Economy of Communion Project

Interview with Emery Koenig | February 11-12, 2026

Emery Koenig spent thirty-eight years at Cargill, the privately held agricultural company, and retired at sixty as its vice chairman and chief risk officer. He grew up in Dickinson, North Dakota, where his father ran a gas station and his mother kept the books, and met the Focolare movement in 1978 through an advertisement in a parish bulletin in Lafayette, Indiana, during his first posting as a commodity trader. He held eight jobs in those thirty-eight years, including ten years in Geneva and five more commuting. He sat on Cargill's board alongside the owning family. He is the only person in this series who lived the Focolare's ideals inside a company he did not own and could not have changed, and much of the interview is about what that costs and what it is worth: the sixty thousand women farmers in Zambia; the hundred schools in Vietnam; the manager he confronted in Johannesburg; the stand he took in 2012 that he was prepared to lose his job over; the nickel his mother handed him for the collection plate every Sunday; and living a purposeful retired life.

This transcript is arranged by subject rather than in the order of the recording. Emery Koenig's words are unchanged. The interviewer's questions have been shortened in places. After its first appearance in each part, the Economy of Communion is abbreviated to EoC.

Part One: Introduction

Interviewer: Let's start simply. Can you share your name, the company you worked for, and the position you held there?

Emery Koenig: My name is Emery Koenig, and I worked thirty-eight years for Cargill, a large multinational company based in Minneapolis. I had various positions over the years. I started as a commodity trader in Lafayette, Indiana, for about eighteen months, then Omaha, Nebraska, for two and a half years, and then I managed our office in Pocatello, Idaho. I went onto the oilseed desk in Minneapolis for two and a half years, then down to Houston, Texas, where I managed our export operations. I came back to Minneapolis as department head for oilseeds. And then Cargill asked if I'd go to Geneva, Switzerland. My family was super keen on going. I was not so keen on going, because life was pretty good where we were. I had to remind them a couple of times after we got there that, I'm sorry, this was your idea.

We spent ten years in Geneva as a family. Then I kept my job there and we had to move my family back to Minneapolis: I had one son who needed to get into a special school for learning disabilities. So I commuted back and forth for five more years, Minneapolis to Geneva, and worked by video from home in between. That worked out. Lots of interesting stories about that.

Then I did various jobs in Minneapolis, which is the headquarters. Long story short, I retired as vice chairman and chief risk officer. I spent a lot of time in risk management. I chaired the Commodity Risk Committee. I also chaired the Enterprise Process, Data and Technology Committee, and I was also on

the People Team, and the Business Conduct Committee. I chaired the Philanthropy Committee, which was always interesting in terms of integrating all those things.

After thirty-eight years, I turned sixty, and what I call my fun-versus-frustration ratio started to sag a little bit. I was spending too much time and energy trying to stay pumped up, and you need to be on your game in that type of environment, especially with risk. So, I decided to retire when I turned sixty. I've been retired ten years now. I still sit on the board of Mosaic, a large fertilizer company that Cargill used to own. I've been on that board about fifteen years, so I'm still involved with agriculture.

Interviewer: Just to hear it from you: what is Mosaic?

Emery Koenig: Mosaic is a fertilizer company. It was a combination of two companies, Cargill Fertilizer and IMC, put together to be much more impactful. It's a large global fertilizer company based in Tampa; it used to be based in Minneapolis. As I said, Cargill used to own a significant percentage of it and the rest was publicly traded.

We're large in phosphate mining here in Florida. We're probably one of the largest landowners in Florida, because of all the land you need for mining and then all the reclamation, putting it back together again afterwards. We also have a large mining operation for potash in Saskatchewan, and a large operation in Brazil. Between those, we do a lot of selling fertilizer, manufacturing, and doing innovative things with customers to help feed the world. That's a theme that goes back to the Cargill days: how do we be the best at feeding the world? That theme continues on with Mosaic.

Part Two: Dickinson, and finding the Focolare

Growing up

Interviewer: Before we get to the Focolare, can you tell us where you were raised? What was your childhood like?

Emery Koenig: I was born and raised in Dickinson, North Dakota. At the time it was a small town of twelve to fourteen thousand people at the time in western North Dakota. We're sixty miles from the Montana border and twenty miles from the Badlands, which is a beautiful area.

My parents came from farming backgrounds, but my dad operated a gas station and a bulk delivery business to farmers and other businesses. I spent a lot of time with my dad, as my brother did, just helping out. And my mom ran the books. She was really the business operator.

It was a very Catholic family. We went to Mass every day. My parents were Catholic; all our cousins were Catholic. And in a town of twelve thousand people, we had three Catholic churches, three Catholic grade schools and one Catholic high school. So, it was a very Catholic area, which was really a gift.

My mom came from a German background. Some of my friends would listen to her and say it sounded like Arnold Schwarzenegger. She was five foot eleven, a big lady, and took no prisoners. She was very straightforward. If someone owed my dad money, you did not want her on your doorstep ringing your doorbell asking for it.

She said to me one time, if you let your heart rule your mind, you're going to lose your pants. That was her business advice. And I think there's a lot of truth in that, if you become overly influenced by emotion. But the flip side is that it's not just about the numbers, either. I learned a lot of things from her, from how she operated. And my dad was a very quiet, very good guy. A very good guy.

So, I grew up in a Catholic environment, went to Mass all the time, and then went to school at the University of North Dakota. There I continued to go to Mass frequently, and because it was a secular school, the Newman Center became a very important part of my Catholic life.

And then somewhere along the line I felt this desire to give my life to God. That relationship with God was very important to me. But in the Catholic tradition, that probably meant becoming a priest. And I didn't want to become a priest. It was just not something I was going to do, for a variety of reasons. So, I was really struggling with what to do with my life. There was also my now wife of almost forty-seven years, and I didn't want to give her up.

When I talk to high school students, in fact, at my own high school, Trinity High School, I've been asked to speak to the senior class, and in a couple of weeks I'll do it for the fifth time. They just want to know about life. About integrating religion, about your background, about living overseas, about adopting kids, about what makes you suffer. All these very interesting things. I like to engage with them.

I tell those students that this is why cohabitation doesn't work: you don't need to find someone you can live with, you need to find someone you can't live without. I've told my wife and I've told other people, I could probably find five hundred women I could live with. There's only one I don't want to live without. With cohabitation you're trying to do something for the wrong reason. And that's why the divorce rate is actually higher among people who cohabit.

Anyway, it was a big struggle. I didn't know what to do. And for a short period of time, I stopped going to church, because I was being torn apart by this desire to give my life to God on the one hand, and on the other hand I had a beautiful lady I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, and I didn't want to give her up.

I also told Cargill when I began working there that I wanted to be sent to a college town for my first assignment, so they sent me to Lafayette, Indiana, which is the home of Purdue University. I thought it would be an easier adjustment, and it was. I also wanted to learn the business from the origination side: how the farmer thinks, how crops are grown, how transportation works, how the trains work, how the trucking business works etc.

I went to Mass at St. Thomas, the Newman Center at Purdue, one evening. I was walking home, and I just felt this desire to pray the rosary. And a week later, I met the Focolare.

How did I meet the Focolare? An ad in the church bulletin at St. Thomas that said: "Anyone interested in living the Gospel concretely in their everyday life, please come to St. Thomas to meet with others." And I thought, boy, that's got my name on it. That's the whole idea: how you can live your life, living the Gospel concretely in everyday life. It doesn't matter if you're married, it doesn't matter if you're a priest, it doesn't matter if you're a plumber or a lawyer. It doesn't matter, as long as you can try to live the Gospel concretely in your everyday life.

So, I went there and met students I'm still in contact with today, almost fifty years later. I'm still in the same Focolare as Don Mitchell. He's the one who introduced me; he was running the student group at the time. He and his wife, Ann, were putting it on.

It really became a way to figure out how I could live my life out as a married person. I could stay in business: I love business, I think it's fascinating how business works, and I could really bring my faith into this whole arena.

I think it was also this notion of mutual love. We call it having the presence of Jesus among us. If God is love, and I have the presence of God within me, and you have the presence of God within you, then to the degree that I can love you and you can love me, we have the presence of God between us. And boy, that's really life-giving. We call it having Jesus among us, or Jesus in the midst.

And the flip side of that same coin is suffering. What do you do with those moments when you're sick, you're lonely, you're tired, you're wounded, you're suffering for whatever reason? To recognize that all those sufferings have been experienced once before by Christ, who loved us the most when he was hanging on the cross. To the degree that I can identify with that, if I can embrace him in that suffering, I can transform it into something life-giving as opposed to something that just drags you down.

Actually, it's this month's Word of Life: *See, I make all things new*. I think that's one of the gifts Christ gives us, to make all things new. And here I was, this wounded, torn-apart, struggling individual, new to business, trying to figure out what to do. It was one way to make all things new, so to speak.

I still remember the Word of Life for that month, the first one when I began to live this spirituality. It was: "if someone asks you to go one mile with them, go with them two."

We're sitting in our office, and our facility was a little bit south of Lafayette. It was impractical to drive up to Lafayette for lunch. There was a little restaurant in the grocery store in Linden, so we took turns driving into town to pick up lunch for the office. There were about five or six traders, plus all the accounting people.

There was another merchant named Lisa who sat in front of me, and it was clearly her turn to go get lunch that day. And somehow, she was hell-bent that "no, it's not my turn, it's your turn." And I thought, okay, I'll give it up. I'll do it. It's not my turn; I'll do it. It's just not worth the fight. You've got to pick your battles.

So, I hopped in the car, drove into town, picked up sandwiches. And on the way back I thought about the Word of Life: if someone asks you to go one mile, go with them two. I came back to the office and went to the kitchen, warmed up her sandwich, put it on a plate, put a napkin with it, and brought it back and put it on her desk. And she turned around, her jaw dropped open, and she said, "I can't believe you did that." And I said, there's no problem.

It started becoming the thing. Every person who went to get lunch did that for everyone else, over time. It changed the atmosphere in the office.

I concluded: "This works! Living the Gospel works! We can really change things by something so simple. So simple. But I've not forgotten that fifty years later. Such a simple experience, but it was one that really left an impact on my soul, and I realized, this is for real. This is not blah, blah, blah. This is for real. To the degree that we could live the Gospel concretely in our everyday life, sitting there in Linden, Indiana, trading grain, dealing with all kinds of personalities: it just put a whole different spin on how we can live our life in a meaningful way. It gives joy to myself, peace to myself, and hopefully to those around us.

The Word of Life

Interviewer: Can you explain what the Word of Life is?

Emery Koenig: This starts with Chiara Lubich, who founded the Focolare. The Word of Life is a sentence taken from one of the Gospels, for a month. February, for example, and this one happens to be *See, I make all things new*, which is actually from the Book of Revelation. And the one I gave you before, where someone asks you to go one mile and you go with them two, is a sentence right out of the Gospel.

Every month there's one sentence, usually from one of the four Sunday readings, that's used as the Word of Life. And there's usually a commentary: Chiara used to write those, and now we have a group of others who write them, often quoting Chiara.

And the Focolare movement tries to live that worldwide, and to live it concretely. What does that mean, living the Gospel concretely? It's not to philosophize or talk about the theology behind the Gospel. It's: I had a conflict, and I tried to do this, and I tried to love, and it didn't work. Or, I had to forgive this person, but now our relationship's much better. Or, I really felt the presence of God between us because I helped this poor person on the street. It's really to do those concrete things.

In our Focolare, we usually read the Word of Life every month and share experiences about how we've lived it through the month.

For me, it's given me a lot of meaning. Every time I get out of bed and my feet hit the ground, I know what I need to do today. I need to try to love. I need to live the Gospel. I need to have the presence of Christ within me, and try to remain at peace, and try to treat each person as someone who has the presence of God, who's made in the image and likeness of God.

And yes, I make a thousand mistakes. But you have to always try to begin again, and not let that experience have you living in the past, living in regret. Because God can't even change the past, right? All we have is the present moment, and the future may never come. Chiara always told us, all we have is the present moment. So always begin again immediately, put yourself back in the presence of God, and go forward. Keep moving.

And to take this month's Word of Life, *See, I make all things new*, once we deepen that relationship with Christ, we recognize the newness that can come from us, and that the baggage, the problems, the woundedness, is really not the point. That's not how Christ sees us. Christ sees us as who we are and what we can be.

I also think about it in terms of forgiveness. To the degree that people go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or that you and I have a dispute and I forgive you and you forgive me, we have this newness. And especially if there's mutual love in there, we have the presence of Christ between us, and he's making all things new. He's making me new, you new, our relationship new, bringing new life. I think it's really a beautiful gift to the world, in this day and age, we do need to see all things new.

Is there a Focolare lifestyle?

Interviewer: If somebody asked you what a Focolare lifestyle is, what are the values that drive someone involved in the movement?

Emery Koenig: I'm not sure there is a Focolare lifestyle, because you've got all kinds of people: plumbers, doctors, lawyers, priests and religious, retired individuals, three-year-old kids, students etc. What's the lifestyle? It's to try to live the Gospel concretely in your everyday life, and to try to love your neighbor next to you, and to try to live in the present moment. That's really the lifestyle, if there is one.

All these very simple, fundamental things: for me, I can remember them, and I can remember to put them into practice. It's not like I need to read sixteen books and subscribe. No. Just try to love. That's all you need to do, is try to love. And to the degree you can do that, I think that's really the change agent in the world.

That goes back to Chiara during the war, in 1943. The worst possible scenario: being bombed, running to bomb shelters. And she recognized that the Gospel is the only thing that's going to matter at the end of the day. Everything else is going to be gone. And I think that's probably really true in life. Everything's going to be gone except how we have loved.

I went to a seminar at our parish here, given by a priest from St. Louis, and he was talking about this whole notion of forgiveness. He said that "the number one test when we get to heaven: how have we forgiven." As it says in the Our Father: forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us. And he made a point I really appreciated, which is that "the key to forgiveness is in the pocket of the one you can't forgive. So, in order to get that key, you're going to have to forgive that person somehow, someway."

I think we all have our person who's got those keys in their back pocket. And I hope to God that I get mine done before it's too late. We all make mistakes. We all need forgiveness. Going back to marriage and relationships, it's just that whole forgiveness, which is one of the things I'll talk to the students about in a couple of weeks. The importance of forgiveness, and the peace that comes from it. Really, that's why Christ came to us.

So, coming back to the Focolare: it's just living those principles in a very simple way, no matter where you're at, no matter what you're doing, no matter who you are, no matter where you're going, no matter where you've been. Really trying to live those things concretely. And you start sensing the peace and the joy and the fulfillment that comes from that.

I'm not one for quoting scripture, but I'll tell you there's a sentence that's really resonated for me the last couple of years. It's Paul to the Galatians, 2:20: *I have been crucified with Christ. The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me.* I tell that to myself fifteen times a day, probably, just to remind myself who I am and where I'm at. To be thankful for this relationship with God, and for the love he has for me and each person, and to remember that I need to run and share that with other people. To have that awareness of the presence of the love of God, and how that's really the most important thing in life, quite frankly. Without that, you can have a jillion dollars, but it's just not going to fly.

What it has done to me

Interviewer: How has being involved in the movement affected your life?

Emery Koenig: You've got your personal life, your social life, your spiritual life and your work life. The whole idea is to integrate all of those, so that we can be whole human beings and be who God has called us to be, where he's called us to be in that moment. To try to listen to him, and to try to do his will wherever we are. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

The easiest one to start with is probably the spiritual side, in terms of really clarifying and re-envisioning who God is. Growing up in a traditional German Catholic family, God was a little bit of a judge, someone to be fearful of, with an ample amount of guilt. Don't want to go to hell, the finger wagging, all those things. So, it was really to re-envision who God actually is.

I still remember one of the earlier times I went to the Focolare in Chicago. I was still struggling with what to do with my life, before I was married: whether to become a priest. And I remember lying in bed at the Focolare, and this recurring thought just came into my mind: God is love and love conquers all. God is love and love conquers all. God is love and love conquers all.

I don't think I slept at all. I was fully energized when I woke up. But I just had that prayer, that mantra, that re-envisioning of who God was. The fact that God is love, and love conquers all. And that probably set me in a position to try to go out of myself.

Because when we're suffering or struggling, we tend to close up. And that's probably the worst thing we can do, but it's human nature. It's a strong tendency. So, to the degree that there is a love of God in that suffering, I have to go out. I have to love the neighbor next to me. I have to try to do the will of God in each moment. I have to continue to pray. I have to come out of myself and recognize who's sitting next to me, and how can I love them, how can I do something. Get them a glass of water, whatever it is. Just try to love. It may be very difficult, but at least you can try.

In married life we have lots of examples of that, when there's tension. The thing about having the presence of Christ in your marriage or your relationships is that when you have that presence, that mutual love, there's a lightness, there's a joy, there's a peace, there's a fun-ness. And when it's gone, it is the most miserable thing you can imagine. It's just heavy, energy-draining. Everything's difficult, everything grinds on you.

So, in married life, in the laboratory of marriage, you're incentivized to try to love. Even the little things. My wife's birthday was on Tuesday, and she got flowers from a couple of the kids, and she was cutting the stems, and then she put them in a vase and got water, and then she went and sat down and watched the Olympics. And I'm going, you know, this could be an act of love. So, I cleaned up her mess a little bit and put things away. And it was like, for you, for you, Jesus. This is an act of love, for you and for her. Just try to love.

And you sort of feel a sense of peace inside from doing something so simple. I don't think she even noticed it. She probably thought she'd cleaned up her own mess. But it was one of those things where you can try to love in that moment. And it gives value. It gives meaning to life. It gives joy.

And who doesn't want happiness? It's always a test for us Christians: how do we have that sense of peace inside, and that joy, that people are attracted to? I know people I'm attracted to because they have that sense of joy and peace inside them, that wholeness and healing. I'm sure they have tough times, as we all do. But that's something you just hunger and thirst for.

So, the spiritual side, the prayer: the Gospel tells us to pray constantly, and that's becoming more and more meaningful to me. Why is it so important to pray constantly? So that we may have the presence of Christ. But we have to invite him in. He's waiting. He's knocking on the door. We have to let him in. If we don't let him in, what is he going to do? We have to open the door.

Something else I tell the high school students when I talk to them: when I was in high school, before every game, I still remember being in my bedroom saying the rosary, for my future. It wasn't for the game. It was for my future. That somehow, somehow, somehow, things would all work out, despite all the issues that were going on at the time. And I look back now and think, boy, he really answered prayers. At the time it wasn't: I can't even remember if we won or lost the game, and that really wasn't the most important thing. But it was something really important to think about long term.

You look back with a golden thread over all our lives. We all have that golden thread, when we look back and see the hand of God guiding us, to the degree that we're open and inviting him in.

I still remember in high school: my senior year, I think we lost one or two games all season. We were dominant. People expected us to go to the state tournament and win it. And I had a lot of colleges looking at me to play for them. But you have to go through the regional tournament first, and we had to play Mandan. We were from Dickinson. Mandan had a seven-foot-one center named Bruce Mork, skinny as a rail. Bruce sat in the middle of the lane. They played a collapsing zone. I couldn't even get across the lane. I couldn't score. I couldn't do anything. They completely shut me down. And we were cold from the outside. So, we lost the first game of the regional tournament. Unbelievable. The biggest disappointment of my life to that point.

And after the game was over, I walked over to the Mandan coach and congratulated him. He had out-coached us. He did a great job of coaching. The next day, that's all the papers talked about: the fact that in my worst moment I walked over and shook his hand. I had no idea it would be like that. I just did it.

And I get home, and my mom is sitting there waiting for me as I walk through the door. And she says, how are you doing? And I said, how do you think I'm doing? And she says, it's a good experience for you.

And it's like: are you nuts? Do you recognize what just went on in my life? I had all these colleges, and now they're not going to be there. How do I get to college? Blah, blah, blah.

And I'll tell you, truer words were never spoken. It was a good experience, because in hindsight, that game was nothing compared to the things you have to deal with in life, with people, with family, with children, with relatives, with employees. It was a good experience because you learn. You learn to know yourself better.

I often talk to people about this when I'm coaching them: your greatest strength is often your greatest weakness. For example, one of my greatest strengths is a perseverance and persistence that just doesn't quit. And to the point where, if I don't modulate that back (and this has happened to me several times in my professional life), I've got dead bodies lying around me and I'm still going a hundred miles an hour, but no one's following. So, I learned to modulate that. And if I modulate it, it's a positive. You want me on the team. You want me to help get things done. If we're down twenty points at halftime in a basketball game, you want me in that game to help dig us out.

Then there's this whole communitarian aspect. Travelling, or moving to eight different locations, always having that community of the Focolare has been very important. Very important. I've known people for fifty years, before I was even married, and we're still friends. We still speak once a week on conference calls. We still see each other quite often. We know each other's families. We just really have that long-term relationship.

There's another thing I've recognized in business: friends come and go, enemies accumulate. I've made my share of enemies over time; shame on me, but I've learned from that. Friends come and go. I've got high school friends and college friends that came and went. But in the Focolare they are more than friends. These are really brothers in Christ. You see each other sometimes only every two or three years, and you just pick up right where you left off. Those are the relationships that really are important, where you have the same values, the same community, the same beliefs, the same concerns, the same goals, in terms of getting to heaven. Those are really important relationships that sustain you.

I think a lot of the world is looking for that community these days, and a lot of people are coming back to the Catholic Church for it, because it's not happening anywhere else. It's not going to happen through the media. It's not going to happen driving down the road. It's not going to happen through the biggest, fastest car in the world. It really comes down to community and those relationships.

And then in business, we often refer to this pyramid: at the bottom you have data, then you've got information, and then you've got insights at the top. You're always looking for the insights. And even beyond that, you're looking for wisdom. To the degree that we have this relationship with God, and with each other, living in a community, we can have wisdom be a bigger part of our lives than relying on data or information or even insights. Because we're looking for that wisdom to come from God. For me, that's become very, very important. Just to keep inviting him in. What do you want? What do I need to do? Help me. You do it. I'll do my part. I want to do what you want.

And socially, we have friends. We just travelled with a couple to Ireland and England. These friends are non-believers, but we still have a very good relationship with them, and we don't judge them. When we're travelling, we make time to go to Mass, and we find we can do that. We have such a good

relationship with them, and we get together probably every other week for dinner when at home. Even if it's not an organized religion, you have that mutual love and mutual respect.

And I think they're lonely. I think they're hanging on to that, trying to build a community with us. They've done very well. But there's still a hunger and a desire for more than that, because from a material standpoint they don't need anything.

And I ride bike with a Jewish fellow from Wisconsin. We have great conversations. So, there's that openness: everyone is made in the image and likeness of God, whether you're Catholic, whether you're Christian, whether you're Jewish, whether you're a non-believer. You still have to love them.

It really helps to have a broad perspective, especially when you're working in international business with all different nationalities. Asia is a big generalization, and so is South America, but there are different nuances: how many words it takes to express a thought, Europeans versus Americans. It's been a gift to try to navigate those. And if you're doing it in a sincere way, trying to love them, trying to respect where their country is coming from.

For example, Egyptians are very proud people, and they should be. They go back five thousand years, and their contribution to the world. Currently they're upside down politically and economically, but always respect their country and speak highly of where they're coming from. Find something positive about them. It really helps build those relationships. Something very simple, but it helps, no matter if they're from Vietnam or Colombia or Venezuela or Egypt. Acknowledge the positive.

That's another thing I've learned from Chiara and the Focolare: to build bridges, you've got to focus on what we have in common. We can think of a thousand things we don't have in common. Let's find the things we do, and focus on those as we go forward. It really does help build bridges and relationships. And who knows where they go? Maybe nowhere. Maybe God has another plan. But I just need to do my part, and that's to try to continue to love.

Even from a health standpoint, I feel I need to do my part to stay healthy. Back when I was in Geneva, Cargill sent me to Leadership at the Peak in Colorado Springs. They ran all kinds of tests: psychological, medical. And the medical doctor there looked at my family history and said, there's no hope. What do you mean, there's no hope? Look at your family history. You've got cancer, you've got heart disease, you've got strokes in you family history. My youngest sister died at thirty-three.

I think he was firing for effect, because all those things you can't control. And then: now that I have your attention, let's talk about the things you can control. Your weight, your diet, your exercise.

So, I really try to do my part on the things I can control and not worry about the things I can't. It's almost like that's God's will for me. I need to work out every day. Despite two hip replacements and a knee replacement, I still have to do the best I can to stay healthy and take care of myself.

All these things help you feel the love of God in a lot of ways. Yes, we all suffer, we all have difficulties. It's far from a panacea. But you still feel that peace, and a joy. And it's a joy the world can't give. It's a peace the world can't give. At my age, having that peace inside is so important.

In fact, Chiara gave me a Word of Life one time from Matthew: the phrase that says, "the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who upon finding one of great value sells everything he has to buy that pearl." And I really think that peace, that joy, is that pearl. You're willing to sacrifice a lot of things to have that peace. It's something the world can't give. And you see so many people trying to latch on to something else, and it's not going to happen. It may work short term, but it's not going to be sustainable.

When people find out

Interviewer: Do you ever meet someone who discovers your Focolare involvement and finds it strange? Or who is happily surprised by it?

Emery Koenig: We just had dinner with a couple. He was on the board of the seminary with me, and they invited us out to dinner. And somehow it came up: where do we spend our time, what's the Focolare? And now she's sending emails to Karen saying, tell me more about this women's group you get together with, the community, I'm interested. Which is great.

Most people, when they hear about the charism of unity: fraternity, brotherhood, dialogue, interreligious dialogue, finding what we have in common as opposed to what separates us. Who's going to think that's stupid? Who needs that? I tell you, the world needs that more and more as time goes on.

So, I think we're getting more curiosity. Living in Europe, in Switzerland for example, the Focolare is pretty well known, very well established. In Germany, France, and especially Italy, most people know what the Focolare is. It's more of a common thing. And here it's becoming better known as time goes on. You have more bishops and more priests who've heard of it and are curious about what it is. At minimum, it's interesting in this day and age, when we're trying to figure out how to talk to each other, how to work together, how to live together. So, we have something to offer the world, not that we've cornered the world's unity market, but we want to do our part.

It's interesting. I was at a Mariapolis one time, and there was a man from the Anglican church. His first name was Alan. We were sitting next to each other and started talking about the Focolare. And he said, you know, there's not a doubt in my mind why the Focolare had to be born within the Catholic Church. And I said, well, why is that? And he said, because if it were not in the Catholic Church, it would become another church.

I think there's a lot of insight and wisdom in that. And since then, this person has actually become Catholic. But of course, it had to be within the Catholic Church, for the grounding.

The other thing: we were at a peace conference the Focolare put on in Washington, D.C., and the papal nuncio was there, and he made an interesting comment. He said, this is the only thing that the Focolare can do that the Catholic Church can't: bringing people from Jewish, Muslim, non-denominational, Catholic and Christian backgrounds together to talk about peace. You can do that, because if the Catholic Church tried to do it, it would be a little more difficult. But it could probably be done.

So, it's kind of our, I shouldn't say a niche, but somewhere we can add some value. We can be a convener. We can bring people together to talk in a safe environment, if you want to use that word, where everyone's respected and no one's going to be dismissed for being non-denominational.

Interviewer: A colleague was asked by a progressive woman at a university how the Focolare would respond to someone who is gay or lesbian. The answer was, we would love them, we're in unity with anyone. And she asked: what about someone who doesn't approve of gay marriage, or doesn't think being gay is within the will of God? We would love them too. We love everybody.

Emery Koenig: That's a good, interesting answer. Good question, good answer.

Actually, I was in Rome in November for a meeting with the Focolare, and we talked to some of the individuals responsible for the interreligious dialogues, the dialogue with youth, the dialogue with LGBTQ people. We have to have the dialogue.

The Catholic Church, with Father James Martin, and Pope Francis, and now Pope Leo, is having that welcoming conversation. We don't need to agree, and we do have a line. That's one thing I also appreciate about the Catholic Church: they hold a paradox. They believe in charity, as you described, and they believe in clarity. And we want both. We want to be clear about what we stand for and what we believe. But we're also going to have charity.

Those are a tough combination. And I'm very comfortable, very happy with that paradox. It's not an easy line to walk. But it is between charity and clarity.

Part Three: Thirty-eight years at Cargill

What makes the company unusual

Interviewer: Cargill's a pretty unique company. Can you share what makes it unique?

Emery Koenig: Sure. Cargill started in 1865, so it's been around a hundred and sixty years. It's privately held, which means all the stock is owned by the Cargill family and the MacMillan family, except for a portion that management owns, and we also had an employee stock ownership plan. Probably eighty-five percent is owned by the two families, and it's all tied up. If the family wanted to sell, it's all wrapped in trusts. So, it's really a private company, which allows you to think long term. That's a really important thing. Every morning you're not looking at the newspaper to see what the stock did yesterday. You can set your own pace.

The family had various requirements of management. They wanted a company they could be proud of. They wanted a company that could have an impact on the world. They wanted us to be a good corporate citizen. Yes, they wanted it to grow, and yes, they wanted it to be profitable. All those things combined were very engaging for me, and very consistent with how I thought, how I believed, and how I operated within Cargill.

