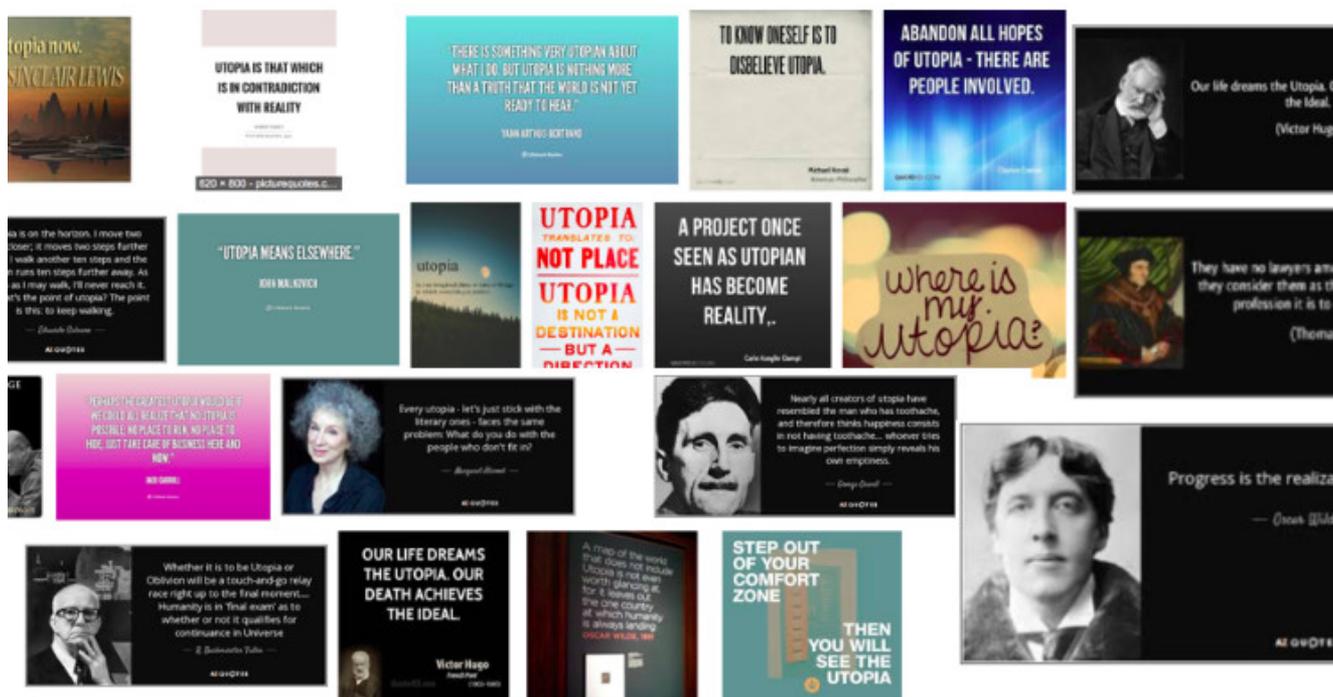


Heading to Utopia on purpose

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The first part of the latest leg of my CORE book tour took me to Boston, Toronto and Montreal. Along the way I encountered long-time campaigners with pipe dreams for a sustainable Shangri-La and business leaders with an increasing curiosity about what lies beyond 'purpose'.

My first stop landed me in the middle of [Sustainatopia](#) – not a place but an event, this year held in Boston. I was there as a plenary speaker supported by my sometimes tour partner, the [Ipsos Sustainable Development Research Centre](#).

John Rosser, Sustainatopia's exuberant founder, gave the

opening address and explained the inspiration behind Sustainatopia's name. Those gathered for two days of panel discussions, workshops and networking opportunities were "on a shared journey," he enthused, to help make a blissful dream come true. There were some puzzled looks on the faces of Sustainatopia rookies (Including me), but no lack of enthusiasm to get the proceedings underway. For my part, I came away thinking that the pursuit of (sustain)Utopia was more about blind faith and hopeful optimism than a roadmap to success.

The limitations of 'purpose'

Forty-eight hours later I found myself in an entirely different environment (and indeed country) as a guest speaker at the [Conference Board of Canada's Business \[Un\]Usual: Profit from Purpose](#) bi-annual event.

In my keynote to the gathered business leaders, impact investors, sustainability consultants, academics and government representatives I noted that the word 'purpose' is suddenly very much in vogue. An awful lot of businesses are now expounding the virtues of having a societal purpose, or declaring the benefits of doing things 'on purpose'.

On one level, this might sound like progress. But I have to ask, what does 'on purpose' actually mean? And why does it sound suspiciously like 'on-brand'? You've heard of 'green washing'. Get set to hear a lot more about

'purpose washing'.

For me, the problem is simply that 'purpose' is too vague. There's no substance to it. Taken on its own, a purpose will always remain a vague intention. Not perhaps as wistful as a Utopian pipe dream, but nonetheless light on clarity and pragmatism.

Fear of the unknown

My final stop was the Core Dinner Debate hosted in Montreal by [Lucie Bourgeois](#) and her fantastic team at [Umalia](#) atop a towering building with spectacular views of the city.

Here the CEO of one of Canada's leading banks echoed the sentiments of other senior executives I've spoken to when he said: "We're willing passengers on the train, but we're in the dark about exactly where we're going." So not knowing where 'the purpose journey' might take them in itself inhibits action. It's one explanation as to why, so often, short-term cosmetic 'purpose' makeover tactics have so little follow-through.

My argument is that when you turn a purpose into a long-term strategic Single Organizing Idea (SOI®) the potential becomes much more clearer and much more tangible. An SOI combines and transforms economic and social purpose into a pragmatic tool that can actually be applied to the day-to-day operation of a business. This makes an SOI the missing link between having a purpose and doing

something about it.

While writing my book I had the pleasure of interviewing Charles Handy, the recognized business thought leader and author of *The Empty Raincoat* (among many other books). I'm happy to say that he endorses my thinking. "Your SOI," he said, "has so much more potential to make a difference than a simple purpose."

What you can expect

Of course, not knowing where you're going is a fool's folly. So having led several business leaders down the tracks to identifying and defining their organization's SOI, I'll conclude by sharing some of the things you can expect from the journey:

- You can expect that with the right challenger and facilitator helping you look at your business you will fairly quickly uncover what your business stands for (your purpose).
- Having translated your purpose into a clearly defined Single Organizing Idea (SOI), you can expect to be able to set goals, objectives and targets with greater ease across all the functions of your business.
- You can expect to see greater clarity in decision making and consistency in communication across your organization, leading to more understanding and openness.
- You can expect to see the entrenched positions of

skeptics and naysayers be undermined.

- You can expect that the espoused values of leadership will more readily align with the shared values of a wider stakeholder audience.
- You can expect to see new possibilities and opportunities to deliver greater and different types of value to your key audiences.
- You can expect to feel that the changes your SOI will demand will make you feel that your organization is more in step with a fast changing world.
- At the same time, you can expect to feel uncomfortable and to be challenged about your ambitions and motivations.
- You can expect to be more closely watched, to fall short at times and be criticized for it.
- You can expect that success won't come over night.
- You can expect to demand that your leaders be leaders and not just managers.
- Over time you can expect your business to become more relevant and more important to more people.
- But what you can't ever expect is to reach Utopia; because that's just a pipe dream.

Part two of this leg of the Core book tour took me to New York and Washington DC. Reflections from these debates coming soon.

Neil Gaught is a strategic advisor and author of [CORE: How a Single Organizing Idea can Change Business for](#)

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