



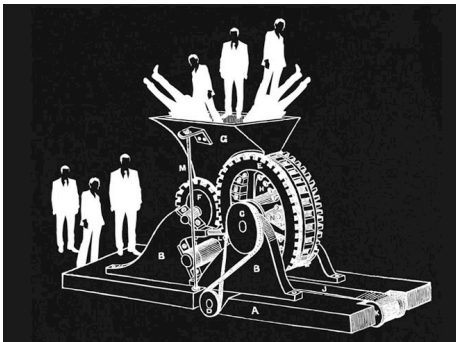
Business and the Journey of the Soul

By Mark D. Youngblood

(Excerpted from the book *Rediscovering the Soul of Business: A Renaissance of Values*)

Business has become today's religion. Somehow, we have come to confuse the means with the end and treat business success and the accumulation of wealth as our life's purpose. We spend most of our waking hours in service to the god of business, where "prophet" is replaced with "profit". We wreck our health and personal relationships in this pursuit. We do violence to our neighbors, to the earth, and ultimately to ourselves. We measure our personal worth based on our income, the jobs that we hold, how much power we wield, and the prestige and social acclaim that we receive. Our heroes are chief executive officers, entrepreneurs, salespersons, and entertainers who command enormous incomes and who accumulate vast wealth.

In establishing material pursuits as our highest ideal, we have forsaken our true nature. Humans are spiritual beings having a material experience, and not the opposite as we have come to believe. In not recognizing our spiritual essence, we have created a mostly lifeless, soulless business world. The opening scene of *Joe vs. the Volcano*, one of Tom Hanks' lesser known movies, provides a vivid illustration of just such an environment.



We are shown a parking lot with people threading their way through the cars toward their workplace: a metal, windowless, single story building surrounded by tall, forbidding fences. Employees in drab clothes plod listlessly through gates flanked by guard towers and armed attendants. Heads hang down and no one speaks to anyone else. A single yellow flower, standing bravely amid the mud and water puddles, is crushed under the boot of an unfeeling, unseeing human robot. The interior of the building is stark, gray, undecorated and lit by harsh neon lights that sputter and buzz. A vulture-like supervisor descends on the arriving employees and begins the daily ritual of domination and antagonism. The department's supervisor removes the one vestige of humanity that Hanks claims — a desk lamp with a scene of a tropical island on it — for no reason other than to enforce unblinking compliance and capitulation to authority.

Our wish would be that this experience be limited to the realm of movie fiction. Sadly, it isn't. In my experience, finding companies that are vibrant and full of life is the exception rather than the rule. Businesses, as they are conceived today, operate outside of the fabric of life. People are expected to deny their humanity, conduct themselves as emotionless automatons and dedicate themselves to the "noble" pursuit of unlimited wealth. Each year people are working



longer hours, juggling more responsibilities, and struggling under increasing demands for improved productivity. Constantly, we labor in fear and anxiety as our friends and co-workers lose their jobs through layoffs and "right-sizing".



There is little joy or meaning in what we do, we feel isolated and cutoff from our emotions and from each other, and we are forced into inhumane actions that offend our higher sensibilities.

The modern business world struggles under a paradigm that is outdated and destructive. Paradigms are powerful conceptual filters through which humans shape their understanding of the world. Paradigms are mental models which are so fundamental to how we think that rarely are we aware of their existence or of their influence on how we interpret the world. Paradigms shape what we are able to perceive, literally acting to filter information and limiting our ability to learn and to change. Our mental models make it difficult to perceive information that is counter to our beliefs and expectations. In some cases we ignore such data, in others we distort it to meet our expectations and in extreme cases we are literally unable to perceive it. This makes it extremely difficult to change deeply rooted paradigms, and our modern business paradigm will be no exception.