One of the biggest motivators I had at Cargill was what I called my "FTO", my freedom to operate. As long as I did my job well, I could operate where I wanted and how I wanted, with a lot of flexibility and a lot of credibility. I really appreciated working for a company like that, as opposed to just results, results, results, results. Because it's more than that, and the expectations from the family were more than that.

Being on the board of Cargill, and vice chairman, and part of the five or six people on the senior leadership team, we had a chance to set the tone for a hundred and fifty to a hundred and sixty thousand employees; it oscillates depending on which businesses we're in. It's a global business. You get a lot of exposure to countries, customers and cultures worldwide, and a lot of international travel, which gets to be tough sometimes. With the time zones you wake up at two in the morning going, two in the morning, this is Tuesday, I must be in Beijing. You lose track of things, but you've got to be on your game.

I really enjoyed the culture. It is a very highly ethical culture, and they're dead serious about it. It's not just a poster hanging on the cafeteria wall. Cargill would never ask me to do something that was against my own personal beliefs, and I would never do anything to embarrass Cargill. That was very clearly understood.

Ethics mattered to customers, too. We're basically a business-to-business company; we do have some B2C, but it's basically B2B. And a buyer looking to purchase commodities would say, please do business with Cargill, because I know they're not going to do anything, or allow you to do anything, that's unethical. We also had a lot of governments who would come to us for advice and counsel on how to handle things in a way that thinks long term.

Cargill is also big on safety. A colleague and I built a palm oil refining plant in India, in the state of Orissa, in the port of Paradip. Orissa is one of the poorest states in India. We were there celebrating one million man-hours without a lost-time accident. Everybody had hard hats: we want to send everyone home with the same number of body parts they showed up with. There was a facility being built next to ours. They had seventeen fatalities. No one blinked an eye.

So, you get various cultures to operate in. But it's really a long-term thing, and in fact the local government came to us and said, help us understand what you're doing with your ethics, and how you're operating with such high concern for the safety of people, because we want to start incorporating that into our government ports and things like that. They recognized you just cannot treat people as though the value of human life is zero. It's much more than that. And I think you become a much more attractive place to work if you've got those standards, as opposed to: we don't care about you, we don't care if you get hurt, we don't care if you're wearing hard hats, we just want the job done.

My job

Interviewer: Can you explain your title at Cargill and give us a brief sense of what you were responsible for?

Emery Koenig: When I retired from Cargill, I was vice chairman and chief risk officer, and I was on the board of directors of Cargill. As I explained, at the time we had six family members on the board, six external directors who were CEOs of other multinational companies, and five managing directors. I was

one of the managing directors.

Part of the responsibility was for the agricultural trading and crush business. The energy business and the ocean transportation business were part of that. Then we had the enterprise process, data and technology process: we were going through a whole SAP rollout, so they gave me the possibility to do that. I did Cargill philanthropy, chaired that one, and then I was on the business conduct committee, and then the Cargill Risk Committee and the People Team.

That's probably one of the reasons I retired at sixty, because I had a lot of hats to wear. And I'm terrible at saying no. Everyone would like you to take this: okay, super, I can learn something, that's great. And eventually, you look at your stack of work.

It makes you become very efficient. You need to have a very good admin assistant. Eighty percent of your information will come from twenty percent of your emails, so you've got to get the rest of the junk off our screen and focus on that twenty percent. Even in how you run meetings: Cargill really tried to polish that up. If we're going to start a meeting at ten o'clock, you'd better be there five to ten minutes early, otherwise you're going to be late. And I would never tolerate cell phones in a meeting. We're going to all engage. And if the meeting is going to end at eleven o'clock, we're going to be done at eleven o'clock. We're not going to linger. People were not afraid to come to a meeting, because they knew it was going to start at ten and end at eleven.

And then there was still a lot of international travel, mostly long-haul overseas: China, Korea, the palm oil businesses in Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore, which was one of our larger trading offices. India, quite a few times. Then keep moving west: Eastern Europe, Russia quite a few times, Ukraine (big agricultural businesses) and then all over Europe, the UK, France, Germany, Spain, Italy. Then Canada, North America, Mexico, a lot of Central America, where we have big poultry businesses, and Honduras. And a lot of time in South America, because Argentina and Brazil are so important to the world as far as agriculture is concerned. And Australia. We've got some good stories from down there: the grain business, the canola crush business, a cattle business.

That's one of the fun things about Cargill: you had multiple different product lines, but even then, you could see the golden thread running through. All commodity risk, whether you're hedging cattle or soybeans or vegetable oil. A high degree of ethics. A high degree of concern for personal safety, for how we wanted to operate our plants. We never wanted to be the cheapest. We just wanted to be the most efficient. I really appreciated the culture that Cargill had built around those plants and those people.

The work, and what I am proud of

Interviewer: What was the nature of the work you did for Cargill? What are some of the things you're proud of, or that were life-giving for you?

Emery Koenig: A couple of things I'd say. Being a family-oriented company: that's probably less so today than when I first started in 1978, when it was a small enough company that you could have that family feel. We were also encouraged to run the business as if it were your own, which I think is very meaningful. It gives you a lot more autonomy, a lot more ownership. Ownership in the sense of, I want this thing to go well because it's my contribution.

Most of my career I spent in risk management. I always found that incredibly intriguing. Risk is always relative to the reward. People say, well, I like to take risks. In fact, when I'm interviewing people, that's often one of my questions: do you consider yourself a risk taker? And I've gotten a whole spectrum of answers. Some people say, no, I hate risk. Okay, you're probably not going to be a good fit for what I'm looking for. And on the other end of the spectrum, oh yeah, I go down to the racetrack and bet every Saturday morning. That's probably not going to work for us either, because it's got to be relative to the reward, and it's got to be built on doing our homework to give us a competitive advantage: understanding what's going on. We still get the markets wrong sometimes, but at least we're trying to do it from a fundamental standpoint: understanding the weather, the farmers, the crops, the production, the demand, the politics that enter in, how grain flows, how we're feeding the world. I found that incredibly intriguing. Really, I'll call it the raw economics of how the world operates from a commodity standpoint.

I was involved in athletics in grade school, high school and college: I played four years of basketball at the University of North Dakota. And this is probably as close as I could get to having a team again. Getting ready for the things that happen in a game, or in business: it doesn't rain, or it rains and you weren't expecting it to. It's the closest I could get without wearing tennis shoes. It really has that excitement, and I enjoyed the adrenaline. Working with teams, and you always had a scorecard for how things were operating.

But how we did things was also very important. How do you teach people to keep the ethics in line? How are we going to operate with customers? What's our brand? What do we stand for, and what won't we stand for? Operating along those lines gave me a huge amount of comfort in the risk arena, and in the global world, where most things are not black and white. Very few things are black and white, so you're operating in gray areas a lot. All we asked of people was: if you're not sure, that probably means you shouldn't do it. And if you've already done something and you're not sure it was the right thing, get your hand up, come and talk to us.

Often what gets people in trouble with ethics is not what they do; it's what they do after they do it. That's when things become very difficult for everyone, when you're digging and retracing and trying to get the truth out.

And as I said, Cargill had teeth in our ethics. You could be a twenty-year employee, and if you paid a one-dollar bribe to someone, you're gone. We just can't have those things being an example for other people around us, sitting and talking about how important these things are and then allowing that. It really comes down to culture being built by the worst behavior management is willing to tolerate. You've got to be really careful what you stand for and what you won't stand for, and not miss opportunities to say those things out loud when you're talking to people. Because if you don't talk about them, employees will think they're not important.

So, it was a combination: the company, the ethics, the freedom to operate, the team orientation, the family orientation. You could move around and do lots of different jobs: I had eight different jobs in thirty-eight years. Opportunity for advancement, promotion from within, largely. That's changed somewhat, because we weren't able to grow our talent fast enough when we were trying to grow, so we had to bring in people from the outside. And you have to be careful how you do that, because when you

bring in people from the outside you have to look at whether they're a good corporate fit, or whether they're looking to be a change agent. If you get too much of a change agent, you're going to have organ rejection, or at least a higher risk of it. So, we're looking for that balance, where we want new blood, but not at the cost of ethics, or how we operate, or what we stand for.

And you're helping feed the world by moving commodities from areas of surplus to areas of deficit. You've got transportation, weather, all these factors coming in. When it does work, it's fantastic. When it doesn't work, you learn some really good lessons about having enough size to handle the risk and being diversified enough that you don't have all your eggs in one basket.

I remember one situation where we were having difficulty in some of our trading, and I went to the CEO and said, Greg, just let me focus on trading, you've got me doing all these other jobs. And he said, no, I want you broad, I want you exposed, I want you travelling to atypical places, just to keep growing. I thought that was really a long-term view, because the short-term view would say: fine, Emery, you just focus on trading, and short term we'll probably do better. But long term, I need you to grow.

He said, I need you to be broad. I need you to be able to address the beef business, the sugar business, the grain trading business, the oilseed processing business, the animal feed and protein businesses, the flour and corn milling business etc. You need exposure to all of those. It was a really good investment, and a good lesson for me in thinking long term about how you grow your talent.

Leaving

Interviewer: I imagine they missed you when you left.

Emery Koenig: That's an interesting question. One job I had in Geneva, they actually had to split it into three different jobs. And that's not a compliment to me. It's the fact that you stay in a job long enough and you keep growing it and you know how it works, and so you put someone else into it, and eventually it's too big to hand to one person. That's the downside of leaving someone in a job for a long time: you get to be good at what you're doing, but replacement is a bit challenging.

The flip side is that you also get into a situation where you know exactly what to do, which button to push, slow this down, change that, move into this. It's can get a little routine. That's where it starts draining your energy, when it becomes routine and you lose some of the excitement. That was always a signal for me that it may be time to move on to the next role and get more exposure.

Cargill was very accommodating that way. I turned some things down. When I moved to Geneva, my family was there with me, and I knew we had one international move in us, and we had to come back to Minneapolis someday. I would have stayed in Geneva the rest of my life if I'd had the chance. Two different times Cargill said, well, what about Singapore? What about Brazil? I said that there are only two dots on the map. There's Minneapolis and Geneva. And they said, well, how about Singapore? I said, again, there are only two dots on the map. Let me remind you what the map looks like. We finally got that organized, and it all worked out over time.

When I retired, the Cargill and MacMillan family wanted to meet, so I had a private session with them. And their comment was, "Emery, we really appreciate you carrying the Cargill Bible." From an ethical standpoint, from a leadership standpoint, for building people and their skill sets, thinking long term, not embarrassing Cargill: I think they really appreciated that. I never viewed myself as carrying the Cargill Bible. But you take these things seriously. And if you don't take them seriously, what are we doing here? You've really got to be engaged, and your heart has to be in it, otherwise you're not offering anything to anyone around you. And you can't set expectations for other people if I don't expect those same things of yourself.

For example, Cargill runs employee engagement surveys every twelve to eighteen months, sometimes twenty-four. They're looking for three things: people who are willing to say, stay, and support Cargill. Those questions are embedded among twenty-five, thirty, forty different questions. And all we asked of managers or leaders was to have an upward trend. Even if only thirty or forty percent of your employees are engaged, next survey we want it to go to fifty. As long as it's an upward trend. And if that's not happening, that's a big red flag, and you are not engaging the hearts and minds of your employees.

World class is seventy-five percent. When I moved on from the business unit in Geneva, we were at seventy, seventy-five percent. And I was bothered by that. Okay, so where's the other twenty-five percent? Why aren't their hearts and minds engaged? Because if you don't have the employees engaged, you can't expect your customers to be engaged, and you can't expect to resolve problems in a low-cost, reasonable manner. So, I was a big supporter of having highly engaged employees. And if someone's heart wasn't in it, just do them a favor and help them find another role, maybe outside Cargill, maybe somewhere else. They're really looking for something different from what Cargill is offering, or maybe they just didn't like the culture. Especially when we were putting a lot of emphasis on leadership, on building teams, on communication, on conflict resolution. That was the expectation. Some people thought I was joking. Some people thought, you guys are all nuts. No problem, but I'm not going to back off on what our requirements are. So, we would help them find another role somewhere else.

In that sense, I never actually technically fired anyone. Usually, if there was a problem with performance, we'd sit down and go through what I needed from them and what I'm looking for. Make sure I'd provided the resources so they could actually complete it. And also, what I don't want to see. And fairly often you could turn it around; they'd get their performance back on track. But sometimes they'd show up saying, this is not for me. I think you're nuts, I think Cargill's nuts, I'm not willing to do this anymore. No problem. Thanks for telling me. You're a good person. Let me help you find a role you're more suited for.

It's really a sad situation if you have people who are not happy, not engaged, whose heart's not in it, for let's say ten years. You've basically wasted ten years of their life. Life is way too short to have people in a situation where they're not being fulfilled by what they're doing, where they're spending a significant portion of their life's time.

Culture, and the lowest standard you tolerate

Interviewer: You made the point earlier that the lowest standard a company has is what sets its culture. Can you say that again, and explain what you meant?

Emery Koenig: My comment was that culture, within an organization or within any body working together, is determined by the worst behavior management is willing to tolerate. Because if we're tolerating you paying a one-dollar bribe, then I stand there and talk about ethics until the cows come home, and I'm not enforcing anything. I'm tolerating unethical behavior, or standing up and screaming at a fellow employee, or showing up at noon and deciding you're going to the beach in the afternoon. It really becomes about what you tolerate.

Let me back up. One big thing I always talk about is congruency. What you say, what you do, how you act, what you believe. Those have got to be reasonably well lined up, ideally very close together. And if they're not, be careful, because you don't trust individuals whose words and actions and beliefs are too far apart. You just lose credibility. They may not be a bad person at all, for sure, but you've got to be careful, because something's going on there and not everything is above board.

To the degree that I can work with people who have the same ethical background, the same ethical beliefs, high standards for how they behave, and who are consistent and congruent: I can trust you, and we can get things done a lot faster.

In fact, one of the books I've read and used a thousand times is called *The Speed of Trust*, by Stephen Covey. He talks a lot about the speed of trust. If you can trust someone, you can get things done so much faster as an organization. And as we all know, time is a very big factor. You've got deadlines, you've got customer requirements, you've got a product that may deteriorate. Whatever it is, the time pressures are always with you. So, you've really had to be able to trust people.

It becomes a dividend. If I can trust you, because I know you, I know what you believe, you're congruent, I know your background, all my experience with you has been very consistent, then we can get things done faster. If I say I'm going to show up at nine o'clock, I'm there at nine o'clock, because trust is built by doing what you said you would do.

And if it's not there, it becomes a tax. I use the example of 9/11. In the past I used to pride myself on leaving home, driving to the airport, parking my car, and walking onto the plane. Now, with the TSA, after 9/11, no one trusts the other person anymore. So, it becomes a tax. Now it takes me two hours extra. Everyone's supposed to be at the airport two hours ahead of time, because of the tax. It's because we don't trust each other anymore.

It's a good example of why we need to surround ourselves with people we can build those trust relationships with. It's a big dividend for getting things done in an expedient manner. And it's a lot more fun, quite frankly. Because if you need checkers checking the checkers, what are we doing?

Not that we can't trust and verify. Cargill is also very big on audits, internal and external. You want to make sure your books are right. I've always welcomed auditors in. Please help me run a better business. Please give me ideas about how I can run things better. So, everyone knows the ground rules.

I often use the example of a study you may be familiar with, where they took a group of schoolchildren and put them in a wide-open field. And all the kids just kind of played together in the middle, because they weren't sure where the boundaries were. They were afraid to get too far out. Then they took

another group and put a fence around the whole field, and the children enjoyed the whole area. They were much more comfortable. They ran everywhere.

People need boundaries. They need to know where they stand, what you stand for, what you won't stand for. And then people can play, and people can enjoy. Here comes innovation. Here comes relationship. Here comes trust. Here comes fun, where people really enjoy coming to work and building those relationships, because they know where the boundaries are.

Cargill's ethics, our work ethic, our concern for safety: those are boundaries. You cross the boundaries; there will be consequences. But in the meantime, have fun. Enjoy. It's your own business. Run it as you can.

Employees deserve good leadership. They deserve to know where they stand. They deserve congruent leaders. And to the degree we can do that, I think we're making a good contribution to them, to the office, to the world, to our customers, and to the cities and towns we operate in.

Sales and marketing

Interviewer: Are there any distinctive approaches to sales or marketing you can think of?

Emery Koenig: There's a difference between sales and marketing, as you know. And it's an interesting point for Cargill, because we can buy anything. We are incredible procurers. We can buy, originate, grow. Marketing and selling: we're not so sure about that, which is why we team up with a lot of large customers such as McDonald's or Unilever or Coke or Pepsi, because they're the master marketers.

We also didn't want to start playing in their sandbox, because it creates a conflict of interest. Wait a second, Cargill: you're supplying me this, and I look out the door and you're competing with me? It's not going to work. And we had way too much exposure on the origination side.

On the sales and marketing side, we went through a transformation where we had to segregate customers. Probably eighty percent of your business is going to be transactional: if you're ten or twenty or fifty cents a ton lower, they'll buy from you, and if you're not, they won't. Then you have people who may buy some goods and services or other things from you: those are somewhere in the middle. And at the top you have what we call family. Those are the ones you tell a lot of things: information about the marketplace, working things out in ways that were very important.

You've got to differentiate those, because otherwise you'll spend all your time on the ATM customers. They put their card in, they want a hundred bucks. They don't want ninety-nine, they don't want a hundred and one. They just want a hundred. Very transactional. Be careful, just don't spend as much time on it. You can have a smooth, trouble-free business, but don't make it take a huge amount of time.

The other side is the family members, who love to pay for services, who love what Cargill is doing, who want to be associated with Cargill. In fact, during the 2008 financial crisis we had some of our customers wanting us to hold their money, because they didn't trust the banks. They trusted Cargill more than they did the banks. That's part of being a big, stable commodity player that's been around a

hundred and sixty years: they knew how we operate the business, and how we operate ethically, and that our word is our bond, and that we do these things because they're the right thing to do, not because they're legal.

It really comes down to who your customer is and how we can add value to them. And it's not always easy to communicate that back within the chain.

Most businesses operate on three legs: price, quality or service. And most of the time you can do two of those. It's really tough doing three. So, we had to pick which ones we were going to play with, and hopefully stay off the price one, because that's when you're back in the transactional business. I only know one company that has defied the two-out-of-three rule does all three: price, quality and service. Good for them. Obviously, it's proven successful. But it's a tough model to find.

Competitors

Interviewer: What about competitors? Any stories from dealing with competitors in a gracious way?

Emery Koenig: I go back to Cargill's ethics and how important those are to us. One of the things you're really at risk of is price fixing. It happens very quickly, very easily.

When we were young trainees on the training program at Cargill, learning to become commodity traders, there's a lot of social activity. You meet your competitors in a bar, or after lunch, or at a restaurant, or at an association meeting. And we were taught and told: if you're ever at a restaurant and your competitors are at the table, and someone brings up price (well, gee, why don't we try to do this), and tries to manipulate the market, you are supposed to spill a glass of water, tip it over, and leave.

So, you have to make sure something happened and that you left. No one remembers you left. Some bloke spilled water; they remember that, and, oh by the way, he left as a result.

It's just one of the things you have to be very, very careful about, because you never want to get into a price discussion at all. You want to steer clear of that at all costs, literally. Because with a large company you share the same brand, the same balance sheet, the same reputation. One person can destroy that, or really put a dent in it. It's all shared. So, what you're doing in one part of the world impacts the other part of the world.

I always was respectful of competitors. Be fair, be reasonable, resolve conflicts if you get into them, be clear, avoid playing games or saying this and meaning something else.

I had one situation, though. A peer of mine, when I first went to Geneva: he handled one part of the business and I handled the other. And I didn't know this until afterwards, but he had gotten himself into a bit of an ethical problem. He left Cargill. He and I always got along pretty well.

To make a long story short, he bounced around to another company, and another company. And then the company he worked for made a large acquisition and wanted to spin off part of it. We needed that part. So, Cargill decided that since I knew him and had a relationship with him, I would be the key contact and negotiate how we were going to get it.

I called him, and he knew we needed that part for our business. He was a little arrogant about it, because he thought he was king of the world, having the whole acquisition and knowing we'd probably want a part of it. So, we negotiated and got through it.

And then it turned out that the business he'd bought (the part we thus bought) had some serious ethical issues in terms of falsifying documents. When you're making a product for a customer, that product will be exactly what the certificate says. In our world, we're not going to push things. The company he bought was not doing it that way. And some of the employees who came with the acquisition finally came forward and said, I'm sorry, we doctored all those documents.

So, there was a really serious problem, and we got into a lawsuit, and I had to testify even after retired. So, I left Minneapolis on a long flight and sat in a courtroom the next day with fifty lawyers and judges and the whole bit.

The point was that it's apparently illegal under this countries laws to lie during a negotiation. And what had happened was that he'd said, I need you to pay this price because I've got other offers, which was not true. I knew it wasn't true. Everyone knew it wasn't true. But we couldn't take the risk. If we missed it, we were going to be in big trouble. We'd have missed a major opportunity.

Long story short, it came out in court as I testified, exactly what my phone conversation had been. Because after every conversation I had with him, I documented the whole thing and sent it to other people so they'd know exactly what was going on. So, we had all those emails to document it. And at the end we won the case, because it was really my word against his, and how we documented it, knowing Cargill and how we operate.

So, it all worked out. It was one of those things where I couldn't quite call him a friend, but I had a good relationship with him, let's put it that way. And his agenda changed as time went on, and you have to be street smart about those things. That's probably why, over time, I've always taken a very cautious approach to dealing with competitors, because of the situations that can evolve. You can get yourself into problems quickly, and they've got a lot of zeros behind them.

Interviewer: Did he get into any trouble for that?

Emery Koenig: He had quit the business and retired before it actually went to court. I think he bailed out before, and he's no longer with that company.

It was another good lesson in terms of: good ethics is good business. And one of the things I tried to do was be very open and transparent. If I had this conversation, I needed other people to know exactly what that conversation was. So, I detailed it: not verbatim, but here's the situation, here's what he said, here's what I think is going on, and just shared it. It went to our legal department and I saved copies, just to make sure it was documented.

It could have been a real hiccup, because we were losing a lot of money. We couldn't deliver. Except we were going to deliver, because we're not going to falsify documents. And in order to do that, we had to spend fifty million dollars to get ourselves in position. Another good lesson. Good ethics is good business.

Interviewer: Who are some of your key competitors?

Emery Koenig: It depends on the business. On a global scale, Louis Dreyfus Company, ADM would be a large one. Some of the co-ops are competitors on a regional basis. In the Brazilian sugar business, we have a different kind of competitor. In the food businesses we supply Nestlé, Unilever, so we're competing with other regional suppliers doing something similar. It depends whether it's coming out of Russia or out of China: China will try to intervene. So, it depends where the grain flows are.

I used to jokingly say we don't have any competitors. What does that mean? Well, it depends on the business. There's just no one with the same breadth and diversification as Cargill who competes head-to-head. ADM does on corn milling and ethanol manufacturing; we're a much bigger trader than they are, and they run big plants efficiently on a cost basis. Bunge is another competitor.

You wind the clock back and you'll read in the papers about the ABCD. A is ADM. B is Bunge. C is Cargill. D is Dreyfus. Those are the large ones. They all used to be privately owned. Cargill is the only one that's still private. Dreyfus is somewhere in between, probably; I think they've gone public on some things but probably still have parts that are private.

And we bought Continental Grain, which was one of our largest acquisitions. It really depends which business we're talking about globally.

The board

Interviewer: Did you answer to a board?

Emery Koenig: That's a good point, because this goes back to the brilliance of the first, second and third generation family members who set up a board of directors with six outside directors: the CEO of Wells Fargo, the CEO of Medtronic, the CEO of Delta Airlines, the CEO of United Technologies, the CEO of UnitedHealth at the time. Really smart people, highly credible. They've seen a lot. They'd been on the board a long time, so they knew Cargill pretty well.

And then six family members from various branches of the family. And five managing directors: I was one of the managing directors on the board at the time.

It was a good experience to be on the board. You learn from giving presentations to the board, which I did: I always gave a market update or presented on projects we were working on. You see their line of questioning and what they're looking for.

And the external directors especially played a great buffering role between management and the family. That could be a real issue. We actually met with the family a day before the board meeting, just to sort out any issues or concerns that had to do with the family and the corporation, before the outside directors got involved. So, it was a very positive thing having those outside directors. They had a huge amount of credibility and experience, and they'd help buffer a lot of potentially contentious issues the family might be concerned about.

We also spent a lot of time trying to educate the family about the business, because generation after generation is coming up, and most likely they haven't worked in the business. The previous generation I was with: they all worked in the business, and they were on the board, and they knew it from the inside. But their children never worked at Cargill, so it was really important that we spent the time to help them understand it. To the degree we did that, it just made our job easier, and they found it easier to support us because they understood more.

We took a lot of time when we were travelling. I took a group with me to Africa, took a group to Russia and Ukraine. They came along on trips just to make sure they understood the business as best they could.

So, from a board perspective: yes, the CEO reported to the board, and I reported to the CEO.

Interviewer: So, the CEO indirectly reported to you as a managing director.

Emery Koenig: Not really. He was also a managing director. But I fully respected his role as CEO.

Interviewer: Where have you seen yourself helping to direct Cargill on certain policies?

Emery Koenig: Vietnam, and all the schools we built there. On a broader level, working with CARE, or with the Nature Conservancy: it usually had to do with children, or education, or the environment. Those are probably the three big buckets Cargill was most concerned about.

Being on the philanthropy committee, the Cargill Cares Committee, you had to have priorities. So, if the Boy Scouts showed up saying, we'd like some money: well, sorry, that's just not where we want to focus. It's environmental issues, or things to do with children and schools, especially in developing countries. That would really resonate with Cargill.

And in the communities, whether it's Minneapolis where we're headquartered or all the places where we have facilities, we just want to be a good corporate citizen. We want to make sure we're supporting the fire department, supporting the charities in that community. It helps the brand. And you've got to build those trusted brands, because if you don't, people just hear about this big privately owned company that doesn't have to report anything to anyone, and all of a sudden, it must be bad. So, we've gone out of our way to be more transparent and more visible, and to do things that visibly help the community, so people can see that we're actually trying to help.

The environment

Interviewer: How did you see Cargill being especially concerned about environmental issues? What are the unique challenges for a company like Cargill?

Emery Koenig: You've got a lot of laws, and then you've got things that are simply the right thing to do. There are things we could possibly put back into rivers, but it's not the right thing to do, so we avoided those.

We also have what's called the abatement curve. All the things that are good for the environment: one-third will make a lot of economic sense, and you need to do those, because they make economic sense: be more efficient, save electricity, save water. Another third you could probably do, but it's going to be

marginal at best, with a long payback. You need to be really sure it's ultimately going to pay back. Or you need to do it because if you don't do it and someone else does, you're going to carry a bad brand image, or take on too much risk. And the other third is never going to happen. It doesn't make sense. It's so uneconomical you can't do it.

You have to pay attention to which bucket things are in. Clearly do the first bucket. Second bucket, marginal. And we don't have unlimited resources.

That's one of the things about being a private company with a family: they reinvested roughly eighty percent of their cash flow back into the company every year. Consistently. Every year, every year, every year. And that's how you grow. As a private company you can borrow money based on your earnings, but you can't issue stock. That's a big difference between a private and a public company.

I chair the Employee Health, Safety and Sustainability Committee at Mosaic, and we've got four other board members on that one. The environment is very important to being a good corporate citizen.

For example, at Mosaic we're the largest landowner in Florida with all the phosphate mines east of Tampa. The phosphate rock is probably ten to twenty feet deep. It's not really open pit and it's not underground; it's just clawing. And then you reclaim the land.

One of the things we did was take a portion of the reclaimed land and build a golf course on it. A world-class golf course, a destination course, with a five-star hotel and two or three restaurants. We built the reputation up and then sold it a couple of years ago for a tidy sum, because that's not our goal. Our goal is mining phosphate and selling fertilizer to help feed the world. It isn't running golf courses. So, we sold it. It worked out really well, and it's a great example of doing something as a good corporate citizen that also makes economic sense.

Florida's a tough place because of the environmental and water issues. If you go down towards Key West you'll see how, around the turn of the century, they drained half the area because they thought it was a good idea, so they could raise crops on it. A lot of wildlife got destroyed because of that, and they ran railroads back and forth. It was a very short-sighted story.

We also have millions of tons of gypsum, a byproduct of making phosphate fertilizer, and it costs us a lot of money to maintain those gypsum stacks. We've had a sinkhole a couple of times. We've had water issues during heavy rain; you get six to twelve inches of rain in two hours and you've got water issues on these huge stacks, multiple football stadiums in size, fifty feet high. So, you try to manage that as best as possible.

