

THE SPIRIT AT WORK MOVEMENT

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THE REVD DAVID WELBOURN is Churches' Officer for Industry and Commerce with the Surrey and N.E. Hants Industrial Mission, and co-author with Sue Howard of *The Spirit at Work Phenomenon*.

Many of the issues raised in the previous articles are reflected in this piece by David Welbourn concerning spirituality in the workplace. His explanation of the rise in interest in things spiritual also recognises that there is a general disenchantment with secular values, especially materialism and consumerism. He argues that the Spirit at Work movement provides a vehicle for people to "bring their soul to work" in their quest to introduce spirituality to this dimension of their lives. Like Partridge, Welbourn understands the term "spirituality" as embracing a wealth of ideas and practices from within the secular culture, but also identifies a "divine" element residing in the mix which brings a connection with a larger story beyond our personal experience. Welbourn throws down a gauntlet to the Church: can it affirm the values of those from other faiths or none and still engage with businesses and corporations at a spiritual level? Businesses are now the most powerful and influential institutions in the world. Their impact exceeds that of nation states and more than rivals that of any government institution. In the interests of a healthy and sustainable world order it is vital that organisations understand and honour their social and planetary responsibilities. LS

Significantly, our business roles now provoke the timeless spiritual questions that remain as poignant and relevant to us today as they have been to people throughout all ages – Who are we? What do we stand for? How do we determine meaning and purpose for ourselves? Are our lives making a difference? Are we influencing the world for good or bad? Such questions are the lifeblood of the individual sensemaking process, and answering them in the context of our work holds the promise of huge benefits to society as well as organisational life. Many people increasingly want to bring their "whole selves" to work, including their souls. They search for meaning and purpose, want to feel they are making a positive contribution to society, and seek a nobler purpose for their life's work. In short, they are increasingly asking spiritual questions.

THE DEVELOPING MOVEMENT

The Spirit at Work (SaW) movement began in the USA in the mid-1980s and has since spread to the UK, most of the rest of Europe, Scandinavia, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and several other parts of the world. Books, articles, websites, networks, conferences and courses have proliferated at an increasing rate, and there has been growing media interest. The movement consists of people of all faiths and none, and is characterised by a spirit of mutual acceptance and

openness. Some within the movement have, however, been critical of, and have wished to distance themselves from, traditional organised religion. An increasing number of business organisations have embraced SaW, or aspects of it, and in the view of many the movement looks set to become a powerful transforming influence within the business world generally.

The UK SaW story begins with the pioneering work of Georgeanne Lamont in the spheres of education, local government and voluntary work. In the late 1990s she turned her attention to the world of business. It was a period that also saw Father Dermot Tredget begin his work at Douai Abbey, near Reading. He has been running successful courses for senior business people on the leadership lessons derived from the Rule of St Benedict. Other Benedictine monasteries have also run courses on SaW. Involvement on the part of British universities seems to have begun with Lancaster University's 1991 conference on "Working with Spirituality in Organisations", and work has also been done at Bath, Cranfield, Imperial London, Surrey, Leeds, Nottingham and Northampton. The Roffey Park Institute in Sussex has conducted a major study of the progress of SaW in UK companies. In 2000 the Spirituality in the Workplace Network was set up, based at Douai Abbey.

SOME LEADING IDEAS HELD WITHIN THE SPIRIT AT WORK MOVEMENT

One thing those who embark on studying the SaW movement soon realise is the diversity of understandings of the term "spirituality". This is hardly surprising given the variety of backgrounds of those involved. Here is a sample of four definitions from among the many that have been offered:

Business writer Peter Block: "Spirituality is the process of living out a set of deeply held personal values, or honoring forces or a presence greater than ourselves. It expresses our desire to find meaning in, and to treat as an offering, what we do."¹

J Turner: "Spiritual needs are fulfilled by recognition and acceptance of individual responsibility for the common good, by understanding the interconnectedness of life and by serving humanity and the planet."²

Alan Briskin provides three pointers: (1) Spirituality is associated with mystery, so it cannot be defined by language, which points to definite things. The "language" of spirituality allows projection onto it. (2) Spirituality is about an internal experience of life, a

