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Timeless Values in Turbulent Times (Windsor, UK)

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We live in a world of accelerated change and choice.

One only has to look at what has happened in the last decade in the political

environments of what was the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, the Mid-East, Africa

and China and other areas of the Far East to understand how dramatic the change

has been. The forces of the free market system and democratic governments are

alive and active in most every part of the world. But with this rapid change and

new found freedoms and choices, we have also seen growing confusion,

uncertainty, and conflicts reflecting both ethnic, religious and racial strife.

During the same period of time, we also have seen major changes caused

by advances in technology. The availability of information has brought about a

new transparency and openness that is affecting the way we conduct our lives and

understand each other. Closed societies are relics of the past. The ability to

contain or control information as part of exercising power is no longer the tool of

manipulation that it once was.

E-mail, e-commerce, the Internet were not even part of our vocabulary ten

years ago. Today, I can hold in the palm of my hand a computer that gives me

instant access to information sources all over the world, and allows me to

communicate with business and financial authorities at any time with recorded

messages and appropriate documentation, eliminating the necessity for paper, postage and delivery.

This rapid expansion of information technology has also allowed us to turn our homes into offices, entertainment, educational and purchasing centers. One can sit before their home computer and purchase everything from groceries to automobiles, plan their next vacation, access libraries and, with a link to one's TV or stereo system, order up the latest in entertainment.

This mobility and flexibility of access to information is beginning to dramatically change how we look at work, where work can be accomplished, and the future purpose and function of the office or production facility. You see, through technology we are now able to move work to where the worker is instead of always requiring the worker to come to work.

At the same time, those who are leaders in government, business or other organizations of society, now have the opportunity to process and analyze information in a way that should improve their thinking and allow them to make more effective decisions, provided they learn to use the computer to resolve the repetitive and routine aspects of problem solving. This added or artificial intelligence component will provide more options and choices, requiring of the leader improved judgment and discretion in order to choose the right and avoid the wrong, determine what is good and avoid that which is evil. How will the leaders of the future make their judgments? Are there timeless values that can be used as the basis for such judgments?

The lines between work and education are becoming increasingly blurred. Again, the explosion of knowledge and access to information, combined with rapidly changing requirements of the job or the task, requires the individual to be

involved in the process of continuous learning and places responsibility on the organization to provide the opportunity for that learning. I often refer to this process as the university of work.

Technology is not only affecting the way we communicate, but it also is affecting our physiology. The developments in modern day medicine, genetics, and understanding of healthy diets improve the longevity of our lives, increasing our body size and expanding the efficiency and durability of our vital organs. At the same time, we do not seem to have answers for the growing problems resulting from what is often referred to as the subjective diseases, such as depression, substance abuse and eating disorders. All of these "medical disorders" affect a person's well being and ability to function.

As one examines the dynamics of each of these trends going forward, it obviously raises pressing public policy issues as to population growth, including dramatic increases in the aging of the population, growing pension costs, health care costs, and care for the spiritual dimension of people.

These forces of change and choice will have a profound effect upon the economies of every nation and every area of the world. In fact, another relic of the past may well be the reference to a national economy. There is a growing interdependence between and among our economies that is definitely global in nature, with the nation state becoming less and less relevant. At the same time, there is the growing disparity of the distribution of income between the so-called rich world and the third world. During the last 150 years, the per capita income of rich nations is estimated to have increased by a multiple of more than 8, while those countries in the third world have experienced an increase of a multiple of 3.

The forces of change that I have just described may well have a compounding effect on this disparity. The reason is simply that the wealth creation formula of the future will be dependent more upon human capital than the availability of land or reproducible material assets. This human capital factor is estimated by most economists to have a value that is twice as great as any physical resources. The importance of the role of training and education and keeping up with the explosion of knowledge and information is obvious. In most developing nations and economies, the infrastructure to accelerate the process of learning is not in place.

But let me pause for a moment and remind us that as we think of the importance of the development of human capital as part of income distribution and equality of opportunity, we should not forget who people are and why they exist and not just focus on what they produce and how much income they have. Once again, there may be a role for these timeless values. There are lessons to be learned from my culture in this regard. While there still are many economic inequities in the American society, during the last 100 years there has been improvement in the measure of inequality and income distribution, with a significant increase in the average real income per capita. But as we have made gains in life expectancy, health, education and real income, with a 19 fold increase in the real income of the poor, we have failed to develop anything comparable in the area of growth in moral behavior or relationships among individuals.

We have proceeded under the assumption that issues of injustice, violence and moral behavior could be improved by raising income. The problems of drug addiction, alcoholism, birth rates among unmarried teenage girls, rape, battery of women and children, broken families, violent teenage death and crime are generally more severe than they were 100 years ago.

