

Work as Service to the Divine

Giving Our Gifts Selflessly and With Joy

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This article begins with a brief overview of trends in spirituality in the workplace and then reports qualitative results of research interviews conducted with people who see work as service to the Divine. Issues of work as prayer, service to others, ego and selflessness, and making a difference are discussed. A brief summary of research by Kurth (1995) is provided. The article concludes with a description of spiritual practices that support an attitude of service.

If you wish the world to become loving and compassionate, become loving and compassionate yourself. If you wish to diminish fear in the world, diminish your own. These are the gifts that you can give.

—Zukav (1994, p. 154)

SPIRITUAL QUESTIONS

Two of the most basic spiritual questions are “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” The way each of us answers these questions is the basis of our individual and unique theology. One way to answer these questions is based on the view that we, as individuals, are part of something that is larger than each one of us.

Rather, we are spiritual beings having a human experience. We are more than our bodies, more than our minds, more than our feelings. We are a part of a larger consciousness, which some of us may call God. We are here to learn as much as we can so that we can evolve into a higher level of consciousness. When that happens, we will see that we are not separate from anything and we will merge with all consciousness. Like a drop of water that joins the ocean, we are aware of our individual selves but we also become aware of our connection to the greater Self. In the process of our evolution, we are helping the Greater Self—the essence of all that is—to discover, unfold, and celebrate itself. This is our work.

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This article explores the concept of work as service to the Divine. It is primarily based on analysis of interviews with people who have made spirituality the core guiding force in their lives. During a 3-year period, 40 formal interviews and more than 700 informal interviews were conducted with people interested in spirituality in the workplace. The following themes emerged from these interviews in relation to the concept of “work as service to the Divine”: work is prayer, to serve others is to serve the Divine, let go of ego and work from a place of selflessness, and make a difference.

Each of these themes will be discussed, with examples from the interviews. I will briefly review results of a research study on selfless service in for-profit organizations (Kurth, 1995). The article will conclude with a description of some of the spiritual practices used by interviewees that help them maintain an attitude of service.

There are many definitions of the concept of the Divine. In this article, it is used instead of the word *God* in an attempt to be more inclusive. There are many people who value spirituality and who are attempting to live in alignment with spiritual principles who prefer not to use the word *God*. It often has religious connotations that make them uncomfortable. There are also people who are atheists but who consider themselves spiritual. Belief in the Divine should be interpreted to mean belief in something greater than ourselves, something unseen, yet something that brings a sense of meaning and purpose to one’s life.

TRENDS IN SPIRITUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

We are living in a time when mysticism and science are starting to sound alike, with concepts among them blending seamlessly. In a book on organizational leadership that examines how the latest discoveries in science can help people manage organizations, Wheatley (1992) quotes Gribban,

The physicist John Archibald Wheeler has been an eloquent proponent of the participative universe, a place where the act of looking for certain information evokes the information we go looking for—and eliminates our simultaneous opportunity to observe other information. The whole universe is a participatory process, where we create not only the present with our observations, but the past as well. It is the existence of observers who notice what is going on that imparts reality to the origin of everything. (p. 33)

Our work, as spiritual beings in human form, is to create. According to some physicists and mystics, our thoughts create our reality—thought precedes form (Fox & Sheldrake, 1996; Gleick, 1987). If this is true, then we must be responsible for the kinds of lives we create and for the sense of meaning we find in our work. This makes everything we do very creative because all our actions are initially created by our thoughts.

But there are many people who feel that the work they do is not very creative. They do not feel that they have power over their lives, and they do not feel a sense of responsibility for finding meaning in their work. In fact, some feel that work is destructive to their souls. Moore (1992) defines soul as follows:

[Soul is] not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance. I do not use the word here as an object of religious belief or as something to do with immortality. When we say that someone or something has soul, we know what we mean, but it is difficult to specify exactly what that meaning is. (p. 5)

It seems that some of the places in which we work take the life out of us. This problem is common with those who work in routine, repetitive jobs, what some call "McJobs." But it is also becoming more common at all levels of the corporation because of the changing nature of the social contract between employees and employers (Noer, 1993). Companies no longer promise lifetime employment and expect that employees must learn how to look out for themselves and their own careers. This has created a great deal of cynicism in some people.

