

The incinerators at Dachau . . .

I was interviewed last month by a reporter for an article published online February 8 by my alma mater, the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota -- and her questions caused me to re-trace my journey into the world of social enterprise. Here's a partial transcript:

I read your "Aching to Change the World" piece ("Jerr's Journal," July 17, 2012), about getting ready to go to India as a Peace Corps Volunteer in 1968. What drew you to enter the Corps?

I was one of the first three men in my platoon to qualify on the rifle range. Me! An English major from the suburbs. How the hell did that happen? Yeah, I was book smart, all right, but I wasn't life smart, and the war in Vietnam spooked me. So I joined the Army Reserves to escape from the draft. I went through basic training at Ft. Leonard Wood in the spring of '67 -- and by the time I'd finished I'd become a crack shot and a conscientious objector. But I had a cushy job as company clerk at Ft. Snelling two days a month, and I'd heard horror stories about "weekend warriors" refusing to bear arms, so I vacillated.

Then, three months later, everything changed as I stared into the blackened depths of the incinerators at Dachau. It was visceral, and I felt the presence of evil again at the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam two weeks later. I've never been the same. I returned from a five-week journey through Europe determined to do *something* to fight back non-violently. I pored through the shelves of Army Regulations during my down time as company clerk and discovered a loophole: Joining the Peace Corps could get me an honorable discharge! I'd be eligible for the draft two years later -- but I didn't care. I knew I'd refuse to go.

How did the Peace Corps idealist and humanities major/M.A. grad transition into the business world? You coordinated one of the first conferences in the field of social enterprise, the "Social Needs and Business Opportunities International Conference," in 1982. How did you hear about and get involved in a movement that was just getting started? What attracted you to this nascent field?

Bill Norris founded Control Data Corporation in 1957 and within ten years led it to dominance in the computer industry. But the race riots of 1967 shocked him. Cities were burning, mobs rioting and looting, even in Minneapolis, the company's headquarters. What he did next helped change the course of business history: He urged CEOs to "address the major unmet needs of society as profitable business opportunities" and launched an array of social enterprises fueled by computer technology and targeted at economic development, health care, education and dozens of other social needs.

I started working as a journalist at age 16, continued nearly full-time during my undergraduate years, and resumed when I returned from India. In the mid-1970s I began hearing about Norris -- and by 1979 I was one of his personal aides. His business strategy was heresy to Wall Street, but the media loved it, and invitations to speak poured in from all over the world. During the five years I traveled with him, I

helped him prepare and deliver more than 300 speeches -- to government leaders, corporate executives, international financiers -- and arranged interviews with more than 100 major newspapers, magazines and television programs. I worked 90-hour weeks just to keep pace, but he never slowed.

During those same years, management guru Peter Drucker began emphasizing the concept of “doing good by doing well” and became the keynoter at the 1982 international conference I organized for Norris. More than 250 CEOs attended. Two years later I worked with Control Data and a dozen other companies as they designed and funded a new organization to help individuals and nonprofits build sustainable, social purpose businesses. We launched what eventually became The National Center for Social Entrepreneurs. I became the first employee and stayed for 16 years, the last eight as CEO.

What do you like about being a consultant, versus sticking with a single organization and leading its growth over time?

In my experience, there are three different types of leaders: Innovators, entrepreneurs and professional managers (“*Jerr’s Journal*,” June 19, 2012). All three are needed in the evolution of a healthy organization, but at different times, and rarely does an individual excel in more than one of the three areas. Understanding that reality has been one of the most important and painful lessons learned by people in the nonprofit and business sectors. No other subject has caused such consternation among my audiences during the past 30 years, whether I’ve been in Nashville, Copenhagen, Johannesburg or Tokyo. People frequently approach me after one of my presentations and tell me “*That’s* why it’s not working at my organization -- we have the wrong people in the wrong jobs!” . . . or, more emotionally, “*That’s* why it’s not working for *me!*”

I discovered long ago I was an innovator -- and I’m not really a consultant. I’m more of a coach, and I do most of my work upstream. My job has been to educate and motivate individuals and organizations about social enterprise. I give speeches about the promises and the perils, describe the global rise of the movement, conduct retreats for Boards and executive teams, do what my friends in the U.K. call “surgeries” (45 minute sessions with individual social enterprises discussing whatever issues are weighing them down) and work with an ever-growing number of young people entering the field.

You earned your English degree in 1966. How do the skills you learned in the study of literature support what you do? If you were an undergraduate today, with an interest in social entrepreneurship, would you choose Carlson Business School instead of the College of Liberal Arts?

I majored in English but specialized in ancient and modern drama, with a minor in humanities and half-minors in classics and philosophy. I frequently begin presentations by claiming I have two degrees that have been especially valuable during my business career. When I flash the words “English Literature” and “Comparative Literature” on the screen the audience bursts out laughing.

But . . .

Those years studying literature *have* been invaluable. When I ask people in the nonprofit and social enterprise sectors why they do what they do, it *always* comes down to values . . . the same subtext that ripples through *Death of a Salesman*, *An Essay on Man*, *Antigone* and *No Exit*. I once helped a community arts organization articulate its core values. Here’s what the Board and staff considered most important: “For many people, the liberating power of the arts is separated from daily life, and the

potential of the arts to address social issues is unrealized: *We believe participation in the arts is fundamental to the life of every individual and community.*"

Using business strategies to address social needs -- merging the profit motive with moral imperatives -- has turned out to be my life's work, and if I had to choose today I'd pursue a double major at CLA and Carlson.

You graduated the same year as English major Garrison Keillor, who in 2011 announced he would retire from *A Prairie Home Companion* and in 2012 decided he would not. Are you similarly ambivalent?

My goal for whatever time remains is to help nurture the next generation of social entrepreneurs.

Not long ago in Dallas I was asked to speak to roughly 200 7th and 8th grade students about the Peace Corps and social enterprise. These were mostly minority kids on scholarship at an international Montessori school -- and they wouldn't let me leave! They bombarded me with questions, started hooting and hollering and leaping on their chairs when the Principal tried to end the session -- and finally the only thing I could do was head up the aisle, slapping hands as I went, and disappear into the parking lot.

Those kinds of young people, from junior high to graduate school, are the third wave of social enterprise, and I find them everywhere. I served four years as Board Chair for SAGE, which sponsors high school social entrepreneurs in 20 countries. During the past five years I've been teaching graduate courses in social enterprise, first as a visiting professor at Carnegie Mellon and now as an adjunct professor at Pepperdine. I've done guest lectures in graduate and undergraduate classes all over the world.

My generation may have helped jump-start the social enterprise movement and a younger generation that came of age in the '80s and '90s is helping it mature, but the next generation is waiting impatiently to join them, and they're the ones I plan to spend my time with whenever possible, for as long as I can. Because sometimes all it takes to galvanize young people is to give them a glimpse of something new -- and then get out of their way!