

DEVELOPING BUSINESS ETHICS CASES THROUGH FILM

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ABSTRACT

Using film in business ethics classes allows students to deal with ethics cases on an emotional and imaginative level. Students must also discern the ethical problem and recognize the interplay of personalities in the case. One film that I have enjoyed showing over the years is “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.” It depicts one day in the life of political prisoners in the Gulag Archipelago of the former Soviet Union.

In addition to specific questions to which the students must respond, a deeper contemplation of ethical problems may be developed through the subtext of the movie. This subtext moves the student into an “under the sun,” perspective found in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The subtext of the movie moves the student away from the naïve equating of business success with the performance of Old and New Testament teaching.

Some of the Ecclesiastes themes that this film demonstrates are:

1. The sameness of the work routine
2. The enjoyment of work for work’s sake
3. The vanity of the ultimate result of work
4. The injustice found in the system of work
5. The cleverness of human beings at work
6. The opportunity for faith to grow through work

The teaching of business ethics is always appropriate in the undergraduate and graduate curricula. In addition to the usual textbook and case work, film provides another way to develop cases and to make the students think about ethics and biblical worldview. Three good reasons for using film have been presented in the literature by O'Boyle and Dawson. First, in the lecture method using prepared cases, students do not deal with ethics questions on the emotional, motivational or imaginative levels. Second, students are not required to discern the ethical problem. Third, students are not exposed to the complicated interplay of issues, principles, and personalities that characterize ethical problems. Film can help move the students along in these three areas.¹

One film that I have enjoyed showing over the years is "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich."² This film is based on the book by the same name by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, famous Russian writer and prophet.³ The film requires engagement and contemplation on the part of the viewer. It depicts one day in the life of political prisoners in the Gulag Archipelago of the former Soviet Union. This one day could be very similar to many other days that these prisoners endured throughout their years of incarceration.

Below are listed the case questions that are given to the students. This list could be expanded. The point, however, is for the students to contemplate Ivan's life, and see if there are any life applications for us in the modern American workplace. Also the students should be helped to begin to discern the subtext which consists of philosophical and theological meditations on life and work.

¹ For a further look at team taught cases through film see Edward J. O'Boyle and Lyndon E. Dawson, Jr., "Helping Students of Marketing Deal with Ethics: A New Pedagogy," *Marketing Education Review*, Vol I, Issue 2, Winter 1991, p. 45.

² Richard M. Pack, Howard G. Barnes, Erik Borge, Executive Producers; *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Norsk Film, (Oslo, Norway: 1971) SUS, Inc.

³ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Penguin Books (New York: 1963).

Questions:

1. Give a brief description of the movie.
2. Give four examples of Ivan's ethical decision making and classify these from an individual perspective or from a group perspective.
3. Relate several things in Ivan's day to a normal work experience.
4. Discuss any outstanding right or wrong choices that Ivan made.

[Movie clips]

There is a subtext in the discussion of the movie. There is an attempt to deepen the students' contemplation of ethical problems; to move them into a perspective more like that of Solzhenitsyn or, perhaps to move them into a more realistic, that is to say, a more biblical perspective.

In developing business students' biblical worldview, more emphasis needs to be placed upon the "under the sun," perspective found in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The simple equating of business success with the performance of Old and New Testament teaching is naïve. If an individual performs the moral and wisdom teaching of the Bible, there is not a guarantee of material wealth. The prophet Job is a good case study on this matter. Some of the Ecclesiastes themes that Solzhenitsyn brings out in "One Day," are:

1. The sameness of the work routine
2. The enjoyment of work for work's sake
3. The vanity of the ultimate result of work
4. The injustice found in the system of work
5. The cleverness of human beings at work
6. The opportunity for faith to grow through work.

In considering these themes, we are dealing with the other side of work; a darker side, but one in which, perhaps, Christlike character is developed. Each of these six themes will be expanded briefly below.

