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Best wishes for the new year. Many people finish up a year feeling tired and overwrought. They go on holidays with a sense of relief, and manage to recover some sense of well-being while they are away. Yet the prospect of returning to the same work environment that left them feeling drained, cheated or unfulfilled often generates feelings of panic. The article below is for them.

Returning to work

Being aware means being aware of what is going on for you now. Suppose you have been on a holiday. Before you went away, you were frantic and frayed, but you created the space for your holiday.

You had no obligations to answer business calls or emails, and there was no expectation that you would be available to make decisions or fix problems. You were free.

Over the days, you relaxed. It was pleasant to rise at leisure and eat with enjoyment. The day's plans were to experience something new, to share laughter and to delight in new encounters. There were many other people around you who were also seeking to recover the sense of being human without the burden of alien purposes that make you hard.

That feeling of easiness gave rise to moments of joy and gratitude. The battles had faded, the necessity to be harsh had evaporated.

And now there are feelings of panic. You are returning to work. You expect that nothing will have changed. You anticipate a return to tensions and conflict, where you will compromise yourself daily and leave your best self at home in a drawer, fearful and even ashamed.

You are tempted to call this "reality" and relegate your holiday feeling to a private space called "respite", or some other term denoting the ephemeral and the exception.

How can you sustain the lightness you came to feel, the ease and strength of those days away? Was it mere escapism? Or is the answer to buy your way out forever, to sell up and buy that boat, that farm, that shop in a small town?

I learn stillness, and know that bliss lies there. I do not start with answers, plans or objectives. I remember the poet's words:

Look from the place
Where we are all one,
Carry the light into the day,
Stay open in the heart.

I accept what I am committed to, I work with a light heart. I give thanks for what I have. I commit to live with honesty, peace and love, with reverence for the lives of others - other humans, other creatures of the earth, and the earth itself.

This is not an answer. The captains of business will still be there, they will be demanding action, blood and money. And their small lieutenants will be at your shoulder too, nasty as ever, to impress their masters.

But it is well to remember that spirit drives action, and to sustain the myth of brute force, your belief is called for too. And what if you withdraw your belief? The world does not work on brute force. Water runs downhill, finding whatever path is convenient. So doing, it carves rivers out of mountains.

Brute force has to be sustained constantly, artificially, just as demand has to be kept at a height by incessant advertising.

The sustainable society, and the sustainable life, makes opportunity out of peacefulness and joy, it makes business out of goods and ideas that have integrity.

Allow yourself constancy of purpose. If the meanness and expediency of the doomsday realists is imposing on you, remember that their beliefs are a house of cards built on blind fear. Your purpose is not to live in compromised ethics and craven fear.

Allow yourself time to take shape, just as trees stand tall because they remain constant in their purpose. Wind and drought may mark their growth, but they do not mar the purpose.

The problem of living ethically and joyfully in a perverse and stunted world may seem intransigent. Yet the joy lies in your inner stillness, and it is remarkable how the champions of force can lose their will, and the problem dissolves.

The spirit of force is the spirit of fear. Master your own fear, and stay the course. Run like water, stand like trees, laugh like sunlight. This is what the poet calls, "carrying the light into the day".



Image from Woodford Folk Festival, December 2006

Schweitzer on civilisation and ethics

In the previous newsletter, I cited Albert Schweitzer's thoughts on ethics. His book, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, delves into the tensions between ethics and the nature of society and the world. The article above echoes some of Schweitzer's thoughts.

Schweitzer says (paraphrased):

In the old rationalism, reason undertook to investigate the world. But it has to accommodate itself to the truth that it is unable to get a conception of life and ethics from a conception of the world. Knowledge of the world will not confirm the place of ethics. That has to come from our will to live.

Deepened world- and life-affirmation consists in this: that we have the will to maintain our own life and every kind of existence that we can in any way influence, and to bring them to their highest value. It demands from us that we think out all ideals of the material and spiritual perfecting of individual person, of society, and of humanity as a whole, and let ourselves be determined by them to steady activity and constant hope.

It does not allow us to withdraw into ourselves, but orders us to bring to bear a living, and as far as possible an active, interest on everything that happens around us. It delivers us from pessimism. The will-to-live which tries to know the world is a ship-wrecked castaway; the will-to-live which gets to know itself is a bold mariner.

Schweitzer derives ethics from the will-to-live which we all experience, and invites us to honour this experience in order to live ethical lives. The real pessimism is to live as a victim of what the world (especially the business world) claims is necessary (as reflected in the cheap phrase, "business is business").

Feedback

Let Glenn know what you think of the newsletter and the website. It's all part of the endeavour to bring an ethical perspective to business, one that enables people to work with integrity and organisations to operate with high principles.

Ethics & Values in Business is operated by Glenn Martin and based in Sydney, Australia. It also operates under the name "TouchWood Ethics".

Glenn is available to write, speak, train or consult on ethical issues in organisations.

You are invited to visit Glenn's websites:

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