And we're competing with other countries (I won't mention the names) who just take their byproduct and dump it in the sea. So, we look at what we're spending to be a good corporate citizen, partly because of regulations, and partly because we want to keep getting permits so we can continue to mine. So, we're very communicative with government: permits, follow-up, building relationships. No matter if it's a Republican or a Democrat, it doesn't matter. We have to have those relationships. Cargill and Mosaic both do a nice job of that. It's really walking a fine line and not getting flipped over, as some corporations do, into supporting all red or all blue. That's a short-sighted way to do things. We try to do things in a very straightforward, straight-up way. And therefore, we get the license to operate. And boy,

that's a big deal. It's a massive risk if we don't have the license to operate: billions and billions of dollars of business, and the farmers are going to suffer. They're going to have to import fertilizer from somewhere else, paying tariffs and paying someone else who dumps their raw materials in the ocean, which doesn't fly.

From a personal safety and environmental standpoint, the family never wanted their name in the paper. They would run from it if they could. So, to have "Cargill polluted this river." We've had a couple of issues. Some were not our fault. If we did make a mistake, we tried to handle it properly.

For example, we'd have a beef recall. E. coli gets into the beef chain. Long story. We created various techniques and we shared them with the industry. Because if this is an industry problem, and we can reduce health risks for people: please, this works, so please use it. We're sharing it with you wide open. That's another way we can work with competitors, because it's for the common good.

We had a situation with chubs of ground beef. You're pulling from all different kinds of cattle and grinding it up. And we had a situation in New York where these got cut into hamburgers, frozen and sold by a major retailer. And God bless the mother who took them home, started the grill, put them on and didn't let them thaw all the way, and the center was not properly cooked. You have to cook them to a hundred and sixty degrees. And her daughter ate it and got sick.

Boy, we had a lot of consternation, because we really didn't do anything wrong. But I'll tell you, we were advised strongly, by the right people: never take on a mother. As a big organization, don't take on a mother. Don't say she didn't do her job. It's going to kill you. So, we sucked it up, paid the medical bills and got everything squared away, even though it was not our fault.

That's why, quite frankly, it's easier for us to sell to McDonald's: you know a high schooler is going to put it in the machine, it's cooked, it's done. They can't even try to screw it up. You can control your destiny. But once it leaves and you don't know how it's being cooked, and you don't know if the truck runs out of fuel and it thaws and they refreeze it and sell it. How do you control that? It's really a difficult situation.

There were lots of examples where we tried to manage those hiccups in the industry and really mitigate them, because there's so much brand-tainting. You've got to make sure the trust bank is built up enough that if something does happen, people go: it's a good company, I know they'll fix it.

Singapore

Interviewer: Is there anywhere you've been that we haven't talked about? You haven't mentioned Singapore.

Emery Koenig: Back in the mid to late nineties, we had to set up an Asian region, because we knew the world was growing. China was growing, and we needed a stronger presence in Asia as we shifted from the West to the East. And we had to pick a headquarters. We had to decide between Hong Kong and Singapore. In 1997, Singapore was more expensive, but it's not in China. Let's go to Singapore. And thank God we chose Singapore.

It's an easy place to draw people into. You've got seven million people in Singapore. I've been there many times.

First of all, it's right on the equator. So, every day, guaranteed, it's ninety-five degrees, ninety-five percent humidity, and at four o'clock in the afternoon it rains. Just write it down. Every day is the same. And the humidity is a bugger when you're trying to get used to it. You go to dinner with the locals, sitting outside, and I'm just sitting there dripping wet, and no one else is cracking a sweat, especially the locals.

It's a very well-run state. Things are perfect. We pulled Singaporeans out and brought them to Geneva, Switzerland, and they didn't like it. They wanted to go back. They just need the cleanliness. Everything's in order. Everything's organized. It's international enough: you've got Singaporean Chinese, Malaysian Chinese, but they just love how well organized everything is. So, they struggled even in Geneva, and Geneva is not a sloppy place. It's beautiful.

We call it a very fine city. Be careful chewing gum. Be careful throwing a cigarette butt on the ground. You are going to get fined. And when you fly into Singapore, as into Malaysia, they announce on the plane that if you are carrying drugs, or you have drugs in you, you will get the death penalty. They don't mince words. Just stay on the plane and go right back out of here. Do not get off the plane. And they don't monkey around: within a week you'll be facing capital punishment. Shocker: they have no drug problems in Singapore. Shocker.

But we've always enjoyed it, and our family enjoyed it there. We spent Easter weekend in Vietnam, three or four days, and then came back to Singapore. We had a large palm oil business based out of Singapore, in Malaysia and Indonesia, so I'd spend time in the office there while the family could enjoy Asia and get out of Geneva for a couple of weeks.

You think about this little island at the end of Malaysia, and what its backstory is, and how it got started under Lee Kuan Yew. What a visionary, and how he set it up. Cars are expensive: you need to buy a permit for a hundred thousand dollars to buy a hundred-thousand-dollar car. So, things are really, really expensive, and the key point is to discourage cars and have public transportation used, which is very efficient. Beautiful views, zoos, aquariums, buildings. The Catholic churches there are mostly open-air, and I've gone to Mass there quite frequently when we're out there. There are a lot of Filipinos who are helping out in various ways, and they're really nice people, very deep and profound in their faith.

Part Four: Faith inside the job

How it fit

Interviewer: You were with Cargill thirty-eight years, and in the Focolare longer than that. How was that a good fit? Was it always easy?

Emery Koenig: That's a good question, and there are many different facets to the answer.

For example, when I was travelling internationally, you get jet lag all the time. You land in a spot, you take a shower, and you're out with customers. You're visiting the office, you're giving a talk, you're going out to dinner. The next day you're doing it again. We had one situation (granted, we had company planes) where we'd leave on a Sunday night, go down to Miami, have all day in the office, dinner that night; Tuesday we're in Costa Rica, Wednesday Honduras, Thursday Argentina, Friday Brazil, and come home. We could do it because we had company planes. But the point is, you're dealing with fatigue and loneliness a lot.

For me, that's suffering, quite frankly. I don't know anyone who enjoys being fatigued and lonely. So, for me, having that spirituality of recognizing the face of Jesus forsaken in those moments, and trying to love, trying to say the rosary, trying to rest, trying to go to Mass. That helped.

I had a wonderful admin assistant for many years, named Sharon. Every time I took a trip, she always planned a Mass for me to go to. She'd have a driver take me there and bring me back. And I always invited anyone else who wanted to come along. I often told her, Sharon, you're Lutheran, but there's a special place in heaven for you, for helping us poor Catholics out. She was so good to work with.

I just had to make the time, and I could. If Mass was at eight in the morning, I didn't want meetings to start before nine. You could control your agenda that way.

So, there are a lot of ways you sustain yourself: by prayer, by the rosary, by trying to love, by living in the present moment, by attending Mass when you can. I've been at Mass in Romania, in Russia, in Argentina, in Brazil, in Japan, in Vietnam, in Hungary, etc. I don't understand a word, but I had my readings with me. That really helped sustain that life.

Then there's conflict resolution. If you're working with human beings, you're going to have conflicts. Especially when you've got the tension between supervisor and employee, and in a business with massive time pressures, earnings pressures, people pressures, and people are human beings, and there are always surprises.

So, I think it's just trying to live in the present moment. Someone would come up and say, I have a problem, I need to talk to you about it. Okay: a hundred percent attention. I'm not talking to someone else. I'm not on my phone. I'm really trying to love them by really listening to them as much as I can, and to be open to them, and truly try to understand where they're coming from. That was a gift to be able to do.

And then that person would get up, and there'd be another one in that chair with a completely different issue, a completely different problem, a completely different opportunity. I need to be open and forget about what I just talked about. Here's a new person who needs to be loved. Quite frequently I didn't necessarily agree with them, so you need to resolve that too.

And also, to recognize that being in a position of authority, you can't let that slip into power. Because power is the dark side of authority. To the degree that you can just use your authority, and be comfortable and confident in it. And the people who worked for me who were also supervisors, with

people below them: to respect their authority, not to undermine them, and to be respectful of what their position and their authority was. I think that gave them more confidence and built a trusting relationship.

Then there are the ethical things. Being on the business conduct committee, a lot of ethical questions would come up. We'd usually have an attorney with us if we were talking about a situation: here's the situation, here's what that person wants, what can we do, what should we do, what's the right thing to do? It's a legal question, but often we need to be above that. Not that we're going to be whiter than white, but we need at least to be aware of what that is, and often we'd have to go beyond it.

And be willing to take a long-term view, recognize the relationships. Sometimes you did have to take a tough stance. Sometimes you did have to take someone to court.

We had one case come up to the business conduct committee, and I'm not going to mention the country. We had a country where there was a whole complex situation of taxes that the exporter would have to pay, and we'd get reimbursed once we exported, and we'd get money back from the government. This was going on, and the country was struggling. And we finally recognized that they owed us something like a hundred million dollars in VAT reimbursements.

We finally had to say, we're going to have to stop buying grain from farmers here. We're going to have to pull back, because we can't let this balloon any farther. We need the money. So, every Cargill employee who visited that country would meet with the president, or the head of commerce, or whoever it was, and say, what do we do? And we'd eventually get five million, twenty million, thirty million. We tried to keep it under control, but it was never a clean shot.

One time one of my colleagues went into the president's office needing to ask for our reimbursements to get our receivables down. And he said, "well, you know, my wife sure could use a new Mercedes. I think that may help." And it's like: okay, I'm sorry, that's not going to work. And then he got into this thing about how his son plays soccer and they need a new scoreboard and a fence around the arena.

So, they stopped the conversation there. Came back and we talked about it: his son, the scoreboard, the fence around the soccer field. And we thought about it and said, you know what we should do? Go back and tell them we'll do that. But we're going to do it for every soccer field in the city.

So, we went back and did that. Every soccer field got a new scoreboard, and we put new fences around all of them. So that if the local paper picked it up, Cargill is a good corporate citizen, we did all these things.

I can't remember whether that brought our receivables down, but at least it was something you can do. You've got to have a lot of thought and finesse and wisdom about how you work through those things, because time and again people will want a bribe. We just can't do that. But there are ways we can do things that keep our conscience clear, that we don't mind showing up on the front page of the paper for the right reason.

Another situation: I had a person working for me who had five children. Number four was seriously autistic. This was back in Geneva, and he wanted to stay in Geneva. He loved Geneva. His wife loved Geneva. His family loved Geneva. And he was doing all kinds of things to accommodate his son. And I

knew that wasn't going to work. I'd been through it myself with our own son. The solution suggested for our son by the International School was to put him in a boarding school in the UK, because it's English-speaking. And you're not going to send a seven-year-old to the UK by himself. So, in our family we recognized that we had to go back to Minneapolis so he could get into a special school.

I encouraged this employee: let's think about this and see what's best for your family, and what's best for you. And he was not really happy about that. But I did find him a very good job back in Minneapolis. He eventually moved his family back, and his son is now in good shape, getting the schooling and the care he really needs.

This is one of those things where you have to try to love, and to think through those things, as opposed to letting the person work it out on their own, when you could do something to help him and his family. For me it was a disruption, because he was doing a great job and I had to backfill his role. But he ended up back in Minneapolis where he could do a very good job, one that was really interesting for him, and his career continued to grow. And his son was also well taken care of.

Decisions that cost the company

Interviewer: People worry that if they live out those values in a company they don't own, they will get pushback, because it might cost the company something. Have you seen situations where you made a decision, Cargill supported you, and it probably did cost the company something?

Emery Koenig: That's a very good question. The tension always exists between short-term and long-term. Often you need the short-term results to be good enough to give you the oxygen to survive for the long term. Conversely, if you only think about the short term and not the long term, you're going to end up in the ditch. Because you've got to think about where we're going, where we'll be in five years, what I stand for, how I can attract customers. That tension is always going to exist.

Second of all, you're absolutely right. As I mentioned, one of my biggest motivators was FTO, my freedom to operate. I just made sure I was doing well enough that I could control my destiny: who I worked for, how I worked, when I worked, who I worked with, how much I got paid. You control a lot of those things.

There's a tension between a concern for productivity and a concern for people. Back in my early Cargill days we used a grid. Down here was low concern for people and low concern for productivity. Up here were the nine-nines: high concern for people, high concern for productivity. In the middle were the five-fives, moderately concerned, the compromisers. Over here are the nine-ones: it's all about the money. The hell with the long term, the hell with people. Domain Experts. And here are your one-nines: I don't care about results; I just want to make sure I'm popular and well liked.

So, we gridded a lot of people. Where are you on the spectrum? What's your dominant leadership style? And a lot of times people say, well, ideally you want to be a nine-nine, right? High concern for people, high concern for productivity. But sometimes you put those people under pressure and they'll compromise really quick. Or you put them under pressure and they go, the hell with people, I just want the results. So, you have a dominant style and a backup style.

I'll also mention, surprisingly, that there are a surprising number of C-suite senior executives who are actually one-ones. They don't care about people, they have a silver tongue, they can massage anything, and they don't really care about results as long as they're good enough. I've known some. And I'll tell you, it's dangerous, and I don't like working for them. I don't like working for them at all.

I don't like working for the nine-ones either. Those are the slave drivers. They don't care, it's all about money. I've chaired a few businesses in the financial world where it really is all about money, and I don't like the atmosphere, because it really is a nine-one.

And your one-nines: you're in the wrong business. It's all about people and you don't care about productivity. What are we doing here? You're really not doing justice to yourself, to your colleagues, to your customers, to your people, to your suppliers, to anyone. So be careful. Quite frankly, I don't think I've ever rated anyone a one-nine. They don't belong in business, seriously. No one really takes them seriously, because they're not putting their effort in. They're not engaged. They're not adding value. They're not helping their teammates by doing their own part well so their teammates can succeed.

And there are probably a lot of compromisers out there, the five-fives, because they always try to smooth things over. Ultimately, that's not a good way to operate long term either. But we all need to compromise at times.

In my early years in Geneva, I worked for a Dutch fellow whose funeral I just went to. He died of ALS. One of the smartest people I know. He was really a good person, but so intense and so smart. You could never buffalo this guy. He could see right through you and know exactly what you were doing and what you were thinking. In very few words he'd take you on. I just felt obliged to fly to Geneva for his funeral: flew Friday, funeral Saturday, home Sunday. I just had to go.

He was so intense. But he really protected people. He really supported people. He wanted you to excel. He wanted you to do well. So, he was very concerned about people and very concerned about productivity. But if you weren't performing, or you were a compromiser, or you were just really focused on having a good time with people, it wasn't going to fly. You just didn't belong there. It was a good lesson for me.

One of the things we did early on in Geneva, when he still in Cargill, was that there wasn't a dispute we didn't take to court. We were just so crazy: no one's going to push us around. He had a very aggressive approach; no one was going to push him or Cargill around.

In fact, he and I flew to Moscow to meet with the senior people there, and they wouldn't meet with him because they knew his reputation. He got back on the plane. I stayed. They met with me the next day.

So, he was very intense, and he was good. But finally, at one point, we looked at what we were spending on legal fees. It was phenomenal. We were spending millions and millions of dollars on legal fees even if we won, because we were suing anyone who disagreed with us. And we finally said that we've got to start compromising here. This wasn't working.

After a couple of years, we recognized we were making more money by compromising (getting things settled commercially) and staying out of the legal issues. Let's split the difference. Let's work around it. Let's find a way. And you also didn't want a reputation as a pushover, so you have to do it in a way

where everyone can smooth it over. Everyone lost a little bit, everyone gained a little bit, and you got on with business. That's the point where you maintain the relationship. If everyone's a little bit unhappy, that's a good agreement.

So, we learned that lesson, and we had it in our business plans that if we got into a dispute, let's try to get it resolved right there on the phone. If we need a lawyer involved to help guide us, let's do that, but let's not be so quick, because it just doesn't work. It was a good example of where we had to change our methodology, and the economics were just not working for the short-run "nine-one" approach.

And I can fully appreciate, going back to my FTO, how someone with four stacks of management above them may not have control of their destiny, and may be told what to do. One situation, back when I was in Houston, Texas: one of our customers called and said, I'm struggling to deliver on our contract, can you extend the time? My boss was in Kansas City, and he was just hell-bent. Nope, we want the money right now.

Okay. It didn't work. I had to play the card because of how strongly my boss in Kansas City felt. And the guy just defaulted anyway. Had we worked with him, it may have worked out. It may not have. Don't know. But when you're playing hardball, often you just force people to the ledge, and they crack and they walk away, and then you have nothing. And it impacts your reputation.

I had a reputation early in my career: I didn't take any prisoners, let's put it that way. I probably needed more wisdom and discernment around picking my battles. There wasn't a battle I wasn't willing to fight. And I learned over time that sometimes I've got to let other people win. They need a victory. I didn't need it as much. They needed it more than I did. Let them have it, and I'll come back, and we'll have a better relationship, and hopefully they'll help me in the long term.

So, it was a good lesson for me: how to pick your battles well. Sometimes you have to fight them. Sometimes you need to compromise. Sometimes you just need to let them win.

Faith and business

Interviewer: More generally, how has your faith played a role in the way you practice business?

Emery Koenig: That's a big question. First of all, I always viewed my role in business as a vocation. Something I really felt called to do, and really loved. It was a gift to be involved with business, and I love the way business works. I also love the way business can get things done. You can have all kinds of obstacles from the governmental side or elsewhere, but I'll tell you: if there's a need, business people will figure out how to do it, all within legal bounds, obviously. I always found that quite interesting: how the world works, literally. How the world works.

That was very attractive, but it really comes down to feeling like it was a vocation. That gave me an energy, and something I could offer to the people I'm working with, and to God, and to our family. To treat it as a vocation. I was very thankful for the vocation, quite frankly.

Vocation

Interviewer: Can you say a word about what a vocation means?

Emery Koenig: A vocation is a calling. It's more than just a job. A job is a job, but a vocation is something bigger and broader, where you're trying to accomplish more than just earning a paycheck.

For me, the vocation goes back to what I talked about before: being called to the priesthood, or being called to business life, or being called to marriage, or being called to family life. Those are all important things, because if they come from God, they ring true inside.

I think that's one way to sustain yourself. We've all been in situations where you think, this is not me, this is not where I belong, this is not comfortable, I don't feel called to be doing this. For example, living in Brazil: I wasn't called to live in Brazil, though I visited hundreds of times. Same in Singapore. But it's something you feel called to do. Ultimately, it gives you a lot of staying power to go through the ups and downs of business, dealing with tough situations: people issues, facility issues, political issues, surprises.

What's interesting is that all the work I'm doing now, with the various boards I'm on, there's not much I did at Cargill that isn't being applied. Whether it's Mosaic, obviously, but even the St. Paul Seminary, or Catholic Rural Life. It's a lot of practical business experience: how to handle situations, how to handle difficulties, how to handle governance, how to do performance reviews, how to mentor a CEO. All these things come from the business world.

I always struggled a little bit, because here's the Focolare and here's the EoC, and I never really had a natural niche within the EoC. And the person I was with in the Focolare in Geneva said, Emery, just wait. This will work out in terms of using all the things: all the travels, all the business experience, all the relationships, all the street-smart things you learn in business. Those will be applied someday.

And boy, truer words were never spoken. The boards I chair: how do you run a board meeting, how do you handle governance, how do you achieve results, how do you take care of people, how do you resolve disputes and conflicts. All those things came naturally from thirty-eight years in the business world. I'm just thankful for that. I feel like it's giving back in a deeper, more profound, more direct way than just being part of the business vocation I had before.

And all those things you go through, whether joys or sufferings, bring you closer to God somehow. You have to put those things in the heart of Mary. You have to embrace the sufferings that are there and keep your head screwed on. Keep a steady hand on the wheel for the people around you, because if I'm freaking out, it's not going to help anyone below me. It's been very helpful to have a steady hand on the wheel: feeling some degree of detachment on one side, and on the flip side just keeping that sense of peace inside. We'll work it out. Remain realistic but hopeful.

I've also read a lot of books about leaders in various situations (in the military, other CEOs) and how they handled difficulties. All these people have gone through a crucible of some shape or form. I know I've got my crucibles. I know you do too. And when you're going through them you think, what is happening here? Why is God allowing this to happen? But you come through, and you can see the fruits of perseverance and trusting in God. You can never trust God too much. You look back and see that it was part of the golden thread that saw you through.

And integrating all those things, because you're pulled in multiple directions. I could have spent three hundred and sixty-five days a year travelling. I could have spent twelve hours a day in the office. But you've got a personal life, you've got a family life, you've got a spiritual life, and you can't sustain that unless you balance it.

That's another thing I learned back at Leadership at the Peak in Colorado Springs, which Cargill sent me to when I was in Geneva. They had four circles: your work life; your spiritual life, defined as wherever you draw energy from; your physical life, in terms of staying healthy; and your social life. And their whole point, after a week going through it with twelve other people, was that the bigger you make one, the bigger you can make the others.

It was really a very good integration, as opposed to: I'm just going to devote everything I can to my work, because that's glorious and I feel so good about it. I know way too many people, as you probably do, where that just is not sustainable. We're running a marathon here, not a sprint. You've got to sustain yourself over time. And the relationship with the Focolare, and my own faith, just helps you sustain that marathon as you move forward.

Work and life

Interviewer: You've said that when you talk to students, you tell them you don't really believe in work-life balance. What do you mean by that?

Emery Koenig: It's a common phrase these days, work-life balance. And I've recognized over time that we've got one life. You've got to be able to integrate your work life, your family life, your social life and your spiritual life into one life. I'm just one human being, and I've got to be coherent and congruent enough to have one life.

I know some people have tried the other way, and I've watched them. I've sometimes had to work with a situation where they'd work twenty-four seven for months. And then they'd take a month off, because they didn't know their name anymore. They were burnt out. It was really a failure to integrate those things, and to make it a marathon again.

I found that to the degree my spiritual life was as intense as my work life, and my family life was as healthy as my work life, and my social life had enough given to it, it really helped balance. And I did a better job at Cargill. I had more energy. I had more endurance. I had more capacity to do things over the long term, as opposed to all or nothing. It's the all-or-nothing that really gets people into failing to integrate those things.

So, when I tell people I don't believe in work-life balance, it's like: whoa, who's this crazy workaholic? I don't want to work for him at all.

Spiritual habits

Interviewer: How important were spiritual habits for you, particularly Mass and the rosary? How did they keep you at your center point?

Emery Koenig: There are probably three or four things. In Geneva, for example, I'd get up at six, go to six thirty Mass, come home a little after seven, have breakfast with the kids and then take them to school. That was the routine every school day. On Saturday I'd go to morning Mass, then go down to the farmers' market and buy vegetables (loved it) and then come home and do things with the kids.

So: going to Mass. I'd say the rosary on the way to Mass and on the way back, both legs. That was very helpful.

Receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation was important to me, because it really helped keep my head clear, and helped me rely on the grace of God for the gifts he's given us, and ask for strength and wisdom and discernment and courage for the things we had to deal with.

Clearly the family helps balance those things off, especially your relationship with your wife, and True North.

And then the relationship with the Focolare. When I lived in Geneva, I went once a week, and you'd share what was going on, and a lot of times you'd get some input, or at least prayers for whatever the situation was. Just to talk through those things was very helpful. I had a very good relationship with the head of the Focolare in Geneva, which we still have today, even though we only see each other once every two or three years and are in contact three or four times a year. There were a lot of things I could bring up, and he would caution me sometimes: don't push that too hard, or make sure you're taking care of your family and Karen.

And lastly, that little voice inside. I found that with the rosary and Mass and the Sacrament of Reconciliation I could hear that little voice better than if there was too much white noise going on. Listening to that little voice is very important, and let's hope that most often it's the voice of the Holy Spirit, guiding in a very non-shouting way. It also helped provide a moral compass. Not that I didn't make mistakes or screw it up sometimes. But those were things I could do on my end, that I had control over, that I really felt were important.

One last thing goes back to my family and where I was raised: do the right thing. And if you're not going to be criticized at some point, you're not doing your job. So, accept the fact that you'll get criticized, and always do the best you can. And if it doesn't work, no worries. Let's start over and keep going.

And this whole principle of the Focolare of living in the present moment is so important. I run into a lot of people, and we've all had to deal with things in our past. But God can't even change the past. So, let's leave those in the heart of Mary, and in the mercy of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and ask forgiveness for whatever we've done. The future may never come, so all we really have is the present moment. There's a really freeing part of that, and it helps clear the white noise so you can listen to that little voice inside, and hopefully have the courage and the grace to act on it.

In the heart of Mary

Interviewer: Can you explain that phrase, to leave it in the heart of Mary? How is Mary central in your spiritual life?

Emery Koenig: I've always appreciated the relationship with Mary as a mother, as someone who is in the background. She's never in the foreground, always in the background. And for me it's really a call that sometimes I need to put myself in the background and let other people shine. She's been a good example of that. Mary the mother of unity. Mary the mother of purity. Mary the mother of God. Mary the Consoler.

A lot of times, especially when things weren't going well, you have this image of Christ hanging on the cross, and Mary stood there, and that's all she could do. Just stand there. There was nothing she could do. That's really an example for me: just to have the grace to stand there at the cross and face it when there's nothing you can do. Absolutely nothing she could do except stand there. Sometimes we're called to stand at the foot of the cross, and there's nothing we can do. And so, you can ask for the graces that she had to do that.

And from the standpoint of the Annunciation: do you want to take this journey on? *Be it done unto me according to your will.* Boy, that's a big leap of faith. But she had the grace to do that. She was full of grace. And I think that's just a little part of that grace, so I can try to do my thing relative to: be it done unto me according to your will.

I used to think that was a scary thing, and probably sometimes it still is, following God's will. But here we are, the Creator of the universe, who loves us more than we love ourselves, who knows all things, who has faith in us. And I'm going to follow my own little goofiness instead of the will of God? Seriously? I find myself having a little gut check: come on, let's bet on the right situation here.

It really helps, especially travelling alone, with fatigue and loneliness. I was in Cairo one time, and it was about two in the morning, and my hotel phone rang. I picked it up, and she said, hi, Emery, how are you? And I said, who is this? Oh, this is a friend of yours. And I said, do you know someone in the Focolare? Because there was a women's Focolare and a men's Focolare in Cairo. And she said, no, no, I'd just like to come up and see you.

These were prostitutes calling. And if you don't have your head screwed on, or if you're not in the right frame of mind, I shouldn't say a temptation, but I guess it is a temptation. Probably for some people more than others. But you've got to be really careful.

Another situation: we were at a meeting at Iguazu Falls, which is a beautiful, beautiful place at the corner of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. There's a huge water falls there. It makes Niagara look like a leaking spigot.

And this is a sidebar: one of the times, for whatever reason, I was in a little motorboat with a guy at the top of the falls. And I'm thinking, what happens if that motor goes out? You don't think about those things because you don't understand exactly where that boat's going. But we survived and lived to talk about it. When I took my wife and kids back later so they could see it, they used a helicopter. Much smarter. That was an IQ test I flunked and they didn't.

Anyway, we had a meeting there with about twenty or twenty-five people, mostly young people. There were two or three people who were my peers. The meeting was over for the day and they went out to dinner, and one of my colleagues said, you know, there's a strip club on the way back. Who wants to stop

at the strip club on the way back? And I'm sure they're pretty raunchy, quite frankly, in the middle of nowhere.

And I just said: those who want to go back to the hotel, come with me. All the young guys came back with me. We had two cars full of young guys. They wanted someone to bail them out so they didn't have to go there. And had I not spoken up, or if I had gone along, they'd have felt the pressure to go along too.

It was really a good lesson: one little tiny thing. Because I wasn't going to go there, but I didn't recognize that they also didn't want to go there either. So, we all went back to the hotel and went to bed and were fresh the next morning. Just little examples where you don't always think about the impact you can have by taking a stand.

The Work of Mary

Interviewer: The Vatican's formal name for the Focolare is the Work of Mary. What does that mean? Why is it the Work of Mary?

Emery Koenig: Chiara had a very special relationship with Mary, and recognized the importance of Mary: even the fact that, as you know, there will always be a woman at the head of the Focolare. There's the whole feminine side of that. And for me that's also very attractive, coming into touch as a man with that feminine side. Because through sports, or just being a guy, your kind of running hard all the time.

If you want another analogy: you have sunshine, which is a very masculine thing. And you have the moon, which is very soft and very much in the background. And you can have too much sunshine. You've got to be careful: you're going to get sunburnt; you're going to kill the plants if you don't let them take a break. So, the importance of the moon, and the quietness, and the subtlety. And putting Jesus forward, because she gave birth to Christ.

I think about this as a formula: Mary plus the Holy Spirit equals Christ. They're the ones who brought this about. Obviously, the Holy Spirit is God and Christ is God, and here's Mary as the mother of God.

I also think there was probably a long period in the Focolare where we worked very hard, almost to a fault. There was a lot of activism going on: the work came from the Work of Mary. To put it positively, there was a lot going on. But I think it tipped over at some point, because people got burnt out. They wanted to give everything, wanted to do everything, and never really balanced that with taking some downtime and not being too crazy about how much we can do and give.

