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The Soul of the Firm (Santa Fe, NM)

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**EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN PUBLISHING ASSOCIATION FALL
SEMINAR
Santa Fe NM
Monday, November 3, 1997**

“The Soul of the Firm”

**C. William Pollard
The ServiceMaster Company
Downers Grove IL**

Thank you for the opportunity of sharing some thoughts with you this morning.

We live in exciting times. As Dickens once said, “It is the best of times and the worst of times.” Our world is one of accelerated change and choice. Changes in the politics and economies of what was the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and what is emerging in China have affected the lives of millions of people. Everywhere one looks there is more freedom.

Yes, more freedom and certainly more choice, but also definitely more confusion and insecurity.

For example, the job is no longer as secure as it once was. We use words in the market place like down-sizing, right-sizing and restructuring to mask the reality that people lose their jobs for reasons other than performance. In fact, some have suggested that we live in a **post job world**. Serious issues are being raised about what is the social contract between an employer and an employee and what should it be for the 21st Century.

But this acceleration of change and choice is not simply limited to the work environment.

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. Others, by the sheer volume of publicity given them, seem to be multiplying at an alarming rate and appear to be more prevalent today than they were in the past.

We continue to speak about being global in our thinking. In fact, our economy is increasingly being affected by global forces vs internal forces - yet everywhere we look - in our own society and throughout the world - **tribalism** is rampant - with growing divisions and conflict among ethnic, religious and economic groups.

Some discuss our period of time, not only in terms of a post-Christian era, but also one dominated by post-Modernism where everything is relative, including the meaning of words.

Arthur Schlesinger describes this period in the history of our country as a time of the disuniting of America. Where group rights have overtaken individual liberties, and the principal of E Pluribus Unum is fading fast.

Hunter, a sociologist from the University of Virginia has described it as a time of cultural wars. Where the fundamental ideas of who we are and how to order our lives, 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 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.

The rapid expansion of technology has allowed us to turn our homes into office, entertainment, educational, and purchasing centers. You can now sit before your home computer and purchase everything from groceries to automobiles, plan your next vacation, access libraries all over the world; and with a link to your TV or stereo system, order up the latest in entertainment or attend church through cyber space.

In business, we have concluded that because of all these changes, we really can't plan for the future; the best we can do is plan for change. Our choices and the choices of our customers are now multiplying at exponential rates.

So in this fast-paced, changing world, what is on the mind of the average American as we approach the 21st Century? As some of you may know, a portion of our business involves providing services ranging from lawn care, pest control, maid service, and appliance maintenance and repair to over 6 million home owners. Recently we commissioned a study to find out just what the average American was thinking about.

In general, they were concerned and confused about the present, uncertain about the future, and skeptical about solutions to either. Specifically, over 70 percent had money concerns relating mostly to their credit card debt. 52 percent worried about their jobs. 41 percent were stressed out over family matters relating to marriage or children.

There was confusion and frustration about roles. Males are no longer the sole breadwinner, a role historically identified with masculinity. It is now a woman's job too. Women are frustrated over the breadth of their responsibilities. They are a wage earner, but also mom, wife, the CEO of the household, and for many, still expected to clean up after everyone else.

83 percent of those interviewed have concluded that young people can no longer take it for granted that they will be better off than their parents. 64 percent believe that their wealth is limited and they are not likely to be better off than they are now.

Listening to music, reading or watching television--not exercising--got the highest ratings for relieving stress.

People feel like they are time poor and they want to streamline their lives, make them more simple.

Children are increasingly influencing the buying pattern of parents. They are tuned into social issues such as the environment, racial discrimination, and their exposure to violence and sex at an early age is an accepted fact. Their value systems seem to be influenced more by outside forces than parents or the family.

Now as we step back for a moment from this broad view of the world swirling around us in a state of perpetual change and we consider our responsibility as Christians and as leaders in business and leaders in the media - in Francis Sheffer's terms - How shall we then live?

Judy and I are the proud grandparents of 11 grandchildren. Recently I noticed that a number of them have begun wearing a wristband with the letters embossed upon it of WWJD - standing for **What would Jesus do?** A profound question that cannot be ignored and must be part of our daily life.

Who are we and what do we want? (answering machine)

Now each of us here this morning represent an organization - and most of our life our time is involved in making that organization work - leading it to be successful - some of us are classified as for profit and some not for profit but we all must generate capital out of our current operations or we won't survive. In this sense, we are all in the business of making money.

