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C O N S C I O U S E N T E R P R I S E C E N T E R

W H I T E P A P E R

Confronting Social Sadness

Healing Society's Biggest Sources of Suffering

Raj Sisodia

*FEMSA Distinguished University Professor of Conscious Enterprise
Chairman, Conscious Enterprise Center
Tecnológico de Monterrey*

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Executive Summary

Every society carries both gifts and wounds. Some nations represent the peak of human potential—excelling in education, public health, or income equality—offering lessons the rest of the world can learn from. But most societies also harbor a darker side: systemic structures that inflict unnecessary suffering on their own people. This is what we call social sadness.

The United States, founded on principles of freedom and entrepreneurship, is shadowed by a legacy of slavery, the decimation of indigenous peoples, and present-day crises of addiction, anxiety, depression, and suicide. Its healthcare system can bankrupt families overnight, and its criminal justice system—which has given 77 million Americans a criminal record—traps the most vulnerable in cycles of punishment rather than paths toward healing.

India, a civilization of profound spiritual depth, remains scarred by the caste system, which condemns an estimated 150 to 200 million people to lives of poverty and ostracism. Mexico and much of Latin America struggle under the weight of income inequality, cartel violence, and rising lifestyle diseases.

Yet healing is possible—and it always begins with love. Mahatma Gandhi lived among the so-called untouchables to truly understand their pain. Greyston Bakery in New York practices “open hiring,” giving jobs to anyone who walks through its doors—no interviews, no background checks. Costa Rica disbanded its military to invest in teachers and healthcare workers. Finland transformed one of the world’s worst education systems into one of its best. In Brazil, Catholic organizations converted solitary confinement cells in prisons into prayer rooms.

The pattern is clear: where there is suffering, love—expressed through courageous leadership in government, business, and civil society—is the only force that heals. But love is not a sentiment. It is a practice. It requires leaders who truly know the people they serve, who have walked among them and witnessed their pain firsthand.

Introduction

Every society has unique qualities—positive aspects from which all of humanity can learn, and negative ones that cause needless pain. Some societies represent the heights of human possibility, excelling in areas like education, public health, and equality. These strengths can inspire and guide other nations toward something better.

In our interconnected world, cultural gifts that bring joy, meaning, and beauty to people's lives are spreading far beyond their origins. This exchange has accelerated with the rise of media and streaming platforms—witness the recently accelerating global impact of Korean culture, from cinema to cuisine to music.

But most societies also carry a shadow side. Systemic issues and blind spots create unnecessary suffering—usually unintentionally. No culture sets out to cause pain. Yet societal structures, once established, can perpetuate hardship for generations, particularly for the most vulnerable. This is social sadness: the suffering embedded in a society's very fabric, often invisible to those who benefit from the status quo.

Addressing social sadness demands that we confront uncomfortable truths. It means recognizing that even the most admirable cultures can cause harm, and that progress requires challenging long-standing norms. But by naming these wounds honestly and working to heal them, we move toward societies that are not just prosperous, but genuinely compassionate.

Social Sadness in the United States

The United States—my adopted country—was founded on a radical idea: that human beings possess inherent rights to religious, political, and economic freedom. Unlike most nations, which formed around ethnicity, geography, or religion, America was established on a set of ideas. This foundation fostered an extraordinary culture of entrepreneurship, enabling individuals to shape their destinies regardless of social class.

That entrepreneurial spirit has produced remarkable innovations and driven economic dynamism that has reshaped the world. But America's story of expansion also includes conquest—land taken from Mexico, the near-destruction of Native American populations, and an economy built on the backs of enslaved people. This dark legacy sits in stark, unresolved tension with the nation's founding ideals.

Social Issues and Isolation

America's high rates of addiction to drugs, alcohol, and ultra-processed food are not merely public health statistics. They are symptoms of a deeper ache—a social sadness in which people turn to escapism to numb pain they cannot name. The relentless emphasis on individual achievement often breeds isolation, anxiety, depression, and despair. The American Dream promises that material success will bring fulfillment, yet many who achieve it find only emptiness.

True fulfillment comes from personal growth, genuine connection, and meaning that transcends material wealth. Healing this dimension of social sadness requires fostering community, redefining success in more holistic terms, and honestly reckoning with the mental health costs of relentless individualism and materialism.

A Healthcare System That Causes Suffering

One of America's deepest sources of social sadness is a healthcare system that can destroy the people it is meant to protect. Many Americans lack health insurance altogether. Even those with coverage can face financial ruin from a single medical emergency.

The data are staggering. Nearly one-third of working adults carry some form of medical debt—the leading cause of bankruptcy in the United States, accounting for over 60% of all personal bankruptcies. Despite having insurance, many people face high deductibles, surprise billing, and uncovered costs that create crushing financial distress. Medical debt erodes credit scores, destabilizes housing, and pushes families into homelessness. People are forced to choose between paying their medical bills and keeping a roof over their heads.

