Review

*Whole Earth Discipline*
By Stewart Brand
Reviewed by Denis Hayes
Ideas

Women Hold Both Sky and Solutions

Review by Kavita Nandini Ramdas

HALF THE SKY: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide
Sheryl WuDunn and Nicholas Kristof

Half the Sky is an absorbing narrative of stories that are rarely heard: a New Jersey teenager is raising awareness about the status of girls in poor countries, an Afghan schoolteacher is leading a learning insurgency, and a former first lady of Somalia’s hospital is saving the lives of mothers in Somalia. These and other vignettes bring to life the struggles and courage of unforgettable women who are, as the book’s subtitle suggests, turning oppression into opportunity.

Half the Sky begins by outlining the most egregious ways in which human rights are violated: trafficking and slavery, prostitution, rape and honor killings, and maternal mortality. The authors do not flinch from describing experiences that are horrifying testimony to the deeply rooted gender inequality that persists around the globe.

The book also explores the reasons for most of their societies gained independence: women’s rights, she is also a member of the board of trustees of Princeton University and Mount Holyoke College, and a member of the Bell Media Group Foundation’s Global Development Program Advisory Panel.

It is critical that the message we take away from this book is not simply horror at the epidemic of global gender violence and injustice. Half the Sky reminds us that women also hold solutions to our world’s greatest challenges. If Sakena Yacoobi and the girls of Afghanistan can risk their lives to overcome illiteracy, poverty, and violence, then we must be their allies by holding our own governments, corporations, and philanthropic sectors to their promises to realize women’s rights. That would make the sky that women hold up a little lighter and our collective futures much brighter.
How Scale and Innovation Can Coexist

Review by Debra Dunn

THE DESIGN OF BUSINESS: Why Design Thinking Is the Next Competitive Advantage
Roger L. Martin

Many books and articles support the view that an organization must choose between creating value through innovation and creating value by building scale and squaring off cost. The thinking styles and capabilities required for success appear to be diametrically opposed. Innovators are right-brained people who rely heavily on their intuition, whereas the leaders of large, efficiency-oriented organizations achieve results through rigorous, continuously repeated analytical processes and reject decisions based on instinct and judgment.

In The Design of Business, Roger Martin contends that organizations can balance intuitive originality and analytic mastery in a dynamic interplay that he calls design thinking. This approach is necessary, according to Martin, to maintain long-term competitive advantage. As the dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto and an advisor to many CEOs, Martin has worked with and studied a wide range of organizations. He has come to embrace the design thinking approach after seeing its powerful impact in a diverse array of companies. The vivid articulation of these company stories, paired with some very useful conceptual frameworks, makes The Design of Business both compelling and actionable.

Martin anchors many of his concepts in a framework depicting the way knowledge advances. He calls this the knowledge funnel. The knowledge funnel is necessary to scale up innovation, but to keep innovating, a firm must return to the mouth of the funnel. As organizations move down the knowledge funnel, they tend to become driven by an analytical approach to management that is incompatible with exploration of new mysteries at the top of the funnel. This is the crux of the conflict between innovation and scale. Martin does not claim that it is easy to overcome this conflict, but he offers several examples of companies who have done just that. Although no cases from the nonprofit sector are included in the book, the ideas are equally applicable there.

P&G’s journey to become a design thinking company from the outset. In 1999, the company’s stock price was declining precipitously, revenue growth had ground to a near halt, acquisitions were slowing down, and most of its biggest brands were losing market share. For the first time in the company’s 165-year history, the board fired the CEO. In June 2000, the board promoted A.G. Lafley as the new CEO. Lafley quickly recognized that P&G’s innovation engine was stalling. To reverse the slide, P&G had to become more innovative, but the expense side of the value equation also had to be addressed. Lafley set about to tackle innovation and efficiency simultaneously by turning P&G into a design organization. In 2001, he appointed Claudia Kotchik as the company’s first-ever vice president for design strategy and innovation, with a mandate to build P&G’s design capability and act as the company’s champion of design thinking. Martin provides deep insight into how Kotchik and Lafley tackled this transformation.

The results speak for themselves. According to P&G’s recent annual report, virtually all organic sales growth over the past nine years came from new brands and new or improved products. P&G has also established significant scale advantage at all levels. These achievements have been accompanied by strong financial results.

Unlike P&G, REM, the company that invented the Blackberry, was structured as a design thinking company from the outset. Founded in 1984, this fast-paced, high-tech pioneer manages the tension between innovation and scale through a co-CEO model. Founder and President Mike Lazaridis is a design visionary, and co-CEO Jim Balsillie leads the business side. This duo has been effective at actively pushing knowledge down the funnel while continuously returning to the mouth of the funnel, trying to discover new things or see things in a new way.

The speed of RIM’s movement through the funnel has resulted in competitive advantage in both cost and innovation.

Martin provides evidence that although it is difficult, it is possible to balance exploration and exploitation. The well-developed cases provide enough specificity to serve as a rough road map for leaders interested in pursuing the design thinking path. Martin also dives into the organizational issues of structure, process, and cultural norms, areas that tend to get in the way of design thinking and need to be addressed.

