

When Generosity Meets Venture Capital by Nipun Mehta

Context: The author of the article below is someone who has dedicated much of his life to volunteerism and generosity, and the below is his description when he was asked to keynote a conference of venture capitalists and entrepreneurs on Nov 10, 2011.

Earlier this year, I had a casual lunch with an old friend whom I hadn't seen in many years. He then invites me to keynote his gala event last Thursday night. Quite a few of the who's-who of the Silicon Valley venture capital world were in attendance; not just money people but idea people too. Very innovative and entrepreneurial people.

My instructions for the talk were: don't be humble, talk about scale. I actually laughed out on the phone, when I heard that, only to realize that it wasn't a joke. The other keynote was a billionaire, who had invented 33 medical devices and held 150 patents. And I was warned that this will be an audience of hyper-alpha-males. :)

I like entrepreneurs because they are always looking to broaden the pie. The best of them don't hold a scarcity mindset but rather focus on creative expressions for creating new value in the world. And this crowd of 400+ folks last night had lots of them. The guy sitting next to me had started 13 companies, including Symantec. The person sitting on front of me was a top exec at JP Morgan; the fellow sitting next to him created Google Earth, before Google bought it. In this context, being a CEO of a 150 person company was just run of the mill. :) Unfortunately, what was also run of the mill was a singular focus on money. Greed. People cheered when a speaker spoke about unethical behavior to get ahead, as if that was truly heroic.

Before I go up to speak, the founder of the group introduces me, which by itself is a big testimonial in this community. He briefly intros me as someone he tried to convince to take the commercial route, but didn't succeed. :) In short, he tells people -- "Look, this is going to be way off the wall for you but you better listen up. This guy has done stuff and I'm vouching for him." It was a big risk for him to put me up in front of this crowd. :)

I open. I had asked some close friends for their thoughts on what insights would be relevant to business crowds. And ultimately, the crux of our message is pretty simple -- do a small act of service, and the insights will appear; if they don't, keep doing more small acts. :) Yet, this is not exactly the kind of crowd that will get excited about Smile Cards ... which, of course, wasn't going to stop me. :)

I speak about my journey that led to tapping Silicon Valley talent with non-financial incentives; then the ServiceSpace journey that exposed us to new forms of abundance (social, synergistic, subtle) via intelligent use of technology; and ended with a vision of creating an incubator of generosity entrepreneurs. The talk, the stories, the sincerity hit them in a shock-and-awe sort of way. While other talks were allowed a couple of questions, they let in lots of questions for my talk. All kinds of questions --

"What do you anticipate 2 years from now?" Don't know. :)

"Have you changed through the process?" A lot.

"What do you think of Occupy Oakland?" Great start; movement of 100% has to follow.

"Is ServiceSpace like a Facebook for social change?" No. FB is for loose ties; we are designing for deep ties, gift ties.

"How does ServiceSpace sustain itself?" Gratitude economy.

"What are your numbers like?" "What kinds of control systems have you developed to create these micro movements?" "How can gift-economy be applied to other fields?" and so on. Really great.

And yet it was like a mini earthquake of sorts. Many were radically jolted out of their context. As ServiceSpace became the talk of the gathering, the founder wrote to me and copied all partners of his firm: "The best compliment you could have gotten was an entrepreneur telling me that you were bad for my business: he heard several people in the audience thinking aloud that maybe they need to do something better with their lives than just try to make money!" The following speakers openly admitted their fears: "I don't know how I can follow that, because I'm going to talk about making money, and getting you lots of returns on it. And then maybe we'll talk to Nipun about giving it away." Perhaps the organizers had presumed that my talk will be the least popular, so they very kindly placed me at the very beginning to give me more prominence; but the raw resonance of generosity was underestimated. :) Love capital is always going to trump venture capital.

Prior to the talk, the organizers asked me if I had gift items for people to take -- I gave her Smile Cards.

"Anything else?" I could bring some books.

"Oh yeah, people love books." You mean, you sell them here?

"No, we just buy them and gift it." Oh. :) How many do you want?

"How 'bout 300?" 300?! Within the hour, we managed to get those copies of Infinite Vision there.

It was also interesting to reflect that had this serendipitous conversation not happened, I would've given the talk, there wouldn't have been any monetary compensation and I wouldn't have asked. And here's five grand being paid forward (100% of the authors' proceeds are gifted) for 30 minutes on stage, as just a side thing. In that moment, I had a lot of gratitude for the vast circumstances that have given me the conviction to stay price-less ... because its a very slippery slope once you start putting a price tag on your time and labor.

