen Schwartz and Suzanne Stoddard have done that. After reading *Taking Back Our Lives*, I am confident that you will be too.

David Walsh, Ph.D.
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P a r t

I

How Corporate Structures,
Products, and Processes
Impact Our Work
and Personal Lives

Suzanne Stoddard

Introduction

*a snapshot of the pressures and potentialities
of our consuming corporate times*

The lust for comfort murders the passion of the
soul, and then walks grinning in the funeral.

—Kahlil Gibran



THIS BOOK IS FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO FIND OUT WHO THEY ARE and what they are going to do about it while they still have time.

If we lived in a healthier culture, a book like this wouldn't be necessary. In a saner society, all of us would have an opportunity to contribute in ways that reflected our unique talents, and we would take much better care of each other. We would allow plenty of time to dance, to make music, to create, to play, and to revel in being human. We would spend most of our time doing what makes us feel alive and laugh as often as happy children.

Instead, we feel stressed by the relentless demands of seeking or holding a job and from the inability to find enough time for ourselves, our families, and our communities. In our heart of hearts, we know there is a more enticing life out there, but we don't know how to find it, and we don't even have enough time to look!

We have made *comfort* a premier value and created enough distractions to suppress *consciousness* forever. Currently, most adults spend fifteen to twenty hours a week watching other people have experiences—in the television, video, and virtual media—rather than having their own. Most children spend twice that amount of time in the spectator realm. Because working and commuting take so much of our time and life energy, we have lost the will to spend our free hours in truly experiential activities, and to share them with the young people in our lives. But the glut of entertainment bores and numbs us. Like all addictions, it takes from us far more than it gives. And the craving to feel good all the time keeps us from feeling alive.

We buy homes that require two wage-earners to cover the mortgage. Thanks to the slick advertising that surrounds us on televi-

sion, radio, billboards, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, our desires are teased far beyond the time or money available to satisfy them. The continual distractions of our highly competitive culture estrange us from our actual needs and natures. We've forgotten that joy comes from meaningful work, loving relationships, creative pursuits, personal growth, service to others, mental and physical exercise, and recreation that actually re-creates us.

Because the major media present information in a segmented and superficial way, we often feel powerless to make a difference in our own communities. It is rare for newscasters to note the cause-and-effect links between the bottom-line-driven practices of transnational companies and the loss of living-wage jobs, the capacity to protect our environment, and growing substance abuse across all age groups. Indeed, corporations have unprecedented power today, impacting far more than our paychecks and the products we buy with them.

Certainly, corporations have brought great benefits to millions of people, raising the standard of living in America to the highest in the world. Yet there have been profound unforeseen consequences that are now degrading the quality of our lives. The middle class is joining the poor as the "anxious class." Even those who are comfortable today fear they could lose it all tomorrow. Insecurity breeds stress and puts us all on a short fuse. And the mountains of soul-killing paperwork that must be dealt with daily in order to avoid chaos are a major challenge for even the well educated and well organized.

In Part I, we present the darker side of transnational corporate growth that is rarely depicted in the mainstream media. We begin by examining the corporate infrastructure, processes, and imperatives, which are the underpinnings of our technological culture. We penetrate the many myths surrounding competition, probing its deeper impact on our work and personal lives. The need for relief from stress draws us to the easy escape of television. Yet the entertainment industry is both a conveyor and a major instigator of increasing disrespect and alienation, as well as diminished creativity and problem-solving ability among our youth. We detail the

connections between the epidemic of eating disorders among our girls and the impossible standard of thinness marketed in virtually all media.

We take you directly into a Congressional campaign where carefully crafted imagery and strategically placed corporate money drive the results. We do a reality check on globalization, showing how trade treaties underwritten by transnationals promote their own highest profits at the expense of the Earth herself and of all living things. As corporations have grown from national businesses to international marketers to transnational operations—above the reach of the law of the countries in which they operate—the pace of our lives has accelerated and our very biological rhythms have been disturbed. Time is a nonrenewable resource, and taking it back has become a necessity.

Part II offers simple tools, immediate actions, and larger strategies for reclaiming our lives in a world dangerously out of balance. Into every chapter we weave personal stories about confronting change, fear, risk, anger, inertia, and family conflicts. The inner clarity that comes from slowing down, reflection, and turning away from the numerous distractions of our culture is the springboard for meaningful action in our personal and economic lives.

Change is difficult. Though we may be in pain, we rarely welcome change. Ellen's story of being left in a Tucson boarding school because of her life-threatening asthma shows that even traumatic change can be transformative. Change can also be initiated from tapping into ancient wisdom traditions that move us away from our typically analytical approaches into nonlinear practices. Meditation, chanting, dance, and journaling soothe our spirits and plumb our depths.

