

REUNITING OUR WORSHIPING AND WORKING SELVES

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CALL TO WORSHIP

In the Jewish holy text called the Talmud, it is written that the first question God asks humans after their deaths is “did you conduct your business affairs with honesty and probity?” How are we faring with this question? Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

The term “business ethics” has become synonymous with bad news – headlines about ethical failures, usually on a spectacular scale – like Enron, which we used as a case study a few evenings ago in our Lifespan Faith Development program on business ethics. You can’t get much more spectacular than taking the stock of a publicly traded company from \$90 a share to 61 cents a share in less than year; piling up \$38 billion in debt and leaving shareholders, employees, and creditors holding the bag; manipulating the natural gas markets in a way that caused rolling blackouts across California, putting gas and electricity beyond the means of low-income people there; and drawing down the wrath of the federal government in the form of dozens of indictments of the company’s executives.

But along with confronting sobering truths, it is the calling of churches to light candles of hope.

I have a friend named Tom with whom my relationship has been mostly a coffee and conversation kind of thing. We’ve talked about books we’re reading, what’s in the newspaper, what’s going in our lives, the usual stuff. And theology. Which is not so usual, because Tom is a lay leader in an evangelical Christian church.

When I was first getting to know him, he had just gone to work at a small but fast-growing heating and air conditioning company. Not long after Tom began the new job, the distributor for one of the major product lines carried by his company came to meet with the owner and key managers. The distributor said he knew that they had dissatisfactions with the costs they were absorbing in servicing these products. He was anxious to keep the company as an account. So he suggested a way of reducing the burden of these service costs: just alter the dates they recorded on the warranty documentation for some of the units in the field, and a substantial portion of the service costs would be shifted over to the manufacturer.

Tom was surprised and disturbed by this; but as a newcomer, he hesitated to react immediately. He watched as the owner and the other key managers around the table nodded knowingly. The meeting rolled right on. In the post-meeting wrap-up session, it became clear that they intended to do just what the distributor had suggested. Later, Tom asked his boss if he

knew it was a crime to defraud the manufacturer by misdating the warranty documents. His boss seemed surprised and said no, he didn't realize that. Tom asked, "But you did realize it was wrong, didn't you?" His boss shrugged and deflected the question with a comment that "business is business," and that distributors often help their customers shift expenses to the manufacturer in order to keep an account.

Tom handed in a resignation letter the next day. He knew it wouldn't look great to be leaving a new job so quickly. And he has a family. They couldn't expect to make ends meet for very long on just his wife's paycheck. But Tom told me he didn't agonize over his decision to leave. Staying, he said, just wouldn't square with his religious convictions.

What I took away from this story was not a rule that everyone should leave his job as a response to ethical lapses. Rather, it was Tom's insistence on connecting his actions to his religious convictions. To me, his decision made some pretty thunderous spiritual statements: that his religion isn't something he leaves behind when he goes to work; that he will not desecrate his work by doing it in an unethical way; that he will not desecrate himself by allowing himself to be used as an instrument of somebody's unethical plans; and that he will not subordinate his spiritual well-being to his material needs, or even to those of his family.

I don't think Tom was being an ethical purist. In a different situation, maybe he would have made a different decision. I do think he realized that there is no point in being materially secure if it comes at the cost of being spiritually wounded.

In increasing numbers, people in the business world are awakening to this spiritual cost. In their book entitled "A Spiritual Audit Of Corporate America," Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton talk about the "moral split" they discovered in their interviews and surveys of business managers and executives:

"People do not want to compartmentalize their lives. The soul is not something one leaves at home. People want to have their souls acknowledged wherever they go. They especially want to be acknowledged as whole persons in the workplace, where they spend the majority of their waking time."

The remedies for the business ethics crisis that we have tried up to this point -- mainly, passing more and more laws against unethical behavior -- haven't done much to satisfy this yearning.

In 2002, in the wake of the collapse of Enron, Congress passed the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. This law set up new procedures to assure accurate financial reporting and personal responsibility for it on the part of business executives. It also created a Public Company Accounting Oversight Board. In a speech in Houston last month, a member of that Oversight Board, Charles Niemeier, expressed alarm that very little has been learned from Enron. "We're acting like we've dealt with all this stuff," he told his audience. "What scares me the most about Enron is not what they did wrong, but what they did right. They took the rules and used them to build a massive illusion."