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movement towards a different understanding, a point of interaction with a larger story. (3) Spirituality is the grasping of a larger unity, as historically found in the mystical tradition.³

Russ Moxley: “When I use the word spirit I am not talking about being religious or about accepting and following the beliefs of a particular religion. I am not even talking about spirit as always achieving an elevated state of mind or being through prayer or meditation – as important as these may be ... For me being spiritual is about being fully human, about integrating all the energies that are part of us. It is about connecting to that life force that defines us and connects us.”⁴

British researcher Michael Joseph proposes, based on his research, that spirituality is basically about four sets of connections – connection with our authentic self, connection with others, connection with nature, and connection with the divine (God, higher power, or however people wish to express it).⁵ Many find his framework useful.

In understanding *connection with self* many in the movement draw on the theories of Carl Jung, who is a huge influence within SaW. They use Jung’s concepts of the “shadow”, “the unconscious” and the “collective unconscious”, and his thoughts about our spiritual journey towards our authentic selves and towards the place where the human and the divine meet. SaW people also talk about various kinds of intelligence, especially emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence, the latter being significantly about the ability to find and create meaning and purpose in our lives. They utilise a range of theories about the levels and stages of spiritual development. *Connection with others* is about living in harmony with those around us. By dialoguing with one another we discover deep connectedness with them and our own spiritual core. *Connection with nature* is about the recovery of the ideas of nature being “alive”, worthy of respect and love, and of ourselves as part of nature. From this naturally flows a desire to protect nature and to bring out the creative potential of the cosmos through our work. *Connection with higher power* (as it is frequently called out of a desire to be inclusive of a whole range of beliefs about the transcendent) is the connection which underpins all the other ones. Here the SaW movement finds much inspiration from the mystical traditions of all the main world faiths, as well as building on the work of “transpersonal psychologists” such as Abraham Maslow and Stanislaw Grof.

There is much debate within SaW about the relevance or otherwise of religion. Some in the movement are opposed to religion, which they see as divisive. Others remain religious adherents, but often uneasily so, being disconcerted by their own religion’s failure both to connect with their working lives and to nourish their spirituality. Yet others, who are not necessarily religious adherents, find a wealth of relevant teaching in all the world faith traditions, including indigenous native traditions.

SaW literature focuses heavily on the theme of “spiritual leadership”, seeing leadership as very much a spiritual task. The good leader is portrayed as a visionary, an inspirer, a servant, keen on the well-being and spiritual development of others. The authentic leader is one who has embarked on a personal spiritual journey.

SaW theory is saturated with a mixture of ideas taken from new science, the New Age movement and Eastern philosophy as well as the mystical traditions of all world faiths. Particularly influential is the idea common to all these, namely, that we all belong together in an interdependent universe and are responsible for the common good. This is adopted as an antidote to the fragmenting tendencies of the modernist era.

This style of thinking has prompted the movement to take a much wider view of the purpose of business than the narrow one which focuses on “the bottom line”. It speaks of “the new bottom line”, which measures businesses’ contribution to the health and well-being of people and planet. It applies models of spiritual development both to leaders and to companies, advocating that businesses become “cosmically aware”.

There is not space to tell the stories of spiritually oriented organisations, but suffice it to say that the number of them is impressive and growing, and that they include organisations of all sizes and in many countries. Some of them are household names, such as Microsoft UK.

WHY THE MOVEMENT IS IMPORTANT

Many companies have discovered that the adopting of spiritual principles has led to improvements both in the quality of life of their people and to the success of their business. The following two stories are typical:

Broadway Tyres is typical of many companies today: its people suffered stress, lacked enthusiasm and were often absent from work, company results were disappointing. A group of consultants encouraged them to introduce spiritual practices, such as stillness, deep listening, storytelling, mutual learning, celebrating one another’s qualities, expressing their hurts, visualising what the

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1. P Block, *Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-Interest* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1993), p. 48.
2. J Turner, “Spirituality in the Workplace”, *CA Magazine* 132.10 (1999), pp. 41–42. The magazine is published by the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants.
3. A Briskin, *The Stirring of the Soul in the Workplace* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1998).
4. R Moxley, *Leadership and Spirit: breathing New Vitality and Energy into Individuals and Organizations* (Centre for Creative Leadership; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 24.
5. M Joseph, “Spirituality in the Workplace – What are we talking about?”, *Faith in Business Quarterly* 4.3 (2000).