Many of these crises in our culture have, in fact, occurred in the last 30 years. For example, births to single women have now grown to 30%, and the proportion of children living in one-parent households has now doubled. Alcohol consumption continues to grow at an alarming rate. The media, including now the many undisciplined productions over the Internet, promote sex, heavy drinking, smoking and gambling. In fact, the messages of constraint, the exercise of responsible behavior with corresponding accountability, are few and far between.

The family unit is under siege and parental involvement in the development of character and moral behavior is lessening. This burden is increasingly being placed upon the schools, even though they can not replace the role of parents. Moral vices are increasingly being defined as illnesses, with the hope that therapists will have the answer. Equivocation on what were established values and virtues in our society have left a spiritual and moral vacuum.

Hunter, a sociologist from the University of Virginia, in his book on the conflicts in our society, has called it a time of cultural wars, where the most fundamental ideas of who we are and how we are to order our lives both individually and together, are at odds. His conclusion is that the nub of the disagreement can be traced to a matter of ultimate moral authority. How do we determine whether something is good or evil, right of wrong, acceptable or unacceptable. He concludes the division or gap in our society is growing. People living and working in the same community are, in fact, poles apart.

In his recent book *The Death of Character*, Hunter concludes that while children today are innately as capable of developing character as they ever were in the past, there now are few cultural or institutional conditions that allow for its cultivation in children or its maintenance among adults.

He suggests that there must be a consensus of moral authority before there can be the teaching and development of character. In his own opinion, our society has lost its ability to generate that consensus. While I am not as pessimistic as Hunter, I do recognize that there is a void and that it reflects a lack of leadership from those in government, business, education and the religious population of our society.

History has taught us that there is definitely an association between the individual character of the leaders of society and the collective well-being of those being led. The majority of Americans claim to be either Christian or Jew. The Biblical standards of right and wrong have provided timeless truths and standards for developing character as well as a sense of purpose and well-being. The missing ingredient is not that there is no basis for consensus, but that there has not been sufficient leadership – leadership by example.

Plato suggested that if leaders were not people of character, there would be a social disintegration. He stated that if the guardians of the laws and state, that had the opportunity to bring good government and prosperity, become a mere sham, than clearly the community and society would suffer.

It was Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the classic work *Gulag Archipelago* who said "gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes nor between political parties, but right through every human heart. Inside us, it oscillates. Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained; and even in the best of hearts, there remains a small corner of evil. It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.

Where does this constriction or restraint come from? As we reflect upon timeless truths in turbulent times, what is our role as leaders? Whether we are here this evening as leaders in government, in business, in education or in religious organizations, how do we then lead in developing the character of people – the character of a society or nation? How do we develop the spiritual assets of our society? The forces of change and choice are affecting the way we live, the decisions we make and the functions and operation of the organizations that provide structure to our society, including governments, business, education, religions and families. As we recognize these forces, in one sense, we are identifying a future that has already happened. As we seek to understand them, we are exercising the art of being human. In so doing, we realize that our humanity not only involves a physical and rational dimension, but also involves a spiritual dimension.

It involves character. It involves determining right and wrong, good and evil. It affects our ability to love and to hate. This is all uniquely a human dimension and if human capital is so important to our future, how then do we lead in nurturing this dimension? How do people find a sense of purpose, develop a strong family ethic, a sense of community, a relationship to others, an ethic of benevolence, a willingness to engage diversity, a sense of right and wrong, good and evil, capacity to resist the lure of hedonism, a sense of discipline, capacity for education, thirst for knowledge, appreciation of quality, a willingness to love instead of hating. I suggest that all of us in this room have a responsibility to lead in the correction of a maldistribution of not just economic assets but, more importantly, spiritual assets in the societies we live in.

Now as I raise these questions, you know I do so not as a philosopher, educator, political or religious leader, but simply as a business person. Someone who is seeking to lead a fast growing and dynamic service company that we call

ServiceMaster - a company that has experienced rapid growth over the last 25 years, doubling in size every 3 – 3 ½ years during this period, serving primarily in the United States, but also in 40 foreign countries, with customer level revenues exceeding over $8 billion this year. We are managing or employing over 250,000 people, serving over 12 million customers.

If I mean what I have just said about our leadership responsibilities, how then do I apply it in my business responsibilities or, to put it another way, do God and profit mix? Should the business firm of the 21st century serve merely as an efficient unit of production for quality goods and services, or can it also become a moral community to help shape human character and behavior? A community that is focused on the worth of the person as well as the production of goods and services – a community with a soul – a community where it is okay to talk about the spiritual issues of life.

