

# Spirituality in the Workplace

by Bob L. Wahlstedt

My purpose in this paper is to make a case for the need and desirability of inviting each person, each co-worker, each employee to come to the workplace as a whole person. Since each of us is at the same time a physical, an intellectual, an emotional and a spiritual being, this means that no aspect of the person should be excluded from or diminished in the world of work. We need to foster an environment that encourages people to be whole for two reasons. First, because it is right; to not do so is to reduce human beings to simply a means by which we attempt to achieve materialistic ends and, in the process, we become manipulative ourselves. Second, we need to engage all the resources of the whole person in order to succeed in our organizational endeavors.

I think that I need to begin by telling you a bit about my personal background and my experience in business since the thoughts that I will present have been formed out of that background and experience. My extended family roots are deep in the Baptist tradition and my early religious training was decidedly anti-Catholic. My own parents, however, related quite easily and well to individual Catholic people even though they held a dim view of the Catholic Church. Will Rogers once said, "I never met a man that I didn't like." My own son turned that quote around in describing my father as a man who "never liked a Catholic that he hadn't met."

Although narrow in religious perspective, I would describe the home in which I was raised as a loving, Christian home with strong values regarding family, integrity, education and work ethic. We were poor, although I did not know that at the time. We did not have running water in the house until I was 8 or 9 years old and I was a teenager before we had refrigeration. A bottle of soda pop was a great treat and usually involved a special trip on foot to the store to buy just one bottle.

As I progressed through high school and into college, I began to realize that many people had much nicer homes and lived a much more abundant material life than we did and that that kind of life was not necessarily out of reach for me. After college graduation, I took a job at 3M Company and set out in pursuit of the "good life." My goal at 3M was to achieve a top management position, hopefully president of the company. During the first 5 years at 3M, my progress toward that goal was "on target," perhaps even outstanding, and I soon became the supervisor of a group of engineers responsible for establishing manufacturing capability for 3M copying machines, micro-film machines and overhead projectors. It was at this point that I experienced an event that might be described as a "turning" or "defining" point in my life.

Part of my job as supervisor was to attend a staff meeting on Friday mornings to report on our group's progress on the various projects for which we were responsible. These meetings involved considerable tension for me since the expectations seemed to always

be beyond what we were able to achieve and the ulcer, which I had been nursing for several years, always took a set-back on Friday morning.

This life-changing event began on a Thursday evening in the fall of 1960. My wife and I were preparing to take a train to Madison, Wisconsin the next afternoon with some friends to attend the Minnesota/Wisconsin football game on Saturday. I had drunk a bottle of Pepsi before going to bed, went to sleep and was awakened by a feeling of nausea. The appearance of the vomit was a little strange but I attributed it to the Pepsi and went back to sleep. In the morning, I went to work and the “normal” Friday morning staff meeting. It was typically stress filled and I left feeling that the entire future of the 3M Company rested on my shoulders.

After the meeting, I spoke with Clarence Michaelson, who had also experienced ulcer problems and told him of my experience the night before. His advice was that I should see a doctor and find out what was going on. When I got home that afternoon, I did call my aunt, a nurse, and told her what had happened. She said, “I don’t know what’s wrong but you are hemorrhaging internally somewhere. She called a doctor, he called me and within an hour I was on my way to the hospital. The football trip was off and I spent the next 10 days on a milk-only diet, standard ulcer treatment at the time.

The life directing part of the experience occurred on Monday morning when many of the people in the Friday meeting came to visit me. My boss and his boss and all the rest said essentially the same thing, “Don’t worry about anything, everything is being taken care of, just get well!” I don’t know if that sounds unusual to you but it sure did to me. I spent a good deal of the rest of my enforced “fast” wondering what in the world had happened over the weekend. On Friday, the whole world depended on me and on Monday “everything was being taken care of.”

Up until this time, the top priority in my life had been the pursuit of economic success. This experience showed me that my health had to become a higher priority.

