

Who We Are, What We Do

Drew Calvert

AT THE Providence Group, our mission is to build a better world. We think boldly. We act bravely. We're mindlessly alliterative. We take a fresh, holistic approach to business and government, with tools and frameworks drawn from every discipline and sector. We believe—if that's the right word—in shared value, inclusive growth, and the power of big ideas to inspire human flourishing. We ourselves are not flourishing. We wish that we were dead.

At office locations in nine cities—six of them in Asia—our team advises leaders on how to drive positive impact. We break down silos. We innovate. Our analysts and fellows boast a wealth of talent and expertise, with one exception: Jonathan Platt, Associate Content Manager and the author of this mission statement, who, as of 11:00 P.M. on May 3rd, 2013, is a twenty-nine-year-old metaphysician and former graduate student of philosophy at Brown. Our presence here in Hong Kong, where we sit alone on the seventeenth floor of a sleek office tower just off Queen's Road Central, is perhaps best accounted for by the hollowness of our character and our need to always cloak ourselves in the billowing robes of prestige. In truth, we don't belong here at all. What happened was, we lost our way in the fall term of 2010, our third year of graduate school, abandoning our thesis work and exiting our field. Our girlfriend, Kim, also of Brown, left us for a Democratic activist and champion swimmer. Thereupon followed a gap year: we tutored youngsters cramming for the GRE. We drank a lot. We read *The Magic Mountain*. Eventually, we shuffled along to a dull, catered recruitment event at the Providence Marriott Downtown, the event that led our trembling lips to this particular corporate teat. Our chair swivels marvelously.

We specialize—or some of us do—in consumer research, corporate strategy, design thinking, political risk, rural development, innovation, and public policy. We combine hardcore analytics with rigorous ethnology. We market our benevolence with extraordinary zeal. Our clients include Fortune 500 companies, government ministries, and nonprofit organizations. Our ratio of “doing well” to “doing good” is what you'd expect, which is to say, unconscionable.

From a spiritual point of view, we are mediocre specimens. Most of us do, in fact, want to “build a better world,” provided that while doing so we still earn roughly thirty times the global average per capita income—not including benefits—and retain the bill of amenities we currently enjoy. We are graduates of day, prep, and international schools. We are, to a one, Ivy or Oxbridge; check us out on LinkedIn. We conduct our meetings with tiresome and halfhearted irony. We diagram on whiteboards. We use digital mannequins in PowerPoints to express ideas. We suspect that some of our colleagues might be having sex with each other: Priya and Ryan possibly, Amir and Jane definitely. The MBAs, we have found, like to pair up with the policy types. It reeks of metaphor.

Our CEO, Jeremi Wren, formerly of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the McKinsey Global Institute, holds visiting professorships at INSEAD and SMU. We were, we'll admit, begrudgingly impressed by our CEO, a man who quotes Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn in TED Talks and has published a decent paper on Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge. Based on this impression we agreed to a casual interview and were shocked to receive a generous offer. We dithered, but we took the job, our dreams of intellectual bliss and personal fulfillment having vaporized dishonorably. We drank more. We bought new shirts. We accepted a transfer to Hong Kong. Indentured though we were to the global ideas industry, we hoped to find at least a chintz of meaning in our work. In time, of course, we learned the truth: it was unrelentingly Faustian. Our moral failure haunts us, which is why we spent a portion of our first annual bonus on the bottle of Johnny Walker Black that joins us for this after-hours burst of content creation.

We operate on three continents. Our extensive presence in Asia reflects our belief in the region's growth potential and geopolitical relevance. Our CEO is married to a Singaporean heiress. We believe the best growth model for twenty-first century nations is an East Asian paradigm with Scandinavian customizations; in this and many other respects we are thoroughly cosmopolitan. Many of us have two passports. We feel surprisingly little by way of patriotic fervor. We are, in fact, embarrassed by the nativists and religious fanatics who populate our nation-states. Not that we don't appreciate the major religious traditions. Christianity has proven to be an excellent source of management lessons, and Buddhism plays an important role in pacifying the technocrats that run the global financial system, including its superstructure. One of our partners, Dr. Park, a former pastor from South Korea who studied at Harvard Business School, knows better than most how to dress the ogre of commerce in Confucian silk or Christian cloth as circumstances demand. We like Dr. Park. He's a good guy. We wish he'd stayed a pastor.

We really don't mean to be as disingenuous as we are. Most of us are intelligent people. We voted for Obama—twice. We know that global capitalism exploits and disenchant, but because we simply can't envision a viable alternative, we remain by default reformers, centrists, meliorists, and *bien pensants*. We watch our peers and former classmates march and camp in city parks from the comfort of our living rooms, with CNN on mute and the soothing tomes of center-left economists on our shelves. We're pseudo-intellectual: we stand by as social science is beaten, mugged, and tossed into the van of management discourse, or gussied up into self-help. Why do we do this? Hard to say. Unfortunately, we don't have time to explore the issue further, for our clock has now ticked mercilessly to 11:25 P.M., leaving us just half an hour to breathe the air of our twenties plus eight additional hours to complete this “deliverable.” It should have been done this afternoon, but we didn't have the bandwidth—we were busy processing self-disgust—which is why, late on a Monday night, our ember slowly fading, we are still here clacking away to the mournful hum of traffic below.

