

Brief Ethical Reflections of an MBA Student

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In the introduction of *Eyes on the Street: The Life of Jane Jacobs*, biographer Robert Kanigel relates a story Jane told of sitting on her front porch with her father in her childhood home and being asked by him what the purpose was of the oak tree in their front yard. After pondering the question, she told him that the purpose of the tree was to live. "Yes, he said, that tree has a great push to live. Any healthy living thing does." Kanigel continues that it may be more appropriate to view her most famous book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, not as a book about cities, but as a book about death and life, and that the entirety of her work can be seen this way, "as a chorus and conversation about life in glowing contrast to death and decay". He relates her saying that she was never interested in pushing any one particular ideal city, but instead said, "I just wanted to know how to keep the life in it going, which in my mind is the purpose of life." (2016).

The word "sustainability" is all around us these days, primarily because our entire planetary ecosystem, like the cities in Jane Jacob's reflection, are threatened with decay and death. Keeping the life systems that sustain us going is thus a moral imperative, and no behavior that does not make doing that a central focus can be considered ethical. The life force, whether manifested in people or in the biosphere, has intrinsic value. It is an end in itself, and we thus should feel morally compelled to nurture and support it.

But maintaining the life force alone is not enough for people. We are conscious, creating beings in ways Jacob's oak tree is not, and we need to express our consciousness and creativity to be fully human. For several decades now when thinking

about "where I stand" in my philosophical outlook toward the world, I have identified the writing of Brazilian revolutionary educator Paulo Freire, especially as presented in his most famous book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as being the world view with which I find greatest resonance. In the very first sentence of chapter 1, Freire says that "the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind's central problem" (2000, p. 43). Throughout the book he lays out what he means by "humanization" as a process through which human beings become "historical Subjects" (2000, p. 160) through their ability to "name the world in order to transform it" (2000, p. 167).

If ethics is the branch of philosophy which "involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior" (Fieser, J., n.d.), then for me the very essence of what it means to be ethical is to fight for the restoration of the humanity of the oppressed through the shared praxis of our quest for liberation (Freire, P., 2000, p. 45).

Yet no human liberation will be possible if the environmental and economic systems required for human social reproduction are unsustainable, so I want to draw inspiration for both Jacobs and Freire, and to work towards co-creating a social reproductive system that is both liberating and sustainable.

As I continue my MBA studies at the University of the People, I strongly suspect I will continue to find myself at odds with the curriculum in many ways. My purpose is to overturn the very system our curriculum is designed to teach us to live in. Sun Tzu's famous maxim that "[i]f you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the

result of a hundred battles" (n.d.) is appropriate here, for if I am to be of any use as a cooperator in a world of competitors, I need to understand as much as I can about how the present system works to have any hope of being able to help change it. It is toward that aim that I enrolled in an MBA program in the first place.

As we come to the end of our *Business Law, Ethics, and Social Responsibility* class, several experiences stand out. Learning about United Nations sustainability goals (General Assembly resolution 70/1, 2015, October 15) was a revelation for me. I wonder how I could have missed this, but I was not aware of these goals until the first week of our class. Learning about them inspired me to sign up for a professional development conference next month with my union, the Virginia Education Association, at which I will attend a workshop titled *Using UN Sustainable Development Goals to Promote Deeper Learning & Interdisciplinary Collaboration*. I would not have signed up for this conference without the direct influence of BUS 5115. The fact that the whole world has gone on record supporting ending poverty and food insecurity, supporting gender equity and universal access to education, and "reducing inequality within and among countries" (General Assembly resolution 70/1, 2015, October 15, p. 14/35) is wonderful, and I have this class to thank for knowing about this.

Early in our course I also learned about corporate social responsibility (CSR), a term with which I was unfamiliar, and which I soon came to realize is fundamentally a sham public relations ploy developed by the rich and powerful to deflect popular resistance to growing inequality and the emerging environmental catastrophe in an effort to preserve the status quo. I read Joel Bakan's *The New Corporation: How "Good"*

Corporations Are Bad for Democracy specifically to gain access to reasoned, critical analysis of CSR, and I found the book to be very useful toward that end. Also useful on a gut level was the video assigned during our last week of class, *Corporate Social Responsibility in the Water Sector* (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2019, August 23). I was struck by the strong emphasis narrator Emilio Guzman put on the word "profit", and how much quieter his voice became when he said "planet" and "people" in listing the "three main pillars" of CRS. It was almost as if he had set out with a single sentence to validate Bakan's thesis.

Humanity in the twenty-first century is engaged in a great struggle for the very survival of our social reproductive system on a planetary scale. For the first time in human history we live under a single, global economic system, and it is that system which presents us with our existential challenge. We will either find a way to transcend this system's myopic, profit driven focus on accumulation above all else and begin to meet the UN sustainability goals, or we will endure catastrophe across the globe. As one small member of the human family, I have an ethical imperative to do what I can, however limited, toward a more just and sustainable outcome to that struggle.

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