

Book Review : “Obliquity”, by John Kay

Anyone who knows me would probably be shocked to hear I’ve been reading a book by an economist. I think it’s the first one – and it’s been surprisingly interesting!

The main premise is that “in many spheres of life, from business to politics, sport to science, and even parenting, our goals are best achieved when we approach them indirectly”. This both puzzles and pleases me – often in life things have come my way when I’ve been focused on something else and I’ve never enjoyed setting goals or objectives and then monitoring progress, as business seems to need us to do. And yet I also believe in the power of intention and setting a positive intention.

Kay uses examples from business to show that the most wealthy companies are not ones which have profit as their primary focus. One I liked was that of Merck who had an oblique philosophy – “we never try to forget that medicine is for the people. It is not for the profits. The profits follow, and if we have remembered it, the larger they have been.” John McKeen in Pfizer, on the other hand, said “So far as humanly possible, we aim to get profit out of everything we do.” Merck made huge amounts of money until 2000 when it changed its vision to be Pfizer-like “being a top-tier growth company; as a company, Merck is totally focused on growth”, and promptly fell out of the Fortune’s list top companies by difficulties with its drug Vioxx.

Kay also suggests human happiness is not best achieved by our focusing on our being happy – rather by making someone else happy, or investing in something outside ourselves (voluntary work comes to mind) and then our happiness comes along seemingly by chance.

I’ve been trying to square this with my belief in intention, and the Buddhist idea of letting go of outcomes has helped me. Maybe we can set our sights on something, think positively about the outcome, and then let go of any neediness or desperation for it to come about. I don’t know about you, but whenever I’ve let desperation come into something then it hasn’t happen. We need a degree of ok-ness within ourselves for the universe’s gifts to be given to us. I’m also reminded in this of the saying “Be the change you want to see”. It all starts with us. I’m not sure Kay would go that far, but that’s what I make of it.

He does tell a lovely story I’ll end with about one of the world’s richest men for whom the acquisition of money wasn’t a primary objective:

“I believe the power to make money is a gift from God – just as are the instincts for art, music, literature, the doctor’s talent, the nurse’s, yours – to be developed and used to the best of our ability for the good of mankind. Having been endowed with the gift I possess, I believe it is my duty to make money and still more money: and to use the money I make for the good of my fellow man according to the dictation of my conscience.” John D. Rockefeller