

# Spirituality

## as an Organizing Principle



**Diana Whitney**

**S**pirituality has entered organizational discourse through the back door and is now sitting in the drawing room awaiting a proper welcome.

We are living at a time when both the benefits and limitations of the modern worldview are readily apparent to us. We see the miracles science has wrought and we also see what damage it has enabled us to create. Great strides in information and communication technologies, transportation, and health care have come packaged with great environmental destruction and the near loss of indigenous lifestyles around the world. The modern focus on objectivity and the separation of science and spirituality, taken to fullness, leaves people separate from one another, separate from nature, and separate from the divine. As a people we can no longer ignore poetry and trust analysis, ignore nature and trust the sterility of the laboratory, or ignore the multiple voices we hear in the night and trust only the rules, laws, or policies written by some unknown people to guide their lives, not ours. Modern science in its flowering has given seed to the postmodern, and with it comes a quest for spiritual relationships, meaning, and integration.

Current considerations of spirituality as it relates to business, work, and organization development can be clustered loosely into four primary conversations: Spirit as Energy, Spirit as Meaning, Spirit as Sacred, and Spirit as Epistemology.

### **Spirit as Energy**

*When we get out of the glass bottles of our ego,  
and when we escape like squirrels turning in the  
cages of our personality  
and get into the forests again,  
we shall shiver with cold and fright  
but things will happen to us  
so that we don't know ourselves.  
Cool, untying life will rush in,  
and passion will make our bodies taut with power,  
we shall stamp our feet with new power*

*and old things will fall down,  
we shall laugh, and institutions will curl up like  
burnt paper.*

—D.H. Lawrence

For many people the notion of spirit in the workplace has to do with the energy or “feel” of the place. Theirs is a conversation about *Spirit as Energy*. High-technology, entrepreneurial organizations are described as spirited, while large corporate hierarchies are considered sluggish and bankrupt of spirit. In this sense spirit refers to a sense of aliveness and vibrancy, people's ability to stamp their feet with power. As the poem by D.H. Lawrence suggests, when we stamp our feet with new power, we shall laugh and institutions will curl up like burnt paper. Consultants speaking from this perspective counsel managers to follow the path of

least resistance, to do what they love and the money will follow, and to manage from their hearts as the means to personal and organizational excellence.

Organizational high performance and the capacity for organizational change are said to be derivative of spirit. As Harrison Owen puts it, “whatever else high performance and excellence may be based on, they would seem to have something to do with the quality of Spirit ... human Spirit, our Spirit, the Spirit of our organiza-

tions.” Much of the early work in organizational transformation considered spirit as energy. Ackerman trained flowstate managers to “work on the energy flow in the system, work for harmony, alter structures to free up energy.” One conference speaker explained organizations in the language of Chinese medicine. She suggested we manage energy flows for organizational health in much the same way a Chinese medicine doctor works to open energy flows and to remove stagnation, thereby promoting health within an individual. Aikido techniques became metaphoric means and methods for dealing energetically with conflict. Both the purpose and process of organizational transformation were to free the spirit; to build organizations with vision, purpose, and values; and to remove the energy blocks to organizational high performance.

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## **Spirit as Meaning**

*To live content with small means,  
to seek elegance rather than luxury,  
and refinement rather than fashion,  
to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich,  
to study hard, think quietly, act frankly,  
to listen to stars and birds, babes and sages, with  
open heart,  
do all bravely,  
await occasions,  
hurry never—  
in a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and  
unconscious,  
grow up through the common.  
This is my symphony.*

—William Ellery Channing

Another conversation among organization scholars and practitioners considers *Spirit as Meaning*. Shared vision and common values are said to create organization meaning and to provide the impetus for organization change. Leaders at all levels of the organization are guided to inspire (to fill with spirit) rather than to motivate. Visionary leadership, as demonstrated by the likes of Lee Iacocca, Ben Cohen, and Anita Roddick, is said to make the difference between successful and unsuccessful organization change. Visioning, or conversationally projecting the organization into the future, and creating alignment among organizational members about the desired future are essential organizing endeavors.