When a society treats healthcare as a privilege rather than a fundamental right, it has built suffering into its very structure. Reforming this system is not just a policy question—it is a moral imperative.

A Criminal Justice System That Punishes Rather Than Heals

The United States incarcerates more people than any other nation on earth. Policies like the “war on drugs” and the proliferation of private prisons have created a system that criminalizes symptoms rather than addressing root causes. Treating addiction as a crime—rather than as the expression of deep pain that it is—has proven both cruel and ineffective.

As of 2023, 77 million Americans carry criminal records, with minorities from impoverished backgrounds disproportionately affected. The system traps people in cycles of crime and

punishment, offering little mercy, rehabilitation, or genuine pathway back to society. This is perhaps America's greatest social sadness: a system designed to punish rather than to heal.

Addressing it requires nothing less than a fundamental shift—from retribution to restoration, from punishment to compassion, from warehousing human beings to investing in their recovery and reintegration.

Moving Toward Healing

Recognizing the darker dimensions of American life—addiction, healthcare inequities, mass incarceration—demands a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths and commit to systemic change. The United States has always been a work in progress, a nation striving to close the gap between its ideals and its reality. That work continues. But only if enough people insist on it.

Social Sadness in India: The Caste System

India—my country of origin—has long been recognized as a source of deep spiritual wisdom. As one of the world's oldest civilizations, India possesses a rich heritage not only in arts and crafts but in profound understanding of human consciousness and the nature of existence.

People from across the globe travel to India seeking inner peace, harmony, and a deeper understanding of life. This spiritual depth is India's unique gift to the world. It is woven into the very fabric of the culture, even though—like all human societies—not every individual embodies it.

And yet, India carries one of the most painful forms of social sadness on earth: the caste system.

Within Hinduism, which encompasses approximately 85% of the population, people are divided from birth into four main castes. At the top are the Brahmins, the priestly and scholarly class. Next are the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste—my own background. Third are the Vaishyas, the traders and merchants. At the bottom are the Shudras, who perform labor such as cleaning, leather work, and other tasks deemed “menial.”

Within these four castes exist thousands of sub-castes organized by specific occupations— weavers, sweepers, leather workers. Many of these are classified as “untouchable,” meaning that members of higher castes are prohibited from physically touching them. The discrimination extends beyond physical contact: in some communities, even coming within 50 feet of an untouchable person is believed to “pollute” a higher-caste individual. Some adherents are so strict that they avoid even looking at an untouchable, believing it would require elaborate purification rituals.

The suffering endured by those born into these oppressed castes—especially girls and women—is immense. An estimated 150 to 200 million people in modern India live under this burden. Although the caste system is now legally prohibited, it persists in practice, particularly in rural areas and in the unspoken assumptions that shape daily life even in cities.

Abolishing the caste system was one of Mahatma Gandhi's great causes. Yet despite his lifelong struggle and 75 years since his death, the problem endures. Dismantling a hierarchy this deeply rooted requires more than legislation. It demands sustained efforts to change hearts and minds—building a society that honors the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, regardless of birth or occupation.

Social Sadness in Mexico

As with much of Central and South America, Mexico's social sadness is rooted in the unhealed fracture between those of European origin and those with indigenous roots. Despite centuries of shared history, stark disparities persist across social, economic, and political life. Indigenous communities face systemic discrimination and marginalization—limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunity. Indigenous languages and cultural practices are frequently undervalued, eroding identities that have endured for millennia. Bridging this divide remains one of the country's most urgent and unfinished tasks.

Another powerful source of social sadness is the pervasive influence of drug cartels and the violence they perpetrate. While not present in every region, cartel activity casts a long shadow over Mexico and several neighboring nations, creating a climate of fear that corrodes social trust.

Compounding this is extreme income inequality—a gulf between rich and poor visible in the stark juxtaposition of gleaming skyscrapers and impoverished favelas, sometimes separated by a single street. This is not unique to Mexico; Latin America as a whole has among the highest levels of income inequality in the world. But in Mexico, it is a daily, visceral reality.

In public health, Mexico faces rising rates of obesity, diabetes, and other lifestyle-related diseases, fueled in part by the aggressive proliferation of processed and junk food. These health crises disproportionately affect those with the least access to nutritious food and quality healthcare.

These issues are deeply interconnected. Poverty and lack of opportunity can drive individuals toward criminal activity. Poor health outcomes worsen in communities with the fewest resources. Healing Mexico's social sadness requires a multi-faceted approach: confronting the

root causes of the drug trade, advancing economic equality, and implementing public health initiatives that reach the people who need them most.

