

CHAPTER 4

A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY OF WORK

The fire that burns within us not only drives us to find and clutch our moral compass but also spurs us to achieve. We reach for the stars to realize our God-given potential. Striving to be the best we can be and pursuing excellence in our lives can be a grand adventure. It can be an authentic response to God's call, and that can be seen as Christian spirituality at work. Here we turn to explore the question of Christian spirituality in our work lives. We try to understand what the idea of spirituality addresses in our lives, what marks Christian spirituality and what the demands might be if we are to embrace Christian spirituality at work. Once again, answers emerge as Woodstock businesspeople discuss important issues in light of their experiences in the workplace.

One afternoon a Woodstock group met to discuss what made an excellent company. A meaty article by James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, "Building Your Company's Vision" (*Harvard Business Review*, September/October, 1996), summarized the main points in their seminal book, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*,¹ and set the stage for the conversation that followed.

The authors compared outstanding companies with successful companies in the same field and determined that those acknowledged to be excellent all had core values and purpose that remained fixed while their business strategies and practices adapted to a changing world. For example, they compared Bristol-Meyers and Johnson & Johnson. The authors concluded that Johnson & Johnson was an outstanding company, better over the long run in comparison with Bristol-Meyers, because it maintained a clear set of values and held to a purpose, that of promoting health. It was not just

something they said in order to make money; it was the heart of their business.

Authors Collins and Porras concluded that great companies understand the difference between what should never change and what should be open for change. They argued that it was vision that provided the necessary guidance about what was at the center and had to be preserved and what to aim for in the future. The article describes vision as consisting of two major components:

1. Core values. This defines the enduring character of an organization—a consistent identity, in which certain values are the essential and enduring tenets of an organization, and purpose is the organization’s reason for being.
2. Envisioned future. This is the famous call for a vision of “Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals.” Big, hairy audacious goals (BHAG’s) have to be bold, clear and compelling. They must be vividly described.

The discussion stimulated by this article began with a consideration of a passage from Scripture about the Great Commandment.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him: “You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with your whole soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:36–40)

Having read the article and meditated on the Gospel passage, the first speaker remarked:

This reminds me of two other passages. The first is “Seek ye first the kingdom, and all these other things will be

given to you.” It also reminds me of Joseph in the Book of Genesis. He always knew who he was and what his values were; he suffered reversals of fortune, but ultimately he prospered.

I think it is true that in our lives there is a plan somehow working itself out, a wind behind our backs carrying us through. I often used to compartmentalize my faith—partly because it did not seem to help much when I prayed about my business or my relationships anyway! But doing it on my own didn't work either. I realize now I cannot just put my spiritual life on one side and the rest of my life on the other side. Somehow, I have to come back before the altar with everything and realize there is a mystery working itself out in my life.²

The next speaker observed:

When I read the visionary companies article, it seemed like there was a prior question: Do I have core values and an envisioned future? Rather than looking at the company first, we have to be fully aware of who we are. We are important actors, bringing something to the company, helping it live out its vision.

A Quest—Spirituality at Work

These comments, prompted by an article on corporate excellence, meditation on the Great Commandment and reflections on personal experience form the heart of the quest for a Christian spirituality of work: We seek the integration of the whole of our lives.

This quest toward the ultimate is rooted in God disclosed in Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit, active and present in our hearts and the community of discipleship called the church, powers it.

God is drawing us into this journey in each and every part of our lives, including that part that takes up the majority of our time as adults; our work.

The quest drives us to action.

