

Spirituality for Executive Leadership: Reporting on a Pilot Course For MBAs and CEOs

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the experience of nine Chief Executive Officers and nine MBAs who undertook a course in Spirituality for Senior Leadership as an experimental course offered at the School of Business, Santa Clara University, (California, USA). The paper presents the design of the course together with feedback from participants.

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Prelude:

I, like others in the class, began my morning drive to Santa Clara University with some degree of trepidation. I wondered whether I read carefully enough. There was this palpable fear of whether I was prepared for a six-hour discourse on spirituality. Will I stumble on my thoughts? Will I come off inarticulate and spiritually immature to my peers? The pressure of a good performance was daunting.

MBA Student

At one level I am scared of death of beginning this course. But I know I should be here, or at least my wife and my colleagues are sure I need to be here

CEO.

This is an interim report of a course in Spirituality for Senior Leadership commencing this Fall, 1998, at Santa Clara University and continuing through December 6. The Syllabus for the course and reading list is attached as Appendix I. Nine CEOs from Silicon Valley and nine MBAs who are working professionals enrolled in the "alpha test" of the course. Participants encompassed diverse spiritual orientations : Hindu, Jewish, Catholic, Major Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Unitarian, Buddhist, and Agnostic. (Participants were not selected for diversity by simply represent the "rainbow" character of a California MBA/Executive cohort). Only a few regularly attend religious services in church, synagogue, or temple.

The course was conducted on Saturdays every other week from 8:30 am until 2:30 PM, with the exception of the two day retreat. Therefore, in the alpha test each Saturday encompassed three class modules (what would be three class periods in a regular academic schedule).

In preparing the report I will follow the unfolding of the course according to the course outline, so it will be helpful to detach Appendix I and lay it along side the report. Participants in the course were asked to provide written feedback following each course module and quotations from their comments are interspersed in the report.

1. Course Introduction

Students and executives had read extensively during the summer prior to the course. Most had sampled the overall reading list, or at least had read the readings for the first three modules. One of the delights for me as professor was the pleasure both groups expressed with the readings, even though this was a body of literature outside their normal reading. For the most part I had chosen extensive readings from the spirituality tradition, rather than "management spirituality" books. While reactions to individual readings differed, no reference was without an appreciative defender when we discussed the selections after each module. The reading list by itself was a "voyage of discovery".

Some of the readings are delightful; some are an absolute challenge to read and absorb. But I have found all I have read to be useful in broadening and strengthening my spiritual foundation.

CEO

The course began with defining spirituality as "lived experience", (in contrast to theology or religion), and with a discussion of course norms to guide us during sensitive sharing each individual's journey.. I adopted a combination of Appreciative Inquiry utilized by Anglican Archbishop Swing in his leadership for inter religious dialog, and dialogic protocols. (See Appendix II). This established a critical set of norms for class discussion and a sense of safety. The class followed these norms without further reminder, an indication they felt the norms were important. It also encouraged and allowed individuals to speak with integrity from their tradition and personal journey, rather than regressing to some vague syncretism. While I included quotations, scriptures, and writings from other traditions, I spoke primarily in the voice of my own tradition (Catholic). By the second class individuals often commenced with phrases such as: "From my Hindu perspective....; As a Jew...; For a Buddhist....; etc. The norms along with instructor modeling were successful in creating authentic dialog regarding individuals' spiritual journeys.

Very good job of setting the ground rules. You are tackling a difficult subject for individuals to discuss openly. You have laid out guidelines to build trust and encourage openness.

CEO

I have a general nervousness or discomfort about being an atheist / Buddhist / agnostic in what I perceive to be a largely Judeo-Christian environment. Consequently, I am greatly relieved by your efforts to separate the notion of spirituality from religion and theology, and by your careful references to "what in your tradition you call the mystery,. i.e., God.

MBA Student

A successful aspect of the course design was to pair a CEO with an MBA learning partner. The CEOs were initially much more self disclosing , which modeled greater risk taking in class dialog for the students. But even more important, the MBAs were profoundly touched by the depth of spiritual sensitivities and leadership complexities reported by the CEOs, making the course far more powerful and "real". There was no doubt in the minds of students by the end of the course that the path a senior executive walks is a complex spiritual challenge.

