
Notes and Reflections

Work and Prayer: Never the 'Twain Shall Meet?*

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It was a great honour to be invited to deliver this convocation address. It is commencement day when everyone feels rightly giddy with success. But I want to talk about failure. Failure! Yes. But let me tell you how I arrived at this curious and seemingly inappropriate theme. I was a little worried when I discovered that I would be speaking to the Faculties of Religion and of Management at the same time. What about not being able to serve both God and Mammon? What should my resounding you-are-the-leaders-of-tomorrow, etc. commencement message be?

At my home university, my office at the Divinity School is in a building that lies on the far northern corner of the Harvard precinct, in Cambridge but just barely. The Business School is situated at the exact opposite end, over a mile away, across the Charles River. I have wondered at times if the spatial distance between the two symbolizes a psychological gulf as well, a distance between world views. The ancients once asked: what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? Today we might well ask, what does Jerusalem (or Rome or Mecca or

* *Editor's Note:* The following is the convocation address given on 6 June 2001 at McGill University. This written version retains the conversational tone of the original address.

Benares) have to do with Wall Street or Madison Avenue?

There does seem to be, at least in the popular mind, a yawning abyss between administration, especially of for-profit businesses on the one hand, and spirituality on the other, between work and worship, labour and prayer. But why do people think this way? There is much evidence that the gulf was not always there. After all, in our Jewish and Christian tradition, the Bible tells us that God himself is a manager. He creates a start-up. He makes a whole cosmos out of nothing. But also, as a manager, God plans, builds a work force and delegates. God puts the Man (Adam) and the Woman (Eve) in charge of naming the animals and tending the Garden of Eden. He makes them stewards. Then, like any manager, God has to cope with insubordination and incompetence.

One might contrast this with the picture of God in Greek mythology. Did Zeus ever do an honest day's work in his life? And what about Dionysius for whom life seemed to be one long riotous office party?

But our spiritual tradition is hardly unique. The earliest traces of human spirituality clearly link work and prayer. Whether or not human beings are really *homo sapiens* remains to be seen (If we blow each other up or strangle ourselves in our own pollution, that title—*homo sapiens*—will seem like a colossal joke!) But archaeology clearly demonstrates that we are *homo laborans* and *homo orans*: the creatures who work and pray, who hunt and gather and plant; and who chant and invoke and dance around ritual fires. The activities were once scarcely separable. Those who study the pre-historic cave paintings in places like Lascaux now believe that the drawings of the bison and mammoths may be visual prayers, etched there before the hunters set out. That explains why the animals are often seen asleep or with unusually thin legs. That would make them easier to catch. Prayer was an integral part of the hunt or the harvest. They went together. So how did work and spirituality, administration of invocation get separated?

Simply put, the divorce began with the social separation of those who prayed from those who toiled and those who fought. Gradually all these separate worlds were segregated from those who bore and

cared for the young. Consequently it became increasingly hard to see the world whole, or to experience my life as a unity. Also the increasing fragmentation and hyper-specialization of work itself made it even more difficult. Remember the frantic Charles Chaplin being minced on the assembly line in *Modern Times*?

Is there a way ahead? I think so. Your invitation provided me with a marvellous challenge: to familiarize myself with writers who try to bridge this crevice, especially those who claim to offer spiritual advice to business people. (Such as Steven Lovey, Eugene Griesman and Deepak Chopra.) One reason I enjoyed them, I confess, is that unlike the weighty tomes I usually handle, these books are light to hold, are available at airports and can be read standing up with a cup of coffee in one hand.

But they raise as many questions as they answered. People today, I learned, want to “bring their whole selves to work,” not just a segment of themselves, and people are demanding more from their work than just a living wage. They are looking for self-realization at work.