The aspect of Mary is very appropriate for the Focolare, for the Work of Mary. St. Francis is credited with saying that you should always be preaching, and sometimes you should even use words. The point is: by our actions, by what we do. We're not out preaching. We're there giving someone a glass of water, trying to do these acts of love in a very concrete way. And letting the other person shine, listening to them: that's very Marian. Letting them express themselves, so they feel the presence of God.

From a church standpoint, you've got the Petrine profile. Last night I caught a little clip of when Pope Benedict announced he was stepping down: he said the Petrine office needs more than I can offer at this point in time. And then the flip side, the Marian profile: the things coming up from the bottom,

from people, from lay people. It's a really interesting dynamic, and I can see where it's giving a lot of life to the church. I think Pope Francis, Pope John Paul II, Pope Paul VI really appreciated that. You do occasionally run into priests who feel a little bit threatened by it, who feel it threatens the Petrine profile. But I'll tell you, there's so much life if we can embrace it and bring it into the church. It's the Marian way of doing that.

And I get a good dose of the Petrine profile too, being on the board of the St. Paul Seminary, where the archbishop is the chairman of the board, and you've got the rectors of the minor seminary and the major seminary, and three or four other bishops, and priests, and guys like me in there stirring things up once in a while.

But the Petrine profile is what's kept the church around for two thousand years. The stability. It's the longest-living organization in the history of the world. Tell me another organization that's been around two thousand years. That's a really important part of it, and I really appreciate it, and I can see why it's so important to the church.

And we have to have this Marian profile too. I think that's where new life comes from: whether it's Opus Dei, or the Focolare, or the catechumens. A lot of these things coming up are really led by the Holy Spirit. I think it's a really positive part.

Part Five: Leading people

When someone is a bad fit

Interviewer: Do you have an example of someone who was a bad fit, how that became apparent, and how you helped them find another place?

Emery Koenig: Yes, I'll give you an example. We had a very interesting office in South Africa, in Johannesburg. It's a great training office. It's all in English, for starters, so you can bring people in and out. If it rains, you're exporting corn. If it doesn't rain, you're importing corn. So, there's a lot of dynamic activity, imports and exports. They also had SAFEX, which is their futures exchange, so you learn trading futures, hedging, risk management.

Our manager there: I needed him in Egypt, so we moved him, and he was willing to move his family to Cairo. We put another individual in. It was okay. Things were going just okay, but the results were a little disappointing. Employee engagement scores were disappointing. It wasn't really happening.

And one day our HR manager got a call from one of the male traders in the Johannesburg office, who said the manager was circulating soft pornographic video clips by email that were supposed to be humorous. None of the male traders liked it. They didn't want it. They told him to stop. He just didn't get it. He possibly thought it was a way to build male bonding on the trading desk, which tends to be male-dominated, although we're doing a much better job these days of bringing in women. And they also don't want a woman sitting next to a male trader who's watching nonsense on his screen.

I had a tough conversation with the manager. I said, this is not going to work, and I'm not going to stand for it. You know our policy. To be clear, Cargill's policy on inappropriate material is that Cargill cannot stop you from receiving it. It can stop you from saving it on a Cargill computer or resending it to someone else. And you violated that. We're going to bring this to a screeching halt. I don't ever want to see it again. And by the way, you just sacrificed your bonus for the year. Bonuses can be significant in the trading business. And he said, okay, I understand, and apologized. Life goes on. About three months later he decided to quit Cargill. He wasn't willing to change. He thought I was nuts, or Cargill's policies were nuts, so he moved on.

The next time I went down to Johannesburg to visit the office and see customers, I was sitting in a conference room, and there was a line around the conference room of people who wanted to thank me for making the change.

As a manager, you don't always see those things. You're not always sure. You're sitting five thousand miles away in Geneva, and you know something's not right but you can't put your finger on it. You've got to take responsibility, because I'm the one who put him there. So, I've got to admit that I made a mistake putting him there, and I have to admit I wasn't close enough to what was going on. You've got to watch the dashboard; the employee engagement results. The employees we're just very thankful that I made a change.

It often really comes down to waiting too long to make a change. I was also responsible for putting on the corporate center meeting, probably every other year: the top fifty or sixty people at Cargill. It was one of my tasks to work with HR and others to put it together, and we came up with the idea that each person in that room would stand up and say: in the last six years, what am I most proud of, and what am I most sorry about? This included the CEO.

And I would say seventy or eighty percent of them said: I'm sorry, I saw it was a problem. I saw it was there. I'm the one who put him in there. I waited too long. I gave him too much of a break. I didn't want to walk towards trouble.

So, it was a failure to address one person, and you have a hundred people below them who are suffering because of a failure to take one step towards addressing a problem. It's a very common issue. You've really got to walk towards trouble and deal with those things squarely. Not necessarily for that one individual, but for the ninety-nine or hundred people below them who are not getting the leadership they deserve. Employees deserve that. And you have to make sure you're providing leadership training for them, and that my own leadership skills are being polished up, which is an ongoing challenge.

About every six months, the senior leadership team at Cargill (five, sometimes six of us) would go off site and sit down and have a "moment of truth." Our CEO said, I want to be involved with this. So, we'd tell him: Greg, here are some things I really appreciate about your leadership that are impactful to me, and I want to acknowledge that. We just went around the circle. And then secondly: Greg, here are some things you do that really make it tough.

Greg was a great guy. Works, works, works. I don't want to call him a workaholic, but it was just way too much work. And I said, Greg, you're sending emails at ten o'clock on a Sunday night to me, and if I don't know the answer, I'm getting someone else out of bed. You've got to let people relax a little bit and re-

energize, as opposed to keeping this machine running twenty-four by seven. You've just got to let people breathe. And I also said, Greg, how much vacation do you take? And he said, I take as much as I have to. I said, Greg, let's talk about that. Here's another thing you've got to do: give yourself a break.

So, it was really a constructive atmosphere, trying to help him. We went around the room and did that for everyone. He called it the "hot seat." It was really the moment of truth. But it was one way to build camaraderie. With every person, I learned something there. I also saw it in myself: I can change that too. You build a real closeness with that senior leadership team, in a very coherent, caring way.

And I think it's important that when you're telling people the truth, you've got to do it with charity. If you're not doing it with charity, it's abuse. Often you hear the expression, well, let me be honest with you. Okay, here it comes. It had better have some charity wrapped around it, or you're going to crush the person.

I adopted, for all my direct reports, and in fact I still do this with the CEOs I meet and with other individuals who I've mentored: two questions for a mid-year or annual review. First: in order to help let's say Andy be the best leader he can be, what are some things you'd want me to encourage him to keep doing? Examples are always appreciated. Second: in order to help Andy be the most effective leader he can be, what are some things you want him to stop doing, start doing, or change how he's doing, that will help him be more effective?

Because leadership is all about influence. Nothing more, nothing less. That's how you influence. We're all leaders. I influence my family, my friends, the people I'm around. The receptionist in an office influences customers walking in. So, you have to have that self-perception of how you're influencing.

That was always the biggest thing when we ran leadership programs, which senior management taught: it always started with self-awareness. Because if people aren't self-aware, and I want to have this impact but the results are over there, then I'm missing something in how I'm coming across.

For example, I've gotten a lot of feedback over time that if I get animated or upset or emotional, be careful: don't stand up, don't point fingers, because it's way too intimidating. And I don't want to intimidate people. I'm trying to fire for effect, to make sure they understand what I'm talking about. So, I've learned to tone it down, calm down, and appreciate the fact that I'm a big guy.

Big hands, and the walk around the floor

Interviewer: Big hands.

Emery Koenig: Big fingers, big hands. And it scares the daylights out of people. I don't want to scare them. I'm trying to help them. I'm trying to communicate with them.

Another piece of feedback I got, when I was commuting back and forth from Minneapolis to Geneva, which I did for 5 more years after I moved my family back to Minneapolis, was that I was coming across as a little aloof, and not as caring as some people giving the feedback thought I should be. I talked to my leadership coach about what we needed to do. I'd leave on a Sunday night from Minneapolis, fly to

Amsterdam, Amsterdam to Geneva, and I had a company apartment next to the office. I'd take a shower and want nothing more than to flip my laptop open and get caught up. I'm already six or seven hours behind on what's going on.

But I understood that the problem was in doing that (which I thought was being productive) was coming across as aloof. So, what I learned to do was, when I got to the Geneva office, I left my briefcase hanging on my shoulder and I walked around and said hello and wished a happy new year or whatever the occasion was, to a hundred and four different people.

And I tell you, my two weeks (I went for two weeks every two months) went so much better. It went so much better, because people felt I cared. And then they're willing to bring you an issue and the solution to the issue, as opposed to bringing you problems because they just want your attention.

I also have a policy: if you're going to bring me a problem, bring me two or three possible solutions we can talk about that you think might solve it. Don't just bring me the problem. Otherwise, you're delegating upwards, and quite frankly it's whining. But if you've got a problem and you can think of two or three things we can talk about, often they're going to decide which one is going to work best. Not me, them. They just need to vocalize it. And once they pick one, it works and it goes away.

And if you don't give people the time, and if you don't let them know that you care, the cycle doesn't stop. They just keep bringing up issues and issues and issues, because you're sending the wrong signal.

Responding to an employee

Interviewer: Can you think of a time you responded to an employee in a way that would not be the typical way a businessman would respond?

Emery Koenig: Well, I'll tell you a highlight and a lowlight. Let me tell you the mistake I made first.

We had a fellow (I won't tell you his nationality) who felt he was the smartest guy in the room. I found him very difficult to work with. Very arrogant. And I just drew a line in terms of how much of that I was going to put up with, and I clamped down, because it was having a damaging effect.

He could not accept any kind of feedback. And one time we sat down to discuss his annual review, and I said, "one of the problems I'm having is that you do not take constructive feedback." And he said, "WHAT? What do you mean I can't take constructive feedback?" And I said, that's a case in point.

Often you just had to knock the guy out of the tree to get his attention and get him back down to reality. It was really a challenge. And that's probably where I could have used a softer tone sometimes or been a little more humane. But you get to the point where you're at the end of your rope. I was willing to let him walk out the door; in fact, he wanted a big salary increase because he thought he could get it from our competitors, and he got up and walked towards the door, and I didn't go and get him. And he came back, because he knew I wasn't going to play that game. So, I probably could have handled that one a little differently. Lesson learned on my end.

Then there are the other ones. I had a soybean trader who was involved with the Chinese situation I gave before. He called me one time (I think I was in the U.S. or travelling somewhere), and he said, "Emery, I just want to let you know I'm having lunch with one of our competitors. And I said, okay, thanks, let me know how it goes."

He didn't have to do that. It was no big deal. But his point was, I want to make sure I don't do anything that destroys trust between us. I'd rather you hear it from me than hear from someone else that, oh, by the way, this is going on. And you don't know if they're trying to buy him away or what else might be going on.

It ended up being a very trusting relationship. I have a tremendous amount of confidence in him and a tremendous amount of trust in him, and we're still in contact today. He's since retired from Cargill too. He's also Catholic, and his daughter is dating someone from the Focolare, so we always have that tie-in. But just a lot of mutual respect, and very straightforward. I can't remember having a cross word with him at all. Not that we didn't have tension; we had to deal with large issues at times. But the way things were handled just really builds those trust relationships.

And trust: it's all about trust, quite frankly. If you build those trust relationships you can do a lot of things. If you don't have trust, I can tell you, if I'm your boss, I can give you an attaboy and you're not going to believe it. You're going to say, well, what's his agenda? I'm not sure. I don't trust him. So that doesn't work. And if I come down and say, this is not working, I need you to think about this, he's crushed, because he thinks I'm going to fire him. And I'm not coming down hard. I'm just trying to explain something to him. So, without trust it's really, really difficult to communicate even positive things, because they don't believe you, or negative things, because they come across as too strong.

That's what I tried to do: build those relationships of trust all the way along the line. Including going to Geneva with my briefcase on my shoulder and walking around and saying hello to a hundred and four people, just to build those relationships and let them know that I'm human, I'm here, and that I care.

And if you let people know you care, that is the most important thing you can do. If they get the impression you don't care, it's really going to be tough. That's one of the things we try to live in the Focolare: just caring. You've got to let people know you care. And it's one of the things about living in certain parts of the country versus others: the culture is more caring in some parts. In other parts you get the impression people really don't care all that much sometimes. So, you've got to be a little careful if the care is not there.

I think it's a really important thing in business to first establish that you care. And a lot of that comes from the heart of Christ: that he cares. To the degree that we can care. We don't want to be naive, but we've got to let people know we care. Even people who are really struggling. You've got to let them know you care. And if you want them to take a different job because this one is not the right one, it's because you care. It's not because you're trying to get rid of them.

Helping someone leave

Interviewer: How have you shown care when it's time for someone to go? How do you show care even though you're helping them leave?

Emery Koenig: It depends on the situation, obviously. As I said, I try to set really clear performance objectives. A lot of people don't like to do that. They don't like that clarity. But: here's where the bar is set. Do you understand? Yes, I understand where the bar is. Good. Can I help you? Yes, you can help me, here's what I need. Okay, got it. Here's what I don't want to see. Is that clear? Yes, it's clear. Okay, let's see how it goes for the next couple of months. And give an adequate amount of time.

The fact that you're taking the time lets them know you care. In a performance review I don't set fifteen minutes. I set hours, if I have to, and I make sure they end up doing most of the talking so they get a chance to express themselves. And I try to do a good job of listening.

I mentioned the two questions before: what will help this person keep doing what they do well, and what do I need to help them improve so they can be a more effective leader. And I always get feedback from everyone around them: people above, below, sometimes customers. You get a well-rounded view of what that person's performance has actually looked like, how they're being perceived, how effective they are as a leader.

It's another way of caring. It's so much easier to sit behind your desk and say, I have the impression you're this, I have the impression you're that. Instead: here's the feedback we're getting. We have some issues to talk about.

A lot of times I'll begin the conversation with; "I want you to be the most effective leader you can be. What are you aspiring to be?" Oh, I want to take this job. Okay, great. And can I offer you something that would help you get there? Oh yes, please tell me. Please tell me. So, you build that appetite to take on the things you need to.

Ninety, ninety-five percent of the time they'll embrace it. They'll make those changes. They'll get what they want. They'll move where they want to be. And it works out well, because to the degree you promote people, others see where that person went and now, they want that job, because look where it led. So, there's a positive thing that rolls with that.

I had one situation with a large position in food grain, wheat. It was going against us. It was a good position, but it was big. The trader was very successful, and he wanted to double down again, and there was no way I could do that. It just wasn't prudent. I didn't feel it was going to work out, and I didn't have the confidence to take on even more risk just because the market kept going against us.

And he said, all right, I need to go somewhere else. And I said, okay, I understand that. I hate to lose you, but I understand. And he went to work for another company that has much looser philosophies on risk management. At Cargill we like things bolted down very well.

One of the things I also learned over time: at Cargill, when we get into a business, whether to buy it or take on positions or hire traders: tell me why. Tell me why you think that. Tell me, tell me, tell me. Let's carry on that dialogue.

We got into some other companies we were considering buying, and their mentality was: "why not?" And that'll put you on a completely different trajectory. Should we do this? Why not? And I'll tell you, we ended up buying them because they were going to go out of business if we didn't pick them up. So,

it's really important that we keep that rigorous "tell-me-why." Because we care, and we want things to succeed. We want you to succeed.

An agent of communion

Interviewer: Pope Francis told the EoC that they can be agents of communion in the world. Is there a way you feel you have been an agent of communion, or of unity, through your career?

Emery Koenig: One of the pieces of feedback I got at the moment of truth was from a colleague with whom I'd had a bit of a difficult relationship. He was way off on the extreme liberal side, and he wasn't American; he came from Brazil. And he made the comment that in meetings I somehow pulled people together, somehow listened.

One thing I do, maybe it's a pet peeve of mine: if someone is speaking and someone else skis across their wake. I often shut it down by saying I'm sorry, we need to let this person finish speaking. There are ways you can do that that add dignity and respect for the individual who's speaking.

And I really learned a lot from Greg here. He had a requirement for all of us, because we'd sit every Monday for four or five hours and have people come in and present. He said, there are two requirements I have for anyone on the senior leadership team: there were five or six of us. First, you will not have a bad day. When people are coming in to give a presentation, you're not going to have a bad day and take it out on the speaker. And second, people are going to walk out of this meeting with more energy than they walked in with. That was a pretty high bar. And I reminded myself of it a lot, in terms of how we treat people, and what our gift is for being in senior management.

One of my requirements when we brought people into more senior positions was: do they understand the power of the office? If you've got people who don't understand the power of the office, they can do a lot of damage.

I remember when it was announced that I was becoming vice chairman and chief risk officer. Before it was announced, I was sitting in a meeting. We had a fifteen-minute break, the announcement was made, and then we went back into the meeting and I sat down. And I didn't really realize it, but my sword had grown another foot in those fifteen minutes. Something someone said before the announcement: okay, fine, I appreciate that as a peer. But all of a sudden, you're one of the top five or six people in a large organization. Be careful. You've really got to be uplifting, and try to give people more energy when they walk out of the room than when they walked in. Use the power of the office to uplift people. That was a good reminder for me, always to be careful about the power of the office.

There are a lot of situations where, when you're travelling around, people want one-on-one time with you. And I could do some of that. But you really needed to be out in a town hall meeting with several hundred people, get them all together, make sure they heard the right message. It was much more effective, and you could reach people that way. They know you. They could touch you. They could hear you. As opposed to me spending eight hours in a conference room doing one-on-ones. Yes, I had to do some of that. But it was really about bringing people together.

And the things you talk about matter: whether it was safety, or bringing women up on diversity, or ethics. If we didn't talk about those, people were going to assume they weren't important. So we really had to keep the messaging up, to make sure people understood what the right message was.

Mentors and coaches

Interviewer: What's your advice to people going into business, especially younger people, about having a mentor, or people who coach you?

Emery Koenig: I've mentored a lot of people at Cargill, and over the last ten years I would only accept women to mentor. They were much more open. They were willing to make themselves vulnerable. Eighty percent of their situations had something to do with their immediate supervisor and a difficult relationship, and that supervisor wasn't always male. So, you help them navigate through that.

I found that men occasionally, frequently, would show up thinking: I'm being mentored by this person and I've got to show him how good I am. It doesn't help. It's not going to help me and it's not going to help you if you show up with your bravado. Don't waste my time. I don't want to waste your time. Those don't work.

The other issue is who chooses whom. A lot of times a mentee was assigned to me because of whatever issue they were working on, and I had some expertise in that area and could try to help. If they understood that and I understood that, it actually worked out fairly well. But if the mentee chooses the mentor, that's very helpful.

And I always set up a couple of requirements. The mentee sets up the meetings. You come with an agenda, things you want to talk about. I'm not going to chase you. I'm happy to listen to you. I'm happy to share my reaction to what you're thinking. But I'm not going to chase you down and force-mentor you, because that doesn't work at all if they're not really interested in improving.

I think it's a good idea, and it's also important that, whether or not they have a formal mentor, there's a lot of informal mentoring that can go on. You find people you trust, whose way of handling situations you really like, or whose brand or reputation you admire. Seek them out. Say: can I spend half an hour with you? Hey, let's go to lunch, I'll buy you lunch, I want to talk to you about a couple of things.

That's really effective: informal mentoring, as opposed to formal mentoring, where you can choose those relationships. And often those people become your supporters, and you need supporters. You need those champions to help you wade through things that come up. Ninety-five, ninety-nine percent of them will protect the confidentiality. Once in a while there's a leaker. So, you've got to really know and trust the person. And make sure you're doing it for the right reason, that it's serious, and you're not just trying to take his or her time, or get on his or her screen to be more visible.

The last point I'd make, and I stress this with college students more than anything, or young people in the workforce: everyone starts out wanting to be the best engineer on the face of the earth. That's a really good thing, and they do it. But they miss the curve in the road where leadership becomes more important than their domain expertise.

Those who miss the curve in the road, or don't want to make that curve, or think it's a waste of time: no one's asking you to give up your domain expertise. We're asking you to add another skill. Leadership is a skill. Just like speaking French is a skill, or riding a bike is a skill. Leadership skills you need to learn.

And find people whose leadership skills you really appreciate. What makes them tick? How does it make you feel? How did he or she handle that? What really resonates? And what not to do: boy, that felt terrible, I'll never do that again. You can learn by watching the people around you.

For example, on one of the boards I'm on, Catholic Rural Life, I've watched bishops and how they operate. You sit down having dinner with one (actually two bishops in particular, three of them really), and I just ask them questions. For example, as a bishop, it seems like a heavy load, it seems like there are a lot of crosses to carry. And I still remember the answer I got back: you're absolutely right, it's a heavy cross, but the graces are even more.

I thought that was a really nice way to put it. The graces are even more. That's what keeps these men alive and holy and willing to stay faithful and bring the church along to where it needs to be, because the graces are more. So, I learn from them, sitting across the dinner table with fifteen other people.

And I've seen a lot of CEOs in action on these boards, and you learn. And someone will come back and want mentoring. I've probably mentored five or six CEOs from nonprofits who would just say, Emery, I need help here, how would you handle this situation? And we walk and talk through it. And we've become very good friends, because the facades fall down. I share the scars on my back, and the things I've done wrong. And they're willing to make themselves vulnerable and share too. So even in those situations you can build a relationship and add value, because of things I didn't choose, that sort of happened. Sometimes I made the wrong decision, but somehow, I learned from it, and I can share those learnings so someone else can avoid the speed bumps going forward.

Interviewer: Have you had a chance to mentor someone through the Focolare?

Emery Koenig: It's an interesting question, because often it comes in the form of business. I run into people who hear a little bit of my backstory, and they're beginning their career, and they may or may not be in the Focolare. Actually, there was a fellow a couple of months ago from Texas, who got permission to get my number from someone in the Focolare, to call me. He just needed some help. Really some help. He was making things a little too black and white in terms of what he was standing for and how he was handling it at work.

So, you start cultivating those relationships. A lot of them show up because of business, or because people want to be mentored in a business situation: including, how do I live my faith in the business world? How do I handle this? What do I do with this? Do I need to leave? Do I need to keep my mouth shut? Do I need to stand up? What do I need to do?

A lot of those are things you just need to talk through. And a lot of the time it's about providing a little bit of clarity, a little bit of attention, and trying to love them. And often the answer is already within their own heart and mind. You just help them walk towards it.

I've had a fair number of those, and it just seems to me they come from the business world, where people are latching on and trying to figure it out, because it seems diametrically opposed. How do we do all these things and yet we're here to make some money? I can't reconcile those. And a lot of times it's about relationships, especially with their immediate supervisors. I've mentored a lot of people with difficult relationships with their supervisor, and how to work through that.

Interviewer: Often it's just coming into the experience, living and doing simple things.

Emery Koenig: Eating together. Cleaning the house. Playing baseball, whatever it is, as opposed to, let me sit down and give you my syllabus and my speech. Because it's not the speech. It's the actions, and how you live those things out, that really matter. And that's where ultimately you find out there are a lot of authentic people. They're not perfect, but they're really authentic. Their heart's in the right place. They're living this way authentically. It's not just a nice show.

What I would do differently

Interviewer: Let's not call them regrets, but opportunities for improvement. Is there something you might have done differently, given another chance?

Emery Koenig: Oh, absolutely. There always is.

I mentioned one before: I learned, probably the hard way, to pick my battles better. Early in my career I had a high concern for productivity and not a high enough concern for people. And I'd drive things pretty hard, because that's the way I was built. In some situations, I was probably a little too tough on people. I was driven so hard. In hindsight, there are situations where I should have slowed things down and brought people along in a different manner. I can think of several situations where I just pushed too hard. That's probably the biggest one.

The other one is that when you're dealing with people, I always tried to be fair, and everyone's got good qualities and things they could improve on, but to communicate that in a charitable way, where people could take it in, is very important. And I know there were a couple of situations, one with a French fellow and one with a British fellow, where I just lost patience. I couldn't handle the nonsense anymore, and I came down really hard on them. Now, you could say it was probably deserved; it probably was. But there may have been a better way to handle it, one that would have been less traumatic for them.

And the last one is that you've got situations where you put people into roles and give them support, and it's working okay but not what it should be, and their leadership skills aren't what you thought they were. You try to build those, but they don't take it seriously enough. And so, to face the music that I made a mistake putting that person in there: walk towards it, address it, get them out of there for the sake of the people underneath.

A lot of things you think about, too. As I mentioned, I could have spent three hundred and sixty-five days on the road, all international travel, visiting a hundred and seventy locations in seventy countries. But the family suffers for that.

I tried to think of things I could do with the family to balance it. If I had to take a trip for a week or ten days, I would most often try to circle back. In the summer I'd take the family back to Brazil, or take them to Vietnam, or Singapore, or Morocco, places I'd been. So, they could enjoy the experience together as a family, and it wasn't all me boondoggling around the world.

I go back to this notion of working smart, not hard. I learned to be more efficient: how many emails, when I cut things off. I actually had a policy in the business unit I ran in Geneva that no one could receive more than a hundred emails a day. And people initially were not happy with that. But I'll tell you, most people came back saying, thank you, I now have time to think, I have time to spend with my family. Because if you're getting three or four or five hundred emails a day, you've got to be kidding me. There's no way you're going to digest that and stay on top of it. And if everything's a priority, nothing's a priority. You've really got to focus on the things that are really important.

And be proactive: please don't send me these emails anymore, because I don't read them, I can't use them, keep them off my screen, I don't want them counting against my hundred. And we measured it: we could read how many emails people were getting. I clamped down a couple of times, because people thought I was joking. And I kept myself at a hundred too. It was a much more freeing action.

Could I have spent more time with the family? Probably. When I was home, I really tried to engage with them and forget about work to the degree that's possible, even though being outside Europe in the U.S. time zone is tough: if you're working with Asia you're either doing things at night or really early in the morning. But even working from home more often worked out as a positive, where you saw the family more.

I'd come back from a business trip, gone for a week or two weeks, and I'd come home dog-tired. And: let's go out for pizza. That was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. But you just had to take the family out and go have pizza, and engage as though I had lots of energy. Just do something concrete for them so we could re-engage.

It takes a lot of energy and a lot of effort, including managing my own health, my own mental health, working out enough to keep myself healthy, because you're a corporate athlete in a lot of ways. If not, I've seen too many situations where people burn out, or become so frustrated that they start having difficulty in relationships.

What I hope I left

Interviewer: What lasting legacy or imprint do you feel you left at Cargill, not financial legacy, but imprint?

Emery Koenig: I always tried to do the right thing when it was sometimes really tough to do. I gave a couple of examples where there were ethical situations, or where the question was whether to get out in front of the press and take a stand on various issues. There's a long-term view: let's do the right thing here, as opposed to compromising and doing what's fashionable, or what has some short-term benefit.

Second, it's important to tell people the truth, but you've got to do it with charity. That's always the challenge for all of us, especially me. I tried to do all those things with charity, and I'm sure I failed millions of times, but I tried as best I could.

I also tried to work smart as opposed to hard. I was never into face time: people didn't have to wait for me to leave. If you have something going on, I would cheer you on. That's one of the things I learned from the European culture, where you work to live. Here in the U.S., it's the other way around, where it's all about work. Over there it's a really nice balance. If you're going on vacation for two or three weeks, your manager would say, have a great time. No problem. We'll miss you. I did have one manager who wanted me to take my laptop with me all the time. But we managed through that.

The point is to allow freedom. People need to be free to take some downtime and unplug, and not be expected to work twenty-four seven, because it's really unfair. And I never expected anyone else to do what I myself wasn't willing to do, in terms of travel, or risk, or moving.

I also tried to make sure I was doing my part to provide an environment where they could thrive. Some of the feedback I still get today, when I bump into former colleagues, is that I protected them from a lot of the white noise and heat that comes down from within the organization. I really tried to protect them so they could thrive, and use their intuition and their creativity, and have ownership of those things. They seemed to appreciate that, as opposed to my boss or his boss's boss walking in and saying, I think we should do this, and me backing up and saying, yeah, do it. I mean, who am I? You've got to have more courage and guts than that.

I probably was known as a risk taker. And risk is always relative to the reward. My wife and I talk about that, because we took a fair number of risks moving to Switzerland, and some of the commodity risks we had to take, and some of the places we had to travel to.

Getting to the Ivory Coast and Ghana (my wife was with me at the time) visiting our cocoa businesses there. We had a million farmers, and we had to create a cooperative, because you just can't deal with a million cocoa farmers individually. Cocoa has to be raised within fifteen degrees of the equator. We were big in the chocolate business, so we'd buy the cocoa, send it to Europe and process the chocolate there.

You have armed guards outside your door at night, guys in bulletproof vests, police escorts to go out to dinner. This was the Ivory Coast. And then you go to Ghana, which is a lot tamer, much more, I don't want to use the word civilized, but the rule of law is more important. And then you ask the Ghanaians, what do you do on weekends? Oh, I go to the Ivory Coast. So that's where they find excitement.

Part Six: Relationships, and the Cube of Love

Community inside the firm

Interviewer: How important is it to build community within the firm itself? What have you done to help people feel a sense of shared purpose?

Emery Koenig: That's a big thing, and there are multiple answers.

