

Working the Salt Mines at Inn Serendipity

by John Ivanko and Lisa Kivirist

John Ivanko and Lisa Kivirist run the Inn Serendipity in Brownville, Wisconsin. This is excerpted from their new book ECOpreneuring: Putting Purpose and the Planet before Profits (New Society Publishers, 2008)

"I came to Inn Serendipity expecting a bed and breakfast – I discovered something more. Lisa and John, you created your own eco-zip code here. From the organic breakfast ingredients traveling 100 feet from the garden to my plate to electricity generated from the wind turbine to passionate discussions around last night's campfire, your efforts break the status quo, cookie-cutter business model. Everything integrates under a green umbrella of having both purpose and profit, spiked with creative, innovative zest for living."

Elizabeth, written in the Inn Serendipity Bed & Breakfast guest book

Our job title doesn't fit on a two-by-three-inch business card. In fact, our diversified business could be its own zip code: an award-winning bed and breakfast; a creative services consulting company; book authors and freelance writers; an electricity utility, harvesting power from the wind and sun; an organic farm producing vegetables, fruit and herbs; a micro biofuels processing facility, transforming waste fryer oil into biodiesel to use in the backup heating system in the greenhouse. We're experimenting with growing tropical plants in our strawbale greenhouse and care for our son without hiring someone to help. Some enterprises generate revenue; others save on expenses, all with a mindset of wanting to make this world a better place.

Our micro business super-sizes our quality of life, not our bank account. Sitting under the starry Wisconsin sky around a campfire shared with guests, we serve up a bowl of warm apple crisp while the wind turbine blades spin atop the tower in the field. Conversations among our guests flow between peak oil to preserving pea pods, covering everything in between. Our six-year-old son, Liam, breaks in with a refrain on his kid-sized accordion.

We're the CEOs — Chief Environmental Officers — of our business, responsible for the "success" of our operations and its environmental and social impacts. Mostly, we eat what we grow, use what energy we generate ourselves and create the meaningful work

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we desire. In other words, success is relative to our worldview and based on what we value and find meaning in. Rather than make money from working at a job, we put our limited funds to work for us to serve what we call our Earth Mission, the purpose for which we're here on Earth. We define our business qualitatively, not quantitatively.

Earned income in the form of wages is over-rated. Our limited funds generate passive and portfolio income; we invest in income-producing assets, not splurging on stuff we really don't need. We try to be conservers, not consumers. As a place-based operation, only we can offer exactly what we sell, our interpretation of the B & B experience. Rather than franchising in the financial sense, we've put most of our business plan and operations on the Internet, right down to the electric diagrams of our renewable energy systems in a Home Power magazine article — and write books about what we've done so others can achieve their own version of the good life. Rather than trying to achieve more meaning through spiritual or personal development alone, we — like millions of others — are turning to for-profit and non-profit businesses to make a difference.

ECOpreneuring: Putting Purpose and the Planet before Profits buries the staid notion that “doing business” and “doing good” can't blend — as if one must come at the expense of the other. This book stems from our experiences and those of hundreds of other green entrepreneurs we've met from coast to coast at energy fairs and green conferences or roasted marshmallows with around our campfire when they came our way as B & B guests. Others we have interviewed for magazine articles or partnered with on various consulting projects and events. Some ecopreneurs have taken junk bicycle parts and turned them into unique picture frames and bottle openers. Others have opened up eBay stores in the middle of nowhere Montana, running wine tastings on the side. Each has a story to tell; many do exactly that right on their package, website or blog. Each of us, in our own ways, sidestepped the stereotype ingrained by society that the coveted end goal of business remains never-ending growth and financial riches beyond our wildest dreams.

There are millions of small businesses owners and more on the way when about 77 million baby boomers start “retiring,” half of them starting the dream business they've always wanted. One entrepreneur, Brian Kurth, started VocationVacations to offer others an opportunity to “test drive their dream business” (vocationvacations.com). Forget the gold watch when you work in a company for more than 30 years. How about losing the watch? Now that's freedom.

No one seems to know exactly how many small business owners, entrepreneurs or free agents there are. While definitions run the gamut, the vast majority

of small businesses are very small businesses. Dan Pink, author of *Free Agent Nation*, estimates free agents account for about 1 in every 4 workers. The US Small Business Administration (sba.gov) estimates that there are 4.5 million small businesses with 9 or fewer employees. Like us, you might be among the 15 million full-time or part-time small office/home office entrepreneurs, or SOHOs. Or maybe you're among the 75 percent of all US businesses with only one person at the helm, typically self-employed with no one else on the payroll. Amazingly, the US Census Bureau doesn't even bother including these so-called personal entrepreneurs in much of their statistical analysis because they comprise less than five percent of business tax receipts. For personal entrepreneurs, you don't even need a cloaking device; you're practically invisible.

Perhaps you picked up this book yearning for something more than a paycheck or growing weary of a paycheck without a purpose. You want your work to be more about leaving a legacy than making someone else rich or working for their dream, not yours. Bored, you want to do something you feel passionate about that also gives back to our world, makes it a better place. You want more time with your family, growing tired of living with the nagging threat of your job being outsourced or company being acquired (and you being pink-slipped or transferred somewhere away from friends or family).

Today our family thrives on less than what one of us made 15 years ago at the ad agency. Our quality of life has grown exponentially, despite the fact that our financial income on paper declined. There are tricks to the trade that many millionaires — and most of our millionaire politicians — use that allow us to make a life without having to become wage slaves. We agree; it's almost impossible to be amongst the working

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or middle class and get ahead. We've discovered a different way to bend the ends that never seem to meet, instead forming a circle, where assets generate income and liabilities are minimized. Working with passion and for the Earth is the core of our daily existence. Our diversified businesses blend and cross back and forth into for-profit and non-profit sectors of the economy, as well as serving or partnering with, at times and very selectively, governmental agencies and big business.

Creativity blooms as we freely hopscotch between a buffet of projects, from running the two guest rooms at Inn Serendipity, writing and photographing for a magazine article for *Mother Earth News* or *Natural Home*, authoring books (some ending up award-winning), consulting on marketing projects for various non-profit organizations as subcontractors, tending our organic growing fields, speaking at conferences, and home-schooling our young son, Liam. Both our lifestyle and livelihood blend and reflect our values, like eliminating our contribution to global warming, eating healthy and local, forming community and renewing the Earth.

While hanging out our shingle and becoming a small business owner is nothing new, mindfully serving the planet through what and how our business operates is. Today's "ecopreneurs" recognize that profit, while a necessity in our world of mortgages and motors, is not enough. We keep a holistic outlook on the big green picture: How can we do well, make a difference and make a living? How can we take advantage of existing small business structures and incentives to benefit both our business and the planet? Running a small business provides freedom to independently control inputs and outputs, from the projects and clients we may work for to the 100 percent post-consumer-waste recycled paper we put in our printer.

We've suffered too long from Free Market Economy Dementia: a state of suspended belief in the free market despite the existence of an alternative reality: ecological destruction, concentration of financial wealth in fewer hands and diminished happiness, community life and family cohesiveness. Free market capitalism fails to optimize societal benefit when companies provide needed products or services at prices "consumers" are prepared to pay. The free market cannot grow infinitely, because we can't find substitutions for everything when there's nothing left on Earth. It's not the economy but the ecology that matters. For lots of reasons, as discussed in this book, no economy can be sustainable in the long term without a balanced, prosperous ecological system and at least some sense of social equity




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