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Speech at Laity Lodge Retreat

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LAITY LODGE RETREAT

Friday, June 4, 1993

As I come and share with you, I do so with a sincere and overwhelming heart of gratitude. I am thankful for our country and for the great freedoms we have to worship and to pray. I am also thankful for a God who loves and cares for me and who is my source of resource, providing that absolute standard of direction for what is right and good.

The freedoms we have as citizens of this country are truly remarkable. Never before have citizens of any one country been given the liberty that we have today. Yet the mood of our land is pessimistic. Not many Americans are excited about the opportunity of tomorrow. We don't seem to trust those who represent us in government. We know that we are going to have to pay higher taxes, but we are not sure about the benefit. The enormity of the deficit means one thing for certain. The dollar bill in my hand today will be worth less, not more, in the future. Laws and regulations continue to multiply in complexity, and we are bombarded on every side by news of variant human behavior patterns, some of which we are encouraged to accept although we have been taught since our youth that they are wrong, and others, by the sheer volume of publicity given them seem to be more prevalent today than they were in the past.

It is a world of accelerated change and choice. The only thing certain about tomorrow is that it will be different from today. Peter Drucker refers to this time as the Post-Capitalist Society where knowledge and information will be the key resources for future economic development. He also notes that the globalization of national economies will create uncharted and many times unpredictable results. Charles Handy refers to it as an Age of Unreason which requires what he refers to as a the need for upside-down thinking. Some of those in our institutions of higher learning discuss our period of time in terms of Post-Modernism and Deconstructionism where everything is relative, even the meaning of words. Hunter, the sociologist from the University of Virginia, in his recent book on conflicts in our society calls it a time of cultural war, where the most fundamental ideas about who we are and how to order our lives individually and together are now at odds. His conclusion is that the nub of the disagreement can be traced to a matter of ultimate moral authority. How are we to determine whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable. The division or gap in our society, he concludes, is growing. People, living and working in the same community, are in fact worlds apart.

Judy and I have just returned from a two-week trip to Eastern Europe and Russia. I had the opportunity to work with young business people from Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland who are entrepreneurs in the true sense of the word and who are learning the joys and pains of growing their business, selling their products, and developing their markets. I was also able to review the progress at one of our ServiceMaster businesses in the city of Prague, where in twelve short months we have established a beach-head and now are providing our management services to seven hospitals, with an excited team of Czech managers. I also spent time lecturing and

listening to students in three of the major universities in Moscow and saw their excitement and desire to learn but was frankly depressed with the conditions of runaway inflation, confiscatory taxation, crime and deceit, which is much of their daily environment. It is as close to anarchy as I want to come, and it is a society that seems void of responsibility. In response to a question regarding a hope for the future, one student responded with a simple request: to live in a society where truth and disclosure was more common than lies, deceit, and cover-ups.

But however you view or label this rapidity of change and choice and lack of predictability in the events that swirl around us, I would like to suggest that in this crucible of uncertainty there is great opportunity for positive direction, provided those of us who have been trained to think, lead.

There has never been a greater opportunity for the free market system to work. There should be little doubt in anyone's mind that this system which has been at the heart of the growth and development of our nation is the most effective way for the production of goods and services and the allocation of resources. It provides the opportunity and the freedom for people to make a choice, participate in satisfying their needs and wants, with a potential for reward commensurate with the task.

It is based upon a fundamental truth--that people are born to be free. It is free people who innovate, create, and produce, all of which are essential to a growing economy. It is my belief that it is this inherent and basic desire to be free that has caused the revolution of change in what was the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. This change was not brought about by an army or the result of a strategic foreign policy plan. Nor was it was the product of any massive foreign aid. It has, for the most part, come from within. An upheaval of change born of the basic nature of people to be free, whether they be Czech, Romanian, Russian, Bulgarian, German, or Kurd.

Communism has collapsed. The centrally planned economies are bankrupt. The free market system in the United States, Japan, and Western Europe has created wealth on the scale never before dreamed of. This free market system as we know it, however, is morally neutral. It is indifferent to moral choices. It is blind to good and evil. It is materialistic, impersonal, and non-human. It can produce great human misery as well as great blessing. It needs a moral reference point beyond the system itself within which to operate. Otherwise, I suggest, it has the potential to bankrupt the human soul. History has taught us that not even government can exercise judgment in the absence of a moral authority without eventually reverting to coercion, discrimination, and persecution of the powerless. The market place is no different.

