The Pulitzer Prize-winning play “Death of a Salesman” has returned to Broadway — the fourth revival on the New York stage since its debut in 1949. This generation of theatre-goers will see the play through the prism of today’s financial crisis, high unemployment, global competition and the backlash from the Occupy Wall Street movement.

It’s a story about an aging employee whose company tosses him aside after 30 years of service when he is no longer productive. Willy Loman, a traveling salesman, has been put on straight commission but cannot make ends meet to support his family. He contemplates suicide because an insurance policy makes him worth more dead than alive. He had high hopes for his two adult sons, but despite their promise they have failed to live up to their father’s expectations.

Loman longs to understand the secret of success and carries out conversations with his dead brother, who at an early age made a fortune in the African diamond trade. Willy wants to be rich, to achieve the American dream, and it pains him that neither he nor his sons can realize his ambition. His oldest son becomes disillusioned with that dream as he learns of his father’s moral compromises.

Willy Loman is no longer a good salesman, and there is some doubt he ever was one. At his funeral, his wife laments that she has made the final payment on the house, fulfilling the American dream to own a house free and clear. But now there will be nobody home. And his son concludes that his father “had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong. He never knew who he was.” Loman suffered not only financial failure but moral failure, as well. He had no other way to assess his life except by material success, even though he had a loving wife and two children who admired him. Unfortunately, none of this mattered to him.

It is the same blind spot we saw in the financial crisis that drove some bankers and mortgage brokers to engage in morally reprehensible practices to achieve success at all costs. This shortcoming has been a perennial problem in American society. One hundred years ago, the philosopher William James commented about “the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS. That — with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word ‘success’ — is our national disease.”

It is no accident that Willy Loman is a salesman with all our mixed feelings about the worthiness of such a practice. But let’s face it: we are all in sales — selling our products, our services, our ideas, our companies, our organizations and ourselves. We sell successfully when we have
earned a trustworthy reputation by listening attentively, building relationships, finding common
ground and providing solutions to customers.

But a society of sellers has an underbelly: selling false dreams without disclosing the fine print
and selling out our integrity by losing sight of the common good. Slick talkers corrode social life
when they convince us to buy something that is not in our best interest.

Despite Willy Loman’s moral and financial failures, his wife stands by him as she chastises their
self-absorbed sons for neglecting their struggling father. She readily admits that Loman “is not
the finest character that ever lived. But he’s a human being and a terrible thing is happening to
him. So attention must be paid. He’s not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog.
Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.”

The entrepreneurial spirit has made our nation an economic powerhouse. But entrepreneurship is
not just about creating new ventures, it also destroys enterprises that have become obsolete and,
in the process, destroys the lives of many employees who counted on that enterprise for their
livelihood and their self-worth. Willy’s sons blame the company for discarding their father after
many years of service. But to Willy’s boss, “business is business,” and “everybody’s gotta pull
his own weight.”

Today so many Willy Lomans go without work and struggle to make ends meet and maintain
human dignity. Who has the responsibility to provide the safety net when the market does not
provide enough jobs? When employees are no longer useful? When material success is not a
possibility? “Death of a Salesman” reminds us that attention must be paid to these pressing
issues of our time.

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