As someone who wears the scars of many battles fought for innovation during 22 years at Hewlett-Packard, a company that succumbed to the natural bias toward scale, I’d give most companies poor odds of achieving the balance Martin espouses, but they will be better for trying.

An Environmental Provocateur

Review by Denis Hayes

WHOLE EARTH DISCIPLINE: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto
Stewart Brand
336 pages, The Viking, 2009

Denis Hayes
Executive director, the Bullitt Foundation
Consulting professor-in-residence, the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley

Stewart Brand, author of Whole Earth Discipline, is described on the book cover as an icon of the environmental movement. He actually isn’t and doesn’t want to be. Brand (who, in full disclosure, is a friend) has always been much more of an iconoclast than an icon.

In Whole Earth Discipline, he combines his deep concern for the environment, his pugnacious search for windmills to tilt at, ...
and his technological optimism to produce an intriguing, confounding, utterly Brand-type book. By that, I mean a full-throated assault on conventional wisdom, laced with enough ironic riffs and personal confessions of his own past errors to disarm most critics.

Brand came to public attention 41 years ago by publishing the wildly successful Whole Earth Catalog, a practical guide for back-to-the-land refugees from suburbia. The catalog questioned virtually every attribute of 1960s middle-class suburban America and offered a telephone-directory-sized, annotated compilation of equipment for rural self-reliance. Ultimately, the back-to-the-land movement proved to be vanishingly small, over-fond of drugs, and stuck in a historical cul-de-sac.

In Whole Earth Discipline, Brand examines and embraces the scientific basis of some of the principal problems that scare the hell out of environmentalists. Indeed, his bottom line on global warming is among the bleakest I’ve ever read, and it’s probably correct. The book poses questions about the very modern environmentalism taken for granted (such as that a sustainable future will rely mostly on renewable energy sources or that sustainable diets will depend on organic crops) and proposes solutions that make most environmentalists gasp (such as nuclear power, genetically modified foods, and urbanization as a complete solution to population growth).

What makes this book different from the embarrassing essays of faux environmentalists like Patrick Moore and Bjorn Lomborg (who come to conclusions similar to Brand’s) is that Brand’s environmental values are long-standing and sincere, and he

As Hall noted, “Almost everyone has difficulty believing that behavior they have always associated with ‘human nature’ is not human nature at all but learned behavior.” In the more than three years I worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador (1966 to 1969), I thought of that book alarmingly often: when every queue I entered dissolved into a mob; when I was given directions to a destination and told it was either “near” or “far” even though it wasn’t; when a pledge I’d taken for a promise was instantly forgotten.

Truth to tell, though, comprehending the underlying logic of this sort of cultural clash didn’t help me feel any more relaxed. I went just as crazy as anyone. Still, familiarity with Hall’s teachings continued to help me through the years. Those insights made it possible for me to get outside my white, middle-class skin during my later years of work in community organizing and political campaigns in districts with heavy ethnic minority populations.

All this experience came rushing back to me this summer when I read Hall’s obituary in The New York Times (he passed away July 20 at the age of 95).

The article prompted me to reread The Silent Language. Boy, was I surprised! To be sure, Hall had placed great emphasis on time and space as elements in intercultural communication. But I’d completely forgotten about the rest of the book, which lays out a complex and detailed anthropological theory about the nature and “vocabulary” of culture. Once Hall launched into a discussion of his theory, he started losing me.

So what we’ve got here, it would seem, is a failure to communicate, and, not to put too fine an edge on things, in a book about communication. I stewed over this conundrum for several days. Then it hit me. The simple truth is that Hall never intended for me to read or understand his theory. He wasn’t writing for an intellectual audience. Instead, he was writing for an academic audience. Finally I understand how communication really works. Or doesn’t, as the case may be.
How can one endorse nuclear power for the world and not even mention Iran? The answer, basically, is Brand’s trademark technological optimism. He conflates nuclear expansion with a nimble skip to “Generation IV” reactors. (All current reactors are Generation II.) With a serious commitment, Generation IV reactors might be commercially available by the 2030s, by which time global warming will have cooked our goose if we haven’t already built an economy relying heavily on solar energy, affordable storage, and smart power grids.

Brand’s discussion of how to deal with the world’s growing population follows a similar pattern. He believes that, because of the power of urbanization, the world population will level off at about 8 billion, “followed by a descent so rapid that many will consider it a crisis.” Brand is lonely in his belief that the world’s population will peak at 8 billion and virtually alone in forecasting a precipitous decline (at least in the absence of war, pandemics, or widespread starvation). To urge environmentalists to shift our emphasis away from trying to gain assistance for family planning and women’s rights to “softening the impact of the de-population implosion” gives new meaning to “Hail Mary pass.”

Despite these problems, there is much to admire in Whole Earth Discipline. Brand starts every section with an open mind, and his is a very bright and curious one. He introduced me to several fascinating people I’d never heard of, like Steven LeBlanc and Robert Neuwirth, whose books I have now ordered. That I draw radically different conclusions from Brand’s after reading his book is almost beside the point. His goal is to make people rethink their premises, double-check their data, and revisit their logic. In the introduction, Brand writes, “My opinions are strongly stated and loosely held.” This is a book to be read with a critical, engaged intellect. But, as Brand himself would tell you, before forming any strong views on these crucial global issues, be sure to read more than one book.