

spirituality & work:

A N T O N Y M S

BY KARUNA CAYTON



Often, as we find ourselves in the midst of the holiday season, or during times of great personal or global tragedy such as the recent tsunami in Asia,

it is common for us to reflect upon our deeper values and life's purpose. It is during these times when it seems especially conducive to thinking about what truly gives us meaning. Many clients and friends relate to me how, for example during the holiday season, they particularly enjoy the quality of time they spend with families and loved ones. Work seems to lose a little of its intensity, except when trying to meet deadlines in order to accommodate the extra downtime we seek during the holidays or vacation time.

Many coaches and consultants, business leaders and executives, are wary of mentioning spirituality and work in the same sentence. This hesitation, I believe, is the result of misunderstanding the meaning of spirituality and, perhaps, the real meaning of work. It is essential that we define our terms so that we can generate some shared understanding.

I will use *my* definition of spirituality in this article because, quite frankly, I like mine the best! When I use the term "spiritual," I am **not** using it as a synonym for "religious." Whether someone is religious or not, agnostic or not, is irrelevant with respect to whether or not someone is a spiritual person. I have known religious people who, from outer appearances and behavior, seem very unspiritual. And the contrary can be said for the agnostic or non-religious person.

Spiritual, for me, means: *actively engaged in developing one's deep, vast inner potential*. This potential possesses qualities of mind and personality such as wisdom, altruism, self-respect, and consideration for others, to name a few.

When I think of individuals who have pursued the development of their inner potential I think of people like Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, H. H. the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, and many, many more.

So, what does this all have to do with spirituality and work? The sad news that I repeatedly hear from clients and others is that they have separated their work from everything else that is truly meaningful in their lives. This isn't true of everyone, but the majority of people with whom I am in contact have a very difficult time seeing their work as something truly transformative

and deeply meaningful. They tell me that when they are on vacation, when they are with their families, when they go to Sunday or Hebrew school, when they attend meditation retreats during the summer, when they participate in volunteer work, when they go to therapy or coaching, *then* their spirit is nourished – they tap into their unlimited inner potential!

I believe if we hold our spiritual reality as something separate, as something sacred, then by default we set ourselves up to have a mundane, ordinary, uninspiring reality in juxtaposition. So, if we think of our work as a necessary evil, a nuisance, something we do so we can enjoy the rest of our life – in the evenings, on the weekends, and when we retire – then logically, since we spend a majority of our life in work, our life is going to be significantly shallow in meaning.

Typically, when people become interested in developing their unlimited qualities of mind, their inner potential, they long to work in a more "spiritual" environment. Of course, this can be helpful for a person's development, but commonly not very practical. There is the mortgage or rent to pay. The kids' clothing, school, sports, hobbies, health and welfare to look after. There are the aging parents who are looking to you to care for them as they get older. You may

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have employees who are relying on you for their security and well-being. And then, there are the pets, the relatives, the neighbors and friends who may all rely on you to support them in whatever form you can. It is very common to hear people describe their situation as a feeling of imprisonment, of being trapped, a "slave" to their job. They long for a break, a long holiday, to take a year off and sail around the Caribbean.

I believe that at least one factor that contributes significantly to high rates of stress, burnout, and depression in the workplace is the inability for people to create true meaning in their work. People will tell me it is the fault of the type of work they are doing. They'll say to me, "You tell *me* how selling shoes all day can be meaningful, spiritual work? It's easy for you to say while you sit here really doing meaningful work helping with people's problems!" Well, I may not want to sell shoes as much as I'd prefer to coach and counsel, but these preferences miss the point. They are a distraction and an excuse. I know plenty of coaches and psychotherapists who are utterly bored with their work. And I believe there are shoe salespeople who enjoy their work. Our ordinary mode of existence is one in which the mind is constantly seeking something "better".

The nature of living beings is to seek a seemingly superior activity. Eventually,

we have to face reality and transform our predicament from within.

Is it difficult? Of course! Is there a choice?

I will offer you this provocation: Whether or not your work, your career, your daily existence, is spiritual and meaningful or mundane and bereft of deep meaning has almost nothing to do with what you are doing. It has everything to do with the mindset with which you are engaged in your work. If you are excited at the prospect, the endeavor, of enriching and unfolding your inner qualities of kindness, wisdom, forgiveness, tolerance, generosity, humanity, and altruism, then I would suggest that your work is the optimum environment to accomplish your goals.

Life is short. It is like a flash of lightning. At the end of our life the only thing that will really matter is *did we attempt to do our best?* When we use our work as a vehicle to develop our inner qualities, *then* we have added a depth of richness and satisfaction that enhances the value of our life beyond our expectation. ☉

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