

Spirituality and Work

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I found the contribution ' *A Rumour of Angels: Researching Spirituality and Work Organisations* interesting (*Ministers at Work* No. 83, October 2002). I would like to have read the complete paper of which this article was a shortened version. Obviously I cannot pass judgment on the observations within the paper as I was not present at either of the workshops discussed, but I would like to comment on the article.

The analysis described in the paper by Emma Bell and Scott Taylor, had two sources. The first was the research of the two writers and the second the observation, from the perspective of participant, of two workshop retreats held in a Benedictine monastery, on Spirituality and Work Organisations.

A sense of unease began when reading the introduction, where the writers introduce three factors that contribute to the interest in this field.

...it is argued that as organisations seek increased commitment from their employees, these intense demands cannot be met without caring for the whole person. ...changes in the global economy have left workers demoralised as a consequence of downsizing; people have become more alienated and less able to cope with the compartmentalised nature of their work and non-work lives ...the traditional community structures that formerly provided employees with a source of meaning are seen by some as less relevant (Mitoff and Denton 1999; Renesch 1992). *(Ministers at Work pp27/28)*

I would like to look more closely at the suppositions.

I believe that there is almost an assumption within the words of the first proposition – admittedly not originating with the writers of the paper – that spirituality is a methodology for salvaging an organisation whose employees are working at a level below their potential. It does not seem that the initial desire is to enable employees to discern and express their spirituality within a working context.

Secondly it is not only changes occasioned by the global economy, which have removed a sense of identification and participation for people in a wide range of contexts, although they are highly significant, and contribute to pressures closer to home. Changes in the culture within an organisation can also have direct consequences for the employees. Traditional ways of working are breaking down. Anything and everything on-line and immediate and the subtle effect of advertising make their mark. Changes in working practices are not only felt within the organisation but the wider environment may also be affected which in turn, affects the lives of other people outside the organisation.

We have created a 'throw-away' culture of materials increasingly designed to be durable, products of mixed components which we cannot recycle. If we find disposal difficult in this country, we need to remember that there is an increasing habit of the west to 'hide' its unresolved problems – Asia, China, Vietnam, Singapore receive electrical waste for 'recycling' (a language cover-up for dumping?) and by so doing find themselves in a toxic waste nightmare largely of our making and, potentially, an environmental catastrophe for both people and locations.

Employees, even if aware of doubtful practices, may be helpless to address any of the issues. They sometimes welcome alternative sources of meaning, outside work, and do not see their spirituality as anything to do with work. They do not find this fragments them but rather enables them to live and cope with the constraints on their lives.

Is it then of any use at all to talk of spirituality within the workplace?

The writers of the article go on to discuss the defining of spirituality. They immediately identify some of the problems encountered, particularly since the incorporation of the word, and possibly the concept, into the management context. They describe explorations for a definition. They identify a shifting emphasis toward experience and away from objectivity, an escape from the exclusive boundaries of religion, and the use of an empty and misleading slogan but there are notions of inter-connectedness and holistic concerns. There is a divide, the authors say, (p 29) between those who believe that spirituality can be deliberately introduced into an organisation to enhance employee commitment and improve performance and those who regard spirituality as a cultural phenomenon which has the power to enhance human understanding and quality of life.

Continuing to consider definitions, Bell and Taylor then state that in their view spirituality cannot be defined without reference to religion. By focusing on the 'spirit', we acknowledge it as a sacred power that can be arrived at only through the employment of rituals and languages drawn from religions. (p 24)

Many people would disagree. Many of the publications currently addressing spirituality in the workplace focus on spirit as an essence or quality or attribute of the individual. William Guillory defines it as 'our inner consciousness'. (Guillory 2000:33) or as a 'way of being that predetermines how we respond to life experiences'. He does say that religion is a form that spirituality takes in practice and but also that yoga, T'ai Chi, prayer, empathy, compassion and treating others with dignity and respect may be other expressions of spirituality.

Larry Gaffin (2001) defines spirituality as: the daily tasks that we perform that serve, support, bring joy, create beauty, reconcile, renew, challenge and comfort, nurture, heal all who are touched by the consequences of our performed tasks. The degree to which these tasks are spiritual is determined by the degree to which they add to or subtract from our common life.