One of the interviewees in my research study described his feelings about his experience of corporate life as follows:

I am, believe it or not, basically an optimist and humanist and believer in people and human potential. I have not been disappointed in life. I have a super network of people with a lot of integrity. But what happens to people when they are inside many of these corporate structures is shocking. I have seen too much behavior, in the name of such sacred business concepts as career, survival, downsizing, flattening organizations, competitiveness, and so on, to remain naive. It's sad out there, and Dilbert is the source of more true wisdom than most of the "management experts." The only ones I give credibility to are the ones who say, "You are on your own, so concentrate on building skills that are marketable." There is no loyalty in the corporate charter.

In an article on the balance of work and spirituality, Laabs (1995) notes that downsizing, restructuring, and reorganization have left organizations with employees who feel lifeless and devoid of energy and managers who must struggle to motivate them. As she notes,

In short, people have largely been disembodied from their spirits and left feeling less than whole, less than human. . . . According to a study of 1,800 managers in Japan, North America and Europe, by Washington, D.C.-based Watson Wyatt Worldwide, more than one-third expect their restructuring activities to continue, and almost as many expect their restructuring activities to accelerate. (p. 62)

Something needs to change. It may be awhile before Wall Street and corporate executives understand that the negative effects of downsizing and restruc-

turing are not worth the temporary increase in stock dividends. In the meantime, people have jobs to go to, lives to lead, and a soul to care for. Fox (1994) says that life and livelihood both flow from the same source, which is spirit:

Spirit means life, and both life and livelihood are about living in depth, living with meaning, purpose, joy, and a sense of contributing to the greater community. A spirituality of work is about bringing life and livelihood back together again. And Spirit with them. (pp. 1-2)

What brings life and livelihood back together again is a sense of having our work contribute to the greater good in some way. Collins and Porras (1994), in their study of visionary companies, found that organizations that focused on core values were significantly more profitable and long-lasting than companies that only focused on the bottom line. The highly successful companies tended to focus on how they could contribute to society. One of the synonyms for the word *contribute* is the word *devote*. The act of making a contribution through our work can be an act of devotion to the Divine. It is a way to thank the universe for the gifts we have been given, especially the gift of life.

It may be difficult to perceive work in this way. Perhaps what is needed is a new definition of work. When we define our work by the job we do, we are using much too narrow a definition.

We must learn to speak of the difference between a job and work. We may be forced to take a job serving food at a fast-food place for \$4.25 an hour in order to pay our bills, but work is something else. Work comes from the inside out; work is the expression of our soul, our inner being. It is unique to the individual; it is creative. Work is an expression of the Spirit at work in the world through us. Work is that which puts us in touch with others, not so much at the level of personal interaction, but at the level of service in the community. (Fox, 1994, p. 5)

Fox (1994) has challenged us to combine life and livelihood. Barrett (1998) asks us to consider whether we have a job, a career, or a mission. Only when we find our mission in life and live in accordance with that can we truly be of service to something greater than ourselves. How do we bring this sense of work, true work, to our jobs? Perhaps we can learn something from those who see the work that they do as service to the Divine.

The concept of service has taken on greater significance in the workplace, largely as a result of the quality movement in the 1980s. Organizations that focus on customer service have been shown to be more effective and profitable (Berry, 1999; Whiteley & Hessian, 1996).

The following sections profile stories from some of the people who were interviewed about spirituality in the workplace.

PRAYER AND SERVICE TO THE DIVINE

“*Labore ut orare*,” say the Benedictine monks, “To work is to pray” (Fields, 1984, p. 107). Some people see their work as a constant prayer and communion with something greater than themselves. Their spiritual discipline is to pray unceasingly throughout the day. They pray while driving to work. They pray while they are sitting in a meeting. They pray as they fill out paperwork or work on a machine. The prayers are prayers of gratitude, prayers for guidance, prayers of healing, or prayers for greater compassion and understanding.

In this section, I present a profile of one of my interviewees, a person who sees her work as prayer. Her name is Maureen and she is highly competent in what she does. She is seen by others in her organization as someone who brings a great sense of light and spirit into her work.

Maureen was born a Catholic and always thought she would be a nun, until she met and fell in love and married Gordon. Although she thought that she was excommunicated for marrying him and left the church, she always felt close to God. Later, when she returned to a welcoming church, she found that those years away allowed her to develop her own internal sense of spirituality.