Based upon our experience and that of others at work, we can affirm that we are God-seekers who, with God's grace, have a chance to grow and choose wisely and rightly in the decisions we make, the actions we take and the people we become. Our work becomes a place for our spiritual growth. At work we can find spiritual growth as we attend to our moral compass. What we can find is a spirituality of work. According to Michael Downey, the two hallmarks of any spirituality are:

1. A conscious striving to integrate the whole of one's life through self-transcendence in the face of fragmentation and depersonalization in our world.
2. An awareness of "levels of reality not immediately apparent," the reality that is more than meets the eye.³

This somewhat vague and fuzzy description of spirituality is mandated by what Downey terms today's "spirituality sprawl": the flood of books, lectures, workshops, Web sites, practices, interests, products and beliefs all under the heading of "spirituality." All are one response or another to our craving for integration and to experience the sacred. One example, the July 9, 2001, issue of *Fortune* magazine ran an unusual cover story, "God and Business: The Surprising Quest for Spiritual Renewal in the American Workplace." *Fortune's* managing editor justified this unusual topic for his magazine by quoting the reporter Marc Gunther as saying, "I was amazed at the number of business people, especially baby-boomers, looking for a higher purpose in their lives, willing to talk about their faith publicly, and trying to integrate it into their work."⁴ The editor continued, "Marc has discovered something real that's affecting a sur-

prising number of our readers, and he has presented it as what it is—a large, unorganized, deeply felt, and deeply personal movement.”⁵ The Woodstock participants that afternoon gave voice to their interest in spirituality, finding higher purpose and integrating their faith and work. That interest only grows. A recent Google search for the words “spirituality and work” produced over 4.6 million links!

Spiritual, But Not Religious

For many, the search for the integration beyond one's self can easily be seen as a spiritual journey but not a religious one. We often hear people describe themselves as “deeply spiritual, but not religious.” While spirituality is accepted and even promoted, religion is denigrated, thought to be suspect or worse, the cause of inhuman acts. From our twenty-first-century vantage point, we have seen terrible things done in God's name: September 11, wars, genocide, persecutions, suicide bombings, terrorism, torture and oppression. A friend once told me, “Religion has lost it. Look at all the people killed and mutilated, and all because of religion.”

Downey noticed a sharp line of separation drawn by many between spirituality and religion. He says:

At the core of the American mindset is a sharp contrast between religion and spirituality, together with an implicit judgment that spirituality and the sacred are essential, while religion, perhaps helpful to some is not necessary to living a deeply spiritual life. In this view religion is incidental, and indeed may be an obstacle in walking the spiritual path. Spirituality is often understood as a very individual, personal, indeed private matter, whereas religion entails participation in the life of a community, in its worship, adhering to its norms and values.⁶

In order to attain greater integration and completeness we need to recognize our deeply felt personal desire for wholeness. If we are to persevere in our spiritual quest, we need more than we can bring to it ourselves alone. Downey claims that religious institutions mediate or communicate the experience of the sacred. Such mediation takes place through the “religious body’s sacred texts, communal worship, traditions, social arrangements of leadership, authority, governance.”⁷ Right now there is a strong distrust of institutional authority, any authority, be it government, corporate or church. Indeed, the actions of many in these institutions including the church have earned distrust. If religion is seen as an untrustworthy institutional mediator of the sacred, it has indeed failed in the eyes of many.

Religion Requires Commitment

The problem with a “go it alone” spiritual quest is that it becomes in the words of the *Fortune* magazine editor, “deeply felt and deeply personal” but purely a private matter. However, as Downey points out, if the search for personal integration is a major constant in every spiritual quest, then adherence to religious beliefs, belonging to a religious tradition and affiliating with a religious community makes a lot of sense. When it comes to the deepest desires of the human heart, you are talking about something much more profound than an individual’s personal tastes or pleasures.

Put another way, the problem for us in this quest is that more than feelings are required. Religion calls for commitment to others, to a collection of others in a tradition and to God who is beyond us all. It requires trust. To many today it seems very foolish to trust anyone or anything, even ourselves. As we search for the sacred, we come to learn that going it alone is inadequate in the long run.

