What is Entrepreneurship?

Published on Oct 06, 2015 by Niko Canner



A recent conversation brought me back to Howard Stevenson's classic definition of entrepreneurship (see Eric Schurenberg's Inc. piece for a useful elaboration):

Entrepreneurship is the pursuit of opportunity without regard to resources currently controlled.

Over a long enough time horizon, almost any significantly ambitious person's quest begins to take on a significant element of entrepreneurship in this sense. One might, in a well-resourced organization, largely have the resources to accomplish today's goals – but one will almost never have the resources required to take on a fundamentally larger set of goals a number of years out.

This isn't just a question of new markets vs. current markets. If one can enter a new market in a mostly sufficient way through M & A, for instance, the new market entry doesn't fit this definition of entrepreneurship – the expansion is about transmuting financial resources into the other business resources one will need. But for GM shaping their engagement in the development of driverless cars or GE engaging with the long-term development of the internet of things, the essence of the work is entrepreneurship. And, importantly, within companies like those any number of people are pursuing big, long-term opportunities largely by trying to marshal resources in the "core" that they don't themselves control.

Similarly, individuals pursuing causes often fulfill Stevenson's definition in an even more pronounced way than most founders starting companies. David Bornstein working to build the field of solutions journalism, or Asha de Vos striving to build a groundswell of engagement with the health of oceans in Sri Lanka, or Mark Pollock trying to cure paralysis face an immense mismatch between the scale of their aspirations and the scale of the resources they control. Contrast this with the most

visible of the Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, who are in many cases awash in capital beyond immediate needs from very early in the formation of their businesses.

This definition matters because it highlights where entrepreneurship **as a craft** is most relevant. Keeping this definition in mind helps us cut through the noise of the startup world and billion-dollar "unicorn" valuations, to understand the broader question of what entrepreneurship really is and how its potential can best be fulfilled.