

# Whispering Around the G-Word

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John Shibley



## A RESPONSE TO PETER SENGE

Pat Paulsen was a comedian who performed on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* in the mid-sixties. Paulsen would spoof TV editorials. In one he looked straight at the camera and said emphatically “The time has come to stop whispering about...”, and then pausing and lowering his voice, he went on... “s...e...x.”

Senge’s article, “Spirituality in Business and Life: Asking the Right Questions” (*Fieldnotes*, December 2003), reminds me of Paulsen’s gag. We’re still whispering about spirituality and work. Mind you, whispering is probably a very good idea. Something intuitively warns us to watch where we step when we write and speak about this subject, to avoid being too clear lest we wake some beast better left sleep-

ing. One gets the impression that writers on this subject are doing a careful, delicate dance.

I want to take a different tack than Senge took in his essay, which will surprise no one who knows me, least of all Peter. I want to write about why this subject is so damn difficult to write about. The beast may wake up, but so be it. At times I will refer to Senge’s article, but only because it’s the latest and most familiar example of the dance that the readers of *Fieldnotes* have.

### Deus Ex Dialogos

Of first importance is this: writing and talking about spirituality and work is difficult because we can’t get very far into the territory without talking about... G...o...d.

Cross-dressers, infidelity, ovarian cancer, depression medication: all these subjects come and go without incident in corporate North America, but mention God and it gets quiet fast. Talking about God just gives people the heebie jeebies.

Senge actually gets off 2,800 words on spirituality and work without mentioning God once, or using the words “holy” or “divine.” Amazing when you think about it. It’s like praising wood for six pages and not mentioning trees.

I suppose it’s possible to have a spiritual life without needing to acknowledge a God or a transcendent Other, but it’s the rare exception rather than the rule, and has been for millennia. The simple fact is that until very recently, a human

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spiritual life automatically meant the acknowledgement of some version of the Holy.

What happens to the conversation about spirituality when you can't talk about God?

Early scientists constructed elaborate cosmologies to explain the movement of the planets while maintaining a geocentric universe with the Earth at the center. Kepler finally declared that angels moved the planets in their paths around the Earth, a 15th-century version of the *New Yorker* cartoon where "then a miracle happens."

In a similar way, when we talk about spirituality and work the taboo on mentioning God requires us to take positions that are clearly at odds with millennia of spiritual practice and seem, on reflection, as unlikely as Kepler angels.

**What Isn't Spiritual Practice?**

Senge writes, "So what is spiritual practice? Maybe the key issue is how to live with one another."

Well, no. Living with one another is surely important, and relationships are powerful, humbling teachers. Relationships are spiritual, and we grow spiritually through them, yes and yes. But THE key issue? Sorry, no.

Spirituality is about being in

relationship with, ah, you know, the G-word, with the God of your understanding. Always has been; always will be.

Relationships with other people can't be the center of a spiritual practice unless you think you can have a spiritual practice without you-know-Who (or you-know-What). While some may advocate this, our spiritual story has had God in it for so long that the burden of proof must fall on those claiming that a God-less spirituality is possible.

It's a heavy burden indeed, requiring the refutation of hundreds if not thousands of spiritual writers and as many years of the best reflection we've produced. Dispose of Merton and Lao Tzu and then we'll talk.

We need a Practice, and we need *to* practice, and we need to listen for the voice of God in our *choice* of practice. Spiritual disciplines find and choose us, not the other way around. Good thing too—our egos can lead us to exactly the practice we need least. We need to wait and see what approaches us.

(Me, I'm coming on 19 years of saying the Daily Office, a prayer form based on monastic life. I think I may be finally getting it. When I really want to experience humility I practice modal scales.)

**I Me Mine**

Senge is not explicitly advocating a God-less spirituality. However, he clearly proceeds as if it's possible to exclude God and still be able to have a useful conversation about spirituality at work.

This is good marketing, but bad dharma. Our civilization is so spiritually hungry that men and woman will eagerly dine at any table that promises nourishment for their souls. Starving people will eat anything. But without God, without some engagement with the reality of the Holy it's just so much spiritual junk food. Full bellies for the moment, perhaps, but no enduring substance.

