

Excerpt

*Spirituality in Business and Life:
Asking the Right Questions*

by Peter Senge

*Why are you so unhappy?
Why are we so unhappy?
Because everything you do
and 99 percent of what you think
is for yourself.
And there isn't one.*

—Wu Wei, 12th Century

For many years, I worked with a diverse network of people in organizations. For the most part, I consciously avoided the word spirituality. In business there was no difficulty at all in using the word spirit—that was not a problematic word. Like any word, it resonates better with some than others, but it raised fewer concerns. Most people in thinking about concrete experiences in an organization will respond right away when asked if they have ever been part of a team with any spirit. They know what it means, and they can anchor it directly in what they experience. But somehow the word spirituality creates ambiguity and concerns. We have a "nouncing" culture; we like to make nouns out of dynamic processes. So I suggest a caution: in our culture, particularly our media-oriented culture, this "nouncing" tendency takes phenomena which are living, growing, transient—which is to say, life—and makes them into things. This is a problem. I have seen one fad after another after another move through our business community and our society. There is this voice in the back of my head, saying, "Gee, I wonder if three or four years down the road, we'll say, we've done spirituality; now what's next?" This is what happens with fads....

As I think about the word spirit or spirituality, I immediately think about its multiple meanings. And one that often gets lost is what I am doing. If you think about someone who really has moved you as a person, someone whom you would regard as having depth, a spiritual quality, what they do is a key dimension of their distinctiveness. Something about the way their life is focused and their energies are directed is in line with something that was quite integral or essential to them. For me, work was an extraordinary opportunity to deal with these questions. All of us have the central concern about using our lives well. Obviously, it would be easy to overstate this point and not recognize very powerful cultural counter-forces pulling in the opposite direction. As I mentioned, there is a belief in our culture that the purpose of a business is to make money. This perspective is almost universal. There is also a story about us as individuals—that what we really care about in life is ourselves. What we care about is how much money we make, and how much power we have.

It would be naïve to discuss these issues and ignore the fact that we live in a cultural stream. We are all products of history. We stand in it; it surrounds us. It is us; it moves through us. And that cultural history speaks loudly and clearly, at least over the last hundred years or more. According to our cultural story, the ultimate goal is to get ahead of others. Students graduate from MBA programs and think about climbing the ladder. In the last few years, the question has become, "How am I going to make a million, or 10 million, by the time I am 30 with my internet start-up?"

Now I shall shift from the philosophical to the concrete, and raise the question of what are we doing practically. We know we have huge problems in the way we live, not only at a personal level but also at a collective level. Perhaps a lot of people would not agree, particularly in this country. Americans are among the least aware on the subject of the deeply problematic nature of our way of living collectively.

I attended a meeting in India last fall with people from all around the world for a three-day dialogue. The group was diverse, with about a third from business, a third from non-governmental agencies, and a third from government. We discussed what is going on in the world; the call of the times was the question. I was a little bit surprised, because as Americans we live with an illusion that everything is so fantastic; everyone is getting wealthy. Of course the truth is much different—only a handful of people are getting wealthy. The economy is moving with zero unemployment—but it depends whom you count as being unemployed. The whole world is trying to catch up with us, but of course when you meet people from other countries the perspective is very different.

There are extraordinary problems in their countries—the social problems, the environmental problems, the intractability of the issues. Things are not the way they should be. Unless we change our way of living, the prospect ahead is not very encouraging. There must be a spiritual revolution, as the only possible way we can imagine all of these issues actually changing. We need to either change what we are doing, or do it with the kind of passion and conviction that we know we can bring to it. No new policies have to be developed, and no drastic change is necessary in organizations. People already feel they are in a place where they can do a lot of really good work already, if they stay at it.

Perhaps I am naïve about this, but I actually find that around the world and spectrum, even in this country, when people have a chance to slow down and think about it, they are deeply concerned about the way we live. There is no complacency or belief that everything is going as well as the way the media would suggest. People complain about not having enough time. Most people are aware that the time to talk with friends has all but vanished, that lunches have disappeared from our work settings, and that socializing does not occur much anymore. People are also very aware that the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer in most parts of the world. According to the World Bank, the bottom quartile of the population, in terms of income share, have lost ground. About a quarter of the people have only a

little more than 1 percent of the world income. And you know the same thing is going on right here at home.

So how do I connect where I live, where I am, and what I do, to my sense of this larger whole? That is a huge question. Very few people or organizations are willing to talk about the problem, but some are. Three years ago, at Stanford, John Brown, who is the Chair and CEO of British Petroleum, gave a remarkable speech. Few people in his position ever speak publicly about environmental issues. The subject is not discussible in public. He said, "Look, we'd really be fooling ourselves if we continue to pretend there's nothing going on with the climate in the world. No one knows conclusively, but if we wait until the scientific evidence is absolutely conclusive, we'll have waited much too long to do anything." It was an historic speech—almost as if the CEO of a tobacco company stood up and said, "Let's face it, we all know smoking kills." Remarkable things are starting to happen where people are finding ways to connect these big issues with themselves....

So what is spiritual practice? Maybe the key issue is how to live with one another. How to live with all the things around us. Obviously meditation and cultivation are important, whatever your contemplative practices. If you lack a contemplative practice, get it. Find what is right for you. Do not waste your time. Because it seems to me that the opportunity is staring us in the face. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we still face the question: How do we live with one another? How many times do we listen to one another? How many times do we not listen for the reality in which that statement makes sense as opposed to listening for what is wrong. How do we connect it to who we are?

