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VIEWPOINT

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REKINDLING THE HUMAN SPIRIT IN BUSINESS

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Editor's Note: An Academy **Viewpoint** is an occasional piece written by a Member, Fellow or Academy guest. The following piece written by Academy Fellow Harrison Owen is another in our series of Member and Fellow responses to the issue of lack of enthusiasm in the workplace. While Harrison agrees that the Spirit in our organizations is generally in pretty sad shape (Soul Pollution), he suggests that there may be more going on here than meets the eye. The larger issues have to do with the transformation of human and organizational consciousness.

How is the Spirit?

By Academy Fellow Harrison Owen

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Robert White's response to the recent Challenge Question is right on the money as far as I am concerned. The fact that he quotes me with approbation has nothing to do with my opinion, of course. And Mark Albion of Wilson Learning fame has put some numbers to a phenomenon that I and, I am sure, many others have been witnessing and feeling quite uncomfortable about. Truth of the matter is that the Spirit in our organizations is, generally speaking, in pretty sad shape. My words for it all are that we are currently experiencing a massive outbreak of Soul Pollution.

Just as we have Environmental Pollution which causes deep wounds to our bodies and the bodies of all other creatures, so Soul Pollution is the contaminated condition of our organizational life when the toxic byproducts of our work can no longer be handled efficiently and effectively, resulting in a sickening of the Soul and a diminution of the power of our Spirit. I suppose I should have said Spirit Pollution for reasons of consistency, but Soul Pollution somehow has a better ring to it.

The early stages of Soul Pollution are experienced as a malaise when it comes to getting up in the morning to go to work. Judging from the bumper stickers in my part of the world, folks would rather be doing just about anything than going to their jobs. Whether all this reaches the 80% disaffection level found by Mark Albion, I don't have a clue, but that it exists at all is a shame. After all, most of what we do in this lifetime is called work or job. Sounds rather like a life sentence.

The progress of Soul Pollution is recognized when it is found that the last time you had fun at work was when you quit, and the advanced stages are marked by such things as stress, strain, burnout, conflict, and abuse of just about everything in sight including co-workers, spouses and substances.

I can fully appreciate and commend Robert White's appeal to responsibility at the individual, organizational and societal levels. Taking clear-eyed responsibility for our present condition is a first step to a cure, but I rather suspect that it may not be sufficient. The reason is that the underlying pathology may be more powerful than we first thought, with an etiology of a deeper sort than we ordinarily look for. How's that for some good medical jargon? Translated it means something like, "There may be more going on here than meets the eye." And what might that "more" be? The transformation of human consciousness.

I suspect that the root cause of our current malaise is nothing other than the massive power of the transformation of human consciousness at work yet one more time. At least, that is a story I have been telling with increasing conviction for 20-odd years. It is not necessarily a popular one, and may not be true, but it makes a certain sense to me.

In 1983, when a bunch of us got together to convene the First International Symposium on Organization Transformation, the notion of Organization Transformation was an oxymoron for many, for transformation, after all, was something that happened only to individuals, and then only in very esoteric circumstances. Just imagine something like General Motors transforming. Absurd! But we were afflicted with the idea, and subsequent history seems to have lent a certain credence to our craziness. A year or so ago, I actually ran into a gentleman with the title, Vice President for Transformation at Sears. I am not quite sure what he did, but the words were there.

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"The Academy is not just another association of business people to exchange information and foster collegiality. It is about investing ourselves in a task of historic proportions." **Willis Harman**

The time immediately surrounding the International Symposium on Organization Transformation was a heady time indeed. Marilyn Ferguson had recently described the machinations of the Aquarian Conspiracy, Tom Peters was Searching for Excellence, and John Naisbett was describing the Megatrends that were transforming our world. Exciting times for sure with much new thinking, which some folks referred to as “New Age”—a rather unfortunate phrase, I think. New ideas, new people, new connections. It was then that I ran into this wonderful person, Willis Harman, who with great patience and learning assured me that my apparent insanity might not be so insane.