Opportunities for personal evolution are generally close at hand, right in the family crucible. Those nearest us attune to our intentions as well as our actions. The situations that ignite our anger also hold the power to illuminate parts of ourselves that are aching for actualization. Because the hectic nature of modern life makes it difficult even to schedule meals together, we suggest many ways to enrich and soften family time.

But no matter how hard we try to make our family time nurturing, if we are not satisfied at work the residue taints our hours at home. Finding work that feeds our soul as well as body is no small task, yet the possibilities have never been greater. We are privileged to live in a time of paradigm shift, when the potential exists for transitioning from “jobs” to “true work” capable of healing the planet and bringing forth our deepest creative powers. The call to help humanity and the Earth can also lead us into service that offers great emotional richness.

As we forge new paths through our stressful, hi-tech world, the need for supportive associations is more important than ever. People are finding ways to relieve isolation and create community through potluck suppers, discussion circles, e-mail exchanges, and cohousing. The more real our relationships with those close to us, the fewer gaps we need to fill with expensive purchases that spend down our resources. If two heads are better than one, even more powerful are two hearts. There is synergy in sharing and collaboration. This book is a perfect example of that. Although you will see only one of our names at the top of most chapters, the book is ours together. In chapters with personal stories, we have indicated primary authorship so you will know who is speaking, but our words and ideas thoroughly entwined through the months of writing.

In offering this book, we *do* have a bias. We believe that the most enthusiastic and fulfilled people are those for whom life is a verb. These individuals continually find ways to learn and take risks, help and support, teach and guide, create and inspire, engage and enjoy. Because they know how to simplify and focus their own lives, they are in perpetual self-development and have a kind of fearlessness about testing boundaries. We believe that everyone is capable of living this way if they choose and that it's never too late to change your life course. Further, we believe that the survival of our planet depends on each one of us developing that part of our nature that seeks to love and contribute to the well-being of others. Finally, we believe the planet's survival depends on our paring down our material needs and simplifying our lives.

This book will stir up deep feelings and strong reactions. Some

of the things we say will seem like an attack on your own particular sacred cows. (We know how you feel. We don't like being told that coffee—our drug of choice—isn't good for us.) But please don't put the book down when you come to one of these. Bear with us. Look at what we've written as a provocation that can help you see things in a different light, question old assumptions, and get your juices flowing. If we only seem to present one side, it is because we feel the other side gets plenty of coverage in the major media. Let our comments fuel your interactions with competition, the entertainment industry, Barbie, and the corporate world.

This book is about both outer action and inner growth. It is subversive. It is about *taking time to live* in a society increasingly dominated by megacorporations that prefer we *not* follow our inner promptings. For, the more satisfied we are with our lives, the less we need what they have to sell. The more we esteem ourselves, the less we need expensive cars, designer clothing, and credit card get-aways. The more time we take to go deep and discover our own beliefs, the less susceptible we are to the addictions and compulsions seen as social norms today. The power to choose is an incredible gift we have always had. In fact, *choice is our most important tool*. We can begin right now to use choice more consciously for our own and others' benefit.

Because awareness without action leads to frustration, we offer a wide array of possible steps—small and large, immediate and long-term—to choose from. We include *Action Items* in boxes within each chapter as well as *Questions for Reflection*, and *Resources* at the back of the book by chapter, so you can explore the themes and issues that engage, outrage, or inspire you. Resources and initiatives toward new ways of thinking, doing, working, and being are sprouting up everywhere. It is impossible to create an exhaustive, up-to-date list of everything available, but once you make a connection with any of the resources, you will be led to others or think of more yourself as you create your own new directions.

These are extraordinary times in which to be seeking our authentic selves.

chapter

1

Ellen Schwartz

A Time Of Turbulence

*when too much information
keeps us from knowing the truth*

If families just let the culture happen to them,
they end up fat, addicted, broke, with a house
full of junk and no time.

—Mary Pipher

You can never get enough of what
you don't really want.

—Eric Hoffer

We must do the things we think we cannot do.

—Eleanor Roosevelt



WE ARE OVERSTIMULATED AND DISCONNECTED FROM OURSELVES AND NATURE. Image, not substance, is the stuff of our lives: how we look, what we wear, the car we drive. Even our democracy is driven by appearance. Candidates are packaged and rehearsed to speak in nine-second sound bites.

We live in the Information Age. Translation: *too much* information, *too little* meaning, and *too little* wisdom. When Thich Nhat Hahn, the Vietnamese monk nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, came to America, he said “Here I am in the land of the Information Superhighway. But do you know what one of your greatest problems is? Communication between each other!”

Not only is communication a problem, but rudeness and disrespect are rampant. Political exchanges are shouted. Talk-show hosts like Jerry Springer and Howard Stern bring new meaning to the word *offensive*. Verbal abuse abounds in movies and television shows that pass themselves off as entertainment. Comedy shows regularly descend to put-downs underscored by a laugh track. Teachers are noticing that many children don’t know how to develop friendships; insults don’t foster trust.

