This week, Fiona Wilson offers us three reading recommendations. Wilson, who lives in Freeport, is executive director of the Center for Social Innovation & Enterprise at the Paul College of Business and Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire. She is also an associate professor there of social innovation, social entrepreneurship and sustainability.

“A Bigger Prize: How We Can Do Better Than the Competition,” by Margaret Heffernan, 2014.

We live in a society where competition is the default, taken for granted, applauded and rewarded. This book dares to ask an important question: Is competition, especially in a world facing seemingly intractable, complex social, economic and environmental challenges, still the best approach to motivation? Should we continue to rely on concepts like “survival of the fittest” and beliefs that “the market” will solve all ills? Heffernan answers with a resounding no.

Through immensely compelling, well-written and exhaustively researched examples, she helps us understand that competition has regularly failed to meet all of society’s needs, and, more worryingly, that competition has led to unprecedented levels of corruption, dysfunction, environmental degradation and inequality. Heffernan offers us the alternative of collaboration, but not a naïve and vague concept. Rather, she gives us powerful examples of people and organizations that are working together and achieving extraordinary results. I particularly appreciated the practical and inspiring examples of businesses taking more collaborative approaches to management and to their work with customers, suppliers – and even rivals – to achieve a prize bigger than shareholder wealth alone.

We live with a constant barrage of dark and dismal media messages about world disasters and looming crises. This book gives us an alternative to sticking our heads in the sand. “A Force for Good: The Dalai Lama’s Vision for Our World” recognizes that we need to understand what’s wrong with the prevailing economic and social systems, but it suggests that a positive vision – one focused on possibilities – will unleash innovation, imagination and the emergence of radical reinvention and new approaches.

As might be expected from a book inspired by the Dalai Lama, the book has plenty on our individual responsibility to reduce negative emotions and foster positive ones, but its real power lies in the many inspiring examples of individuals and organizations that are creating positive change in the world. I especially loved the chapter on “Economics as if People Mattered,” which highlights a more compassionate breed of capitalists who are using business methods, working together so that shareholders and broader stakeholders (communities, employees, the environment) alike can prosper.


Few would argue that climate change has become a highly politicized debate, especially those of us who have suffered through excruciating dinners with family members on very different sides of the debate. The reasons for the divide – especially when 97 percent of climate scientists agree that Earth’s climate is changing – are less clear. This tiny book (barely 90 pages) is written by a respected scholar but aimed at an inquiring public. “How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate” is a very readable synthesis of the research in sociology, psychology and other social sciences about why human beings are able to accept (or reject) the science of climate change. Hoffman is not trying to sledgehammer climate change deniers to acquiesce, but to help each of us understand the cultural bias that we bring to our own interpretation of climate change science. He hopes his book will help change society so we can collectively address climate change, and he ends with tactics and strategies for bringing people together and finding common ground based on the science.

Open Book is an occasional series in which we ask Mainers to tell us about sustainability-related books they are reading.

Share
Read or Post Comments

Were you interviewed for this story? If so, please fill out our accuracy form

Send questions/comments to the editors.