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Unpublished Essay

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FLOWERS IN ARMOR
The Crisis of Spirit and Authenticity in a Corporate Career

On my desk in my executive office, there was a small, two-sided acrylic picture stand. In it, I kept two photos that I had taken in the same village church on a trip to Southern France – one was a bouquet of flowers that had been painstakingly arranged in the silent church by a calm little old woman. On the obverse side was a statue of St. Joan of Arc, in armor and with her lance, battle-ready.

Some days the flowers faced me; more often, it was Joan. The images helped me to remember that the part of me that would just as soon cultivate beauty was still there, even when I had to "saddle up" for battle.

My eventual decision to leave behind my corporate role was the only way I knew at the time to resolve that anguished inner divide.

The Knot of Light and Shadow

What follows is a deeply personal reflection on my experiences as a woman in executive leadership in a major business corporation. I think it would be fair to assume that my 15 years in corporate life could be viewed from the outside as successful (1984 – 2000). I certainly learned and grew tremendously, achieved a great deal, got promoted to the top of my field, and earned the respect and confidence of many. The good news of my corporate story does not stir my soul to writing, however. Rather, the reflections that follow are in many ways an exploration of the shadow, an exploration of crisis and ultimate "failure".

When I speak of failure, I mean the recognition in my bones that there was a coherence or inner integrity in that corporate career that simply eluded me despite years of strenuous efforts to get it right, and with consequences both positive and negative for me and for others.

Although I kept regular journals during those years, things that seem relatively clear to me now only emerged retrospectively, with the gradual passage of time and the benefit of reflection from a distance. I am grateful for the healing effect of this process. The pondering has enabled me to redeem the memories of very painful moments with recognition of all that was good and valuable in those same events. It is perhaps a paradox that an exploration of failure and flight leads me today to a deeper appreciation of fidelity and growth. My own life is teaching me about this elusive knot at the core of our human experience.

Two languages arise readily in me when I grapple with these issues. One is the language of organizational psychodynamics: emotion, self-observation, structures and inner dynamics. The other is the language of spirituality and mystery in the heart of my being. Each gives me access to the interiority of my life experience as an individual as well as in relationships and organizations.

This story contains several kinds of insights and discussions:

- ❖ Conclusions about what I believe to be the inherent disconnect between the broad range of values that a public business corporation might genuinely espouse, versus the actual trajectory of power and financial accountability that ultimately defines it.

- ❖ Related conclusions concern what I have learned about the shadow side of my idealism in the work of organizational leadership.

- ❖ Insights into my own mixed motives under the pressure of difficult work, and the unacknowledged damage to organizational trust that can come in the wake of leadership promotions – my own, and others'.

- ❖ Ways to understand my collusion with models of leadership and management that were fundamentally incongruent with my espoused values, and my personal struggles in terms of unconscious role and gender dynamics in the organization.

This reflection starts with the impact on me as I observed with great sadness the demise of the organization in which I once worked. It continues as a reflection on some of the critical moments in my journey when I struggled with what I experienced as crises of authenticity, ethics, and personal values in the fulfilling of my corporate role.

What Grief Reveals

> *"My dream of last night was a dream of grief, of being overcome, of needing to crawl away and cry … discovering grief for the end of the company for which I did such strenuous things that were painful for so many others, as well as to me."*
> *– Personal journal, 2-16-2010, ten years after leaving my corporate role, one year after the company was acquired.*

I could begin with my career story, but I won't. The actual event that crystallized these reflections was the unexpected sale of the company for which I had worked, some years after I had already left my senior executive role to start a management consulting practice. Although it was a major publicly traded enterprise, the company had retained the self-image of a family business, honoring the values of its founders. The sale sent shock waves through the company and the colleagues who had once worked there.

Observing the end, exactly 100 years after the year of its founding, was full of sadness for me. Something had died. It wasn't the commercial business per se that died, but the networks of relationships and history that had given the company its personality, its "DNA", its character and culture. This "something", the interiority of the organization, is like the soul or spirit of a person; it is an experienced but invisible reality without clear value in the marketplace. Like the death of a person, the end of the company's independent existence brought the end also of its story, its purpose, the communal identity of the people in relationship to it. The grief was deep and it surprised me.

It strikes me now that I was unable to appreciate the depth of this kind of catastrophic ending when it was experienced by other people in the firms that my company itself acquired in the past.

