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Stories of Transformative Leadership in Human Services: Why the Glass is Always Full

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The Commitment to Being

Chapter Twenty Four Excerpt

If the Work is Sacred, Then So Are You

“Sacred” is defined as “worthy of esteem and reverence, often because of age and experience.” (Webster, 2003) What greater work is deserving of such esteem than that of caring for the ill, providing for the destitute, teaching the young, providing safety for those at risk, whether neglected child or ignored elder?

There are many reasons why some people hold such work in far less than reverence. Some of those reasons can be partly explained in terms of social policy and shifting definitions of “deserving” and “undeserving” (Jansson, 2001, Trattner, 2000). Likewise, political and economic decisions on what is worthy of investment play a significant part in popular societal measures of value. (Krugman, 2002, Phillips, 2003)

We briefly mention these broader contextual issues because they cannot be ignored by those seeking to transform our schools, child welfare agencies, mental health programs, and homeless services. (Fabricant & Fisher, 2002) However, as our two stories make clear, these larger debates will be influenced, for good or ill, by the willingness of those who engage in this sacred work to toil each day in ways that, like other sacred acts, inspire those touched by its presence. For that to happen, one must frame their work as Helen Jacques, Oliver Trumbull, and Marjorie Jessup do. And, as their daily struggle to remain open to the possibilities of genuine engagement in their day-to-day tasks makes clear, such openness cannot happen if you do not see yourself as sacred, too.

If the Work is Sacred, Then So Are You



The greatest challenge we have confronted as teachers, consultants and in our own lives has never been the lack of knowledge and understanding needed to improve ourselves. It has been the stubborn, perplexing, deep-seated unwillingness to personally change, even when confronted with overwhelming external evidence and internal desire to do so. Examples abound in every part of our lives and with those with whom we work. We each belong to a gym, one in Harlem, the other in Greenwich Village. Each January and again in May, the gym floors fill with new and eager members who set about pumping iron, running treadmills, and stretching calves. Having watched with alarm as they joined the 64% of adult Americans overweight (US Dept. of Health, 2003) and desperate to slim down, they are immediately noticeable for their intense efforts...and their disappearance one month later. Only 30% of all health club members continue after two months, even when they spend upwards of a thousand dollars to join a gym for a year; less than half of that thirty per cent re-sign the following year. Why do so many who clearly wish to change how they look and feel find themselves unable to do so?

It is no different in most organizational trainings. When we began our consulting work, our trainings, whether on leadership, team-building, or systems improvement, uniformly received excellent ratings. We were thrilled, especially because participants rated our work so highly on its usefulness and applicability to their jobs. The thrill soon faded when we learned that our lessons almost never appeared back at the work place after more than a week or two. How could it be that people who learned from and found useful our new techniques on communications and building a winning team would not continue to use what made their own work more effective and easier to do?

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Sacred acts usually imply ritual if they are to be sustained. As writers as recent as Thomas Moore (2002) and as ancient as Buddha and Moses emphasize, it is not possible to sustain belief, whether religious or secular, in universal transcendence without acknowledging its presence through some consistent act of consecration. In more formal religions, these acts are witnessed in churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples each day. In spiritual practices, they are found in physical activities such as yoga and meditation. If you seek personal and organizational transformation, you must find your own consecrated acts that bear witness to your value and your sacred work as well. Otherwise, transformation cannot occur, no matter how desperately we seek it.

In the final section of this book we lay out the tasks and activities one can use in creating your own sacred promise to your worth and your work. The tasks speak to the two domains neglected most by those who work with others: the physical and the spiritual. Graduate and post-graduate work, whether in business, education, or social work, overwhelmingly emphasize intellectual development. Most trainings focus on learning new, results-based approaches to the

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organizational difficulties of managerial and professional life. We take such work as important—and present-- in your development.

We also know that this exclusive emphasis on intellectual growth and managerial skill is insufficient to take on the more profound tasks of personal and organizational transformation. (Bolman & Deal, 2001) We began to be aware of these limitations through our own consulting work, as trainees returned from their mid-day lunches happy with the morning lessons...and too sleepy to focus much longer. Taking a risk borne of our own personal experience, we introduced a silent ten-minute meditation into each training session. Trainee consternation at something so foreign to the training's results' focus gave way to one of our most eagerly-awaited portions of the day, as trainees found themselves re-energized and capable of effort that previously was thought impossible. By spending a few minutes on restoring themselves, they restored their vigor to do the work ahead. Transformation will require no less.

What we mean by “starting before the beginning” is as subtle as it is simple. We are asking you to start the process of your transformation with an internal commitment as *a sacred promise to your own worth* as the anchor from which your personal mastery will grow and develop. It is the Second Golden Rule for all of those who work inside human services, education, and health care: *Do Unto Yourself As You Seek to Do Unto Others.*