As with all such outbursts of ideas and creativity, something of the True Believer comes into play. New insights become “The Ultimate Insight”—with the total solution of all the world’s problems just a moment away. At the very least, the temptation to look at the world through the rose-colored glasses of the new perception is hard to resist. And the Transformational crowd was no exception. For sure Transformation is exciting, liberating, uplifting, Soul-confirming, Spirit-empowering... But that is not all it is. There is a shadow side as well, a side the “Love and Light,” or some would say, “Flow and Glow” folks (which included all of us some of the time) would rather avoid. But the wisdom of the ages has always known that the brighter the light, the deeper the darkness.

So what about Soul Pollution and Mark Albion’s 80% disaffection rate? I would suggest that all of it is the organizational equivalent of the Dark Night of the Soul, which unfortunately is an essential, automatic, predictable part of the transformative process. No Dark Night of the Soul, no Light at the end of the tunnel? At least, that is the story.

Organizational Consciousness

Just as individuals progress through levels of consciousness, so do organizations. There are many and complex schema describing this transformative journey. For the individual, one of the simplest and oldest is reflected in the Great Chain of Being, which Ken Wilber (Up From Eden) outlines as follows: Body, Mind, Intellect, Soul and Spirit. Actually there are seven parts to this journey, but the first is *nothing*, and the last is *nothing*, and it is very hard to talk about nothing. In between, however, consciousness manifests in some rather more concrete ways. I attempted to identify what might be called the “organizational analogues” (Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations, Abbott Publishing, 1987): ReActive, Responsive, ProActive, InterActive, and Inspired.

Just to give you something of the flavor, a Reactive Organization (equivalent of Body) is very basic. Things are just getting started and it is exciting, entrepreneurial and confusing. A Responsive Organization begins to get things organized, but in very simple ways. I always think of a good British Pub, where your favorite brew is always available to you, your neighbors and friends, who have all been gathering in the same place in the same chairs for years. It is comfortable.

The ProActive Organization is what most of us thought was the epitome of organizational finesse. This is the home of the MBA, everything is done by the numbers, and the mantra of the day is Control, Control, Control. And if you are ever out of Control, you are out of a job. ProActive is the organizational equivalent of the individual Intellect, which as we all know is the domain of the Ego—which all too often becomes the Island Ego. Ego is not a “bad” thing, but there is a dark side which appears as, “I define myself against all else.” Walls are built, defenses are created, and at its worst, “I stand alone and not much else matters.”

Organizations do exactly the same thing, I think, which is manifest in corporate arrogance. My favorite example is good old General Motors as described by Charles Wilson (the president) who said, “What’s good for General Motors is good for America and vice versa.” Somehow, General Motors became a world in itself. In fact, many thought it was the world, a position which becomes tragic when the world changes, and nobody notices because their attention is so fixated on themselves. Which is exactly what happened when the Japanese and others introduced those “funny little cars.” We all know how that story turned out.

In the name of maintaining control, the organization at the ProActive level builds systems and structures to maintain control. Departments are isolated from departments, and everything is isolated from the world at large. The fiction of creating the perfect “Closed System” takes over, even though no system can ever be fully closed.

To give the devil his/her due, ProActive organizations of this world have done quite well, thank you very much. Enormously productive, such organizations have given us what used to be known as the “good life”—two cars in every garage, etc., etc. But the cost has been enormous, particularly to those individuals who call such places home.

Human Beings are funny creatures. They seem to do well only in community, whether that be family, neighborhood or nation. Deprived of community, these creatures become stressed, alienated, anxious and generally nasty. I think it can be fairly stated that if one were to set about and design a system/structure which would totally destroy community, it would be hard to improve on the current state of the art in the ProActive Organization. Community depends on communication, but that is limited by institutional modes, departmental walls, personal fiefdoms, all dictated by a policy of need-to-know. The rationale is Control, and the result (supposedly) is efficiency.

I know it is probably heresy, but many corporations remind me of Zoos. Separate cages for all the critters, and (in the better ones) full benefits provided. All very orderly and definitely under control. But zoos are *collections*, they are not the rich community of animal life on this planet. So if I had to spend my life in such an environment, I know I would hate it. And the only surprising thing in Mark Albion's figure is that it is not 100%. I guess there must be a few folks who think they are the Keepers, and they get to go home at night.