Niemeyer cited the example of the new rules the Oversight Board developed for internal corporate auditing controls. What started out as a two-paragraph standard of conduct ballooned into 330 pages of regulations. [pause] How ironic. Enron -- the scandal that brought this Oversight Board into being -- was all about gaming the government's complicated regulations. "All the rules created all these opportunities," one Enron executive admitted later. "We got to where we did because we exploited that weakness." Gaming the rules wasn't a way of buffing the shine on Enron's business. It WAS Enron's business.

Many see the new law as mainly a lot of mechanical "box-checking" that actually relieves executives of the responsibility to wrestle with ethical dilemmas. As the General Counsel of DuPont Canada has observed, "we can say with complete certainty that Sarbanes-Oxley will do nothing for corporate ethics. [Its provisions] should be read as Codes of Legal Compliance. Ethics in the sense of social responsibility was never on the Sarbanes-Oxley radar screen."

My friend Tom didn't need a code of legal compliance to bring himself to behave ethically. The power he drew on was his own spiritual experience, which he came to in a religious community. This power was so great that it knocked down the wall between his personal life and his business life; made it impossible for him to compartmentalize; and made him ready to pay a big price to preserve his spiritual well-being.

How did that happen? How can that happen on a larger and larger scale? Everyone has the capacity to connect his religious convictions with his actions, just as Tom did. I don't consider him to be cut from a better moral cloth than anybody else. Rather, something in his spiritual experience just made this universal capacity to integrate more accessible.

Instead of passing more laws, we need to turn our attention to those parts of our lives outside the workplace that contribute to the compartmentalization. The title of today's worship service doesn't capture some of these other parts. We need to reunite our worshiping selves not only with our working selves but also with our investing and consuming selves. More Americans than ever before own stock, either directly or through retirement plans. We like it when the price of our stock goes up. But stock prices are simply an expression of profitability, and when we invest our money or let others invest it for us solely on the basis of which company is most profitable, we are reinforcing the very culture that upholds the bottom line as everything . . . and discards business ethics as irrelevant.

And as consumers, we naturally want to get the best value at the lowest possible price. Businesses that give us what we want as consumers thrive; businesses that don't . . . just don't survive. But when we buy solely on this basis, without regard to how the seller does business, we are reinforcing the very culture that upholds price as everything . . . and discards business ethics as irrelevant.

To change these things is to change a whole culture. The forces keeping that culture the way it is are strong. It didn't get the way it is overnight. To call this heavy lifting is quite an understatement. People hoping to make such a change had better look for allies. Where might we find them? I have to tell you, some of the most visible ones are evangelical Christians. The

idea of teaming up with evangelical Christians can make most of us pretty uncomfortable. But listen to this declaration on business ethics from an evangelical Christian church:

“[M]anaging a business to further God's agenda may require making choices that hurt the company's bottom line. Taking actions to protect the environment, ensuring that employees are paid at least a livable wage, or declining to capitalize on a competitor's mistake may all cost a business some of its profits. Success for the Christian in business, however, must be measured on a different scale. Christians need to be prepared to "fail" for the sake of the gospel.”

With a little editing of the Christian gospel language and the talk about “God’s agenda,” couldn’t this declaration have been written by a business ethics action group in a very liberal UU church? What might we learn from them? What might they learn from us?

It’s sad that many people in the business world feel they cannot bring their whole selves into their workplace. But an even sadder truth is that many are not be able to bring their whole selves into their church either. Many do not see church as a place to come for help with their sense of spiritual compartmentalization at work. We need to ask ourselves how we can change that.

Compassion for unethical conduct isn’t easy. Shortly after Enron slid into bankruptcy, Jim Wallis, the editor of the liberal religious magazine called Sojourners, asked, “Where do the Enron executives go to church, and are they hearing preaching and teaching that talk about the moral issues of our economy?” It was a good question. But in terms of pastoral response, or even what might be preached or taught, Wallis had nothing to offer beyond some pretty conventional finger-shaking. “Biblical ethics,” he said, “condemns in the strongest terms the behavior of the Enron executives: greed, selfishness, corruption, cheating. This is directly contrary to the Jewish and Christian faiths.”