After recovering from the ulcer, as I continued my work at 3M, I observed that many, perhaps most people who had reached top management positions had consciously or sub-consciously put their work responsibilities ahead of family. Some stated that they had “lost touch with their children.” This was not an acceptable risk for me and the commitment to family over work priorities led to a decision in 1963 to leave 3M and join Dale Merrick in a sales rep firm.

Our territory as manufacturers reps included northwestern Wisconsin and, in the summertime, my father, who was retired, would often accompany me on business trips. A second significant event occurred on one of these trips. We had a lot of time to talk since more time was spent on the road than actually making calls. On this occasion we got into a discussion about pre-destination. My father believed that God knows everything that will happen but I argued that this concept is incompatible with the idea of free-will. I realized that, to my father, this was more than an interesting theological argument when he said, “Bob, maybe I can’t convince you, but I know God!” This ended the

conversation and we traveled in silence for a long time as I thought about what he had said and I realized that he did know something or someone that I did not know and that was what made him the man that I respected and loved so much.

I began to seek this God of my father without much success and, one day, expressed this frustration to my sister. She asked if I had prayed about it. I answered, "How can you pray to a God when you don't even know he exists?" She said, "How about praying, "God, if you exist, reveal yourself to me?" That seemed intellectually honest to me so I began praying that prayer on a regular basis. Soon, I realized that every time that I prayed, I would start thinking about the use of alcohol in my life. Drinking had become a regular part of both our social life and business relationships, often to what I now recognize as an abusive extent.

One night that I prayed that prayer was after a day of business with a customer in New Ulm, Minnesota. We had finished with dinner and several drinks at a local restaurant. The day had gone well and the dinner was one of those warm experiences that build the relationship with the customer. In the motel later that night, I told my partner about the prayer and the responsive thoughts about drinking thinking that he would probably tell me about the positive role alcohol had in relationships with customers. What he did say, however, was "I guess your just going to have to try it" implying that I should quit drinking. I did become a teetotaler for 2 years. This was my first experience in trying to follow the leading of the spirit of God in my life.

These experiences, and the influence of an audio tape by Ted DeMoss, an insurance agent and president of CBMC (Christian Business Men's Committee), resulted in formalizing of the following list of priorities:

1. Health; physical, emotional, and especially spiritual (God)
2. Family
3. Work
4. Community service (Ministry to others)

I believe that a well-ordered life should provide times to address all of these priorities but when conflicts arise, it is very helpful to have a clear perception of what is most important.

In 1970 Lee Johnson joined Dale and me and we founded Reell Precision Manufacturing Corporation.

We began to meet regularly on Monday mornings to pray and consider the "meaning and purpose" of our work together. This time became "sacred" both in a spiritual sense and in the sense that we considered it a very high priority. We talked about a desire to "follow the will of God" although we had no concrete idea of how we would know that "will." We did not expect audible revelation but neither did it seem reasonable that God would reveal His will by a 2 to 1 vote. A friend speculated, "If God can reveal His will to one, He can reveal it to three!" We took this to heart and decided that we would only act when

we were unanimous. This commitment to unanimity has been a singular unifying principle.

As the Company has grown, the concept to “follow the will of God” has been restated as a commitment to the “practical application of Judeo-Christian values for the mutual benefit of co-workers, customers, shareholders, suppliers and the community” so that it can be embraced by people from a variety of spiritual backgrounds and perspectives. This commitment is the cornerstone of our Direction Statement and has become the foundation of the company.

Early on, we had identified three things that were important to us personally, the need to have and maintain a source of income, a desire for personal growth and the opportunity to integrate our spiritual life with our work. The commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” led us to assume that all of our employees would want these same things and we decided to try to provide for everyone these things that were most important to us.

Let me tell you about four innovations that this commitment to Judeo-Christian values has led to at Reell.