Lots of fun stories after the talk, as people came upto me privately. I had warned people that I would hug them before I spoke to them, so that already confused the tradition of speedy business-card exchanges. :)

An established researcher tells me, "What you are doing is truly amazing. But you guys may not even realize what you are doing." And then he goes on to described theories that explain what we're doing, and offers to volunteer. :) A venture capitalist tells me a story of how he helped an old woman push her cart at a grocery store that morning; another person tells me about the need for good news; a CEO of a very innovative company, who also spoke, told me how he was just blown away by our radically different design principles -- and that he just wanted to be around us to pick it up by osmosis. Another guy insists that I have to go to Burning Man with him. :) A head of a bank vehemently argues with me about what essentially came down to tragedy of commons. A woman talks about applying gift-economy methodology to a community project she's doing in Santa Barbara. Various people came and said, "I've never heard a talk like that." Never? "Never." :) One guy wants to introduce us to the Google Venture folks, just to have an emergent conversation. A couple of CEOs offered their services freely to us, and asked for reflections on their service projects/dreams. Another person wants his son to intern with us, and invited me to speak to his private school. Some people thanked me for my courage. While I was expecting fireworks, I was delighted to see the warmth with which people blessed me.

And everyone took Smile Cards.

At one point, I was talking with five-six folks and I'm introduced to one guy -- almost on cue, everyone else leaves. It was kind of strange to get a sense of implicit hierarchies

even here. I wonder if *any* of them realized that when they were talking to me, they were listening to a guy that the IRS would classify as poor. :) Anyhow, this fellow tells me that he was very moved by what I had to share, and adds, "I just realized that I've never done things for others. I want to do it. But I don't know how. I don't know where to start." I told him to find his inner voice. :) "Do you have a card?" he asks. "No, unfortunately, I don't. Do you have a card? I'd be happy to email you later." "No, I don't have a card either, but let me email you," he says while taking out his iPhone and saying that he would come down to Berkeley for a coffee chat. (As an aside -- I don't carry cards to such things, as a counter-culture social experiment, but in this crowd, if you don't have a card, some people start figuring that you must be so important that you've transcended cards. Maybe I should carry cards. :))

Later, I was told that this fellow was a serial entrepreneur and had sold his previous company to Cisco for 7 billion dollars. He, and many others like him in attendance, will probably release lots of monetary value in the world, as a direct ripple of last night's talk. Who knows how that'll emerge, but that's a good side-effect. What's even nicer is that the talk and the conversations were anchored in something far deeper than money -- inner transformation. When people asked to connect personally, I told 'em to come to Wednesday. :) When they pondered what they could do, I asked 'em to a small act of kindness and observe how it changes the eyes through which they look at the world. At least one of them is going to come volunteer at Karma Kitchen. External ripples were obvious, but I particularly smiled at the internal ones.

As I was leaving, as my car was arriving from valet-parking :), an open-hearted gentleman walks with me to the car. He's a CEO of a popular company too but one could tell that he was in the middle of a mini-transformation of sorts, the kind that you feel privileged to witness. The next morning, he wrote me this email ...

"It was truly a great evening last night and I would like to share something with you. We've all to been to many such events, but last night was different for me. A few days prior to getting a personal invitation from a company partner, I had a small vision around a potential transition. I went into last evening with the experiment of trusting my emerging awareness and enjoying the process of opening up my heart, and seeing what level of reaction and reception that vibe attracted. One thing leads to another and [...] then our conversation at 10:30PM. Talking to you put me on a surf board of a tiny ripple that continued well after the event.

As I was driving home, my wife calls to tell me that our 80 year old neighbor was driving herself to the ER due to dizziness and high blood pressure. So I drive over to the ER, and spend the next 3 hours, till about 2am, at her bed side as the doctors performed the tests. Interestingly, it turns out to be the same ER station where the company partner practices on the nights he is on call!

Well, the night stay at the hospital was rather beautiful as my Japanese neighbor and I talked about Japanese culture and people, as showcased during the tsunami. I pontificated that Japanese have a higher propensity to be in contact with their spiritual selves because the culture immerses a Japanese person in empathy, sensitivity, gratitude. Great spring board into finding our inner voice, and getting in touch with our spirit. She agreed. I asked her about her 50 years of teaching Ikebana. She talked about how the process of creating the arrangement is co-creation between herself and a nature force of sorts. She explains how sometimes when she is done with creating the arrangement, that she herself is amazed to find beauty she they did not consciously create herself. We talked about how Ikebana is a practice for creating beauty but also peace.

At about 2AM, when we were walking to my car to drive her home, she felt so sorry that I wasn't able to go home to sleep sooner. She is a close neighbor and she felt comforted

yet uneasy that I went through such efforts on her behalf. But for me, I was still in a different head space and time of night wasn't relevant to me. What was relevant to me was that I was granted an intimate and heartfelt audience with an other human being that entertained my inquisition on the nature of spirit. But in the Japanese way, I knew I needed to give her a reason to take some action to give back to show her appreciation in a way that she can express genuinely. And so I pulled out one of the 2 Smile Cards that I picked up at your table and gave it to her. I said that I was only happy to be there with her and this Smile card is something she can also pay-forward to someone. She smiled and kept it in her hand the whole way back home. What was a tedious affair on one level, was a beautiful ending to a buzzing evening.

Thank you for your talk and our conversation last night."
That ripple alone is more than enough for me.