

NOT PUBLISHED

ETHICS, RELIGION, AND PHILOSOPHY AT
THE HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL:
A PERSONAL MEMOIR OF TWO VISITS

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There we are, arrayed on the steps of Baker Library, aligned in three neat rows with our four HBS instructors seated in front. All of us white and male and with absolutely no consciousness of why it should be any other way, five bow ties, three clerical collars, the de rigueur business jackets, most of us with those frozen expressions of pleasantness that we imagine should be assumed on such occasions. The label at the bottom tells that it was the Danforth Seminar on Religion and Morality in Business Administration. The date was July 7-17, 1959. We were thirty-six in number.

We had come--chosen equally from religion, academia, and business--to explore the possibilities (considered quite heady at the time) of finding pathways to morality within the normal practice of business. And we struggled mightily--at the time, I might have said "manfully"--with our topic. Laden with articles from the Harvard Business Review and charged to prepare case after case heaped upon us by our HBS professors, we were driven to our daily round of case discussions at a relentless pace.

For most of us Danforthians, it was a strange, even bizarre, experience. The business representatives were clearly at sea in this revisited university atmosphere, frequently allowing bluster to substitute for reason and logic. The clerics found themselves somewhat dismayed at what they must have assumed to have been an excessive concern for the pursuit of mammon, as well as to have been lured into the very citadel for instruction in the ways of mammon itself. As the days wore on, though, this discomfiture only hardened their determination to assert ever more strongly their sense of moral authority concerning the doubtful materialistic goals of business.

The academics were a mixed lot, picked from here and there on God knows (pardon me, Mr. Danforth) what grounds. In my own case, my dean brought the seminar's notice to me with great excitement, urging me to apply inasmuch as I had just joined his faculty to teach courses on the relations between business and society. It may be difficult for those in established, well-known universities to comprehend how remote they appear to be to those who only serve in second- and third-rate, lesser-known (or not known at all) academic institutions. The Harvards, the Yales, the Princetons are as shining temples on some Olympian height, where only the greatest of the greatest intellects reside and do their work. Such, at any rate, was my own perception of Harvard at the time.

The catch in the application was having to say something about one's religious convictions. As I was at the exuberant peak of my period of religious rebellion from a conventional Southern Presbyterian upbringing, the application gave me pause. But not for long. Getting that place at Harvard was worth whatever deviousness might be required in wording my statement on

religious association and orientation. I dearly wish that I might be able now to see what I then declared. To my amazement--and no little cynical amusement on my part--I was accepted. But I worried a bit that perhaps the admitting authorities had seen through my somewhat tentative position and would make special efforts to set me on a straighter path once there. It's a price paid by most who are reared in a Calvinist tradition--a stern God is always there, just over one's shoulder, always checking. I never quite figured out just why this Godly presence was necessary since I had absorbed the notion in Sunday School that predestination had pretty well set me up for one fate or another whether I behaved well or poorly.

Today I remember only three of the academic faces in our class photograph. Of those three, only one--Joe McGuire--was to emerge as a leading figure in the field of corporate social responsibility. In another four years, his Business and Society would be widely used by those who were groping for guidance in teaching about corporate social responsibility. The rest returned to their accustomed posts in obscure colleges, to dispense a Harvard-enriched version of what morality demanded of the business practitioner.

The intellectual fare in those days was paper thin. Ohmann's "Skyhooks" article from the Harvard Business Review was the darling of the business school philosophers. The message was pretty simple and straightforward: business practitioners need to guide their daily decisions by rising above the grubbiness of materialism. Rather than bootstraps, they need skyhooks. The religious implications of this metaphor were not lost on any of us, although some of the clerics must have winced at the Dale Carnegie character of it all.

Joseph Fletcher from the Divinity School was called in at one point to instruct us on the felicities of situational ethics, which at the time was all the rage. The clergy did more than wince at this affront. In fact, this episode probably did more than anything else to thrust them into the somewhat militant forefront of the remaining discussions. Before long, the Bible-thumping propensities of the Protestant ministers became evident, as the business representatives and academics, not quite sure of their ground, faded into the background.

George Albert Smith--who told us with wry humor that HBS students had dubbed his course which was officially known as Business Responsibility in American Society as "BRAS, the uplift course"--Ed Bursk, and Ed Learned were among our instructors. They handled us gently and with the skills one associates with classroom instruction at Harvard. With what exasperation they may have returned to their offices and homes after a day with us, one can only guess.

