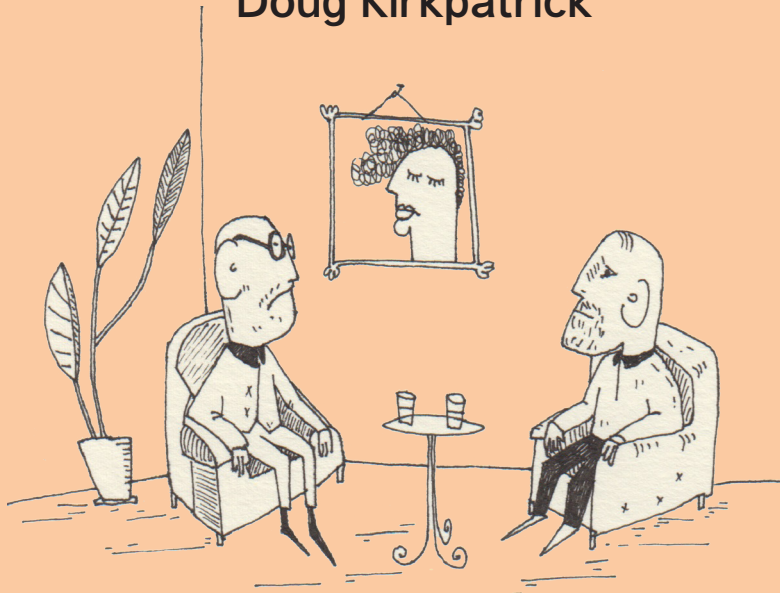


My Dinner with Peter: A Conversation with Peter Koestenbaum, PhD

Doug Kirkpatrick



Peter Koestenbaum's parents fled Nazi Germany just before World War II, landing in Venezuela, where Peter grew up. A brilliant student, he studied philosophy at Stanford, Harvard, and Boston Universities and began a stellar academic and consulting career, eventually becoming the subject of an influential *Fast Company* article in February 2000, by Polly LaBarre: "Do You Have the Will to Lead?"

Peter is the founder and Chairman of Philosophy-in-Business (PiB) and the Koestenbaum Institute and has shared his leadership philosophy with business leaders globally. He has been close to business executives and their deepest concerns, sharing with them insights and feelings, new perspectives, and more serviceable adaptations.

He taught for 34 years in the Philosophy Department of San José State University in California, having received the statewide Outstanding Professor Award. While a professor there, he spent 25 years working with psychologists and psychiatrists in seminars, lectures, and books, exploring the relationship between psychiatry and the healing potential of philosophy.

His business books are *Leadership: The Inner Side of Greatness* (also in Spanish, Swedish, French), *The Heart of Business* (also in French), and *Freedom and Accountability at Work: Applying Philosophic Insight to the Real World*, with co-author Peter Block.

Peter Koestenbaum and Doug Kirkpatrick are dear friends and are happy to share the following "dinner" conversation with *Emergence* readers.

Peter:

I'm ready. I'm ready for everything. And I'm just delighted you're calling. I've been waiting for this for a long time. And I can't tell you how much I value this conversation. Thank you. And one can set one's clock by your call.

Doug:

Well, I did make a mistake a few weeks ago and called at the wrong hour. But usually, I'm on time. So that's what I strive to do.

Peter:

There is a story in German philosophy. It's that the people in Königsberg set their clocks by the walks of Immanuel Kant. He walked at exactly the same time every day, and when he passed by, you set your clock. Because a philosopher knows his time. It's Immanuel Kant. Anyway, I'm ready for a wonderful conversation with you. I look forward to it. I thank you for it. And tell me what's going on.

Doug:

Yes. Thank you for it, Peter, as well. So, I think I mentioned I'm editing a new magazine.

Peter:

And what is the name of the magazine?

Doug:

It's called *Emergence*. And what I'd like to do is have a short article in that called "My Dinner With Peter." And just have a dinner-conversation-style conversation. And the theme of the issue is humanizing business. And so I just want to ask you some questions and get your answers about the theme of humanizing business. That's what we're about today.

Peter:

We are in two different generations, okay? And that makes a difference. I want to be worthy, at least in some measure, of this opportunity. How do we start?

Doug:

I think we'll just start with a dinner question. And the question is: Peter Koestenbaum, why is it important to humanize business?