Now I make money cleaning floors and toilets, killing bugs and weeds, serving food and maintaining boilers - and you have a special ministry - a mission of communicating our life and faith with all of its high points and some of its warts and moles . The common link between your lives and mine is not what we do - but instead the reality that we can't do it without people. Who are these people - why do they work - what are they becoming in the process?

Can the organizations we lead also become moral communities to help shape human character and behavior? Communities with a soul? (Here cite Fortune article on the soul-less company suffering from an enemy within - Henry Ford comment.) Will leadership from those of us who call ourselves Christians make a difference? Are we sold on investing in our people. Do we have a vision for their potential - do we read what we write? Do we walk the talk? Are we prepared to lead with a servant's heart?

Will the real leader please stand up? Not the president or the person with the most distinguished title or the longest tenure, but the role model. Not the highest paid person in the group, but the risk taker. Not the person with the largest car or the biggest home, but the servant. Not the person who promotes himself or herself, but the promoter of others. Not the administrator, but the initiator. Not the taker, but the giver. Not the talker, but the listener

It was Samuel Beckett and James Joyce who were friends and confidants. 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, radio and television scripts are generally obscure and esoteric works stressing the absurdity and despair of life. His characters are typically engaged 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 purpose or meaning, he may well have been describing the modern day worker in an environment of accelerated change and choice and no moral leadership.

It was Socrates who stated that a person should first **understand** oneself as a means of making contributions to others. **Know** thyself was his advice. Aristotle counseled his followers, to use one's talents to the utmost, one must have **discretion and direction**. His advice was "**control thyself**". Another great thinker suggested service to others, especially those you seek to lead. "Give thyself" were words spoken by Jesus as He 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 into today's world two thousand years later? There is certainly no scarcity of feet to wash and towels are always available. The only

limitation, if there is one, is with the leader. Are we willing to be on our hands and knees, to compromise our pride and status, to be involved and to have compassion for those we lead and those we work with?

Now as I ask these fundamental questions about leadership and about the purpose of life and work, you know I do so not as a philosopher or educator, political or religious leader, but simply as a person in the marketplace with its own litmus test of the bottom line. Someone who is seeking to lead, with my partner Carlos Cantu, a fast-growing, dynamic service company that we call ServiceMaster.

We have experienced rapid growth, doubling in size every 3-1/2 years for over 20 years, with system-wide revenues now in excess of \$5 billion. We are a public company with our shares listed and traded on the New York stock exchange. And yes, I live in one of those pressure cooker environments where earnings and profits must be reported quarter by quarter, and where earnings and profits have been up every quarter for the past 26 years. The shareholders that Carlos and I are responsible to as leaders, vote every day on our leadership - they have the choice to buy, hold or sell.

But what I am suggesting here today is that the measure of my success as a leader cannot be limited to the calculation of a total return on the value of our shares or the profit we produce. The answer must come from the people I work with - the over 250,000 people who are a part of the ServiceMaster Team who are making it happen every day as they serve others.

Much of our business may be classified as routine and mundane. The task before us is to train and motivate people to serve so they will do a more effective

job, be more productive in their work, and yes even be better people. For us, this is both a management and a leadership challenge. It is more than a job or a means to earn a living. It is, in fact, a way of life or a mission.

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

If you were to tour the rest of the building, you would notice that nearly all of the work spaces are moveable. Most of the walls do not reach to the ceiling. Practically everything in the building is changeable and adaptable, just like the marketplace we serve with its changing demands and opportunities.

But the marble wall conveys a permanency that does not change. The principles carved in this stone are lasting. The first two objectives are end goals. The second two are means goals. As we seek to implement these objectives in the operation of our business, they provide for us a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and avoiding that which is wrong. They remind us that every person has been created in the image of God with dignity and worth and great potential. 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 part of God's mix.

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

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

In a diverse and pluralistic society, some may question whether our first objective belongs as part of a public company's purpose statement. But regardless of where a person is with respect to this objective, the principle that can be embraced by all is where it leads us, and that is to the dignity and worth and potential of every person. For us, this is fundamental to understanding the purpose of a business firm. For me as a Christian and one who has put his faith and trust in Jesus Christ, it provides a wonderful opportunity not only to talk about my faith, but to live my faith.

With these objectives, we are shouting to the world that God does have a relevance to a work environment where not everyone has the same religious faith or is a member of a particular denomination, church, or synagogue. We are proclaiming that God does have a relevance to a work environment where people are earning money and making a profit. We are affirming that God does have a relevance to a work environment where performance and results are the accepted standard of accountability.

Not everyone will understand the purpose and meaning of our objectives. Listen to a letter I recently received from one of our shareholders:

“While I firmly support the right of an individual to his religious convictions or 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 an 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 a profit is not a sin. I urge that next year’s business report be confined to just that--business.”

