

Life at Work. Keith Suter Interviews Thomas Moore for the Australian Institute of Company Directors. Posted on Web 6th Feb 2008.

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– The British management writer Charles Handy in one of his books recalls that when he reached around 55 he was still wondering what he would do when he grew up! It is intriguing that one of the best management writers of our era and a great inspiration to generations of business people should show that he was still reflecting on his purpose in life at such an advanced age. Today we are speaking with an American writer whose books have become best-sellers partly because they do address the deeper questions of the purpose of life and work. Thomas Moore was a catholic monk for twelve years and later reinvented himself as among other things, a psychotherapist. He is now also on the lecture circuit and joins us today.

K- Why would an Australian company director want to read your book as after all Australia is a secular society and most company directors don't normally look towards religion for answers to business questions.

T – I don't approach religion in a particular way of a particular institution. I approach it as a way of dealing with the deepest mysteries that as human beings we have to face. I think that a person who is trying to deal with work and career is facing one of those situations. It is quite a mystery and goes very deep and often we don't talk about it deeply enough so people think that it is a secular issue and it really isn't.

K- How is business a spiritual practice?

T – Well, there are a number of ways. I think that the most important is that business is a way of sustaining community. So we are relating to each other, offering services to each other that we all need. That is the most important aspect of community. If you look at a small or even primitive community, you find that a market or some other exchange is going on and often this idea of community is understood as a spiritual activity. The second thing is that this kind of work for community requires ethical sensibility so it requires a spiritual point of view in order to develop an ethic that really works.

K – By the way, there is a lot of emphasis now on the lack of trust brought on by the global financial crisis. Is trust also linked in to this spiritual practice?

T- Another word for trust, almost identical is faith and faith is a word regularly used in religious language. I don't feel compelled to use religious language for what I do so trust is something that requires a vision. You have to transcend your narcissism and get beyond your own self-interest in order to create trust between people.

K – I think we need to define the word spiritual a bit more. Many people would see spiritual as being something religious. I think that you use it differently and in your book you make a distinction between soul and spirit. Could we clarify that?

T-In a general sense when you are going beyond the religious traditions spiritual relates to any transcending of one's self or one's vision so I think it is a spiritual activity to contemplate, meditate and carry out deep and far-reaching conversations with people. To try to imagine that you are participating in a community greater than you are in your work. I think that the constant expansion of one's world and your place in it is spiritual activity but you may achieve that through religion or you may not. Soul is quite different. I use the word to mean the depth

of who we are – the depth of thoughts, feelings and experience. Something that touches us so deeply but is inside us to create trust between people.

K- Incidentally I have said that Australia is not a religious society, which is not quite true, sport is our religion. We may not go to church but we do go to sporting events. You refer to golf as a spiritual activity.

T- Well, I do see sport as similar to a religious activity. We have the stadiums, the rules and the people whose whole identity is wrapped up in sporting activities. I wouldn't call it a religion but would call it a quasi religion.

K- How do you find it when you are talking to business people about spirit? How do you get business people who are trying to achieve next quarter's results to stand back and create a win-win situation within the community?

T- I recently went on a long book tour and I purposely spoke to all types of business groups from corporations to small entrepreneur groups. I spoke to many people and it took nothing to talk to them about these issues. When the economy goes down people wonder about their future and the future of their families and their children. These questions of business always involve the whole of life. I think that people are hungry to have their business life addressed at this level because normally they hear much about the economics and about job hunting and career. However, they are worried about the effect that work falling apart would have on life, as it is so interconnected. Wondering if life is worthwhile, what to do next etc. May people I spoke to asked, "What do you do when the work that you have been doing just doesn't satisfy". People have to take a leap into the unknown and that is a spiritual issue which people feel very deeply.

K- You seem to be zeroing in on the purpose of work and its impact on life. In the book you refer to “essential direction” what you mean by that.

T- We are not on a linear path. I think that most of us take turns, in my own life I have taken major turns! Positions that I lost, it was a good thing as I wouldn't have found the things that fulfill me. The essential direction is not a straight line but it is rooted in your nature, who we are. It also has something to do with our family and their impact in our life choices.

K- Now, in your book you emphasise the importance of a client telling their story.

Why is that important and how do you encourage people to do so?

T- First of all, I give people the opportunity to tell their story, usually people come to me for counseling and therapy and they are prepared to tell a story. They may think that my role is to interpret the story and tell them what they should do but I don't do it that way. I try to give people the opportunity to tell their story and listen very carefully to what they say. I encourage the story and don't really trust people's explanations of what the problem is. One of the problems with life is that when we have a problem we don't really know what is happening. Therefore, I don't trust that, I do listen and help people to tell their stories. I will also ask people to repeat their stories for new dimensions and to allow us to hear and understand it better. Because the story is an art form rather than an explanation, it tells us a lot but not the whole story. If you reduce life to a simple explanation, I think that we have lost a great deal.