In my interviews, this is a common pattern. It seems to be an important step to leave one’s traditional religious upbringing and to develop a unique spiritual understanding that is based on personal experience rather than outside teachings. Some like Maureen may return to their religious roots, others may become more at home in a new tradition, and still others will develop an eclectic sense of spirituality that combines many forms of teaching (Schaefer & Darling, 1997).

Within Maureen’s office, there is a sense of spirit. The office is filled with stuffed animals that Maureen has collected. It makes it a very cheery place to be. The animals cover the tables—the larger ones sit on the floor, some hang from the pipes that run across the ceiling of this basement office, and some even sit on the duplicating machines. They get moved around periodically, with certain stuffed animals and dolls having more prominence during particular holiday seasons. She also displays pictures of her husband and seven children on bulletin boards and walls, and there is a bulletin board with inspiring prayers and poems she has written.

She has a book of prayers that she keeps with her all the time. “Everything I pray for, I receive. Everything works out for what I want here at the University. My prayers get answered,” she said.

When asked how she integrates her spirituality with her work, she reiterated, “Prayer. I pray all day long. I talk to God constantly. I know all my prayers by heart.” Some of her prayers are for others who are in need or who may be ill. Her husband had cancer and she believes that his quick recovery was due to prayer and to visualizations and affirmations. Some of her prayers remind her to be forgiving, to be of service, to love God, and to see God in everyone.

Maureen sees her job as an opportunity to serve God by being of help to others and by sharing her joyful love of God with those who it can inspire. She tells a

story about a young woman who once asked her, “Why would God take someone I love?” Maureen found that she was able to say things to this young girl that helped her to understand the death of her loved one. Although she did not know where the words came from, she believes that God was helping her to comfort the girl. This kind of thing happens to her a lot—work provides an avenue that allows for service and comfort to others.

When I asked her where she would like to grow with her spirituality at work, she explained,

I put my prayers up at work and I'd like to be more aggressive about it. But I don't want to offend anyone. If I had to take my Bible and things out of here, I would have to quit my job because they are number one to me.

At the end of the interview, she apologized about the way she answered questions, saying,

I can't express my feelings like an educated person. I know there's a reason and a purpose. I know I have a lot to give and I can help so much. A lot of things are happening right now and I'm feeling so close to something. I can't explain it, but things are changing. I can feel it and I just love it.

SERVING OTHERS IS SERVICE TO THE DIVINE

The goal of many spiritual traditions is for us to come to the knowledge that there is no separation between us and others, between us and the Divine, between us and anything that is (Davidson, 1998). The quantum physicists have shown us that we are all made up of the same stuff of the universe and that stuff, in its most basic form, is light (Fox & Sheldrake, 1996). Therefore, what we do to others we do to ourselves; what we do to others we do to God (Zukav, 1994).

For those who see work as a spiritual path, one of their primary values is to be of service to others. It is through serving others that they can serve God because the spark of the Divine is in each of us. Laura is an excellent example of someone who sees serving others as a service to the Divine.

Laura used to work for a large consulting firm. She decided to leave because she wanted work that more closely reflected her values. Since she left, she now views everything she does as contributing her gifts to the world. She said, “It's all lifework; some is for pay, some is not, but it's all fulfilling.”

For pay, she designs and conducts workshops and individual consultations that “help people shift their thought patterns and be happier.” She also does work that is not for pay, work in the sense that Matthew Fox (1994) described earlier as “living with meaning, purpose, joy, and a sense of contributing to the greater community” (p. 2). Laura explained,

I volunteer my voice for community theater pursuits and singing at nursing homes once a week. Some of my most peak moments have been singing, when I stop trying to sound good and just let the music pour out. I have felt that someone higher than myself was singing through me. Truly wonderful. Before each workshop or performance or dinner with a friend, I pray that I can be a channel for God and be of service to these people. That doesn't only include "intense" service work. It also includes listening with my heart, being with them, laughing together, letting them help me.

I feel more fulfilled than ever before. My life and work have meaning. I look forward to each day, so much so that I forget to get enough sleep! I never want to "retire" because I no longer separate my work from my life. Interestingly, I'm making over twice as much money and working far fewer hours. I don't care about making a lot of money but I think if your work is in synch with your gifts, the energy you pour in comes back to you and the universe supports you. I think "As you sow, so shall you reap" doesn't refer to physical toil, it refers to the passion behind the work.

