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Learning from Movies

“How is one to live a moral and compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in life, when one finds darkness not only in one’s culture but within oneself? If there is a stage at which an individual life becomes truly adult, it must be when one grasps the irony in its unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of such paradox. One must live in the middle of contradiction, because if contradiction were eliminated at once life would collapse. There are simply no [obvious] answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light.”

- Barry Holstun Lopez (born Jan 6, 1945) is an American essayist, poet, fiction writer and prose stylist whose work is best known for its ecological concerns. The quote was sourced from www.wisdomquotes.com

Wouldn't it be nice if we were free from all kinds of heart-wrenching dilemmas? Imagine a life where what is right was easily distinguishable from wrong; it was easy to do what we believed to be right; there were no 'grey' zones to navigate through. Alas, this is not the case. Living by integrity is a fine balancing act.

Ethics, principles, morality, beliefs and indeed, values have much to do with concepts enshrined in corporate governance and corporate social responsibility. Yet, high-sounding words like dignity, commitment and respect are often greeted by lip service in some corporations, families and social circles, which simply breeds mistrust and cynicism.

You need not look too far to know what you consider important in life. Your everyday decisions reveal your values. No matter what you claim, it's ultimately the thoughts you entertain and actions you take that reflect what you believe in and what you truly value.

Dilemmas are usually ethical in nature, and in my view are largely self-created. This is not to say that you will never face ethical challenges in your surroundings. You will! So how do you successfully navigate your way through the fog of complexities and contradictions? If you are looking for simple answers, I am afraid, there aren't any.

We can gain practical insights on how to live a life of dignity and integrity from a variety of sources. Hollywood is one! There are films which depict rich human drama in a variety of contexts that have inspired and enlightened many.

In the sub-pages to your left, I recommend a few that will help you reflect on some of life's challenges you might be facing.

From the examples in these and films, it becomes clear how important it is for us to carefully analyze each conflicting situation we face, before hastily taking steps we live to regret. Such analysis involves consideration of alternatives open to us and their potential impact on all those involved in the story. Trying to balance competing interests and demands is vital. Flexibility, patience and consultation are essential, before finally drawing the line. Actions have consequences!

We wouldn't need leaders and managers if life and work were a series of simple choices. There are paradoxes and dilemmas that confront us routinely. How we deal with them determines our personal and professional trajectory.

Clear principles and core values guides us. Our reputation is either built or tarnished on the basis of what we think and do.

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Recommended Movies

1. Blood Diamond
2. An Inconvenient Truth (A documentary by Al Gore)

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Wall Street (1987)

This is a beautifully woven tale of human strength and weakness. The movie is set in the 80s - the 'yuppie' phase in the financial industry. This was the time when young urban professionals did their best to make as much money as they could as fast as possible, and sometimes through illegal means like insider trading. The idea of retiring at 40 seemed attractive, but those same people with such thoughts are still working today. A number of them made their money and ended up going into a lifetime of debt because they spent their earnings quicker than they could make it. Ultimately the 1980s was good while it lasted, but boom times like these don't last forever. This becomes painfully clear as Charlie Sheen's character becomes a warning to all those who think they can out-think and manipulate a strained economic system.

Wall Street is about those for whom material wealth takes precedence over morality and ethics, and those for whom it does not. Moreover, it is the story of one who is struggling to decide which of the two he is: greedy or ethical. In this movie, Bud Fox is a young and ambitious stock broker who wishes to excel in life. His father, Carl, provides a strong moral foundation that values human life and well-being over the profit motive. However, Bud's mentor, Gordon Gekko, is a ruthless and legendary Wall Street player whose values seriously conflict with those of Bud's father. So caught in the middle is Bud, who pitches his father's airline to Gekko with the intentions of saving the company while everyone gets rich in the process. This business deal sets the stage for the conflict of interests Bud faces, and whether in the end it is his moral father or his greedy mentor he would most like to become.

Finally, we learn how, when Fox discovers Gekko has double-crossed him and intends on shutting down his father's business, he uses everything Gekko has taught him to turn the tables around thus being authentic to who he really is.

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Becket (1964)

In this film, King Henry II of England in the 12th century AD has trouble with the Church. When the Archbishop of Canterbury dies, he has a brilliant idea. Rather than appoint another pious cleric loyal to Rome and the Church, he decides to engage his old best friend, Thomas Becket, technically a deacon of the church, to the post, so that he can control the church. Becket begs for him not to. This is because he (Becket) does not want to risk losing his integrity and cares about his soul more than his country. If he's supposed to do something, he will, without submitting to corrupting influences.

Soon, Henry II and Becket are at odds with each other over church business and become bitter enemies. Students of history know that the king ultimately had Becket murdered. Becket paid a high price for wanting to live on integrity!