## **1. Employment Security**

A major challenge was faced in 1975 out of which came the formation of a major philosophical pillar of the company. Drastically reduced sales made it obvious that the payroll could not be supported without incurring an unacceptable financial loss. The usual business reaction to this problem is to “bite the bullet” and make the difficult decision of who to lay off. Prayer and discussion led to a unanimous agreement to take a different course. Instead of laying off some of the employees, all employees were asked to take a 10% reduction in time worked or salary (actually the three of us took a much larger cut). Before the year was out, this reduction had to be increased to 20%! Although this commitment to people would be tested again later, here was the beginning of a philosophy that makes the security and growth of employees the highest priority of the company. Even this past year, we have undergone a similar test and all of us, excepting the lowest paid people, took a 10% pay reduction for 4 months in order to break-even.

## **2. TET (Teach-Equip-Trust)**

In 1983, we faced a problem that led to revolutionary changes in our people relationships. It didn't seem like a revolution at first; we simply had a problem to solve. Our set-up procedures called for an independent evaluation of set-up samples by Quality Control after the set-up was complete and before the job was run. The problem was the time that often elapsed before the set-up was approved.

When the set-up was finished, the set-up person would submit samples to Quality Control and it would usually take several hours before an inspector was free to do the evaluation.

Of course, by this time the set-up person had gone on to the next job so, if the samples were not satisfactory, more time would elapse before the adjustments could be made. In some cases, this process would have to be repeated several times before the job was approved. Manufacturing found this understandably frustrating because they could set up a job and not be able to run it for several days.

Someone asked the question, “What if we taught the set-up people to do their own inspection and trusted them to do it right?” At this time we had no objective other than to improve the efficiency of the set-up procedure. We decided to buy a complete set of inspection tools for the set-up people and assigned one of the quality control inspectors to the manufacturing department to train set-up people in inspection techniques. This would allow the set-up person to stay on the job, without interruption, until it was ready to run.

The results were surprising! Not only did we achieve the expected improvement in efficiency, but the quality of production improved as well! This was the first step in a philosophical evolution from a Command-Direct-Control style of management (CDC) to a Teach-Equip-Trust style (TET). By teaching the set-up people in inspection procedures, equipping them with inspection instruments and trusting that they would do things right, greater productivity, better quality and growth for the individual were achieved.

This positive but limited experience with the benefits of trusting people prepared us for even more significant improvements when we were exposed to training in Statistical Process Control (SPC) and Just-In-Time manufacturing (JIT) provided by a major customer. These new techniques were exactly what was needed to allow us to extend the Teach-Equip-Trust philosophy to our entire manufacturing operation.

This change was truly revolutionary! Previously, our assembly process required 5 weeks making, inspecting and stocking sub and final assemblies. Now, all sub-assemblies and inspections are done in one continuous flow process by production people. The entire process takes less than 2 minutes and the finished unit is ready for shipment without further inspection when it comes off the assembly line! In fact, it is placed directly into the shipping carton.

As promised by the proponents of JIT, we have experienced the positive financial effects of reduced inventory, inspection and assembly costs, better quality and better utilization of space.

More importantly, assembly positions are enriched. Assemblers can move up in responsibility and pay to Senior Assembler and Line Leader positions as their skills increase through training and experience.

This experience... this revolution has shown us that the biggest misconception of American manufacturers is the belief that production workers are not dependable and must be motivated and/or constrained to do quality work. We have been amazed by the self-motivation and dedication to quality and productivity that they demonstrate when

they are freed to develop and use their full potential.

### **3. ESOP**

In 1985, with Dale approaching retirement and Lee and Bob a decade or so away, an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) was established for the purpose of transferring some of the ownership of the company to its' employees. In 1990, the ESOP held a little more than 30% of RPM stock. In this way, all employees share in the success and growth of the company.

We are often asked about our ESOP by other companies who are thinking of establishing one. I always ask, "Why do you want an ESOP?" Many times the answer has only to do with tax savings. Although there are tax benefits, I always tell them that this is not a good reason to have an ESOP. If the owners of a company do not truly believe that the employees deserve to have a "stake" in the business and share in the benefits of growth, the ESOP is being misused and will probably not be successful.