One can only bring one's life experience to the seminar. Therefore, as an MBA student I observe the executives' struggle and try to integrate (both lectures and CEO perspectives) with my own personal experience and perspective. This course is a rare opportunity for me as an MBA student to experience the struggles of integration from the perspective of the executive.

MBA Student

A dialog segment within the first class module commenced with an opportunity to share why each individual chose to attend this class in Spirituality for Business Leadership. Major themes included were a desire for greater personal integration between leadership and personal spirituality, a need to discover a source for both inspiration and courage in difficult times, a turning point (new company or position) which invited a reexamination of how to make the new organizational context a more spiritual and humane setting, and a sense of isolation in the leadership role. All these concerns were made more compelling by the frantic pace of executive life. (These executive mirror the recent interview study by Professor Ian Mitroff soon to be published by Jossey Bass).

2. Integrating Business Leadership as a Calling into the

Spiritual Journey

The second module focused on the power of business as a contemporary societal institution; the all encompassing aspects of life within the organization, the way in which the organization impacts on employees, communities and nations, the potential for great good and great mischief, and the holistic complexities of senior leadership. The lecture was designed to create a tension between the potentiality and the frailty of a leader trying to span such broad challenges. Then the theme of "calling" (vocation) was developed, referencing the calling stories of Christian scriptures.

I liked the quest that was presented during the first session. It was a challenge: Can we integrate personal and business life into a single self?

CEO

Since one of my questions is how a life spent in business can be a spiritual life, the presentation of the contributions made by business to society was helpful. It gave me this insight: if business is essential to society and most people must participate in it in order for society to function (as opposed to being full-time charitable volunteers or monks), and if all people are called to a life of full spirituality and holiness, then it must be possible to live a full spiritual life while in business (because the alternative is that either everyone becomes a monk and the entire society dies of starvation, or spirituality is available only to a privileged few)

MBA

Executives and their MBA learning partners then walked together in the Mission Gardens at Santa Clara, discussing how each individual felt called to the leadership role, and what challenges they were struggling with. The MBAs were impressed at both the level of aspiration toward goodness and the difficulties of the executive role.

As for myself, I came to the first seminar expecting to encounter executives who through success would have lost a sense of self and identity, and consequently would be searching for a spiritual element in their lives. I was confused as the executives spoke of integration in the first seminar. I had not yet understood the spirituality of these executives. During this discussion, I was in awe of the depth their spirituality. Through their voices I have just begun to understand the struggles inherent in personal integration and senior leadership.

MBA Student

I find the mix of students and executives wonderful. For us it provides the freshness of the voice of the young. For them I am sure they draw value from our experience, and comfort that even after this many years in many ways we are as spiritually naïve as they are.

CEO

3. Listening to the Inner Voice in the Midst of Turbulent Business Environments

Each Saturday course segment included as a third module a unit on prayer/meditation. All began with music appropriate to the particular exercise in the beginning and at the end. (Music selections included early Christian classical, Hindu Chant, Native American Chant, Zen Flute, and Sufi selections). For prayer/meditation modules we moved from an executive seminar room to a small chapel at the corner of the Mission Church.

The first spiritual exercise was taken from Black Elk's, Lakota Sioux spirituality. It was prayer and meditation focused on the gifts we receive from our "spiritual elders" as guides for the journey. The exercise was selected because the prayer form and meditation form would stand outside the spiritual traditions of the members of the class, and allowed individuals to share their meditation experience in "the voice of an elder" rather than in their first person voice. The majority of the class members did share a reflection in a protocol in which no eye contact was made.

Reactions to the first meditation for the most part were favorable, although a few found this first encounter in prayer sharing a little uncomfortable. (It will be noteworthy to follow the development of the comfort with prayer and meditation over the duration of the course). Most class members had not included regular prayer in their recent lives, and certainly not with professional peers.

Highlight of this first session was the meditation, the Lakota Sioux Living Circle. I found it profoundly moving.

CEO

Like several of the other execs, I have drifted away from active prayer and will need to become comfortable with it again.