Work as service to the Divine, then, is about giving our gifts to others, with joy, whether we are paid for what we do. The gifts may be our unique talents, such as computer programming, marketing, nursing, singing, or calling square dances, or it could be a smile, making eye contact, taking the time to listen, and allowing ourselves to be a channel for God's wisdom. It is the attitude with which these gifts are given that matters, not the gifts themselves.

According to Marcic (1997), when work is performed in the true spirit of service, it becomes a positive force for all concerned: the employer, the employee, the customer, and society.

EGO AND SELFLESSNESS

All major spiritual traditions suggest that full human and spiritual development occurs through a path of letting go of ego and identifying with something greater than ourselves. For people who see work as service to the Divine, it has been essential for them to deal with ego and selfishness issues and to work toward being more and more selfless.

It is probably easier to practice the concept of work as service to the Divine in situations where we are volunteering or where we are not being paid much for our work and are doing it for the simple love of doing it. But the majority of adults in the industrial world have mortgages or rent to pay, children to send to college, and food to put on the table. Most of us must work for a living so that we can pay the bills. A majority of people work in for-profit organizations. So the challenge for many is how to see work as service to the Divine in these organizations, which often do not care much about them as people.

Spiritual masters advise students to stop being outwardly focused and attached to the material world and to start focusing more inwardly on their experience of soul and their connection to the Divine (Rabbin, 1998). The goal is to

let go of attachment to ego—that part of ourselves that puts us at the center of our own universe. Tom learned to do this through clarifying his values and his mission in life.

Tom has had a very successful career as an executive in nonprofit organizations. Four years ago, about the time of his 50th birthday, Tom decided to leave his director's position at an educational and historical nonprofit organization that paid well and brought him a lot of recognition. He had taken a week off around the time of his birthday to contemplate what was important in his life and decided that what he cared about most were the problems caused by poverty around the world; he wanted to dedicate his life to doing what he could to reduce this suffering. He became the director of a much smaller nonprofit organization that helps artisans around the world to market and distribute their products.

Tom found that he had to let go of ego to attain the satisfaction of contributing to a cause that he cares deeply about. He also had to sell his large house by the shore, move his family, and leave behind a spiritual community that nourished him. But he recognized that these things were based on ego, and he felt much more drawn to being of service.

Tom made changes in his life by choice. It was different for John. John had created and managed a publishing company that was well-known for the quality of its publications. As the organization grew, John's sense of importance grew as well. Then one day it all came crashing down around his ears. Someone that he had hired to manage the day-to-day running of the business had made a number of poor decisions and had mismanaged the money. Suddenly, the organization was bankrupt and everything that John had built was gone.

John sees this as a lesson in ego and believes that it took something this dramatic to get his attention about how his identity had gotten so wrapped up in his work. He now lives a much simpler life and desires only to be of service to those who can use his skills and knowledge. He is much more at peace and feels that he can make a greater contribution by focusing completely on letting go of his ego needs and offering to be of service to the Divine.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

As people move away from a focus on satisfying ego needs and toward a greater desire to be of service, one of the driving forces that seems to arise is the desire to make a difference in some way. Covey (1995) calls this the desire to "leave a legacy." Part of what gives our lives spiritual meaning is knowing that our lives made the world a better place in some small way.

Canfield and Hansen (1993) tell the story of a friend who was walking along a deserted beach in Mexico. He noticed another man in the distance walking toward him. The man kept leaning down, picking something up, and throwing it into the ocean. As their friend got closer to the man, he could see that the man

was picking up starfish that had washed up on the shore and, one at a time, he was throwing them back in the water.

The friend asked the man what he was doing and he replied,

I'm throwing these starfish back into the ocean. You see, it's low tide right now and all of these starfish have been washed up onto the shore. If I don't throw them back into the sea, they'll die up here from lack of oxygen.

The friend replied that there must be thousands of starfish on the beach and that he could not possibly get to all of them. There were simply too many. He said,

And don't you realize this is probably happening on hundreds of beaches all up and down this coast. Can't you see that you can't possibly make a difference?

The man smiled, bent down, and picked up another starfish. As he was throwing back the starfish into the ocean, he said, "Made a difference to that one!" (pp. 22-23).

If we try to solve the world's problems, such as poverty, hunger, or ecological devastation, we can feel overwhelmed and paralyzed. This starfish story helps to show that we can make a difference to one person, or one living creature, at a time.

