

Foreword: Poetry and Business

BY JOHN BARR

At best they have been viewed in America as odd bedfellows; at worst there has been a history of attitudinal sparring between them. W. H. Auden caught the general attitude of poets toward businessmen when he wrote that poetry “survives in the valley of its making where executives would never want to tamper.” For the businessman’s part, the major American poet Hart Crane was born to a father, the inventor of Life Savers, who thought God had played an outrageous joke by giving him a poet for a son. Closer to home, my own father, a railroad man and a good man, had this advice when I announced that I intended to become a poet: “At least go to college. Then if you become a poet people will think you are an eccentric and not just a beach bum.” Sound advice in 1961.

Having listened to my father but also to myself, I have pursued parallel careers in both business and poetry. The experience has persuaded me that the connections between the world of business and management and the world of the arts and humanities are manifold, profound, and resistant to easy conclusions. It also has convinced me that those connections are terribly important. If the province of the businessman (by which I mean businesswoman as well, here and in what follows) is as large as all external reality, then the province of the poet is as large as the world of internal reality within us all. The life of action versus the life of contemplation—the “man of affairs” versus the “man of letters”—is an opposition as old as literature. It is the tension between “doing” and “knowing.” And the somewhat insistent desire of each of these ways of living to establish a validity and sufficiency independent of the other runs directly out of the human condition. Are we better able to deal with the imperfection of reality by controlling, to an extent, the world around us, or by making sense, through art and contemplation, of the world within us?

The secret, of course, is that choosing one need not mean excluding the other. As Clare Morgan's book shows, the special kinds of knowledge that poetry discovers can enhance and animate a life in business. And vice versa. Art that is not rooted in the whole of human experience—call that “art for art's sake”—is doomed to be ephemeral, peripheral, because it cannot enrich the life of a general reader. Conversely a business career that has not been informed by art's power of seeing, by poetry's hallmark openness to ambiguity and risk, may not achieve its full potential. This is so because business and poetry are more alike than either knows.

The business of both is to create order out of a chaotic universe. True, the venues of business and poetry are different. The businessman delights in making sense of things in the *external* world, achieving his order by making a sale, building a plant, or similar commercial success. The poet, on the other hand, delights in making sense of things in the *internal* world, achieving order by creating a perfect poem. Robert Frost calls a poem “a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification such as sects and cults are founded on, but . . . a momentary stay against confusion.” For both, then, creativity is a means of controlling chaos, finding order. Business and poetry draw their waters out of the same well.

The agent for this work is the imagination. Poetry gets a lot of attention for its creativity; it is called one of the “creative arts.” But people not in business often miss the point that business is also a creative art. Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream was certainly a creative act on the part of Ben and Jerry. A new company, a new product, even a solution to a mundane business problem requires an idea. And an idea is an act of the imagination.

The modern CEO, I have come to think, is one of the finer products of Western civilization. Not that every business leader we know is a perfect human being, of course, but the CEO of my imagination is a marvel of internal balances. He is comfortable with risk if not in love with it; pragmatic but not at the expense of principles; willing to act and be judged by the results, and, in all the above, refreshingly free of hypocrisy or self-pity. Oh, and he has probably read some poetry.

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