Years ago when my company was in the role of the acquiring company, I and my executive team colleagues presided over a corporate integration process. We did what we could to provide generous support to displaced employees who were living

through a similar process of the death and dismemberment of their organization. It was plenty hard, for sure, because I was aware of their anxiety and vulnerability as their jobs disappeared or changed – but I wasn't in touch with the depth of their grief for the loss of the company itself, with all its memories and all its promise.

I understood that grief in a deeper way as I watched the demise of the company in which I had worked so hard. I was aware also of feeling sad regret. In my years there, I had imposed many stresses and painful changes on myself and on others – all for the cause of assuring a successful future for the company… and implicitly for its people. Was it worth it at the time? Perhaps.

In the face of frequent cynicism from employees, especially the unions, I had advocated cooperation with management on behalf of a vision that had an "all-for-one, one-for-all" tone to it. No wonder the cynicism – in the longer term, that is not ultimately true.

This is not a conclusion fired by anger or blame at the individuals, myself included, who dealt with the corporate system as best they could from within its own rules, logic, and sense of fairness. I wanted to believe that there was a win-win possibility. This value was a major feature of my professional training in the field of Organization Development. Even more fundamentally, my desire to cooperate with authority was also an important element of my personal psychological make-up. (As the eldest child in a large family, I grew up much influenced by the rewards that come from identification and cooperation with the plans of the parents.)

But the cynics were at least partly right. It is not a level playing field. A powerful personal learning is that it is important for me to recognize and be willing to acknowledge the unevenness of the stakes in the risks and rewards of corporate life. I was not honest with others or with myself about the unequal privilege that went with our different responsibilities and status.

Greater candor about such things wouldn't change the fact that solutions to problems must be hammered out no matter how imperfect, but it does respect the lived reality of the affected employees. They know the truth in their bones. Authenticity may be grim at times, but un-founded idealism isn't fair.

Shareholders Win

I knew, of course, that it is not the primary objective of a corporate business organization to fulfill each employee's individual goals, vocation, dignity, although such values are often honored in a general way. In a rational economic work organization, the roles are designed for the efficient execution of its primary tasks.

But in my years as a manager and leader in a global manufacturing company, I believed it to be possible to hold multiple interests in an optimal balance of some kind – the interests of the customers, of the investors, of the employees, of the community at large. In the short run, that may have been the case, although at a great cost. In the longer run, I was wrong.

The fact is that the ultimate, governing objective for decisions made by public corporations in the long run is the return on investment to the owners[1], trumping the other purposes that the company might have held as valuable and in some cases achieved. I don't state this as if it were a bad thing, nor a good thing – but as a reality.

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[1] I don't believe this hierarchy of values applies in the same way to every business organization – family firms and companies embedded in local communities and economies are more likely to have multiple measures for survival and success.

Despite many years of faithfulness to the founder's intentions for the company to be a good employer, by the time the major-shareholder family-owners were distributed through three generations, the experience of ownership was no longer one of face-to-face relatedness to a community of employees and customers – people with names, families, personalities, talents, and histories with one another.

The "owners" of the past became the "investors" of the present – holding shares as a form of wealth to secure the future of their children and their philanthropic purposes. Ownership was no longer an experienced responsibility for the life and purpose of an institution in the world, as it is in the early days of a new enterprise when the owner is often the founder, creator, and manager.

So, for its own perfectly valid reasons, the family owners sold the company. These investors redeemed the value of their shares, and passed ownership of the company to the anonymous shareholders of a larger global corporate enterprise.

Then, on behalf of the equally legitimate financial interests of these new owner-investors, the executives of the acquiring company disposed completely of the corporate management apparatus in the acquired company that was now redundant. Many hundreds of jobs were shed. The product lines and research labs and commercial business processes were partitioned and re-incorporated into the new parent organization, or they were divested. The organic integrity of the original company as a whole has disappeared.

There is a powerful irony in these events. In the perverse reality of the modern structure of capital, the investor community includes the very employees who may lose jobs when deals are struck[2].

In this case, the decision of the family investors to sell their substantial ownership stake brought financial returns to ALL the shareholders of the original company, including the employees themselves – hundreds of whom would end up losing their jobs because the cost structure of the acquired company included functions that were now redundant. Although the purchase of their invested shares yielded a generous return to employees, for most it was not nearly enough to offset loss of employment.