Downey maintains that religion is much more than any one particular religious institution. It has three elements, all of which must be held together. The first is the institutional dimension where our quest for the sacred is formalized, structured, made concrete with traditions, texts, patterns of community and authority that mediate our sense of the sacred to us and facilitate our communion with the sacred. Second, there is the intellectual element of religion with formulations of cogent systems of thought and the development of our capacity for critical reflection to help us clarify our understanding of the sacred and communicate it to others. This intellectual element also serves our religious communities and us when the gift of the sacred is betrayed. The third element is the mystical element, the experience of the sacred.⁸

Religion does require commitment to a community of believers, to know and understand what that community stands for and to act out of concern for those values and beliefs. Spirituality, by comparison, is a free lunch. It does not cost energy or effort, anything like aligning oneself with a fallible collection of humans struggling within an institution.

While we have to recognize institutional shortcomings as well as our own, our initial visit with Peter in the High Priest's courtyard reminds us that our faith community has always been embedded in real life. Guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, it is built upon the shoulders of fallible men and women who sometimes stumble and fall and then get up and do heroic things, as did the first followers of Jesus Christ. In the broadest sense, our spirituality is our way of living. Again, according to Michael Downey, "Christian spirituality is not one dimension of life. It *is* Christian life in the presence and by the power of the Holy Spirit, being conformed to the person of Christ and united in communion with God and others. Personal integration takes place and through conformity to the person of Christ."⁹

Following Christ should be reason enough to want to be united in common with God and others. It should be reason enough to want to stand on the shoulders of the fallible, yet faithful, men and women who went before us. It should be reason enough to accept responsibility to promote the good, achievable only through acts of faith, hope and charity. We should accept and relish the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Spirituality on the Job

We can experience the fire that burns within us. We know our constant need for the moral compass to help us stay on course. We recognize the thrill of a job well done. We have felt the wind at our backs carrying us through. More often than not, those experiences have come on the job.

Most of us will spend the majority of our waking hours as adults at work. Add to that the time spent preparing for our career in school and in training. Then, there is the time preparing for, traveling and worrying about work. We must also recognize the work we do for which we do not get paid. We spend well over half our entire lives working. At work, more than anywhere else, our lives play out. This is where we pour out our proverbial blood, sweat and tears. If we are to integrate our lives, if we are to realize our aspiration to move closer to God, it will have to be where we spend our days, and sometimes our nights and weekends as well. It is in our everyday lives, in our day-to-day experiences that God is drawing us to God's own self. The circumstances, events, problems and opportunities that we meet each day, the lives we live each day are where we encounter God. A spirituality of work begins with the recognition of this and that those we encounter are important agents on our path to self-transcendence toward a loving, inviting, empowering God.

God calls us where we are, in the ordinary, the humdrum, the drudgery of work as well as the thrilling, rewarding and eventful occasions we might experience on the job. Our spirituality must encompass the whole of our lives, our relationships with God and our neighbor as much as our interior lives of prayer and growing self-understanding. This means that the social, political and most certainly the economic realms—every dimension of our personal and communal lives—are in play in our journey toward the sacred, our journey to God.

Many would concede that their work takes up a good part of their lives and that they have experienced some growth and maturation while on the job, but they say it is a real stretch to think of the workplace as holy ground, a place where one might encounter God or we grow toward God. Holy places are supposed to be special, set aside, mysterious, awe-inspiring. Few can describe their work that way. Spiritual disciplines, prayer, fasting, asceticism, meditation, contemplation, worship all require time and space not available on the job. Spirituality and work require time, energy and effort. Even if we agree that who we are and what we do at work are important to our growth and development, important to our path toward wholeness, integrity and self-transcendence, how can we be seriously “spiritual” and still get our jobs done? How can we find God at work? This question will guide our considerations in the chapters that follow.

Exercise

1. Give thanks to God for the time to consider your work and your relationship with him.
2. Ask for the grace to seek God in your life at work as you go about your everyday affairs.
3. Think about your work. List five satisfying, exciting, wonderful things you can say about what you do and are able to do in

your work life. Write them down; look them over. What does your list say about your work and your desires?

4. Identify five things you find most troubling or discouraging about your work. Again, write them down, look them over. What do the things on this list say to you about your work and your own quest for integration of body, mind and soul?

5. Tell God about your findings, what you are going to do about it and what you want God's help with.

6. In gratitude, close with a prayer—your own or the Our Father.