Ann is a 42-year-old computer systems analyst who was working for the last couple of years as a sales engineer for a software vendor. She flew with sales people and provided technical assistance in the sales process. She was flying 10,000 to 15,000 miles a month all over the western half of the United States. She said, "The frequent flyer miles were great but I had no home life to speak of."

During this time, she met the man who was to become her husband and they had a long-distance relationship. They got married and she moved to Seattle but describes their relationship as still being a long-distance relationship because she was on the road all the time. By the summer of 1994, she was ready for a change but felt too scared to do anything about it. She describes how this change took place and how she sees the nature of her work now:

That August I went to a workshop on Maui with Alan Cohen, the focus of which was to help us break through those barriers that were keeping us from living the life we really wanted. As a result, I knew the job had to go. This produced major panic for both me and my husband—he worked in social services, so you can imagine the difference in our incomes. My leaving my job would mean our whole lives had to change. Fortunately, he had been to the same workshop a year before so we were able to walk through the fear and just decide that it would be OK for our lives to be different. Within 2 weeks, as a result of an internal reorganization, I was offered the opportunity to get laid off from my job with 2 months' severance pay and unemployment. I said "yes," and within another week my husband was offered a job as Alan Cohen's operations manager on Maui.

So I arrived on Maui just over a year ago, without a clue as to what I would end up doing. I doubt if I'll get much sympathy here, and I admit that there are worse places to have a lot of time on one's hands. But it has been very difficult for me to go from being the competent, highly paid professional to being unemployed and faced with the task of redefining my life. My spiritual life also got a considerable kick in the pants as a result of that workshop. One of the things that was emphasized was that if we are following our hearts, the universe responds with prosperity of all kinds. Not necessarily a lot of money, but enough.

Ann is exploring where her heart leads her and is currently making jewelry and doing healing work. She uses both *Reiki* (a Japanese form of working with energy) and flower essences (a homeopathic form of healing). She works with both people and animals and says that she feels more drawn to work with animals. Three times a week Ann works as a volunteer at a no-kill animal refuge. She is planning on opening a practice for gentle alternative care for peoples' pets. Ann sees her new work as making a real difference and says that she is happier, more relaxed, and has a greater sense of well-being.

Not everyone who sees work as a spiritual path has to give up a higher paying job to find their calling. Lynette had been laid off from an insurance company and had been looking forward to being unemployed for awhile. Then she received a call from her former employer asking if she would come back temporarily to help in a new training program. The program was designed as part of a welfare-to-work initiative to help people on welfare learn how to be customer service representatives. Lynette saw this as a real opportunity to make a difference and accepted the temporary job.

As she began to work with these people on welfare, she saw the very difficult lives that they were leading and how hard it often was to do a simple thing like just get yourself to work. People lived in crime-ridden and violent neighborhoods and their lives were filled with tragedy. Lynette saw this as an opportunity to be compassionate and to reach out a hand to people who are often misunderstood and looked down on. Her group of trainees finished the program in half the time allotted and had the lowest turnover rate of any of the training groups at the company. Lynette was offered a permanent position and was promoted. She continues to see her job as an opportunity to make a significant difference in peoples' lives.

It does not matter what kind of work a person does when we choose to see our work as service to the Divine. It can be duplicating documents, answering the phone, caring for children, teaching, or healing animals. All work gives us the opportunity to make a difference if we choose to see it that way.

Shelia is an attractive, energetic woman in her 40s. She radiates warmth and loving energy—it touches all who come into her presence. Shelia is a special education teacher, and she sees her work as an opportunity to follow what she calls “the path of compassion.” Before she came to work at the elementary school where she now teaches, she worked with terminally ill children in a hospital in Colorado and worked at an inner-city high school. Wherever she has

worked, she asks herself, “Why am I here?” Her answer is, “Because I have something to give to people here that no one else can.”

At her elementary school, she works with both the children and their parents. There are nine students in her class, so she is able to give them a lot of personal attention. She tells the parents what she will be doing with the children because some of it is unconventional and based on her spiritual practices.

She is a *Reiki* master and uses touch and energy a lot in her classroom. After lunch each day they have quiet time and she plays meditation music and rubs their shoulders. One day a child was having a temper tantrum and she held the child on her lap to calm him. Given the fear of being accused of child molestation, a teacher walked by and told her that she should not be doing that. But Shelia said, “It’s okay. I’m clear about my intent, and the parents know what I do, so I’m not afraid. The children need to be held and touched.”