Even if the shareholders hadn't decided to sell, perhaps the end of the company was inevitable. The pressures of the global economy in the last 15-20 years of the company's life had stressed the people of the formerly resilient, confident company almost to the breaking point. Relentless waves of restructurings and cost-cutting had stripped away the buffer zones and rhythms within which people could think, be creative, renovate their energies. The strong fabric of relationships and trust woven over many years took a long time to wear thin and fray, but fray it did. The commitment of the company to the local community and to their employees took a back seat as the corporation struggled to fulfill the demanding expectations of investors and customers. Sooner or later, something would have taken it over the edge.

Conflicted Motivations

My experience bears out what the research tells us: people prefer to work in places that are characterized by leader credibility and trust first and foremost, even when the work situations are objectively very difficult for employees to deal with. The problem in my case was that I was hiding the truth from myself as well.

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[2] Burkard Sievers, Psychotic Organization as a Metaphoric Frame for the Study of Organizational and Interorganizational Dynamics, Administration and Society 31 (5) November 1999: 588-615

I remember being pleased to learn that employees found me to be a "straight shooter". My conscious intention was to be truthful about what the realities were and what the possibilities might be, even harsh ones, and I didn't resort to spin doctoring. However, I clearly took positions on the issues in a way that put my own values and hopes into the mix, without registering that I had limited power to ensure that my values would govern the outcomes. I was trusted for my candor, but also for my vision – but the realization of that vision wasn't mine to control. I wanted to be honest, and I wanted there to be happy endings.

That problematic knot of motivations reveals the ways in which projected ideals can infect communication, seducing myself and others into hope and avoiding thoughtful engagement with the realities as they look to cynics. I am not sure if I know how to manage this complicated nexus of realism and aspiration with greater integrity, but I do believe that I have learned to examine the edges of hope and the edges of despair with more respectful attention.

A related learning for me is to accept that while I may make the best of a difficult situation by applying positive values, that won't change the reality of an economic structure which is not in its essence defined by democratic, egalitarian, or humanistic relationships. It is a reminder to me that social morality via public policy is a necessary corrective to economic rationality. Citizens can and should curb systems that would otherwise respond only to the impersonal marketplace, in order to ensure that the needs and desires of the human community are factored in, no matter how imperfectly.

At this point in my journey, I look back on my executive self with some compassion. I did act, and I did attempt to make a difference while doing my job, and my efforts had some positive results as well as unintended negative ones. However, I can see now that I failed to maintain a critical perspective that could take the wider system into account, and I didn't have a way to integrate my internal corporate leadership role with that kind of understanding.

I don't think I was capable of doing so at the time. It was not an intellectual incapacity – I came of age in the 60's and 70's, and my social criticism capacities earlier in my life were well developed. However, I had come to realize that the assumption of the moral superiority of "outsider politics" is fundamentally false, that all participants in the social and economic order are complicit in its problems as well as beneficiaries of its goods. That awareness had made it possible for me to cross the boundary into corporate life despite an initial sense of internal conflict. I believe that society needs economic organizations and that capitalist structures can be of net benefit, albeit with regulation. As a contributing member of an economic organization, I was very engaged.

When things changed for me was when I was entrusted with organizational authority and some degree of power, and much of it at one fell swoop, without gradual acculturation. Isolated and stressed, I did not have a community of thought, reflection, or challenge to help me examine the function of leadership critically. All I had to go on was the inner feeling of something "not right". It was the inarticulate distress signal of my soul, faced with issues of integrity for which it had neither language nor grounding.

I think now that my eventual decision to leave my life as a corporate executive was a resolution of the conflict revealed in many smaller moments. The journey took me through abandonment, seduction, conflict, and change.

Betrayals

My first stint as a manager in a business setting was at a manufacturing plant. The plant manager talked me into giving it a try, convincing me to leave my position as a member of the corporate training and development consulting department to become the Human Resource leader at his plant. I was called "the experiment" by my peers in the HR community – as in, *"Let's see if an OD specialist can make it in the generalist field of employee and labor relations."*

It was a world of learning – somehow, I found my way, earning the respect of the union during contract negotiations *("How can a newcomer be kicking our butt?")* and a certain measure of admiration *("She's a straight talker; we can work with her.")*. For my part, I was finding it immensely interesting, rewarding, sometimes frustrating, always challenging.

When a change of international business strategy required the shut-down of a major section of the plant, I threw myself into the work of managing the change as a member of the plant leadership team. I put my credibility on the line to maintain open and candid communication lines with anxious employees who were facing job loss. We invited the CEO to meetings with employees and formed representative sounding board committees to keep everyone engaged and heard. I worked with HR colleagues at other plants to create a way for their open positions to be posted first for our displaced employees to consider, before outside hires were recruited. I had little control over what would happen to the employees, but I did ask them to trust the way that I and we would handle this distressing event.