A Time of Transformation

If this were the end of the story, it would be a sad one indeed. But there seems to be some light at the end of the tunnel. At the very least, we collectively are coming to recognize just how miserable we are. And we have been taking a number of steps to ameliorate our circumstances, as in programs for Community Building, Personal Empowerment, Conflict Resolution, Stress Reduction and the like. But I fear these, though well intentioned, are largely palliative, for the pathology we encounter is NOT an indication of system malfunction. In fact just the opposite. *The system is working perfectly, doing just what it was designed to do – keep everything under control.* Actually, I rather suspect that our efforts with these many programs only increase the misery, because each one of them suggests that there could be a better way to be. And for the moment (during the program) we do feel better. But then comes Monday Morning, and it is Soul Pollution once again.

The light at the end of the tunnel is really there, I think, but the source has nothing to do with “fixing” the current level of organization consciousness (ProActive). The electric possibility is that we will, in fact, move on to a new level of Organizational Consciousness, which I have chosen to call InterActive.

The fundamental characteristic of the InterActive Organization is that it is consciously and joyfully an open, living system and, therefore, a self-organizing system. Constant engagement with the surrounding environment in a flexible, adaptive manner is the mode of operation. And most importantly, *control*, as we used to think we had it, is a thing of the past.

Perhaps most curious is the fact that there is nothing new here. For I am convinced that there really is no such thing as a non-self-organizing system—albeit there are a few folks who actually think they did the organizing. Thus the InterActive organization is a blinding flash of the obvious, or at the very least, a return to reality. The great gift of the InterActive Organization is that we no longer have to pretend that somebody (perhaps ourselves) is actually in charge and controls everything. What a blessed relief! And it turns out that stuff that used to take eons to organize and mountains of effort to maintain in an orderly fashion happens pretty much by itself. As Stuart Kauffman, biologist and Self-Organizing System mavin says, “Order for Free.”

There are some other benefits as well. Learning is a constant, ongoing phenomenon. Having fun at work is an essential condition. Control and Structure are still very much present but always appropriate to the people involved, the task performed and the environment in which it all takes place. Best of all, there is a profound sense of genuine community. Last, but by no means least, the level of productivity, efficiency and effectiveness absolutely blows the mind.

Doubtless this all sounds like a wild polyannish dream, but in fact there is a large body of experience which more than suggests that it is a dream that can and does come true. Not to be mysterious--that experience is the 16-year natural experiment with Open Space Technology. For all the details and a greatly expanded version of the rationale, I invite you to take a look at my latest, and hopefully last, book, *The Power of Spirit: How Organizations Transform* (Berrett-Koehler, 2000). But just for the sake of argument, grant for the moment that it is true, at least substantially. Wouldn't this be a marvelous antidote for Soul Pollution?

The Dark Side

So if the possibilities are so sunny, why are we sitting around feeling miserable? Let's get on with the business. Let the Transformation roll! But not so fast, there is a cost, as is the case in every transformative moment. And that cost is very painful. Shortly put, what stands in the way is our deeply held need for and belief in Control. In the workplace, control has been the coin of the realm. When you had it, and the extent to which you had it – you were a wealthy person indeed. And without control, you were nothing. Just think of the average employee evaluation form which asks questions like: How many people do you control? How long have you done it? And how well do you do it? If the answers are Lots, For a Long Time and Very Well, you get the executive office suite and the six-figure salary. And we are supposed to give up all that?

Just to make matters worse, we all have a vision of what a better workplace world might be like, perhaps not just like mine, but it is there. And every Monday Morning, for an awful lot of people, that Vision is shattered. Worse yet, it seems that every time we seek to implement our vision through some training program, it works and feels just great for the moment. But Monday Morning triumphs. Soul Pollution breaks out again.

So here we are—sitting in the middle between an Organizational Consciousness (ProActive) which is not working for us--all the while holding a vision of positive future possibility, which is denied by our inability to give up the one thing we have taken to be the crown jewel of organizational life—Control. No wonder Mark Albion came up with his numbers.

But even here there is some good news, I think. Even though our pain in the moment is extreme, that pain is precisely the thing necessary to get our attention. No pain, no gain. Quite literally. Perhaps when the pain becomes sufficiently severe, we will just relax and allow to occur what is probably going to occur anyhow. Our Transformation. No guarantees, of course, and it is just possible that we will “blow the mission,” so to speak. But to this point, the transformation of human consciousness has been proceeding quite well. Not necessarily according to *our* plan, but considering how it all started back in the caves chasing woolly mammoths and all, things haven't gone too badly. Let's hope we can keep it up.