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Leadership in Turbulent Times (Jackson, TN)

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**Union University
Jackson, TN**

**April 26, 2006
C. William Pollard**

“Leadership in Turbulent Times”

I am delighted to be with you today and share some thoughts about the opportunities and challenges we have as leaders in our workplace.

We live in a world of accelerated change and choice. It was Dickens who said “It is the best of times and the worst of times”. Although he wrote this years ago about the struggle the tale of two cities, he may well have been writing it about the world we live in today.

There is much about what is occurring around us that is exciting and pregnant with opportunity. As Americans, we have been blessed. We live in the most sophisticated and advanced culture that history has ever known. We have all the modern conveniences at our fingertips. We live very well in comparison to most of the rest of the world.

I was reminded of this reality during the past year as I traveled in Kenya, northern Uganda and southern Sudan and listened and shared with people who were not only less fortunate than I was, but were without some of the basics of life; like food in their stomachs, clothes on their backs, a roof over their heads, and safety for their children.

As we look at all of what we have as Americans, we also realize that our economic well-being has not done much to resolve issues of uncertainty, fear, and despair in our society.

As we seek to learn and live with the madness of terrorism, we are frustrated with the lack of meaningful solutions. While we have made great gains over the last 100 years in areas like life expectancy, education, and growth in the real income of our citizens, we have failed to develop anything comparable in the area of growth in moral behavior or the reduction of violence.

The subject of sin or evil and the call for constraint and exercise of responsible behavior are not often heard or considered outside the walls of a church, or other place of worship.

Robert Fogel, an economist from the University of Chicago and 1993 Nobel Prize winner, authored a book titled *The Fourth Great Awakening*, in which he traced the history of religious faith in America from pre-Revolutionary War times to the present.

As he analyzed the effect of religious faith upon the development of our society and economy, he concluded that the biggest issue today in our culture was not the lack of employment opportunities or even the distribution of economic resources. Nor, in his judgment, was it a lack of diversity or equal opportunity.

In his opinion, the major issue was simply what he called a lack of the distribution of spiritual resources or spiritual assets. There was, he concluded, a

void in our society in the development of the character of people and a provision for their spiritual needs.

The lesson from his study is simple and yet profound. The health and welfare of people cannot be understood or measured solely in terms of their economic or physical well being. Nor can it be measured solely by their intellectual or educational accomplishments. There also is a spiritual dimension to the human condition. It is this spiritual dimension that influences moral behavior and the development of character and is the genesis of love, not hate; good, not evil; right not wrong.

So how then do we develop the moral and spiritual side of people in this changing world of the 21st century? Our churches, places of worship, educational institutions and families should continue to be primary sources for this development. However, a number of these institutions are under stress, and some have limited their involvement in character and moral development.

Where do people, including those of us in this room, spend most of their waking hours? The answer is our work environment. Why shouldn't the development of human character and moral behavior be an integral part of what happens in this environment?

Can people find a sense of purpose or meaning in their work? Develop a strong ethic that extends to serving others; a sense of community and a willingness to give back a practice of charity? A commitment to truth and a respect for the dignity and worth of their fellow worker?

I believe that for this to occur, there must be moral leadership from those of us who have been called to run and lead a business. Leadership that is transparent and; that is willing to serve and lead by example. Leadership that refuses to accept a separation of the sacred from secular and is actively involved in integrating their faith beliefs, with their work.

Books and articles about leadership and the qualities of a good leader abound. They often describe leadership as something that is glamorous and elevated. But you know, I have found it to be hard work and sometimes unromantic. Its essence is performance. Leadership, in and of itself, is not necessarily good or desirable. Leadership is only a means. To what end is the real question.

Leadership is not so much about you or me or what we want, it's more about the people who follow and the direction we are leading them. It is about the responsibility we assume for the growth and development of those people.

