

## Excerpt from “Work As A Spiritual Practice”

By Lewis Richmond

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*Lewis Richmond was formerly executive vice president of Smith & Hawken, Ltd., and currently is the founder and owner of Forerunner Systems, Inc., a leading provider of inventory management software to the catalog industry. The following excerpt from “Work as a Spiritual Practice” comes towards the end of this helpful book about ways to engage with work and the workplace creatively, with imagination, and a sense of greater possibility. Almost an epilogue, this excerpt speaks to our power as individuals to change the world of work not for ourselves only but for the greater good. – KH*



The marketplace begins in the mind.

To put it another way: The marketplace does not control us, we control the marketplace -- at least to the extent that our inner values and character are stronger than the lure of advertisements and possessions. If we truly want our system of commerce and the conditions of our employment to change, then the place to start is with ourselves. The sum total of what each of us must have or can do without creates the whole economy that employs us and sustains us. If we built an economic system based more on loaves of bread and less on Rolex watches, more on compassion than on competition, more on spiritual than material values, we might end up with a very different world from the one we live in today. The contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh once said that if every American were to forgo one alcoholic drink and one serving of meat per week, it would feed the population of his native country for a year. What would induce us Americans to do that? Why is fasting such a common spiritual practice through the world? Is it because it helps to remember what is really important? The ultimate solution to the inequities and failings of free-market capitalism is not economic but spiritual. In the end, it is our own deeply held beliefs and values that create the world in which we are all fated to live.

If an emphasis on spiritual values becomes sufficiently strong among a large enough group of people, the marketplace will begin to reflect that desire. There are already some markets that are almost entirely the creation of a shift in values, such as the organic food industry or alternative healthcare. Even meditation centers and corporate mindfulness programs are filling a market need. And what about the workplace itself? Employment operates like any other market, according to the laws of supply and demand. Right now, for example, there is a worldwide shortage of computer programmers, which accounts for their premium starting salaries and benefits. But remember the old slogan, “Suppose they gave a war and nobody came.” Suppose money was no longer the prime attraction for talented, spiritual aware job seekers. My workshops are full of people for whom the lure of riches no longer suffices. For them, quality of work and quality of life are what count. And that reflects a larger trend. One research institute estimates that over the next ten years 25 percent of Americans will become “downshifters,” and strive to scale their life back to some degree.

There was a time when the workweek was six days, when health benefits, flex time, maternity leave, and the host of other workplace benefits we now take for granted did not exist.

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Seventy-five years ago, a worker who insisted on such perquisites would have been laughed out of the boss's office and probably fired. Many business executives would argue that catering to workers' spiritual needs is going too far. I read recently of one chief executive of a Midwestern firm who complained to his human resources staff about fuzzy-headed, "New Age" ideas among some middle managers. "I want you to develop a test to identify those people," he grumbled, "so we can get rid of them." I'd be willing to bet that "those people" were that firm's most talented managers.

On the other hand, some progressive companies are establishing wellness programs, yoga classes, meditation and prayer rooms, and on-site health clubs. There are now corporate training programs in mindfulness, and Buddhist meditation teachers are being recruited to lead them. Companies usually need robust earnings to support such perks, and in all likelihood such programs will be the first to be cut when profits dip. The fact that these programs exist at all is a good first step, but they are not necessarily a sign – yet – of fundamental change in the core business culture.

How many of us in business stop to ask ourselves: Why are we doing all this? What, ultimately, is the point? What is profit, really, and why is it important? All of this worldwide commercial activity is, at the end of the day, supposed to be contributing to human happiness, to contentment, to a better life for people. Otherwise, why do it? And is it really providing more happiness to more people? The vast, interconnected global economy that we have created presumably exists to satisfy at least some of these goals. Or does it? Do we control it, or does it control us? Does it exist for the benefit of everyone or only the powerful few?

And if happiness is the ultimate goal, then what is happiness, anyway? Is it just having more money in the bank? More cars in the garage, more vacation homes? Most people would agree that happiness, at root, is a spiritual not material, value. That is what Jesus and the Buddha taught, what all great spiritual leaders taught.

But why seek to be happy? Why make a living? Why live at all? The philosopher Albert Camus began his masterpiece *The Myth of Sisyphus* by writing, "Judging whether or not life is worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of all philosophy." Each of us, whether we realize it or not, asks ourself that question every day, and every day we make that judgment anew in favor of life. We do want to keep on living, against all odds. We even find joy in it, wherever we can.

Is it possible to imagine a world where we can expect to make more than a living, to find not just necessity in our work but joy as well? Can that be the next entitlement for workers of the twenty-first century? If that seems too much to ask, I would argue, why ask for less? That said, such a change in fundamental values and outlook will not happen quickly. It may take ten, twenty, fifty, or a hundred years. Many people in the developing world are just emerging from grinding poverty – just as Europe was a few hundred years ago. And even in the United States, the richest country on the planet, there is much poverty. People in the world's emerging nations may need to have their three televisions and two cars long enough to assure themselves that such luxuries are not the be all and end all of human existence, as the American TV channels they received on their satellite dishes would have them believe. The Buddha himself needed twenty-nine years of the princely life before he came to that conclusion, and he was a born sage! Materialism as the reigning creed of human existence may need to complete its life cycle just as previous belief systems have done. But in the end, it is not our worldly desires that will set the grand agenda for our long-term future as a species but our spiritual aspirations.



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We encourage you to read the entire book “Work As A Spiritual Practice,” by Lewis Richmond. Based on Buddhist principles, the book is accessible to persons of all faiths who keep an open mind. To purchase the book, visit any bookstore, or our Resources section here:

<http://www.hosfeld.com/resources/books.php#cat3>

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