

A WRITTEN WORD IS THE CHOICEST OF RELICS

10 *Foundations of Business Thought* is an eclectic guide through the historic and socio-philosophic maze of our distant and recent business past. Threading its way through, and past, some musty and anachronistic corridors and around some modern and abstract corners, the path it cuts is designed to illuminate alternative entrances and exits. It is a seeker's blueprint to the intellectual architecture of the business world, rather than a static, or passive, consumer's nuts and bolts template that, like many standard introduction-to-business texts, exists to introduce you as efficiently as possible to the mechanical processes of commerce.

20 The readings prepare you to think about what it means, in the most personal terms, to be part of the commercial world. Most contributors to business texts avoid this kind of exposition, averting the philosophical in deference to the practical. Rather than ask you to study why debt transmogrifies into credit or what it means to act categorically as if money were an end rather than a means to an end, they ask you to study isolated straws such as the mathematics of finance and the strategies and tactics of contemporary consumer marketing in which the primary purposes of capitalization and generating revenue sit like lonely thoughts on a sea of rudimentary ideas.

30 There is something very partial about the usual approach because it reduces the world to a pursuit of money and a set of life goals built around getting and spending. This is a reduction because it narrows the study of business to a single, how-to program and cuts equally serious inquiries into commerce away from the connective tissues of philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, biology, chemistry, and even physics. Worse, it makes the search for the self an absurdly narrow affair. Any short course, programmatic presentation of business disciplines compresses all possible joys from business into the "neutron star" of profit and its own "Four Weighty Ps" of power, position, privilege, and place. Once captured by this academic social singularity, the moral and intellectual velocity required to escape its gravity is too great for most

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of us. This is how the business world often imprisons rather than liberates.

Francis Bacon, the early seventeenth-century essayist and philosopher whose own desire for power in excess "caused the angels to fall," has presented the picture in lucid fashion:

It may be truly affirmed, that no kind of men love business for itself but those who are learned; for other persons love it for profit, as an hireling, that loves the work for the wages; or for honour, as because it beareth them up in the eyes of men, and refresheth their reputation, which otherwise would wear; or because it putteth them in mind of their fortune, and giveth them occasion to pleasure and displeasure; or because it exerciseth some faculty wherein they take pride, and so entertaineth them in good humour and pleasing conceits toward themselves; or because it advanceth any other their ends. So that as it is said of untrue valours, that some men's valours are in the eyes of them that look on; so such men's industries are in the eyes of others, or at least in regard of their own designments: only learned men love business as an action according to nature, as agreeable to health of mind as exercise is to health of body, taking pleasure in the action itself, and not in the purchase: so that of all men they are the most indefatigable, if it be towards any business which can hold or detain their mind. —Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*

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Bacon, whose own mischievous business behavior landed him as a prisoner in the Tower of London with a fine of 40,000 pounds, concluded during his final years that the world of business was a great deception. Bacon observed that men in business were an unstudious, limited, and blinkered lot whose faith in their own certainties was unassailable. These certainties, which he describes in the passage above, caused business practitioners to be certain that competitive engagement in the commercial world,

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galvanized by self-interest and catalyzed by the promise of self-advancement, would purchase the ephemeral and the eternal, a mortal home on some vast estate and an immortal, celestial home in an infinite firmament. Do the following notions strike you as “certainties”?

1. Business brings profit, and love of profit is a powerful seduction;
- 10 2. Business (especially business success) brings in honor, which is a revitalizing bath of the all-consuming will to power;
3. Business builds assets that provide the otherwise hollow practitioner with current, capital, and intangible occupants for the many vacancies of one’s life;
4. Business generates pride, which, when felt for others, is not such a bad thing, but when operating self-referentially is just hubris; and
- 20 5. Business advances the practitioner’s ends. There is no need for self-improvement because self-advancement eliminates the “need.”