When it was all over, the results were inconclusive, to say the least. After seeing the renowned case study method in the flesh, I remained adamantly opposed to its use in my own classes, and this attitude was to last for many years. (I finally came to my senses sometime in the 1970s and discovered the virtues of case studies, which I now find indispensable.) Neither were the HBR articles to my liking--too bland, too diffuse, too goody-goody. As for the Danforth Foundation's fondest hopes that some sense of religious morality would now be insinuated into my classes, it was another disappointment. I did

establish a professional friendship with Joe McGuire that has lasted to this day and had a similar but briefer relationship with Cliff Jones. Four years later, I found myself the Associate Dean in Paul Kohberger's business school at the University of Pittsburgh, an outcome that neither of us could possibly have believed possible during that summer seminar in 1959, when I was a faculty member at the University of Kansas City (now the University of Missouri at Kansas City).

In retrospect, I doubt that the Danforth seminars had their intended effect at all. What they may have done, though, was to lend an air of professional and academic legitimacy to those faculty members who attended and then returned to their campuses. To have participated in such an approved activity at the citadel of business education was thought, rightly or wrongly, to have done something important and significant. For a few of us, it was an early step (and an entirely unsuspected one) on an odyssey that would lead toward the building of a new field of management study. That's not a bad outcome but neither was it what the Danforth authorities had in mind. As far as furthering the study or comprehension of the moral and ethical components of business decision making, the seminar was a total flop. There was no respectable body of literature, no research capable of creating one, no agreement on the linkages between religious thought and business practice, nothing beyond the diverse and largely primitive theological viewpoints of some of the participants, no particular lessons to be carried home or back to work, no general principles or theory to guide inquiry or teaching. Instruction in business ethics had taken a giant step sideways.

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Returning after a 30-year absence carried its own excitement, though clearly not the same kind that one feels at the beginning of a career. True, there was the satisfaction of being included, for I doubt that any of us ever becomes indifferent to the opinions of our professional colleagues. True also that Harvard was to be the host for this gathering, for little had happened in three decades that seriously challenged its preeminence as educational leader in management education. It remained, for me, somewhat Olympian. And, of course, one yearned to know how the B School planned to allocate and direct the largesse of John Shad's gift that was intended to advance the study and teaching of business ethics.

But beyond these personal interests lay such a vast change in the business world since those dear dead days of the late 1950s! The gauzy Danforthian ideals had been swept away or trampled underfoot by the social ruffians of the 1960s and the regulatory bureaucrats of the 1970s. The game had turned from principles to power, exercised in the streets (with the media ever present) or in the halls of Congress. The corporate executive had taken a tumble in the public eye, had declined from a near-national hero to a villainous ogre who was best chained up in a network of regulations and public pressures. Granted some relief--actually, a considerable amount--by the Reagan crowd, corporate leaders in the 1980s still found themselves ever on public trial as dozens of stakeholders (itself a newly coined term that had replaced Frank Abrams' "constituencies") put in their claim for attention and action. The newly returned visitor could well wonder how all of these

developments, or how many of them, had been incorporated into the Harvard point of view.

It was in this mixed mood of quest and curiosity that we convened as the Workshop on Ethics and Management Education. We numbered 40, six of whom were women; all of us were white. It was December 8-9, 1988. One barely noticed that what had taken ten days in 1959 was now to be accomplished in only two. It was safe to assume also that, absent the Danforth sponsorship, we were now to be counted among the beneficiaries of the Shad munificence.

But what of the 1988 participants? Where were the clergy? Now numbering only two, reinforced by two professors of religion, they seemed to have been invited for reasons other than their standing as "men of the cloth:" one was a management professor, the other a doctoral candidate in the Harvard Business School. And of these two, only one injected a note of religiosity into his comments during the workshop conversations, which elicited mild bafflement or awkward silence from those questioned. The Bible-thumpers who had so dominated the Danforth conclave were nowhere to be found. Score one for Harvard, I thought.

And business executives? Again, a striking difference. Only one was present. A giant whose on-the-job actions and corporate philosophy had belied the popular image of the business leader, Irwin Miller's workshop remarks hinted at a somewhat antique world view (though one of those cherished antiques, whether furniture or work of art, that one wishes to preserve as a reminder of older and better times). Here was an executive who had instilled into his organization some of the very notions that seemed to be the heart of the Danforth approach, and he had made it work in ways that seemed miraculous to outside observers, for he had done it during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s.

And the rest of the invited guests? This time, professional philosophers outnumbered all others. And the workshop leader, too, was credentialed in philosophy. Where were their counterparts thirty years earlier? Not one of their type had been invited to my Danforth seminar, but now they were the intellectual focus of this workshop. It was their language, their conceptual framework, their way of defining ethics problems, their analytic skills that were now to be built into the consciousness of the Harvard MBA student. True, one of the newly-converted B School ethics professors claimed almost never to have used the term "ethics" in his class discussions, finding it unnecessary, but all of the teaching cadre had been schooled in the language and approach of the professional philosopher prior to their walking into the lions' den where ethics would be made an explicit part of classroom instruction. Small wonder that a number of them found their knees a bit wobbly on the first day, or that they needed a boost of morale and helpful hints from the support staff!