So how would you answer this shareholder? What would you say in response to the question, what is the common point between God and profit? The link, I believe, is people. People created in the image of God with dignity and worth. We are sometimes criticized, as this shareholder did, for our mixing of God and profit, but seldom for our performance. As I seek to integrate my faith with my work, I must aim to excel at meeting the market place standards of selling and serving customers - making money and creating value. If I don’t want to play by the rules, I don’t believe in the ball game. On the other hand, I can not live a bifurcated life. God is with me and I am His representative - in the pew on Sunday or in the business deal - investment meeting - or difficult personal situation on Monday - the story of Jesus is a story of God becoming human - to dwell among us He cared enough to be involved not with just a select few but with the world - because it was the world that He so loved.

As I think about the great potential and opportunity we have to serve and to lead in the marketplace, I am reminded of a letter recently received from one of my colleagues, Shu Zhang, after she returned from a Management Skills Seminar. Shu was raised and educated in China, indoctrinated in communism, and is now working with us to help develop our business for this market. Listen to this letter I recently received from her:

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 had to be cared for and loved. She is not just a pair of hands - but a whole person.

As you serve and lead in your world of publishing and communication, I encourage you to seek to identify the soul of your firm - to care and nurture your people, to provide for them opportunities of growth - to unlock their potential and always be prepared to serve as your lead - never asking someone to do something you wouldn't do yourself. I also encourage you to stretch your vision, to look beyond the audience of the evangelical subculture for your books and publications, to push on the boundaries - know and live the tension of being in the world but not part of it.

As evangelicals, there are some things I believe we should consider. In an increasingly secularized society where we are encouraged to accept all forms of

variant human behavior and where there is a diminishing respect for the sanctity of a life, we need more avenues of alliance, not difference, with those who may not understand or identify with the evangelical label but who have a like starting point, a faith in God through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. However, as evangelicals, we often spend too much time and effort defining, dividing and excluding.

Sometimes our theology can so damn the sinner and pagan, that there is no room in our thinking to understand or appreciate a person's creativity or potential to contribute. We can become blinded to the fact that all people have been created in the image and likeness of God and the polluting effect of sin does not completely remove this reality.

In our penchant to protect the truth, we can subtly or sometimes overtly encourage a mentality of circling the wagons and encourage withdrawing from the world, whether that be represented by the academy of thought, in both arts and sciences, the marketplace of ideas and opportunities, or the political reality of the governments we live under.

Or in the process of seeking to preserve the heritage of our faith, we wage a war of words among ourselves using battle cries like "gender neutral" to draw our swords. We can even make money at such an activity while a lost and needy world

goes rushing by. Why do we have to scare people to get their attention or create enemies in order to organize or motivate constituencies?

God has called us to be in the world, although not part of it; and He has provided the example of the Incarnation as our model of the expected intensity and scope of such involvement. He has called us to be excellent in what we do, whatever the task, job, profession, or ministry.

When we excel in what we do, whatever that may be, as a doctor, lawyer, teacher, publisher, minister, parent, or spouse, we live our faith in a way that cannot be ignored or contained. When we proclaim our faith and muddle in mediocrity or do not live our faith, we sow the seeds of cynicism and rejection.

In this time of rapid change where people are searching for meaning, we all need to be encouraged to walk the talk -- and as we celebrate together God's great gift of salvation -- to reach out to a lost and needy world.

As we seek to do a better job of relating to the world around us, we should expect what Stephen Carter has referred to as a culture of disbelief, where the subject of God or faith in God is not something you talk about openly and is considered by most intelligent adults as a relic of the past. But let us not be

discouraged - we have the gift of our minds - our wills - our language - which, like the Greek of many years ago, is the trade language of the world and we have the potential to create and innovate within the “soul” of the firm.

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

Can our firms be moral communities for the shaping of human character and behavior? I conclude my remarks this morning with some lines from T. S. Eliot's Choruses from the “Rock.”

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of God.
And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads.
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbor,
Unless his neighbor makes too much disturbance.
And the wind shall say, here were decent Godless people:
Their only monument the asphalt road,
And a thousand lost golf balls.
Can you keep the city that the Lord keeps not with you?
A thousand policemen directing the traffic,
And not tell you why you come, or where you go.
When the stranger says: “What is the meaning of this city?”
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?

What will you answer? We all dwell together,
To make money from each other? This is a community?
And the stranger will depart and return to the desert. Oh my soul be prepared
for the coming of the stranger.
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.

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