George Saunders’ Exhortation

BETTER THINKING ABOUT HOW LITERATURE SPEAKS TO BUSINESS

ELAINE JOHNSON © 2014
George Saunders

- George Saunders, named on *Time’s* 2013 list of the 100 most influential people in the world, has published four short story collections. His latest, *Tenth of December*, won the prestigious Folio Prize.

- Saunders, widely regarded as the best short story writer in English, is admired for dark, sharp, playful satire that forces readers to question their assumptions and examine their actions.
The short story “Exhortation” in *Tenth of December* consists of a single memorandum exhorting employees to satisfy top management. I have abridged the text as follows:

“Memorandum:

- From: Divisional Director
- **Re: March Performance Stats**

We have a job to do, we have agreed to do it well. We all know that one way to do a job poorly is to be negative about it. Say we need to clean a shelf. Let’s use that example.
If we spend the hour before the shelf-cleaning dreading it, *investigating the moral niceties* of cleaning the shelf, we make the process more difficult.

We all know the “shelf” is going to be cleaned either by you or the guy who replaces you. Do I want to clean it happy or sad?

What mental state helps me clean that shelf well and quickly? The positive mental state.
• I’m saying let’s try not to dissect every single thing we do in terms of ultimate good/bad/indifferent in terms of morals.

• The time for that is long past. I hope that each of us had that conversation with ourselves a year ago when this whole thing started. We have embarked on a path for the best of reasons. I have seen you executing your tasks without neurotic thoughts.
• Remember that record-breaking week Andy had back in October when he doubled his usual number of units?...Forgetting namby-pamby thoughts of right/wrong?

• No one can argue with his numbers.

• Andy has failed to duplicate those numbers in the months since October. Others may be monitoring that troubling falloff in Andy’s numbers.
Andy looked totally focused, outside himself [in October].

He’s gotten neurotic and withdrawn since October. Andy’s too depressed to hear me, disconsolate. He’s being neurotic and second-guessing his actions of October.

Are the actions Andy did in Room 6 undone by his boo-hooing?
Andy leaving Room 6
No one is walking out of Room 6 feeling perfectly okay. You guys don’t walk out feeling super-great. I’ve done some things in Room 6 that didn’t leave me feeling so wonderful. Room 6 can be a bummer. It is very hard work.
But the people above us who give us our assignments think the work is important. They have begun watching our numbers closely. I have been told that our numbers are not to go down any further.

At the Sectional Meeting, I was told that our numbers are not to go down further. I said (and this took guts), “Look, my guys are tired physically and psychologically.”
The looks I got were not good. I was asked to remind you that if we are unable to clean our assigned “shelf”, someone else will be brought in to clean that “shelf” [and] we may find ourselves being that “shelf.”
You can imagine how regretful you would feel, the regret would show in your faces, as we witness in Room 6 that regret on the faces of the “shelves” as they are “cleaned,” so I am asking you to try your best and not end up as a “shelf,” which we will have no choice but to clean clean clean in Room 6.
Faces of regretful “Shelves” in Room 6
Well I have gone on and on. Please come by my office, anybody who’s having doubts about what we do. The information that you are having doubts will go no further than my office.

All will be well, and all will be well, etc., etc.,

From Todd, Divisional Director

THE END
The memorandum begins by encouraging workers to have a positive attitude.

The tone shifts to sinister as it argues against being moral and insists that those at the top care only about numbers.

If employees are slowed down by moral scruples and do not make their numbers, they become expendable.
• “Be afraid” is the sub-text of the message. “Failure will be punished.” Describe the impact of fear on employees you know or have observed.

• Give examples of businesses that focus on numbers at the expense of people. Is this focus justified in some cases?

• Identify a moral dilemma that confronts business leaders. How should it be handled?
Fear is anathema in Deming’s business world.

Dr. Deming said that people need to feel that they have an important place in a business, that they belong.

Dr. Deming said that cooperation and positive relationships give humans a sense of belonging.

A sense of belonging strengthens intrinsic motivation. One wants to succeed for the sake of the entire group.
Art Kleiner’s book warns that “The culture of numbers does not let corporations achieve their promise as agents of good.”

Businesses must make the world better. They are responsible for communication, transportation, technology, climate change, and globalization.

A business cannot achieve its promise by focusing only on numbers. It cannot thrive if its only purpose is accumulation of wealth, ROI. It cannot thrive if it uses numbers to describe human interactions.
Conclusion

- Increasingly it seems that business must reinvent its purpose to encompass more than making money.
- Kleiner says that the purpose of business is to make enough profit to flourish and to benefit employees, serve customers, and strengthen the community.
- Is a community’s well-being the true end of business? Is making a profit a means to that end, not the end in itself?

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GM’s Cobalt and Managing by Numbers

• Automakers have a legal duty to produce safe cars and to correct flaws.
• Engineers detected a defect in the Chevy Cobalt’s ignition in 2004, when the car was introduced. They suggested a fix.
• On the basis of the numbers—the high cost of repairing the ignition—executives rejected the fix.
Chevy Cobalt
Cobalt after ignition switched off
GM’s Ethical Failure

- For a decade, GM failed to comply with laws requiring disclosure of vehicle defects. GM knew that the ignition switches could fail, yet did not recall the cars or suggest a fix.
- The NHTSA, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, disregarded customer complaints about faulty ignition switches that shut down engines, killed power steering and power brakes, and disarmed air bags.
• The inaction both of GM and NHTSA permitted Cobalt to cause 31 accidents and 13 death.
• 1.6 million cars, six different models, are now being recalled--Saturn Ion, Saturn Sky; Chevrolet HHR, Chevrolet Cobalt; Pontiac G5; Pontiac Solstice. Together these models caused at least 78 deaths and 1,581 injuries.

(See www.nytimes.com/2014/03/09/business)