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A Philosophy of Life and Work

C. William Pollard

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**Wharton School Of Business
Zweig Executive Dinner Series
Philadelphia PA
February 26, 1998**

“A Philosophy of Life and Work”

**C. William Pollard, Chairman
The ServiceMaster Company
Downers Grove, Illinois**

I'm delighted to be with you this afternoon and share some thoughts about life and work - my philosophy about both.

I don't know how each of you are looking at the future as graduates from a distinguished school like Wharton. But for somebody who's out there and looking back, I believe we live in exciting times with great opportunities. Yes, some may quote Dickens to refer to this period as the best of times and in some cases the worst of times.

At the beginning of this decade, I was invited to talk at Peter Drucker's 80th birthday party. My assignment was to speak on the characteristics of an effective executive of the '90s. My task seemed larger than life, especially in view of the distinguished audience and my respect for the wisdom of my friend and counselor, Peter Drucker. My talk centered on how a leader should be prepared for a time of accelerated change and choice and also reminded the audience of a constant that would not change - namely, the importance of people to the success of any venture or enterprise.

And now we come to end of this decade. The changes that have occurred over the past eight years have affected the lives of people all over this world.

Nation states have crumbled. Communism is no longer the threat it once was. Market economies have proliferated. There is an explosion in the availability of information. And our tinkering with DNA has now raised the reality of cloning. There have been changes in our family life, the way we work, the way we live and the pace of change seems to be accelerating.

Changes occurred in a major way in our own business. Two-thirds of our revenue today comes from business areas we were not doing just ten years ago. The only thing certain about tomorrow is that it will be different than today.

In a recent article about the future in a Harvard Business Review, Drucker talked about the major events that have already happened or were occurring that will affect our life in the 21st century. He referred to these events as a future that has already happened. Recently the editor of this magazine asked me to write a response to the article identifying what I saw were some of the forces of change. They included the following:

- 1) Although we speak about being global in our thinking and our economy is increasingly affected by global forces, everywhere we look in our own society and throughout the world, tribalism is rampant with growing divisions and conflicts among ethnic, religious and economic groups.

- 2) The mobility and flexibility of accessed information is dramatically changing how we look at work and where it can be accomplished. We are increasingly able to move work to where the worker is instead of moving the worker to where work is. This growing ease of access to information has also allowed us to turn our homes into offices, entertainment, educational and purchasing centers. The combination of an explosion of knowledge and the

limitation, constraints and costs of our more traditional educational methods means that the lines between work and education are becoming increasingly blurred. Continuous learning on the job is a must and provides a growing opportunity for what I refer to as the “university of work”. There are also growing opportunities for making information more productive, especially in the repetitive and routine aspects of problem solving. As information becomes more available about the firm to employees, customers, competitors and the public, the leadership of the firm becomes increasingly transparent. Candor will be the best way to earn credibility. Those ugly negatives and those exciting new innovations will no longer be secrets. The leader will be an open book. All this means that we increasingly demand more and more in a shorter period of time. And our business, social and community organizations we will have to be more flexible and responsive. Flexible in how we produce and serve. Job descriptions and job titles may no longer be relevant for the future. The opportunities will come in changing ways to contribute, not in defined structured positions. As a result, there will be growing discussion and consideration of what is the social contract between the employer and the employee.

As I think of all of these elements of change, I can’t help but reflect upon the changes that have occurred in my life during the past 35 years. I spent my graduate school experience not in business school, but in law school and practiced law for 10 years after graduating from Northwestern, specializing in tax and corporate acquisitions. It was a stimulating time in my life. There were great demands upon my time and opportunity to earn good money for individual performance, but in fact another thing was occurring and that is simply the demands of the profession were having a significant effect on my physical condition and upon my family life. The law was becoming a jealous mistress in my life. And one morning, at the age of 33, my wife found me out cold on the

bathroom floor, subsequently diagnosed with a bleeding ulcer. There followed major surgery and an extended period of time of recuperation. It was a time for me of reflection about life, about my faith as a Christian and what it meant and my obligations to my family, my love for my wife and the role of work in my life. There followed a major change in my career. I joined the faculty and was on the administration of Wheaton College for a five-year period. During this period of time, the school received a gift of an operating coal company and my legal expertise came into play and I was assigned the responsibility to run and sell these coal companies and work through some difficult legal issues involving family and management. This was at the time of the oil embargo and when the price of coal shot from \$10 a ton to over \$100 a ton. The resulting sale four years later meant a significant addition to the endowment fund of the school.

In this special responsibility, I was reporting not to the President of the institution but instead to a committee of the Board of Trustees. Two members of the committee were also senior officers of ServiceMaster. When the coal company was sold and my work at Wheaton was over, I planned to go back to the practice of law. However, at that point I was recruited by these two officers to consider a career at ServiceMaster. This was almost 21 years ago.

