

Heaven at Work

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I recently had the great pleasure and privilege of interviewing Martin Rutte and Vince Brewerton; two people who are at the forefront of a cultural development that offers the potential for powerful personal and societal transformation. Martin is the Chair of the Board at the Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace, Sobey School of Business, St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Vince is the Centre's Executive Director.

I first met Martin at the Business and Consciousness conference in Santa Fe in 2007, where he was a speaker and organizer. Since then, we've become dear friends, sharing a love of transformative spiritual practices. Martin brings a combination of business skill and savvy with soulful wisdom to his passion for helping others to find meaning and purpose at work. As he told me in our conversation, his journey toward founding the Centre began in 1986 when, at a retreat, he had an experience that re-directed his life:

"I went in to a funk and I didn't know why", Martin recalled. "I looked at my marriage and my work, and loved both of them, so I couldn't see the source. I ended up at an Augustinian Monastery, where I had a very profound epiphany experience. A phrase kept coming in to my head: 'It's about God'. This was very powerful for me."

Martin came back from the retreat and told his staff at the management company he was running and his family about this experience. He told them that he'd like to explore the idea of bringing spirituality in to work.

Martin told me that, "Everyone said, 'No, no, no. Don't use the word 'spirituality'. Use the word 'ethics' or 'values' or 'integrity' instead'. I realized that they were concerned that I'd be viewed as proselytizing and that my business reputation might suffer. But I knew that there was no integrity for me if I avoided using the word 'spirituality'. I also knew that I had to break through this blockage, so I looked at the source of proselytizing and realized that it's based on the idea of having 'the answer' that is shoved down someone's throat. But I said, 'Spiritually is not about having the answer, because that's what can turn into proselytizing. Instead, it's about having a question, an on-going question -- an inquiry. "' In the same way a business person continuously inquires, 'How do I make my business more successful?' we could engage in the inquiry, 'What is spirituality at work?' The longer we inquire, the deeper and richer would be our insights."

As someone committed to, and deeply immersed in, the business world, Martin decided to start a center that would teach spirituality in this way; as an inquiry. And he knew that he wanted to establish a center at a business school - instead of a theology school - where it could directly impact the workplace. He approached the Dean, faculty, and students of the Sobey School of Business at St Mary's University and they loved the idea. In 2004 the Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace was born. During its first four years of life, the Centre was run by two Saint Mary's professors, each on a part time basis.

The Centre's mission is;

Positively and strategically influencing the conversation and accomplishments about spirituality and the workplace globally.

The Centre engages academics and leaders in various sectors and organizations in collaborative conversations about spirituality and work. The outcomes of these conversations include: community-based research projects, networking and support for leaders wanting to inspire their workplaces, and consulting projects. The Centre works with faculty from Saint Mary's University as well as workplaces, other universities, and religious organizations, to develop lectures, courses, and programs, and to disseminate the latest developments about spirituality and work. It has an international email database that enables it to communicate with more than 1,000 people in 24 countries.

The Centre currently works with four PhD students, holds two undergraduate courses, and hosts visiting professors from academic institutions around the world. The Centre has received enthusiastic international press coverage, as the only institution of its kind in Canada, and only one of three or four in the world.

Early this year, Vince Brewerton was appointed the Centre's first full-time Executive Director. Like Martin, Vince has a long and successful background in business, including as a management consultant for 23 years.

"At the start of my consulting career, I worked for a large international consulting firm. After six or seven years there, I found that the primary focus on money no longer spoke to me", Vince told me. "I was experiencing a change in values, which led me to start my own consulting business that focused exclusively on the charitable sector in Canada. This step enabled me to work with people that I found incredibly inspiring; people who are devoted to a worthy cause. I soon realized that for me and for many others, it's not about finding work with meaning, but about finding meaning in our work. Like Martin, this was my epiphany moment. From that point on, I helped organizations open up to the hunger that people have for meaningful conversations at work."

When the Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace began looking for a its first full-time Executive Director, Vince was the clear choice.

"The goal of the Centre", Vince explained, "is to change the way organizations and people work. Not in a way in which we tell people what to do, but to really encourage a change in workplaces so that conversations about meaning and purpose can take place there. As individuals, so much of our focus and time is devoted to our work; the workplace is where these conversations are most needed. To support this change, there is a growing body of research that shows that when these conversations happen, organizations and employees prosper more."

Both Martin and Vince stressed that for some, spirituality is expressed through religion, and the Centre deeply supports this. The problem that can arise when religion or spirituality are taken to extreme is that they become dogmatic. The issue then is not the religion or the spirituality but the dogmatic nature of it. That tends to turn others off, and being turned off they are reluctant to

engage in the inquiry. It closes the door. Inquiry, on the other hand, does the opposite by opening doors. Inquiries can be about the questions that, as human beings, we yearn to explore; questions such as: What is my purpose? Where can I find meaning? How can I connect more deeply with others? How can I experience and express more of my spiritual essence at work? Both men see work as the place where inquiry in to these questions is desperately needed, and where powerful transformation can occur. This is what Martin calls, "The New Prosperity",.

"We must transform work, and because work is such a huge lever in temporal society, we could therefore transform the world", Martin said. "People have a notion of the kind of world they want, and it's often suppressed for a variety of reasons; maybe we think this kind of transformation is not possible, but I believe that it is. Our vision is a society in which people can have authentic conversations about the deepest yearnings. This is authenticity in the chaos and mud of the world. We can create a new narrative of what it means to be a human, and what it means to participate in humanity. We can create Heaven on Earth."

As a Rabbi - a person devoted to nurturing the spirit - and a businessman - a person who must focus on sales and profits - I have often been asked the question, "Is there really any place for spirituality at work?" Martin and Vince are leaders in positively and enthusiastically answering this question in a way that is directly implementable, and that is changing the vision of both work and spirituality; a vision that is nothing less, as Martin reminds us, than Heaven on Earth!