These are the certainties that bought a prison sentence for Bacon. Later in his life, he concluded that he had an oversupply of unevaluated certainties. “If a man will begin with certainties,” he said, “he shall end in doubts: but if he be content to begin with doubt, he shall end in certainties.” Bacon applied the scientific method—even to the studies of philosophy and business and could see that the two respective disciplines needed one another. He added natural science, behaviorism, and even religion. The more fields of study he mastered, the more doubts appeared. The more doubts he mastered, the more certainties, of a new and better-evaluated variety, emerged. He arranged them all in a utopic synthesis called *The New Atlantis*. The world of business thought figures prominently in this visionary epic. Henry Thomas, in his *Biographical Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, calls *The New Atlantis* “a Utopia in which he [Bacon] pictured a race of men dedicated to the study of nature and God.”

In this ideal state, there is no strife for the simple reason that there is no greed. Nobody tries to surpass his neighbors in the personal acquisition of wealth. All the goods and funds are fairly distributed among all the people for “money is like muck, not good unless it be spread.”

The business . . . is of the most unusual sort. “We maintain a trade, not of gold, silver, or jewels, nor of silks, nor for spices, nor for any other [material] commodity. . . but only for God’s first creature, which was light; To have

light of the growth of all parts of the so world.” For this purpose, the Utopians maintain a class of businessmen called Merchants of Light—philosophers and scientists who traveled throughout the world for the international exchange of new ideas and fair play.

Imagine a world in which business practitioners are not foreigners in the land of philosophy and faith.

Imagine a world in which the material manifest of business is to secure essential needs and necessary wants and, thus, provide time for the most important business of all—study and illumination.

Imagine a world in which business is conducted by learned people who are energized by every encounter between commerce and its sister disciplines—philosophy, faith, science, history, and even the arts.

This is the world of the learned business practitioner, according to Bacon. And it is a world that cannot even be conceived without the confluent streams of diverse, multidisciplinary inquiry into the study of business. Those in business are not excused from becoming, as Henry David Thoreau states it, “acquainted with wiser men.”

Thoreau is often thought of as a foreigner in the land of commerce. This is an incorrect belief about the man. He tells us in *Walden*, his magnum opus on the joys of living within nature rather than outside it, that his experience at Walden was, in great part, about determining just how he might use business rather than allowing business to use him. Thoreau seems like an outsider. He wants to live an unadorned life of the land, yet at the same time, he wants to live within the confines of his own human nature. There are two natures at play in *Walden*—topographic nature and human nature, and without certain synchrony, there can be only doubt and frustration. This is a very wise conclusion for a young man. (Thoreau was not yet thirty years old when he conducted his *Walden* experiment.)

Thoreau says that understanding business is crucial to learning how to avoid being crushed by it—that an education in business allows for maximum utility. The more one understands business, the more productive one becomes (which is a central tenet of commercial thinking). For Thoreau, the goal of efficiency is not to increase profit; rather, it is to reduce the amount of time necessary to the earning of a living. It is this logic that he employs to liberate himself from the burdens of giving himself over to a world of work. To live within one’s own nature, he tells us, requires time and study—usually of the most pleasant variety. What we generally find, he tells us, is

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that most luxuries are hindrances to living well and that business, properly understood, is best employed to serve our basic needs only. Thereafter, we are free when we live on our own terms. For Thoreau, this kind of freedom is the foundation for an ideal life.

10 An idealized life seems to be a common goal for most people. Thoreau traces this kind of thinking to the classic Athenian thinkers, Plato and Aristotle, though he pleads the case so for all great thinkers. How to live the ideal life generates different ideas. Many of these ideas are already available in books. Thoreau is adamant about independent thinking and behavior, but he believes that serious reading is essential. The most intelligent ideas and the most judicious judgments need the support of serious reading (such as the readings to be found in *Foundations of Business Thought*).

