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## A family business vs. a corporate behemoth—can it be a win-win outcome?

By Janet and Jeffrey Clements

**STORIES OF CORPORATE FRAUD, CEOs** who take the money and run, and overly aggressive competition, have shaken the confidence of both workers and investors. But these conditions are also furnishing opportunities to demand of business a higher standard of conduct and accountability—opportunities that, if acted on, will establish business on firmer ground and help steady our individual and collective economic progress.

As small business owners, we've based our motives and actions on spiritual principles, and have tried to stay with those principles even in the midst of economic turmoil. We believe that these principles come from the divine Principle, from God. Something that happened to us several years ago showed us that there are spiritual laws—laws of God—that, when understood and practiced, will both protect one against being victimized by others' wrong-doing and produce beneficial ripple effects in the larger economy.

After the company Jeff was managing was sold and new management was brought in—and after a lot of prayer and listening to God for direction—we invested in a new franchise that was based on providing a unique setting for energetic, quality family recreation, an indoor playground called The Discovery Zone. This opportunity came along shortly after we had our second son, and we loved the family-centered nature of the new business. The substantial investment for the franchise included equipment, build-out expenses, and a long-term lease. Because of the uniqueness of our operation, the opening in the Chicago suburbs drew much publicity and attention, locally and nationally.

The first year was an overwhelming success, and thousands of families spent quality time at our place with their kids and friends. We were grateful to have been led to invest in this direction. But early in the second year, we noticed someone outside the store counting the number of people going inside. Over several months, we saw visitors taking notes on the food menu, questioning the visitors there, and recording details about the store and how it was run. Something was going on, and we didn't have a good feeling about it.

A few months later we learned that the CEO of a multi-billion dollar corporation had visited our store with his grandson and had apparently loved what he saw. So much so that he made it his own special project to get his company to open a store just like ours. He'd sent his people to get the details through corporate espionage—spying, albeit legal.

Even though metropolitan Chicago has millions of people and many areas with similar demographics to choose from, he decided to open his first operation within a few miles of our business. This had an immediate negative effect on our profit margin, although we were still doing well enough to sustain our business. Then our neighboring corporate behemoth decided to open another store practically down the street from

ours. Now our whole livelihood was at stake, and we faced the prospect of being completely wiped out financially. Our revenue had fallen, we had high fixed costs, and it appeared that no one would be interested in buying us out under those conditions. All of this got us praying, just as we had before we made the initial investment.

What came to us was that God doesn't make failures. The Bible promised us, "For that he [God] is strong in power; not one faileth" ([Isa. 40:26](#)). This gave us hope, but we had no idea how the promise could be fulfilled in our case.

Competing with this major corporation was like doing battle with the giant Goliath in the Bible, only we didn't have even the sling and five smooth stones that the young shepherd boy David had for weapons. Clearly, the answer could only come by finding different "rules of engagement" and a God-based economic model. And we knew that since God is infinite good, the answer had to involve a good outcome for everyone.

That wasn't how things looked at that moment. It looked as if we had laid the groundwork and now another enterprise was stepping in and reaping all the rewards, while we suffered irreparable loss. We found another Bible passage, though, that we came to understand as universally lawful: "They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for . . . mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble . . . . The wolf and the lamb shall feed together . . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord" ([Isa. 65:22,23,25](#)).

We saw more clearly that there is a divine law of relationships that rules out cutthroat competition. It wasn't that we were the chosen and the megacorporation was the usurper. Rather, we all are chosen ones to the one creator, and He gives each of us harmless ways to prosper.

The first step forward came as we put down our fears by means of these prayers. That happened as we realized that each concept God creates has its own uniqueness, like individual rays of light coming from the same source, yet always moving in harmony with each other. The old saying in economics—"A rising tide lifts all boats"—actually has a spiritual basis. God's giving isn't partial or random, but wholly good and all-inclusive. The same Principle of good that protected us, we came to believe, also prospered the other corporation.

Soon after we began praying along this line, a major investor bought the original franchiser and moved their headquarters to Chicago. They knew that the other corporation was trying to put us out of business, so they bought back our operation to defend their market position. They paid us a price that left our investment intact. And a new career opportunity opened up for Jeff that provided satisfying and rewarding work.

Incidentally, within a few years, the aggressive competitor company decided to sell all its stores to our original franchiser, who merged them with their stores and continued to succeed and build additional stores. During this time, many families throughout the country enjoyed the recreation and family fun that inspired the original business idea. There were no victims anywhere.

We've come to see that our real business—and really the business of humanity in general—is to serve God and to express His goodness toward one another. Then no matter what direction the economy looks to be headed in, you have a business that can't be lost.

Jeff went on to work as a consultant, and is now CFO of The Mary Baker Eddy Library in Boston, Janet is now a Christian Science practitioner.

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