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Glengarry Glen Ross (1992)

Those who must rely on their wits to make a living are often prone to desperate measures born of the insecurities inherent in their field of endeavor - a commission salesman, for example; or in this instance, a real estate salesman, in particular. To what lengths do people go when under increasing pressure to deliver on the numbers/targets? This is a legitimate question that every consumer would no doubt like to have answered before signing on the dotted line and committing big sums to a purchase.

Writer/director David Mamet goes to great lengths to answer this question in this film, an unflinching, hard-edged movie that examines the motivations of those who would readily and eagerly separate you from your hard earned income, and whose least concern, apparently, is the value of their product or that parcel of land, which according to them is situated in just the right place for you! And if you've ever trusted a big-ticket salesman in your life, after visiting Mamet's film, it's doubtful you ever will again.

Very simply, the story is this: The Company wants results; the hierarchy expects their salesmen to produce, and they don't care how. Toward that end, a 'motivator' (Alec Baldwin), has been dispatched to this particular office to put things into perspective for those who would sell their wares. The deal is that at the end of a given period of time, the salesman whose name is at the

top of the tote board will get a new car; those who fail to meet their quota are out the door. End of story. They will, however, be supplied with `leads,' but from the `old' file. The new, `fresh' leads are reserved for those who first prove themselves worthy by doing whatever it takes to make the sale, without qualm, reservation or conscience.

This film clearly provides important pointers to corporate leaders on how *not* to create a working environment that results in employees leading lives of quiet desperation.

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Judgment at Nuremberg (1961)

This film is of enduring significance as it highlights the age-old dilemma of whether to follow orders of ones superior or to live by ones all-abiding conscience. It is so much more telling today than it might have been back in 1961, particularly in light of the post-9/11 world we live in today and the ensuing infringement of civil liberties that are being experienced by some citizens in a few countries.

Even though this movie is a fictional drama about actual history, it tells a compelling story while asking searching question we can ask of society.

Stanley Kramer (director) successfully communicates how the Nazi's used every facet of civilization, no matter how minute, to facilitate the extermination of their enemies, to inculcate it as an ordinary part of life. That was why judges were chosen to portray the issue of "obeying orders" versus "human decency." Herr Rolf is "forced" to defend the worst criminals imaginable, and yet his very defense and the principles behind it are abused in the process, used as a weapon against the very law they represent. Thus did the Nazis prevail with the willing acquiescence of the German people, and the abominable disregard of the rest of the world.

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Crimson Tide (1995)

A more recent film, it contains intense moments: two great actors, eye-to-eye, portraying characters absolutely certain of their actions, absolutely convinced that the other's course of action will lead to sure disaster. A submarine commander (Hackman) and his second-in-command (Washington) are both shouting at the same time, each ordering the next ranking officer (Dzundza) to arrest the other. Washington believes, with good reason that Hackman is unfit to command because he is disregarding naval procedures. Hackman believes, with good reason, that Washington is disobeying an order and instigating a mutiny. A possible nuclear exchange and the deaths of billions hang in the balance. Dzundza knows that he must make the correct decision, regardless of his like or dislike of each of his superiors.

Conflict in the story is between very different Naval Officer types. The captain is the old Cold Warrior (don't think about the order, your job is to just do it) and the EO is the "new breed" (educated and taught to think about the actions they are asked to undertake). Orders are received and both respond very differently to the same order. Paradigms vary.

Commands come through for the captain to detonate the weapons from their submarine, but then another message after that one which is incomplete splits the entire crew. The captain thinks it is time to take control with aggression while the EO believes that this is way too important to act without knowing everything there is to know. Both are convinced that they are in the right. The captain fears that any delay in launching will leave America vulnerable to a first strike by the rebels. The EO fears that launching the ship's missiles without waiting for clarification of the second message will lead to full-scale nuclear war. There is, however, little doubt that the film's sympathies lie with the EO.

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The Secret (2006)

The Secret is a very well made documentary that shows how the power of our thoughts, our attitudes, and our feelings can impact our lives positively or otherwise.

The core message of this film is something that great minds and people of the world have talked about e.g., Einstein, Emerson, Plato, Aristotle, Martin Luther King Jr., Lincoln to name just a few.

This documentary features "Morris Goodman, who tells his awe inspiring story of how he recovered from paralysis by using The Secret. Dr. Denis Waitley, who used various aspects of The Secret in training Olympic athletes and Apollo astronauts to reach new heights of human endeavor. Best selling authors and philosophers including Bob Proctor, John Assaraf, James Ray and Joe Vitale, explain how they have created lives of phenomenal success utilizing The Secret. Doctors in the fields of medicine and quantum physics explain the science behind [The Secret](#)

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