20 We need to know the best that has been thought to temper our own impressions and conclusions. If we want to live idealized lives, we need to think of serious reading as the kind of refraction that precedes reflection. “I aspire to be acquainted with wiser men than this, our Concord soil has produced. As if Plato were my townsman,” he says. And, as if to pinch just a bit of salt into the language, he adds, “It is not all books that are as dull as their readers.”

30 Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* is part of our serious reading in this Introduction. What you learn, as you begin your study of the following readings, will add brilliant color to the business life you will one day lead. What you remember will give dynamic and protean shape to the business and, therefore, personal relationships you will one day forge.

40 P. T. Barnum is remembered as a nineteenth-century American “master showman”—this derives, primarily, from his establishment of several museums that exhibited all sorts of oddities, like the Fiji mermaid, General Tom Thumb who stood just a few inches over three feet, and Joyce Heth, the supposed 161-year old nurse to George Washington. He also presented road shows featuring these, and other, oddities, but added exotic entertainments such as the European nightingale songstress, Jenny Lind, who drew crowds by the thousands. The road show concept was an obvious link to his establishment of the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Barnum also owned a number of different businesses and published a newspaper. Later in his life, he served in the United States House of Representatives. A fascinating entrepreneur, he is said to have made quite a capable congressman as well.

50 Unlike Thoreau, who tells us that classic texts are very important to understanding our own lives, Barnum

believes that securing one’s independence provides answers to a question that also interests Thoreau: how are we to live? Barnum says that economics is the central fact of independence—that it teaches us the most crucial rule necessary to creating and sustaining the independence that allows us to make life choices. Barnum has no grand educational scheme—he is not attempting to provide us with a detailed, long-term education in culture and philosophy, or a series of shop classes designed to introduce vocational opportunities. Instead, in the tradition of Ben Franklin, he provides a brief primer on economics and independence distilled into fundamental rules such as:

1. Earn money by doing what comes naturally; 60
2. Avoid envy and vanity; 70
3. Don’t waste time;
4. Learn how to maintain your health;
5. Don’t drink intoxicating beverages;
6. Be frugal;
7. Don’t be capricious; 80
8. Spend less than you earn;
9. Live within your means;
10. Keep track of your expenses.

Barnum is famous for having said (or, at least purported to have said), “There’s a sucker born every minute.” A sucker might easily be that person who fails to accept Barnum’s rules as a valuable education. 90

Your business life could well be a work of the learned imagination that could free you to seek your own nature in the world of commerce and the community of all living things. If you so fail to comprehend these foundations now, your work—your life—may become leaden and uninspired, unexceptional in concept and unappealing in design. All hope for a full and healthy personal development might be lost if you thoughtlessly adopt the shallow certainties of an encapsulated, predigested business mindset. 100

Mary Wollstonecraft, a late eighteenth-century British philosopher, reminds us of a time when women were denied the opportunity for personal development through formalized education that would have allowed them to achieve a deeper, broader cultural literacy and

the political good that might naturally proceed from equal gender participation in public discourse. She was more interested in equal education than in equal political rights. Her protest against anything that posed a barrier to such equalized education positioned her against a number of accomplished thinkers of her day, both men and women. Irrespective of any individual biases that existed at the time, no one doubted her sincerity, intellect, and will, especially after she authored several notable books justifying her ideas, in addition to her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a classic addition to the Western canon.

Despite the ongoing revolution in France, post-1789, she traveled to Paris just to be in the middle of that conflagration, despite knowing that the political relationships she developed and sustained there would endanger her life. As surprising as this was, she had already demonstrated her strengths when she wrote a carefully worded and well-defended response to the British politician and writer, Edmund Burke, who was critical of the French Revolution. However, Wollstonecraft saw value in such a bloody and confusing conflict that she thought would liberate potentialities across a broad spectrum of groups, including women—despite its brutality—and she told him so, notwithstanding his position of power. In no way was she shy and retiring, or reticent. She was not afraid to take controversial public positions, and while this may not seem unusual to us moderns, it was unusual during an epoch in which women had few public platforms and political rights. They didn't even have the right to secure an education.