As we look at leadership this way, it is imperative for us as leaders to know what we believe and why we believe it. To know where we are headed and why it is important for people to follow. To understand who people are and why they work and not just what they do and how they do it. To live and share our faith in a way that will engage people. To be an example in our private and public life of the reality of our faith.

As I have now retired from my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and look back, I can add up the numbers that show growth in profits, customers

served, and a return for our shareholders that averaged 20% per year. While these figures are part of a normal business assessment of performance, the conclusion for me cannot be limited to these money or value-creation measurements. The real and lasting measurement is whether the results of my leadership can be seen in the changed and improved lives of people I have led.

As a business leader, I wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for shareholders. If I didn't want to play by these rules, I didn't belong in the ballgame. But I also tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be an open community, where the question of a person's moral and spiritual development and the existence of God and how one related the claims of his or her faith with the demands of their work were issues of discussion, debate and, yes, even learning and understanding. I considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

Our corporate objectives at ServiceMaster were simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We did not use our first objective as a basis of exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God's mix.

It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated

standard and a reason for that standard, we could not hide our mistakes. Mistakes were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task. It involved matters of the heart as well as the head and it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement. While at times it was discouraging, it also was energizing as one realized the continuing potential for creativity and innovation, as there was a focus on the development of the whole person.

One of the best ways that I found to share and lead in the development of our firm as a moral community was to seek to serve as I led and to reflect the principle that Jesus taught His disciples as He washed their feet – namely that no leader was greater or had a self-interest more important than those being led. In seeking to so serve, the truth of what I said could be measured by what I did. My ethic would become a reality I acted out of my faith.

Servant leadership has been a learning experience for me. It has not come naturally. The first thing I had to understand was what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as I joined ServiceMaster, now almost 30 years ago. Before then, I had practiced law for ten

years and served in the administration and as a faculty member at Wheaton College.

As I concluded my time at Wheaton and was preparing to go back to the practice of law, I was recruited by Ken Hansen, who was then Chairman of ServiceMaster and Ken Wessner who was the President and CEO of the company to consider joining the firm. They wanted me to come and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the Company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner.

During the recruiting process, the two Kens shared their vision for the future and inferred that someday I might have an opportunity to lead the Company. And so, as I came to that final day of decision about whether I would join the ServiceMaster team and as I sat in Ken Hansen's office waiting to sign the final documents of employment, I decided to press the two Kens about exactly what I would have to do to be CEO of this Company.

After all, I was 38 years old and time was running out. I also was looking at an opportunity to join a large law firm in the city. I felt I needed to know more about what was necessary for me to secure the top spot in the Company. So I started pressing Ken Hansen on what needed to be done and how long it would take for me to be President and CEO of this Company. After about five minutes of listening to me, Ken Hansen stood up, looked me in the eye, and said: "Bill, the interview is over."

As I was ushered to the front door and left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that I'd blown my opportunity and this was God's way of directing me back to the practice of law.

Two days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to know what happened in his office that day. I said sure and we met for breakfast the next morning. Ken's words to me that morning were simply put this way: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster and contribute, you will have a great career. But if you are coming to the Company for a title or position or to promote yourself, you'd better forget it. Ken then proceeded to share with me the meaning and role of being a servant leader in a public company. There were lessons for me to learn, the first of which was never give a title or position to somebody who can't live without it.

And as I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken would test my commitment and also take time to teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes of the people I would lead. During the first eight weeks of my initial assignment as a corporate vice president, I spent my days out working with our service workers doing the service tasks we perform for our customers. In so doing, I learned the reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead. Little did I realize then that this would ultimately involve over 250,000 people as we grew to serve over 12 million customers. This experience often reminded me of my own imperfections and the need to admit my mistakes and ask for forgiveness and seek guidance from above.

The faces of our service workers would often flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and the wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. When all the numbers and figures were added up and reported as the results of the firm, they had to do more than just follow the rules or satisfy the changing standards of the accounting profession. They also had to accurately reflect the reality of our combined performance – a result that was real – a result that you could depend upon. A result that would reflect the true value of the firm. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those that I was committed to serve.