Today's business paradigm holds that companies exist for profit, that this profit is earned through competition, and that employees exist to serve the interests of the company. Businesses are viewed as machines with profit the product and human resources just another mechanical piece. The ultimate aim of business is to grow endlessly and at an extraordinary pace. Little regard, beyond that required by law, is afforded the environment, community, or concerns of employees. Given this view of business, there should be no surprise that we find little evidence of soul in business. Machines don't have souls.

A Dawning Awareness

I became aware of the need to reintegrate soul into the world of business through my first work experience. My indoctrination into corporate life came in the service of a giant oil company. During this time, oil companies were experiencing unprecedented growth, and profits were so extreme that Congress enacted the Windfall Profits Tax. The employees were reaping their share of the profits through accelerated performance review schedules and double-digit pay raises. You would imagine that if money could create the joy and vibrancy that you would expect to find in a soulful business, surely this would be the place. It wasn't. The employees were miserable.

I worked in a skyscraper where the walls, the carpet, the furniture, *everything* was gray. Personal decorations were allowed only to the extent that they conformed to corporate standards (and almost none did). The company operated under a rigid command and control management style and internal politics determined who had



power and received the prestigious jobs. Work was something you were paid to do, not something you were expected to enjoy. After six years I was sick at heart. It took all my strength to drag myself to work. I was making more money than I ever imagined, I held a position with ample power and prestige and had a bright future ahead of me. But something was deeply, profoundly wrong. I felt that some important part of me was starving to death. It made little difference that I had material prosperity so long as I lived in spiritual poverty.

I discussed this feeling with my boss. I explained to her how unfulfilled I felt despite the material comforts and prestige. Her advice was both startling and disheartening. She said that most people in the company felt much the same way, and that they had come to accept work as just a way to make money. She advised me to find something *outside of my job*, such as a hobby, charity or church activity, that would give me the meaning for which I was looking. I was thunderstruck. It seemed unthinkable that I should have to live the majority of my waking life in a dreary, meaningless existence — only to find respite a few hours each week squeezed in-between work and the normal demands of living. In the hopes of finding fulfillment through economic freedom, I left to start my own business.

The Turning Point

On the morning of June 6, 1985, I died. Not a physical death, but a psychological death, what Dr. Stan Grof calls an "ego-death". I had just spent the past year trying to start my own company, spending my entire savings, going deep

into debt and exhausting myself in the process. On that morning, I finally admitted what had been obvious for a while — my company was going to fail. With it went everything that defined who I was to the world. I could no longer say that I "was" my job, because I had none. I couldn't rely on my wealth to create a sense of worth and identity, for I had no money and loads of debt. I could not look to social standing, for a failed entrepreneur has no social standing. And the failure of my love relationship a month earlier ensured that I could not find myself through the love of another. I had nothing, therefore I was nothing. And I died.

The failure of my business proved to be the pivotal point in my life. Up to that point, I had defined myself through my income, job status, relationships and other external material concerns — all the things that my business indoctrination had taught me to value. When these were stripped away, I was left with nothing. I was in abject despair. I couldn't eat. I couldn't feel. I couldn't think. I wanted to cry but had forgotten how. In final desperation, I closed my eyes and withdrew deep inside to find a place of safety. Down, down into a place of deep, dark, soothing coolness I went (later I realized I was in a deep state of meditation but at that time had never even heard of it). Then I let go of myself and simply fell away.

In that instant something marvelous happened. I experienced a flash of brilliant light and was instantaneously bathed in all-encompassing, unconditional love. In that moment, I was reborn. I opened my eyes to a new sense of joy in just being alive. I felt mesmerized by the wonder of life and its mysteries. Since then, I have come to



look at the world with different eyes. I have remembered the real purpose of life — to provide a vehicle for the spiritual journey. I realized that external circumstance has nothing to do with who we *really* are; marvelous, infinite souls on a journey of self-discovery and spiritual evolution.

