Brunello Cucinelli on the Importance of Ancient Philosophy and Practical Jokes

The king of quiet luxury critiques tech-driven burnout, preaches humility among the wealthy and explains why he remains deeply hopeful about humanity

By Holly Peterson

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Brunello Cucinelli among cashmere goats in Mongolia, as seen in the documentary 'Brunello: The Gracious Visionary.' BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

I HAVE NEWS for all the billionaires out there replacing flashy status symbols with stealthier emblems of wealth—the type signified by the logo-free baseball caps worn on series like "Succession" and "The Morning Show." Much of your low-key look can be traced back to another billionaire, Brunello Cucinelli.

Recognizable by a subtle sparkly strip hidden inside a collar or on an aglet at the end of a drawstring cord, Cucinelli's luxury clothing brand employs a muted palette of tans and grays. Those not in the know might faint at the prices—$4,600 for a cashmere-and-silk sweater, $11,800 for a suede jacket—but sticker shock hasn't dampened sales. The company now has 160 stand-alone stores spanning 40 countries worldwide and saw $1.6 billion in revenue last year.

Cucinelli, 72, grew up in poverty on an Umbrian hillside in central Italy. As a teen, he divided his time between school and driving oxen to till the land. By the age of 24 he'd dropped out of engineering school to read philosophy and pursue modeling.

When, in 1978, he decided to make bold-colored cashmere sweaters for women, a dye expert said he was "crazy to dye cashmere in these colors." Determined, Cucinelli borrowed enough money to buy 20 kilograms of ecru-colored cashmere to make 60 bright sweaters. They quickly sold out.

Today, he headquarters the brand in the medieval hilltop hamlet of Solomeo, in Italy. The peaceful atmosphere features extensively in the documentary about his life, "Brunello: The Gracious Visionary," which premiered this spring. He runs his business by the "humanistic capitalism" he derived from ancient philosophers whose names he casually drops in conversation. He forbids email after 5:30 p.m., mandates 90-minute midday breaks and pays wages 20% higher than the industry average. He also returns a portion of company profits to his charitable foundation.

Cucinelli credits his work and life intent to Marcus Aurelius, who said you should always live as if it's the last day of your life.

Tell me about the earthen colors in your collections. Why are so many of your fabrics tans, ivories or "goat-colored"?

Beauty, order, tidiness, these are the basics. But what matters most is to live in harmony with creation. The first thing Xenophanes said is that from earth all things come. When I was pulling the oxen in the fields, my dad would tell me, "The farrows; they should be straight," for that simple reason.



Models dressed in the subdued tones of Brunello Cucinelli ‘s women’s collection during Milan Fashion Week. CLAUDIO LAVENIA/GETTY IMAGES FOR BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

Who was first to support your clothing line?

Barney Pressman at Barneys, he was the first one to display my goods in the New York shop window 35 years ago. That was esteem and respect, and we used to joke a lot. Playing jokes and pranks, it needs to be amusing and not belittling, obviously. I still play practical jokes. Never offensive, always respectful. It’s something really joyful to play jokes. People have stopped joking because with AI, there are no jokes. AI does not joke. Whereas the human being, they have folly, and AI does not have a pinch of folly, nothing.

You had an original idea and created a behemoth brand pretty much on your own intuition and steam. Is that luck or savvy?

I think that life is broken down into three phases. Epicurus says the first part comes directly inherited from your parents. The second part is destiny, fate. And then there’s me, my own making. I’ve always tried to find a way between what came from the heavens, fate and what I can do myself.

You've said how you treat your employees comes from how poorly your father was treated in a concrete manufacturing plant. You wanted to do the opposite, to foster what you called "the moral and economic dignity of the human being."

You shouldn't send any business-related emails after 5:30, because you have your own life. It means focus. And we need to work a fair number of hours so we have time left for our families, our needs, our friends and ourselves. We all start working at 8 a.m., everybody has a lunch break at 1 p.m. sharp for an hour and a half, and then 2:30 to 5:30—that's it. But we work in a very concentrated way. Otherwise, 30% of our time is wasted on nothing. And there's no time left for the heavens.