I'd go around to various businesses and something wasn't happening, and you don't know exactly what it is. Often it comes down to the leader: the leader failing to have a vision, and to envision one that's clear, that he can articulate, and that's compelling. If they had that, a lot of things would be going on. And if you don't have that vision, you end up with: I want to do this, and you want to do that, and we're at loggerheads. As opposed to: here's where we're going, we need people to pull together, you do this, let's do this, boom, we're going after that.

So, it's so important to state that vision and to keep it compelling, and to be able to articulate it. A lot of managers say they do that. Often, if I see something's not happening, it's because they can't, or they're not doing it, or they're just not capable of it. So, you need to address that leadership breakdown.

Second, I was a big supporter and a big proponent of the employee engagement survey. Early on, if we were at fifty percent (and I said world class is seventy-five) we started out with simple things. We'd offer free doughnuts, bring people down to the conference room, give them a cup of coffee. We just wanted participation to be high. If you have ninety percent participation, that's already a sign of engagement.

And when you bring employees in and let them say, well, the air conditioner doesn't work, and this person's opening the window and I want the air conditioning: okay, let's resolve that. This carpet is threadbare: okay, we'll fix the carpet. All these things tend to be down at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy. You start with the basic stuff. And you do that for three or four or five cycles of the survey. And now we're into self-actualization, which is a lot more difficult.

Say you're at seventy-five percent engagement, and you have ten people around a desk or in a group or in a room. You've got seven and a half (let's call it eight) highly engaged employees. The other two are going to be miserable. If they're not engaged and these people are excited, they're going to lunch together, and I don't want to go with those guys, I'm just looking for my paycheck. They're going to opt out. I think they're going to opt out over time, because it's just not fun working alongside highly energized, engaged people.

We worked hard to make sure we were listening to employees and really understood what was going on. As I mentioned, our engagement measures were say, stay and support Cargill. So, we'd ask a serious question, and one of them was: would you be willing to tell your friends about Cargill?

And we got the employee engagement surveys back from Japan, and they were incredibly low on that particular question. They would not tell their friends. And that's a say-stay-support measure. So, we finally had to dig into it. Can you tell us what's going on here, because you rated this so low? We listened to some employees, had some follow-up focus groups. And they said: we are so happy here, we wouldn't tell our friends about it, because they'd feel bad.

So, they couldn't tell their friends about it, which measured as *not* engaged. And they were really engaged, to the point where they didn't want their friends to feel bad. It's one of those interesting examples of how you really need to understand what people are telling you, especially across cultures, where they interpret things differently.

The third thing goes back to the feedback about coming across a bit aloof and removed, given that I was living in Minneapolis and working in Geneva, commuting back and forth. My leadership coach and I would brainstorm about how I could make myself more present to these people. I've never met some of them. I'll never meet some of them.

And you've got concentric circles. You've got the people who work around you: they know you, they love you, you love them, it's really good. Then you've got the outer ring of their direct reports; they see you, they know of you, they hear you, you can engage with them. And then you've got the outer circle, who don't know you. I've never met them. May never meet them; they're in the Philippines. But I'm a leader, and I've got to influence them and be part of the team and let them know I care.

So, my leadership coach and I came up with the idea that on the monthly recap I wrote about how the business was doing, I should put a picture of myself in the corner of the email that went out to the whole business unit. So, they could see a picture. And then I'd travel around to these places, and everyone would say, oh, Emery, how are you doing? How's your family? They felt like they knew me, because they'd seen a picture of me. I didn't know them as well, but at least you create an atmosphere of caring: I've put a face on it, as opposed to this anonymous goofball in Geneva who sends these emails and I've never met him and never will. Now I see him. He's acknowledged. He gave some positive comments in last month's market letter.

There are little, tiny things like that where you can adjust your impact. Because leadership is all about influence. And if I can influence these people in a positive, constructive way and keep them engaged, that's a winning combination. So: employee engagement, self-awareness, getting the feedback, working out how you course-correct, and then coming back and testing it. Is this working? And then you can figure out, yep, we've got something here that I need to continue to do. So I did it for the rest of my time as a business unit leader in Geneva.

The whole person

Interviewer: You've talked about recognizing the whole person. Do you have any other thoughts on that?

Emery Koenig: We had Greg Page visit Geneva, and I always loved having people come to Geneva so I could tell the story of my business unit. I thought it was great. So, we put on a presentation for them.

Afterwards I would take Greg around and introduce him to everyone. And I remember there was a lady named Angela. And I introduced Greg to Angela (Angela was very, very friendly), and I said, Greg, do you know what Angela wanted to be when she grew up? And Greg says, no. And Angela didn't know where I was going with this. She wanted to be a box.

It was a great conversation point. The point is, I knew enough about Angela, and we'd had a conversation somewhere along the line, that somehow when she was a little kid, she thought it would be a good idea to be a box. I don't know why she wanted to be a box. But it was funny, and Greg laughed, and she laughed.

The point was that you could introduce those people. And I'd have loved to take the employee engagement scores right after that walk around with Greg. Everyone's amazed: the CEO cares about us. Emery's bringing him around, introducing him to everyone and explaining what their job is. And Greg loved it. He just ate that up. I knew he would. And the employees loved it. And I loved it.

Interviewer: And he never forgot her.

Emery Koenig: Never forgot Angela.

The point is to get to know people a little bit more on a personal basis. So, we'd do things: a Christmas party, or different activities where the whole office would be involved, just to socialize. We went go-kart racing. They came up with the idea of going paintballing, and I said, no, we're not going paintballing. There's enough violence in this world without going paintballing. So, we went racing little go-karts. And we had ski weekends. Good fun. They enjoyed that.

Beyond transactional

Interviewer: Business can be merely transactional. How have you tried to go beyond that, with employees, with customers, in management?

Emery Koenig: The transactional is interesting. It's very efficient. It's very short-term. You can manage expectations just like an ATM. You put your card in. I want my hundred dollars. I don't want ninety-nine, I don't want a hundred and one. I want exactly a hundred. And its very low maintenance, and it should be. You shouldn't have to spend a lot of time on it.

From a business standpoint you have to understand what that is and what it is not. A lot of times I've seen a lot of resources invested in trying to get someone to be more than an ATM person. And there are situations where that can happen, as you gradually walk them up the value propositions. But it depends on what their values are, quite frankly. Because if it's all about price (I don't care about anything else, just the price), that's a tough discussion.

And then there's the way you handle things and the way you treat people. Even at a restaurant, I always try to find the server's name. I always try to be polite to them and thank them, and make sure they're adequately compensated, just to acknowledge the dignity of what they bring to the table. It makes me crazy when they're not treated that way.

Another awakening I've had (and I'm sure you've heard this) is that the true test of character is how you're treating people when you know it's not going to count. That's where cleaning people, waiters, people trying to eke out a living at the lower end of the economic chain: how are we treating them? Do we treat them like they're made in the image and likeness of God? Are they treated how I'd like to be treated in that situation, putting myself in their shoes?

I worked at my dad's gas station, and I'll never forget one time. This is back in full service, before self-serve. And this lady drives up, drives across the bell, and it is pouring rain out there. So, I went out and said, good afternoon, ma'am, how can I help you? And she said, can you give me a pack of cigarettes? I said, sure. She gives me the money. I'm dripping wet. I get her cigarettes, and she just rolls up her window and drives away.

And I'm going: I think I just learned how not to treat people. I'm sure it was very efficient and very transactional for her. I didn't feel very good about it. So, I think about not missing those opportunities to acknowledge who you're working with.

I still remember, we were in Paris. We'd just moved to Geneva, and we went to Paris early on, because we just had to get out of all the boxes they were setting up in Switzerland. It's a couple of hours by train from Geneva. We were going through the station, and there was a homeless person there. And my daughter, she had to be two or three at the time, and there was this homeless person sitting there, and I can't remember exactly the situation, but she just said, Dad, Dad, we have to help him. We have to help him. So, I put some money in his shirt pocket.

It's one of those things where you just can't miss those opportunities. So even on the street, I try to stop and acknowledge people. A lot of the time they just want to be seen, and you know this better than I do. They just want to be seen, and acknowledged as a person with dignity, as opposed to, I'm just a beggar on the street. So, I ask them their name. And I'm sure they've got a backstory. But for the grace of God, that would be me. Clearly. And I'm sure you've seen that also.

And then there's the other side of it: the admin assistants in various businesses. I always treated my admin assistant like a queen, because she could make my life so much easier. In fact, she was so good, including arranging Masses when I was travelling. She'd walk into my office every day and say, Emery, I'm here to save you time. What can I do to save you time? I need my car picked up at two o'clock. Done, I'll pick it up for you at two o'clock.

She was just so good at that, and I really appreciated it. I know she made me look better than I deserved to look. She made me smarter than I actually am, and more efficient than I actually am. She retired, and I retired two years later. I couldn't deal with it anymore. It just became heavy, quite frankly. She was so good, and I tried to do everything I could to make sure she was fully appreciated. We're still in touch, ten or fifteen years after she retired. What wonderful people.

And often: we'd have a crop report come out, and the traders would get together and put five bucks or whatever on who could get closest to the soybean number the USDA was going to publish, or the corn number. So I'd go down to the cafeteria, where there was a lady named Twyla, a funny little lady, probably in her mid-sixties or early seventies. And I'd ask her, do you want to put a bean number in? She didn't know anything about soybeans, except maybe cooking them. And she'd always put a number down. She'd say, well, give me a range. I'd say okay, and give her a couple of points. She won this pool four times in a row. And finally, the guys in Geneva were calling me wanting to know what Twyla's bean number was, so they could put their number close to hers.

It's another story about how you take care of people who, in the world's eyes, may not count as much.

Build up relationships every day

Interviewer: Chiara's Cube of Love has been made into a company cube, and I've been going through its sides with each entrepreneur. The first is: build up relationships every day. How do you try to do that?

Emery Koenig: It first starts with my relationship with God, and with Christ. As time has gone on, I understand better what that relationship is and why it's so important, and how important it is to be around people who have also really embraced that relationship with Christ. It's really transforming in a lot of ways. So, it goes to praying constantly and asking for Christ's help: to follow, to do what he wants me to do, to be who he wants me to be, to try, with all the foibles and everything else we all have.

Then your relationship with your spouse, if you're married. That's also very important, because that's the laboratory of life: of forgiveness, of starting again, of negotiating, of compromising, of bringing new life into the world.

In fact, yesterday was my brother and sister-in-law's forty-third wedding anniversary, and I sent them a text saying happy anniversary. And I said, someone told me today that there's one thing money can't buy, and that's your fiftieth anniversary. And Karen saw that and said, where did you hear that? And I said, well, it came from Andy. So, I used your quote. I stole your quote.

Relationships with Karen are very important. And as we talked about, you have a lot of really beautiful moments where the presence of God in the marriage is really pointed, and it's really important. And you have some really tough times. Really tough times, that you can't see your way through, but you hang in there and you get through. And then you've got a whole bunch of life (just normal life) right in between. And that's where love being a decision, love being a choice, choosing to do an act of love, become important. In that period where it's just a bunch of life, how do you build that relationship by doing very simple things?

So, this morning when I left to come here, I usually give my wife a kiss. I gave her an extra-long one today, and she was giggling at the end. Joking with her, just to try to build that relationship.

And then, to the degree you try to be on good terms with people around you and try to love them, whoever your neighbor is. It's a very strong principle of the Focolare, in terms of: who is my neighbor? It's the person sitting next to me. It's not someone sitting in Calcutta. It's the person sitting next to me, the person I may or may not like. But I still have to love them, and try to listen to them, and do what I can to be Christ to them if I can, to the degree I can.

And even in business, you can easily get into disputes. It's not so much on the bigger things. It's when you get down to the last portion of it and people have their heels dug in on the last detail. Sometimes you have to give in. Sometimes you have to hold your ground.

The most important thing when I'm dealing with a conflict is to think about what I want the relationship to be when I'm done with this conversation. I had a difficult conversation with someone in the Focolare, and I told him right up front: when I'm done with this conversation with you, I want to have a better relationship than we do now. So therefore, here are some things I need you to change. And we talked through those, and I really called him out on some things that were bothersome for the Focolare, and he took it to heart and changed it, and things got resolved.

It's important to consciously identify what I want that relationship to be when it's over, including with your spouse. There's this saying: do you want to be right, or do you want to be married? And sometimes I've gone too far. I'm right. I know I'm right. I'm going to die on this hill. And it's like: okay, do you want

to be right, or do you want to be married? Okay, let's be married today. And you have to let it go and not die on that hill. It's just not worth it, quite frankly. At the same time, you have to set boundaries and speak the truth with charity, as we talked about.

Support with actions, not words

Interviewer: The next one is: support with actions, not words. Any example you can think of?

Emery Koenig: I had one driving home last night. I don't know why this popped into my mind, but when I was in seventh grade, I forgot my trombone. So, I walked home and got it, and came back, and there was a fight going on in our schoolyard. And I just stuck my head in there going, what's going on? And one of the boys came out and popped me right in the face. And I had this massive black eye.

The school bell rang. I had to go inside. And I just had this big shiner. And I literally hadn't done anything. I had my trombone and I was looking to see what was going on. And he just hit the wrong person, I think.

The next day he shows up for school with a cast on his arm. He'd broken his fist hitting me in the face. And then he had to serve Mass, and he couldn't serve Mass with a broken arm. So, I served Mass for him. I volunteered to serve Mass for him.

It's one of the things I think about sometimes: where you just need to step up and do the right thing. I don't know why that example popped into my head driving home last night. But a silly little example.

There's also a Japanese saying that children learn from their parents by watching their backs. It's not necessarily what they say, but how they act and how they live. I think there's a lot of truth in that. Watching their backs. So always try to be a good example of how we live our life by going to Mass. Sometimes when you're travelling it's not easy, but we make it work. It takes effort sometimes.

Going back to being aware of the power of the office: people are watching everything you do in an organization, especially at a senior level. They're watching what you talk about, what you don't talk about, who you talk about, how you talk to them. It becomes very visible. And you've really got to watch your actions, because they do speak louder than words.

I was in public speaking classes, and one of the things the instructor said was: just be aware of your size. If I'm standing at the podium, don't be rocking back and forth; people will think the building's going to fall over. Be careful about the size of your hands, because it can be intimidating. Even though my words may be soft, the hand gestures may be a bit strong. So just be aware of some of the physical aspects.

People are watching. And I'm clearly not the center of the universe but just be cognizant of how you behave. Even growing up it was a bit of a challenge, because I was always a big guy. I looked my second-grade teacher right in the eye. So, I was always a big kid. And for a big kid, things were less funny than when a little kid did them. I was treated as though I was much older than I actually was, and I clearly made a thousand mistakes, millions of mistakes, just being a silly little kid. My friends were too, but it wasn't funny when I was doing it.

So, I learned to be much more cognizant. It's funny: when I was playing basketball in high school, and even grade school, I had a certain way of cleaning the bottom of my shoes. And you start watching the younger guys, and they start cleaning the bottom of their shoes the same way. I never thought that would be important to them. But they're watching.

Interviewer: How did you clean them?

Emery Koenig: I'd wipe them this way, so my socks were all brown. Otherwise, you'd slip. Just wiping them off on the sides of my socks.

Share expertise, time and yourself

Interviewer: The next is: share expertise, time and yourself. Are there times when you think, I know something that can help this person grow, or, this person just needs me to take the time to let them say what they need to say?

Emery Koenig: I think it's important. In various positions you're in a speaking role, and there are things you need to share. And to the degree you can share things by making yourself vulnerable, people really resonate with that; I've found that over time. So, I was never concerned about sharing personal stories, because when someone else shares, I never forget those. It adds a lot of meaning.

The flip side is that I've also tried to listen. When you work in a commodity business, you're making decisions and processing pretty fast. And when you come home to your wife, she's not interested in your decision-making capacity. She wants to process. And you have to listen. So, I've learned to shut that down. I'm sure I've done it wrong a thousand times, but just to shut it down and listen, because she needs to process.

I think of an example. My wife's brother was killed in a farm accident, probably about ten years ago now. And we went to the funeral, and came back. We have a big koi pond in our backyard. And she just wanted to lie there and float. And I lay next to her, floating, and just held her hand. And that's all she wanted to do.

I'd never done that before. But it's just what she needed at that point in time: just to lie next to her on the water, floating, as she was going through all the grieving that comes when you lose your brother. I think he was fifty-five or so when he passed away in that farm accident. And it's just what she needed at the time. And it's so much against my nature, because I've got to do stuff, I've got to get stuff done. Lying in a pond for half an hour or an hour was not my idea of a way to spend a Saturday afternoon. I've got things to do.

But you sort of have to die to yourself in that sense, and really try to love, and put those things off to the side, and be Marian in that sense of doing those things for her. I think it was very meaningful for her. And I could feel her pain. I lost a younger sister also, so I've been down that road before, and I know how painful it is to go through losses like that.

And in business, especially in an organization like Cargill where we'd sit for four or five hours on a Monday through presentation after presentation, you have to pick your soundbites very carefully. A lot of the time I found you just look for the power questions. What question could I ask that would trigger a

thought, or an idea, or a what-if, that could really open things up and help them?

So, I'm not giving them advice. I'm doing it in the form of a question, which I found to be very beneficial. It's not as intimidating as: I think you need to do this. Instead: hang on, have you ever thought about such and such? And then they say, hmm, I hadn't thought about that. That's where you can add a lot of value, but doing it in the form of a question works better for me than trying to give advice.

And lastly, when I speak to university or high school students, just sharing personal experiences really resonates with them. It's tough, because the one I do in high school is on video, and you don't know where they're at. You don't know what they're thinking, although the teacher does give me a list of questions they're interested in. But you don't know where their brain is at ten o'clock on a Monday morning. Still, you've got to try to love them and try to engage. Try to share things you've done, not what you talk about in theory. And I think it always resonates.

I still think back on experiences. I've got a friend of mine in the Focolare here in the U.S., named Sid. And I still remember, literally forty or fifty years ago, he worked on a hog farm. I could tell you five experiences he shared fifty years ago about how he handled situations working on a hog farm. I never forgot them. They really resonate when people talk about the actions they took, as opposed to, well, here's the theory of how I operate.

Value every person and every idea

Interviewer: Next: value every person and every idea.

Emery Koenig: That's a tough one. Because that's one of my strengths and one of my weaknesses: I'm quick. Quick to assess, quick to judge. Because in business you can't sit there and analyze for two weeks. You've got to use your intuition, your nose. Does it smell good?

For example, when Cargill asked me to go to Geneva, I got a call from my big Dutch boss, Huub Spierings. And he said, Emery, I'd like you to come over and be the merchandising manager in Geneva. You need to come as soon as you can. Three to five years.

And I said, okay, well, let me go home and talk to my wife. And he said, wait a second: does this smell good? And I said, yes, it does smell good. Then do it! Just do it!

That's the environment I was in: that I'd move my family internationally without going home and talking to them. And thank God I did talk to them, because of the dark moments. When you make an international move, or any move, you have a honeymoon period, and then you go into literally depression, and it's a year before you come back out the other side. And during that period, I had to remind them: this was your idea, we talked about it, you agreed, we're doing this, so let's put our big pants on and see this thing through.

There's a pressure to make decisions like that in a commodity trading world. You've got to make fast decisions, with less and less information as time goes on, risking millions and millions of dollars and in some cases people's livelihoods. So, it's very important to take the time to listen, to have the right

discussion. I'm getting better at that, and I've learned to keep my mouth shut even when I've got the answer in mind.

Actually, it's an interesting point. I got feedback one time from the people I was working with in Geneva that they weren't sure why we were in the meeting. They weren't sure if I'd already made the decision and we were just going to sit around, the four or five of us. Or whether we were going to have a discussion and at the end we'd all have an equal vote. Or whether we'd have a discussion and at the end I'd decide what I wanted to do. Or whether I'd already made up my mind and was just testing it with them.

And the bottom line: it was a really good learning experience. Their point was: just tell us. We don't care which it is. Just tell us what the rules of the game are and we'll play it with you.

So now when I sit down in a meeting, I have to declare it. Okay, here's the situation. I'm going to have to make a decision. I'd like your input. No problem. Let's do that. Or: let's decide what kind of pizza we want. Okay, we'll all get an equal vote. I'm exaggerating with the pizza, but it could be something we can all have a say in, like where we have the Christmas party.

It was a good lesson for me: that to respect them, you've got to tell them what the rules of engagement are. It helped a lot with clarity, and clarity is a good thing in relationships. They knew where they stood, and it really helped build that relationship. It was respectful of them.

I always try to respect people and where they're coming from. Sometimes it's tough, especially if they've got an agenda and they won't come clean on it, and you've got to call them out, which I'm sure you've experienced too. But ultimately, you're called to try to love, to try to love each one of them. I go back to the try. It's not easy, but I can at least try. And if I fail, I can start over next time. Say hello to them, or sit down and say, I apologize, let's start over again, let's begin again. And they're very open to that.

Be first to help others

Interviewer: Next: be first to help others.

Emery Koenig: I'm sitting in Mombasa, Kenya, having dinner. And there's a Cargill colleague sitting across from me, and he and his son had just climbed Kilimanjaro. They did the five-day climb, which is a brutal five days.

And I got the idea that my oldest son and I could climb Kilimanjaro together; he was about to get married. You can do a five-day climb, a seven-day climb or a nine-day climb. So, we decided we'd do a seven-day climb. Got everything ready, lost weight, got all the equipment, and my son and I pushed his wedding to a date that would work. You have to go in February or September, so we went in September, because that's the dry season.

So, we get there and we're climbing. You start at around a five thousand feet and you end up at nineteen thousand, three hundred and something. You've got half the oxygen you need.

We had two guides, a cook and a guard, and lots of porters helping carry our stuff up. And it's getting colder and windier. The main guide's name was Godfrey. He was well known on the mountain. Everyone was friends with him. He was kind of the godfather of Kilimanjaro.

And here comes this guy running. He had a shirt on, I think he had shoes on, and he had no gloves. In Swahili, I think, he told Godfrey that he needed to get back to his camp. And Godfrey was trying to warm him up a little bit. And I had gloves on, and my son was with me, and my son was the first one to offer him his gloves.

And I'm going: boy, how Christian am I? He was quicker to try to help the guy out than I was. And the fellow said, no, no, no, I don't want anything, I'll get there, I'm fine now.

But it really was a humbling lesson for me, where I missed the opportunity to be the first to do those things. And I was very proud of my son for having the compassion and the heart to recognize that's what he should do. I don't know what was going on in my head. Obviously, nothing, except survival. So, it's one of those things I've thought about a lot, and maybe it's been a good lesson, because now I try to do better. I try to be the first one to help.

And you've got to be prudent. You have to use your head. Two Sundays ago, we walked out of church and I was hanging on to my wife (not tightly enough), and she was looking at the beautiful day and tripped over one of those curbs where you park your car against, and did a face plant. I mean, right smack. Bounced off her face. She's got blood running down.

And people came to help, the parishioners, and I helped her up. People really coalesced. Are you okay? I really appreciated the gestures, and people were offering tissues so she could wipe the blood off. And she was fine. Embarrassing, and she had a bit of scarring for a while. But it's one of those things where you've got to do what you can in those moments.

And also, to be free: you can offer help, and it may not be needed, it may not be wanted, it may not be appreciated. There may be someone with more expertise. But at least you can do your part. So, it was a good lesson for me on Kilimanjaro: try to be the first to do those things.

Competitors can be friends too

Interviewer: The last one on this list is: competitors can be friends too.

Emery Koenig: Maybe I had the fear of God put in me at a young age at Cargill, because I was always very careful about crossing the line. Cargill is the largest company in our business, and we have a lot of information. We spend millions and millions of dollars trying to get information first-hand. Information is where we feel we have a competitive advantage. And almost everyone wants to know what we're thinking.

So, I'm always cautious about: gee whiz, what do you think about the crop size, boys? You can really do a lot of damage, in the sense of giving away trade secrets. It's Cargill's property, quite frankly, because they paid millions and millions of dollars to get it. And not that we're even right all the time. But you have to be very careful.

So, I probably would have been very cautious about building a relationship with competitors, for the reasons I described.

Part Seven: Money, stewardship and the common good

Stewarding your gifts

Interviewer: How should one steward the gifts God gives you, in terms of abilities?

Emery Koenig: I think it goes back to the common good, and to this need to give as opposed to giving to a need.

I still go back to my parents in Dickinson. My dad had a gas station he needed to open on Sunday mornings at six or six thirty. So, my mom was insistent we were all going to go to church together, and this was before the time when you had a Saturday evening Mass. So, we'd go to either five thirty or six thirty morning Mass at our parish.

The good news is that if you got out of bed, my mom would make your bed for you, because we had to make our beds every day. So, my brother and I would get out of bed, stand against the wall and sleep while she made the bed, because we just needed those extra minutes. And then we always went to Mass together as a family and came home and had breakfast, and it's six o'clock in the morning and there's nothing to do and all your friends are still sleeping. But it built character.

Anyway, the point is that when we went to Mass, my mom always took change along (coins), and she would pass out a nickel to each of us. And every Sunday, every Mass, every child had to put the nickel she gave us into the collection box.

So, I developed a habit of giving. They were big on tithing, and on this notion of giving and having responsibility for what we need to provide for the church. They were always very, very giving. The culture of giving was very prevalent in them.

I still remember in college one year (maybe my junior year) I had five dollars left in my budget, and it was Sunday, and I needed to give something. So, I gave fifty cents. I gave ten percent of it, and I had to make the other four dollars fifty stretch until the next week. And that was important. Even when we got married, my wife and I decided early on that tithing (giving ten percent of our income away every year, or each month, or however it worked out) was very important for us. And somehow things always worked out.

So, there's a good lesson, starting with the nickel in the collection at church with my mom: doing it when it's tough to do, when you don't have much. It really becomes meaningful when you're doing it that way. And we stuck to it throughout our married life.

My wife is a nurse by background, a registered nurse in critical care. It reminds me of a story from when we lived in Omaha. That was my second job, and she was working as a nurse, and we'd both come home and compare notes on how the day went. And that day I'd made a mistake, or made a bad trade, and it

cost me something like twenty-five thousand dollars, which is absolutely nothing in the real world, and I can tell you some other stories later on. And she came home and she'd had a patient die on her.

And my little problem with money just disappeared. It was not the issue, when she's dealing with life and death. Those are meaningful. That's life. That's what counts.

So, it keeps things in perspective. And having an attitude of giving really helps bring peace inside, but it also resets your priorities. It keeps you from getting caught up in, well, I need a bigger house, I need a fancier car, I need to go on bigger vacations.

Living simply

Interviewer: In what ways did your faith lead you to live more simply than you could have, so that you had more to share?

Emery Koenig: Moving around, we always had a house. Our first house we bought in West Lafayette, Indiana. We sold my wife's car and I rode a bike so we could afford to get a house. We bought a house for fifty thousand dollars. Then we moved to Omaha and did the same thing.

We always lived in a house we were comfortable with. And if you know you're going to move again, you have to buy a house that's going to be saleable in a reasonably good area. The condition of the house, the age, the colors: you have to keep it pretty neutral.

We found this especially when we moved down to Houston, Texas, in 1987, when the oil boom was doing a crash and burn. The housing market was going down two percent per month. Per month! It was just crashing. And we looked at a house that was about the same price as the one we'd had in Minneapolis. It was a much nicer house, but the same price. You could have taken the money and really upscaled. You could have bought, I shouldn't say a mansion, but an unbelievable house for a reasonable amount of money.

And we decided we're only going to spend what we had in our house. And it was very adequate, a nice neighborhood. Some of my colleagues, and some of the people who heard about it, said: what are you doing? Why don't you just scale up? We don't need to scale up. We didn't need to do that.

We always wanted a house that was saleable, but also one that people could feel comfortable in. We never needed to have the biggest house among our friends, or in the neighborhood. We also decided early on in our marriage that we never wanted to be house poor. And that freed us up to keep providing funds for the church, and for various projects near and dear to our heart, including the Focolare, and to help other people. It's a much more freeing experience.

When we lived in Geneva, we'd sold our house before we went. About the six-year mark, our kids were asking: where's our house? Because we had to rent over there: at the time you had to live there ten years before you could buy. Where's our house? And we knew we were eventually going to come back to Minneapolis.

So, I put my wife and my oldest daughter on a plane in February and sent them back to find a little cabin we could live in. Just to have some stake in it. And it's a bit of an inflation hedge, because if inflation keeps going and you're out of that market, it's going to be tough to step back in if prices escalate.

So, they found a cabin, which we live in and still live in today, very modestly priced. It was out of town, about thirty-five minutes from the office. Most of my colleagues lived on a huge lake with multiple millions of dollars invested. And we had our little house, which we were just very happy with. We had a slightly longer commute. We loved the smaller town we were living in. We'd invite colleagues out to have dinner with us, and they'd say, really, this is where you live? And it was nice, very comfortable, with three acres. A very nice home. Very comfortable, very happy with it. But not a huge amount of money, and we didn't need it. I had people working for me who had five- or six-million-dollar homes, or several of them.