The philosophers were the group, of course, that had brought their powerful analytic and normatively-honed tools to bear on the ethical dilemmas of the business order. If anyone had an intellectual claim to speak in 1988, it was they. When the theory of corporate social responsibility that had served reasonably well during the 1950s collapsed under the weight of the so-

cial revolutions of the 1960s, the applied philosophers had some answers of their own. While Harvard and other management schools became enamored of the 1970s' Bauer-Ackerman theory of corporate social responsiveness that counseled the building of a defensive response mechanism to fend off external pressures, Norman Bowie, Richard DeGeorge, and their philosophic compatriots demonstrated a different and a more critically normative way to pose the needed questions about corporate social performance. It was they, not management scholars, who showed the way. They too had produced the textbooks and the anthologies, had selected or written many of the case studies, had designed the ethics courses that were found increasingly in business schools, had made the difficult and often frustrating journey across the disciplinary boundary that had long separated (as it still does in many universities) philosophy from the business school, had founded the Society for Business Ethics and established the two academic journals devoted to business ethics, and had served as exemplars of an intellectual and normative approach to the core ethical issues of the business order. Without them, no workshop on business ethics in the 1980s would have been conceivable or meaningful.

Most of the rest of the (non-HBS) lot were holders of law degrees or were management professors known for their efforts to incorporate an ethics orientation into their own courses and into the business school curriculum. As translators and integrators of the work of others, their role has become an important part of the business ethics enterprise in schools across the nation. Some of these--one thinks of Ed Freeman and Ed Epstein--go beyond translation to make their own original theoretical contributions. The inclusion of a prominent sociologist (Amitai Etzioni) may be a harbinger of a coming generation of ethics-and-values analysis. Already having integrated philosophic insights into economic theory, an Etzioni could well show the way for other social scientists to join with the philosophers to enrich the normative study of business operations and decision making.

And so we learned that yet another chapter is being written in the history of the Harvard Business School. A required ethics course, albeit a brief one, is in place, a faculty (consisting of "heavy hitters," we were assured) has been schooled in how to teach it, plans are being laid to spread the ethics message throughout the curriculum (Yea, verily, even unto the forbidding precincts of finance!), and a talented support staff continues to work assiduously and enthusiastically to promote this newest cause. Led by the imagination and energy of that scholar with the marvelously apt name of Goodpaster, the future of business ethics at this institution would seem to be considerably brighter than the fate that overtook the earlier Danforth efforts. It is a future that will owe not just a little also to the longstanding efforts of John Matthews, Kenneth Andrews, and Ray Bauer, as well as the more recent contributions of Barbara Toffler, Laura Nash, and yet others who now are stepping into the needed faculty responsibilities. It's a comforting thought, given Harvard's leadership role.

And for those who had the opportunity to be 1988's guests, the workshop discharged the usual functions of serving as a badge of belonging, a symbol of participation, and a medal of recognition whose mention on a resume sends a coded signal to one's professional confreres. Beyond these supports for one's self esteem lies a deeper meaning and function of such gatherings. They are a

validation of one's commitment to a particular course of intellectual inquiry, a network not just of cherished colleagues but of related ideas and theories, an ongoing dialogue among like-minded scholars searching for a piece of the truth, and a needed and welcome affirmation that questions asked in the dark hours of one's night are shared by others, even though the answers remain elusive.

During the last session of our workshop, as I gazed around the room, my eye rested on Clarence Walton, a longtime friend whose warm and constant support had been important to me personally since first encountering him some 30 years ago. Here, I thought to myself, is the living metaphor of my own odyssey and, in a much larger sense, the odyssey of all those who have sought an understanding of the relationships between business and society. Pioneer of such studies at the Columbia Graduate School of Business in the 1950s, coauthor of the renowned Conceptual Foundations of Business, a book that nourished and sustained the field in its very earliest days, an academic administrator who had never left his scholarly activities behind nor forgot his own normative roots that brought him into the study of business institutions, and who had just this year capped his several other books about business values with the eloquence and wisdom to be found now in The Moral Manager, he did indeed sum up most of what both the Danforth seminar and this most recent workshop have striven to accomplish and what may be seen, by the perceptive observer, to have been the accomplishments of the entire field in the span of a single generation.

For such understanding, one can be grateful not only to Clarence but to our host whose workshop encouraged the nourishment of ideas and memories, as well as the deeper reflection that makes those memories worthwhile.