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# A Season of Hope

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December 10, 2004**

**C. William Pollard  
“A Season of Hope”**

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This is a very special time of the year. It may well be described as a season of hope. For those of the Jewish faith, the celebration of Hanukkah recalls the joy of being free from oppression and the hope that can come from a rededication of one's faith and worship of God.

For those of the Christian faith, the celebration of Christmas represents the hope that comes from the birth of a child who came to seek and save and provide a way of redemption and reconciliation with God.

Both celebrations provide a reminder of the continuing reality of God's mercy and kindness and His grace and love throughout history. He is a source of hope. A confirmation that faith and hope fit like hand and glove.

We all have experienced feelings of the absence of hope which at times can result in despair and even depression. For most of us, these feelings are short-lived. They may be brought upon by a loss of friendship, a job, a loved one, or a broken relationship with another. The pain is real, but time does have a way of healing.

But for some, the feelings of despair and depression have the potential to be more long lasting. The cause may not relate to a loss but instead to a feeling that a person does not measure up or there is no way out. There is a disparity between what the person thinks they ought to be and what they fear they really are or ever will be or a feeling that their circumstance of life will never improve.

We are, in a sense, prisoners of our hope. Hope always encompasses more than what we see, touch, or acquire. It always looks to the future. A dimension of life that can still be affected by the choices we make. Hope raises the question of our immortality and it is in response to this question that we find the link between hope and faith. The Bible puts it this way as it describes faith as the substance of things hoped for and the reality of things not seen. Faith and hope are often strengthened in the crucible of adversity and hardship.

I recently had the opportunity to travel to Africa with representatives of Samaritan's Purse and Opportunity International. We visited some of the most troubled and difficult areas of the world, including locations in northern Uganda and southern Sudan. I was overwhelmed with the challenges and hardships of life that faced many of the people I met. Few families have not been affected by the scourge and pandemic of Aids. There are over one million orphans in Uganda. The average annual income per family in these areas is less than \$1,000. In

northern Uganda there are thousands of refugee families living in tent cities at not much more than a subsistence level. They are suffering not only from hunger but also from the pain and loss of one or more of their children who have been kidnapped by insurgents and are being used as slaves of war. In Southern Sudan the same conditions were present but only worse, all as a result of a prolonged civil war fed by long-standing tribal and religious differences and fueled by the age-old search for power by a few.

Yet, despite these desperate conditions, I found hope. Hope represented by a group of fifteen women in a small rural community, each with their own little trading business, who joined together to form a trust bank, borrowing on average of \$100 a piece to grow their businesses so they could use the additional profit to support and care for 43 orphan children. Hope represented by a group of Canadian and American young people working in a difficult and dangerous war zone to distribute food and necessities of life to hungry refugees and also building schools for their children. Hope found in the work and spirit of a young American doctor in Sudan who performs 18 to 20 surgeries a day in the most difficult of circumstances with a limited power and water supply, and 100+ degrees temperature. Or hope shown by a ten-year old boy I met in a hospice dedicated to caring for children dying of AIDS. Although very ill himself, he found the strength to help and encourage others who were worse off than he was and spoke

of his own faith and hope as he pointed to the names on the ceiling of those children who had gone on before and were now in heaven.

What causes people to have a sustainable hope even in the most difficult of circumstances and conditions of life?

As I have experienced in my own life and witnessed once again in this trip to Africa, the answer is found in this other side of hope – a faith in God as translated into the action of caring and serving others. In so doing, people grow in their hope as they become agents of God’s mercy and love.

Some of you may be wondering by now what all this talk about hope, faith, and God’s mercy has to do with our lives as business people. Well, first of all, I think we would all agree that there is both hope and despair in business. We often talk in terms of vision, motivation, morale, or lack thereof, but we are speaking about the same thing.

But what about the faith issue – the question of God – the spiritual dimension of life. Is it appropriate to mix this side of life with business?

During the last several years, there have been numerous articles and books written on the subject of the growing interest in spiritual issues in business.

One of those books was written by a Nobel Prize winning economics professor from the University of Chicago. In his book entitled *The Fourth Great Awakening*, Robert Fogel traces, from pre-Revolutionary War days to modern times, the various religious awakenings in America and their impact on our society and the economy. He concludes that one of the greatest issues in our society and the world of business today is a lack of a consensus of moral authority and a lack of what he refers to as a distribution of spiritual assets.

In light of the events of the last several years raising questions of integrity, character, and ethics in business, the issue before us as business leaders is whether the firm can not only make money and create wealth but also be a moral community for the development of human character.

If it can, there is a role for faith – there is a role for God.

Now, for me as a Christian, my faith starts with that child born in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago. I believe that it is through Jesus that God has made his mercy and grace available to us. Jesus lived and died for a purpose that those who God created and loved may know Him as Lord and Savior. It is God's offer to all, but like any offer must be accepted to become a completed transaction.

But if that is my faith, the source of my hope, how should I live my faith?  
Can I integrate my faith with my work and my relationship with others so as not to impose it upon my friends and fellow workers but instead share it in a way that it can be examined, tested, understood and, in some cases, even embraced by some.

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 on average doubled every four years. 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.