The business environment, which for so long had been my entire world, suddenly seemed completely inhospitable, even toxic. It simply didn't seem to have any relationship to my spiritual purpose. Business is an integral part of life, but it doesn't operate in that way. Business has a life of its own — it serves its own, not those of spirit, and it operates by its own rules. As spiritual beings, we are on an inevitable journey to ever higher levels of consciousness. We crave meaning and a worthwhile purpose in our lives. As Chester Barnhard says: "People want to be bound to some cause bigger than they, commanding, yet worthy of them, summoning them to significance in living." Businesses are mostly emotionless, amoral machines. There is little hope in such environments for finding fulfilling work.

The disparity between our experience of business and our need for soul fulfillment is the source of much misery. We reach out for something — anything — to fill the resulting emptiness. Ironically, our pursuit of material wealth and pleasure is in large measure due to the lack of fulfillment that such pursuits create. Instead of seeing this vicious circle for what it is, we simply intensify our efforts, convinced that if we can only earn enough money, buy enough things, have enough social prestige, we will be happy. And of course we never are.

No person who I have ever met believes that people are born into this world solely to earn a living. And yet, that is exactly the way in which we have constructed our societies. Think about your own life over the course of the past year.



Where have you spent the majority of your time and what do you spend most of your time thinking about? Dr. Juliet B. Schor, writing in her book: *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of the Leisure*, notes that the average American now works the equivalent of a whole month more per year than did his or her counterpart in 1970. In fact, people are working longer hours than at any time in history other than the Industrial Revolution — spending more time on the job than did medieval serfs! We have created an insidious cycle of 'work and spend' that keeps us tethered to an economic treadmill. The time has come to end this destructive cycle and rediscover the art of living.

A New Model for Business

There is much irony in knowing that we, the creators of our paradigms, have come to be enslaved by them. This is also the source of much hope, since anything that we have made we also have the power to change. And change we must.



Our present business practices are leading us on a perilous course of self-destruction — destruction of our social framework, destruction of our health, and destruction of the Earth. In order to avert this fate, we must conceive differently three key elements of our business paradigm. These are the beliefs that the ultimate purpose of business is to create material wealth, that employees exist to serve the interest of the company, and that successful business is characterized by rapid and endless earnings growth.

For purposes of illustration, we can consider the metaphor of business as a vehicle. Clearly, money is required to run our businesses. Under our current business paradigm, businesses exist to create wealth for the owners. Restating this in the language of our metaphor, the *vehicle exists to consume fuel*. Gasoline powers our vehicles. Without fuel our vehicles are out of service. The destination for our vehicle is no further than the next source of fuel, and our largest concern is that we take on enough gas to get us to our next fill-up. So, we wander aimlessly from fuel source to fuel source, getting nowhere at all. The journey is virtually irrelevant so long as our vehicle consumes as much fuel as possible, and the bigger the vehicle the more fuel it can consume. In reality we are quite reckless in our travels, leaving a trail of destruction and suffering behind us. These vehicles are machines in which mechanical parts and the human passengers are treated equally. Both are components to be consumed and discarded at will, without regard and without remorse. After all, parts are parts.

There is, however, another way of conceptualizing business. We can recognize that our destination is spiritual transcendence, and that the journey is the evolution of the soul. If we reorient our model and say instead that the vehicle's purpose is the journey — to deliver people to a destination — then business comes to serve employees and we have another use for money, which is to fuel the journey. Clearly, we must always have enough gasoline to keep the vehicle moving, but we don't need an excess, nor is our purpose to use gasoline. In fact, we would hope to use as little as possible. The size of our vehicle would be relevant only in that it be big enough to make the journey. The quality of the journey becomes as important as achieving the destination and only those vehicles that can deliver us to our destination with suitable quality are acceptable.

