WE CANNOT SOLVE THE PROBLEMS FACING humanity today within the same conceptual framework that created those problems. If social entrepreneurs hope to make a significant contribution to the betterment of the world, they will not only need to address significant social and environmental problems with creative business plans, they will also need to contribute to the emergence of a new, more adaptive, conceptual framework for economic activity. In other words, social entrepreneurship ultimately must be about the reinvention of the business itself. (What Craig Dunn has referred to as “deliberate disruptive design.”) Otherwise, social and ecological problems will continue to proliferate faster than social entrepreneurs can ever hope to respond.

At the core of this emerging design framework must be a more mature and holistic conception of human nature; a corresponding reconceptualization
of social and economic relationships; and a recognition that the increasingly complex problems facing humanity today can only be solved through sustained, effective, and altruistically motivated collaboration among people and organizations who bring diverse insights, experiences, talents, and capacities to bear on those problems. This chapter explores several foundational elements of such a framework and then briefly discusses the experience of one entrepreneurial effort—SecondMuse—that illustrates initial efforts to apply this framework in a learning mode.

FROM SELF-INTERESTED COMPETITION TO ORGANIC COLLABORATION

Prevailing conceptions of human nature—especially in the fields of business and economics—often reduce human beings down to our basest material instincts and appetites. “Homo economicus” is thus frequently understood as a competitive, egoistic, and self-maximizing creature engaged in rational calculations designed to maximize its material well-being.

This caricature of human nature exaggerates some features of our nature while obscuring others. Most notably, it obscures our capacity for cooperation, altruism, and sacrifice for the common good. In this regard, all of the human sciences are beginning to demonstrate that humans embody the dual potential for competition or cooperation, egoism or altruism, self-interested orientations and other-interest orientations. Which of these potentials is more fully developed depends on a complex interplay among our education and training, our social environment, the institutional incentive structures we operate within, and the personal choices we make as we navigate these systems.

A growing number of thoughtful entrepreneurs, economists, and others are adopting this more holistic view of human nature. Yet, on the whole, business practices and economic policies continue to implicitly reflect the assumption that human beings are essentially selfish. Based on this assumption, the dynamics of self-interested competition are widely presumed to be natural, inevitable, or even ideal expressions of human nature. Competitive relations are thus assumed to be the normal operating mode of entrepreneurs, corporations, governmental agencies, and even