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INTEGRATING BUSINESS AND SPIRITUALITY: THE SOUL OF LEADING CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

Business corporations and university-based schools of management training and education are both becoming centers for spiritual growth as well as technical skills and financial results. This paper seeks to provide a brief overview of some of the literature on work and the spirit and then describes a series of mini-cases in which business schools and corporations have partnered in social purpose ventures to improve the world. Several brief analyses of efforts to relieve human suffering, fight poverty in developing nations and channel business consulting strategies to humanitarian ends are shared. Spiritual theories that drive such strategies are identified, results are reported, and the paper concludes with implications for utilizing private sector management tools to transform the world.

KEYWORDS: Spirituality, Business, Change

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual practices are increasingly a force for change in today's world. In the public sector spirituality is addressed frequently in the name of Judeo-Christian values. For example, George W. Bush launched a major faith-based initiative in the first year of ascending to the presidency of the United States, calling for churches and other nonprofit organizations to join the fight in combating America's socio-economic ills, promising federal funds to help improve the quality of life. Other US presidents since have followed suit.

Business books with spiritual themes began to be increasingly produced by most publishing houses: *The Spiritual Art of Business* (Rowan, 2023), *Leading With Soul* (Bolman and Deal, 1995); *Reawakening the Spirit at Work: The Power of Dharmic Management* (Hawley, 1993); *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America* (Whyte, 1994); *Rekindling the Spirit in Work* (Schechter, 1995); *The Reflective Executive: A Spirituality of Business and Enterprise* (Griffin, 1993); *The Tao of Leadership: Leadership Strategies for a New Age* (Heider, 1986); *A Brief History of Everything* (Wilber, 1996); *Authentic Leadership: Courage in Action* (Terry, 1993); *Spirited Leading and Learning: Process Wisdom for a New Age* (Vaill, 1998); *Capturing the Heart of Leadership: Spirituality and Community in the New American Workplace* (Fairholm, 2000);

Wisdom at Work: The Awakening of Consciousness in the Workplace (Davidson, 1998); *New Traditions in Business: Spirit and Leadership in the 21st Century* (Renesch, 1992), and more.

A plethora of corporations began to tout spirituality as a core aspect of their culture — Ben and Jerry’s (Lager, 1994), the Body Shop (UK), Lotus, Malden Mills, Semco (Brazil), Starbucks, Timberland, Tom’s of Maine (Chappell, 1993). There are numerous conferences on spirit and work including the “Business and Consciousness” conference held annually each winter in Mexico, and Babson College’s spring conference on “Spirit and Business.” Even the Academy of Management, the very epitome of academic business scholarship and research, has created a “Management, Spirituality and Religion” interest group.

Internationally a number of world leaders articulate the need for societies to drink from their spiritual wells, to draw upon the wisdom of the soul in order to quench today’s thirst for peace and truth. Vaclav Havel, former Czechoslovakian president, and Nelson Mandela of South Africa are two of the most cited sources. Even the World Bank, increasingly criticized as a global oppressor of poor nations, now has a group of staff who meet weekly as the bank’s “Spiritual Unfoldment Society,” trying to infuse the institution’s policies and practices with more respect for the “soul” of Third World nations and their spiritual needs, as well as addressing physical starvation among the poor (Barrett, 1998).

TOWARD AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

While the notion of spirituality is somewhat vaguely defined in much of the management literature, for purposes here several sources are appropriate from the world’s great religions traditions. These sayings are not simply a matter of formal religious faiths, institutions or churches, but instead they have to do with the quality of relationships between human beings. As such, they are as applicable in the business context as any other setting.

“No one of you is a believer until you desire for another that which you desire for yourself.”

-Islam (*The Sunnah*, 2023)

“Again, is there any deed in the world that would be nobler than service to the common good? This is worship: to serve mankind.”

-Hinduism (‘Abdu’l-Baha, 1969)

“What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the entire Torah.”

-Judaism (Glatzer, 2009)

“Therefore, all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”

-Christianity (*The Bible*, 2020)

Terms like kindness, service, laboring for the common good, lifting the oppressed, and so forth — all seem to suggest the imperative, not of a particular religious persuasion, but of ethics and helping humanity. These are core spiritual values for getting at the soul of one’s work. This paper suggests that they are also relevant facets of business school education. With such a perspective, one is able to draw upon Parker Palmer’s classic volume about higher education, *To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (1983). In this book, Palmer reflects on his Quaker roots by calling for learning that enables students to reach their full potential. Such an education allows new visions and the addressing of ultimate concerns. “The teacher is a mediator between the knower and the known, between the learner and the subject to be learned (29) In truthful knowing (spirituality) the knower becomes co-participant in a community of faithful relationships with other persons” (32).

