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# What's It All About? (Lake Geneva, WI)

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**Geneva Lakes Business Luncheon**

**Lake Geneva WI**

**C. William Pollard**

**June 21, 2002**

**“What’s It All About?”**

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Have you ever been in a situation where you have asked the question: What’s it all about? What does life really add up to? Maybe it has been a problem in your business that has caused you to ask this question. You have worked hard, thought you were making the right decisions, but in the end, the project turned out to create a loss, not a profit. Or maybe it involved a personnel problem. A key employee left and went with a competitor. Business was lost. Or a bank loan that came due when there was not enough money in the till. Or that investment you made in your 401(k) plan was half of what it was 18 months ago.

There are circumstances of life that may occur in our business world as well as in our families or in our relationships with others that causes us to stop and ask that basic question: What’s it all about?

There are many people asking this question today of corporate America. The Enrons, Global Crossings, Worldcoms, Tycos and Arthur Andersens have raised questions among investors, among those directly involved in the middle of it. What’s it all about? What does it all add up to?

Two years ago I was asked to speak at a Fortune magazine conference with Jeff Skilling, who was then President and COO of Enron. At that time, Enron was flying high and Jeff had all the answers. He was introduced as the man who had

helped create the new economy and his take-home package in stocks and bonuses was worth over \$500 million in Enron stock.

Today, he is facing years of litigation and possible criminal charges with his stock worth almost nothing. Jeff must be asking the question: What's it all about? What did all those deals add up to?

This week I talked to an old friend who is a retired partner of Arthur Andersen. Last week was a tough week for Arthur Andersen as it was convicted of obstruction of justice. During Jim's tenure with Arthur Andersen it was one of the leading accounting firms. He was a great audit partner – honest and ethical. But if Arthur Andersen goes bankrupt, he won't have a retirement. What was 40 years of doing his best, working 50 or 60 hours a week all about?

There have been times in my ServiceMaster career over the past 25 years where I have asked that basic question: What's it all about? During this period of time, we were able to grow a large service company – doubling in size every 3 years and over 30 times larger than it was when I first joined it. But it wasn't always a smooth and easy ride. There were down times – difficult years. The first 3 years after I became CEO in 1983, the stock was down, not up. People were asking the question: What's it all about? Do we have the right leader? My conviction and vision about the future was not yet a reality. Was it just a dream or would it happen? But it did happen. People believed and the value was there.

But nothing remains static in this world. There is always the next challenge and another new horizon. Several years later in 1999 when my partner and successor contracted cancer, I had to come back into the business and found myself in the middle of a new set of business challenges and problems and, yes,

some alligators. And yes, there were times when I asked the question: What's it all about?

Sometimes we confront this basic question of life as we observe how others live and act. Several years ago, I was traveling in the Mid-East, visiting our business units in Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. While I was in Egypt, I had a chance to visit the pyramids and tombs of the Pharaohs. The pyramids are one of the seven great wonders of the world. But what motivated a society and an economy to be dedicated to building great edifices to stone and wooden gods to house the dead bodies of its rulers? We admire the skill and intelligence of those who designed them and directed their construction, but what about those who built them? Upon whose muscle and back each stone was laid? What was their life like? How did they prepare for eternity or life hereafter? Who were their gods? Were most of the slaves? Were some of them Jewish slaves building for Pharaoh - who forced them to make bricks without straw - suffering and sacrificing, waiting for that day of Exodus? That day when Moses would stand up and say: Let my people go!

What a challenge of leadership it was for Moses to leave over two million people across the Red Sea – a barren wilderness. A journey that would normally take approximately two years but ended up taking 40 years. A journey to the Promised Land that Moses would never enter because of some choices that he made.

I stood at the top of Mount Nebo with the wind in my face and looked over the fertile Jordan valley, with the Dead Sea to my left and Jericho due west. This was the Promised Land and it was this mountain where God had brought Moses to see the land that he would never enter. A dream, a vision that would not be fulfilled by Moses. As I stood there, I thought of some of my dreams – many of

them God has allowed me to see fulfilled. Did Moses ask the question after those many years, standing at the top of Mount Nebo: What's it all about? As I reflected upon that scene, I also was reminded of some of the contrasts I saw when I was in Cairo - contrasts of wealth and of great poverty. Over 30,000 people are living on or within the garbage dumps of Cairo. Did somebody put them there or are they there by choice? What does their life really add up to?

While I was in Jordan, I also had an opportunity to travel to Petra. On our way to Petra, we stopped by the side of the road to visit with some Bedouin children, tending their flock of sheep and goats. Soon they were invited by their father to join him in his tent. The men were invited to the front end of the tent and my wife and the other women traveling with us were invited to the back of the tent. We sat on the rug stretched over the sand and sipped tea from unwashed cups. I was reminded that this tent and surroundings must have been much like Abraham over 3,000 years ago. For this Bedouin, however, there is no future to his lifestyle. The cost of feed had outstripped the market price for sheep and goats. The future meant he would have to abandon the freedom of being a nomad and move into a town or village and get a job.

He was a very gracious host. He even invited us to stay for lunch. But being unsure about what had gone into his stew that was cooking over the fire and with a schedule to meet to be in Petra by early afternoon, we declined and were on our way again. Why did I make the choice to leave? Was I too busy to learn from this Bedouin and his family? Was my stomach too sensitive to eat his cooking? Did I care enough about him as a person – a person created in the image of God – to accept his hospitality and begin the process of friendship? If he had come to my house on his camel, would I have made the choice to invite this stranger into my home – dressed in his robes and sandals with his dirty feet? Would I have

washed his feet as Jesus did with His disciples? Would I have offered him a lunch? What is really important in life?

As I thought about all of these situations, I realized once again the reality that we are people of choice. We make choices in life and we must live with the consequences of our choice. We are people of choice because that's the way God made us. He knew when He made us that way that some would choose for Him and others would not.

My choice for God – to follow Jesus – has been the most important choice I have made in life. It has provided a reference point for my business life and my family life. When I have been faced with the contrast of challenges and disappointments in my life, Jesus has been there as my partner. I have never felt alone. You see, over 50 years ago, I made a choice by my mother's knee to accept God's promise to forgive me of all my shortcomings and provide a home for me that wouldn't be limited to this life here on earth. It was that same offer that Jesus made to the young businessman who came to Him and asked Him where is the meaning in life? How do I find eternal life? Jesus' response was simple but direct. You must make a choice for Me. Change direction and commit your life to Me and not to yourself and your own desires. He has described it as an experience of being born again – not physically but spiritually – a conscious decision to turn to God. A decision to be owned by Him.

In business, we know that an offer and acceptance makes a binding contract. While Jesus has made this offer of life to each of us, it only requires our acceptance to be a full commitment and a binding contract.

What's it all about? What is your answer to that question?

As we close let me share a little poem, written by an old friend of mine, about two men playing a midnight game.

Here repeat the poem: Midnight Games

As you reflect upon this printed story of two people playing midnight games, don't get lost with the fact that one was rich and the other was not. The issue was not one of money, but of ownership. When you come to the question of: What's it all about? – be sure you know the answer to: Who owns you?

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