My experience confirmed Peter Drucker's conclusions: that people work for a cause not just a living and that mission and purpose were important organizing and sustaining principles for 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 that 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, innovation, and hope 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 - 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 as I was able to serve those I led.

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 first joined the ServiceMaster team, now over 27 years ago.

My predecessors in the business, Ken Hansen, who was then Chairman of the Company, and Ken Wessner, who was then President and CEO of the Company, were both involved in recruiting me to join the firm. They wanted me to come and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the Company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner. In the selling of the job, it was suggested that I, along with others, would be considered in the future for the CEO position of the Company.

The interviewing process took several months and as we were coming to what I thought of as the final interview to confirm compensation and starting date, I decided that I needed to know more about what it would take to be CEO of ServiceMaster. As I pressed the point and tried to get some assurance of how I could become CEO, Ken Hansen stood up and told me the interview was over. Ken Wessner then ushered me to the front door. As I left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that it was over. I had blown the opportunity.

A few days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to have breakfast with him to discuss what had happened in his office. When we sat down for breakfast, he simply said: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster to contribute and serve, you will have a great future. But if your coming is dependent on a title or position or ultimately the CEO's position, then

you will be disappointed. To be successful at ServiceMaster, you will have to learn to put the interest of others ahead of your own.

His point was very simple. Never give a job or a title to a person who can't live without it. Determine at the front end whether the leader's self-interest or the interest of others will come first. Know whether he or she can define reality by being willing to do what they ask of others.

I took the job and Ken in his own way tested my commitment and understanding of what he had told me. I spent the first six weeks of my ServiceMaster career out cleaning floors and doing the maintenance and other work which was part of our service business. There were lessons for me to learn, the most important of which was my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead.

Later on in my career the faces of our service workers would 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 or simply another producer, 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 of faith 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. 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

One of the current best sellers 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 he 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 in this room may already know – one of the best ways for a Christian to integrate their faith with their work is to live it and to do so in service to others.

Another lesson I was soon to learn was to accept people for their differences and to be ready to be surprised by their potential. A colleague of mine tells of an experience of his that has been a great reminder of this point. It is often the custom of firms to hand out service pins in recognition of years of service. My friend was involved in such an event. He was surprised by the response of one of the recipients. The young man opened the box, took out the sterling silver tie tack, said thanks and then with a wide grin proudly put the service pin in his ear lobe, not his lapel.

People are different and we should never be too quick to judge potential by appearance or life style. The business firm is a place where diversity should be promoted. The leader's responsibility is to set the tone and to provide an environment where different people can contribute as part of a whole and so to strengthen the group and achieve unity in diversity.

This is not always an easy task. In fact, during the period of my leadership, as I sought to expand opportunities for women and minorities, I set a standard for the senior officers that for every open position, they should first seek a woman or a minority to fill the position. It was a controversial position to take and not always understood within the organization. It opened up the doors of opportunity at the officer level and other levels of the Company for a group of people that historically had not had those opportunities. On the other hand, it also limited the opportunity for well-qualified white males.

Was I right or wrong in so leading? A question that reminds us that ethical decisions are not always black and white and not always popular. In some situations, there is no one best solution. As we live and work in an imperfect world, there will be moral ambiguities and judgments will have to be made.

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 be 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 living your faith.

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 ended up with a broken relationship. In such times, there is a need for admitting your mistakes, asking for forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation.

As we seek to lead, we should never assume that what we have in position, achievement or success is for ourselves. In God's system of fairness and justice, why should any of us be preferred?



Psalm 24 reminds us that God owns the earth and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. I possess my life, not as my own but as a steward and God has given me the choice of how to invest it.

God as my shareholder expects a return. “From everyone who has much, much will be required. And one who has been entrusted with more will be asked for more.”

As I have traveled over the years and visited various areas of this world, I realize that I have been given much. Why wasn't I born on the garbage hill of Cairo, Egypt? Why wasn't I one of the orphans that I visited in Africa just a few months ago? Why wasn't I born in Eastern Europe or Russia, a culture still shaped by and infected with the evils and corruption of Communism?

As I reflect upon this reality, I have concluded that the only reason I have something that somebody else doesn't have –whether that something is represented in money, possessions, education, talent, title, or position – is for me to use, share, and invest so that it will benefit others and represent the message of love and redemption of my Lord and Savior.

I can't live a bifurcated life – church on Sunday and work on Monday. The business firm has been my channel of distribution for fulfilling and living my faith

– a channel that for me 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.

So for me, business is not just a game of manipulation that accomplishes a series of tasks for a profit, with the gain going to a few, the atrophy of the soul of the person producing the results. People are not just economic animals or non-personal production units – nor can they be simply lumped in categories of Evangelical, Protestant, Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Jewish, or Muslim. Every person is created in the image of God, with their own fingerprint of personality and potential. As a leader in the workplace, it is my responsibility to provide an environment that unlocks that potential and, as a Christian, to walk and talk about my faith in a way that invites others to seek and embrace the same Lord I love.

I am reminded of C. S. Lewis’ words when he 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.”

So, during this season of hope, may I ask where is your hope – and who is the object of your faith -- and how are you translating or integrating your faith with your work? How are you growing as an agent of God’s mercy and grace?

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.”

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Revised 1/9/05