We are so cut off—heart from mind, feelings from action—that we do not respond with appropriate outrage at the “entertainment” that inundates our children. The interactive video games are the worst, because the children themselves take part in the murdering and maiming.

“Family values” is a political buzz word, but in reality, our political and economic systems do little to support families. Despite an increasing number of jobs, we have an actual loss of jobs that pay a living wage. While the defense budget catapults above and be-

yond what even Pentagon brass request, there is less money available to renew our schools for the twenty-first century. As the public airwaves are jammed with messages to buy, enjoy, and indulge, we are more often called consumers than citizens. Our familial and societal fabric is so frayed that more than 38,000 people die from guns each year, over half from arguments, accidents, and suicides. To try to ease our pain, to find a place of refuge, we are offered not only the malling of America but the walling of America.

What is it we're missing? Perhaps listening. Stories. Actions beyond our own lives.

Listening. Listening deeply. This is not something we are accustomed to in the era of the John McLaughlin model of communication. Too often we find ourselves jumping down the other person's throat before they even have a chance to finish their thought. This does not make them feel heard, appreciated, or understood.

Try listening to someone without interrupting or preparing a rebuttal in your mind while they're talking.

Stories. We can barely avoid hearing the stories of the rich and infamous. We know the polished details, spun to make their sex lives, love, rage, or pain much bigger than ours. We know those stories better than those of our own families or neighbors. Yet, it is the stories of the real people connected to us that ultimately hold meaning for us. What a loss it is, when families gather for the holidays, to have half the family bellowing for strangers running after a ball, while the heartbreaks and hopes, tough times and triumphs of those closest to them go unexpressed.

Invite a family member to sit down for a cup of tea. Tell them you'd like to get to know them on different levels. Ask some questions:

- *If you could have an hour with someone you admire, living or historical, who would that be?*
- *What was something you initially didn't want to face that you came through and felt good about later?*
- *If you died tomorrow, what would you want to be remembered for?*

Actions beyond our own lives. Though this is the land of rugged individualism, and independence is what we are taught to exalt, it is really interdependence which allows us to survive and flourish. Ralph Nader said “If we don’t spend enough time in our public citizen lives, we will never have truly happy private citizen lives.” We must work on several levels at once, moving fluidly in and out of the personal, familial, societal, political, and corporate arenas.

For too long we have fallen prey to the expert syndrome. We are supposed to be experts before venturing an opinion in a particular field. Most people don’t paint or draw after the primary grades, because they’re not “artists.” Most don’t enter into spirited discussions on the economy, because they’re not economists. And we’re not supposed to object to all the money still going into nuclear weapons, because we’re not defense analysts. Yet, all it takes is common sense to see what’s happening to our lives and to the planet.

Stress and hurry are the hallmarks of our time. Yet, the core of life is simple. We are called to take care of ourselves, keep our bodies healthy, and develop our own unique gifts with zest—even passion. We are called to spend time with those we love, being kindly and helpful, taking care not to discourage or humiliate. And we are called to do something in the broader community to make the world a better place than we found it.

This is neither easy nor hard. It merely involves taking a small step each day. Nothing grandiose. Just consistent actions.

The Native American four-fold path, as taught by Angeles Arrien, has a lot to offer us in these times. The first step is to *show up*: be where you need to be when you need to be there. The second step is to *be aware*: identify as much as possible what you are bringing to the situation—thoughts, emotions, assumptions, judgments, expectations. Tune in to the environment, too, and to what your and other peoples’ physical condition and state of mind seem to be. Third, *speak your truth without blame or judgment*. Your truth is simply that: the consummation of *your own* thoughts and experiences. It is not eternal truth, or the “right” or “only” truth. Offer it as a perspective that may help others decide what is most appropriate

for them at that moment. Fourth, *let go of outcome*. Perhaps this is the most difficult. We live under the illusion not only that we can control others but also that it is good to manipulate a situation to our own ends. Yet, we cannot really control anyone but ourselves (and often we can't even do that!).

For too long we've emphasized freedom in this country and forgotten responsibility. We've organized our time and our lives around the pleasure principle, instead of around true happiness and joyful service.

Experiment with the Native American four-fold path in three situations this week.

In these times, we have the privilege of awakening. While we have been anesthetized watching "the good life" on TV, fear, anger, and alienation have grown too strong in the land. Yet there is room for optimism. Getting in touch with the deep silent spaces within ourselves, coming together with hearts and minds, we can change the face of our communities, our nation, and the world.

Questions For Reflection

- ☞ What part of modern life is most raw to you?
- ☞ Do you feel deeply listened to? By whom?
- ☞ What stories do you hunger to know? To share?
- ☞ What part does selfless service play in your life?

this material has been excerpted from

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