

The Dispatch

August 2020: Minor Keys in Business and in Life

This month's Dispatch uses language from music to acknowledge the more difficult times in our lives and family businesses. Davon reminds us of the mysterious comfort sometimes found in minor keys, while Bill demonstrates how what others view as a minor key in the moment become major keys over time. And Lance suggests that the minor keys in a family business are a necessary ingredient in family business success. We hope you enjoy the comments and feel free to offer any feedback by replying!

Life's Minor Keys

Davon Cook

I'm not a fan of organ music. My mother is church pianist, and she likes to play most hymns fast. So I grew up with that lively sound all around me. When I attended a church with a historic organ for many years, I struggled with the heavy, serious tone that was revered by the music lovers there. Remembering it now, I instantly conjure up those dark, sad Good Friday hymns in minor keys. They felt so arduous, sad, out of tune. At least at Easter those minor keys are reversed by the joyous singing of Lord of the Dance on Easter Sunday in my faith tradition.

What about in life? When we're in a period filled with 'minor keys', with chords that are discordant, sad, off...what do we see? Sometimes with time and hindsight, we see some good things that came of it, as Bill suggests. Sometimes, we may not find the silver lining; the minor keys may be a phase that just has to be endured.

In our current times, I hear much reflection on how Covid is shaping our lives. Some days, I find the happy tunes help me appreciate the unexpected benefits—time with children, more family meals at home, good news of generosity and community. And other days, I simply feel the heaviness of that organ dirge. Yet, upon reflection, I do remember times I found those minor chords oddly comforting, a witness to the difficulties we face. In this issue, we ask you to reflect on the minor keys life has handed you. How do they affect your endurance and grit? What have you learned from the discordant times that will serve you well going forward?

How a "Minor" Key became a "Major" Key for Me

Dr. Bill Long

Precisely thirty years ago (August 18, 1990), my family and I packed our bags and moved from the West Coast to Sterling, Kansas, where I took up a position as chair of the history department at tiny Sterling College. I had already established a positive professional reputation in the West, and my move to rural Kansas was greeted by friends as tantamount to a major personal loss. I didn't agree with them, of course, but their words were ringing in my ears as we gradually left the cool of the Northwest for the 107 degree temperatures of Sterling. To put my move in the language of our theme for the month, my friends told me that this was a move into the "minor keys" of life when, up until then, the "major keys" predominated.

We stayed in Kansas six years. There was culture shock, to be sure, but it wasn't really as major as I had experienced when I was fifteen in August 1967 and our family moved from button-down New England to the

San Francisco Bay area in the middle of the “Summer of Love.” When we left Kansas in 1996, I did so with ambiguous feelings. I felt that I had minimal if any impact on a great small college, and I felt that things hadn’t really progressed like I wanted. When I reached Colorado on I-70, I remember even heaving a bit of a sigh of relief because the great “rural experiment” for me was over. I was fully in the “minor” keys of life.

But life didn’t end in 1996, and what I have discovered in the 24 years since then is that what was once a minor key for me, or something that was played with somber overtones, has turned into a major key. In 2005 two of my former Sterling students contacted me, telling me that I had an important impact on their lives—and they invited me to help them shape their business or work with them on some projects. I returned on countless occasions to Kansas in those years, developing relationships with new people, understanding the flow of life, and doing so from the perspective of one who was gratefully receiving rather than thinking he was going to make an impact.

So, my “minor” keys of 1990-1996 gradually changed. Today I can say that there is probably no more formative experience for me as a productive writer, a mentor/coach, and a student of history and diverse cultures as my time in Kansas. I had to go from what others considered the “center” to the “margins” of life, but I found a new center there. And I thank God every day for those “minor” keys.

Minor Keys in the Family Business

Lance Woodbury

While there are many happy moments (represented by “major keys”) in the family farm and ranch, there are plenty of sorrowful, minor keys, too. The risk we take in working next to our family members is that the choice to operate together leads to sadness. It might be the unexpected loss of a family coworker, or a broken relationship between once-close siblings. Seasons of financial difficulty or business uncertainty, hopes or goals long-held but yet unmet, or individuals’ behavior leading to chaos, sometimes make us wonder if the movements of our family business opus are destined to be played by Muddy Waters!

But just as major keys sound happy in contrast to minor keys, the minor keys must be given their due. Interludes of sorrow give way to episodes of joy. Stan Reiss, a farmer in Southwest Kansas, reminds me that in tough times, we are always “one day closer” to something better. And Viktor Frankl, the author and holocaust survivor, said that “What is to give light must endure burning.”

As I reflected on the minor-major dichotomy, I was reminded of J.R.R. Tolkien’s poem The Riddle of Strider. Note the sense of mystery and the appearance of sadness combined with the hope and promise of restoration:

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.

Your family business may experience shadows, but you will also experience the light. The minor keys are indeed an important part of family business success.