Peter:

Two reasons. Reason number one: it's good for business. And reason number two is it is a human trying to be human. It is a human being trying to understand what the potentials are of being human and what the dangers are of being human. And humanizing business, for me, means to have an enormously profound insight into what it means to exist as a human being in a world. And to realize that there are maybe several worlds that we have to consider. We call the experience of a world our worldview. And a worldview can either be very pragmatic, or it can be very, shall we say, emotional or even religious. And so the question that you raise, Why is it important to humanize business? The answer is it's good for business, it's good for being human, and it's good for discovering the truth.

Doug:

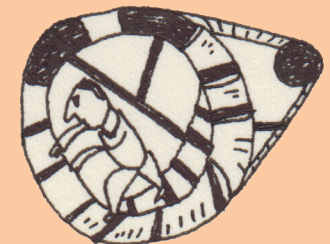
Are you suggesting that it's every human being's job to advance the humanization of business? That responsibility belongs to everyone?

Peter:

Wonderful question. The answer is a decision and not a discovery. And that is the ultimate *sine qua non* of our conversation: that you create the conversation; you create what you are trying to be as a human being.

Doug:

So if an individual finds himself or herself working in a business in which they find themselves dehumanized, where they're treated like cogs in a machine and not treated well, what should the response of that individual be? →



Peter:

You are raising an extremely important question. And the answer to that question is that to answer that question is everyone's task in life. And that it isn't an answer that somebody has, but the answer is created by you. And suddenly, it shifts you from being a victim. That's probably the best way to start our conversation: that if somebody is treated poorly, what does that person do? That person makes a decision to address that issue as topic one in his or her human existence. And that key—that it isn't a discovery; it is a decision that you make as to what it means to be you—that secret is really the answer of our conversation.

The person who you are in all areas of existence is something that you choose and create and are on your own and will be judged for it. And this kind of a complex difficulty is key to making any kind of progress whatever. It's all about you. And the creation of being human, the creation of saying that I am—this is what I am as a human being, which is the essence of these conversations—that moment is what is a decision and not a discovery.

Doug:

Are you suggesting by saying that people have to make a choice, a decision, that they have free will? And how do we know that people have free will?

Peter:

Same topic. Free will and anxiety are the two key experiences of being human. And the exploration—in great depth and in every possible way—of free will as infinite as being you and as anxiety as being infinite and unclear forever, as it were. Free will and anxiety are the beginnings of any true philosophical expedition. And I think you hit the nail on the head by saying those two things. Free will and anxiety. Really understand what that is, and the whole question about what you should do is in your hands. It is totally in your hands. And that's what makes you human.

And my talking in this way (I'm almost 93). My talking this way is an attempt to explore this territory with you—and I have the highest respect for you; I consider you maybe my dearest friend, in many ways—that to understand what free will is and that you are free will and the infinity of free will. And also, understand that this is an anxiety-producing state of affairs. To explore that is what you come up with when you raise the question that you raise. And when you understand that, then you understand that the decision to be a philosopher, the decision for authenticity, if you will, is what this is all about.

Doug:

So if one finds oneself at a business that's not humanizing, that perhaps is dehumanizing, how can one employ anxiety to improve their situation?

Peter:

Now, you see, now you have a question that is perfect. Somebody has a bad job, in one way or another. What do I do? I have to now recognize fully what it means for me to be a free human being, that I am free, what that really means, that I am infinitely free. That that dimension exists in me. And then the other part is this insight produces a tremendous amount of anxiety and confusion and what have you. So free will and anxiety are states of being which are required for accomplishing anything that is going to be worthwhile in life. We're getting closer to the start of this conversation.

Doug:

So embracing anxiety is really a necessary condition for advancing oneself and developing one's humanity and one's existence in the world of business.

Peter:

This is well said. This is golden, what you just said. Exactly. That is exactly correct: that anxiety and free will, properly understood, are the only tools we have and the only tools we need in order to address that issue. And that addresses everything. That is the beginning of our conversation.

Free will and anxiety are infinite states that you have in a universe. And to try to fully understand what that means, that is the task that we have right now.

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Doug:

Peter, how did you become aware of the importance of free will and anxiety in addressing these core issues of humanizing business?

Peter:

I think it was through literature, and it was through pain. In a bad business, you have two tools that you can have now to make a huge difference. One is your free will, and one is your managing anxiety. And if we address those two topics and address them from your point of view—this is a dinner with Peter. We're getting together. We're sitting down. This is to get a position on how we can have a conversation.