Fortune Magazine has described the soulless company as suffering from an enemy within and cites a quote from Henry Ford as being descriptive of many business leaders when he said: “Why is it that I always get a whole person when all I really wanted was a pair of hands?”

How many times as business leaders have we been guilty of looking at people in our firms or organizations as just a pair of hands, part of the line on a P&L sheet we call costs and labor, an economic animal who can be motivated by a compensation package or new incentive plan or stock option program?

Drucker’s classic definition of management is getting the right things done through others. But what I am suggesting here today is that a leader who seeks to integrate their faith with their work cannot stop there. He or she must also be concerned about what is happening to the person in the process. Those people who are producing profits, who are accomplishing the mission of the firm, are also

human. They have cares and concerns, emotions and feelings, beliefs and convictions. They can love or they can hate. As the soul of the firm, they can contribute or detract, motivate or discourage. They have a spiritual dimension. Those who are involved in business as a calling must be involved in what I refer to as soul craft. They must learn to treat people as the subject of work, not just the object of work. It was C.S. Lewis who said, “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – they 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.”

Learning how to integrate your faith with your work can sometimes come from a painful mistake or failure. Implicit in leadership is the power to make decisions that affect others. You can be right in your intent and decision but wrong in how you use power to implement that decision. The pain of honestly facing your mistakes and seeking forgiveness is part of the learning process of soul craft.

The mistakes I have made as a leader that hurt the most are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others. In seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have at times pressed too hard for results without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk of failure that were influencing substandard performance of the individual involved. I have learned that people put in a corner must fight or crumble and the rightness of my position can be lost in the defeat of the person.

In the process of winning and imposing what I thought was right, I have sometimes ended up with a broken relationship. In such times, there is a need for admitting your mistakes, asking for forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation.

Early on in my leadership at ServiceMaster, I was to learn another important lesson of how to integrate my faith with my work and my teacher was my son Chip, who now serves as President of John Brown University.

After college, Chip's first graduate school experience was Harvard Law School. When he came home after his first year at Harvard, he was asked to share some of his experiences at one of our church services.

Chip explained to the audience that his experience at Harvard had thrust him into an environment where there were people of many different faiths and beliefs. He concluded that if he were to engage and embrace them with the truth of what he believed, he would not convince them through words of defining or defending his faith. Instead he needed to live and share his faith in a way that it could be examined, considered, and yes, embraced by some.

His thoughtful presentation and example provided a model for me to follow as a leader in my business life. It would be wrong for me to use my leadership to impose my faith or treat people differently because they didn't believe the way I did. There would be times when I could share my faith, but it needed to be within the context of how people saw me live my faith.

There was no room for me to live a bifurcated life – church on Sunday and work on Monday. My business was to be a calling - a channel of distribution for

fulfilling and living my faith. And so it has become, a channel that has reached from the janitor's closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. The marketplace has provided a wonderful opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do, but who God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

Joshua is one of those Biblical examples of a great leader. As he came to the closing days of his leadership, he called all of the tribes of Israel together and reminded them that, with God's help, they had been victorious in battles and were now occupying the Promised Land, living in cities they did not have to build and eating from vineyards they did not have to plant and then he challenged them to fear God and serve Him with faithfulness.

It was a challenge, not a command, for God does not compel anyone to follow or worship Him. In Joshua's conclusion, he emphasized this point when he said, "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now, the Hebrew word that is translated "serve" is Avodah, and can also mean worship or work. Yes, that's right – our work also can be worship to the God we love. The business firm, the place where we work, serve customers, and make money, also can be a place of worship as we excel in what we do and bring

alive the reality that Jesus lived and died for a purpose: that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior.

I close with these lines from T. S. Eliot's *Choruses from a Rock*:

“What life have you if you not have 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? Is this 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.”

* * *

April 26, 2006