Wollstonecraft makes it clear that healthy, personal development requires inspiring and exceptional education, whether cultural, theological, philosophical, or commercial, that is equal to any such education that a man receives—or, in some cases, endures! How can there be a community without such equality of opportunity? To extend her argument to commerce, you may ask: Are the foundations of business thought less pertinent to one group of humanity than to another? Is it conceivable that future economic progress, dependent on what would come to be known as marketing, accounting, finance, management, and production is assured a better result by excising women from participation? In fact, is there any reason to exclude women from any opportunity that might enrich their lives and enliven communities and a nation?

It is Mary Wollstonecraft who, among others, frees women to seek their own nature in the world of culture and commerce. They, too, have the opportunity to seek formalized education so as to create lives of learned imagination in business—or wherever they choose.

An education that failed to teach you how to make your way in the world and that failed to tie vocation to the economic necessity of making a living would be self-destructive, disconnecting you from family, friends, and society. It would leave you feeling insecure about your future, lacking in confidence about your very survival. It would, likely, contribute to a personal sense of despair and anomie, isolating you and making you suspect by those who had skills and various levels of social class distinction, but it would create a national malaise, too. Nations that leave groups isolated from the mainstream of work culture and economic opportunity generate envy, anger, and division—symptoms of national sickness.

Booker T. Washington, the first director of the Tuskegee Institute, a school for post-bellum Black Americans, provides us with a viewpoint regarding education for such an isolated group of men and women, who only several decades earlier, had been liberated from slavery. The 1890s and early 1900s found Black Americans losing their rich and vast background in “blue-collar” skills that had enabled direct relationships with white Americans who needed those skills for hire. Such relationships sustained inter-racial connections and, at the same time, built and maintained vocational and economic opportunities for Black Americans. These same relationships muted W.E.B. Dubois’ call for immediate and complete political rights and replaced them with the logic of a gradual securing of those rights by way of locking in economic partnerships between the races.

Significant sectors of politically engaged Blacks and whites called for immediate granting of all rights, through whatever means necessary—including not only the kind of cultural literacy programs for Blacks, such as advocated by Wollstonecraft, but the alignment of Black American sympathies with revolutionary socialism. Washington opposed this approach. He was clear in his opposition to programs and politics which, he believed, fractured Black-white economic partnerships and the amicable relations that often followed. He opposed the socialism of W.E.B. Dubois, in any of its permutations, in favor of a far more productive democratic capitalism that linked the races in the mutual goal of building America. Washington was adept at promoting his positions—all the way up the chain to the office of the president of the United States.

Booker T. Washington offers a simple formula: an education for Black Americans that recovers the lost vocational skills that were once so important to dignity and, as it so happens, Black-white relationships, and that are even more important in the early 20th century. He directs the Tuskegee Institute in a mission of broad-spectrum vocational education—a “hammer and nail” approach

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10 to achieving economic success—enough to earn dignity and to buy property, thereby setting the stage for property rights as a foundation, even a prelude, to full political rights for Black Americans. Blue-collar business is, after all, another route to the employment of the learned imagination. You, too, are free to seek your nature in the commerce of building things. This is a classic foundational return to the platonic idea that there is nobility in becoming the creator of things—*homo faber*—that there is nobility for people who work with their hands to make things, repair things, and ensure that our nation “works.” Washington says that such an education builds the person and the nation.

W.E.B. DuBois suggests that it is nothing less than civilization you are building—a civilization of men and women, people and culture. And for this, he says, “We must have ideals.” DuBois is asking you to see that ideals and meaning are tied to your education. You will think and feel as deeply as your vocabulary allows. Your own internal logic should suggest that the status quo requirements of contemporary business— 20 unlimited profit, infinite growth of capital, assets, and markets, and finally, self-interest untethered to the interests of an integrated, fully inclusive ecological community—are inadequate for your potential to see wider, think deeper, and act better.

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