Shelia loves her work and feels that she really makes a difference, that she has been given unique gifts to use, and she uses these with her students and with her coworkers. She is highly intuitive and very compassionate—the combination is powerful. One of her students was a child who had been physically abused and had become psychotic. She worked with him to let him know that the world would be safe. One day he came to school and told her that his mother hit him and he had marks. Shelia and the principal confronted the mother and she denied it. But the child said, “When I’m with my teacher I feel safe and she said that it was okay.” Because the child was not afraid to speak, both he and the mother were able to get help. Shelia knows that she made a difference.

Another one of her students was diagnosed with a brain tumor and Shelia was teaching her while the little girl was in the hospital. As the illness progressed, Shelia continued to visit her and knew that she was dying. Near the end, the girl asked her mother if Shelia could come in her room. Shelia describes what happened then.

I said, “Tina, what do you want?” Tina replied, “I want you to tell me what heaven looks like.” I did a visualization with her and helped her to create her own picture of heaven. It was a wonderful place all filled with light. Later, just before she died, she said, “I see the light.” I knew that I had made a difference.

Making a difference can come from gentle compassion, and it can also come from tough love. Shelia described one of her fellow teachers as being very negative, always whining. Shelia was finding it difficult to listen to this and decided to confront this teacher. Shelia described the teacher’s behavior to her and told her how she felt about it. She advised, “Your negativity blocks you. You need to give yourself the opportunity to open.”

The next day, the teacher came to her and told Shelia that she had really thought about what she said, and she told Shelia her story. It turned out that she had a heart problem and that she was really scared. Shelia was able to make a difference to her too.

All work offers us the opportunity to make a difference. We make a difference through our relationships with others in the workplace. If we can see the Divine in them and to internally ask ourselves, "How can I be of service to the spiritual unfolding of this being?" we will find ourselves doing and saying things that are just right for that person. We have so many relationships with people in the workplace: bosses, fellow workers, customers, people from other organizations. Each relationship is an opportunity to be of service, to make a difference.

SELFLESS SERVICE IN FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Krista Kurth (1995) conducted research for her dissertation on the concept of selfless service in for-profit organizations. She defines selfless service as action that is informed by a conscious attitude composed of the following three factors (p. 3):

1. "An awareness of and/or belief in a Transcendent Reality through which one is, and feels, connected to others and the remainder of the natural world." In simple terms, this means seeing God or the Divine in other human beings and in all of nature. When a person carries this conscious attitude, they cannot help but be more loving; more compassionate; and more giving to fellow workers, to customers, and even to superiors. For example, I once had to work with a manufacturing supervisor who was blocking all the programs I was supposed to implement in his area. After reading some inspirational literature that emphasized the importance of seeing the Divine in others, I had a meeting with him to discuss a particular program and tried to focus on the God that was within him. His response to me completely changed and he became one of the most ardent supporters of my programs.
2. "An interest in enhancing the well-being of others and in transcending one's own self-interested desires." As human beings develop spiritually, our concept of self enlarges beyond our singular identity. We begin to see our interconnectedness to groups, to communities, to nations, and to the planet. We learn to care for the greater good because we see that we are a part of something larger. This kind of behavior is easy to see in parents who subjugate their own needs for the needs of their children. It is found in managers who support the career growth of subordinates, even though they might lose a talented person from their group. And we see it in people who chose careers where they might make a difference in the world rather than choose a career just for the sake of money.
3. "A non-attachment to outcomes and personal rewards while in the process of performing actions." This is a willingness to do the right thing without worrying about whether you will get a pay increase, a pat on the back, or some other form of recognition or reward. I once had a subordinate who would not do anything extra unless he was going to get extra pay or other incentives. He was considered by many to be a very poor performer and his career was on the skids. I tried to talk to him about how his attitude was hurting him, but it did not seem to get through. Then suddenly, for reasons I do not understand, he made a major transformation and began to initiate and carry through on major projects that were innovative and successful. Doing meaningful work became more important to him than obtaining rewards from the system. The irony of the situation is that he then began to be rewarded much more substantially.