CEO

At the end of this module and all subsequent modules a theme for back home prayer/meditation was suggested. For the duration of the course twenty minutes in the morning and evening was suggested as a discipline. A few in the beginning, then more, and finally a majority of the class by the end of the course adopted some prayer/meditation discipline and began to experience the power of spiritual practices in their life.

4. Business Leadership Challenges and the Need for Self Integration

This module built on the work of the Harvard cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner who shows the development of leadership as a life work. Class participants choose a leader, (Ghandi, Roosevelt, John XXIII, Martin Luther King, etc.,) and observed the lessons from these leaders' life journeys for the required spiritual integration of the business leader. The theological premise integrated with the psychological studies was the importance of "being" and a precedent for "doing" if one is to avoid cynicism, despair, and burnout in the intensity of the leadership role. It was a powerful and delightful dialog, with CEOs illustrating applications to their own life journey from the stories of their selected leader, and MBAs examining model leaders with full human frailties from whose experiences they hoped to learn. The felt sense of the need for personal integration as a precondition for leadership emerged as a strong theme which continued throughout the course.

The concept of "integration" is really starting to cohere for me. I hear it as the underlying theme of the class. It comes across strongly in the lectures and readings, (Gardner's "embodiment", Rahner's "praying the everyday").

MBA

5. Discernment and Senior Business Leadership

Discernment flowed as a critical need from the prior discussion of the leadership and organizational challenges to which leaders must respond. As one CEO expressed it:

As an executive, you have a limited number of major "plays" which you can make during your time in office. You need to be clear what matters, and what your focus will be!"

CEO

My reality - I haven't included God in the decision process. May have made some better decisions if I did and I would be surer of my decisions.

CEO

Since both MBAs and CEOs are well trained in problem solving, discernment offered a rich new overlay for following the movement of The Spirit in their lives. For many the discussion of discernment was a comforting verification of how God actually had spoken to them, often without their full realization. For all it was a reminder that prayer is the foundation of discernment, and that "going it alone" was allowing the false self to lead down paths of error.

What spoke to me most of this module was that intuition will come to you through sincere prayer and discernment - and that you can trust this intuition because it comes from outside you (God).

MBA

Wisdom and discernment are key to successful leadership and are provided by God as we humble ourselves before Him.

CEO

6. Approaches to prayer/meditation/reflection and the Leadership journey

At this point the felt gap between the demands for personal integration in the leadership role, the holistic challenges of the contemporary organization, and the complexities of discernment led naturally to a sense of need for guidance. There was a readiness to explore prayer as the "narrow door" to discovering God's will in order to find sustaining ability to "be" and to "do".

The first thing that struck me about the second class was the ability of a couple of the CEOs to articulate a time when they surrendered to God in time of need. I really admire the rawness of some of the feedback. I personally used to pray a lot and in the last couple of years have felt "too busy".

MBA

If I were to make one observation it is that neither generation present in the course has been taught how to pray. Prayer had been too often associated merely with ritual in the lives of many seminar participants. So there was a wonderful sense of "discovery" in the ways in which prayer can be spontaneous, we pray without realizing it, prayer can be integrated into the "every-day-ness" of our lives in Rahner's sense, and in discovering diversity of forms of prayer. "Pray always" was a admonition not understood, and not seen as achievable. The module on prayer was a wonderful "Ah Ha" (breakthrough) for most who for the first time were brought a contemporary perspective on prayer. To discover that God who is infinite has an infinite number of ways of allowing us to pray, and that it is God who prays in us was liberating. In the Journal entries from seminar participants one began to see a turning to prayer.

After lunch, we listened to a lecture on prayer. This lecture helped me tremendously. I realized that "HELP" was actually prayer, and there were many times that I was praying and did not even know it.

MBA

Prayer (active) is difficult for me to do. Hard work in a sense, yet I realize thinking of it (prayer) as work won't work . Have to let go not easy for me.

CEO

The lessons on prayer were very important to me. I don't know how to pray. I don't feel connected and don't know how to connect. Listening for the inner voice, was new for me. That God is here to help us in the process of discernment was a powerful lesson.