I am a person of faith. I am a Christian – a follower of Jesus Christ. My faith, by its very nature, is a defined faith. Definition brings clarity. It allows for order – a systematic way of thinking and learning. Definition, however, also sets boundary lines, determines limits of what is and what is not. It can be exclusive by shutting out those who do not believe the same way I do or fit my definition.

How, then, do I relate my faith to a diverse and pluralistic marketplace. As a leader in business, as a leader of this large public company, how do I integrate my faith with my work? How do I touch the spiritual side of people within my community?

Do I redefine my faith to be more inclusive, tolerant and acceptable? Water it down so as not to be offensive? Do I maintain that old separation between the sacred and the secular? Simply accept the premise that religion and business and

politics just don't mix? Do I use my leadership to try to impose or propagate my faith?

Or do I seek to simply live and share my faith in such a way that it can be examined and tested by my colleagues and fellow workers and, yes, even embraced by some, all within the context of the community that works together to produce goods and services and generates a profit.

When you visit the headquarters of our firm, located west of the city of Chicago, you will walk into a large two-story lobby. On your right on a curving marble wall, 90 feet long and 18 feet high, carved in stone letters 8 feet high, are four statements that constitute our company 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 our building, you would notice that nearly all of the workspaces are moveable. Most of the walls do not reach the ceiling. Practically everything in the building is changeable and adaptable just like the marketplaces we serve with their 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, regardless of faith, choice or label, has been created in the image of God with dignity and worth. They become the basis for our single-minded focus on people as individuals not just part of a protected group or classification.

We do not use our first objective as a basis of exclusion. It is in fact the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognize that different people are all

part of God's mix. And 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, forgiveness.

Nor is it a standard that should be used as a simplistic reason for our financial success. It cannot be applied like some mathematical formula. It does, however, provide a foundation and a reference point for action. It becomes a living set of principles that allows us to confront life's difficulties and failures with the assurance that the starting point never changes. It causes us to think and re-think about who we are – why we work and what is the purpose and meaning of it all.

Few people find fault with our commitment to a set of principles. Quite frankly, it is the "God language" that raises eyebrows. "Aren't you walking on shaky ground when you try to mix God and profits?" ask the critics. "And what about employees who don't choose to believe the way you do? Aren't you forcing your beliefs on them?"

At a shareholders meeting, one of our stockholders, while commending us for our profit performance, made the following statement: "While I firmly support the right of an individual to his religious convictions and pursuits, I totally fail to appreciate the concept that ServiceMaster is in fact a vehicle, for the work of God; the multiple references to this effect, in my opinion, do not belong in the annual business report. To interpret a service for profit, which is what ServiceMaster does, as a work of God is an incredible presumption. Furthermore, to make profit is not a sin. I urge that next year's business report be confined to just that – business." How would you answer this shareholder? What is just business? Can we divorce business from people?

The link between God and profit, I believe, is people - all of whom have been created in God's image – all of whom are part of the world God so loved. As a business firm, we are not a church, nor are we a Christian company, although many of the principles we follow are consistent with the Christian faith. We have people and leaders who are Christians, but we also have people and leaders who are Muslim, Jewish or of no professed faith.

We serve and work in a diverse and pluralistic world. At the same time, we believe the work environment need not be emasculated to a neutrality of no belief. A belief that God exists and is at work is not just some relic of the past. Or, as Steven Carter notes in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief,* "Like building model airplanes - just another hobby; something quiet, something private, something trivial and not really a fit activity for intelligent, public-spirited adults."

As a business person, I want to excel at generating profits and creating value for shareholders. If I don't want to play by these rules, I don't belong in the ball game. But I also believe that I can live and relate my faith in this environment so that the business firm I lead can achieve another purpose. It can be a community to help shape human character and behavior - an open community where the questions of who God is and who we are and how we relate our faith to our work are issues for discussion, debate and yes, even learning and understanding. **The people of our firm are in fact the soul of the firm.**

One of the current best sellers in the U.S. on business leadership is entitled *Leadership Engine* written by Noel Tichy, a professor at the University of Michigan's Graduate School of Business. In his book he describes companies that build and develop leaders at every level of the organization. One of the companies he studied and reported on was ServiceMaster. At first he was concerned about

whether we would be a valid example because of our objectives and makes these comments about what he found.

"For many people who don't know the folks at ServiceMaster, the stated value of 'To honor God in all we do' is troubling. Before we went to visit them, one of my colleagues suggested that their religious orientation might make them unsuitable as models for more 'normal' organizations. But the truth is that . . . . . . when you get to know the people who work at ServiceMaster, you quickly see that there are no traces of ethereal other-worldliness about them. They are serious business people firmly focused on winning. 'Profit [to them] is a means in God's world to be used and invested, not an end to be worshipped. [It] is a standard for determining the effectiveness of [their] combined efforts'."