Cucinelli with his father, Umberto, in 2018. BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

Do you believe that money corrupts people? I find that many people with a lot of money don't treat others well.

How you treat others lies within the human soul. I would admit that having money tends to make you a big know-it-all or arrogant. If you have more money, you convince yourself that you are better than others or smarter. But deep down, I believe that the human soul is good. I think there are more good people than evil people.

I also believe in the good of most people. That's why I'm confused why people who have money change their behavior, and adopt a belief that some people are valued higher as human beings.

How many rich people do you know who are willing to listen? Not very many. Pythagoras jotted down three pages called the Golden Verses, where he gives tips on how to lead a good life. One in particular struck me, telling us that before you go to bed, review all your deeds of the day three times before you fall asleep. If you did something good, rejoice, something bad, repent. If you don't behave properly, are you going to have a sound sleep?

Do you have advice for your salespeople when they have demanding, difficult customers?

Just the other day we had a general meeting, and I paid compliments to my direct sales agents, for how really kind they are to everybody. Even Hadrian, the emperor, said, "I've never met anyone who did not feel better after receiving a compliment."

Well, bad behavior can be learned. I believe that children do what you do, not what you say.

I agree. The other day we went out to a restaurant, and we all went back to the kitchen in the back, just to say hi and thank you to the staff who work there. And on the street, when you see people begging, when you hand money to them, do not humiliate them. Just tell them, "May God help you" in a very friendly way. Otherwise, they will feel belittled. No one says that you inherit the ability to be kind or that your children will follow in the same steps, because that's not the case. My father would say, "Do you want to be the richest guy in the graveyard?"

Many studies show the more money you have, the less empathy you have. Why is that?

It’s bad to be competitive about money, showing off how much money you have. There’s also the fact that 30, 40 years ago we had no idea as to how much money someone had, because we had no way of knowing, whereas now the fact that we do know has exacerbated the competition. I know what kind of artwork you have, what kind of money you have, your assets, everything. What we need to retrieve is the three great ideals, the basic tenets of human beings, like great politics, great family and religion or spirituality. We have to go back to believing in powerful ideals.



A Brunello Cucinelli shirt at the factory in Solomeo. ALESSANDRO BIANCHI/REUTERS

You have certain rules. No phones in your meetings; there must be only two people on any company email.

Why should 15 people be copied in an email? Thirty years ago, I would speak to you, and it’s up to you to report or to spread the news to someone else.

Do you think the internet makes it harder to communicate in person and have productive conversations in meetings?

St. Augustine would say, “You have to tidy up your soul every day the same way you tidy up your kitchen.” If our soul is not tidy, it is not in order. I don’t want to be liable for harm to your soul, and that’s why you’re supposed to leave work to tend to your soul, whatever is good for you. The morning after, when you turn up for work, you will be twice as focused. I went to Milan to meet someone who was supposed to manage my assets. And he said, “I work 13 hours a day, from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.” So I have entrusted him with nothing, none of my assets. We need to rediscover normalcy in life.

I don’t know how you convince American CEOs who are competing with China to increase humanity in the office.

How can we become more human instead of being overwhelmed with this technology? How can we put humanism into the technological equation? What humanity is struggling with nowadays is the malady in their soul.

The internet was supposed to bring us together, and, paradoxically, it created these roadblocks and divisions.

I’m convinced Meta did not have a clue as to what they had in their hands, what they were creating. Already in 2015, Reid Hoffman was talking about AI to me, and I could not understand a single word of it.

Are you fearful of the future for generations to come?

I’m 72 years of age, and I was there when the fax was born, the email, and everything seemed so scary, but I believe in humanity. Just yesterday I was having lunch with my grandchildren, and when you have the future just in front of you, you cannot but think that it will be a bright one. My 15-year-old granddaughter, she said to me, “When I start working at your company, the first thing I’m gonna do is fire you on the spot.”