Corinne McLaughlin, (1998) Executive Director of the Center for Visionary Leadership believes that spirituality at Work can be seen in many ways:

Some would say it's simply embodying their personal values of honesty, integrity and good quality work. Others would say it's treating their employees in a responsible, caring way. For others, it's making their organisation socially responsible in how it impacts the environment, serves the community or creates social change. And for still others it's holding religious study groups or using prayer, meditation or intuitive guidance at work. Some see God as their business partner or even their CEO. However, some people fear the corporation has begun to co-op the function of churches. Others fear spiritual beliefs or practices will be imposed by employers, but to date this has been extremely rare... *And as long as personal spiritual expression doesn't involve company time, cost the company money, or lead to the harassment of other employees, it's usually acceptable.* (my italics)

Carole Juriewicz (2002) believes that:

...the term workplace spirituality refers to the idea that individuals hold a set of moral beliefs (distinct from religious beliefs) that inform their sense of right and wrong in the workplace ... by acting on these beliefs, individuals achieve a sense of sacredness in their actions, their work, and in their world in general. When organizations act to maximise opportunities for their employees to experience this sacredness, they demonstrate a concern for workplace spirituality. Research indicates that by advancing spirituality in the workplace, organizations and the employees in them will achieve higher levels of productivity and performance. More importantly, the positive effect of such actions will extend beyond organizational boundaries to enhance the wellbeing of employees, families, communities and society in general.

The situation is complicated by another factor identified by Bell and Taylor – the individual and community aspects of spirituality.

Mitoff and Denton (2000:26) describe the analysis of spirituality by Ken Wilber, who proposes that two dimensions are sufficient both to sort and to understand the varieties of spiritual experience. These dimensions are the *inner* versus *outer* and the *individual* versus the *group, community* or *society*. While acknowledging that the *inner-individual* is the understanding of spirituality held by most people, the authors rightly give space to the *inner-communal* as a function of the culture in which the person finds her/himself. '... (it) is a function of the deep beliefs, values, rituals and celebratory acts that constitute the deep meaning of a society. Indeed culture is such a powerful force, it virtually 'creates people.'" The *outer-individual* refers to the effect of an individual's acts on others and the world and the *outer-communal* stresses that spirituality is revealed in the structures –the organisations and institutions, and also by societies.

This recognition of a corporate quality resonates with Pattison (2000) who observes:

this spiritual aspect (of organisation) is the inner aspect of outward material reality; it can be likened to the personality or character of an individual. It needs to be discerned, understood, nurtured and cared for if the institution is to maximise its potential for promoting human well-being for those who use or work in it.

Each organisation, however, will have its own culture, its own character. The observation was made by Wittgenstein, who said:

... one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not understand the people...

Many very varied writers have addressed the ethos, the characterisation, the 'feeling' that one has on entering an establishment or organisation. This has underpinned many organizational procedures. Over many years a range of management practices have been introduced to address human values or the quality of product or

process. Until recently few have addressed a spiritual component although as long ago as 1984 Wink, in his introduction to his book, *Engaging the Powers*, wrote:

Any attempt to transform a social system without addressing both its spirituality and its outer forms is doomed to failure. Only by confronting the spirituality of an institution and its concretions can the total entity be transformed, and that requires a kind of spiritual discernment and praxis that the materialistic ethos in which we live knows nothing about. (1989:10)

I believe that the communal aspect requires much more recognition, a factor indicated by Bell and Taylor in the section headed 'Discussion and conclusions.' The authors make clear that their analysis brings them to particular conclusions. Workplace spirituality, they say,

... primarily emphasises the role of the individual based on themes such as leadership and the personalised meaning of work, yet simultaneously draws attention to the collective nature of work as a community.

The ideas and practices of contemporary spirituality, based on the primacy of the self, do not encourage the development of social systems. Ultimately, this tension may encourage a more Westernized interpretation of workplace spirituality as reliant on changes in the behaviour of individuals rather than encouraging a shared responsibility for each other.

From their observation of the workshops Bell and Taylor identified three themes which mirror the three arguments put forward in their introduction and are reproduced at the beginning of this article. These are language and values surrounding workplace spirituality, the rituals and practices with which it is associated and the tension between the individual and the community in the development of spiritual work practice.