Several months ago I called a friend of mine and got the following response from his answering machine. "Hello. This is not an answering machine. It is a questioning machine. There are really only two questions in life that are relevant. Who are you and what do you want? Please give your answer at the tone."

How would you answer these questions? They are fundamental. They bring us to a beginning point. I suggest tonight that the answer to these questions cannot be limited to ourselves but must include a sovereign God and the issue of our relationship to him.

As we focus on the importance of God, it leads us to the value and worth of people--people created in His image with dignity and worth. People, with their own fingerprint of personality and potential. It is the person, not the machine, that can respond to the unexpected and surprise the customer with extraordinary performance. Only people can serve. Only people can lead. Only people can innovate and create. Only people can love and hate.

Animals have the capacity to learn a conditioned response and an established pattern of behavior. But people have the potential to improve upon the knowledge, to modify and to adapt and to exercise judgment within a framework of moral values. People make choices, both good and bad.

It is only people who have the ability to learn to do and to be. It is this process of becoming that is uniquely human.

For many of us, we will spend most of our waking hours in the work environment. It is this environment and the people we work with that have an influence and lasting affect upon just who we are becoming. It is the process of relating within the context of the firm that we learn to develop and build upon individual strengths and also cover individual weaknesses like shingles on a roof.

It is those shingles on a roof that bring value to a firm, a compounding multiple and overlay of people growing and developing in their individual and combined effort. On the other hand, if there is no order to the shingles, major gaps develop. The roof leaks. The firm has not taken advantage of placing people in areas of their strengths, and the potential value of combined effort is lost.

It was Deming who reminded us that we are born with an intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, dignity, and a curiosity to learn. It was Drucker who provided us with the simple yet profound definition of management: getting the right things done through others. As the shingles overlap on the roof of the firm, we must also ask the question of what is happening to the person in the process. Is he or she developing and growing as a whole person, or is it just a game of manipulation that will accomplish a series of tasks for a profit, with the gain going to a few at the top, resulting in an atrophy of the soul of the person producing the results?

In the market place, we have ways of measuring the value of the combined efforts of people in an organization that we call the firm. It all adds up, we hope, to profits. And profits add up to net worth. If we organize the firm for public ownership, we might even anticipate value being measured as a multiple of those earnings. But what is the value and worth of the person? Is it to be measured in a pay check, an incentive plan, or some stock option program? Things that are unique, one of a kind, grow in value with age. But is this true about people?

Several years ago, I purchased a Hummell Christmas plate for my wife Judy. The price was \$21.95. It was the first Christmas plate produced by the famous German firm. The store clerk assured me it would increase in value. A few years later Judy and I attended an antique auction and were surprised to see that same Hummell Christmas plate being sold for more than \$1,000. What was it about the plate that brought about this remarkable growth in value? Its substance hadn't changed. It was not more beautiful. It had not accomplished more. But it was in much greater demand. The original molds had been broken. Now there were only a limited number with no opportunity for replacement. Of course, there was also the factor of inflation. All of these factors, except for inflation, had contributed to an increased value.

There is only one mold per person and no opportunity for replacement. Yet does this count for value in our normal way of thinking as we build the firm and the people within the firm? Publicus Cereus, a famous Roman writer in the First Century, concluded, "A thing is worth what someone will pay for it." For him, this was not just a simple truism, but it was reality. He had been a slave brought from Antioch to Rome where he was purchased by a wealthy philanthropist who promptly set him free. Perhaps he knew the large sum of money his benefactor had paid for him. "Am I worth that much?" he might be asked. What is any human being worth? A few dollars, which is the combined value of one's chemical substance? The price of a slave? Or even the involvement and investment of a life of another? The measurement of human worth cannot be limited to a dollar value. It is more truly recognized in a contribution that a person is making in the lives of others. The people they marry, they parent, they work with, they teach, they serve. Value, then, is measured in the changed lives of people.

As I come to this conclusion, I do so not as an expert in psychology or philosophy. My thoughts are simply shared from the perspective of one who has spent most of his life in the marketplace. One who has had the responsibility to lead a firm we call ServiceMaster, a public company with customer level revenues today in excess of \$3.5 billion, serving over 1,500 health care institutions, 500 colleges, universities and public school districts, and providing a variety of specialty services to over 4.5 million homeowners. A firm that has experienced dynamic growth, doubling in size every 3 1/2 years for the past 22 years, a firm that has made service and change a way of life for its people including the reality that today over two-thirds of our present volume is represented by new businesses initiated or acquired within the last ten years. The span of services today stretches from Karachi, Pakistan to Tokyo, Japan. Our future and survival is simply dependent upon over 150,000 people, most of them located in our customer's environment, with many different skills and talents, doing things right and doing the right thing in providing a quality service.