I felt free. I felt very open and free. And I think it was a good decision by my wife and me to keep our priorities.

That's where we talk about humility. Humility is understanding who you are and what God has given you. Your feet are on the ground. You don't think any less of yourself; that's false humility. But doing it in a way that really gives you peace, and you can be free to operate with anyone, because your priorities are on who God is and where our family stands.

In a lot of situations I've seen, the house becomes the most important thing above everything else. And that's a dicey way to live. I've seen some situations not work out very well when people take on too big a house, or when the demonstration of wealth becomes a big deal.

That was one of the things we really enjoyed about Geneva: the demonstration of wealth was not important. In parts of Asia, it's very important. Not in Europe. Before we lived there, we were visiting Geneva while I worked there for a couple of weeks, and my wife bumped into someone at church, or on the street, or a coffee shop, and she invited Karen to have coffee with her at her house. And she went to her apartment, and from the outside it was nothing. You open the door, and she was from one of the big Swiss private banks. But you'd never know it from the outside, because the demonstration of wealth isn't important.

Even in Brazil, you were encouraged to drive a much less visible car, just for safety reasons, because in São Paulo especially, crazy things can happen. Don't wear jewelry. Don't bring nice watches. Don't have ona lot of glitz and glitter.

Two of my colleagues told me about a situation that was actually on the news in Brazil, where a guy was driving up to a stop sign. I don't know if he had a convertible or his window was open, but he had a Rolex on. And a man comes up to him with a gun and says, "I'll take the Rolex, please." And the guy says, "okay," takes it off and gives it to him, and the man runs away.

And the guy in the car yells after him: "what are you going to do with the Rolex?" And the man says, "I'm going to sell it." And the guy in the car says, "what do you want for it?" He looks at it and says, "a hundred bucks." And the guy in the car says, "I'll take it."

So, he sold it back to the driver. He may not have been the smartest burglar in the world, because he didn't recognize he had the gun, and the watch, and the guy had money too. But anyway, it all worked out. It's a funny story I share sometimes about how these things operate when you have a Rolex in the wrong part of the world.

Interviewer: A recent survey found that among people earning three hundred thousand dollars a year, forty percent are living paycheck to paycheck. Lifestyle inflation. That's an amazing statistic.

Emery Koenig: That's a scary thought. And look at the knock-on effects, which people don't necessarily think through. Take that scenario. You've got someone at three hundred thousand living paycheck to paycheck, and let's assume that includes a big mortgage. And now you're working to pay that mortgage down, not spending time with your wife or your family, and here comes the stress in the marriage. The kids are off: where's Dad? He's never around. And here's a divorce, and the whole thing unravels. Because of one decision. There may be more factors in there, but one decision can take you down a rough road.

A blank check for family

Interviewer: One of the things that tempts us away from giving to the common good is wanting to take care of our own. People almost act as though they can write a blank check if it's for family. What do you make of that?

Emery Koenig: No, I think it's important. Actually, I think Bill Gates plans on leaving each of his children ten million dollars, which is nothing for him, and that's it. Everything else goes to his foundation. Which I think is very honorable. And we've had the opportunity to meet various families who've signed on to the Giving Pledge. I think Ted Turner signed on, Warren Buffett. It's a strong message: you just don't want to implode your kids with money they didn't earn.

I've seen way too many situations among multiple families where they end up with drug and alcohol issues because they're looking for some meaning in life and can't find it. I remember meeting one family member. What are you going to do this week? I think I'll go skiing. What are you going to do next week? I think I'll go skiing. They're just trying to think of ways to fill up their time. And it's really robbing them of the meaning of life.

The Gospel talks about the importance of work, and how important it is in Catholic social teaching: that fulfillment, and feeling like you're giving and contributing, and the meaning in life that comes from that.

It's a challenge, and there's no single answer. Each family is going to be a little bit different. But we are very much against imploding kids. We don't want trust fund kids in our family.

When you're in business, you need to decide what, if anything, you want to leave to your kids. That's always a big discussion within families. I've seen families get torn apart because of it, and I've seen it handled very properly. We were always coached by my mom to make sure we handle things in a good and proper way. So, we talked to our estate attorney, and she gave us the advice: give your kids enough to do something, but not enough to do nothing.

So, there's a balance. What we did is set up a life insurance policy for each of them, which will be tax free. Everything else goes to charity. And it really gives us a freedom to live that way. The kids will be taken care of enough.

In families who own corporations, you can see what tremendous wealth does to people. I knew why I got out of bed every morning at five o'clock. They often struggle to have that same experience, because they don't need to. They're billionaires. Excess wealth can destroy, or make it really hard; it's really suffering. I actually feel sorry for them in a lot of ways, because you just don't have the same meaning in life. Exposure to that really helped keep things in perspective for us.

Catholic social thought

Interviewer: What are some of the key teachings of Catholic social thought that you find important to live out?

Emery Koenig: There are probably two, maybe three.

One is respect for the individual. That's another thought I had in high school, struggling through things: "respect enriches life." If I respect you, and you, and you, and if I respect what I have and I'm thankful for it, if I respect the driver in front of me. Just respect, respect, respect. It really enriches life. Flip it around: if you have no respect for anything or anyone, boy, that's a dismal existence, quite frankly. It really is true that respect enriches life.

The other one, which really influenced my leadership style, is subsidiarity: subsidiarity and solidarity, but subsidiarity in particular, where you want to build people up from the bottom.

That's where my real learning experience came from, when I was working in Geneva. I had to move my family back and I kept my job there for what ended up being 5 more years, so I was in Geneva two weeks every two months. When I wasn't there, I was in Minneapolis in my basement on a video screen. Here is the team. It's a high-risk business, one of the most successful within Cargill, with a long-standing reputation for success. And here I was sitting in my basement 5,000 miles away.

So, all I had was the people who reported to me, and their leadership. If I could build their leadership skills and have them be more effective at what they were doing, and have them handle things I might have handled if I'd been there in person, and we actually functioned better. Much better.

I did have several people with a tendency to micromanage. I encouraged them to think about it. I said, if we can't get this under control, I may just put you in a hotel room for a month and let you manage the business from a hotel room, and then you can't micromanage anymore.

I often use the analogy that instead of operating like a *master chess player*, moving this piece here and that piece there and this person over here, you do it as a *gardener*. You build things up as a gardener. You have to tend the garden. You have to walk in the garden. You have to pull weeds. You have to water it. You have to maintain it. And you watch it flourish around you.

It's not about me. It's about them. It's about the garden, and how we bring those things to life. And it puts me in my place of humility, because I know it's not me. I can just help release it, or help it thrive, or help provide fertilizer, and make sure it's flourishing. And when you see people who are working with you and for you flourish, you really feel that was the right thing to do, as opposed to playing the old, I'll call it old school, command-and-control, or the chess player type of thing.

Interviewer: Part of subsidiarity is doing what is proper to you, what your role calls you to. Micromanaging is doing what someone else is supposed to do.

Emery Koenig: And that was my pet peeve. It goes back to my FTO, my freedom to operate. One thing I had a low tolerance for was if someone else wanted to mow my lawn for me. If I had a manager who wanted to "mow my lawn for me": you go ahead and mow my lawn for me, and I'm going to go find something else to do. Because it's not fun when you have people swooping down, messing in your business, in how you're operating. And then they disappear, and you're sitting with a mess, and you feel some degree of resentment you have to work through. It's really very unfortunate.

It's almost like having people on a soccer pitch with three, four or five coaches yelling different things from the side. What are we doing? Who do you listen to?

So, I had a very low tolerance for people mowing my lawn for me. It could be a character fault, but it was very important to me.

What a real loss looks like

Interviewer: You mentioned a twenty-five-thousand-dollar loss and said it was nothing. What did you mean? What are the bigger losses?

Emery Koenig: I'll give you a couple of examples. I was at my daughter's college graduation in Connecticut, and I got a call from my senior trader in Geneva.

To explain briefly: China was a massive importer of soybeans out of the U.S., Argentina and Brazil. They drove up world prices for soybeans, including ocean freight, and it had a massive impact on the marketplace. And then for whatever reason the market started to go down, so they were out of the money: they had paid a lot for the soybeans and the market was now lower.

We had seventeen cargoes of soybeans, each one worth roughly forty million dollars, either loading or already on their way to China. And they brought in inspectors. There's not a doubt in my mind that they dropped three or four kernels of soybeans with a tainted color on them (in a 55,000 metic ton cargo) and said, sorry, we can't accept this. These are tainted soybeans. We reject the cargo, and you have to cancel the contract.

It was probably a loss of seventy-five to a hundred million dollars in a very short period of time. We got the U.S. government involved, right up to the US president at the time, to try to find out what was going on. And it was really amazing: God bless the Chinese, they're very shrewd and smart in how they operate. They operate as a team. It was China, Inc. The banks, the government, the industry, all coalescing together against the Western world, if you want to call it that, because our competitors were in a similar boat.

That was a significant portion of that business unit's earnings for the year. To make a long story short, we did have to cancel the contracts. They defaulted. We got some compensation, but it wasn't enough. But we had made a lot of other money in other areas, which compensated, so we ended up exactly where we would have been without those losses. It really worked out well. But getting that phone call in the midst of my daughter's graduation, walking across campus; he knew what it meant and I knew what it meant.

Those are the big losses. As chief risk officer, and chairman of the Cargill Commodity Risk Committee, you're looking at all Cargill's risks on a global basis: cattle, hogs, corn, beans, wheat, vegetable oil, sunflower oil, sunflower seed, canola. And it's very important that all those positions are reported by nine a.m. Minneapolis time every morning without fail, because we have to know exactly where we're at, all our risks, at any given point in time.

In theory, if you added all those up, I could have lost a significant amount of money and still stayed gainfully employed. I'm not sure that was the case. I didn't want to test it. Because you've got uncorrelated risk. Risks are frequently uncorrelated. Something's going to go down, something may come up again. So, it could never be that severe, I don't think.

But it does keep you: I often say it "allowed me to sleep like a baby at night," because I was up every two hours. You're thinking about those things. The risks that were taken, if you've got problems. You're anticipating rain and it doesn't rain. You think this is happening and it doesn't happen. There are always surprises, and you have to manage all those risks.

So, to the degree you can stay diversified, and you bring in people with experience: I always looked for a strong appetite for risk, and discipline. Those are the two big characteristics you need for traders. And often people have one or the other. My role was to help build both those skill sets up, so they were willing to take more risk, but they also knew what the word "no" meant. I'm sorry. We're big enough. We're not going to take on any more risk.

We had situations in sugar; sugar was probably the biggest one. We also went into the energy business, where there were significant losses. And that's the good news: with a large company, we can handle those types of losses. It's very disruptive to the team, and there's a lot going on, but we learned to handle those in a very calm, reasonable manner. Be humane, be fair, be just. And also recognize that you need people out there taking risks. If you're not losing money at some point, you're probably not being aggressive enough. So, there's a fine line, and you can tip over it.

I thought the whole commodity business was very fascinating, even the mentality of traders. A lot of times they'd have enough experience that they'd say, something about this market smells, something's going on in this marketplace, I don't know what it is. And I'd say, come over and let's talk. And as they talked it through you could see the light bulb going on: oh, we need to stop here, because we're taking too much risk. Or, we need to double down, because this is really an interesting opportunity. Just being able to talk that through with them was a gift for them.

Very seldom, if ever. Let me put it this way: I would never push someone out of an airplane to take a risk. I would stop them from jumping if I didn't think it was a good risk. But I would never push them out. They had to have ownership of that themselves, in terms of jumping out of an airplane on their

own, figuratively speaking.

Providence

Interviewer: Providence is central in the Focolare and the EoC. Do you have experiences of providence that were powerful for you, that gave you a sense of God guiding the moment?

Emery Koenig: To the degree that we do our part, I think it increases the odds that God's going to do his part. If I'm sitting back saying, well, God, let's have some rain here. Wait a second. I need to prepare the soil. I need to fertilize. I have to do my part. To the degree that I did my part, I think it increased the odds that somehow things would work out. Not that I have control over that, but I think we're called to have some responsibility and to do our part. Maybe only ten percent, but at least you've got to do that.

One thing that comes to mind is actually not something within Cargill. I joined a board (and I don't want to mention the organization) and they were struggling a bit financially. In fact, in a couple of situations they were struggling even to make payroll. So, Karen and I talked about it, and we decided to fund the organization enough that they could get back on track. Add some people, add some resources, buy some time. Put together a couple of propositions for grants they could apply for. And now we're in a situation where we've been blessed by several foundations that has been very supportive.

Karen and I have talked about this, because we had to do our part, and we had to take a risk. It was providential, in the sense that if we wanted to save this organization, we had to help it out. There were no guarantees it was going to work. We did our part. We did a lot of work with the CEO. We helped get a structure in place and the right people in place. And once you get that flywheel turning (because getting that flywheel turning is very hard), once its turning, things work out very well.

In this case we were very blessed by providence coming from several foundations that have put us on a whole different trajectory than we ever even imagined. We've never been in this kind of shape before. But it took what I could do on my end for capacity, and putting in my time and energy and coaching. I think God did his part.

The other one I'd say is long term: starting from the nickel in the collection box, to things working out, to the experience in Geneva, to the opportunities I've had to meet a lot of world leaders. I'm not going to name-drop here, but it's just amazing that the exposure to world leaders I'm had.

And it's not something I'm doing. It just puts me in a situation where: okay, I'm here. What is the will of God for me? I just need to try to love, try to listen, try to offer a smile, or offer something that Cargill might be able to do to help the situation.

The wound and the blessing

Interviewer: Luigino Bruni writes about the wound and the blessing. In business we put policies in place so that your problems don't become my problems, and in protecting ourselves from wounds we also protect ourselves from ever helping someone in a way that could be a blessing. Is there a way you have opened yourself to wounds that led to your being blessed?

Emery Koenig: I understand the question. I personally am very careful about lending money, or saying, okay, we'll do this and you pay me back. I'd much rather give them the funds.

For example, we adopted two children from Peru. Their birth mother had a real tough situation. She was not in control of her own destiny. And so, when we left, we gave her through our translator enough money (I think for six or nine months) to be able to live in an apartment. And it was a gift. Much clearer and clear to do it as a gift, as opposed to getting into lending.

We've had a couple of situations where my wife said, well, I've got this friend (actually, it was a cleaning person in Geneva) who could really use some help. And I said, let's not get into the lending thing. If we want to give her a gift, let's do that. Let's give her a gift and make it free. Not that we're looking down at her, or that we're wealthier, but we're trying to help.

That's one of the things we learned going through internal philanthropy within the Focolare: we call it the communion of goods. Each of us has a role. If you're giving me money, there needs to be an exchange. I need to give you something in return, in terms of the relationship, so as not to feel indebted. It's an equal partnership, as opposed to me just cutting checks and handing them to this poor little chap here. We need to try to stay away from that.

So, for example, if I do see someone at a stop sign, I give them ten dollars or five dollars or whatever I have, and ask his name, and give him the dignity he deserves. And it's a gift. There's always the question mark: well, is he going to go buy cigarettes or drugs or alcohol? Well, that could be. But that's not my issue. My issue is that I need to help him in his situation. With some prudence and judgment, of course. But we always try to be on the side of gifting.

And there are organizations that can help discern those things. For example, my wife and I went to the Labouré Society. Their mission is to help men and women who want to enter the seminary or religious life but have debt; most of the time it's school debt. And they don't give them any money. They help them prepare their story, prepare letters, make contacts. They help train them with classes, to help them get through it.

The number I saw when we were at the meeting was something like four hundred and fifty priests who are priests now because that debt got taken care of. And I can understand, from a diocese's standpoint, if you've got half a million or three-quarters of a million dollars to put a person through seminary, that's a lot of money, and some dioceses clearly can't afford it. Some families clearly can't afford it.

And going to school these days: if you're looking at being a doctor and you realize, well, that's really not my vocation, or maybe I want to be a teacher, well, that's not my vocation either. And all of a sudden, they recognize the priesthood is where they really belong. But now they've got this school debt, and it prevents them from fulfilling their vocation.

So, we're contributing to the Labouré Society to run this program. It's a really smart, practical way of helping people fulfil a vocation that wouldn't be practical otherwise. Look at it from the seminary's standpoint: we'll pay Andy's debt of two hundred thousand dollars, and then Andy's in the seminary for a year and realizes this is not his vocation. Now what does the seminary do? Are we going to come back

and sue you? No, we just can't do that. And a lot of the money that should be going into the retirement fund for priests and religious is now going to fulfil these things. So, it's a really interesting idea for how they operate. And again, the funds don't go to that person. The funds go to running the program.

Profit maximization

Interviewer: Business schools are very good at teaching profit maximization and not much else. What do you think of profit maximization as a goal, and is there an alternative that makes more sense?

Emery Koenig: Profit maximization, underscore maximization: that's a dangerous term. It's very short-term oriented. It's like: if I need something, I need to suck the blood right out of you, and I'm going to do it right now. I don't care about tomorrow. Today's my opportunity to suck blood. I'll deal with you tomorrow as I need to. And boy, I don't think that's the world I want to live in.

Now, you get into optimization, and a lot of organizations talk about the triple bottom line. Obviously, profits are important, but so are people and the environment. And how are we doing on those? Because if it's just profit maximization, you may be sucking the blood out of your people. You may be sucking the blood out of the environment. But it looks great today. I fear that our current administration is sucking the blood out of a lot of different things today, and I think we're all going to pay. I hope not, but that could be a possibility down the road, especially on relationships.

So back to the point. Yes, you do need to earn money. We're responsible for capital, and capital has to have a return. You want to do a good job. You want to be credible. It's the oxygen for future growth. If you're not making money, or not doing something that achieves reasonable returns, you're not going to get the capital: it's going to go somewhere else, and you're just not going to be a sustainable business. So, I don't want to make light of that. But it's got to be more than that. Way more than that.

If we're only teaching profit maximization, I think we're doing a big disservice. When I've talked to business schools, or to engineering students, I go way beyond that, because you've got to get into the people aspect and the long-term aspects. Otherwise, what a dismal life and what a dismal world we're going to live in if it's all profit maximization.

That's where the EoC helps provide a conscience for that. At least to think about those things, to find ways to think about the person we need to help, about investing in the business and investing in our community, and recognizing that with the profits we have to pay someone back. The bank. Moneys not free. So, we have to be responsible with the assets we're given, or that we've earned.

So, is there an alternative? I think it's an *and* more than an alternative. Because you can't disregard that we're not running a charity organization here. We do have to earn money. Even the non-profits, or what I call mission-based businesses, that I chair or am involved with today: I'm sorry, we've got to make money. Focolare Media, we have to make money. Your EoC businesses: I'm sorry, we've got to return something. But it's got to be an *and*. We've got to do more than that.

I prefer to look at things as optimizing profits rather than maximizing them, because if you maximize now, sometimes you're going to sacrifice your future. And there are situations (with customers, with relationships, with investments) where you're going to have to sacrifice, and take on debt or take on

lower earnings up front, because of how we're trying to build it.

I give full marks to Cargill. Back in the late nineties, when things started to get a little flat: we weren't earning what we wanted, engagement wasn't what we wanted, the culture wasn't what we wanted, Cargill turned the organization upside down. They called it strategic intent. It's not a new strategy; it's a strategic intent, a direction we want to change. We wanted to increase our value with customers, as opposed to a customer being a necessary evil. Providing customer solutions, as opposed to: if it's good for me, I'll do it, and if it's good for you, you'd better pay me or I'm not going to do it.

We went through a bit of a trough there, because we lost a lot of people who thought it was crazy. We were building leadership skills as opposed to management skills, because you manage things, you lead people. We lost a lot of people, earnings stayed flat, but I'll tell you, we ended up on the right trajectory. We had a bit of a tailwind from the markets too. But it was really a case of optimizing the balance between long term and short term. There's always tension between those two, and there has to be. But if you get down to just maximizing the front end, you're really going to pay for it down the road.

There are a lot of organizations that did that. You mentioned Enron. They maximized the front end and things didn't go well, obviously. And they had a lot of ethical issues. In fact, I've shown that film, *The Smartest Guys in the Room*. It's an eye-opener. Boy, who would have thought?

Interviewer: My MBA class watches a film a week: Enron, *Inside Job* about the 2008 crisis, *Margin Call*, one about Jeff Bezos.

Emery Koenig: That's another interesting one. They were ten years before they made a profit. Ten years before they made a profit. You're talking about faith and hope, and the tension between short term and long term. Clearly it was a long-term play, and it was exactly the right thing to do.

Business and the common good

Interviewer: Business contributes to the common good in complicated ways, sometimes unintentionally. How can we, through our intentions and commitments, use business to produce more of it?

Emery Koenig: I often think about corporation: cooperation, working together. It's such a magical thing. If you can take raw materials and all of a sudden, we have an iPhone, or a car, or a candy bar. It's miraculous, quite frankly, to get all those things happening in a profitable, safe, environmentally responsible way. It's amazing.

A lot of studies have been done. If you buy people a jacket, they have a sense of belonging. I work for Ford Motor Company, and my dad worked for Ford Motor Company, and I'm proud of that. It gives them a sense of belonging and identity. Hopefully it doesn't get carried away, where all they think they are is a Ford employee. But that sense of belonging matters.

And now you look at a lot of these corporations: they're going to have a daycare, a drugstore, a barber shop. All these things, because it's really a place where people spend a lot of time, and you need to be able to accommodate that. If it were purely transactional, you'd say, I'm sorry, have your husband do

that, or your wife, or hire someone else. But having those things really adds in a positive way to that cooperation and working together, and bringing together the common good, and creating an atmosphere that's positive and fun to work in.

For example, on the trading floor we used to have a hundred and four people on the floor itself. About half of that was back office, not in a derogatory sense, but accounting, forwarding, documentation, logistics. And the other half was trading and working with customers.

I had this philosophy: pack them in tight, so it's energetic and it's buzzing and you've got energy. If you're making a trade with the Russians and I'm talking to the Chinese, I can hear what's going on and I can adjust things a bit. So, people would come to Geneva to visit and say, wow, there's so much energy here, so much electricity, so much life and vibrancy.

And then I'd get into an office where everyone had their own little stanchion, and it drove me nuts. I can't even handle that. It's so anti-life in a lot of ways. Just make it tight and energetic, because you can create electricity. And the more energy you have, the more people's ideas come forward. Someone would stand up and ring a bell saying, I just sold a cargo to Korea, oh, fantastic, and the guys on the other phone with Korea are laughing their heads off, because they know the corn trader is ringing the bell for the trade. A lot of stuff like that.

It helps create an atmosphere where you've really got something to offer people. The last thing you want is a morgue, where it's dead quiet, nothing's going on, no life, no energy, no excitement, no conflict. Pretty boring. It's not going to be a stimulating environment to work in.

Advice to a student

Interviewer: I have a student, a bright accounting major, who doesn't want to go into business because he feels he can do more good in nonprofits. I counsel students that they can do a great deal more good going into business. What are your thoughts?

Emery Koenig: Amen, brother. I've had a similar question come up.

I'll use my own example. Over my career, at about the ten-year mark, I was managing operations down in Houston, and it was grinding on me. What else could I do? Is this going to be the rest of my life? Is this a choice I'm making here?

It wracked my brain for a long time. And I finally decided the only other thing I'd rather do, possibly, was become a lawyer. So, I took an LSAT prep course. I thought it was super interesting. I really loved getting into a different mindset. Then I took the LSAT, and I still remember I was in Kansas City and I called my wife and she said, well, you got your scores back.

At the time you needed three things: a good LSAT score, progressive grades in college, and work experience. My grades in college were good enough, and they were progressive. My LSAT score was good enough to get into most law schools, probably not the top ones. And work experience: I had ten years with Cargill. And I still remember going: you know, I think I'm going to work for Cargill.

It was the most freeing experience, because at least I had a choice. I could do this, or I could do what I'm doing. I really felt free to continue to work for Cargill. I never looked back. But I had to get that out of my system somewhere along the line.

You need to earn a living. And I think it's important that people do something they're passionate about, that they like, where they have expertise and can grow. And if they want to volunteer, be on a board, spend Saturdays with a boys' club or a girls' club, do those things. That's a really nice balance.

I do run into people: I've got a niece who works for a nonprofit and is happy as a lark. For some people that's exactly what they need to do. Very mission-driven. And I also know people for whom going into business drives them nuts, because it's not enough of a mission. And I'm sorry, I feel like it *was* my vocation. We're feeding the world and we're adding value here. It's a good contribution that Cargill is making, or Mosaic, or whoever it is. There's a lot of good these companies are doing, so please acknowledge it. Don't paint with a black brush that all companies are bad, all business is bad, all big companies are bad, so I'll just stay away from them. That's really short-sighted. So, I coach people the same way you do: just do something you really love. And that may be a nonprofit.

But I also notice that with nonprofits, or, I'd rather call them mission-oriented. Not that Cargill doesn't have a mission, or that other companies don't. But I don't like to call them non-profits, because they have to make a profit. They have to thrive or survive. They have to earn money in general, or be able to raise it in donations.

And I've often found, getting into mission-based organizations, that they need so much help, because they really don't know how to run a business as a business, with a board. What is the board's responsibility? How do we have committees? What's the committee structure? Who's got decision rights over this? What's our ethics policy? What's our grant-making policy? Putting a structure behind that, including personnel issues. It's first nature to a business. It's not always so in a mission-oriented organization, because we're focused on helping feed people, or whatever it is. So, I think it's really important that we appreciate the contribution businesspeople can make to a mission-oriented organization, by serving on the board or helping out.

And I'd be a little concerned that a nonprofit may not be the best place to *learn* business. It's a misnomer: it's mission-based. You still need to earn money. You still need to run a very solid organization. You still need to build a brand.

Take the Catholic Community Foundation, which is a very well-run organization. I was on their board for nine years and chaired their grants committee for eight of those years. I think we had two hundred and thirty, two hundred and fifty million dollars of assets under management, and now we're bumping up on a billion. In the last fifteen years or so. It's really a big gift to the church: handling capital campaigns, donor-advised funds, endowments where people can leave a legacy gift to be distributed in perpetuity. A lot of positive things going on, and a very well-run business, with a lot of business people on the board. Over the last twenty-five or thirty years they've really built it up.

So, you can eventually get there. But often it's not where you find really good business principles being taught, because it's just not necessarily their highest priority. In business it *is* a priority. It has to be, because otherwise you can't survive, you can't thrive, and you can't perpetuate what you stand for.

Interviewer: Is the Catholic Community Foundation like a community foundation, where it's like putting money in a bank, but it can only go out to a 501(c)(3)?

Emery Koenig: For a donor-advised fund, that's correct. But you also have institutions. For example, we're starting the Focolare Foundation, and we've deposited money in there. You've got endowment funds, and you've got agency funds, which act more like a bank: you put it in as a 501(c)(3) and you can take it back out. So, there are variations. But for a private individual, you're absolutely right.

And they outperform. All their investment guidelines are compliant with the USCCB principles on ethical investing, and they outperform the regular market. By two or three basis points. But: good ethics is good business.

Interviewer: What advice would you give to students who fear that business is a soul-sucking endeavor, that they will be squashed in a corporation and won't be able to hold on to their values?

Emery Koenig: I appreciate the concern. A lot of it comes down to how you handle your own soul, and not gifting it to the organization or gifting it to your supervisor. Maintain your own dignity and your own respect for yourself.

It really comes down to: who are you going to work for? Is it an ethical company? What do other employees say about it? Do they feel like they're getting their soul sucked out of them, or do they say, this is the greatest place, there's innovation, all these things going on, I'm free, I get to travel, I'm meeting great people, we've got a great team, we do things on the weekends together?

You've got to find the right organization with the right culture. And I'll tell you, I'm just so thankful, and I lucked out with Cargill. What they stood for was very consistent with what I stood for.

Getting back to ethics, I still remember a senior executive telling me when I was a young merchant: here's what you need to remember. Never embarrass yourself, and don't you ever embarrass Cargill. That's really good ethical advice.

And if you get to treat it like your own business: I mentioned the whole freedom to operate, and how I could run my businesses, in general, how I wanted to. I was totally free. Yes, we had requirements. You've got to deliver the goods. But it was far from soul-sucking. Now, if you want to let your soul get sucked away, that's your problem, not the corporation's problem.

But I can also see where you've got organizations (hopefully they're few and far between) that are just there to deliver the goods. And it also depends what the job is. If you're going to be on an assembly line pulling a lever, that can be a soul-sucking one.

For example, Cargill had a big poultry business in northern England. I have never seen someone disassemble a chicken with a knife the way they do, because the faster and more efficiently they do it, the more time off they get at the end of the week. So, they're highly motivated. But I'm not sure what it would be like to have your business card say, head chicken eviscerator. Still, they're highly incentivized, and they get time off at the end of the week. So, there are ways to make it more interesting, rotating those jobs around. There are some manual labor jobs that can feel like that at times.

Cargill's beef business has often served as an entryway for people just coming to the U.S. They may or may not speak English. We make sure they have the appropriate documentation. And once they get a better job, they'll move on to something else. It's really an entryway.