The workshop participants sought a definition of spirituality which would make their organisations more 'soul friendly'. The attempt to reach a definition of spirituality at work seems to have centred round the Christian notions of service and vocation (p32). The writers provide a number of terms used within the workshops to describe spirituality: belief, journey, unity, higher power and personal fulfilment. The conclusion was tripartite: something that goes beyond the explanatory, scientific frameworks and prioritises experience; as a means of incorporating death as a positive part of life and as a journey to be experienced.

The writers say (p 34):

... conceptual attempts to distinguish between spirituality and religion are both analytically and empirically unsustainable, rendering problematic attempts that have been made to clearly differentiate and distance workplace spirituality from religion.

Many of the management courses now introducing spirituality as a component use the word value to denote ethics, justice, anti-discriminatory practices, a search for meaning or purpose, health, happiness, peace, trust, fulfilment, integrity. Tom Egan (1999) states that:

'... in my view, the word 'spirituality' itself frequently carries negative connotations in the business environment that often puts people off or at least on guard when it is used in the workplace setting. Thus I prefer to avoid using the word 'spirituality' at least when actually in the office.'

Bell and Taylor also say that (p 35):

... workplace spirituality provides evidence to support the notion that religious symbols and ideas are increasingly able to 'float free' from their former points of institutional anchorage. Utilization of spirituality as the basis for management development courses suggests it is being 'adopted and adapted by different agencies to suit their own purposes... the incorporation of spiritual values in situations that are quite different from religious, institutional contexts.

Bell and Taylor comment on the ineffectuality of language to define spirituality (see King 1996), maintaining that it emerges through language and action. A definition of workplace spirituality was offered by Ottoway following a review of 17 authors all of whom were trying to articulate the role of spirit in some aspect of work. 'Spirituality of work is a source of energy, empowering and transforming the life of daily work. Described in modern language spirituality is beyond the rational and is creating a new order.' This does not necessarily reflect the Christian belief but would resonate with many people. I think the discussion on Spirituality and Work has to broaden out beyond the Christian perspective, even if, for Christians, or for practising members of other faiths, it has to come back to a concept which contains the transcendent in some form.

Bell and Taylor mention the demoralisation which accompanies 'downsizing' (p 27). The questionable use of language to hide rather than to elucidate is often a management tool. The insidious use of language, designed to mitigate the stark reality – downsizing, restructuring, redesigning, releasing, de-layering, de-cluttering, building down – or Chrysler's 'a career alternative enhancement programme' - when we mean sacking or redundancy, does not encourage identification with the corporate nature of the organisation. The 'emperor's new

clothes' in which organisations dress their operations are seen as merely words by those affected by some of the policies.

Any discussion on spirituality at work must recognise the corporate character of the institution, organisation or system in which someone is working. Bell and Taylor address the 'individual and communal' but there seems to have been a focus on the need for a 'spiritual space' (p 33) to allow the transfer of spirituality into the workplace. This was either a literal space or activities such as controlled breathing or prayer. The writers note a tension when individual spirituality develops in collective organisational contexts (p34). I think the corporate aspect needs to be more strongly addressed.

The first I have written about above – the identity adopted - intentionally or unconsciously - by an organisation. Pattison (2000) states that 'Organisational spirituality is manifested in and maintained by, ritual. Ritual activity is symbolic action that sustains social meanings and values but does not itself affect reality.' Its ritual will be manifest in its policies and strategies. Levels of formality, environmental layout, mission and purpose, the size of the organisation and so on, will determine widely different cultures. Recognising and interpreting the ritual and symbolism of an organisation may be the first step towards discerning its spirituality – good or bad. For an individual to seek to discern her or his own spirituality independent of the norms of the organisation could create tremendous tension.

Richard Barrett (2002) identifies 7 levels of Corporate Consciousness. Survival, Relationship, Self-Esteem, Transformation, Organisation, Community and Global/Society. Successful leaders in the 21st Century, he says, will need to find a dynamic balance between the interests of the corporation, the interests of the workers and the interests of society as a whole. To achieve this goal they will need to take account of shift in values taking place in society, and the growing demand for people to find purpose and meaning in their work. Organisations which cannot move from the first three levels will increasingly find it difficult to survive. The transformation from the lowest to the highest levels involves liberating the corporate soul.