At this intense juncture, the Plant Manager was rather unexpectedly promoted to a new role in a commercial division, and a new plant manager appointed. The change of my boss hit me hard, and everyone else at the plant, too, because the leader who was leaving was very popular and trusted while the one coming in was less well known and created a sense of apprehension in me and others.

I was so upset at the news that I left the plant to have a solitary, teary, angry lunch by myself at Taco Bell. Eventually I composed myself, picked myself up from the feelings of abandonment, went back to work, and carried on.

What I felt viscerally but didn't know how to name at the time was the major breach this personnel move created in the all-important psychological role of the leader as the stabilizing container of anxiety for a stressed workforce. In the days that followed this loss of support, the pressures subtly increased on all of the others of us who were members of the plant management team.

Smack in the middle of all this, one of the senior executives of the company called me back to Home Office one day and told me I was being assigned to a new role -- a coveted promotion -- to lead the global corporate training and development group of which I had once been a member.

Because of my personal experience of feeling abandoned when the previous plant manager left for his new job, I knew my departure would also contribute exactly and precisely to the cynicism and mistrust of management that I had been so intent on healing. More than anything else, I dreaded breaking the news to the people on my department team who were depending on my leadership and support for this very difficult work.

When I spoke of this concern to the SVP in that Home Office meeting, he responded that the corporation had more need of me in the new role than in the prior role. He made it clear, although not in those exact words, that I was an instrument of corporate work, an asset to be deployed. I think he must have felt it necessary to offer me some mentoring, since I was questioning the wisdom of such a move at this

particularly sensitive point in time. His message was something along the lines of "Don't take it so personally."

Indeed? And how else does one relate to co-workers if not personally, from a self-in-role that has emotion, mind, and heart included? And how else can workers trust management if not in the form of persons that they can know and relate to? I was completely unsuccessful at following his advice.

Part of me was rejoicing that I could leave what I experienced to be a very hard job and go on to what I considered my dream job in the company. Yet I also felt like I was being violently severed, leaving behind my arm or my leg in a ripping apart, not even a thoughtful surgery. The human community I had grown to be part of in my workplace, and the human needs to which I was attempting to respond from my role as manager, were apparently not viewed by my bosses in the same way that I saw them.

I went home from that meeting feeling deeply conflicted and I cried tears of bitter guilt all night. I hated that I was also at some level relieved to go to the new job, doing work which I loved and which fit my skills and talents very well. The whole situation left me incredibly conflicted and overcome with powerful emotions. It was a parallel process of intense proportions – my own experience of company-initiated job relocation, parallel with what was happening in the plant workforce; except that my options were good ones and theirs were unknown, unsought, and mostly not good. Appropriate or not, my personal sense of guilt and betrayal of those who trusted me was enormous.

In retrospect, I believe that this experience was the decisive break in my internal ability to create coherence between my values and my identity as a corporate person. It was an early, distressing signal that my own motives and framework for how to behave in an organization were not shared at the highest levels, and probably not even perceived.

I didn't know how to interpret it at the time. I knew that it didn't seem right in my own gut, but that it did apparently seem like the right thing to those with a greater scope of authority than I had. Was it my place to question this decision? Or to accept it and move on? In some ways, it was an incredible relief to leave the plant with the supposedly clear conscience that this was best for the corporation all around. But I knew in my heart of hearts that a betrayal had happened. I couldn't explain it, not even to myself.

This was the first of a number of significant experiences in which I was left with an un-resolved internal rupture between what seemed right by the lights of my personal, spiritual, and perhaps feminine values of relatedness and mutuality, versus what appeared to be right in terms of what I saw as the "real world", business, masculine values of rationality and pragmatism. I became aware of an inner crisis of personal authenticity and spiritual integrity.

Serving which Master?

After my assignment to the corporate training and development department role, I went on to gamely apply myself and my skills to the new role, and in time I tended to the growth of a new community of people – the training group – which to my pleasure survived the corporate workplace as a lifetime network of friends and colleagues. There were many moments of achievement, celebration, and progress that offered genuine counterpoint to the harsher, lonelier role I had held at the plant. I thrived, even when exerting strong influence to create changes in the ways that the corporation understood and deployed training and development experiences.