There is much about our business that may be classified as routine or mundane. We are often dealing with people in entry level positions who are unskilled and many times uneducated, and more often than not, unnoticed. The task before us is to train, motivate,

and develop these people so that they may do a more effective job, be more productive in their work, and, yes, even be better people. This is both a management and a leadership challenge. For us in ServiceMaster, it is more than a job or a means to earn a living. It is in fact a mission or way of life. Our company objectives are simply stated: to honor God in all we do, to help people develop, to pursue excellence, and to grow profitably. The first two objectives are end goals. The second two are means goals. As we seek to implement these objectives in the operations of our business, they provide for us a reference point for what we do and how we determine that which is right and seek to avoid that which is wrong. In so doing, we seek to recognize the dignity and worth of every person as being created in God's image and, thus, to unlock their potential.

It was that potential that my partner, Ken Wessner, saw in Bob Ware, who 25 years ago was working as a houseman in a hospital that we began serving. Ken identified Bob as a person with potential. As part of this identification, training, encouragement, and motivation was needed. Bob soon grew to a supervisory position, then to a manager's role, then to a regional manager, area manager, division manager, division officer, a senior officer of our company, and is now operating one of our more successful franchises as an entrepreneur and successful independent businessman. It is not only Bob's business accomplishments that we should admire. It is also that Bob has grown as a person, a father, a parent, a contributor to his community and has come to know God and the importance of a relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord of his life.

Today, Bob can point to many other people who are growing and developing within ServiceMaster that he personally has touched, mentored, and encouraged, all as part of a duplication and reproduction process that occurs when the value and worth of one individual is identified and that individual learns the joy and excitement of growing and contributing to the development of others. So the story could be told of many others in ServiceMaster who as ordinary people caught the vision that they could accomplish something extraordinary with the support and help of others and so fulfilled one of our founder's dreams of building a business with ordinary people, motivated, trained and excited about accomplishing the extraordinary. It is this simple truth of recognizing the potential dignity and worth of every individual that has been the single most important ingredient in our success and growth as a business.

People work for a cause, not just a living. The firm with the highest pay scale is not necessarily the one with the most motivated and effective people.

Several years ago I was visited by a former senior officer of one of our competitors. He was complaining about the things that were happening in the company since it had been taken over by another firm. He concluded that too many of the executives and other managers were now trying to sell themselves to the highest bidder. They were not committed, and they were in the process of becoming nothing more than hired guns. The mission and purpose of the firm had been lost. There was no longer a cause. Yes, some had been lured to stay with added incentives and bonus packages, but

the real question was where was their heart. His concluding comments to me were right on target. He simply said, "Bill, you know what makes a good service company? It's when people feel success in their work and are happy with the people they are working with because they have a common purpose. It's no longer true there in Brand X."

Samuel Beckett and James Joyce were friends and confidantes. Although the writings of Joyce have received more fame and publicity, Beckett won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969. His essays, short stories, novels, plays, and radio and television scripts are generally obscure and esoteric works, stressing the absurdity and despair of life. His characters typically engage in meaningless habits to occupy their time but have no purpose or mission and accomplish nothing. As he spoke with unflinching honesty about the emptiness of life without a mission or purpose, he may well have been describing the modern-day worker in an environment of accelerated change, choice, dislocation and discontinuity. It is not how things have to be. A leader who is willing to serve with a purpose provides hope, not despair and an example for those who want mission and meaning in their work and who are prepared to accomplish more than even the defined task.

Why is Mary Lindgren a housekeeper in a 150-bed community hospital still excited about her work after 15 years? There have been some changes. She has moved from 2 West to 3 East. She actually cleans more rooms today than she did five years ago. The chemicals, mop, and maid cart have been improved, but the bathrooms and commodes have not changed nor has the arrogance of some of the physicians and nurses or the basic routines of the task. Part of recognizing the importance and motivation of Mary, the task must be defined as something more than a clean floor. For her to continue to see fulfillment in her job, she must see herself as an extension of patient care. She is one of the team helping sick people become well. Mary has also experienced recognition for a job well done. She knows that others have cared enough to give her the very best tools to accomplish her task. In fact, as a task is accomplished and she makes improvements, including those that extend to the patient, she recognizes a level of dignity and self-worth. (Here give story of Olga in Guy's Hospital.)