Spirit and meaning are said to reside in the stories told about the organization. Like a society or tribe's creation story, the organization's stories serve to create and recreate what is meaningful for the organization's members. Story telling, myth making, and the celebration of the hero's journey are taught to managers as tools to deconstruct and reconstruct the organization's sense of meaning. Organization culture can be considered the grand story of the company, the story that holds it all together. The conscious creation of organization culture involves the careful delineation of the way things are to be done, by and with whom. It is a process of making meaningful selected patterns of daily work life, and rendering others meaningless.

Central to the Spirit as Meaning conversation is the recognition that workers in the industrialized countries, especially the United States, are wanting

more from work than a paycheck. The quest for the soul in business, artful work, and right livelihood is on. As William Channing's poem suggests, to live content with small means, financially, does not mean to live without a sense of elegance, worth, or wealth. To let the spiritual grow through the common is a path to meaningful living.

Early conversations about Spirit as Meaning focused on people who found their work empty and sought meaning in spiritual practice. As more and more people embarked upon the transformational life style through the commitment to a spiritual practice of some type, the conversation widened. Now, not only do people want their own lives to be full of meaning and purpose, but they also expect the same of their organizations. Awakening people want to work for organizations that care and that are consciously contributing to the planet. People want their organizations to make positive contributions to their communities and to the world, and they want work to enliven them. Empowerment has become a code word for Spirit as Meaning. People want to be involved creatively at work and they want their voices to be meaningful to those with whom they work. They want opportunities to express themselves and to know they are heard and are contributing to the social good. They want to be liberated to learn and to grow while making a meaningful contribution. The exchange of labor for dollars is no longer satisfactory. Work has become a lifestyle and people want a good life. They want to bring their whole selves—mind, body, and spirit—to work. Meaningful work engages the whole person. It is a dialogue unbounded by roles and infused with creativity, a willingness to collaborate with others, and a daily enactment of beliefs, values, and relationships within the context of our now global community.

## **Spirit as Sacred**

*The man whose mind is rounded out to perfection  
Knows full well  
Truth is not cut in half  
And things do not exist apart from the mind.  
In the great Assembly of the Lotus all are present  
Without divisions.  
Grass, trees, the soil on which these grow  
All have the same kinds of atoms.  
Some are barely in motion*

*Now, not only do people want their own lives to be full of meaning and purpose, but they also expect the same of their organizations.*





*While others make haste along the path,  
but they will all in time  
Reach the Precious Island of Nirvana.  
Who can really maintain  
That things inanimate lack buddhahood?*

—Chan-Jan

The realm of *Spirit as Sacred* is a conversation quite different from those of Spirit as Energy or Spirit as Meaning. In this arena there is an implicit understanding that all life is imbued with a divine spiritual presence, a spiritual potential awaiting discovery and emergence. Taoist, Buddhist, and Native American beliefs are drawn upon to exemplify the understanding that divine spirit is a quality of all beings. Humans, plants, animals, and rocks are all of spirit. From this perspective, spirit is not something separate from mind, body, or action but is indeed an integral quality of being. To posit spirit as separate from body or mind is to miss the point—something modern science has helped us do very well.

Conversations about Spirit as Sacred in the workplace would have us seeking the Dora Penas of the world. Dora Pena, a potter from the San Ildefonso pueblo in New Mexico whose pots are in many museum collections around the world, including the White House art collection, works in close relationship with spirit. Dora describes the way she works as an ongoing prayer. Before she gathers the clay and sand from the hills near her home, she prays and makes an offering to the spirits of the clay and sand. As she mixes water with the clay she prays to the spirit of the water; as she coils and rolls the clay into a pot she prays to invite the spirit of the pot to be present.

I know of few people other than my Native American friends who live and work in relation to spirit as an integral part of all life. Among them the examples are many—Thomas One Wolf who prays to the Creator before hunting, that he might be gifted with the life of a deer. Grandpa Pete Concha who reminds me to visit before traveling to the far east for business so he can bless me and ask Spirit to keep me safe and to bring me home safe. The pueblo women who dance, as the spirit of the corn, with gratitude before the fields are planted and after the harvest is gathered.

The people and businesses most organized around the notion of Spirit as Sacred are the many ecologists and environmentalists around the world. They are, for

our time, the voice of spirit in all of life's forms. They are the voice of biodiversity as a sacred trust. They are the voice of our human dependency on nature.