1. The sameness of work is presented in Ecclesiastes as follows: “I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted” (Ecclesiastes 1:14-15). “That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So, there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).⁴

Solzhenitsyn presents this sameness to us in the work routine of the camps. Get up early every morning. Go through the chow line and eat the same food. Line up and go to the work place. Work at the assigned work project. Eat the noon meal. March home in the darkening evening. Eat the same food again. Some personal time is allowed in the evening, followed by lights out and bed. The next day the same routine is played out. Maybe this same routine lasts for ten years-maybe for twenty.

Truly, most of us in the U.S. workplace do not face such a grim scenario. However, there is an inevitable sense of déjà vu that accompanies various work routines that we have done before-maybe ten or twenty times before. Is this terrible? No. The preacher in Ecclesiastes has warned us that there is a certain sameness involved in work. Our reaction to the routine of work is the important biblical dimension of this phenomenon.

⁴ All Scripture references are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, Creation House, Inc. (Carol Stream, Illinois: 1973).

There are several angles we could take here in thinking about a proper response to sameness. The team leader in “One Day” says to his men, “Well, don’t let it get you down, men,.... We’ll live through it, even in this power station.”⁵ Survival is a positive value.

In our rich country we usually don’t think in these terms. However, the simple fact that we have jobs is a great blessing. The ability to buy food and survive is a positive value.

Sameness can also produce contentment without complacency. “...godliness is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment,” (I Timothy 6:6). A God-centered perspective can help us to be grateful for work even if it becomes routine. Solzhenitsyn helps us to see this.

2. Enjoyment of work is a great blessing from God. Maybe a worker is out of the inner circle of decision making. Nevertheless, the joy of human work can produce gratitude in us to our Creator for another day’s life under the sun. “...my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun,” (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).

Heart satisfaction is the reward for good labor. When we look at the long-term result of our labor---houses, investments, charitable involvement---we may see, like the preacher, that we have been striving after wind.

The team leader in “One Day” is observing his men in the afternoon. They are working hard in building the new power station. Building blocks are being thrown up to the second floor by hand. The mortar mixers are working as hard as they are able. The hod carriers are straining to move the steaming mortar upstairs. The end-of-the-day whistle blows, and the team leader

⁵ Solzhenitsyn, *One Day*, p. 90.

says; “Not bad in half a day and without the hoist. We were just getting going when they call it off. Why do these rats make the workday so short?”⁶

Here is a man who is enjoying good work even in a prison camp. The results he may never see nor enjoy. It is the work itself, and the cooperation with the team that is enjoyable.⁷

3. Another scene from the film presents the truth that the ultimate results of work are not guaranteed. Our loved ones and heirs may not enjoy the fruits of our labors. Ivan recounts his time in prison camp, and says; “I can’t remember what my wife looks like.”⁸ Ivan may not, in fact, ever see his wife again. Neither he nor she will ever see any payoff from his work. Ivan recounts that the camp guards and officials receive a big payoff from the fruits of the prisoners’ labor. This leads us to the next topic of injustice in the workplace, over which we may have no control. So, we work in faith, and, if we can, in enjoyment.

4. Injustice is rampant in our world. In recounting the story of his capture, Ivan tells of his innocence as a simple soldier. His unit was slaughtered and he was captured by the Germans. Ivan and a few others made their way back to the Russian lines. It was there that he was captured and interrogated as a spy. He was forced to sign a false confession, and was eventually sentenced to ten years labor in the Gulag which was considered to be a relatively mild sentence.

The possibility of injustice is present with us in the workplace. “Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them,” (Ecclesiastes 4:1).

⁶ *One Day*, SVS, Inc.

⁷ Unless we are all badly mistaken about why we do things, it is the working at a task, the achieving its completion or, more generally, the full awareness of a significant experience that determines our motive—not the sensation of pleasure. Rudolf Arnheim, “From Pleasure to Contemplation,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, Spring ‘93, Vol 51, Issue 2, p. 95.

⁸ *One Day*, SVS, Inc.

Both oppressors and oppressed are crying because of their situation, but there is no relief. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is a wonderful illustration of this dark side of human existence. The tears of the oppressed are evident in the film, but the bad life of the oppressors is displayed also. With their machine guns, shouting, foul language, and brutal treatment of their fellows they are themselves becoming brutalized. In a certain sense, the captors become more dehumanized than the prisoners. It is precisely in prison under oppression that jewels of human character are made. These jewels include Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemoller, Edith Stein, Corrie ten Boom, Richard Wurmbrand, Josef Tson, and many others.