Speed seems antithetical to space for reflection. Indeed speed is a huge issue for everybody. No one has time to do the things they want to do with twenty-four hours of e-mail, seven days a week, or voicemail and so on. There is an organizational part of this, with which the business world is really struggling. It boils down to an extraordinary misunderstanding at some level. People are trying to run organizations that are more adaptive, flexible, capable of adjusting to a dynamic world. But we will not get there by running around like a bunch of chickens with our heads cut off. To become more flexible and adaptive requires more awareness and more awareness actually requires slowing down. In disciplines of all sorts, whether jazz music or tai chi, if we aspire to become more capable of improvisation, of being able to move with what is present in the moment, then we have to expand our capacity to be aware of what is present in the moment. This level of awareness is not reached by becoming frantic. We sometime confuse being frenetic with being adaptive, which leads to the deep confusion in the business world.

The key to the future in the business world will be electronic communication, although at present it is a problem for all of us. It really is not a problem. Just stop and think for a minute: your life has always had more information than you can possibly take advantage of. When you drive by the library, do you feel compelled to go in and read all the books? Do you have to read all the e-mail? Now obviously there are also questions of relationship—because I sent you an e-mail, and I will be

hurt if you fail to respond. Well, that comes in establishing the boundaries relationships require. All relationships have boundaries. So if we do not respond to all the e-mail, we have to negotiate that with one another. The new question concerns living together. As living systems, we have biological capacities. We are not solely biological, but we are partly biological. We have capacities. So to me, the practical question is a personal one. First, I keep asking myself, what do I want to do and how much time do I want to spend on my e-mail, or my voicemail, and then I negotiate with my network of relationships whether I can do that in a way consonant with the relationships I want to maintain. And we must also question our practices to expand awareness. Strangely enough, in a speeded up world, meditation may become a survival skill. It is a joke—meditation is not a survival skill, but until we can quiet ourselves, we cannot deal with being frenetic. The question always deals with becoming aware without getting caught up. It has critical implications for us.

I was in conversation not that long ago with the director of the Shambhala Center in Nova Scotia. We were joking that in the business world, meditation has become discussible now because it gained legitimate entry as stress reduction. And he said that when we introduce people to meditation, we tell them it is about stress *intensification* because it opens us to what is going on. We begin to realize that there is a lot going on. Without practices of some sort, I think our capacities to be aware in turbulent and uncertain settings are challenged, and we need to find out how to build those capacities.

There is a problem with spirituality in companies, which concerns how spirituality might improve the management of our companies. In that sense spirituality could be a mechanism to make more money! Spirituality could be used to make people feel comfortable with the fact that, although working well, they do not understand what is the real goal of their company.

I also have real problems talking about spirituality in companies. If the larger context does not change, spirituality becomes yet another technique to keep doing what we have always been doing. I guarantee that within three years, we will be saying, we have tried spirituality and now what else are we going to try? However, it is not really difficult to talk about these issues, if we talk about you or me doing whatever we are doing. We can develop a discipline of reflection and inquiry about our motives. What does it mean for me? Is it really what I want to be doing in my life? If not, what can we do to change it? This line of inquiry is accessible to all of us, which does not imply we can change right now. We all have constraints in our lives. And constraints may keep us doing something we do not want to do. But seldom have I seen a situation without some latitude.

Then there is the question of the purpose of a business. And I actually think a lot of people are starting to raise that question so that we stop telling ourselves the dominant story of the last fifty to seventy-five years—particularly in business schools and consulting firms—that the purpose of the business is to maximize the return on investment. This is surely an idiotic view today. In the world there is a surplus of financial capital. It's true! The global financial markets have an extraordinary surplus of financial capital. We are trying to maximize a resource, which is already in excess supply. There are a billion or two billion people in the world underemployed—no work, no meaningful employment. So we have this strange world where we are destroying natural resources, habitat, species, while gradually starting to pay the price which will be evident in your insurance premiums next year. Two years ago was the biggest year in the history of the property liability insurance industry in America. Last year will probably be bigger still. We are all starting to pay the price for instability in the global climate. At that level, the CEO might not be able to initiate change, but a group of people in conversations cutting across organizational boundaries will change the focus of the purpose of the business.

Remarkably there are businesses in the world today that are really serious about starting to manage what they call the triple bottom line of how an organization pays equal attention to financial, social, and environmental impacts. We have to be successful in all of those, because if not we will not be viable, and be undeserving of financial investment.

A real shift is occurring. We really should be driving cars that get 200 miles to the gallon, which is absolutely feasible. I believe that in twenty years it could happen, even in ten years. But there must be a real shift in how people think about the Ford Motor Company or British Petroleum. One person cannot do that alone. It will take a critical mass of people, including enough people in positions of authority.

What can each of us do as individuals to bring spirituality into our work? First do not go and preach about it. Foster conversations. Ask yourself and the people around you, why are we doing what we do? Are we doing it the way we want to be doing it? Do we want to go to meetings? If not, why don't we change the meetings? There is already plenty we can do right here at home. There is another level of questions about the institution as a whole—the context. Both are equally important. Of course this comes back to systems of education, and so on. We all participate in all of these. Do you want to know why the Ford Motor Company does not have 200 mile-per-gallon cars? Because they do not believe we care enough. They have very little evidence that people care. So we are all locked into these systems.

The ultimate irony of the systemic perspective is that it concerns each and every one of us as individuals. The ways we think and act create our system of commerce, which cannot be changed by any one person. Bill Ford, the Chairman of Ford Motor Company, cannot change it. Believe me, he is totally powerless by himself. Yet on all these levels it can be changed, but we have to decide; we have to choose that we want to live a different way and then decide what we are going to do today and tomorrow. Perhaps in this way, we will bring spirituality to the workplace.

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