We will never achieve truly soulful businesses until we redefine the basic tenets of the current business paradigm. We can achieve increasingly humane work places, but that is not the same thing as a soulful business. In fact, quite a few of the current business practices are creating a better workplace for employees. Worker empowerment, self-directed work teams, the quality movement, cultural diversity — all are allowing more soul to shine through into the business world. But always these concessions are weighed against their contribution to profit and shareholder value, and rarely because they are important to human development and self-expression. In a *Business Week* magazine article titled "Managing By Values" (August 1, 1994), a director of the Levi Strauss company makes the point about their values-driven orientation that "the challenge for Levi's is that decisions are not



just 'nice' decisions, but decisions that are meant to enhance shareholder value". Levi's CEO adds that "We are not doing this because it feels good We are doing this because we believe in the interconnection between liberating the talents of our people and business success." These are not fundamental changes — anything given in the name of profitability can be, and frequently is, taking away for the same reason.

Characteristics of the Soulful Business

The idea of a soulful business dedicated to a spiritual cause inspires images of touchy-feely organizations where everyone is always happy and smiling and everyone gets along. Because profit is not important, we have images of a government-like lethargy and inefficiency. However, this is *not* what soulful businesses look like.



In many ways, a soulful business looks much like any other business. These businesses are fully committed to generating revenue, operating effectively and efficiently, and in hiring and

retaining the best people available. They may "right-size" and have layoffs. They survive through product innovation and effective competition in their markets. And they insist on dedicated, purposeful effort from employees. Becoming a soulful business takes less a change in operations than a fundamental shift in the psychology of how we think about business. Out of that shift flows the basic changes in behavior and decision making that characterize a soulful company.

Soulful businesses are committed exclusively to worthy causes. They strive for a positive influence on community and nature. The quality of the employee work experience is a high priority. Corporate values are centered around selflessness, service, personal growth and learning, truthfulness, openness and equity. The entire range of human emotions are accepted. Hugging and other modest shows of affection between consenting people are common, and love is an acceptable word. Balance is encouraged between work and personal time. People are not expected to hide or suppress events in their personal lives. Authentic human reactions are valued over "polite" behavior. Individuality and independent thought is revered. People shape the business rather than the business shaping the people. Every employee takes personal responsibility for the welfare of the company, and this is easy because the corporate purpose is aligned with their personal journey.

Soulful businesses have a distinct feel to them. They have a robust, vibrant energy. People are excited about their work. There is a bustle of activity, but it is not the frantic activity of the



profit-driven, cost-minimizing company. People seem to know and enjoy each other. There is a strong feeling of community. Employees walk with a spring in their step. The environment is radiant with human energy and expression. In companies like this, you feel uplifted after visiting them.

Soulful Business Requires Soulful Employees

Not-For-Profit organizations are examples of businesses which recognize that the purpose of business lies in a noble destination and in the journey itself. However that is not enough to create a soulful business. If you were to wander through most large charitable organizations, you would see the same lifeless, automaton existence that you find in for-profit corporations. So, it is evident that orienting the business around a noble cause is not enough. It requires each individual entering into their unique journey. The company can promote a positive environment for people to express their full potential. However, it takes people committed to fully realizing their potential. This requires releasing our illusions, having the willingness to change, and dedicating ourselves to self-reflection and inner exploration.

Joseph Campbell, the renown historian and mythologist, calls this the "hero's journey" a prerequisite for "finding your bliss". A person's "bliss" is in finding the work that you were uniquely called to do. When you find your true work, the feeling is unmistakable. Your work is effortless and has a timeless quality about. You are fully engaged and feel energized by doing the work. Robert Henri, writing in *The Art of Spirit*, describes this phenomenon:

When the artist is alive in any person whatever his kind of work may be, he becomes an inventive, searching daring, and self-expressive creature. He becomes interesting to other people. He disturbs, upsets, enlightens, and opens ways for a better understanding Where those who are not artists are trying to close the book, he opens it and shows that there are still more pages possible.