We’re going to have to do a lot better than that in dealing with the tough questions standing between us and a solution to our ethical crisis. Questions having to do with the meaning of success. Questions like, how did self-worth come to be culturally defined in a way that is so twisted, so corrosive of conscience? What material advantages might we have to surrender if we want to have any hope of re-integrating the working and worshiping sides of life in America? Now THERE’S a scary question. When we say that material advantage sometimes comes at a high spiritual cost, what exactly do we mean? Do we really believe that?

UUs proclaim “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” It’s our first principle. But sometimes do we unconsciously pencil in a small asterisk beside that principle, to make an exception of a few groups we just can’t bring ourselves to call worthy? If worth and dignity are “inherent,” are they really things you can forfeit? If it feels difficult to have compassion for people who have sold their souls to the marketplace, might it be connected to some resentment of them for “getting away with” something? To people who are serious about their spiritual lives – people like us -- can doing something as self-annihilating as selling your soul be getting away with something?

The people sitting in sanctuaries like this one all over the country this morning who are not all that different from the business owner or distributor my friend Tom ran into. They have stories about feeling as trapped by the machinery of the business world as the employees do. They see their competitors cutting corners ethically and wonder how they can keep up if they don't do it too. They've had it drummed into their heads endlessly that it's a dog-eat-dog world.

Compassion doesn't have to mean excusing unethical conduct. But we do need to be able to recognize ourselves in these stories. One of us got up here this morning and told a story acknowledging some personal acquaintance with ethical struggles in business. I join in his acknowledgement. When Peter told me his story, it connected with some memories of my own experiences in law practice. If you think you're a different breed of cat, think again.

On December 12th of last year, Loren Steffy, a business columnist at the Houston Chronicle, stood at the end of the long driveway leading up to the federal penitentiary in Waseca, Minnesota – about as close as he could get to the spot where Jeffrey Skilling, the disgraced chief executive of Enron, was about to begin serving a 24-year sentence for his crimes. Steffy watched through his binoculars as Skilling hugged his wife goodbye and walked into the prison.

As a Houston journalist, Steffy had seen the Enron havoc up close. He remembers – he undoubtedly will never forget -- the night Cliff Baxter, a high-flying Enron executive, slipped out of his house in suburban Houston after everyone else was asleep, drove his Mercedes S500 to a quiet street a mile away, and lifted a silver .357 Magnum to his right temple. Baxter left a note. "I am so sorry for this," he wrote to his wife. "I feel I just can't go on. I have always tried to do the right thing but where there was once great pride now it's gone. I love you and the children so much. I just can't be any good to you or myself. The pain is overwhelming. Please try to forgive me."

Somebody, in some church somewhere, needed to do better by Cliff Baxter and his wife and kids and the many who loved him -- better than declaring that he committed an offense against the doctrines of the Jewish and Christian faiths.

Loren Steffy doesn't have any illusions about Enron being the story of a few bad apples. In his column about Skilling's entry into prison last December, he wrote "Enron was a laboratory of temptation, deception, and hubris that illuminates not just the failings of a few men and women, but a far broader human frailty that resides in us all. . . . It lingers in the halls of corporate America," he said, "in the break rooms as well as the boardrooms. It's carried like some latent disease in us all, hidden in our hearts, checked only by our own vigilance."

I don't know what Loren Steffy thinks about religion, if he thinks about it at all. But I do know that his writing deserves to be called ministry. With a column in a major metropolitan daily, he has a great pulpit. And yet, I wonder whether there are days when, writing for the readers of the Business Section of the Houston Chronicle, he asks himself, "is anyone listening?" Here, in this church, no matter how challenging the business ethics crisis looks, at least we don't have that problem. This kind of listening and reflecting is what we gather for. This IS the candle of hope, right here. You can call this ethical malady a commercial one. You can call it a

legal one. You can call it whatever you like. But the cure, the healing, if any is to be found, will be spiritual.

CONCLUSION

We give the name “sacred” to whatever has the potential to move us closer to spiritual healing, to wholeness, to an experience of the holy. When we see something as sacred, we do whatever is necessary to revere it. We make common cause with those we don’t usually consider our allies. We speak up in situations where we usually remain silent. We take risks instead of hanging back. The expression of our spirituality in the world of work is sacred. The way we treat each other when we buy, sell, invest, invent, manufacture, and consume is sacred. May our own church and religious communities everywhere take up the work of putting these truths into practice.

AMEN.