You said the theme of your magazine issue is humanizing business. And please state the name of the publication again.

Doug:
Emergence.



Peter:

The meaning of emergence is in two topics. It is to deal with free will—and the fullness of its possibilities—and anxiety in the fullness of its possibilities. Literary, scientific, psychological, mechanical, whatever. Those are the topics: understand free will and what that really means, and understand anxiety and what that really means. Free will and anxiety. All of this, properly explored, will change the conversation, will change my sense of who I am, and will answer all the questions that you can possibly have under your initial question.

So the initial question, the initial question about humanizing business, is to help with your love and your commitment and your humility, is to help your business clients to understand free will as an infinite experience, and anxiety as an infinite experience. And if you, as a leader, deal with those two issues, you will be a different person.

Doug:

Peter, I've heard you mention the word love a few times in our past conversations. What does love have to do with business?

Peter:

Maybe the answer to free will and anxiety is love. And love is also a decision. Love is what matters. But your bringing up love at this point is something for which I shall be infinitely grateful to you. Because free will and anxiety lead to a decision for love. That's really the answer to everything of what we're talking about. We got there. You got there. Thank you for getting there. In other words, free will and anxiety must be understood, and the answer is love. Thank you. That's why I look forward to these conversations.

I feel bad about the current state of the world because it's been a hard time for me on many levels. It's been a difficult time for the United States, for business leaders, for everybody. It's been a tough time for all of us. And so the tough time is based on free will, and it's all up to everyone, using anxiety and turning it into love. And love is the answer. →

Free will, anxiety, and love. It is a tripod on which this conversation will stand. That's the definition of emergence. That is a definition of self-creation. That's what emergence is. Emergence is self-creation. It is to allow yourself to be created. And you allow yourself to be created by understanding the fullness of your free will and understanding the enormity of your anxiety. That's Kierkegaard, almost precisely.

A dinner with Peter. Let's look at the menu. Three dishes on the menu: free will, anxiety, and love.

This is me in a few days of being 93. My parents died young, and I decided not to. And this conversation is your gift to me. It's my opportunity to share with you the things that matter most. And we're getting there, but we need to humanize it. *Emergence* magazine is going to make people free. It's going to make people anxious. And it's going to help bring love to business.

Doug:

Let's talk about courage. Because I've heard you say that anxiety is the fuel for courage. So please tell me what your thoughts are about courage in humanizing business.

Peter:

Courage is the decision to say, "I am." And we need to produce a phenomenology of emergence. Phenomenology simply means to describe what you experience at this particular moment. What is it like for you to be you at this particular moment? It has to do with emergence. And what is emergence? Emergence is to discover that I am free—I have free will—and that I have anxiety, and that I am now learning how to operationalize humanizing business. Is that a good start?

Doug:

I think about your use of phenomenology, and I think of millions of people around the world who feel stuck in bad jobs and businesses. And so, how can they exercise free will and leverage anxiety to experience emergence into a better state of affairs?

Peter:

Can you phrase that into something that makes sense to you and will make you feel that this was a worthwhile conversation up to this point?

Doug:

Sure. Let me try.

Peter:

Go ahead.

Doug:

So, we think about the world of business. There are many movements, at large, to make business better for human beings, to humanize business. We have movements like Workplace Democracy and Humanocracy and Teleocracy and Holacracy and Sociocracy and an untold number of other themes and movements. And yet, we still find that we're spending trillions of dollars a year on excess bureaucracy, as Gary Hamel notes, wasting people's lives. We find that most executives doubt their own ability to manage complexity and technology. We find that much of the time of knowledge workers is time that could be better spent doing other things or that they spend doing things that are better done by other people. We find that most workers are disengaged around the world, and many are actively disengaged, undermining their own workplaces. And we find this great dysfunction and waste of human life in business.

And so: how can we communicate to people, to human beings, that they can experience emergence into a better state by harnessing their anxiety and engaging their free will and moving from a current state of being stuck and emerging into a better state where they can experience a humanizing business environment?

