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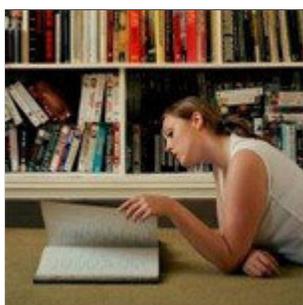
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Teacher's Corner



Business in Society: Acts of Compassion Bringing Humanity into Business

I teach business in a liberal arts college because the curriculum allows me to emphasize business's fundamental embeddedness in society. My own definition of this connection emphasizes the individual as a key player both in business and in our local and global societies. I also emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals with each other and as a part of larger, transpersonal entities - social constructs, culture, politics, religion, philosophy, history, literature, and the natural worlds. At heart, I am a social change agent using my role as a teacher and my experience and education in the discipline of business to shape and influence tomorrow. With these explanations as a background, I offer my suggestion here: that we create time for noticing the positive role business can play in society.

I recently took my first trip to Eastern Europe. Because my research looks at global social change leaders, and yet my data has come predominantly from the West, I participated in the European Academy of Business in Society's recent conference in Warsaw, Poland. What struck me is how much I often learn from being experientially immersed in a place. In my continued attempts to bring society alive in my classroom in Texas, I toured Warsaw, Krakow, and the concentration camps Auschwitz-Birkenau. There I had my first visceral understanding of the role business and economic theory played in World War II.

I arrived in Krakow by train around 10 a.m., but because Poland is so far north, daylight never really came. A stiff Siberian wind blew snow and rain around as the tour guide greeted me and a colleague. The guide hurried us along so that she could show us the sights before dark, which comes by mid-afternoon. After seeing the Jewish ghetto, we stopped at the Schindler factory that Steven Spielberg made famous in the 1993 film *Schindler's List*. I hadn't realized it was in Krakow. The frightening reality for me was that while I had seen the film and used it in my Business Ethics and Social Responsibility class, only now had I grasped its underlying message about business being embedded in society.

This factory sits directly across the street from walled-off, burned out buildings (where the guide said people still live) that once served as shelter for a large supply of workers desperate for jobs. Oscar Schindler was a Czechoslovakian business man who built his factory here because the labor was so cheap and the government contracts for goods so plentiful. Schindler saw a financially profitable business opportunity to build a factory in Poland because the Nazi government was forcibly relocating Jews to smaller and smaller regions of Krakow. The basic supply and demand model was at work; the often single-minded financial profit motive of business propelled this enterprise.

Some people tell me that liberal education and human processes of meaning making, often created through religions, do not belong in the study of business.

However, on that bitter winter day, I was struck with the realization that our economic supply and demand theory and our financial profit maximizing business incentives in our global society have allowed the inhumane treatment of human beings over time. Over time, Schindler began to see this too.

He realized the systematic injustices being done to human beings in the name of political and state ideology through his business model. He then began to see a role for himself as a member of a larger human community. Rather than an individual operating in isolation of and at the expense of others, Schindler began to see himself as not inherently different than his workers. Oscar Schindler was afforded tremendous privilege by virtue of nationality, socio-economic class, religion, political affiliation and business acumen; yet he and his workers (and his suppliers and buyers) were all human beings. This common connection transformed Schindler from seeing business as a faceless entity to seeing business as groups of individuals making individual and collective decisions about their actions. He held a responsibility as a member of the business community and as a member of society.

I want my students to see and feel that same dual responsibility for their actions. They commonly object to my assertion that they hold power and responsibility by virtue of their education. Power to them often means the ability to tell others what to do. I see power as the ability to influence the world around them - today and across generations even through small actions like their treatment of the natural environment, use of resources, and buying decisions. Even Oscar Schindler, who by most accounts was a greedy capitalist seeking to maximize his financial profit at any cost to others, made incremental shifts in how he spent money. Schindler's decision to spend money in order to protect his workers ultimately saved about 1100 Jews from the gas chambers that I visited in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps. From a secular perspective, 1100 is meaningless, only .1% of the approximately 1.1 million Jews estimated to have been exterminated before or after living nine to a bed in the wind-whipped shelters of Birkenau alone. However, from a meaning-making perspective, Schindler's 1100 worker list is a symbolic act of compassion. At the time, the capitalist's acts of social responsibility through his business created hope for his workers, their families and their friends. Now 50 years later, we know the legend of humanism that the businessman created as his actions are retold both in the Academy Award winning film made about his story and in the stories of the 5000-7000 descendents of those whose lives he protected.

I believe that we deceive ourselves about our societal responsibilities when we make the assumption that our individual actions do not matter. Simply because business decisions impact other human beings should be enough reason to make these decisions based on criteria more broad than pure economics. By seeking only financial gain, we ignore the interdependencies between human beings and organized systems. As academics and educators, we hold a special responsibility for teaching business in context of society and culture. For example, we must ask when the cheap labor costs of producing in third world countries is too cheap to justify on humanitarian grounds. We must coach students to ask when a "good deal" is simply too good to be right. I want students to experience their own lives as both individuals and as valuable, contributing members of a larger society, whatever their religious or other meaning-making beliefs. Therefore, they become inherently responsible for the well-being of others.

Societies are shaped by individuals' beliefs and values. Those values are often shaped individually and culturally through religions. As individuals in relationship with business - as consumers, workers, and teachers - our beliefs and values make a difference on our decisions, in business and in society.

April seems to me to be an especially good month to notice the role of business in society. This month marks significant religious anniversaries worldwide - Passover (the celebration of freedom for Jewish slaves from Egypt), Good Friday and Easter (the Christian commemoration of the death and resurrection of Jesus), and Mawlid an Nabi (the birthday of the prophet Mohamed who founded Islam). Perhaps this April, we can recognize not only our religious holidays but also our role in the business-society interrelationship. After all, Oscar Schindler's birthday and

Holocaust Remembrance Day are also in April.

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