The concept of selfless service is similar to concepts of stewardship (Block, 1993) and servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). The value that Kurth (1995) adds is that her work is based on empirical research and does not focus only on leaders. Kurth interviewed 20 people who work in for-profit organizations who see their work as selfless service. One of the paradoxes she discovered was that when it comes to selfless service, “the way to do is to be.” For example, she reports about a venture capitalist and financial consultant who said, “I think it has a lot more to do with how you do things than what exactly it is that you do.” Another consultant said, “We are talking about a way of being and how that way of being expresses itself in a business context” (p. 3).

Kurth (1995) asked her research participants about how they specifically express selfless service in their for-profit organizations. Here are eight actions they took to express selfless service followed by my interpretations of these actions from my own research (p. 8):

1. “Surrendering to and trusting the Divine.” To do this, we must let go of our own agenda and desires and believe that we will be guided by a Higher Power to do what is needed for the greater good.
2. “Maintaining a positive and accepting attitude toward life and other people.” Many of the world’s spiritual traditions state that human beings have a choice about how we respond to circumstances. At its simplest level, we can respond with fear or we can respond with love. Those who are committed to the practice of selfless service are people who consciously focus on responding with love. They always try to see the best in each situation, in each person, and in themselves.
3. “Being connected with and seeing the Divine in others.” As mentioned earlier, this is the practice of acting as if God is in every person we meet. People who practice this way of being often report that they concentrate on their heart area when they interact with others, and they concentrate on the heart area of the person with whom they are connecting. This seems to strengthen the feelings of connection.
4. “Being present, listening, and responding to others.” To be of service to others, we need to know on a very deep level what that person needs. The best way to find this out is to give that person our full attention, to listen to both the words and the feelings expressed, to trust our intuition, and to respond selflessly.
5. “Treating people with love and respect.” This is a natural outgrowth of seeing the Divine in others. If we see ourselves on a spiritual path and are trying to get closer to God, one way to do that is to be as loving as we can be to other people—we are all connected to the Divine. The most basic level of this is to treat people with respect and to assume that all people deserve to be treated with dignity.
6. “Talking with others about spiritual issues.” In almost all work settings there is an unspoken norm about not talking about spiritual issues. People get spirituality and religion mixed up and fear that someone will try to force their beliefs on others. Those who see their work as service to the Divine, however, are generally able to create an atmosphere that is supportive of each person’s individual spiritual path. They are comfortable talking about their own spirituality and others feel comfortable talking with them about spiritual issues.
7. “Creating an open atmosphere and sense of community.” When people are able to openly share their spiritual issues, a real sense of trust and connectedness seems to develop. Those who practice selfless service tend to value open communication

and community and will talk about them and create events that model and support this kind of connection between people in the workplace.

8. "Choosing work that is of benefit to others and in harmony with the community and natural world." I have found that as people become more and more committed to a spiritual path and to serving the Divine, they feel compelled to do work that benefits the world in some way. The Buddhists call this the practice of "right livelihood." They can no longer tolerate work that conflicts with their values in any way, and I have found that many people are changing jobs for this very reason. It also seems to be the driving force behind a significant segment of entrepreneurship.

It is interesting to note that most of these actions are internal actions—an attitude, a way of perceiving the world. Kurth (1995) asked participants about the impact that selfless service has had on them and on their organizations and concludes that it has many benefits, including spiritual renewal.

For instance, one participant related that "living in service is the only thing that really gives meaning to life." His goal is to "get in touch with that space of service all the time." Another participant, a stockbroker, said, "I just know if I'm in that place where I am working and living out of abundance or love the impact is pretty internal. It's just a feeling of 'This is the right thing.'" He feels more peaceful and senses "that in and of itself [it] is really worthwhile to me. It's just an easier type of existence" (p. 10).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the choice to see work as service to the Divine is a personal choice. No one should try to impose spiritual values on others (which also seldom works). If we live and work in a congruent way with our beliefs, people will notice and will sometimes ask what it is that we do. This often is an opportunity for valuable dialogue about the importance of service.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT BEING OF SERVICE TO THE DIVINE

Most spiritual practices help us to see that our work can be of service to the Divine. We can pray about this work, meditate about it, or read spiritual literature that describes the importance of devotion and service. Sometimes it is also helpful to learn about the specific practices that people have created for themselves.