### **4. Target Wage**

In 1988, one of our advisors came to the Triad and reported that production people were saying that they liked everything about working at RPM except the pay. This led to a meeting of our "management committee" in which someone asked, "how much does it take to provide an "adequate" standard of living for a typical family?" We agreed on a "target wage" of \$18,000 per year and instituted a policy by which all "satisfactory" co-workers would be raised to that level within five years regardless of the "market value" of the job. In the eight years since 1988, our target wage has been increased to \$22,693 and most co-workers reach that level in 2-3 years.

Some of you will may recognize these as applications of the principles of "participation," "subsidiarity," "common use" and "justice" as articulated in Catholic social thought. I also want you to realize that neither I, nor either of my co-founders of RPM had any knowledge or heritage of that social tradition. It was only recently, in the past two years, through acquaintance with and now the friendship of Dr. Michael Naughton that I learned how closely our pragmatic attempts at applying Judeo-Christian values had brought us to the Catholic social tradition. Naughton's book "The Good Stewards," pulls together concepts from papal writings of several centuries to form a "blueprint" for a spiritually based organization.

Reading Michael's book was like looking in the face of God and hearing Him say, "Well done, faithful servant!"

So much for my background and experience. Four years ago, I completed my 60th year. It was like driving down the road, coming around a corner and seeing the end of the road! During the same year, I had the privilege of meeting former Bishop James Shannon. He

told of Robert Greenleaf, the author of many articles on “Servant Leadership.” Greenleaf came to realize that everything he had done before he was 60 prepared him for his “real work” in his 70’s and 80’s regarding Servant Leadership. I found that to be a most encouraging and energizing word and dare to hope that our experience could be helpful to others who desire a more fulfilling work life. Now let me speculate on the future of spirituality in the workplace.

In a recent “Stakeholder” dialogue at St. Thomas, the growing part of society that is “left out” of the material success of the rest was stressed. The panelists all recognized this as a severe problem and expressed varying levels of despair over the prospects of a solution. One stated that it would require a fundamental change in our thinking and approach but did not describe such a change. I would suggest that the fundamental change that is necessary could be an extension of our experience in manufacturing.

The late Dr. Deming has taught us that it is shortsighted to think of production workers only in terms of the physical skills that they bring to the job. Many companies are achieving higher productivity, better quality and enhancing the work-life of their employees by utilizing their intellect as well as their physical capabilities. The Japanese have known this for some time. Konosuke Matsushita (Panasonic) said:

We are going to win and the industrial West is going to lose out; there’s not much you can do about it because the reasons for your failure are within your selves. With your bosses doing the thinking while the workers wield the screwdrivers, you are convinced deep down that this is the right way to run a business. For you, the essence of management is getting the ideas out of the heads of the bosses and into the hands of labor. Business, we know, is now so complex and difficult, the survival of firms so hazardous in an environment increasingly unpredictable, competitive and fraught with danger, that their continued existence depends on the mobilization of every ounce of intelligence.

I believe that the recent resurgence of the American economy can be attributed to improved quality and productivity from Dr. Deming’s influence. In the same way that the quality of our products and services has been improved by empowering all co-workers to utilize their intellectual as well as their physical abilities, we need to change the effect of our organizations on the quality of our society by empowering each other to utilize our emotional and spiritual abilities to bring our activities and products into alignment with the true “meaning and purpose” for our life and work together.

We must bring all of the resources with which we have been endowed to bear on these seemingly overwhelming problems in our society. We can no longer expect to be successful using only our physical, intellectual and emotional gifts. We must utilize our entire being. We must recognize and apply all of our capacities, physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual.

At a recent luncheon with several CEOs and others on “Spirituality in the Workplace,” we were asked to define “spirituality.” Some felt that spirituality related to a deeper

power “within us;” some felt that it involved a “higher power” outside ourselves. This has led me to try to define spirituality in inclusive terms to which all who have any sense of spirituality could agree. This would provide the basis for a dialogue, leaving the possibility and questions regarding “good, better, best or bad” spirituality for discussion outside of and beyond the definition. It seems to me that the following definition accomplishes that objective.

Spirituality is a search for meaning and purpose or the source of meaning and purpose in life transcending the physical senses, conscious intellect and emotion.