BUSINESS AND SPIRIT INTERVENTIONS

Within the context of the preceding ideas about spirituality, several short cases will illustrate how business school professors and students have collaborated to infuse their management training with values of a spiritual nature. They also show how MBA programs may partner with local business firms and executives using business to address poverty. Drawing on interviews, observations and organizational reports, several social purpose ventures have been initiated at U.S. business schools to address economic problems in various parts of the globe.

Where, what and how these strategies have evolved will be summarized. The schools and projects names are pseudonyms to preserve the participants’ privacy.

Cooperatives and Microcredit in the Philippines (CMP)

Beginning with a small seminar in 1989, a business school professor and students later obtained travel expenses to carry out a three-month economic needs analysis in the Philippines. They were motivated by their inner concern for poor families in a country that used to be the number two economy in Asia but had dropped to second from the bottom. The team studied economic cooperation strategies that might be applicable in the Philippines such as Mondragon in the Basque country of northern Spain, which was launched by a priest drawing on Catholic social teachings. Mondragon eventually grew into over a hundred worker-owned enterprises (Whyte and Whyte, 1988) emphasizing equality and

cooperative labor relations. Ever since then worker-owners have controlled not only their own factories but banks, health care firms, schools and other institutions down until the present.

Another source of inspiration was the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh which had loaned over \$100 million by the late 1980s to poor rural women. Generating jobs for the poor and empowerment for women, Grameen's microcredit strategies began to be replicated elsewhere. Would such a model succeed in urban Manila?

Since it started three decades ago, with help from U.S. business students, executives and foundations, CMP's combined resources have created hundreds of worker-owned cooperatives. They have also loaned out over \$268 million to microenterprises, benefiting more than 2.1 million Filipino families. The spiritual nature of using MBA skills in poor communities inspired students, faculty and executives to better understand how leadership is about change, not only in society, but also in one's heart. Since that humble beginning, CMP has expanded to 11 nations providing microloans, business training, and more. Last year's 2025 productivity report documents such facts as 43,000 entrepreneurs were given business training in 173,500 sessions; 72 percent were women; and 250,000 total lives were impacted during that year alone.

Economic Rebuilding After Natural Disaster (ERAND)

The second case began in 1999 after Hurricane Mitch killed some 20,000 Central Americans, destroying highways and bridges, and leaving a million people homeless. Faculty at a U.S. management school initiated what was called the "Stewardship Project." It drew on Peter Block's notion that business consultants should learn to "choose service over self-interest" (1993). What managers should do, he argues, was apply their professional skills in behalf of the less-fortunate, not to just make money and rule over their employees. In the dog-eat-dog competitive world of MBA programs, such a notion was quite radical at the time. But when a new course, "Social Stewardship," was announced soon after Mitch's disaster, some 40 students enrolled. Their numbers grew to over 60 including some who audited but did not formally register. Teams were formed to do such tasks as identify areas where Mitch's destruction was greatest, organize a public relations campaign, establish fundraising methods, and prepare to restore destroyed jobs and so on.

That first year, ERAND's achievements exceeded all expectations. Over \$116,000 was raised and some 46 students and faculty spent 6-12 weeks in Central America during summer 1999. Training sessions in microenterprise were provided, 47 village banks were established, creating jobs for over 800 women and benefiting some 4,000 victims of Hurricane Mitch. Empowering the poor had a major impact on the American college students as well. As one MBA student declared upon return, "This was the most significant management education of my two-year program in the business school. It

was also when I came to really know myself. It was the greatest spiritual; experience I've ever had." ERAND is still operating today. It has broken off from its university base to become an independent nongovernmental organization (NGO) with its own board and staff. Currently, ERAND recruits and links up with faculty and students from other business schools from across the USA, plus others from various nations. Thus far, its programs have mobilized over 3,650 students who've integrated their business education and management skills with high ethics, having so far raised some \$11 million to labor and empower the poor in 15 countries of the South Pacific, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia.

Andean Humanitarian Service (AHS)

The third case grew out of the Institute for Public Management which is housed in a business school. While several professors were teaching nonprofit management and/or MBA ethics several decades ago, Latino students proposed designing a South American nonprofit foundation as a class project. By the end of the semester AHS was created, initial funds were donated from private sources, and trained staff members were hired to live and work in poor, indigenous villages high near the ancient Inca capital of Cuzco, Peru. During that first semester, students and faculty jointly learned the dynamics of "servant leadership" (Greenleaf, 1977), how to build a caring community, ways to live ethical business values, and methods by which their business skills could change the world.

The group formed a board of local corporate executives and has successfully raised some \$2,300,000 since then. Expeditions of North Americans have traveled at their own expense and constructed schools, established libraries, taught hygiene, and trained villagers in an innovative family nutrition program called "Square Foot Gardening." The latter enables poor families to generate 80 percent more produce in only 20 percent of the land that had usually required four family gardens. Adobe greenhouses were constructed by partner groups. A computer lab was equipped and set up. And when the terrible ravages of earthquakes hit another region of Peru, more students and older U.S. volunteers gathered supplies and helped villagers rebuild dozens of homes.