At one point, when I first got on the senior leadership team, we had a hundred percent turnover in some of these businesses. And I'm going: how do you survive with a hundred percent turnover? And we worked and worked and worked and got it down to twenty or thirty, which is really good for that business. In general, if you're between five and a maximum of ten percent, that's very reasonable. You want to have some turnover, but not a hundred percent for sure. And if you get north of ten, that's a red flag. It's very labor intensive. We pay very good wages, but it's not something you may want to do the rest of your life, unless you can figure out how to switch your brain off.

So, it comes back to choose your company well. Choose the culture well. And to a degree you can choose your supervisor well, and what type of business you're in. There are some people (I probably worked for fifteen or eighteen different supervisors) and some I would go through a wall for. They were really super. I learned a lot from them. And there were one or two in particular who were very, very difficult. They were either workaholics or they were abusive. One we nicknamed Dr. Death, because he could literally suck the life out of a person or a room very quickly. Very, very difficult to work with. They're no longer with Cargill, obviously.

But even then: I still remember fairly early in my career, I got out of bed one morning and thought: today I'm going to learn how *not* to treat people. Today will be a good day. So, you learn even from those people. You learn what you can do to protect yourself, and how to set your boundaries. And at some point, you may have to move on, maybe outside the firm, or just to a different role, to move away from them.

There will always be some difficult individuals to work with. And some of those individuals got promoted higher than they should have, from a leadership standpoint. We spent a lot of time at Cargill calling those out, because it just wasn't fair to the people below them. People deserved the best leader we could provide.

Part Eight: Feeding the world

The joy of giving

Interviewer: People often say capitalism is based on self-interest: the butcher, the brewer and the baker are each doing what's in their own interest, and it happens to produce bread and beer and meat for the rest of us. Some find it strange to say that giving makes you happy. Can you explain that?

Emery Koenig: Giving. Actually, it was in high school that I had a moment where I recognized that if you want something, give it away. If you want something, give it away. If I want a friend, I need to give my friendship away. If I need something (it may be money) I need to give what I have away and rely on God's providence to come back and do it in a way that I can't do myself. It's something that stuck with me for my lifetime. If I want something, give it away.

And I think, too, if we're made in the image and likeness of God, and we have the presence of God within us, and God is love, then love only becomes alive if you're giving it away.

In married life, I was thinking about this morning after almost forty-seven years of marriage: it's a laboratory in forgiveness. It's a laboratory in love. It's a laboratory in love being a choice. Some of the high school seniors I talk to ask, how do you stay married? And I tell them, don't quit. Just don't quit. That's the biggest thing. You may feel like quitting, but hang in there. Usually, it's the time when I really feel like saying, the heck with this, that you drive to the store and bring flowers home and give them to your wife. That's the act of love and embracing that suffering, because you have to try to renew that relationship, renew that love.

Even in business: our CEO, Greg, whom I spoke very highly of and still think very highly of, and we're still in contact, he said one time that, we're a faith-based organization. What does that mean? It means that if I do something for you, I have enough faith in you, and I know who you are, and I trust you, that somewhere along the line when I need a favor you're going to reciprocate. So, it's really building a human relationship, as opposed to being transactional: I need this, here's my contract, you deliver, and if you don't deliver, I sue you. We've got to be bigger than that. We've got to be better than that.

I've also been involved with a lot of boards, including Cargill's philanthropy. Cargill gave away one and a half percent of our pre-tax earnings on a three-year rolling average, which ends up being about sixty to eighty million dollars per year at the time. And I'll tell you, when earnings went south and we're still operating on three years back, it was tougher and tougher to stand there and still give money away, even though the family wasn't so happy with our results. But we needed to make sure that those organizations we'd agreed to support (whether in Africa or elsewhere) we had to stand there and do that. So, I always defended that and would not let Cargill back off, because people have this need to give.

It's not giving to a need. It's the need to give. And it makes people happy. I'm sure we experience that at home, and with colleagues, and getting a sandwich for someone. That whole notion of giving just makes people happy.

I hope I see parts of it coming back now: a concern for the common good, more than just what suits me. What suits my ego, what suits my desires, what suits my bank account. I've got to be more concerned than that.

The culture in the U.S. is very interesting, because it does have a culture of giving. It's the most philanthropic culture in the world. I'm sure there are some self-serving parts to that, but in general it's just an attitude of giving. If there's a catastrophe or whatever, people give. For example, Notre-Dame in Paris, with the damage from the fire, the biggest amount of money came from the U.S. Not a small amount. People just have this need to give.

I think that's part of our culture here, which we in the Focolare, we in the Catholic Church, we in society, need to make sure we keep tapping into. It's becoming more and more important as the government pulls back a lot of those services. For example, my sister-in-law, because of what's going on

in Minneapolis right now with immigration enforcement, is going to Hispanic families who are afraid to leave their houses, bringing them food, taking their kids to school. Because it really makes people happy.

I think that's really part of the joy. It can't be about me. It can't be about my selfishness. To the degree that I'm able to give, I'm happy. That's one of the things Chiara said one time: "Christianity will guarantee happiness." Guarantee happiness! You may suffer, but you're going to be happy. And I think that joy inside comes from giving, from trying to love our neighbor, from trying to love the person next to us, from trying to do the will of God in each moment. Those things make us happy.

And quite frankly, that's part of our human nature. We found that out after Covid, when everyone was isolated for a year or two. Holy smokes, we need each other. We're built for each other. We're meant for each other. I think it's one of the early paragraphs in the catechism: "man is a social being." We have to reach out and do those things for the greater good, and to the degree we can help rebuild that, I think it's a good thing.

Which goes back to Cargill and being a good corporate citizen: adding value more than just putting grains or raw materials out for people to eat. We wanted to do it in a way that adds value, that adds life. So, for example, before we go into a country, often we'll go in there and start building schools, whether it's in Vietnam or other parts of Asia. I think we're over a hundred schools in Vietnam that Cargill has built. We go in as a good corporate citizen and build schools. And then when you want to come in and say, I need a permit to build something else to help sustain bringing in food, importing commodities, building a flour mill or a corn mill, the government is much more interested, because they recognize we're not simply here to extract value from local people. We're adding value. We're building those schools.

One of the last times I was in Africa, we were in Zambia, and we had built a school that actually had male and female toilets for the students. And they were so happy. So happy that they gave me a goat. And our manager next to me said, Emery, this is like a Mercedes-Benz. For them this is a really big deal. These are very poor people, and they give you a goat.

Now, what am I going to do? I'm going to take this goat back in the company plane to Minneapolis? There was one of our Cargill people with us who raises goats, so we took care of that. But it was something to give, to show their appreciation that we had actually built a school and built restrooms for the students, so they didn't have to meet under a tree. And it really helps build our corporate citizenship, and expresses the values that Cargill stood for.

That's the giving to a need, as opposed to the need to give. I think people have that innate need to give. And to the degree we can provide opportunities to do that, it's a big gift for the world.

Egypt

Interviewer: Can you think of an encounter with a customer where your Focolare values played a role, where you responded in a way you might not have if you were just doing business as usual?

Emery Koenig: There's probably one that comes to mind but I have to set a little background, and I think I'll name the country. This is Egypt.

Egypt is a very interesting place. It's the fourth largest importing country for agricultural commodities, a big importer, because they're obviously in the desert and can't raise their own food.

We had a customer who was importing corn out of South America in particular, and the U.S. We would support him in placing corn into Egypt. We had our own office in Cairo, but no facilities.

He and I had dinner one time. He was also a pilot. He had his own domestic airline. He had his own trucking company. He was building a soybean crushing plant outside Alexandria, and a discharge facility to unload the soybeans, truck them into the crushing plant, and then distribute the oil and meal to his customers.

We had dinner together one night, and this was shortly after an airline crash, an Egypt Air flight leaving New York, I think it was, took off and crashed. And he just made the comment, as a pilot, that ninety percent of airline accidents are pilot error.

So, we thought about that and looked at our exposure in the business, and we said: boy, if this guy got killed in a plane accident, we'd have a huge amount of exposure. So, we asked him, would you mind if we took a twenty-five-million-dollar life insurance policy out on your life? And he said, no, it's no problem at all. I understand why you're doing it. It's important.

A couple of weeks later the policy comes back, and it does not acknowledge that he's a pilot. So, it's null and void. And I said, we've got to send it back and have them acknowledge that he's a pilot.

Two days later, he's flying parts for his plant from Germany back into Egypt, and he runs out of fuel in his airplane, which is the ultimate pilot mistake. And he finds a place to land in a rice field. He gets the plane landed, and there was one palm tree sticking out, and he hits it and gets killed instantly.

And here we are. This man owed us sixteen million dollars, a significant amount for the size of the business. And he had a soybean plant partially built that we didn't want any part of, because it was in the middle of the desert, and we like things set up much differently.

So, in order to get our money back, I had to finish building the plant and get it up and running so I could pay Cargill back. I had to go to the our CEO and say, I need another eight million dollars. And there's a rule of thumb in business: "never throw good money after bad." So here I am, getting that read back to me. Emery, do you know what the rule is? Yes, I do know what the rule is. Let me just make this work. And I got: "okay, you can have it, but not a penny more." To make a long story short, we got the plant up and running, and it ended up being one of Cargill's most successful plants. Did a very nice business there.

Now, is that directly tied to the Focolare? Probably, in the sense of hope. And perseverance. Things looked pretty dark, but you don't want to lose that hope. And also recognizing the people there, especially in a country like Egypt, where you've got a significant number of people below the poverty line.

I don't know if it comes down to hope or perseverance or being responsible. I allowed this error to be made; therefore, I'm going to get Cargill out of it. I don't know if it's a justice thing or a responsibility thing. It could have been easier: in fact, I had a lot of pressure from senior management: "Emery, just let that go, we'll write it off, don't worry about it." I just couldn't do it. Because there was a right way to do this, and I believed we could get it done. So, we engaged the team, and we had the support from Cargill, and we got it done and paid ourselves back in multiples.

I always enjoyed visiting Egypt at that time, because the government subsidized petroleum for cars: everyone paid twenty cents a gallon or whatever it was. They subsidized flour, they subsidized sugar, they subsidized vegetable oil. So, there was no one going hungry. It was a positive thing in that sense. You just don't have the raw poverty you see in a lot of other countries. Everyone was reasonably okay, not where they wanted to be, maybe, but reasonably okay.

At the time I was also on the board of C.A.R.E. based in Atlanta, GA. Remember the CARE packages that were sent to Europe during and after the war? That was the board of CARE. So, we started working with CARE with farmers in Egypt who were raising rice along the Nile. It would all get flooded and they'd lose all their money. So, we got them into soybeans, and they could truck their soybeans up to our plant. It was very small volume, but it helped build a relationship with CARE.

That's where a lot of our partnerships came from. Being on the Cargill Cares Committee, chairing that, you look at all the things we're doing with the large charitable organizations. They're all partnerships, public and private partnerships, where we could provide something that was really important.

The women farmers of Zambia

Interviewer: Can you tell us the story of the women farmers in Zambia?

Emery Koenig: Let's talk about the southern cone of Africa. You've got Zimbabwe and Zambia and South Africa. South Africa is the larger agriculturally oriented one, whether it's cotton or corn or soybeans. And the growth in South Africa was such that if it rained, we'd have a surplus, including exports north to Zimbabwe and especially Zambia. And if it was a drought, we'd be importing, including into Zambia.

So, we started developing a business as we grew in Africa, and as we worked on growing more crops, we started working with female farmers. One of our employees moved from South Africa to Zambia with her family to help start these businesses up.

One of the things we had to do was learn about the productivity of these farmers. Each family needs one ton of corn to survive for a whole year, and they were barely making the one ton.

So, we started developing how to teach them to farm. Teaching farming practices, providing the seed, because a lot of the seed they'd get would be adulterated, or the fertilizer would be adulterated with sand. So, we tried to get clean product to them that would work, so they wouldn't get ripped off. And then provide a market when they grew their crops: we'd take their crops off them and make starch, because starch is a big thing in the southern African cone. Cornstarch is a very big staple down there. If someone had a big meal, they'd have starch afterwards for dessert.

So, we ended up working with sixty thousand female farmers. We'd lend them the seed, lend them the fertilizer, teach them how to farm, and walk through all of it with them, because literacy and education rates were not always that high. And we got their yields up to four tons per hectare, which got them out of poverty. Now they could raise something else too, not necessarily all corn. We had them in groups that acted like little cooperatives, so they all had to protect each other. If one didn't perform, someone else had to make it up.

And with the female farmers we had a hundred percent performance. Anything we lent them, anything we taught them, they always paid everything back. I don't know if I was joking or not, but we said they had a hundred and one percent success rate. Let's call it a hundred. Everything we lent them, we got back. They were very, very good about responsibility, and I think it really helped the sanctity of the agreements and contracts we had with them. When we tried it with men, the highest we ever got was eighty or ninety percent. They had to sit at the bar and think. And the women are out there working the fields, raising families, cooking, depositing money in the bank and running the family. They were just so much easier to work with in that type of culture. So, we decided to work only with female farmers. And it was really great to be around them. They were so appreciative.

For Cargill's hundred and fiftieth anniversary we ran learning journeys, and I took one to South Africa and Zambia. We brought people from Walmart, from Unilever, from a couple of universities, from the Iowa Corn Growers Association, etc., to come see how this world operates and what we could do together. Each company is trying to do something, but if we can work together, we can leverage each other's resources. It was really an interesting trip. We learned a lot and built some very good relationships, and it was an eye-opener for them in terms of where our starting point is, and how we can work together to really get people out of poverty.

A couple of times I was there talking with the women, and there were two requests. One was: Cargill, please don't leave us. They recognized that we really were adding value to their lives and helping them get out of poverty.

And the second was: can you take our money for us? Because we paid them in cash, and they had to walk two, three, four, five miles down a dirt road to the closest bank and put their money in and then walk back. The safety aspects were serious: we had one fatality at one of our facilities where someone was killed because they had cash. Not a lot, but they had cash. So, we got into electronic banking with mobile phones, to try to do that. We were just on the verge, right when I retired, of making it economically feasible, as opposed to just a humanitarian project.

It was a great model. If you can get people out of poverty and get them educated: here we're building schools and laboratories, you start changing these countries that really need help. You've got 1.2 billion people in Africa, fifty-five countries, and we have to do something to help raise them out of poverty, especially by getting the children educated. That's the key to eliminating poverty, ultimately.

All these things were opportunities to do something for the common good. And the impact you can have outside North America is significantly bigger, where a dollar goes a lot farther than it does here in the U.S. That's why I just loved working with Africa, loved working with the Middle East. The impact you could have was very, very big.

The schools in Vietnam

Interviewer: Could you also talk about the Vietnam schools? Cargill trying to do the right thing, which was also, long term, good business.

Emery Koenig: We got into the animal nutrition business, taking corn and other things and mixing them together for bagged animal feed, whether for poultry or hogs. And it was the animal nutrition business that really led the foray into being a good corporate citizen.

As I mentioned, the family had expectations of management: that we be a good corporate citizen; that we do something of noble importance that was not insignificant to the world; that we run a business they could be proud of; that we grow; that we be survivable, because in 2008, for example, that's the only stock the family owns, and that's their entire net worth, so we've got to protect it, and that's why Cargill has to be diversified. And also, that we be profitable. Who doesn't want to be profitable?

So, you get into these areas and recognize where they need schools. They're meeting under a tree. So, let's build a school. And these are not expensive schools to build: cinder block, open air. And then build lavatories, especially for the girls, which is very important.

You're spending money up front. Granted, it's not a lot. And it's all in the hope of being a good corporate citizen, and of building a better relationship where people understand that.

For example, I was Cargill's representative on APEC, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and I went to all the meetings. The one in Hawaii, President Obama was there. I've been to one in China, and others in Asia etc.

We were meeting in Vietnam with APEC, and I sat down at the table, and you're sitting with a lot of your competitors and other people wanting to meet with the president of Vietnam. So, we go around the table. My name is Emery Koenig and I work for Cargill, and thank you for allowing us to operate in your country.

And the president says: Cargill? Come, come, come. You sit next to me. You sit next to me. And, do you have any issues or problems?

I said, well, we're having trouble getting permits on some of our feed plants, and we're being penalized because a lot of the local operators don't have to pay the same tax we do. And he said, I'll take care of it for you. No problem.

And what I didn't realize was that Cargill's first school, of the hundred we've built there, was in his hometown. I didn't realize that.

So, did it pay off? Obviously, it paid off. But you've got to be a good corporate citizen and do the right thing to help people get out of poverty.

I remember one of my first trips down to Brazil, you fly into São Paulo, and you just see the favelas all the way around the city. I went to the Focolare in Brazil and I was talking with the people there, saying, what's the solution? How do you break this cycle of poverty? And he was very clear, and he's the one who came up with the Economy of Communion (EoC). He said you've got to educate children. That's the

only way you're going to raise people who can run for election. They're the only ones who can choose, who have the education that's so important in a democracy, to vote for the person who's actually going to help you, and not for the person who's giving you a dollar to get their vote.

So, getting people out of poverty starts with educating children. That's really why the education of children, and the health of children, are so important to Cargill. That's how you're going to break the poverty cycle ultimately. I've never forgotten that, and I've used that example, which gives you a lot of encouragement to go back into Africa and build schools and lavatories.

Even now, at the school in Nakuru, Kenya, we're up to six hundred and seventy-five students, and it's a private school. Tuition is not easy. We're probably ten to fifteen percent lower than the other two private schools, and we've got a higher standard of education. So, we've got to make sure we're paying our teachers properly, which was my point when I was pushing the board on Tuesday. We've had six teachers turn over, and they go to the government school in Kenya because they get health care and they get paid more and their life is a little simpler. Here, as a private school, it's more mission-based, and you may or may not pay top dollar. So, we can also roll over things we've learned in Africa or in Brazil and leverage them in Kenya.

Helping those in need

Interviewer: Cargill says it feeds the world, so that is part of the mission. But how have you tried to use business, or what you have been given through business, to help those in need?

Emery Koenig: It's a great question and a great opportunity.

We had a serious problem in East Africa in terms of starvation. And the family members of Cargill bought a cargo full of rice with their own personal money, and we had all the logistics, and put it into East Africa to help supply that. Now, that's the good news, because you're filling an immediate need. And the family stepped up: it wasn't Cargill, it was the Cargill family that did that.

The flip side is that if you're a farmer in that area, you just got squelched, because you're bringing in free commodities. How am I supposed to raise rice or corn and bring it to market? So, it's a double-edged sword.

What tends to work best is to provide funds into those countries and buy the local or regional crops. And you need people who can do that in an ethical way, so that silly things don't happen, like the product being absconded with, or not given to the people it belongs to. Which gets into our partnership with organizations like CARE. We've had a twenty, thirty, forty-year relationship with CARE, because they are very good at that, and very trustworthy. We apply a lot of funds to them and they help do that.

Second, to build trust in your brand you need to be a good corporate citizen. How you run your business, food quality, being reasonable in how you price and not gouging. We've donated turkeys, donated beef, donated all those things just to help an immediate situation.

Longer run, it comes down to running very efficient logistics: not being sloppy, not spending money where we shouldn't, to keep prices very reasonable. That's one thing the American consumer counts on: having reasonably (I'll call it cheap, not cheap in terms of quality, but in terms of price) food. Look at

the percentage of income that's spent on food here. It's much less than in Europe or a lot of the world, because we've got a very efficient domestic system.

And again, free trade is very important, because that's the most efficient, where you don't have to deal with tariffs or artificial trade flows that aren't workable. We had a situation with a Middle Eastern country that decided they wanted to raise their own wheat. And it's like: seriously, we can help you with that. So you have those discussions, where you try to bring in food and let them do what they're very good at.

At Cargill, and even at Mosaic, we have a lot of things going on with employees and with customers: projects where we go out to a school, or an area, or a food shelf, or a soup kitchen. We want the employees engaged, we want our customers engaged, and we'll supply whatever we need to help fund and support it. It's a really meaningful experience for employees.

I remember one time in Geneva our office went down to a food kitchen to serve during lunch. And I remember myself and a colleague getting instructions. We had to cut the sausages, and we were instructed to be really careful to cut them all the same, because if you cut one too big the person behind is going to be very upset. So, we had to make sure we were being very fair and reasonable.

It gives people a joy. Employees enjoy engaging in things like that. So, there are multiple opportunities: within the formal side of business, within trade flows, within the global business, with employees, with the partners we have. And we're big supporters of the United Way; we raise a lot of money for them.

Peace and unity through trade

Interviewer: How might Focolare or EoC values bring about peace and unity through business, at the company level or at a bigger one?

Emery Koenig: It's a good question, about the role business can have: locally, regionally, nationally and especially internationally.

Cargill and many companies are big proponents of free trade, because it's much more efficient. In the case of China, because they opened up their trade; it's gotten complicated with tariff issues, but in general they opened up their trade and brought something like seven hundred million people out of poverty and into the middle class. So, there's a really positive part of that.

Second, there's the notion of comparative advantage. To put it in agricultural terms: Brazil is unbelievable at raising soybeans. The climate, the land, the soil: everything is really good for it. Europe is very good and has a huge history of raising high-quality wheat. And the U.S. loves to raise corn. So, to the degree that you have a comparative advantage, if the world needs soybeans they should probably be coming out of Brazil, rather than forcing other countries to grow crops just to be self-sufficient.

But it requires trust and it requires relationships. It requires understanding how the rest of the world works. When Covid hit, a lot of this came to a screeching halt, because you weren't sure what was going on. But in normal times, open free trade, the trust it requires, the relationships it requires, and thinking

longer term, because if I'm selling a commodity or a product or a part to another country, you have that codependency, and it really pulls the world together. Not that it doesn't have hiccups, but in general it's a positive thing.

Second, you have a lot of governments trying to do the right thing. But for example, we had situations where there was a crop failure in several parts of the world and we had extremely high commodity prices. At Cargill we always have this debate: if there's one bushel of corn left in the world, who gets it? Food, feed or fuel?

And for a variety of reasons, governments have mandated that it has to go for fuel. And if it's mandated, you can't change it, so it's forcing pigs to go without and humans can't eat it because we're going to use it for fuel. We spent a lot of time at Cargill trying to relitigate that: when you've got extremely high prices, let's draw down this dependency on being forced to use it for fuel.

It's a scary thought to get in front of farmers trying to reduce the mandate. It's almost like saying, okay, Andy, you must eat three olives a day. I'm sorry, who's mandating that? Well, the government is. It doesn't work in reality, but with the fuel issue they've done it. So, we worked very hard on that, and I think there's more common sense being played into it now.

And you've also got developing countries who are struggling to import petroleum or fuel, so they start using food to make biodiesel or ethanol. And it really doesn't make a lot of sense. So, if you go back to depending on a country that's got the rain and the land and the fertilizer and the cost structure and the transportation to supply that food, you can do other things with your livelihood, as opposed to forcing food into fuel production. The exception is sugar. Sugar is a highly economical, powerful fuel ingredient. But even there, they toggle back and forth between using it for ethanol or exporting it as sugar.

2008

Interviewer: Can you talk about the undermining of trust in the 2008 and 2009 crisis, when banks stopped lending even to each other? How did that affect business at Cargill?

Emery Koenig: That was a really, I'll use the word, scary crisis. It just really shook the whole world, and things froze up.

I remember I was responsible for a three-hour segment at one of our meetings with two or three hundred people there from all over the world. And they wanted to walk through various scenarios about what could happen, just to have the dialogue.

I think it was Eisenhower who said that going into war you need to have a plan, and once you're in battle, the plan is useless, but you've got to have a plan. You have to have people prepared to think and then adjust as you go forward.

So, I wanted us to think through various scenarios, because no one knew what was going to happen. We spent weeks trying to think of scenarios: this could happen, then this, then this. And a week later we were in crazier shape than what we thought was crazy when we came up with the scenario.

We spent a lot of time at Cargill thinking about what was going to happen. Was the economy going to be a W, where it drops and pops up and it's choppy? Could it be a V, where you come down and bounce back? Some people were of the opinion it comes in an L, where you drop down and stay there forever. Could it be an I, where you just crash and sit there? Could it be a U? We finally concluded it was probably going to be a W, and I think that's how things evolved.

It was really a scary time, because everything froze up and trust levels went to zero. As I mentioned before, some of our customers came to us because they didn't trust the banks anymore (banks were going bankrupt in some cases), and they weren't sure. They knew we would hold on to their money for them, because we were very trustworthy and did what we said we were going to do.

Eventually we got the system back up and running. We've got some breakers in there now that would hopefully minimize it. I'm not saying it can't happen again. I don't think it'll happen to that degree. But it's still a scary thought. And now we've got cryptocurrency, which could be entering in, and AI. There are a lot of moving parts that are new today.

In general, in the commodity business, we like volatility. We don't like random, crazy, unpredictable, uncontrollable volatility. That's a random walk through chaos. Volatility is good. A random walk through chaos is not so good, because you really have to pull back.

And then you get into countries who are exporting: if something's going on, or they have a crop problem, they tend to freeze their exports and pull all that back. Which is very disruptive when governments get involved in the food chain. Conversely, when you get very high prices, governments try to subsidize to bring food prices down. Which is really an artificial signal, and it punishes the farmer, because you need those high prices to trigger more production, more efficiency, more positive things.

So it goes back to free markets, and trying to keep governments out if you can. We need some regulation, for sure. But letting the world operate in a positive way is good for the world, good for the interdependence we have on each other, good for building trust.

For example, back in the seventies, when the U.S. embargoed some exports to Japan, we found ways (legally and ethically) that we could still help them in terms of providing food. And they never forgot that. It really built relationships for years, if not decades, because they never forgot that we stood there.

To the degree that we didn't play that game as Cargill, and stayed out of it, we've got a reputation with our customers and also with governments: if things do open up, please call Cargill and let's sort it out together. Because they know where our ethics stood, and what we were willing to do and what we weren't.

And again: good ethics is good business. That was always our motto at Cargill. Good ethics is good business.

Catholic Rural Life

Interviewer: Can you say more about Catholic Rural Life?

Emery Koenig: Sure. It's been around a hundred and three years now, and we've got four bishops on the board. It really gets down to the condition of the Catholic Church in rural areas. As I said before, forty to forty-five percent of priests are foreign-born, so you've got accents and other cultural issues when they're assigned to a rural area. They have two, three, four, five parishes. They're living alone. It is really tough.

And you've got rural areas where the farms are getting bigger and bigger, and there are fewer of them, farther between. Agriculture is a cyclical business, and you get these down cycles. The suicide rate in rural areas is three times higher than normal. They have no one to talk to. And if someone's suffering from depression, it is so far outside the metro areas often and they feel that I'm a farmer and I feed the world, don't want to go seek help.

So, there's really a cry for help in a lot of ways. How do we bring the Catholic Church to life in rural areas? How do we build those relationships between priests? How do we build community, with the priests but also through the parishes combining together? The bishops play a significant role.

We found three or four (we call them spark plug priests) who have a lot of expertise in rural areas. The parish priest at the parish I'm in now is one of our spark plugs. We've got four of them who are real spark plugs. And we bring them in on week-long retreats to share their experience and their best practices. A lot of praying, a lot of sharing, a lot of small group discussion, a lot of leadership training. How to handle these situations when you're alone and you're from India or from Africa. How to be accepted. How to learn how farming works, how to go down to the state fair and walk around with your boots on and shoot the breeze. There's a skill set in that.

It's a lot of work to get that flywheel turning, from where we started with two or three people in the organization and no money. And I think it's nice to see God's hand in that, that he really wants to do his part to help rural life thrive. Including having people in urban areas understand what life is like out there, in a good way, and where food comes from, and all the things they do and the risks they take with weather and markets and governments and tariffs to deliver the goods to the grocery store.

Part Nine: Afterwards

Joy

Interviewer: Can you think of times when you had a deep sense of joy from living out your Focolare principles in business, when you found it deeply meaningful?

Emery Koenig: Hopefully there have been enough of those to keep me around thirty-eight years, for starters.

A lot of them have come since I retired, because you recognize you're reaping the fruits of what you've learned and what God has taught you, and all the things you try to bring to the table.

Even on the St. Paul Seminary, I'm on that board. We're actually at capacity at the major seminary, and the minor seminary, St. John Vianney, is one of the largest in the U.S. It's so gratifying to see our archbishop and the diocese, after all the bankruptcy that we went through ten or fifteen years ago and

pulled out of, and how many good things are happening. You can really see the Spirit of God working, and people coming back to the church. Even the church we go to down here, St. John the Evangelist: they have fifty-five new catechumens, adults who want to join the church. Fifty-five. Not one. Fifty-five. It's just amazing.

And this is business one-on-one: when you get into a mission-based organization, they've never done performance reviews, they've never set up an org chart. These are common things you have to do, so you teach them how, and help them manage it, and help them stay out of trouble. Often these individuals are very good at building relationships. They may or may not be as good at running the business. That's why I find myself being asked to be on the finance committee, or board affairs, or governance, or the executive committee.

So that's gratifying, where you feel that all the hard things, all the lessons. Because as you know, experience is a tough teacher. She gives the test first and the lesson afterwards. As a professor, you know that. Giving the test first is not fair, but the lesson comes afterwards.

