



PUBLICAN'S POSTINGS



Living

I hope you will indulge this blog post; it is not the typical type of information I usually discuss. This blog is about a movie; actually, it is about several movies plus a few literary references. It is also about how I feel government works. It is also about a particular man who passed away last week. I love films and I also love history (I was a history major in college; that was long before I became a CPA and went into finance).

So, the movie that you should see is called *Living*. It came to the theaters late last year, is now available streaming on Netflix and many other streaming services. The actor who plays the main protagonist, Bill Nighy, got an academy award nomination for best actor and many believe he should have won. He is great, and the film is near great, certainly very good.

But this film has a history. The screenplay was written by an Anglo-Japanese novelist, Kazuo Ishiguro, who has written several famous novels, the most famous one having been made into a well-known movie itself (*Remains of the Day*). Ishiguro was greatly affected by one of history's greatest film directors, Amira Kurosawa (famous for *Seven Samurai* and *Rashomon*, among others), and decided to remake a film released in 1952, which what some say is Kurosawa's greatest film, *Ikiru*, which translates into English "to live." (*Ikiru* can be seen on the Criterion Channel app.)

The plots of both movies are virtually identical. Presumably placed in Tokyo and London, respectively, the two protagonists are managers of a government department (in *Living*, it is the Public Works Department) which are made up of true paper-pushers, who not only do nothing, but actually intend to do nothing. In both films, our hero gets a terminal cancer diagnosis, and through his encounters with other characters, and despite poor relations with his own son and daughter-in-law, he decides to make his life more meaningful by acting on behalf of a group of people who are trying to fix a problem, the exact nature of which I will not exactly disclose here.

The [New York Times](#) felt that the protagonist in *Living* was "[confronting the crisis] of one's own life with newfound clarity of perceiving the ways in which it is fraught and one's complicity in its corruption." A review of *Ikiru* said this: "[the protagonist] ...is confronted with opportunities that allow him to make a lasting contribution in his world. Kurosawa explores the issues of alienation, bureaucracy, class, death, and enlightenment."

The screenwriter of *Ikiru* was apparently influenced by a short novel by the great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, called *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a story about a judge in 19th century Russia who tries to confront his life as he is dying. But the existential themes of both movies also suggest more modern authors, such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, both of whom were contemporaries of Kurosawa and his screenwriter.

Living should be required for every government worker. While the film's Public Works Department, with their stacks of paper, and do-nothing attitudes are comedic stereotypes, unfortunately this is the view that many citizens believe is true.

I have been working in government now for 6 years. Here are some things I think are right and wrong about government:

- Our employees are intelligent, diligent, and hard-working.
- Our employees truly care about our “customers,” (citizens/taxpayers) and bend over backwards to help them.
- There are an incredible number of laws that need to be paid attention to; these laws are the product of a complicated society combined with competing interest groups who are adamant about their rights, many of whom think nothing about threatening to sue while at the same time wanting complete transparency.
- The culture of government is to avoid risk, to avoid lawsuits, to avoid headlines.
- Because government workers are “law enforcers,” they have a lot of power.

I watched the movie both as a government worker and as a citizen. I was horrified at the actions of the bureaucrats, even knowing it wasn't accurate. As a citizen watching this movie, you will surely sympathize with the group of people who are trying to solve a problem, and this is how the film wants you to feel. You will cheer on the protagonist. You will be grateful he has broken through his terrible “void of nothingness.”

The person who died last week was an example of someone who not so much fought the bureaucracy of government, but actually acted against its deceptions, starting at age 42, and continuing to fight it for the next 50 years. Daniel Ellsberg died this week, at the age of 92. Ellsberg was a military analyst who released in 1971 the Pentagon Papers, “a classified study of the Vietnam War, showing that a generation of military and political leaders had lied to the public.” (Charles Savage, [New York Times](#), 6/20/23).

So, I urge everyone to see *Living*, and, if you want to try the Criterion Channel, watch *Ikiru*. And, if you want to keep movie bingeing, watch the 2003 film *The Pentagon Papers* about Ellsberg (not to be confused with *The Post*, which is a 2017 Steven Spielberg film about the publication of those Pentagon Papers).

For those of you who work in government, think about what you can do to truly make a difference. If your work ever seems like the fictional Public Works Department in this movie, do something to change it. If you don't know who to talk to, call me!

For those of you who watch government from the outside, think about joining a committee or a commission, and then do something. If you find yourself becoming distrustful of government, get involved. If you don't know how, call me!

Individual acts of meaning can be powerful weapons for beneficial change.