CEO

I hope that these moments from class will propel me over the next few months to continue with active prayer.

MBA

The prayer/meditation experience for this module was "Lectio Divina" . Participants were encouraged to bring scriptures or religious writings from their own tradition to the exercise, and the level of "faith sharing" at this point intensified. A comfort in acknowledging the Transcendent Mystery (however understood) now emerged with increased vigor.

One of my greatest opportunities for growth is in my prayer life. The information provided in module six is an excellent resource for me.

CEO

7. The Special Challenges of Leadership Power

Until now we had largely focused in the course on the positive and the potential. There were criticisms from some executives that the discussion was idealistic, not admitting the pressures of greed, vicious competition, the short run earnings demands, etc. So there was a readiness to confront the "dark side" of business leadership.

Nonetheless, my wife who prepared lecture slides for the next two modules was skeptical.

"Are you really going to be this harsh in your critique of leadership? Isn't this going to seem unduly negative? Won't this alienate your group?"

The session on leadership power and the temptations to narcissism, over control, and vanity was inspired by a meeting with NASDAQ executives at a meeting in Pebble Beach where CEOs indicated that "hubris" was the pitfall for senior business leadership. This

module clearly set forth the seductions toward narcissism associated with those in powerful corporate positions. . The "Bonfire of the Vanities" in the executive suite was highlighted, and the need for humility and God's grace made evident. Rather than being alienating, both Executives and MBAs found the unit powerful, and another warning that without prayer occupying a position of power without misstep is not possible.

I believe that this last class got to the heart of the issues of being a CEO. The choices that one has to make and the implications of our actions. It is easy to be lead from day to day reality, because of the power of the office of CEO. It is easy to be self-delusion, because of the actions of subordinates artificially seeking to be approving of the executive And in the age of advertising driven ethics, it is very easy to absorb our society's reinforcement for wealth building actions, at any cost. So in the middle of all this where is center? I think we went a long way to address some of these issues.

CEO

8. The Spiritual Challenges of Wealth vs. Poverty of Spirit in the Business Leader's Life

Poverty as a spiritual path and Wealth as a Challenge is a special paradox for CEOs. Their charisma is wealth creation, and their reward is riches. This unit reviewed the "economic" scriptures (dealing with wealth and poverty) in Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism, and discussed the practices of almsgiving, justice giving, charity giving, philanthropy, stewardship (both of organizational and personal wealth), and asceticism as a companion executive discipline. . Issues of social justice and maldistribution of income were also developed. The scandal of the destitute, both in North America and globally was set forth.

It was the first time that the CEOs were relatively silent and introspective to the surprise of the MBAs.

What was missing: The CEOs' views on either the "Virtue and Affluence" text or on the subject of wealth and philanthropy at the individual and/or corporate levels. Was there a reason that they were quite silent about these issues?

MBA

The silence was not a rejection of the challenge, but reflected that for the most part these considerations had not been high on the consciousness of most of the CEOs. In Silicon Valley CEOs are first generation wealth creators. In terms of motivation theory, this is the generation of "overachievers" who create wealth, but as a by product of their desire to "do"; to solve a problem in chemistry, electronics, bioscience, etc. The wealth which accompanies these technological successes, and consumption excesses which are easily slipped into are frequently not reflected upon, much less the impact on their families, and the community. Thus the module was quietly and thoughtfully received by CEOs,

especially as students challenged the conspicuous consumption and insensitivity to less advantaged which they perceived as a negative dimension of Silicon Valley.

Wealth accumulation is not an easy subject. It brings out some deep conflicting emotions. I was silent because I need to think and pray about all this.

CEO

I have been guilty of underestimating the ethical challenges and the maldistribution of income in business.