K- You talk in your book about failure being a prelude to success, what do you mean by that?

T- I mean a number of things. One is, if a person wants to find his or her own direction in life you have to take risks. Life keeps barreling no matter what, you may think that you have got to a place that is comfortable then another opportunity comes along or a failure might happen so life keeps coming at you. We need to deal with this rush of life and move with it instead of trying to get it under control.

K- You refer to work as a type of “calling” which has religious overtones. What do you mean when calling work a calling?

T- I mean first of all that it is a spiritual issue so there is a sense in which when we look back on our work things develop in such a way that this isn't just decision making, there is something fateful in the process of finding one's life work. That is a spiritual issue in a sense that forces beyond our self are shaping us as we go. We move with them, make choices and take risk. We may decide to try to protect our self from this and people who are very protective may not know what to do, as they haven't allowed life to shape them. Therefore, there is a sense that we are called to do what we are going to do and sometimes that calling comes as the voices of friends telling us what to do, owners, bosses or managers. These voices give us hints on the direction that we should go.

K- Your approach to life is somewhat different to what you might see with secular people. I teach overseas students including many Chinese, which would, if listening to this interview would find it totally beyond them because most of them would argue that they are not spiritual. They would say that everything is material, it is what it is and there is no hidden meaning or anything like that. It is intriguing that Your books are as popular as they are looking at a way of life that is different to that being taught in materialist societies such as mainland China. There there is no such thing as spiritualism and spiritual movements get themselves into trouble. Even on university campuses in the western world, we have post modernism where they would argue that life doesn't have a pattern it is just one thing after another.

You in a sense are providing a third approach tapping in to a much older tradition saying that life is full of meaning and our challenge is to try to make sense of the various messages that are coming to us and not trying to pretend that they don't exist.

T- I don't use the word spiritual much but I do speak about things that come from beyond us. It's true that I do come from a religious background but I am finding that many experts in religion have a much more sophisticated notion of these things. What we do sometimes is think of religion and the spiritual in very naive and old-fashioned terms. Very conservative terms. What I am trying to do is be part of this movement where we don't make these grand distinctions between secularism and religion, as we don't see them anymore. We are not talking about the existence of some voice out there, something floating through the cosmos. What I am saying is that I hope we can be more intelligent and sophisticated about the way our life takes shape. To be secularistic is what I would call it and dismiss these notions of the mystic and that which transcends our world and consciousness. We have to look at our life and admit to ourselves that we are not fully in charge of this. I am not saying that there is an angel floating around or something but I am saying that we are not fully in control.

K-You seem to be bordering on what some would call the new age.

T- Well, I am not a new age or any other type of catholic. It is there and is a part of me and I think that my theology influences me but so do other religions—Zen Buddhism, ancient Greek and others. I think that these religions hold tremendous wisdom for us and I think that it would be a shame if we lose this and adopt some kind of scientism or secularism that loses that wisdom. Then all we have left is cold scientific studies and some people's facts. I don't think that that is enough for us to get along.

K- It is interesting that in the middle of the last century, 20th century American sociologists predicting the death of religion. Saying that as society gets richer it has less need for religion. The growth of communism led people to believe that religion was simply the opium of the masses. However, here we are in the 21st century and religion has bounced back with vengeance. You are foreshadowing a 21st century in which religion or spirituality will remain very important. You think that there is still a future for religion and spirituality.

T- I have studied European renaissance history and art, which has been very important for me. I read that the great artists and thinkers of the European renaissance, 1500's especially. They described their culture as being guided by integrity that is how I feel about religion of the past. I think that we need something entirely new. I think that we are moving towards something new but we are guided by the past. I feel guided by the great religious and spiritual poetry that I have read in the past. Especially when viewed with my own thinking. This becomes very relevant and suited to this century. If I do that, I do notice that the 20th century is over. It's over because I could see that we were trying to pull away from something that didn't work at the end of it. When I was studying for my PhD, many of the professors were studying about the death of God. What they meant was the end of a certain kind of religiosity. It was ending and they were saying what is going to happen next, we are not quite sure.

K- So, is it possible for a person to get to the heart of their life's work late in life? It is possible for people to suddenly find that essential direction then, even if they have done well in secular terms but are feeling an inner emptiness. Can they then make their later life be fuller of meaning?

T- My father is now 96 and recently had a change in direction. He saw that when he was nursing my mother in hospital four years ago there was a need for help on the ward. My mother died and around that time, a vacancy for a ward volunteer up. Dad was wondering what to do as all of his work references had died but he went for the job anyway and got it despite competition. He had been a plumber all of his life so this was a change in direction for him. At that late stage in life, he found a very fulfilling life work. He found that he could deal with people who were struggling to communicate, he could make them laugh and improve their life. If my dad can do it then anyone can.

K- Well, that is very encouraging for us all. Thomas thank you for your time today.



