“A Time to Kill” – Experiential Activity

Any time quotation marks are used the statement is a direct quote from “A Time to Kill”

Setting of the business world

In the movie “A Time to Kill,” the American legal system was portrayed in a negative light in most instances. The film is set in the southern state of Mississippi and it revolves around a symbolic legal case in which the main character, Jake Brigance, is a
white lawyer arguing for his client, Carl Lee Hailey, a black man facing murder charges. As one would imagine, racial prejudice contributed many factors to the overall quality of work environment for the lawyer and the defendant in this particular setting. In addition, Jake’s law firm was in financial trouble and was having a hard time attracting new clients prior the events occurring that led to Carl Lee asking Jake to defend him. The defendant was charged with the murder of two white men in cold blood that had brutally raped his 10-year-old daughter.

This legal process exemplified the vast amount of racial prejudice that was obvious in the south at the time. The film illustrated how many different groups had a stake in the outcome of the case, as it case was symbolic for whites, blacks and the American legal system. These circumstances vastly affected the world in which Jake was trying to do business. As quoted from Jake’s mentor in the movie, Lucian Wilbanks, while discussing whether he should take on the case, “The case is very interesting because you could win and justice would prevail or you could lose and justice would also prevail.”

After deciding to take the case, the backlash and racial prejudice from the community infiltrated Jake’s business throughout the movie. Jake was merely trying to perform his job and he was constantly being harassed for accepting the job of defending Carl Lee. The hatred eventually led one of the victim’s brothers to begin to organize a branch of the Klu Klux Klan in the town where the movie takes place. These Klan members terrorized Jake for representing Carl by burning crosses on his lawn, kidnapping and assaulting his co-workers, planting a bomb in front of his house and
eventually burning his home to the ground. They continually made efforts to disrupt his work in an attempt to get him to drop the case.

Another element that exemplified the insecurities of the business world portrayed in the film was a scene involving Jake, Carl Lee and the NAACP. At one point, the civil rights organization had their leaders try to convince the defendant to take the case away from Jake because he was white man and they did not think he could do a good enough job representing a black man in such a symbolic case for the black people. However, the scene later illustrated how much faith the defendant had in Jake as Carl Lee slyly pressured the group to give the money they raised to pay for his defense with their lawyers, to Jake.

In addition to racism, corruption affected the way the business world was portrayed in the movie. During the course of the trial, the white prosecuting attorney, Rufus Buckley, utilized “connections” at many levels of the government including influencing the judge presiding over the case. Most importantly, when Jake attempted to get the trial moved to a different venue to ensure his client had an “impartial” trial, Buckley made calls to his “friends” at the legislature to help influence the judge’s decision on the matter. It was obvious the prosecuting attorney was corrupt and had no regard for business ethics. The combination of all these factors did not create a good environment for Jake to practice law.

**Ethical Dilemmas**

The first important ethical dilemma in the movie is when Carl Lee is pondering what actions to take to deal with men that raped his little girl. He is trying to decide if he
should trust our legal system to provide justice or take the law into his own hands. This issue was portrayed as an easy decision for Carl Lee after he sought counsel from his lawyer regarding a similar case in which two white men raped a young black girl in a neighboring county and were cleared of the charges by an all white jury the year earlier. Carl Lee resolved the issue by taking the law into his own hands instead of trusting the legal system and he murdered the men that were accused of raping his daughter in cold blood while they were en route to their arraignment.

This issue could have been resolved when Carl Lee first visited Jake at his office. At that point, it was clear Carl Lee was thinking of doing something drastic and Jake had the opportunity to persuade Carl to trust the legal system and ensure him the prosecution would seek the maximum sentence and death penalty for the men that committed these horrific acts. However, the lawyer did not do this. Given the circumstances, if I were in Carl Lee’s position I would have more than likely made the same decision knowing that the probable punishment would not fit the crime if the men were allowed to face a trial. The previous trail’s results indicated justice would not have been served in this particular setting. Although murdering these men is completely wrong in the eyes of many, including the legal system, I do not think I would have been strong enough to refrain from completing these illegal acts. In my opinion Carl Lee served a “greater good” by taking ruthless criminals off the streets.

The second important ethical dilemma that was apparent in the movie was the decision Jake was faced with after Carl Lee visited him at his office. At this point, Jake could have notified the authorities and diffused the situation. However, he failed to do so. This resulted in Jake feeling partially guilty for what Carl Lee did the next day
because he could have made a difference in the outcome if he had let the authorities know what Carl Lee had said to him. This decision impacts Jake’s conscious throughout the rest of the movie. He now is an accessory to the crime in his opinion and when faced with the decision to keep pressing on or give up the case, he has no choice but to keep representing Carl Lee due to his own guilt regarding the murders.

If I were in Jake’s position, I would have let the authorities know everything that Carl Lee had said to me. Even if I agreed with Carl Lee and believed his actions would have served a more appropriate justice, I would have called an authority to provide the details of the conversation. This would have provided an opportunity to attempt to make sure the murders did not happen and more importantly, maintain a clear conscious.

The third important ethical dilemma in “A Time to Kill” is the decision the jury faces in deciding Carl Lee’s guilt or innocence. The all white jury is challenged with putting their prejudices aside and fairly hearing a case and deciding the guilt or innocence of a black man. At first, the issue is portrayed as an extremely easy decision for the majority of the jury members throughout the movie as they voted each night at a restaurant dinner table. After all, he gunned the men down in cold blood. However, after listening to a poignant closing argument, the jury members get slapped in the face with a moral dilemma. This argument forces the jury members down the path of imagining what state of mind they would be in if the men had done what they did to Carl Lee’s daughter, to one of their own children. This proves effective as the jury then decides to consider the defendant legally insane at the time of the murders and clear him of the charges.
If faced with being on this particular jury, I would have argued for Carl Lee’s guilt. After all, the law is the law and the man took the law into his own hands and murdered two men. However, I would find it difficult to put any prejudices or bias one may have aside to morally and fairly hear any court case. Jury members will always be affected by each member’s individual beliefs and morals and subconsciously these biases would have to seep through into their opinion on the case.

Other Business Ethics Issues

In the film “A Time to Kill” there were many other business ethics issues that were portrayed. The film addresses a huge dilemma in employee work/life balance. Jake gets so “addicted” to the murder case he loses touch with reality. The movie makes this clear when his parents and wife continually remind him throughout the movie how he is sacrificing his family life for his work life. This decision puts his and his families’ lives at risk and clearly impacted his family relationships in a negative way. This is an issue each person in any business faces everyday. The film also addressed the business ethics issues of violence in the workplace, gender/race discrimination, drinking on the job, conflicts of interest, and most importantly one’s own moral standards.

Summary

After completing this activity I learned that ethics issues are being presented using a variety of different platforms each day. One must always keep be aware of how people are attempting to influence one another whether it be intentionally or not. The task also illustrated how many different forms of communication relate to ethics issues and ideas.
While subtly addressing these issues, each form of media is specifically designed to portray issues in the positive or negative light it wants you to adhere to. We as individuals need to be extremely careful how we allow these outlets alter our own moral standards and beliefs.