

The Dispatch

July 2020: Seeing Pain Differently

In many respects, we are living in a painful time: Health concerns from Covid, spiritual pain from church closings, economic pain for many employees and small business owners, hunger for many living in poverty, personal isolation and a lack of intimate social connections – one needn't go far to find suffering. In this month's essays, Lance and Bill offer some thoughts on pain. Lance asks whether relationship pain in the family business can be overcome, while Bill reflects on the experience of many people who live with levels of physical pain in their lives. Both are realistic but hopeful. Let us know if you have any feedback!

Living with Pain in the Family Business

Lance Woodbury

Most writing about family business mentions both the benefits and challenges of being in business with your relatives, and offers strategies about overcoming the obstacles to good family relationships and business continuity. But my observation is that being in business with your family usually increases the incidence of pain in the lives of the participants.

For instance, the need for communication in business means that there are many occasions for miscommunication. The necessary business focus on compensation, profits and wealth often provokes complaints about fairness. Trying simultaneously to be a good boss or a good business partner and a family member creates more role confusion and disappointment. Because we are supposed to inherently trust family members, the pain is wrenching when trust is broken.

So why live with such pain? When it can be so difficult to be in business together, why continue? I believe there are several reasons.

First, I think many families see the business as an extension of the family: to get out of business together is akin to splitting up the family. Even with current pain, getting out of business might be *more* painful. (I don't believe this has to be true, but I'll save those thoughts for another essay!)

Second, I think many family businesses are hopeful. The entrepreneurial origins of the family business, where an enterprise was forged from sheer determination, and has survived through depressions, floods and droughts, suggest most obstacles can be overcome. As painful as it gets, we can get to a better place...together.

Finally, I think many family businesses believe the pain may be worth it. The benefits of working the land, building a business, contributing to the well-being of their employees and community, and enjoying the fruits of business success make some level of family pain an acceptable price to pay to stay in business together. They understand the cost.

As a mediator, I of course want to restore relationships in the family and in the business. I remain hopeful that pain between family business participants can be healed, when the timing is right and family members are ready for reconciliation.

Faith and Family Business: Thinking Differently About Pain

Dr. Bill Long

When I was young, I thought that when older people spoke about their pains they were complainers. Now that I am considerably older I realize that one of the great, and often unsolved, mysteries about life is how pain accompanies us for a goodly portion of our life. Some have suggested that while the twentieth century's great medical accomplishment was addressing severe and life-threatening pain, the twenty-first century's will be tackling the much more difficult issue of chronic pain. We are still a long way off on that one.

The central reality of life for one who lives with pain is that pain, figuratively speaking, takes you out of the center and puts you on the margins of life. Most of us have a sense of what it means to be in the "center" of our own lives, where we easily, and sometimes breezily, relate to family, friends, work and the challenges of living. But what pain does to us is remove us from the "center" of life—by putting us on the sidelines or margins. Conversations sometimes are halting, and always there must be planning about whether we are going to be putting too much pressure on body and spirit by some activity.

The central issue of pain control, from a perspective of faith, is whether the marginal life of the person in pain can ever regain the center again. I don't mean whether there will be a miracle drug that will take away the pain, but whether there is a way of defining life *in pain* that is not just a satisfactory but also a good one.

One verse from the Psalms has helped me answer this question. The Psalmist says, in Psalm 139, "Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you." What that means to me is that God is in the business of redefining our categories of life. When put on the margins, or in the darkness, realize that the darkness we so much dread is light to God. The Psalmist firmly believes that God is able to redefine even the category of pain, and make out of it a new center in life.