Peter:

You see, I have been my true self today before you. And what you have just taught me is that we have five themes, with emergence as the result. One is a capacity for phenomenology. And phenomenology is the description of our experience of being us. And that theme, the phe-



nomenology, a description of what it means to exist as a human being in the world, is really what you're trying to do with this magazine, and that's called emergence. And the totality of all of that is growth—it's positive, it's refreshing, it makes people responsible, and so on.

And then the themes that come out of that are free will, anxiety, courage, and love; and these themes just need the method of phenomenology to be sensitive to our immediate experience. That's where the data come from—phenomenology. It allows us to discover the enormity of free will and the anxiety in free will. And this is what emergence suggests. Emergence is what you want to produce. Phenomenology is the method that you can use to produce it.

Peter:

You want go through our list of today's words again? Those words, those six words?

Doug:

Sure. Emergence, anxiety, free will, love, courage, and phenomenology.

Peter:

That's seven. The seven horsemen of the apocalypse. Okay?

Doug:

Well, it's seven because free will is two words [laughs].

Peter:

You can write it as one. You can use the word freedom, but freedom is a more narrow word than free will. Now, are you upset about this? Is this a good beginning of this conversation? Or where are you right now?

Doug:

No, I'm not upset at all. I'm enjoying the conversation. It's just like we're having dinner with a glass of wine, and we're having a conversation about deep topics.

Peter:

And emergence needs a phenomenology. A phenomenology: that is a description of what emergence really is. We're going to examine emergence through the methodology of phenomenology. How do people experience that emergence? And then, you have the four topics: free will or freedom, anxiety, love, and courage.

Doug:

Yes.

Peter:

And now you have the outline of what this is all about. And don't mess with me, you know?

Doug:
[Laughs]. Yeah. Thank you. You're funny. That's good. Yes, go ahead.

Peter:
This is from a dying soldier, okay? I think I'll make it to 100, but I'm not so sure at this moment. But I think my opportunity to make it to 100—I will be soon 93—is connected with making these topics now that you have enumerated operational. But they need to be clear—they are freedom and anxiety and love and courage.

And so now we can begin in this conversation by saying we have a job to do now. We have to implement these four themes. And you can start talking now as to what humanizing business really is all about. It's to make those things happen: free will, anxiety, love, and courage.

Emergence means, first and foremost, that we describe what is emergence. Emergence is to understand free will, is to understand anxiety, is to understand love, and is to understand courage.

Doug:
In the course of an hour and 15 minutes, you came up with a new model of emergence. And I think it's perfectly suited for Emergence magazine and the readership. It will introduce these themes to organizational leaders around the world, perhaps for the very first time, and in a way that they have probably never heard before. I think it will make a lot of sense to them because they are suffering from anxiety; they don't know why people don't exercise free will, and there is a kind of a heartlessness in many workplaces. And people are fearful and afraid to exercise courage. So I think this may speak to them in a powerful way.

And if we do nothing more than share this model in the pages of the magazine, we will have done a great service to some business leaders all around the world. So, thank you for joining me in the virtual restaurant today. I appreciate it very much.

Peter:
That was dessert [laughs]! All I did was eat while you ordered the various dishes that they had to offer.

So the next step is how you operationalize all that we discussed today. I want to tell you a little fable that I learned in Switzerland many years ago that I want to share with you that is relevant to what we are talking about.

In a village where Socrates was living, there were two young boys who were intellectual and ethical misfits. They were making fun of Socrates and told the village citizens gathered there, "Don't pay any attention to this Socrates, this old man. He is full of malarkey. We want to prove to you that Socrates is stupid." So they caught a bird, and one of them held the bird in his hands behind his back and said, "Socrates, what do I have behind my back?"

And Socrates said, "Well, I don't really know. But could it be a bird?" And he was right. And the kid with the bird said, "But now is the big question. Is the bird dead or alive? You won't know." Socrates looked at the people, "Citizens, they're asking me a question: is the bird dead or alive?" The kid with the bird said, "Look, citizens, this is a question he won't be able to answer. Is it dead or alive? If Socrates says it's dead, I show the bird to you, and it flies away. If he says it's alive, I crack its neck, and it's dead, and he's wrong again. He won't have the answer."

Socrates simply answered, "You want to know whether it's dead or alive? Well, the answer is all in your hands."

Whether the kid kills the bird or not is in his own hands. The question of leadership, of being a business success, is all in a leader's own hands. It involves a choice, a decision.

Doug:
Well said, Peter. Thanks for joining me for this dinner conversation!

[END]