CEO

10. Contemplative Practice in the Hectic Space of a Business Leader's Life

The module on contemplative practice which immediately followed these two modules (Module 9 had been rescheduled to the last class meeting) was particularly well placed. There were so many challenges in the above two units that it might have been off putting as my wife had feared, had it not been for the ability to "rest in God" rather than in anxiety. The module on Contemplation introduced the class to apothetic prayer, its psychology and theology, and the parallels and differences with Eastern Meditative practices. With respect to latter, I had been privileged to hold a Nathan Cummings Foundation Fellowship in Contemplative Practices during my Sabbatical in preparation to teach this course, and had spent time with Taoist and Buddhist practitioners. This was an important bridging for class members who were agnostic and outside the Judeo-Christian tradition. It allowed me to conduct the experience of Contemplative practice with sensitivity to the differences, and with deep appreciation for the beauty of Eastern contemplative practice.

What a wonderful moment this meditative experience was. Members of the seminar seem ready to fully enter into contemplative space, and relinquish pretense that the ego and intellect could resolve the many spiritual issues which power and wealth create for senior business leadership. Even more encouraging was the fact that a number of participants following the module began building contemplative practice into their busy schedules.

The statement that "prayer is much about listening not just speaking" stood out to me. Our communication with God doesn't have to always be spoken out loud and "demonstrated" to others. It can be personal and in a listening mode and that God helps us become better at prayer.

MBA

Thank you for the guidance in the contemplative practice. It is my favorite path to prayer and meditation, although I have a lot of room to do it more effectively. But then again, it is the effort that matters most in the eyes of God. Correct?.

CEO

I was very interested to hear from you that Thomas Keating recommends contemplation for the overcoming of the ego and the recognition of dependence on God (I don't remember your exact words) .Since this is the very point I've been struggling with, I'm very motivated now to try centering prayer and just see what happens

MBA

11. - 12 Retreat: a time for prayer/meditation/reflection on the lessons learned regarding spirituality and the call to leadership

Our retreat was held at Villa Holy Names in the Santa Cruz foothills. It was a stormy and rainy weekend. It also seemed as if most of us were not "in the mood" for the weekend. Midterms were haunting the students, and a number of executives were caught in turbulent business problems. We arrived as sullen Californians feeling put upon by both external events and the weather.

The retreat schedule beginning after a noon meal on the first day was as follows: an opening mediation based on Lectio Divina focused on the gifts and challenges of each of us in our present and future leadership roles; silent meditation; sharing our reflections; dinner; Zen Sitting; and Silent meditation.

As was our course norm, readings for Lectio were available from diverse spiritual traditions. It was interesting that now all seemed to feel comfortable reflecting on, indeed being appreciate of, the scriptural "jewels" from these diverse traditions. The sharing of gifts and challenges just before dinner highlighted the diversity of gifts within the group, and the mysterious way in which God makes sure we need and bless each other. Then in the evening Tracy Kahan, a faculty colleague in Psychologist Santa Clara University explained and lead the group in a very disciplined Zen Sitting. These experiences touched participants in important ways.

The next morning we began with a "Mindful Walk" meditation. A memory I especially cherish is the mental picture of CEOs and MBAs scattered across the grounds engaged in Mindful Walking in light rain. We had come a long way on the journey as evidenced by the discipline that rainy morning.

Then in late morning another faculty colleague, Hersh

Shefrin, Bellotti Chair of Finance, led the group in a "joyful celebration" of Jewish Prayer utilizing the Psalms of the Hillel celebration, the Exodus epic symbolizing our own spiritual Exodus from sin toward the Kingdom of God.

A small miracle occurred which we all hold in our heart. First we had recited the Psalms responsorially. Then Hersh asked us to allow him to chant part of the Psalms in Hebrew so we could experience the joyful nature of the chanting,, suggesting we hum as only one member of the group knew Hebrew . At this stage of our own mindfulness, the room filled with loud voices singing in Hebrew. None of us quite understood how that was possible, but the joy exploded in the chapel.

Then the Jewish prayer. Excellent stuff. It was interesting to hear the comments afterwards that

Hersh (and all of us) was amazed at our willingness to sing the psalms in Hebrew. I think it is true that the group has developed a trust.

MBA

The overwhelming sentiment of all even though we had arrived distracted and somewhat dispirited by nasty weather, was a wish that the Retreat could have been longer.

I thought the time spent on the retreat was wonderful. However it was too short. The problem is that people will not know it's worth it until after the time is over. I am just as guilty as any one in the front end thinking that "noon to noon" was a huge block of time to give up. But once I got there I quickly changed my attitude from the notion of time given up to time to be realized and well spent. In the end it was indeed time well spent and I found myself wishing that we had more.