Ipek grew up in Turkey and says that spirituality is a part of the fabric of life there and not separated from work. After getting a degree in psychology, she left Turkey because she found it too oppressive for women. She said, "Something within me would have to die for me to fit in with Turkish culture." She began working in mental health and through a friend found a spiritual community. For 3 or 4 months, she lived there and immersed herself in the spiritual life. She says that this experience gave her the values that she lives by today. It was there that

she was taught about all work as being of service to the Divine, which she calls “the Mother.” Later, she moved to an ashram and got swept up in jobs that had an administrative or managerial component. From this, she learned that “a large part of work is staying in remembrance of the Divine.”

Ipek is now a very successful organizational development consultant and says that in spite of having gone through very intense spiritual training, she still struggles with “staying in remembrance.” The following is an example that she provides:

Last week, I was preparing a proposal for a consulting job. While I was trying to make it appeal to a high-level corporate thinking, I found myself thinking like my clients. I was not thinking of how it could be in service. When something like this happens to me I will sit before the Mother and meditate and say, “I played in the mud again and here I am.” I can only offer that.

When I asked Ipek about what advice she would give to others who want to integrate their spirituality and their work, she said that it begins with your relationship to the Divine. She suggests that for someone who does not have a spiritual teacher, the most important thing is to personalize the Divine.

Using “the universe” or “Higher Power” becomes an “it.” There’s something in human beings that needs a relationship with a Divine being. Do you see it as a mother, a father, a friend, or a lover? Consciousness is a being you can relate to. Bring it alive through prayer, meditation, and ritual.

Ipek has a daily spiritual practice that helps her to continuously see her work as service to the Divine. “At the end of the day, before I meditate, I do a mental scan of all my activities and I offer it to the Mother. I say, “Mother, it was your energy that did this through me. Take this as my offering and help me to be a clearer channel.”

In the interviews I conducted with people who put spirituality as the central focus of their lives, four key spiritual practices emerged that help them to maintain an attitude of service: (a) being in nature, (b) meditation, (c) journaling, and (d) reading spiritual literature. Most people try to do one or more of these practices on a daily basis.

BEING IN NATURE

People report that being in nature renews their energy, helps to provide a balanced perspective on the spiritual and the material views of the world, and reminds them of their interconnectedness to all living things, and therefore to the Divine. The more time people spend in nature, the more they become committed to preserving the environment and the more they develop a desire to serve the planet.

MEDITATION

Meditation is an inner practice that also seems to lead to feelings of interconnectedness with all things. Most people want to care for and protect those things or people to which they feel connected. Meditation often expands the things to which we feel connected. It also creates a silent place where inner wisdom or guidance from a Higher Source can guide the practitioner in ways to be of service.

JOURNALING

Most of the interviewees practice some form of daily self-reflection. This can include reviewing one's actions at the end the day, beginning the day with a list of what you are grateful for, reflecting on key relationships, or practicing affirmations. The most common form of self-reflection reported was writing in a journal. Some people do this as a daily practice, whereas others do it as needed. Several books on the market have encouraged this practice (cf. Breathnach, 1995; Cameron, 1992). Journaling seems to help the practitioner bring closure to unresolved issues, which leaves more energy to give to others. It also helps the person to identify a sense of higher purpose, which almost always entails being of service in some way.

READING SPIRITUAL LITERATURE

A fairly common practice is to read some form of inspirational or spiritual literature on a daily basis, usually just after rising or just before retiring for the night. Practitioners often tie this in with one of the other practices above, such as meditating on what one has read or journaling about the theme from the reading. All the major spiritual traditions support the concept of serving the Divine through serving others (Marcic, 1997). Therefore, reading spiritual literature becomes a way of reinforcing the sense of service that is already a strong characteristic of those predisposed to spirituality.

SUMMARY

There is a major trend toward a greater appreciation of spirituality in our lives as we enter the new millennium. True spirituality cannot be compartmentalized; therefore, it becomes a guiding force in all parts of a person's life when they become interested in spiritual growth. It affects personal relationships, work relationships, sense of vocation, and connection to community. There is an increased interest in spirituality in the workplace (Neal, 1997; Neal, in press).

I believe that it has become a management issue as well as a personal issue. Managers need to understand that their employees, perhaps as many as 24% according to the Integral Culture study (Ray, 1996), may have strong spiritual values. It is generally accepted that a service orientation helps an organization to be more competitive, and it also provides a greater sense of meaning and purpose to employees (Berry, 1999; Whiteley & Hessian, 1996). Therefore, it is important that we have a greater understanding of this phenomenon of a spiritual sense of service in organizations.

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