This very satisfying role ended for me about two years later when I was asked to take the senior HR executive role for the company in the midst of loss, the sudden death of my predecessor. I was shocked and bereft by the loss, grieving, and feeling mobilized to serve in a time of great need even though I was aware that it would cost me my preferred role and professional work.

I was also feeling the powerful seduction of the status of the role – it would bring much authority, compensation, and organizational perks. I reasoned that if I didn't accept the role, someone else would, and that person would end up being my boss with great influence on my work – Would I not prefer to have that control myself?

My decision to accept the new role went against my personal knowledge of my vocational desires and strengths – this was not the career path I had desired – but I did believe that I had the capacity to learn and to rise to the challenge somehow. I was 42 years old. I was willing to try.

It was an extremely difficult way to step into a demanding new role, complicated by the fact that a time of genuine grief exerts a regressive pressure in an organization. The raw emotions suppressed the very real politics of competition triggered by my appointment, creating an initial sense of rallying and loyalty which of course could not be sustained.

It was suggested that I be coached by the Z Co consultants who were then providing various kinds of team training in the company. Whenever I'd meet with them, the consultants kept insistently asking me to name my vision – that is, my own idea about what I was doing in my role. I rebelled strenuously against the Z Co approach. I thought at the time that I was _serving_, not fulfilling my own vision but attempting to support that of the company. Bingo! That is precisely what I was trying to do, and it was ultimately a problem for me.

I had set about serving the wrong master. I spent many years – especially the last six of them in my executive role – attempting to serve the will, purpose, vocation, or spirit of the corporation as an organization, as if it were a community of persons. I knew that the rules of the game required that authority, power and resources be unequally distributed, but I didn't consider that to be an issue. All my earlier training, prior work experience and professional development had oriented me to a framework of participative management, dialogue, stakeholder engagement.

I really was trying to live into a corporate future that would somehow coherently hold the inequalities of power within the relationships of community. Not that this was explicit for me…my executive colleagues experienced me as a skillful voice for more effective organization and leadership practices, not as an advocate for workplace democracy. I was trusted and respected as a steward of the corporation's human resources.

But many of my co-workers could sense that I did not believe in the inequality paradigm – the union members, administrative assistants, and women colleagues in all kinds of roles. These persons gave me their trust. They may have believed that I could influence the culture in that direction, or that I could be depended upon to act in their best interests.

In point of fact, I could not ultimately make that big a difference. When I presided over frequent downsizings, I desperately tried to mitigate personal impacts. From the point of view of the company as a whole, this was worthy work for me to do and I am glad I did it.

This tension came home to me especially as I reorganized my own corporate department in the face of steady pressure for greater productivity. I changed so many people's jobs and ended up terminating the employment of so many

individuals. Even though this was "humanely" done through generous early retirements and severance programs, I know that in that work I was not guided by an integral, human vision that congruently held both my personal values and my professional values. I was attempting to shape a higher performing organization, but I was jettisoning people who didn't fit exactly in the interests of the corporate direction. Costs had to be managed, certain qualities were valued, certain types of leadership were valued, certain visions of the vocation of the function were valued. I attempted to remake the function in the modern image, all of it very valid according to the professional literature, etc. Mentors and consultants challenged me to buck up and do the right thing, be a strong leader, take the necessary actions on behalf of a more effective organization.

Either through lack of a conceptual framework that suggested it, or through lack of sufficient personal and emotional maturity as a leader, I was not able to fashion a strategy for reshaping the organization that would build upon the strengths of the people who were already there. Despite my espoused values of inclusiveness, I made many judgments about who should go and who might stay. Without question, making these decisions were the hardest parts of a very hard job.

I had inherited something that had been cultivated for many years in a certain way, and I believed that it should be changed. My ideas of the changes were not necessarily wrong. The function was in fact heading for big problems if it didn't change. But my values were way off. I was oriented to the north star of corporate performance, simultaneously hoping that my executive team colleagues could get behind a vision of a human organization of intentionality and effectiveness.

But they didn't. Especially the CEO didn't. He was clear-minded and unconfused about what his job was and how it would eventually be accounted. I read him, correctly, I believe, as being unconvinced and unmoved by visions of a collaborative workplace culture or major goals other than commercial and financial ones. He was fair and courteous to be sure, and had no intention whatsoever of hurting or taking advantage of people – but neither was he on a mission to lead a group of people to accomplish something for the world and fulfill their human potential (while in addition delivering adequate return to the shareholders).