Healing Social Sadness Through Love

To heal the wounds of social sadness, we must recognize a fundamental truth: while there are many ways we can hurt each other, there is only one path to healing. That path is love.

Love is the antidote to social sadness. It must be infused into every aspect of how we live, work, and govern. Our leaders—in business, government, and every other domain—must learn to lead with love and compassion. Not as an abstraction, but as a daily practice.

*“To lead the people, you must love the people. To love the people, you must know the people. And the only way to truly know the people is to spend time among them.” —
Senator Raphael Warnock*

This principle guided Mahatma Gandhi in his fight against untouchability. In every city he visited, Gandhi traveled with and stayed among the so-called untouchables. He ensured they were welcomed into his ashram and seated at the front during his speeches. Gandhi understood something essential: to champion the cause of the suffering, you must first enter into their world. You must witness their pain. You must know them not as statistics, but as human beings.

At the Conscious Enterprise Center at Tecnológico de Monterrey, we are putting this principle into action by advocating for what we call a dignified wage—and demonstrating to companies how this can become a source of competitive advantage rather than a cost burden. We urge businesses to commit to paying and treating their employees well, especially those in the lowest or entry-level positions.

Governments set a minimum wage, which is often insufficient to live on. A step above that is a living wage—enough for basic survival. But beyond both of these lies the concept of a **dignified wage**: a wage that enables a person to live a fully human life. Not merely food and shelter, but education for their children, access to culture, and the chance to flourish.

As a society, we must commit to reducing suffering and eradicating social sadness. This starts with each of us bringing more love into our daily interactions—and demanding that our institutions and leaders do the same. By truly seeing, understanding, and uplifting those who are suffering, we begin to heal the deep wounds that divide us and build a world where every person has the chance to live with dignity.

How a Bakery Heals Social Sadness

Greyston Bakery in Yonkers, New York, is one of the most powerful examples of a business healing social sadness. Founded by Buddhist Zen master Bernie Glassman, the bakery produces around 40,000 pounds of brownies daily—but its true product is human transformation.

Glassman’s journey began with a profound realization: when you witness suffering with an open heart, you cannot remain still. You are compelled to act. Inspired by this conviction, he created Street Retreats, in which he and his students immersed themselves in the lives of the homeless—sleeping on the streets, eating at soup kitchens—to understand their reality from the inside.

In Yonkers, Glassman confronted entrenched cycles of homelessness, addiction, and incarceration. His response was not charity but enterprise: he established Greyston Bakery as a vehicle for social transformation.

At the heart of the bakery’s mission is its groundbreaking **open hiring** policy. No interviews. No background checks. Anyone who wants a job is given one. This single practice upends the conventional logic of employment and extends dignity to people the mainstream economy has discarded—particularly those with criminal records.

Greyston became more than a workplace. It became a sanctuary—offering not just employment, but hope, dignity, and a pathway to self-reliance for people who had been told they were unhirable.

Glassman’s impact reaches far beyond a single bakery. His Center for Open Hiring is spearheading a movement to bring this inclusive model to other organizations. To date, fifteen organizations and corporations—including Unilever and NYU’s Stern School of Business—have embraced the concept. Even longtime Greyston supporter Ben & Jerry’s is considering implementing open hiring practices.

Greyston Bakery is a testament to what becomes possible when a business is animated by love rather than mere profit. It demonstrates that companies can be a formidable force for healing—transforming individual lives, challenging societal attitudes, and proving that compassion and commercial success are not in conflict, but deeply complementary.

Countries That Work to Heal Social Sadness

Costa Rica: From Civil War to Global Model

Costa Rica emerged from a brief but devastating civil war in 1948 that claimed 4,000 lives. What happened next was extraordinary. As his first act in office, newly installed President José Figueres Ferrer made a decision unlike any in modern history: he disbanded the country's military. Costa Rica became the first nation to voluntarily dissolve its armed forces—not because it was forced to, as Germany and Japan were after World War II, but because it chose a different path.

With military resources redirected, Costa Rica built “armies” of teachers and healthcare workers. The country placed special emphasis on educating women and girls, achieving some of the highest levels of female educational attainment in the world. Today, Costa Rica boasts impressive standards in education, public health, life expectancy, and preventive care—along with far lower rates of violent crime than its neighbors.

Costa Rica also pioneered environmental healing. By the 1980s, decades of agricultural expansion, cattle ranching, and logging had reduced forest cover to just 21% of the country's land area. In response, the government established protected areas, national parks, and the Payment for Environmental Services (PES) program, which compensates landowners for reforestation and conservation. The results have been dramatic: forest cover has risen to approximately 52%, and over 25% of the country's land is now under protection. Costa Rica has become a global model for balancing ecological health with economic growth.