In American experience, this scenario may be played out in a less dramatic fashion. Our response to injustice toward ourselves builds the character of Christ in us. There is a time to speak out against injustice. There is also a time to accept a bad situation. Many Gulag prisoners lived many years in prison due to false charges against them. Some of these prisoners exhibited the fragrance of Christ. This is a grace-filled life indeed.

5. Harsh situations give opportunity for human ingenuity and cleverness to be displayed. “One Day” illustrates aptitude for invention---from making knives, to buying tobacco, to high-flying philosophical debate. Truly, “...God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices [inventions]⁹,” (Ecclesiastes 7:29) The *imago dei* that is present in every human being includes ingenuity and cleverness.¹⁰

In the film we see the cleverness of the prisoners as they devise and deal in the prison economy. “Press it down. You’ve packed it too loose,”¹¹ says Ivan to his tobacco-selling friend

⁹ Francis Brown, et al., *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Hendrickson Publishers (Peabody, Massachusetts: 1979) p. 364.

¹⁰ The word ‘imagination’, a Latinism, reflects this intellectual, yet non-rationalistic, understanding of ‘image’. ‘Imagination’ carries with it the connotation of creative thought, not merely the technical exercise of reason; and it is in this sense that many Christian theologians have considered humans to be made in the image of God. Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, InterVarsity Press (Downers Grove, Illinois: 1996) p. 78.

¹¹ *One Day*, SVS, Inc.

as he measures tobacco into a glass. He then pays with money he has sewn into the lining of his coat. Another prisoner makes knives and offers to sell one. The team leader bargains sharply with the camp bookkeepers in order to get more favorable rates for the team, and hence better rations at meal time.

Ivan pulls a fast shuffle and steals an extra bowl of boiled grass for distribution as the team leader sees fit. The imprisoned film maker, Tsezar, discusses art, politics, and the latest theatrical productions in Moscow with fellow prisoners. The prisoners think and act creatively to make their miserable situation a little better. These small actions of daily life illustrate the fact that God has made us for work and inventiveness, and even in prison camp these human characteristics cannot be erased.

6. The last point in the subtext that I hope that students will see is that harsh situations, including prison, provide an opportunity for faith to grow and mature. The classic scene in “One Day” shows a conversation between Ivan and Alyosha, a prisoner from the Caucasus, as they are getting ready to turn in for the night.

Ivan’s bunkmate says, “Pray that Jesus Christ will scourge the wickedness from our hearts. Rejoice that you’re in captivity. Here you are free to examine your soul.” Ivan responds, “That’s all very well for you, but why am I here? Because we weren’t ready for war in ’41? Is that it? Am I to blame for that?” Alyosha answered, “You see your soul is crying out to pray. Why don’t you listen to it and set it free?”¹²

We are not sure of Ivan’s exact situation with respect to Christ, but we do see that God is working through the circumstances to prepare him for, perhaps, more questions and more answers about the nature and character of God.

¹² *One Day*, SVS, Inc.

The film ends as the prisoners are bundling up for bed. Ivan eats a small sausage that he has been given by the film maker, Tsezar, for favors done during the day. The camera moves away from the camp into the darkness. The narrator states the final line: “There were 3653 days like this in his sentence, from the moment he woke until the moment he slept. The three extra days were for leap year.”¹³

There are many other films which can be developed into business ethics cases. There are also films which provide a philosophical subtext which can be drawn out into discussions of a Christian worldview which should include meditations on the nature of work and our relationship to it. The realism of Ecclesiastes is one facet of worldview thinking that is illustrated in the film “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.” This film is used not to discourage anyone, but to provide encouragement and liberation just as in the book of Ecclesiastes.

The following Ecclesiastes short passages are presented for further reflection:

““I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end” (Ecclesiastes 3:10-11).

“And I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot” (Ecclesiastes 3:22).

“Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart” (Ecclesiastes 6:19-20).

¹³ *One Day*, SVS, Inc.

“I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise, nor wealth to the discerning, nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all” (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

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