Increasingly, I recognized that the values I was trying to work by were not widely shared among my executive colleagues. At the same time, I was discouraged by the relentless pressures for performance on my own organization and on the whole company. Ultimately, I believe I compromised my vision by the very way in which I went about the re-engineering of my function, in a process that hinged on power dynamics. I knew that consensus wouldn't have been possible, but I was not able to shape a strong enough middle ground. It was in fact a very lonely way to lead.

Over the years since then I have personally repented what I felt was wrong in my actions at that time. I was most especially distressed when I ended up terminating the employment of my closest colleague. This was the most egregious personal experience of the fundamental "wrongness" of what I was doing – perplexing to me because this decision was all but unavoidable, legal, and responsibly done from the point of view of the corporation's directions and interests. But from the relational perspective in my own heart, it was a grave "sin", a profound wrong – of this, there was and is no question in my mind.

In my corporate role, I was acting from a clear picture of the business rationality of the organization, and could only read my incredibly distressed feelings as lack of strength, lack of experience, lack of something – I had no guide or role model to help me understand that my pain signaled the presence of something valuable in my own self that I was in the process of brutally violating. It is hard now to face the memory

of my weakness, my inability to find a way out of the spot between rock and the hard place in which I found myself.

Of course, who is to know if on balance it wasn't better for someone or something that I did take these actions. The actual decisions that I made may well have been the right ones – many signs would point to that being the case.

But my spirit was taken almost to the breaking point by the incredible aggressive energy that I had to mobilize in order to use the machinery of corporate power -- rather than mutuality and dialogue -- to achieve the changes that seemed right for the organization.

Ripped in Two

This experience of internal rupture happened enough times over the years to be undeniable within me; but I didn't understand it. I assumed it was a deficiency on my part, need for a skill of some kind that I hoped I would eventually acquire.

The predominant corporate culture where I worked was decidedly shaped by men – sharp and smart, assertive and critical, calm and calculating, busting on each other with humor and competing with one another quite seriously. These were good and honest men and it was a good company, full of people who had friendships going back many years.

In my company, I was often the only woman in the room during senior leader meetings. As the executive for Human Resources and therefore a representative of the company's people-values, I was expected to take make the case for the fair treatment of the employees affected by a business decision. In both of those capacities, as a woman and as the HR leader, I may have been the only one on the team unconsciously permitted (perhaps in some ways *required*) to **feel** the import of the actions taken, although I certainly was not expected to express those feelings publicly.

Over the years when I attended top level meetings as a member of the senior executive team, every now and then there would be days when I would have to withdraw to a private place for a good cry of fury and frustration. (The executive floor had a little hidden studio apartment in it for execs who might find themselves stuck overnight at the office for whatever business emergency. It was my salvation.)

The tears were embarrassing to me, but sometimes I just had to surrender to the fact that my heart was wrung out by whatever exceptionally painful organizational decision had just been made. I'd rage and weep for a while, and then powder my face and get back to the work of implementing the corporate mandate, aware again of my inner self ripped in two.

With the benefit of hindsight, I don't think my inner distress occurred because the values I labeled feminine (relatedness/mutuality) or masculine (rationality/pragmatism) were polarized or incompatible. Rather, I think it was because the values of relatedness, mutuality and personal connection were *denied and suppressed* in that corporate environment, as if the only valid basis for good business decisions were impersonal, logical ones. It was subtle and confusing. The rhetoric of the company leaders was clearly about concern for employees, yet in my experience, corporate decision making was impersonal, business-driven, and lacking in any sense of compassion. Most of my male colleagues were, I believe, totally out of touch with this disconnect.

This insight is of great comfort to me. I wasn't crazy. And from this vantage point, my older self has some empathy for how hard this was for all of us.

I observed over the years that when an employee was to be dismissed from the company "for cause", such as genuine incompetence or dishonesty, these men (and myself for that matter) could take a firm lead on the necessary actions, even with a measure of empathy.

But when large scale job losses were necessitated by tougher economic conditions, many more of the affected employees were innocent bystanders – in the wrong job at the wrong time. The unspoken contract of loyalty and job security could not be honored. I wonder if my male colleagues, in self-protection, didn't slam the door on their own intolerable feelings of heartache and guilt that came from these inevitable betrayals – and if their disowned feelings weren't subsequently "exported" into less-defended hearts like my own.