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► company could become, and so on. Within a year phenomenal change had taken place. The staff were passionate about the business, now worked as an interdependent team, sales rose, absenteeism fell, profits improved by 60 per cent, the company expanded and people were happier.

Bill had so far been a successful manager, who had got where he was by “plain old butt-kicking”. Recently though he had been told by his boss that if he wanted to move to the next level he would have to adopt a different style. Not knowing any other way, he requested help. A spiritual adviser asked him whether he behaved in this way towards his children. “Pretty much the same way,” Bill said, describing his approach as “tough love”. Then the adviser got a hunch, and asked Bill about how he related to his grandchildren. With a smile, Bill said “With my grandchildren I don’t take complete responsibility. That leaves me free to enjoy them and help them to learn.” The adviser recommended that he take that approach with his management team. Bill accepted this advice and as a result pleasantly surprised those around him. He was promoted a year later. Bill had adopted a more relaxed, more spiritual approach to relating to and motivating people.

SPIRIT AT WORK: CHALLENGE OR OPPORTUNITY TO THE CHURCHES?

While many from the churches are involved in SaW, it is generally the case that the contribution of Christians, and of any others of a traditional religious faith, is only truly welcomed if they are prepared to be open to the ideas, beliefs and values of those of other faiths and none, and willing to work alongside them. While attempts to proselytise are frowned on, explaining a specifically Christian viewpoint is acceptable and indeed encouraged. In my view, it is far better for Christians to be involved and to put up with occasional feelings of discomfort than to adopt a purist, stand-off position, or to shout the odds from the sidelines. The SaW movement needs the special insights that Christianity can bring.

I am often asked whether SaW represents a challenge or an opportunity to the churches. My reply, as may be deduced from the preceding paragraph, is that it represents both. But how are churches placed when it comes to their making an appropriate response? In my judgement, and in that of many SaW practitioners who are also church members, the churches are in a pretty poor shape. Working members of our congregations all too rarely find their ministers and their churches even remotely interested in the work side of their lives, let

alone supportive of them or providing teaching that relates to this major area of their Christian discipleship.

An often-heard complaint is that our churches offer teaching that is too cerebral and too dogmatic, or that our churches just are not sufficiently spiritual. Or that they offer a form of spirituality that is out of tune with the needs and aspirations of the modern age and particularly of people in today’s world of work. Some long for their churches to rediscover the Christian mystical tradition, which has largely been forgotten in the Christian West. Others hope that the church may be more willing to learn from all other sources of human knowledge, including especially new science and the world’s wisdom traditions. And they want the churches to be more “worldly”, in the sense of being passionate about, and a major player in shaping, humanity’s and the world’s further evolution. A church with these characteristics would be a welcome ally of, perhaps indeed a major shaping force within, the SaW movement.

RESOURCES

There are many websites, journals, networks, consultancies, etc. dedicated to supporting and promoting the spiritual companies and individuals that make up the SaW movement. Readers wanting to find out more might care to visit the websites of the Association for Spirit at Work, <http://www.spiritatwork.org>; and Spirit in Business, <http://www.spiritinbusiness.org>

Or they may care to consult the following books:

Barrett, Richard, *Liberating the Corporate Soul: Building a Visionary Organization* (Boston/Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1998)

Biberman, Jerry and Michael Whitty (eds.), *Work and Spirit: A Reader of New Spiritual Paradigms for Organizations* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2000)

Block, Peter, *Stewardship: Choosing Service over Self-interest* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1993)

Greenleaf, Robert, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Significant Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977)

Howard, Sue and David Welbourn, *The Spirit at Work Phenomenon* (London: Azure, 2004)

Lamont, Georgeanne, *The Spirited Business: Success Stories of Soul-Friendly Companies* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002) ■