Business cannot abide a conversation about God for the same reason our culture marginalizes the Holy; we love the idea of being in charge. We're Number 1, not some deity we can't market to or manipulate. George Harrison sang:

*All through the day,  
I Me Mine  
I Me Mine  
I Me Mine*

*All through the night,  
I Me Mine  
I Me Mine  
I Me Mine*

"The good news is that our spiritual clarity, when it comes, penetrates the divisions we pretend exist between work, recreation, family, and community. The Light is within us, and we carry it wherever we go."

The blunt, uncomfortable truth is that a spiritual practice requires the acknowledgement of a more powerful Other and the surrendering of ourselves to that Other. It's not all about us.

However, work life *is* all about us. It's all about people directing, innovating, creating, selling, buying, and "creating our own future." ("*All through the day, I Me Mine I Me Mine...*") That attitude is incompatible with one of surrender. There is no room for any will but our own.

Senge suggests starting spiritual conversations in companies with these questions: "Why are we doing what we do? Are we doing it the way we want to do it?" Good enough questions, certainly, and absolutely acceptable fare around the corporate table. But spiritual?

"Are we doing God's will?" is a spiritual question. "Is this Right Livelihood?" is a spiritual question. "How are we creating suffering?" is a spiritual question. Try those questions and see what happens (but have your résumé current).

No matter how much we might wish it, the central concern of a spiritual life is not "using our lives well," as Senge suggests. It's in making our lives available in love for the Other's use. The Holy adores an active partnership

between our individual lives and Its will, but we are never the senior partner.

### **Against Spirituality and Work**

The corporate world will mangle spirituality to its own purposes, and "Spirituality at Work" will be another leadership fad. Count on it. (Has it made the cover of *Time* yet?). Business turns ideas into profit. That's what business does, and damn well too. Render unto Caesar.

Seeking a relationship with the Holy, however, is not a fad. It is a fundamental human instinct. We've been doing it a long, long time. "Spirituality and Work" will end up on the ash-heap of management history, but spirituality will do just fine.

The good news is that our spiritual clarity, when it comes, penetrates the divisions we pretend exist between work, recreation, family, and community. The Light is within us, and we carry it wherever we go. It illuminates all without prejudice. There is really no "Spirituality & Work" any more than there is "Spirituality & Civil Engineering." There is just spirituality.

If a renaissance of spirituality is to save us (and it can) then it needs to acknowledge God as the necessary point of departure. I'm not particular

how you think of God, but you must think of Her. (Or Him.) (Or It.) We need to let our spiritual lives stand on their own and not contort them by forcing them into an unnatural and unnecessary partnership with work (or Civil Engineering).

Thoreau wrote of a craftsman; "Having considered that in an imperfect work time is an ingredient, but into a perfect work time does not enter, he said to himself, It shall be perfect in all respects, though I should do nothing else in my life."

If we talk about spirituality and work at all, let's do it in perfectly, without regard for the time we might save by eliminating troublesome spiritual realities like God. Let's say the truth and wake the beast and take the consequences.

This may take a while, but that's okay. God will wait.

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The author wishes to acknowledge the comments and encouragement of Ellen Fowler, Jade Angelica, and Michael Jones.

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# A Response to John Shibley

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In thinking about John Shibley's response, I'm noticing that it is more natural for me to think of the role of spirit in organizational life (than to think of God), of leading with and from heart, of being open to grace, and mystery and uncertainty. And to returning again and again to purpose, to attending to the other, to the stranger, and to those more vulnerable.

I think that it is true that to speak the word "God" in organizational life leaves a path of silence, but I'm not sure that one should therefore assume that what is missing is that naming of the sacred. I think the lack of the word in organizational life is not because it is an undiscussable, but rather because it is a concept that is limiting, and excluding of a broad understanding of spirit and the spiritual. I am a believer in noticing the range of words that can point us toward sacred space, and sacred relationship with each other and with a higher power. It is a practice of mine to notice which words seem to invite reflection, spoken or not, about the sacred, and which seems to reduce the likelihood of such reflection.

It may be that my views are shaped by Quaker practice, one that is open to all believers, and non-believers as well — all spiritual seekers. In that practice, speaking ones truth, and also welcoming other perspectives both are important. Some of the language that would have been natural to my Methodist, Midwestern upbringing, seems out of place in Quaker spirituality.

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