Each of our employees dedicates ten percent of their working time to projects of their choice. Examples include a new app for teaching personal finance, a pilot project designed to test a novel rice-planting technique, a “voluntourism” organization to help rural Indonesians market local produce, and a feverish inner monologue on the problem of the divided self. If nothing else, this policy keeps our team in a state of busyness, the better to ignore the echoing drip from the faucet of conscience. Other avoidance strategies include deference to *noblesse oblige*, Third Culture Kid Syndrome (useful as a smokescreen for privilege and itineracy), and Corporate-Parental Martyrdom, which involves having children and excusing all hypocrisy on the grounds of obligation.

We email, of course—that's the main thing. We greet and advise and leverage each other in sumptuously inane prose. We sign our emails “best” because it's shortest and we hate ourselves. Occasionally, to boost morale, we like to imagine Franz Kafka clacking away in our Frankfurt office, emailing and emailing; or Kierkegaard in Copenhagen, forgetting the attachment. We've created several Gmail accounts with Kierkegaardian pseudonyms, which we use to email our friend Quinn, a writer from Chicago.

The other person we like to email is Lara Bainbridge, Dr. Park's executive assistant. She works in our Malaysia office but travels often to Hong Kong for meetings. Lara doesn't belong here, either; she's too authentically dedicated to others' well-being. We have never met a person who combines warmth and competence to such a degree as Lara. We admire her wit, her poise, her tact, her quiet laugh, her friendliness. We admire her enormously. At the end of our first week, she invited us to happy hour and offered a brief synopsis of the latest office drama; for us this marked the beginning of a workplace camaraderie. Our email exchanges are lively and delightfully irreverent. We write in the frothy argot of our CEO's newsletter (available in PDF and print upon request), which makes us laugh and soothes our harrowing loneliness considerably.

Last Friday, with Lara back in town, we invited her for a drink at a quiet bar in the Mid-Levels. She summarized her research on community development; we told her about our thesis, a comparison of Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's respective calls to “end” Western philosophy. We discussed William James, one of Lara's favorite writers; she thought his earnest inquiry might counterbalance our adolescent Kierkegaardian tendencies. We trust her taste. She's thirty-four and undeniably wiser. Having both spent childhoods “overseas”—we in Singapore, she in Jakarta—we bonded over the benefits and pathologies of an expat youth: our chameleon nature, our sketchiness, our whorish flexibility. We were “fungible,” she said, which was typically astute. We drank three pints in quick succession while Lara merely sipped her wine. And then, for reasons we cannot explain, we talked and talked and talked and talked. We talked about our bad year, our sense of failure, our black moods, our vast inner tundra. We cast her as a therapist. Why? Why did we do this to her? We blew our soul like a cloud of smoke directly into her face. And then we did something much worse: we asked if she was interested in joining us for a drink in our studio in Causeway Bay. She sensibly declined, citing work obligations. She finished her wine and taxied home, though not before suggesting, with impressive tact but real concern, that we should taxi home as well. We didn't. We stayed at the bar alone, brooding, ideating. Later that night, sipping a whiskey nightcap in our studio flat, we sent Lara a lengthy text attempting to apologize. When Lara didn't reply, we lay supine on our tiny couch and placed a cushion over our face, simulating burial.

At the Providence Group, we focus on the future, not the past. Tonight, however, the winds of the past are howling rather ferociously, and we're drawing new conclusions. We have, for example, convinced ourselves that Lara was only

humoring us when she instigated the friendship we so recklessly abused. The shame is unextinguishable. We wonder if we should message her with a follow-up apology. Our clock reads 11:50 p.m., which is late by most standards, of course, but not completely beyond the pale. We chide ourselves—what foolishness. A midnight text would only serve to exacerbate the crime. No, there's nothing left to do but pour ourselves another drink and pray for an early, painless death, for we are a waste of flesh and blood, a drain on the world's resources. We think of all the resources we've drained without creating any value in return. We think of the mess we've made our life. We are wretchedness personified, alienating family and friends with our poisoned mind, our sordidness, our intellectual snobbery, our loathing, our moods, our unbelievable—oops, here comes a message from Lara.

Hey, I just saw your text.

The tap before the hammer blow. The executioner limbering up.

I hope you're feeling better.

Christ. We brace ourselves for a thousand cuts.

I had a shitty weekend, too, so I took a break from all the machines, and I almost forgot what day it was! I wanted to wish you a happy birthday before it was too late :-)

She tells us to open our desk drawer, where we find, wearing a ribbon and bow, a paperback edition of *The Collected Works of William James*, a gift she'd slyly planted in our office before her Sunday flight.

Welcome to your thirties, J. Relax—you'll make it out alive.

At the Providence Group, we work with some amazing individuals. Sometimes they astonish us. Sometimes they inspire such hallucinatory tenderness that our eyes moisten, our nape bristles, our swollen heart goes pit-a-pat, and our mind glows with thoughts of them like shoals of glimmering plankton over the deep-sea fiber-optic cables carrying our messages.

We craft a brief, normal reply with no mention of plankton. There is more we'd like to say, but we sensibly refrain; we are in no state to venture beyond the social formula. We are half drunk in a dark office, careening into middle age, deliverables still undelivered, the decade's disappointments still metastasizing within us. We are, to put it mildly, lost. Already we are berating ourselves for being so pathetic as to warrant such a gift. But we have to consider another possibility as well. We have to consider that maybe we are worthy of such kindness. We have to at least consider that. We have to consider the bookish child, the curious teen, the romantic fool, the earnest lover of wisdom who, even as he flickers on his last kilowatt of youth, feels almost fluorescent with a longing for communion. This, too, is who we are. □