Religion, then, could be defined in a similarly inclusive way as “any method of practicing spirituality.

These definitions would include all religions, and many practices such as meditation, yoga, etc. They imply that some methods (religions) may be more structured and some less structured, some more personal and some less, some more effective, some less and some could even be destructive. All, however, are included within these definitions.

I think it is essential that we define spirituality and religion in very inclusive terms respecting the diversity of our society. We must be able to begin dialogues with each other about spirituality without raising immediate barriers and defensive mechanisms.

Before this exercise, I thought of myself as quite spiritual but not very religious. Based on these definitions, however, I no longer believe it possible to be “spiritual” without being religious in some way. That is to be spiritual without practicing spirituality is an oxymoron. Now, I would say that I am not very conventional or organized in my religion. On the other hand, I think it quite possible to be religious without being spiritual. That is, it is possible to participate in religious practices without seeking or being open to or searching for meaning and purpose in life transcending the physical senses, conscious intellect and emotion.

In our organizations, I think that it is crucial that we encourage and stimulate each other in our spiritual growth as well as in our physical, intellectual and emotional growth. The trick is to do that without prescribing, proscribing or discriminating on the basis of particular religious beliefs or practices. Brigid Schulte of the Washington Bureau, in 1994, reported:

Somewhere between the extremes of religious indoctrination and silence — the national norm since the 1960’s decisions banning school-sponsored prayer, the South Orangetown (New York) school district has been searching for a way to give religion a place in schools without trampling on the Constitution. This year, a 35-member Religion, Respect and Diversity Committee, made up of Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Hindus, Muslims, atheists and agnostics, decided to put mistrust and prejudice aside and came up with a policy for the district: Public schools have the responsibility not to teach religion, but to teach about religion. All religions.

We need to move from the prohibition of religion to the encouragement of all spirituality that is not coercive or destructive. This does not offer an easy answer, nor does it provide any answer at all to the problems which we face. It only offers a way to bring all of our strengths and abilities to the battle. I believe that we can succeed in this struggle but we cannot succeed with less than a total mobilization of all our resources.

Finally, let me tell you about an encouraging development of at the University of St. Thomas. Through the friendship and encouragement of Jim Shannon, I have become an Executive Fellow at St. Thomas. There, I have been privileged to observe, participate and even, to some degree, influence their soul-searching as the Graduate School of Business has struggled to understand how the Catholic, Christian nature of the University should affect the way business education is delivered. This has allowed me to know Dr. Kenneth Goodpaster, who holds the Koch chair for business ethics at St. Thomas.

Dr. Goodpaster and Mr. Tom Holloran, an adjunct professor, introduced a course in the spring of 1996 called "Faith, Spirituality and the Modern Manager." I had the opportunity to be a guest speaker at one of the sessions. I also attended most of the rest of the sessions. The course filled up within hours and all of us who were involved, Ken, Tom, the students and observers are convinced that there is a great need and a great hunger for instruction on how to integrate that which is most important to us with that which consumes most of our time and energy.

After being offered again in the fall of 1996, the curriculum committee approved it as an MBA elective called "The Modern Manager; Spirituality at Work." I am pleased to have been offered the opportunity to team-teach this course this fall semester with George Golden and Tom Dolan.

Since there has been very little academic study of this subject, the St. Thomas course has utilized "voices of experience" from the scattered attempts at practice that exist in workaday world. Several consistent principles have emerged from the successful of these witnesses. Let me tell you about three.

1. They have differentiated between "spirituality" and "religion." One student likened spirituality to a lighthouse and religion to a road map. There are many road maps but just one lighthouse. We can bring our spiritual insights and motivations to work only if we honor all (including non) religious perspectives and promote none.
2. They have encouraged the development and participation of the "whole person," physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual, in every job in every department.
3. They have encouraged the "reflective" side of the human personality through the practice of "silence."

It is my hope that this movement and this course at St. Thomas will transform the world of work from one in which people are “used” to achieve material ends to one in which material is used to build up the people who are involved in the work.