Being on a personal journey of self-realization does not imply saintliness. It is about unfolding. It is about becoming truly, completely, authentically who we are and evolving to ever higher levels of consciousness, of spiritual being. But we are still human. Being soulful is being *completely* human. There will always be dark and light, shadow along with beauty, and we need to see reality for what is — to overcome our illusions and self-deceptions. So, if we think about businesses and individuals all aligned around their spiritual journeys, what you will find is not some Utopia. You find humanity. Good and evil. Joy and despair. But you will also find passion, vibrancy, and the sheer joy and wonder of being alive.

Businesses with Soul

Fortunately, companies exist today who have been able to conduct business profitably while at the same time demonstrating a robust spirit and soulful environment. Most of these are small businesses where a single visionary can make a profound difference. Southwest Airlines stands as a notable example of a large company with a demonstrable soul. Herb Kelleher, the notorious



CEO of the company, promotes an employee-centered environment rich in humor and celebration. On one of my first flights on Southwest, I was astonished to hear the flight attendant follow the normal safety announcements with a parody of the announcements. I was astonished! I had to ask someone else if they had heard what I just heard. Imagine that — a sense of humor in a business setting! Later I learned that Southwest employees are *encouraged* in this behavior.

The consulting firm where I presently work is an excellent example of a company centered around creating a soulful business environment. Over a decade ago, the two founding partners, Dr. Kareen Strickler and Dr. Don Brush, shared a vision of a business where they could live out their values and pursue their spiritual growth in a business context. Kareen determined early in life, through her father's example, that she would not spend her time doing things that were not meaningful and that did not bring value to the world. While working with Southern Methodist University's Institute of Cultural Affairs, she internalized their credo that "anything worth doing cannot be completed in your lifetime." This led Kareen and Don to conceive of a "mighty cause" for their business, one that was bigger than both of them. They wanted to have an impact that would make the business world different, that would help give people a sense of purposefulness. Their journey, and mine, is the revitalization of the workplace where people will have a sense of meaning and renewed joy in living.

They sought to create a business built on genuineness, honesty, and personal warmth.

Each potential client is evaluated for consistency with their value system before they accept any work. They carry their values into the client environment with some remarkable results. One client confided to me that they periodically found a reason to call Don in for more work because they so enjoyed just being in his presence. Remaining true to their vision has not come at the cost of personal financial sacrifice — in fact both have enjoyed top incomes for most of the years the company has been in business.

Most of the companies that I encounter which are able to sustain a soulful environment are relatively small. Perhaps that is a prerequisite. If so, there is hope in several emerging trends. All of the net new jobs in the United States in the past decade have come from small companies. Tom Peters, noted business author and futurist, predicts that companies in the future will break into smaller and smaller pieces, until they attain a level of no more than one hundred employees. Developments such as these may portend a more fertile environment for the emergence of soul in business than we ever before have known.

Conclusion

People today are in greater transition than ever before in history. The rapid and profound changes in our lives are forcing increasing numbers of people to reevaluate their values and to assess what is truly important to them. As more and more top people drop out of the traditional job market and seek more fulfilling work, we will see a profound shift in the working world as we know it.



Businesses are in a position to have a profound effect on human consciousness. Joseph Campbell notes in *The Power of Myth* that man has always placed at the center of society the institutions which had the most importance. Initially, churches were the largest buildings and were located at the center of the society. Later, political buildings were the most prominent as governments and politicians gained supremacy in power and influence. Today, the buildings of industry are unparalleled in size and importance. We spend a huge amount of our time at work. Much of our behavior is shaped by our work environment. I believe that it is here that the spiritual transformation of our society will take root.

As we approach this exciting new time for our world, we will find our paradigms shifting. As they do, we will lose whatever security we may have known as we leap to an uncertain future with nothing more than hope and faith to guide us. Perhaps we can gain some comfort from the words of the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who wrote:

*Come to the edge.
No, we will fall.*

*Come to the edge.
No, we will fall.*

*They came to the edge.
He pushed them, and
they flew.*