Finland: An Education Revolution

Finland consistently ranks among the happiest countries in the world and is celebrated for its education system. But this was not always the case. Until the 1970s, Finland's schools were considered among the worst in the developed world.

Recognizing this as a source of national suffering, the Finnish government undertook a sweeping transformation. The reform was student-centered and built on principles of equality and quality: personalized learning, holistic development, a broad and creative curriculum, minimal standardized testing, and a culture of trust and collaboration rather than competition.

The results have been extraordinary. Finnish students consistently rank among the highest performers internationally. The achievement gap between the highest- and lowest-performing students is among the smallest in the world. And levels of student well-being, satisfaction, and low stress are the envy of educators everywhere. Finland proves that healing social sadness in

education does not require more pressure—it requires more trust, more care, and a fundamentally different vision of what school can be.

Brazil: Light in the Darkest Places

Brazil grapples with a severe prison crisis. Conditions inside its prisons are often horrific—rampant sexual abuse, physical assault, and a dehumanizing environment that provides almost no opportunity for rehabilitation. Rather than preparing people to reenter society, these conditions deepen trauma and harden criminal behavior. The scale of this suffering is staggering—arguably even worse than in the United States.

Yet even in this darkness, there are glimmers of light. At a conference at the Vatican several years ago, I encountered a group from Brazil who had taken over a set of prisons under the management of a Catholic organization. One of the first changes they made was to abolish solitary confinement—widely recognized as one of the most devastating forms of psychological torture.

In place of isolation cells, they created rooms for prayer and meditation. By replacing punishment with spiritual reflection, they offered prisoners something the system had denied them: the chance to reconnect with their deeper selves, to find grounding, and to begin healing from the inside out.

This is what it looks like when love enters the places society has abandoned.

Healing Social Sadness Through Collective Action

The examples from Costa Rica, Finland, Brazil, and Greyston Bakery share a common thread: in every case, healing began when someone chose to see suffering clearly, refused to look away, and acted with love. These are not isolated stories. They are proof of what becomes possible when institutions align around human dignity.

To heal social sadness at scale requires collective action across business, government, and civil society. Among these, **businesses are uniquely positioned to lead**—because of their resources, their reach, and their ability to move quickly.

The Role of Business

Lead with love and compassion. This means building cultures that value every employee, fostering genuine inclusivity, and ensuring fair treatment at every level. It means offering

dignified wages, mental health support, and real opportunities for growth—especially for those at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy.

Embed social responsibility into core strategy. Ethical sourcing, environmental stewardship, and active investment in communities are not add-ons—they are essential to a business worthy of the world’s trust. Companies can support local education, healthcare, and development initiatives, directly addressing root causes of social sadness.

Practice inclusive employment. Adopt models like Greyston’s open hiring to give marginalized individuals—including those with criminal records—a genuine chance to work and thrive. Reducing inequality and social stigma begins with who we choose to hire.

Form collaborative partnerships. Work alongside government and civil society to pool resources, expertise, and influence. The most intractable social problems require coordinated, cross-sector solutions.

The Role of Government

Governments must create policy environments that reward socially responsible business—through tax incentives, regulatory support, and recognition. Equally important, governments must invest in the social infrastructure that makes everything else possible: education, healthcare, public transportation, and community institutions. These are the foundations on which healing is built.

The Role of Civil Society

Civil society organizations serve as the conscience of a community—advocating for justice, holding power accountable, and mobilizing people around shared values. They work directly with communities to understand needs and develop targeted programs: job training, health clinics, educational initiatives. They are the bridge between policy and lived reality.

A Shared Vision

Healing social sadness is not the work of any single sector. It demands a shared vision—a collective commitment to a society in which every person can live with dignity, connection, and purpose. Businesses, governments, and civil society must establish forums for genuine dialogue, align their efforts, and hold each other accountable for progress.

Conclusion

Social sadness is real. It lives in the bodies of people who cannot afford a doctor's visit. It lives in the shame of those branded with a criminal record. It lives in the eyes of a child born into a caste that tells her she is less than human. It lives in the communities torn apart by violence, inequality, and despair.

But so does the capacity to heal.

Every example in these pages—from a bakery in Yonkers to a prayer room in a Brazilian prison, from a small Central American nation that chose teachers over soldiers to a Nordic country that reimagined what school could be—tells us the same thing: healing is possible. It is always possible.

But it begins with love. Not love as a sentiment, but love as a practice—a disciplined, courageous commitment to truly seeing the people who are suffering, entering their world, and working alongside them to build something better.

By leading with love—in business, in government, in every institution that shapes our lives—we can begin to heal the wounds of social sadness and create a world where every human being has the chance to live a dignified, meaningful life. That is not just an aspiration. It is our deepest responsibility.