MBA

Interim Conclusion

At this time in mid November I must conclude this interim summary without the final meeting of the seminar being reported. Our last meeting will be held December 5 and will include:

9. A Business Leadership Encounter With Voices Sometimes Not Heard

I -Thou encounter with someone in deep suffering in a circumstance in which you cannot be instrumentally helpful, but must simply be present.

14. Individual study reports of a spiritual master and insights for the future leadership journey

Each participants anticipation of what will be different in their individual leadership journey as a result of the course.

15. Bringing it all together and celebration of the business leader's spiritual journey

With reflections on how the course should be structured for future participants.

Some Final Comments

This seminar was an "alpha" test. What are some take away thoughts now while the course is still underway and I have had limited time to reflect.

The need for such a course is greater than I could have anticipated. The desire for personal integration in business leadership through deepening spirituality is intense for both MBAs and Executives.

Prior to offering the course many colleagues were skeptical regarding the interest of MBAs in such a course, and their readiness to enter into these issues in depth. I found equal readiness both in the MBAs and CEOs, and individuals in both cohorts at all stages of the spiritual journey: some just considering a first step, and others advanced in spirituality. But no fewer advanced travelers in the MBA cohort than in the CEO cohort.

The norms of appreciative inquiry allowed for a successful ecumenical encounter.

The norms guiding discussion worked very well. With respect to ecumenical tensions, there was only one symbolic and minor issue not related to dialog. Fr. James McGee asked members of the class to bring an "icon" (8 x 11 photo) of the spiritual masters selected by individuals for intense study. This lead to a concern about "false gods" by three seminar participants. A matter dealt with graceful and openly by class participants but a reminder of the constant need for sensitivity.

An agnostic student had difficulty with the "God talk". early in the seminar. Yet, over the course of the seminar he found increasing depth of perspective and value in the course. Special sensitivity to those who do not acknowledge a personal god is important. It also suggests, since the majority of the students attracted to the course do believe in a personal God, that advising students in addition to sharing the syllabus so that they can make an informed choice is important. (In this instance I had a long discussion before the student enrolled in the class, which helped bridge the initial tension).

Pairing CEOs and MBAs is magical. However, despite the strongest indication that full attendance was expected, the uncontrolled executive life intruded and executives missed classes. This required individual tutoring, sharing audio tapes, and assistance in interpreting readings outside class. We are still exploring the number of weekends one

can realistically expect an executive to be present, and how to "bundle" the course to make it accessible to executive participants.

The snippets of quotations included in this report are indicative but do not capture the depth of the feedback. I have been cautious not to invade privacy and to keep the quotation segment terse. Much of the feedback is very personal. A number of individuals shared significant psychological and spiritual experiences in their feedback. Instructor time to respond to such feedback outside class is important.

At the retreat Fr. James McGee played an important role, both in leading prayer and in being available to individuals for spiritual direction. His ministerial presence was important to the needs of several individuals at the retreat.

Of course, the success of a course in spirituality rests with the Holy Spirit. Prayer/meditation is critical and at the core of the experience. The manifest results on the tenor of the class of including spiritual practice was inspiring.

The afternoon modules spent at the St. Francis Chapel comprise some of the highlights of the day. I know each time I cross the threshold that I am in a sanctuary. The energy that permeates the room when the group is gathered is palpable. Twenty individuals on separate journeys - all seeking the truth - creates a force that each of us can draw our individual strengths from.

MBA

In conclusion, the course touched lives deeply. It succeeded beyond any hope I dared to hold before the pilot test. .

To paraphrase the Psalmist: (Ps 63)

Oh God, our God,

It is you that we sought.

Our souls thirsted for you,

Our flesh longed for you

Like a dry and parched land without water.

Therefore we turned our eyes toward you

in your heaven

And beheld your power and your glory

Because we discovered your steadfast love is greater
than life itself

Our lips sang your praise.

We are learning to bless you each day of our lives,
to lift up our arms and call upon your name.