I am convinced it is not coincidental in the least that the reason I was promoted into the HR VP executive chair is because my predecessor, a man of sensitivity and warmth, had a heart attack and died one night at the untimely age of 52, just as the company was in the middle of yet another wave of downsizing. I think that's what happens to some men when they can't bear the awareness that by doing their job, they are causing devastating pain in the lives of people they care about. Their hearts literally break.

Exit

For what felt like a very long while, I stayed committed to the hope that I would eventually arrive at an integration to resolve my ripped and conflicted inside experience. I tried to honor both the part of me that was represented by the photo of the flowers in the South of France, and also my "inner Joan", the part of me that felt mobilized for war.

But there came a time when I could no longer avoid the realization that the split was not healing. For me, the job stresses were relentless. My days were filled with making decisions, giving direction, and endless meetings. There was less and less time for things I most loved to do – helping other people resolve organizational problems, mentoring colleagues, collaborating with team mates on projects, taking time for learning and renewal.

Depression, medication, exhaustion, and spiritual desolation were the private symptoms I coped with, symptoms that I knew would one day torpedo my public performance if I didn't make a change. I waited patiently to see if I might be gaining enough experience, skill, or wisdom to see things differently and to feel them differently.

I did not. So one Sunday morning, writing in my journal, I realized I had learned to do the job well by external standards, but I still didn't feel right about it. It was time to leave, to move to something that would be a better fit between my own self and my work in the world. I was unwilling to live my one life under such stress, constantly working against the grain of my personal gifts and values.

So six years after taking the job, I resigned. This caused no end of consternation and confusion for many, because there was no outwardly evident reason why I should want to leave. By making that choice, I failed some who had set their sails to my direction as a leader. Those who reported to me felt abandoned and betrayed. My executive team colleagues were surprised and dismayed. Others at some greater distance were apprehensive – Did I know something that they didn't? Had I been actually fired? What meaning should they make of this move?

No, I hadn't been fired – but perhaps for some it was more disquieting to realize that I had quit. In fact, one of my senior executive colleagues did the very same thing about a year later, to the considerable disappointment of the CEO.

There would have been no way to make everyone happy with me and it was wrenching to voluntarily leave the people I cared so much about, but I knew my decision was the right one for me then. When people said, "It must have been so hard to leave such a great job!" (evidently projecting their dreams into the job of a VP), I could only respond that it would have been much harder for me to stay. For my spiritual survival, I had to leave.

It is right that I left then, although it was also painful. The mystery of the spirit within me kept enough anguish alive in my soul to drive me out of a place in which I could not find peace.

The Powers

What was going on with me in my corporate incarnation? Why was I unable to develop a coherent worldview that would let me make sense of myself as well as the system within which I was working? The theories of organization in which I had been trained and mentored didn't correspond exactly to my experience, but I was mute about the gaps. Instead of reading the experience of my heart and soul as a valid sign that something was amiss, I understood my symptoms as my personal deficit, the incompleteness or inadequacy of my corporate persona.

The grandiosity of my ideals was part of the problem. I was attempting to provide leadership towards many different things, all at the same time: effective organizational performance for customers, creative and respectful human interactions, personal growth for employees, business viability for investors, socially responsible community relationships. I tended to be relentlessly optimistic about the potential for eventual success for all parties.

Even though I have always been at home with the notion of differentiated authority roles, my underlying orientation was to see leadership as service, exercised in ways that would be collaborative with others. Stewardship was an important part of my notion of organizational leadership.

However, the system of corporate power is set up so that it is a hierarchy – the owners have authority over their employees, and they delegate that authority to the management. The managers exercise this power on behalf of the interests of the owners, while doing their best to optimize the purposes of customers, communities, employees, etc.

A problem in many public business corporations is that, to the extent that employee interests are respected, in most cases this is an *instrumental* value, intended to ensure that the employees are satisfied enough to bring their discretionary human creativity and commitment to their work.

In many enterprises, the intrinsic value of the work itself goes a long way to stimulating this voluntary self-contribution: whether it is nursing or other healthcare, or building things, or solving practical problems, or producing food, or creating beauty, etc. etc. etc. – the range of valuable human activities is enormous.

The challenge appears to be in how one holds in balance these multiple good goals – it is not really possible for a human organization to completely fulfill the personal developmental aspirations and needs of each person who belongs to it. Trade-offs are necessary, and all players don't get what they most want from the relationship.

It did me no good, nor was it productive for employees, for me to fail to see the actual outlines of the company's values-in-action. The interiority of the organization – its invisible spirit, shaped by the actions and exchanges of its members in a marketplace – carried violence and shadow. There was not, ultimately, a redemptive human primary purpose to mitigate the pain that resulted from many business decisions.