This is good as far it goes. But there is a problem. A satisfactory work life entails not just the attitude people bring *to* the workplace. It also entails a workplace which *itself* makes such satisfaction possible and it requires doing work that has some genuine human significance. This means both those of us in religion and spirituality, and those of us in administration have some hard questions to ask. Self-realization? What about those whose jobs simply do not permit anyone to bring their whole self to it? What about those millions of workers (the Haitian immigrants in the shirt factories, the Thai girls assembling computer casings)? What kind of self could one realize in a sweat shop? How much satisfaction can one get from producing frivolous or destructive products?

Abraham Lincoln once said a nation cannot long endure half slave and half free. How long can a world endure in which some of us have spiritually rewarding jobs, many others are toiling in routine, mind-numbing grinds, others are turning out useless widgets, and the rest have no work at all? Is this something a new generation of managers and a new generation of religionists could tackle together?

Something I found in a book required by the University of Chicago

Business School entitled *Zen and the Art of Archery* is both cheering and troublesome. It says: Management is a state of being, not a task. It is an eternal quest toward self-realization.

Perhaps. But the question here is *whose* self-realization? If you are a manager, spiritual meaning at work cannot be just your *own* personal quest for fulfillment. Meaning in work life is not just for you. It is not just an executive perk, like the key to the bathroom or a corner office.

I think we need three fundamental changes. And administration and spirituality must cooperate on all three...

1). We do indeed need a fundamental change in the attitude people bring to work. They *should* expect more from it, indeed *demand* more from it, and see it as an opportunity to contribute to the common good.

2). We need fundamental changes in relationships people find when they *get* to work. It is little wonder that more and more what unions are asking for their members have to do as much or more with the work process as with compensation. Man does not live by bread alone.

3). We all need to ask more doggedly what is the purpose for which this enterprise exists? What is the end product of the work? Can we hope to gain genuine long-term satisfaction from jobs that produce trivial or ruinous things?

Then there is failure. This is a question that should be of concern to both groups here today. So many of these books about "success": *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Successful People*; *Time Tactics of Very Successful People*; *Keys to Success*, etc. etc. We learn that any and all of the following spiritual techniques like chanting, yoga, meditation will promote your success. But we never really learn what success is. Can one be a success as a manager and a failure as a human being? Or vice-versa?

And what about failure? I think commencement day is the right time to talk about it. True, spirituality is about self-realization and liberation and human fulfillment. But spirituality is also about finitude, mortality, suffering, and failure. The successful human being is not just the one who handles achievement and recognition well. It is the one who handles failure well. The stage producer George Abbot once said, "Generally speaking, success brings out an actor's worst

qualities and failure the best.” Jimmy Durante had some helpful advice too. “Be awful to nice to ‘em when you’re goin’ up,” he said, “because you’re goin’ to meet ‘em all comin’ down.” Both these worthies should know. There is no business, as the saying goes, like show business.

Spirituality is about living up to your limits, but it is also about limits. We live today in a global business culture whose inner logic is infinite expansion: more and better ideas, new horizons, wider markets, a growing economy. But we also live on a finite planet, with only so much air and water and soil. The Japanese Buddhist teacher Kobo Daishi once said, “I have only learned one thing in life: how much is enough.” If the great challenge of the previous few centuries was to throw off the shackles and strive to reach the limits, the challenge of the present one is learning to live within those limits. To live in a culture that tells us we never have enough, but somehow, despite it all, to learn how much *is* enough.

Religion, spirituality, business, management. These enterprises should not lurk on the different far edges of university campuses. We should be together and closer to the centre. Managers need to remind religion that the purpose of God for human life is not to flee the world but to engage it, to tend and nurture it. Spirituality must remind management that the basic purpose of management is the feeding, clothing, housing, educating and caring for all God’s creatures. Making the world more human.

In success and in failure, we need each other. So I salute everyone here. Those of you who study the great religious traditions because we need that wisdom now more than ever. Those of you in management because it is a great time to be in business today. Both groups because for the first time in human history we have the means to feed and clothe and house and heal all God’s children. That is your enterprise, and it is one we all share. I wish you all Godspeed.