Several years ago, our grandson Benjamin was born in England. Judy and I had the privilege of being there with Chip and Carey at the time of his birth. You know there is something special about the birth of a new baby, a wonderful miracle of life. In one way, the little baby is helpless. Everything has to be done for it. All it can do for himself is sleep, eat, and sometimes cry. Yet as I looked at this little baby boy who was just seven pounds or, as they say in England, one-half a stone, and who fit in the cradle of my arm, I realized that all of the potential was there to be somebody. It is this search to be somebody that is basic to all of us. For most of us this accomplishment, if it comes at all, will come in the work environment.

Now some may define being somebody by achieving a title or position or rank or even a certain income level. Others may define it by the size of a house or a car. These measurements may be the most common ones talked about, but they also can be very hollow, especially if they are only self oriented. I believe that it is when you have the opportunity to contribute to another in a way of serving, teaching, and helping, that you will receive lasting gratification and understanding of the real benefit of being somebody who is working for a cause.

It was Aristotle who reminded us that the ultimate was not what we knew but how we acted upon what we know. Our founder Marion Wade used to simply put it, "If you don't live, you don't believe it." Several years ago Alexander Solzenetzen gave the commencement address at Harvard University. The title was "Worlds Split Apart." He concluded that our world was split. Not split over views of East versus West or communism versus capitalism or socialism versus the free market system. But instead over a person's beginning point. Was a person to be the measure of all things? Or was there a God above the person who provided a source or reference point for the straight line of right or wrong decisions? This was also addressed by Alan Bloom in his book, The Closing of the American Mind. He concluded that the average student attending a college or university today has accepted the premise that everything is relative. Since there is no source of truth or reference point in such an environment, there is no search for truth and therefore can be no real meaning. Thus the gradual closing of the American mind.

It is within this context that we at ServiceMaster start with an absolute reference point and seek to honor God in all we do. In a pluralistic society, not everyone will agree with the starting point. But few would disagree with the great potential for good as people recognize the value of worth of others ahead of their own self interest or self gratification.

This first objective is not simply an expression of some religious denominational belief, be it Judaism, Protestantism, or Catholicism. Nor is it an attempt to merchandise the free enterprise system or the services we sell wrapped in a religious blanket. It is instead an affirmative statement that the source of our way of doing business is with God. It is a rejection of the notion that the final authority is with man's own reason or that ethics change based upon culture or environment. As one starts with God as a reference point, it does not mean that everything will be done right. In ServiceMaster, we have experienced our share of mistakes. We have our warts and moles. As part of the way all of us have been created, we make both good and bad choices. But because of our standards, we can't hide our mistakes. They are flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, forgiveness. The people of the firm cannot live as schizophrenics, saying one thing and doing something else. When a mistake occurs, it is either corrected or, if it continues, results in an explosion that demands the attention from everyone including top leadership. Mission and purpose, well understood and implemented, among the members of the firm provides the best of internal control.

Nor do we think a standard that seeks to honor God in all we do is the reason for our financial success. It should not be applied like some mathematical formula used for arriving at a specific answer. Its effectiveness cannot be simply measured in dollars and cents. It is a living principle that allows us to confront the difficulties and failure that are all part of life with a reassurance that the starting point never changes and provides a certain reason and hope above it all. The ultimate litmus test is not in the income statement or balance sheet. For us, it is more truly measured in the changed lives of people. It is not so much what we know but how we are known. People of integrity, seeking to do that which is right even when no one is looking and staying committed, whether the test is adversity or prosperity. Yes, these principles can work even in the market place.

In response to a recent Wall Street Journal editorial on family values, one of our managers wrote the following in his letter to the editor:

"Mr. Crystal is right on target. Our society has become too secular, too amoral. Our economic life is probably the most secular facet of our society. Fortunately, I work for a company that is non-secular and proud of it--ServiceMaster. Reference to God in our company objectives gives us an ethical framework for business behavior."

As I read this letter from Jim Horner, I realized once again that the continuing process of understanding and applying our objectives was working.

Now as a leader in this environment and as one who has answered the questions of who am I and what do I want by starting with God and a personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ His Son, it is imperative that I live my faith, not just preach it. And in the process of living my faith that I learn to accept and work with God's mix of diversity and still advocate and maintain His absolutes. This could be the subject of another talk, and I think it is now time for questions.

* * *

6/3/93