In some organizations where the espoused values place persons at the center, there are better ways to ask the questions of tradeoff and balance, such as: *"How much can we achieve together, while at the same time respecting the freedom and spirit of each of us individually?"* Or *"When does our mission carry us beyond our supposed limitations into possibilities for creativity and generativity and self-giving that were not initially imagined?"*

To lead like this, one has to be radically, fundamentally, unified with one's colleagues. The power and advantages can't be so drastically unequal. Only in a setting where all share fairly in the success or failure of the human effort, only in that environment can one authentically ask others to change – just as one is taking risks and changing oneself.

There is no conceivable way that a publicly traded corporation today can operate within that understanding. A shareholder owned corporate entity is driven to *maximize* investor return, unless curtailed in some ways by regulatory requirements such as the need to spend for environmental responsibility, for example. I do think that a privately held company with face to face relationships between owners and employees can aspire to it (especially those intent on social entrepreneurship) because it remains within the power of the owners to choose solutions that *optimize* the best possible outcome for themselves, for the success of the enterprise, and for the goals of its community of employees, customers, neighbors. And certainly nonprofits and voluntary organizations can operate more centrally from a basis of values.

I lost my way by bowing in obedience to the world's logic of power and of the marketplace, of the corporate culture. Without an independent frame of reference, a critique and alternative view of how to navigate my corporate life, I had no way to steer my ship. To my regret, I caused harm and pain along with the good I did, and I am not sure the tradeoffs were worth it.

The fact that I left well-paid and honored is a scandal to me, since my decision to leave was not just a personal career decision, but the discernment of a failure on my part, an inability to fulfill the hopes and intentions that I myself promulgated faithfully in company settings. I put so much on the line, and I was unable to live up to my own hopes.

I am horrified to say that I think it no wonder that some aggrieved employees in other companies resort to deadly violence. The injustice some employees experience is appalling, and they lose their self-control and lash out in great pain and anger. The violence of their actions is visible; but the violence of the system of control and power that they suffer under is invisible and unacknowledged. "We become what we fight. Violence begets violence."3

Next?

My experiences haven't led me to the conclusion that corporate business organizations are evil. Rather, I think that to lead or live in such a system with some

33 Walter Wink; Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination; 1992; Augsburg Fortress; Minneapolis, MN.

measure of integrity and peace, it is necessary to accept *its* truths and its imperfections, and to accept ***my own*** truths and imperfections, and to make the best of both of them without doing violence to others or myself.

This insight and this capacity were mostly beyond me at the point in my life when I worked within the corporate organization. While it may always remain difficult, I feel much more capable now than I was in the past. The more I understand my own story, the freer I can be to incorporate the fruits of that experience into my life and work tomorrow.

In the years since I struck out on my own as a consultant to organizations, I have regained a sense of personal congruence. What I do in this role now is a much better fit to what I believe and who I am. There are always going to be gaps and stresses and disappointments of some kind or another, but in general I try to operate from a solid stance in my personal values and feelings along with my knowledge.

I try hard to be honest, with myself and with my clients. My intention is to practice the asceticism of giving up my personal hope or vision for what my clients might do; instead I try to focus on the integrity of their process and the fullest possible mobilization of their human potential.

I hope that I will not ever again let a business pressure override my respect for and solidarity with colleagues and friends. When painful moments arise, as they have, I do my best to stay in the mutuality of our relationship while we work on it, rather than bundling the feelings off into a corner while I use impersonal judgment.

If there is a theme in this essay, it is my realization that it is impossible to escape the deep imperfection in myself and in all human organizations, and also that despite these truly painful flaws, some modest good can be done and in fact, must be attempted. It is clear to me that there is no "later" or "over there" in which things will be just right. There is no higher ground (in academia, or government, or the nonprofit sector) from which the world of corporate experience can be judged and found wanting. We take ourselves wherever we go. Some organizations are much healthier and some much more toxic – but all are flawed, just as all are capable of some good.

I can only hope that the regular habit of reflection on my experience creates the possibility of greater wisdom and more generous patience with myself and with others, and the courage to act on my values even when I know from the beginning that I will fall short of the ideal. It is freeing to know that integrity is not measured by success, but by faithfulness and honesty.

The photo of the bouquet of flowers is still on my desk, my quiet reminder of the power of emotional integrity.