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Business, Conscience, Service

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Businessman and philanthropist Bob Gay visited the Huntsman School on November 13, and delivered an incredible talk about business, conscience, and service. Although Mr. Gay didn’t care for business growing up, his father, a very successful businessman, convinced him to enroll in Harvard Business School’s PhD program in economics. From there his career moved from McKinsey and Company, to Bain Capital, where he was managing director for 16 years, and then co-founder and CEO of Huntsman Gay Global Capital.

But the greatest lesson he learned came during volunteer service for his church, where he served as the mission president in Ghana for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. On a treacherous trip to Sierra Leone, one of the many obstacles that faced the crew was a road “with potholes the size of caves.” Due to a random UN cell tower along the route, he received a phone call from his former business partner from Bain Capital, who was calling to tell him that Bain had just closed a very large business deal, primarily due to the effort Mr. Gay had built for Bain before leaving for volunteer service.

“I had been the largest shareholder in Bain Capital, although I had turned it all in when I left on our mission. Once I knew the size of the fund, … and not in a second, but in nanoseconds, I knew what my partnership was, and I knew approximately what that fund would return. And all of a sudden I knew what it had cost me to serve as a mission president in Ghana,” Mr. Gay said.

“It was massive, massive amounts of money that would make anybody blush,” he continued.

As “what if” thoughts crossed his mind, he fell into a “stupor for two hours.”

Then, all of sudden, their tire got caught in a pothole and flipped their vehicle. The truck slid, going 65 miles an hour, on a gravel road. When the crew came to, the villagers were singing the death wailing cry. As the crew explained that no one was dead, the villagers said to Mr. Gay, “You’re dying.” As he looked down, he saw that his body was covered in blood and that there was huge wound in his arm. In the middle of nowhere, they wrapped the wound as best they could and waited for the next car to come by.

When they arrived at the medical clinic, the doctor said he would lose the arm, but that he could kill the infection. As Mr. Gay laid down in the small operating room, the doctor saw his name tag and asked if he was a member of the LDS Church. When he answered yes, the doctor said that the gowns he was wearing, the instruments he was using and the drugs he was administering, were all new. The only reason their hospital had these supplies was because some elderly couple from the LDS Church came and donated everything just under a year ago.

“And in that instant, I heard the great voice in my life say, ‘Everything you have in life is because somebody else went out and did service,’” Mr. Gay said. “I haven’t looked back since that day.”

His final message to students was this: If you focus on a career, your impact will be limited…and you are likely to get it wrong. If you honor conscience, hone skills, take ownership, and look to serve, you can astonish the world.