I think that there is another understanding of spirituality which is even more important and which was not picked up by Bell and Taylor or acknowledged as a component of the workshops. This entails an engagement with something outside ourselves. As a Christian I would want to understand this as a relationship, an encounter with the holy, with God, either as an individual or as a community. It is difficult to practise Christianity in isolation (love God, love your neighbour) so I would emphasise both aspects. In addition I would look for some expression of the transcendent within this encounter.

As a minister in secular employment, however, I have long advocated the use of secular words to describe religious concepts. I have to be careful, therefore, before dismissing some of the apparently non-Christian descriptions of spirituality as non-Christian. I believe implicitly in an incarnate God. Therefore God will be found in all workplaces in any number of guises. All people, people of faith and those without, are subject to the same feelings, hopes, fears, despair and joy. In an attempt to describe the Christian *experience* there are many secular words which are effective.

To me, there appear to be fundamental questions to be asked. Is the incorporation of *spirit* and *spirituality* into management speak legitimate? Have these words been introduced as a genuine attempt to enable people to find expression of their spirituality or, much more cynically, because it is a way of harnessing yet another input from the workforce? Can spirituality be expressed by the use of words such as values, ethics, compassion, wisdom, service, empowerment? Can it only be defined either as an integration of a person (bringing your soul to work) or providing a spiritual space in which to pray or meditate or is there a third way which has not yet been widely explored? Brian Diehm (Diehm 2000) says:

... some misunderstandings about work are widespread in the secular world. The error common to many of these is placing the value, and the dignity, on the work being performed rather than on the human performing it ... Our work can never transform this world into an earthly paradise.

And he goes on to say:

But that doesn't mean we can ignore this world in the expectation of the next ... our work can also be a sharing in Christ's redeeming. 'By enduring the hardship of work in union with Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth and the one crucified on Calvary, man collaborates in a certain fashion with the Son of God in his redemptive work. He shows himself to be a disciple of Christ by carrying the cross, daily, in the work he is called to accomplish.'

It is true that many people find their working conditions extremely hard, demanding, a vicious cycle of deadlines, a separate but necessary feature of their lives which has to be endured but I want to protest most strongly at this interpretation (though it may be part of the catechism). I believe that we are capable of transformation – even in this world. I believe that because God is incarnate – in this world – then the work place is also a holy place. I believe that, therefore, it is possible to encounter God not only in some quiet place outside the work

area, but right there in the work I am doing, in the place that I am doing it, in the process of doing it, in the product or service I am engaged in.

Having said all that - as a practising member of the Christian faith - can I argue that the attempt to define spirituality at work in non-religious terms is inappropriate, even if it is not recognised as such by either employer or employee? What about the motivation? If it is introduced by an astute management to enhance profits, does that negate it? Can't God work through it in just the same way? Can the experience of spirituality which has no overtly Christian words to express it, be valid? I think I have to say that the experience can be valid, can be of God.

It is widely agreed that spiritual expression may be possible through music, poetry, landscape, art and so on. But we speak of the indomitable or the courageous *human* spirit. We speak of mind, body and spirit. Can this human element be recognised as spiritual without a transcendent relationship? I think the answer is probably yes, but it then lies outside the definition of spirituality by which I live. In my understanding of spirituality there is an encounter with the holy. In this engagement, this recognition of a relationship with the transcendent, other factors come into play. It is not just 'me (my body, mind and soul) and my work', or the 'organisation and its ethos (caring, valuing and so on)', but how life is lived - at work, doing the work and within the work itself. It is about transformation.

In religious terms, as well as the more frequently mentioned elements such as meaning and purpose, there is an ongoing need, in the work place, to recognise the place for redemption (forgiveness, freedom, liberation) and atonement (compensation, making it up to someone, recompense) and absolution, (forgiveness, release, being given a clean slate) for death (loss of job, authority, responsibility, autonomy) and resurrection (new way of doing things, new things to do), for salvation (rescue from difficult situations; ways out) and hope. This is needed at the organisational level as well as for an individual. Prayer and space are only a part of it. Spirituality should not take us out of the world but be part of the transforming of it – corporately as well as individually.

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