As I joined the company, with a little over two hundred million in revenue, it had experienced six strong years of growth in revenue and profits at a compounded rate of twenty plus percent. Now, a little over twenty years later, our company is twenty-five times larger than it was back in 1978 with our system-wide revenue exceeding six billion dollars. We now employ and manage over two hundred and fifty thousand people and have seven million customers with services stretching from Karachi, Pakistan to Tokyo, Japan. And yes, I live in one of those pressure cooker environments where revenue and profits must be reported quarter

by quarter and where revenue and profits have been up every quarter for the past 27 years. The shareholders to whom Carlos Cantu, my partner and I are responsible to, vote everyday on our leadership. They have a choice to buy, hold or sell. But the measure of my success as a business leader is one who has tried to find meaning and purpose in life and work. It cannot be simply determined by the value of our shares or the profit we produce. The answer must come from the people I work with and serve.

Much of our business may be classified as routine and mundane. We do such things as clean toilets and floors, maintain boilers and air-handling units, serve food, kill bugs, care for lawns and landscapes, clean carpets, provide maid service, and repair home appliances. The task before us is to train and motivate people to serve so they will do a more effective job, be more productive in their work, and yes even be better people. For us, this is both a management and a leadership challenge. It is more than a job or a means to earn a living. It is, in fact, a way of life or a mission.

When you visit the headquarters of our firm, and I know a number of you have done so, you will find a low, long, tan-colored building, located west of the city of Chicago. When you walk into the large, two-story lobby, on your right is a curving marble wall, 90 feet long and 18 feet high. Carved in stone on that wall in letters 8 feet high are four statements that constitute our objectives: To Honor God In All We Do, To Help People Develop, To Pursue Excellence, and To Grow Profitably.

If you were to tour the rest of the building, you would notice that nearly all of the work spaces are moveable. Most of the walls do not reach to the ceiling.

Practically everything in the building is changeable and adaptable, just like the marketplace we serve with its changing demands and opportunities.

But the marble wall conveys a permanency that does not change. The principles carved in this stone are lasting. The first two objectives are end goals. The second two are means goals. As we seek to implement these objectives in the operation of our business, they provide for us a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and avoiding that which is wrong. They remind us that every person has been created in the image of God with dignity and worth and great potential. They become the basis for our single-minded focus on people as individuals, not just part of a protected group or a particular classification.

It does not mean that everything will be done right. We experience our share of mistakes. But because of a stated standard and reason for that standard, we cannot hide our mistakes. They are flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness.

Nor is it a standard that can be used as a simplistic reason for financial success. It cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. It does, however, provide a foundation, a reference point for action. It is a living set of principles that allow us to confront the difficulties and failures that are all part of running a business, with the assurance that our common starting point never changes.

In a diverse and pluralistic society, some may question whether our first objective belongs as part of a public company's purpose statement. But regardless of where you are with respect to this objective, the principle that can be embraced by all is where it leads us, and that is to the dignity and worth and potential of every person. For us, this is fundamental to understanding the

purpose of the firm. For me as a Christian, it provides not just an opportunity to talk about my faith, but to live my faith.

So for us, people are not just economic animals or non-personal production units. Every person has their own fingerprint of personality and potential. And we believe that the work environment can become a place where the spirit and soul of a person is enriched by what they do as they learn, serve and contribute to others. And yes, when it does happen, there is the potential for extraordinary results in serving customers.

Frankly, when you view the person as only a production unit or something that can be defined solely in economic terms, motivational or even incentive schemes have a tendency to become mechanical or manipulative. In so doing, there is a drive to define a system that will idiot-proof the process which in turn can make people feel like idiots. Fortune Magazine recently described the soulless company as suffering from an enemy within, and sighted Henry Ford's quote as descriptive - "Why is it I always get the whole person, when what I really want is just a pair of hands?"

So, in the process of doing business, in growing the firm, we are attempting to respond to that basic question: Can a business firm excel at generating profits and also be a moral community to help shape the human character and behavior? A community with a soul. This is the grand experiment of ServiceMaster.

Leadership is both an art and a science. I believe that the results of a servant leader will be measured beyond the workplace. The story will be told in the changed lives of people. The art of human and humane leadership will care for people as the subject of work not just its object.

It was C. S. Lewis who said “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations -- these are mortal and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.”

I close with these lines with T. S. Eliot:

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of God.
And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads.
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbor,
Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance.
And the wind shall say, here were decent Godless people:
Their only monument the asphalt road,
And a thousand lost golf balls.
Can you keep the city that the Lord keeps not with you?
A thousand policemen directing the traffic,
And not tell you why you come, or where you go.
When the stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city?”
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?
What will you answer? We all dwell together,
To make money from each other? This is a community?
And the stranger will depart and return to the desert. Oh my soul be prepared
for the coming of the stranger.
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.

2/17/98