The value of integrity is on most companies' values lists. As such it is a code word for honesty, authenticity, and truth-telling within the organization. Discussions about the application of integrity in organizational life seldom evoke the meaning of integrated or whole. Organizations are still suffering under the modern fiction of fragmentation, functionalism, and division of labor. Spirit as Sacred acknowledges the connection of all life and all energy such that actions of the part affect the whole. "In Chinese philosophy it is said that the slightest wave of the hand moves molecules all the way to the end of the universe". As modern communication and transportation enables us to experience the world as one being, we see the reality of our connectedness. As we see the effect of local actions on global existence, we wonder if perhaps we have been connected all along and just didn't know it. Spiritual practices of peoples around the world assume this connection. It enables them to live in ways and to perform rituals and ceremonies that positively collaborate with the whole of being. I have been told that the ceremonial dances performed by the Tewa people help the sun rise each day. The belief that humans and planets are related is essential to their life and ceremonies. Theirs is a sacred ecology of life based on a sense of wholeness and relatedness.

For many Western business leaders the notion of wholeness is one of the realities of globalization still to be constructed. Globalization appeared in the conversations of my clients first as a title in search of a job, and then as a potential strategic leverage. Clients with titles such as Vice President of Global Marketing, Global Vice President of Human Resources, and Director of Strategic Globalization are asking questions: What is globalization? What are other companies doing about it? How can we take advantage of globalization? Is globalization just another business school fad or is it real? All of these questions belie an understanding of the wholeness of the world and the essential relatedness of all of life, as well as the existent opportunity to cooperate with relatives, colleagues, and business partners worldwide to infuse the notion of globalization with meaning and spirit that will sustain life for generations to come.

With this sense of wholeness and connectedness comes a deep reverence for relationships. Spirit as Sacred places relationships at the center of social organization.

The Lakota Sioux draw purpose for action as well as a sense of social location from their relatives. A Lakota is credentialed not through schooling and degrees earned or by years of experience, but rather through relationships. Relationships that matter—those that give form to life and social organization—may be blood-line relationships or Hunka or chosen relationships, as well as relationships with spirit beings, and relationships given through vision. Each person's identity is in relation to the community. The community and the ongoing life of the people are enacted through relationships.

Unfortunately, one of the challenges facing organizations today are the many scars that exist from times when relationships were not honored and people were not treated as sacred. Spirit as Sacred calls for a radical relational perspective, one that not only honors all life and relationships, but also honors the multiple voices and ways of knowing of the world's people.

### ***Spirit as Epistemology***

*When the animals come to us,  
asking for our help,  
will we know what they are saying?*

*When the plants speak to us  
in their delicate, beautiful language,  
will we be able to answer them?*

*When the planet herself  
sings to us in our dreams,  
will we be able to wake ourselves, and act?*

—Gary Lawless

Perhaps the greatest divide created by modern science between indigenous people and the Western world is the epistemological divide. While Western science developed methodologies and studied the world in order to control the forces of nature, indigenous people studied the world in order to cooperate with the forces of nature. This difference is awe-inspiring to me as I have come to realize essential differences not only in the ways of knowing but also in the knowledge gained.

For many people for whom spirit is integral to life there are realities other than the visible worlds of technology, living nature, and human beings. Within these realities reside spirit beings who on occasion make

themselves and their views known. Examples include the nature Devas who guide the care of the gardens in Findhorn, Scotland, the spirit relatives who talk to Lakota people in sweat lodge ceremonies, and the many spirits who are channeled by psychics around the world. In all cases the presence of spirits depends on relationships among them and some person or group of people. Spirits are invited to come forth and communicate through ritual and ceremony. For example, the Navajo sand paintings may be looked upon as symbolic representations of healing, but to the Dine people, "The making of the sand painting is the creation of the presence of the beings. The beings are not at all separate from what the sand looks like. Once the sand painting is there, they are there."

Business and organizations around the world call on holy people to bless buildings, business endeavors and the people whose work is to serve the community. But once the blessing is made, whether by a Shinto priest, a Rabbi, or a Medicine Man, what business and organizational leaders engage spirit on a daily basis for decision making, for team building, or for maintaining balance within the local community, as it relates to global well-being? All too often consultants, serving as the metaphoric ministers of organizational well-being, provide assistance based upon the scientific paradigm of control over nature. The challenge of Spirit as Epistemology is to open to the voices of spirit and to learn the ultimate lessons in cooperation: how to co-construct global communities and organizations in balance and in harmony with spirit. ■

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