He goes on to say: "ServiceMaster has achieved such adherence to its values. . . because everyone from [the top] down works at making them an everyday reality. One of [their] twenty-one leadership principles says (No. 6), 'If you don't live it, you don't believe it.' And they really mean it. Service permeates all the way to the highest level of the company. And no matter how senior they become, each spends at least one day a year performing front-line service work."

Tichy is confirming in his own way what many of us in this room may already know – one of the best ways for a Christian leader to live his or her faith is in service to others. We call it servant leadership and it reflects the example set by Jesus as He took a towel and washed His disciples' feet.

In so doing He taught that no leader is greater than the people he or she leads, and that even the humblest of tasks is worthy for a leader to do.

Does this example fit in today's world, 2000 years later? There is certainly no scarcity of feet to wash, and towels are always available. It is in seeking to be a servant as I lead that I am able to live and share my faith in a way that it can be tested, examined and understood by my colleagues. The only limitation, if there is one, is self-imposed, namely my ability to be on my hands and knees, to compromise my pride, to be involved, and to have a consistent compassion for those I lead and work with.

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 or simply another producer; an economic animal that can be motivated by a compensation package or a new incentive plan or a stock option program.

Peter Drucker's classic definition of management is getting the right things done through others, but what I am suggesting is that the business organization and its leadership cannot stop there. They must be concerned about what is happening to the person in the process. These people who are producing profits are also human. They have cares and concerns and emotions, feelings, beliefs and conviction. They can love or they can hate. As the soul of the firm, they can contribute or detract, motivate or discourage. If a leader is to be effective, he or she must be able to exercise authority and power and, in the world of accelerated change and choice, to do so he or she must be involved in what I refer to as soulcraft, developing the human character and responding to the basic questions of who people are and why they work, not just what they do and how they do it. Viewing people as the **subject of work**, not just the **object of work**.

While some may think that this view of the corporation may be just one of those American things, not applicable to Europe or other parts of the world, let me read to you

a letter I received from one of our associates, Shu Zhang. She was raised and educated in China, indoctrinated in Communism, and has been working with us to help develop our business for that market. Listen to her letter:

Dear Bill:

I felt so much need to talk to you since I came back from management seminar.

When I grew up in China, religions were forbidden and the communists taught us religion was superstition. Mao's book became our bible. When I was five or six years old, I could recite Mao's quotations and even use them to judge and lecture the kids in the neighborhood. Mao said serve the people. Leaders should be public servants. This coincides with some of ServiceMaster's moral standard. When I think deeply, I see the difference which makes one work so successfully and the other collapses fatally. It must be the starting point of ServiceMaster to honor God, and that every individual has been created in his image with dignity and worth.

Ten years ago in China, people were not allowed to think and speak freely. Those who held different opinions and views with the government were treated as the enemy, and enemies were not treated as human beings any more. When people found out Mao was just another Chinese emperor, we lost our believing. This is a generation who had been brainwashed since we were born. When I went to Beijing last March with you and Ralph, I met with my high school classmates. They talked a

lot about the consumer oriented Chinese young people. We have heard a

lot of excitement about the big change in the Chinese economy which

brought tremendous opportunities, but this also worried us about a

generation without beliefs and moral standards.

　　ServiceMaster is designed to be a big, tall tree with strong roots

which penetrate extensively to almost every corner of a person's daily life.

It is still growing, and I am still searching."

I hope and pray that as part of Shu's searching, she will find the Lord I love. But

for her to be attracted, she had to be first included and accepted. She is part of the world

that God so loved.

Can a business firm be a moral community for shaping human character and

behavior and also excel at making money? This continues to be the grand experiment at

ServiceMaster.   By no means have we arrived. It is a daily challenge and there will

continue to be skeptics and critics. In effect, what we are saying is that God does have a

relevance to a work environment where not everyone has the same religious faith. But

people have a spiritual dimension as well as a physical and rational dimension and the

business firm has a responsibility to the whole person. As we seek to implement this

value system which recognizes right and wrong, good and evil, and the dignity and worth

of every person, we are reaffirming timeless truths and standards for the development of

character, for the development of community, for the development of society.

It was C. S. Lewis who reminded us there are no ordinary people. We 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 mortals who we joke with, work with, marry,

snub and exploit.

What is business without people? What is community without people? What is a nation without people? Who are the people? Why do they work? Why do they cooperate? Why do they support a common cause? Can we begin to understand or answer these questions without a reference point of faith or spirituality? And, after all, what is the purpose of community? Can they stay together and achieve a common goal without being a moral community?

I conclude my remarks with some 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.

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