So, all those lessons you've learned over time, being able to put them into practice on boards or committees, has been very, very helpful. I feel happy about that, in terms of where I'm spending a lot of my time and energy since I retired ten years ago.

I always heard that it's good to retire *to* something as opposed to *from* something. Retiring to something has been very opportune, despite the fact that my wife doesn't think I'm retired yet, because probably half my day is occupied with board work. But it keeps my brain engaged. It keeps the rust out, at least to some degree. And you feel like you're contributing, like you're giving back, with fewer limits. When I was working at Cargill, I served on one or two boards, but the time pressures were unbelievable. You can only do so much and still do your job, plus the travelling and all the wear and tear that goes with it.

Even now, I'll run into colleagues. In fact, I had a conversation with one last summer, a Brazilian who's managing a large business here in the U.S. We'd had dinner together years ago, and he quoted something back to me that I feel is very true, and I think he found it true, because he still remembers it. It was: if you give me a choice between having really strong, independent-thinking rock stars as traders who can't work together, or the second team, if you want to call it that, but they're so cohesive, they're sharing information, they're working together. I'll take the second one. We'll do far better, and have a lot more fun, and go farther.

It goes back to the old African saying: if you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. And that's a lesson I learned, where some of our big traders left for a variety of reasons, and a second team stepped up. I was in Minneapolis managing this thing remotely, and we did so much better, because we really coalesced as a team. I had to build their leadership skills, and they felt empowered to do what they needed to do.

When it was harder

Interviewer: Can you think of times when living that way actually made your life harder?

Emery Koenig: Probably two examples.

One is that I was on the board of a large international organization. I don't want to name it. I was on it for six years, and they asked if I was interested in becoming chairman of the board. Ninety percent of what they did was very good, very positive: crisis intervention, feeding the poor, all kinds of good things. Ten percent got into female reproductive rights. And I had to draw a line there. That's just not going to work. That's not something I could stand up and represent as chairman of the board.

So, I decided to step off the board. It was easy for me to do that: make a clean exit, rather than try to soft-pedal my way through. It was not a major suffering. But it was one of those things where it crossed a line for me, as a Catholic and given my own personal beliefs.

Another one: I'll go back to ethics. We were getting reports about the proliferation of pornography coming into a lot of our systems. As I mentioned before, our policy was that you can't store or send it. You can't stop it if somebody sends you something stupid. So, we did a clean sweep of everyone's computers and found probably about twelve hundred people. We had conversations with them and told them we wanted it to stop. A lot of them thought we were joking. And we had to terminate those people. Because you just cannot have, especially a woman sitting next to a man who's watching nonsense on his computer during business hours, for crying out loud.

And it also got into a situation on the corporate leadership team. Early in this discussion, one of my colleagues said, come on, guys, this is guys. We're guys. Guys do this. This is just a cultural thing. You don't want to be naive and American about this whole thing.

And I came unglued and I explained in an email (which I still have) that there is a stronger relationship between pornography and violent crime than there is between smoking and lung cancer. And therefore, under no circumstances am I going to stand for it. So, I pushed hard to have justice done, because we had to take a stand and we just couldn't do this. And I got support from the CEO on that one.

Another slippery slope I had to get on (and I know I still have the email, because I shared it with Michael Naughton and he used it in a couple of his speeches) was this. And I've got to be careful of the words I use here. But Minneapolis, back in 2012, was going to vote on same-sex marriage. And the church came out very much in support of (if I have my details right, correct me) marriage between one man and one woman.

And we were starting to get calls from some of our employees, and from some of our employee resource groups, saying: when are you going to take a stand? General Mills is out there speaking about it, and three or four other major companies are saying this is just good business.

And I came across strong on that one, for a couple of reasons.

One is that it's against my own personal beliefs, first of all.

Second, you've got employees. Let's just pick a number: fifty percent probably agree with that stance, and the other fifty percent don't. And if we're going to have a corporation taking on a social issue, what about the employees who don't agree with it? They're going to be disengaged. They're going to say, I'm

sorry, that's not me. And who are you, as the CEO or as Cargill senior leadership, to make those statements when I don't agree with it? I'm out of here. It could really disengage a lot of people.

Third, in the spirit of diversity: we talk about diversity here. Here's some diversity for you. I'm a Catholic, and this is against my Catholic religion. So, let's talk about diversity. How are you going to include me in your statements?

And one more point: where do you stop? If we're going to weigh in on this issue, are we going to weigh in on abortion? Are we going to weigh in on other social issues? Where do you stop as an organization? You can't. You've got to stick to your knitting. It's not our role to take on the personality of the CEO and say, well, I've decided we're going to be supportive of whatever it is.

There are some issues: the environment, absolutely we'll weigh in, because it's the right thing to do and it's the common good that we really need to weigh into.

But there was a big risk in that one, and I was willing to put my career on the line had I been overruled. I would have had to do some serious thinking about what I was going to do, because I just couldn't stand for what Cargill was threatening to stand for. And the CEO fully supported that. We never said a word. I'm sure some people were disappointed that Cargill didn't take a stand. But I think it was exactly the right thing to do.

Family

Interviewer: What has been your family's response to your being committed to Focolare values and to living your life the way you have?

Emery Koenig: Probably the most important thing is that my wife and I are very much aligned on it. Because it would be so easy to get between Mom and Dad, and that would not be good news. If Karen were dead set against it, I'd have had to rethink some things just to manage through that.

Fortunately, she's been very engaged for a long time, and she's got her group of women that she associates with. She loves spending time with them. They have a conference call every week. It's really a great community and a support system in a lot of ways, and I think she's very happy with it.

So, to the degree that we're trying to live this mutual love, trying to have the presence of God between us, we're painfully aware when it doesn't happen. We clearly don't have a perfect marriage; there's no such thing as a perfect marriage. But you can try. And you can try to have a home where people are at peace and feel comfortable, where there's not a lot of tension. That's a really important part of it.

Growing up, our kids were involved with various facets of the Focolare. It got tougher when we moved to Geneva, because it was all in French, and all these kids had known each other for a long time, and our kids were walking around with baseball caps and looked like: who's this American guy who doesn't speak French, walking around in a baseball cap? It was tough for our son and tough for our daughter, the younger two. The older ones did okay.

I see how three of the four are living their lives with their families, and you can see that those things have permeated into their mindset and their values, even though they may or may not be practicing the same things at this point in time.

There was a lot of give and take, because I had to go to retreats. I spent two weeks in Rome at a time, for two years. Every month there'd be a weekend, or a day at a retreat. But hopefully those things helped me be a better me, and I needed a lot of help. So therefore, when I was home, hopefully I was a better father, even though I wasn't spending a hundred percent of my time there. And to the degree I could work that out with Karen, where she also did her things on her side, and we managed and balanced it, I think that worked out great.

What would make the Focolare stronger

Interviewer: What do you think would make the Focolare stronger today?

Emery Koenig: Define strength. Because strength could mean quantitative; that's one way to think about it. Or qualitative.

I think it was Pope Francis who talked about the Catholic Church possibly being a smaller church, but deeper, more profound, more grounded. More adult formation. We'll understand much better, and we'll grow from that, as opposed to having the chatterbox going.

And now, with the third president: we've had Chiara, and then Maria Voce, and now Margaret Karam, and this could be decided where she goes another five or six years: you can see there's been a lot of what some would call purifying. Like St. Paul: we've made some mistakes in how we handled things. Let's course-correct.

Because when you have people (and this happens in a lot of organizations, even within the church, even within religious orders) where there's an abuse of power. It can happen so easily in business. We can talk about abuse of power all day long. So how do we handle that?

Now we're going to a different model where, as Pope Francis requested, we separate governance from the spiritual side of life. Because to combine those two is a dangerous combination, where you're baring your soul to someone who also has control of what you're going to do next in life. That's a big responsibility.

So, we're going through that period at this point in time. And I can see a lot of subsidiarity coming up, and even synodality, where these local communities are starting to thrive. In Indianapolis, or Chicago, or Columbus. Those are really starting to grow up, being more self-governing, I should say governing, but just taking the responsibility and ownership of themselves, versus waiting for someone from Chicago to fly down and take the leadership.

I remember back in the day, the Focolarini ran the entire Mariapolis. Now it's all done by lay people. Some of the Focolarini attend, and maybe they give some of the talks, but that's it. They're not designing the whole thing. So, there's a growth element in that.

To the degree we get more qualitative, and do some healing, and really understand what those vocations are, then the quantitative is going to come when God wants it to come. People are looking around at everything else, and it's not working, so they want to come back to a community.

The Economy of Communion

Interviewer: The EoC has evolved too. Project Leah in Indianapolis was locally created, locally understood and locally supported, and that worked very well, which is a different level from a centralized approach. How do you see the relationship between the EoC and the Focolare?

Emery Koenig: I was actually in Brazil, and the person who came up with this idea, who probably gave it to Chiara, was in Brazil, in the Focolare. And part of it was just São Paulo. Have you been to Brazil? The favelas around the city. I call it the crown of thorns. You fly in there and you think, we've got to do something here. So, they came up with this idea of the Economy of Communion.

I've got a good friend of mine, Jean-Michel, in Switzerland, who has an EoC business with goats, milking goats and goat meat. And he always gave me grief that I didn't fully support the EoC. And I'd say, what do you want me to do, Jean-Michel? What do you want me to do? I can't quit Cargill and go help you milk goats. It just isn't going to work. It's a small business. But I think it's still doing well; I think one of his sons is taking it over now.

So, you get in contact with some people (whether it's John Mundell or Jean-Michel or others), and those are the ones who really understand what the EoC is. I'm going to use the word *few* who really understand it, really practice it, really get it. You can really see it, and you see the fruits of it. You see the joy. You see the impact on society, or Project Leah.

And a lot of the others are just trying to figure out how they can do this. We had some people thinking that maybe New City Press should become an EoC business. Boy, that's not going to work. And they fully supported us in not going that direction. It's just a totally different model.

I think that's probably one of the things that happens when you go through these growth patterns, where you have this initial enthusiasm and you're throwing lots of stuff against the wall. Some sticks and a lot gets flushed out. Even with startups, I think the failure rate is like ninety percent. Any business has got a ninety percent failure rate at least. Okay, so that's reality.

And then you catch the next wave up. So hopefully we're in that consolidation, getting down too much more qualitative individuals within the EoC, as opposed to everyone walking around saying EoC, EoC. Well, okay, yeah, EoC. It's fashionable to talk about it, but I don't know what it means and I don't know what I'm supposed to do.

And full credit to you: I think you've really given this a lot of credibility and a lot of meaning, not only from your background and what you've done in Omaha, but also just getting involved with the EoC. I think it's been much-needed leadership. So a big thank you for that.

The Focolare around the world

Interviewer: How have you seen the Focolare practiced differently in different countries?

Emery Koenig: In Switzerland, for example, you've got Geneva, Bern, Zurich, Lausanne, Ticino, five or six. And it's a small country. You've only got seven or eight million people, and you've got all these Focolare communities. A lot of people know the Focolare. The church knows the Focolare. It's much more, I'll use the word mature. You'd have a meeting and two hundred people would be there. You hold one in Chicago and fifty people are there. It's just a whole different stage.

Second, you've got distances to deal with here in the U.S. that you don't have as much in Europe.

The positive thing about American culture is this culture of giving. The negative is the John Wayne cowboy: I pull myself up by my bootstraps and I make it happen myself. That whole community aspect is just a little bit unnatural for the typical American mindset to pick up.

And the flip side: having lived outside the U.S. for a long time, you can see that Americans can get stuff done. We can really pull together and go get stuff done. In Europe, God bless them, I love every one of them, but they cerebralized it. They've got to think about it. And everyone has to weigh in, which is a positive thing too. But pulling people together to get stuff done is a lot more difficult. So, you've got trade-offs.

I've been in the Focolare in Brazil, in Singapore, in Japan, in Russia, obviously in Geneva, and in several places here in the U.S. And they all have their own characteristics.

The one in Russia, for example: we had one man with a PhD in physics who was selling office chairs, because that was all the work he could get. And they were living in this little tiny house with all the doors shut, because they couldn't afford to heat them. And this house used to be one where the government had multiple families living in it together. It was just a whole different reality of survival in a lot of ways.

I've been at the one in Jerusalem. They all have their unique personality in some ways, but there's that golden thread running through. You know you're in the Focolare, and you know you're around people you can trust.

So, in the U.S., I think it's going to be a matter of time before we catch that wave. As the church comes alive more and more, and we get a lot of what has happened in the past behind us, and the church gains more credibility, and people have exhausted all the other means of finding happiness and peace, I think we will hopefully provide a means for them. It may not be for everyone, I don't think. But at least we can offer people something they can hang on to, to give them hope.

Boards

Interviewer: What are the boards you're involved with right now?

Emery Koenig: There's Mosaic, which is the publicly traded global fertilizer business. The St. Paul Seminary. Catholic Rural Life. And Moto Hope Mission, which is a school in Nakuru, Kenya, where we're up to six hundred and seventy-five students. Half are boarders, half are non-boarders. We just had a board meeting a couple of days ago, so it's fresh in my mind.

I just stepped off Catholic Studies; I was on their board for nine years with Dr. Michael Naughton. And I was on the board of CARE in Atlanta for six years. They wanted me to do nine. I only wanted to do six, so I stepped off.

And at Cargill I was on Cargill's board, and on Cargill International's board, which is a separate entity, and I chaired the board of Black River Asset Management. So that provides good board experience too.

Interviewer: What do you frequently find could use improvement at nonprofits, from your board work?

Emery Koenig: First, the board's own functioning. I got onto one board where, at my first board meeting, I was very vocal that this was the most dysfunctional board I'd ever seen in my life. We had a couple of wrong board members on there. They were just caustic, ripping the CEO apart, and you couldn't agree to a thing, because they'd take you into the ditch right away.

So having a functioning board is super important, and how those board meetings are run, and your committee structure. It really comes down to the board. Because if you get that wrong, it's hell to pay for the CEO and for the rest of the board members. It's not fun to show up at board meetings and watch a circus going on. But we got that one fixed, which was good.

Second: a sense of urgency. One thing I've noticed (and this is probably truer for business than for government) is that people who've been involved in government often just don't have the same sense of urgency, because in business you've got time pressures, earnings pressures, people pressures, succession pressures. You really need to keep things moving. And if you get into a situation where either I don't care, or someone else is going to handle that, or we've never worried about it before so why should I worry about it now, it just gets a little too casual. And you lose a lot of the sharpness and the crispness. So, it's important for nonprofits to have a degree of that sense of urgency, within balance, within reason. You don't want to drive yourself nuts.

The third thing is making sure you've got the right people in the right roles. This goes back to *Good to Great*: having the right people on the bus, sitting in the right seat, and the wrong people off the bus. That includes the CEO and the staff. Make sure we're thinking ahead enough, and that the board is challenging enough in a respectful and constructive way. Because sometimes it's: well, Joe's been in this role for twenty-five years. Well, I'm sorry, we're now into AI, and Joe's not working. In fact, he's not even happy. He's sitting at an empty desk watching his watch so he can go home. Let's help Joe out here, and encourage him to find something else he can do, or retire, or do something different.

And really holding up the mirror for the CEO, which is a big gift a board member can give: holding up the mirror in a constructive way so they can get feedback. That's where I enter these informal mentoring relationships with CEOs. They recognize the value you're adding and they want to hear more. They feel comfortable.

We had a situation on one of the boards where an employee I thought was very highly regarded by the CEO, and by me and the rest of the board, ended up leaving. She contacted me and was really upset, and it was scathing. Very negative comments about the CEO. And I said, thank you for sharing this.

So, I talked to another board member, and we decided we needed to tell the CEO this was going on, so she wasn't blindsided. And it was really a tough conversation, because those comments were more venomous and vicious than they should have been. I didn't mince words, but I tried to relay the situation. And I'm sure there's another side of the story, for sure.

And I remember her comment, probably seven or eight years later. She said, I just have to tell you: that experience we had together, it hurt so good. Because she needed to hear those things. It was very helpful. It hurt, but I think she grew from it. Those were not fun conversations. But sometimes you have to do that and get the truth out, ideally with charity.

Retiring

Interviewer: What would be your advice to someone planning to retire? You said be thankful. What else?

Emery Koenig: First of all, have that attitude of thankfulness. Thankful for your career. Thankful for your health. Thankful for being able to retire, even if you're sixty-five or seventy or seventy-five, that you're in a position to do it. Especially thankful for your health. As my parents always told me, your health is your wealth. We all know people who are uber-wealthy but are walking around with oxygen masks and can't leave the living room. They have all the money in the world.

The other point is to retire *to* something as opposed to *from* something. I've seen a lot of Cargill employees and managers who retired and then just showed back up at the office. They had nowhere to go. They had nothing to do. Their wife doesn't want them around the house because she's not used to it. So, they show up at the office. It was sad. It was really sad.

There was a statistic (it may not be true today, but I remember earlier on) that the average male dies twenty-two months after retirement. I'm not sure that's still the case. But boy, you think about that, and how many people: we've had people die at their desk, or at a swimming pool. So we offered annual physicals at the Mayo Clinic through Cargill, because we just want to make sure these corporate athletes catch things early.

Also, find things that are interesting and engaging. When I was still working, I was invited to two national golf tournaments, and my wife and I went. You get bitten by the bug, you come back, you buy new clubs and take lessons, and then you recognize, I have no time for this. I can't spend eight hours on a Saturday chasing a little white ball around when I've got kids at home. So, golf doesn't work for me.

To the degree that you can find organizations, especially boards: people need the expertise. Not that it's the be-all and end-all, but there's a big yearning for people to come into those. And you meet a lot of smart people. I stayed very engaged. It keeps the cobwebs, most of them anyway, out of my head. And you feel like you're adding value.

That's one of the things: my wife has friends of fifty years. College friends. She's had them her whole life, and they get together. They have weekly video conference calls, and they're meeting in Arizona for ten days in March. They're a really close-knit group. Everyone knows everything about everything in that group.

For me, I never really had any close friends. I had some college friends I called friends. Friends in high school came and went. College friends came and went. But I never really had close friends, because I never really had the time to develop those relationships. We were moving around. If there were people I could keep in touch with through Christmas letters, we'd do that, and I still have those. But there was never a time where: okay, name your top five best friends. I don't have any. I couldn't really do that.

Now I can name some, because I've developed those relationships. A lot of it comes from the board work I'm on. Six of the seven boards I'm on have something to do with the Catholic Church. And it's such a gift being exposed to really good people. Not that there aren't good people in other areas, but these have similar values, similar goals, similar beliefs. I just enjoy their company and enjoy spending time together. It's been really a gift.

So, the last ten years have just buzzed by very quickly. And I'm glad I retired at sixty. Before sixty, I'd come up and try to take a peek over the ledge, and, ooh, that's scary. I'm not sure I could do that. And then you get to the point where your body starts telling you it's time to retire, and your fun-versus-frustration ratio starts to sag a little bit.

The first time I told Cargill I wanted to retire, they said, okay, how about if you stay on the board, do some public speaking, stay on top of the markets for us? And if I do that, I might as well just keep working full time. So, I continued along.

And finally, I remember I was at a meeting, and I went into the restroom and looked in the mirror and thought: okay, I'm going to go have a meeting with the CEO and tell him I'm going to retire, and I'm not joking this time. And I'm not going to let you talk me out of it this time. So, I just laid it down. Game over, and we're done.

Karen could watch my fun meter just sagging. It got heavier and heavier. So, I knew it was time to go when I turned sixty, and I'm very thankful I did. It was good timing for me. And your body will tell you; that's what Greg Page always told me. Your body will tell you when it's time to retire. My body was telling me.

And the fact is, you run very hard. I was probably more sick in the six months after I retired than in the six months before. Your body's like, okay, buster, you've been running me hard, it's time to slow down. And I had two hips replaced, a knee replaced, a couple of other surgeries. So now I'm back to where I probably should be. And thankful for everything.

Looking back

Interviewer: In what ways has God used you in your retirement? And how do you see God's hand leading you through your life?

Emery Koenig: Being raised in a Catholic family, where church was very important and a priority. I really appreciate what that did for our family. Not that life is easy or perfect. But it provided a good foundation.

Of my four siblings, I was the only one who went to a public school, on a scholarship. All the rest went to Catholic schools. So, for me, I really had to dig down. I had to go to Mass. I had to find the Newman Center. I had to build those relationships within the church, and make it manageable.

And there are some things that happened when I was growing up that have taken a long time to heal, to get over, and to reconcile. And you can also see God's hand in going through those types of situations. That's where the prayer life always comes back to what you know, what you believe, and what you can hang on to.

The church has been such a solid thing to hang on to. Not that all the priests are perfect, or everyone in the church is perfect; we're not. But it's all the things we talked about, that have kept the church around from the Petrine side for that long.

I still remember, and I share this with the high school students, that in high school before a basketball game, I'd be in my room saying the rosary for my future. I didn't pray for the game. I didn't pray for winning. Just for my future. And I can look back now and, boy, he's kept up his end of the bargain. He heard my prayer. Not that my future has turned out glorious. But I feel like things worked out much better than they could have. Things eventually worked themselves out in a way where I could see the hand of God come through.

Whether it was putting the Focolare in my life, putting the right people in the Focolare in my life at the right time to have the right conversations. Being in the locations we were in with Cargill, and the relationships we made, and all our friends, whether from Houston, Omaha, Pocatello, Minneapolis or Lafayette. We still have friends we met at church. Those are the friendships that have lasted over time, which is kind of interesting. It wasn't short term.

So now, after being retired ten years, you start looking back. And that's one of the pieces of advice I give to people who are retiring: just have an attitude of thankfulness. Be thankful for what you have. Thankful for where you're at. Thankful for God's gifts. Thankful that you're still here. It really goes a long way towards living a life that adds value to somebody, and trying to live out what God's asked you to do. You can't always see it at the time, but you turn around and look back and think, boy, thank God there was a golden thread in there. And you can see how very quietly, very gently, he guided these things.

I mentioned before that I struggled with the idea of becoming a priest in grade school, high school and college. And I look back now and think, boy, I think I did the right thing. It was a lot of tension, a lot of difficulty, a lot of discernment. But how things have evolved, I think it worked out better. I'm not sure I'd have been the right person for that role.

And I can even see the hand of God in that. Maybe he did have the idea of me becoming a priest, but somehow things worked out where I'm still happy, I'm still fulfilled, I'm still part of the church, I still feel like I'm contributing, I still have this relationship with God, I still feel this presence of Christ in my life. And I'm happy.

Chiara often said: you have the sun, and you have all these rays. Just pick a ray. It doesn't matter. Just pick one. They all lead towards the sun. It's a nice analogy to think about, as opposed to being overly preoccupied with: oh, what's my ray? What happens if I miss my ray? Is it all over if I miss my ray? And God's saying, it doesn't matter. Pick one. What makes you happy? Let's go. And if it's the wrong one, I'll help guide you back and we'll square it up. I always liked that analogy.

What I hope to leave

Interviewer: What lasting impact do you hope to leave on the Focolare?

Emery Koenig: Probably the good answer is that I don't have any expectations. I can try to do the best I can do, adding value where I can, with the things I've been invited into.

We set up New City Press with a board, and that's been operating. We combined Living City into New City Press, and now we have Focolare Media. I'm still chairing that board. And we're setting up the Focolare Foundation, partially because I've got a fair amount of background with the Catholic Community Foundation. And getting involved with the International Center of Unity and Peace in Jerusalem, which is a capital project we're working on.

The Focolare thinks I have expertise in those areas. I don't want to oversell myself, but there are a lot of things I can do to help: working with consultants, and knowing how capital campaigns work, and adding some advice and making a contribution. So, I'm happy that a lot of the things I've experienced in the last forty-eight years (business plus ten years retired, and all my experience with other boards) can be brought to add value.

I hope it's a better organization, well run. From what I understand, in some cases it's being used as an example: how we got a formal board set up, like Focolare Media, and how it's really come to life, and how we're now at forty percent donations heading to fifty, and how you need to run a really solid business when a significant portion comes from donations. And with the foundation, to build that long term, and the importance of a board and governance, and an executive committee, and a strategic development committee, and a marketing committee, and how you get those committees to report, and how you run a board meeting. Hopefully I've helped put an organizational structure in place, and find good people to run it. I think so far, it's been successful. We'll see how things go down the road.

Maybe that's my contribution, all based on what I've learned in business and am willing to share. And it's been very gratifying. It's great to see the progress. It's great to see the people growing. It's great to see the businesses growing. It's great that the Focolare is trusting people who are not internal members. It's atypical. Sometimes we're bringing people from outside the Focolare because they've got expertise. We've got four people on the board of Focolare Media who know the Focolare, love the Focolare, are not part of the Focolare, but have a lot of expertise and are really big helpers.

As opposed to finding someone who just loves the Focolare, who's in the Focolare, but doesn't have any expertise. Be careful. Just be careful. You've got a lot of well-intentioned people, but it may not help you that much.

One last thing

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Emery Koenig: We can talk about the EoC a little bit: how you take it to the next step. This project is obviously part of that.

It's had its ups and downs, the EoC. And I personally am so thankful that you're on board. I'm so thankful for the grant. You add so much credibility and vision and drive and energy around this thing, in a meaningful way, and I think that's very, very important.

That's one thing I've noticed within the Focolare. Great people, well-meaning people, just not trained to do these things. Which goes back to our conversation about business, and why we have business people on these boards, because we can help get stuff done, help get stuff organized, help have a vision, help train, help provide leadership. So, I'm very thankful for your role in that, and thankful for this project, and hopeful that it will take it to the next level.

Let me just rattle off some things from an outside standpoint. You may have already thought of all of this.

Have a board. And these should be governance boards, not advisory boards, because governance boards have teeth, they get stuff done, and people will want to join. I was on an advisory board once, and it was not easy, and I understand why it had to be advisory. We can't sit there and tell the director to do this when the university says, no, no, no, we're going to do that. But it's just so different as an advisory board versus a governance board.

So, you may want to think about setting up a governance board with qualified people who can help manage the structure. It doesn't necessarily have to be large, but you need the people, the expertise, who can set those things up. Provide a vision, provide a structure, provide a way for this thing to operate when you're trying to bring all these new entities up and running. How's that going to work? Do we have a backstop? What's our role?

I sat in, a year or two ago, on a conference call someone in the Philippines set up with various people from the EoC. And it just wasn't going anywhere. It didn't have any point. They were trying to share stories. Okay, we can share stories until the cows come home, but what is the point? How do I run a better business? How do I know when to start? How do I know when to stop? How do I ask for funds or help? How do I analyze the market? How do I set up a business plan? How do I get lending if I'm going to go to a bank?

Going back to Nakuru, Kenya: one of the people involved has been big on micro-lending, and he's put north of a million dollars into it. Boy, it's had its hiccups over time, but now it's doing fairly well. The average loan is probably three hundred dollars. But it's one way to get people to get a business up and running.

The interest rates he was charging were probably too low, at six, seven, eight percent. But I know other people who are charging forty percent. And I don't know a business in the world that can operate borrowing money at forty percent. It kills them right out of the box. It just doesn't work.

But micro-lending: how do we have access to that? There are firms that will micro-lend, and maybe they would consider EoC businesses. We looked at that with our micro-lending business in Kenya, with another firm. The question was, do we want to partner with them or run separately? As long as he's putting that kind of money in, we'll run separately and control our destiny. And there are some great stories coming out of that.

Getting the right people involved is super important. Bring people from the outside, people with expertise. And yes, they probably do need to know something about the Focolare. But they need to know a lot about business, and about how you get things done.

Here's another great opportunity: your retired people. Bring them on. Let them sit on a board, or mentor some of the people in the EoC one on one, and pull the plug if the thing is going into the ditch. If we've got the wrong person, the wrong market, the wrong product: you've got to cut your losses short if you can. Unlike what I did in Egypt, where I borrowed more money from Cargill.

So, there's a great opportunity for some of your retirees to operate as a consultant, or a board member, or a mentor. And they're all well-meaning, all these people setting up businesses. They're very well-meaning. But we just need more success stories. We need more John Mundells and Nick Sannas and John Welshes.

If twenty percent of your businesses are going to be high-performing, growing businesses that are having an impact: how do we showcase those, and not just share the little stories about the other eighty percent? Because that may or may not be helpful, unless you get some resources on them, whether a mentor or micro-lending or something to get them out of the ditch. I'm sure the failure rate, like any other small business, is eighty or ninety percent. Again, very well-meaning people. But there may just not be enough expertise.

Working on Jerusalem, for example, the International Center for Unity and Peace: the consultant we're working with and I are in violent agreement that we've got to bring in people with expertise to run this place. We can't just have some really well-meaning person who loves the Focolare, is in the Focolare, was born in the Focolare, but has no expertise. It probably is not going to work. It's going to be high risk. So you'd rather bring in someone who knows how to run a business, and pair them with someone from the Focolare, to make that work.

So, that's my outside, uneducated view of the EoC, from watching the ups and downs and ins and outs.