

Received: December 1, 2015

Revision received: December 19, 2015

Accepted: December 26, 2015

OnlineFirst: January 1, 2016

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DOI 10.12711/tjbe.2015.8.0020R • November 2015 • 8(2) • 333-335

Book Review

## Banality of Being Special

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Ben Özelim!

Hal Niedzwiecki

2011, İstanbul, Ayrıntı Yayınları, Lacivert Kitaplar Dizisi, 272 pages

In recent years, social media has penetrated almost every aspect of our lives. You can share photos via Instagram; alert friends about what you will be doing over the weekend via Foursquare by checking in; use Facebook to form sui generis pages; take part in a continuous bidirectional flow of conversations on Twitter; constantly inform “the world” about everything from your mood to taste in music; and attend to whatever version of worldwide news suits you. So much electronic availability gives the perception that we are able to maintain an online relationship with “the world.” Anyone can comment on any topic on Tumblr or advocate or defend any idea to the death on Blogspot. People offer anyone a look at their little baby’s (or as often now, their cat’s) latest clumsiness video on YouTube. Periscope will let you broadcast your most *special* moments live. Use Wattpad to discover whether or not you have writing skills or to create your own fan base. We can make our own music, write our own stories, create our own movies; basically, we can express ourselves in almost any way electronically imaginable way whether you have talent or not, thus making it possible to delude ourselves into thinking that we have our own fans and could be heading toward fame and fortune any day now. This plethora of communication technology lets us see ourselves as special, different, and outside of the banality that is life for the greater part of humanity. Unfortunately, the myth of America, the dream of the founders of the United States, *You can do it; you can be whatever you want; just work*

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Citation: Karadoğan, S. (2015). Banality of being special [Review of the book *Ben Özelim!* by H. Niedzwiecki]. *Turkish Journal of Business Ethics*, 8, 333–335.

*hard enough and you can make your dreams come true*, has infected social media and now drives completely unrealistic expectations of large segments of media users.

We are all ordinary people. However, some are able to distinguish themselves and express some originality. How do they do that? How could we find our way to being different, original, unique, and special? In his book, "Hello, I am Special," Canadian novelist and cultural critic, Hal Niedzviecki addresses this question that plagues many people for all of their lives. He presents devastating and impressive information, data, and observations that while we feel different, special, and unique when participating in all these online activities, the truth is that we are only wasting our time engaging in nearly the very same things as millions of other people do every day as we seek to express and re-establish our identity over and over again. This shocking revelation will likely be poorly received by many who will continue to believe that what happens online is reality rather than simply a version of it that we wish for in our own minds.

The book presents a large body of information, observations, and analyses from the author's deep field research of almost every aspect of life from cinema, music, and talent shows to religion, education, and business. He reveals the motives that drive people to seek to be different, unique, and special. Psychologists, personal development specialists, and therapists have written many books and taught many people on popular culture, the many layers of everyday life, and how they build and form self-esteem, self-confidence, culture, and myth. In the meantime, these specialists work at treating and transforming the most rebellious spirits into conformists compatible with the system they live in, lest the person go stark raving mad striving for something that can never be. According to the author, the self-help industry moves the emphasis on succeeding from focusing on the system to an individual's personal desires, expectations, devotions, and obligations to work as a productive member of society that seems to move people away from their perceived goals of originality. Nonetheless, there are individuals who question and oppose the system and seemingly find a way to defeat it. We see their dramatic success and recognize them as unusual and unique individuals; however, they have found a way to be completely compatible with the system even though they have created a truly unique identity for themselves.

The book mainly focuses on Canada and the United States, and the stories seem to originate only from North American society; however, when you think about the speed of technological globalization and cultural transfer that the internet has created, you can see that the author is actually describing a global phenomenon. In the sense that as culture is becoming homogenous across all countries, individuals are becoming more standardized, leaving us with a sense of being more marginalized and meaningless. At this point, the author is drawing attention to the fact that we are not only talking about abstract concepts or assumptions but also the stories that he is telling about real humans

who have developed unrealistic and unlimited desires and ambitions to become superstars. It is clear that these people live their lives for the sake of acquiring a reputation

According to the author, people no longer seek to earn a respectable reputation, or to be happy in an attainable way, but instead want only to get rich by becoming famous. In the past, most people spent their time between family, school, and religion and were relatively happier than people today, especially young people of today who seem to think that fame is a commodity that can be easily acquired. Most people in the past did not believe that owning more stuff was what it took to be happy. Determination generated a sense of purpose in people's lives. Today, we have more products and services, acquire more things even faster; however, a sense of unhappiness is pervasive in the restless generations browsing the internet.

The author reframes the issue as an existential question, "What are we looking for?" He suggests an answer by stating that people are seeking an opportunity to build their own story on their own terms and conditions that could make a way to world media recognition for them. In my opinion, the only thing lacking in this book is how did this "I want to be special" phenomena rise and develop? The author implies it as a given and continues his research without offering much about the causes, which may be much harder to identify and articulate. Near the end of book, there are some assertions of a few possible ideas, but no real offer of an answer to the question. In spite of this one problem, the book is sufficiently interesting and the author's work is extensive enough to not only provide readers with entertainment but also with significant insights. We will just need to reverse the expression of "everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes" into "everyone will be ordinary for 15 minutes."