Graduate students and undergraduates report that they learned the "sheer joy" of good, hard work. Accounting students volunteered to set up an annual budget for AHS, teaching the U.S. and Peruvian staff how to do spreadsheets. In Peru, they taught simple bookkeeping methods to thousands of poor microentrepreneurs. Business management students taught concepts such as new marketing techniques, total quality management principles, and systems thinking. Organizational behavior students designed and implemented problem-solving and team building tools.

To carry out humanitarian service high in the Andes was not easy for middle-class U.S. college students. But the cases they wrote up, the journals they kept, and the papers they wrote, showed that

their experiences proved to be meaningful. A short quote that one of them located was from Albert Schweitzer, one of the world's best-known humanitarians whose power and credibility was derived from the fusing of his professional education with spiritual values. A group of graduate students had traveled to Africa to learn from Schweitzer, and to them he declared the following: "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve" (2024). Today, the business faculty, managers, and student volunteers laboring with AHS seem to understand what Schweitzer meant.

So far, some 380 college students and faculty have spent semester-long internships in Peru, and plans continue being made to expand from Peru to the Andes region of Bolivia.

LEADERSHIP, SPIRIT, AND ECONOMICS

The cases above include faculty and students from the west coast to the east, and from Texas in the southern U.S. to Colorado in the mountain states. Collaborating with firms in the private sector, housewives, community associations and families, the quality of life for thousands of Third World families is better today. Because of such efforts, CMP in Asia has seen some of its early, small worker co-ops grow into strong companies doing transactions worth millions of dollars a year. CMP's core mission is being successfully executed: "To build self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit within those who struggle for sufficiency in developing countries. We do this through the principle of a hand-out, not a hand-up." Its management education program trained over 30,000 people 2001 alone. With respect to ERAND's reconstruction of Central America since Hurricane Mitch decimated the region three years ago, many poor people have moved from dependency to dignity. Likewise, AHS is facilitating qualitative improvements among indigenous villages in Peru. Business student interns and involved corporations that supply materials and/or capital have gained new appreciation for the spirit of Adam Smith's writings. In his brilliant publication, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), the founder of free markets articulated the soul of genuine capitalism. Said he: No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members is poor and miserable. All the members of human society stand in need of each other's assistance reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem (96).

Apparently, whether spirituality is based on the ancient religious traditions of the past, or the insightful vision of the father of the free market, work and the soul are intertwined. Business leadership is not so much the "command and control" model of past texts. Instead, it includes the element of love.

For the author, having an interest group within the Academy of Management is an innovative big step. It helps to legitimize movement away from the leader who is the head of a corporation to one who becomes the heart of the firm. It offers to business students an alternative beyond power struggles,

competition and narcissism. Instead, faculty, students and executives may strive for higher objectives than only status and material consumption.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps more than ever, those involved in management research and education now have expanded opportunities to address huge global problems. Steps can be taken beyond worshipping the bottom line, or carrying out yet another corporate acquisition.

The reality is that some 40 nations are worse off in 2002 than they were in 1992. “The average income in the 20 richest countries is 37 times the average in the 20 poorest nations — double the gap of 40 years ago” (Cox, 2000 6A). The horrific terrorist attacks on New York’s Twin Trade Towers and the U.S. Pentagon on September 11, 2001 have raised public awareness of the huge discrepancies between America and places like Afghanistan. Yet Mahatma Gandhi argued that “poverty is the worst form of violence.” More recently, the collapse of the Argentine economy has resulted in national chaos, including going through five presidents in only a two-week time period.

Managers in the private sector, business school students and professors have technical expertise to address these problems. If managerial skills can be enriched with spiritual values, the world may become transformed. Religion itself is not the answer. Indeed, Gandhi also observed that:

For the poor, the economic is the spiritual. I may as well place before the dog . . . the message of God as before those hungry millions who have no luster in their eyes and whose only God is their bread to them God can only appear as bread and butter.

Management skills, driven by spiritual passion, have the potential to empower the world’s have-nots. Business with heart can alleviate poverty and combat injustice. Sustainable strategies exist for genuine change, such as microcredit, worker-owned cooperatives, and community service to those in need. CMP, ERAND, and AHS suggest models that perhaps could be replicated within other schools of management, MBA programs, and corporate-community collaborative partnerships. Perhaps, the day may come when such college projects are spun off regularly. Over the past decade, thousands of entrepreneurial start-ups were born in America’s business schools. What could be the global impact if NGOs and other nonprofit groups were being spun-off at the same rate? Only these would be initiated by social entrepreneurs, not business founders. Who knows, maybe the day will come when ethics and spirituality undergird most management schools. If and when that occurs, a kind of MBA Peace Corps may emerge to unify the practice of spirit and work as an integrated whole.

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