

A Thin Spot¹

LLOYD E. SANDELANDS

ABSTRACT

A “thin spot” in thinking about business endangers our human being. This article traces a change in business thinking over the last generations to note how, under the spell of the scientific method and the thrall to utilitarian values, our understanding of our self has grown harder, more determined, and less sympathetic. Bringing together ideas about the meaning of self from the study of semiotics and from the author’s own religious faith, this article describes how we can reclaim our human being by grounding thinking about business in faith that reaches to God.

INTRODUCTION

For naturalism, fed on recent cosmological speculations, mankind is in a position similar to that of a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting, and the inevitable day drawing near when the last film of it will disappear, and to be drowned ignominiously will be the human creature’s portion. The merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day,

Lloyd Sandelands is a Professor of Management and Organization at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business, and Professor of Psychology in the College of Literature, Science and Arts at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, MI. E-mail: lsandel@umich.edu.

and the ruddier the bonfires at night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the total situation. (James 1902, p. 139)

And so, better than 100 years ago, William James foresaw the danger in thinking about business today. Walled-in by natural science and directed by utilitarian values, we skate upon an idea of ourselves that is rapidly and dangerously thinning. This article is about the danger in how we think about business and about how we must think differently to keep ourselves from a sad demise.

IN WORD AND THOUGHT

What's in a word? There was a time when people in business were called *personnel*; today they are called *human resources*. And there was a time when the business art was called *administration*; today it is called *management*. What do these vernacular changes mean? What is gained and what is lost in transit from *personnel administration* to *human resources management*?

Words are never idle—for in them go ways of thinking, views of the world, and indeed, whole philosophies of humankind. In talk of “human resources” instead of “personnel,” and in talk of “management” instead of “administration,” are important differences in thought and practice. “Personnel,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* is a collective noun that refers to “The body of people employed in an organization, or engaged in a service or undertaking, esp. of a military nature; staff, employees collectively.” Its etymology traces to the French adjective *personnel* for personal, as distinguished from the adjective *matériel* for material. “Human resources,” by contrast, is a plural noun that refers to “people (esp. personnel or workers) considered as a significant asset of a business or other organization.” Its coinage is new, from the United States. “Administration,” according to the *OED*, is the verbal noun for “The action of administering or serving in any office; service, ministry, attendance, performance of duty.” Its root is the verb “to administer,” the etymology of which traces to the Latin *administra-re* meaning “To provide, supply, or impart

(usually something necessary or helpful).” “Management,” by contrast, is the verbal noun for “Organization, supervision, or direction; the application of skill or care in the manipulation, use, treatment, or control (of a thing or person), or in the conduct of something.” Its root is the verb “to manage,” the etymology of which traces to the Latin *manus* for hand and the French *menager* for the skillful direction and exercise of horses. Between these words the meanings of business move—from the concrete (a body of persons) to the abstract (an asset of business), from the subjective (personal) to the objective (asset), and from the existential (provide or supply something necessary or helpful) to the instrumental (control a thing or person). Talk about business today is harder, more determined, and less sympathetic.

The meanings of business tell a story of the ascendance of a utilitarian science of business and with it a shift in focus and priority that Pope John Paul II (1981) identified as moving from a spiritual idea of “work for man” to a secular idea of “man for work.” The story began to gather in the industrial revolution of the 19th century with applications of time and motion study to industrial production. The story continued in the 20th century with the extension of rational methods of optimization to virtually all forms of business activity, including service, sales, marketing, logistics, accounting, finance, decision making, staff support, research and development, and management itself. Today, there is hardly a part of business untouched by such rational methods and few businesses succeed without their superior application (think only of economic giants such as Wal-Mart, Toyota, General Electric, and McDonald’s).

Frederick Taylor (1911) was among the first and most persuasive champions of this so-called “scientific management,” which he saw as more than a technique, but as a guiding philosophy for business. It is a philosophy epitomized by what he called the “task idea”:

Perhaps the most prominent single element in modern scientific management is the task idea. The work of every workman is fully planned out by the management at least one day in advance, and each man receives in most cases complete written instructions, describing in detail the task which he is to accomplish, as well as the means to be used in the doing the work. And the work planned in advance in

this way constitutes a task which is to be solved, as explained above, not by the workman alone, but in almost all cases by the joint effort of the workman and the management. This task specifies not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it (p. 39).

Scientific management sees the worker not as a person to be ministered to, but as a resource to be managed. The worker is not a being in body, mind, and spirit, but a collection of movements to sequence and optimize. Scientific management divides mind from body by subjecting the doings of the worker to the thinking of the manager.²

To be sure, a philosophy as neglectful of the human person as scientific management could not but invite dissent; and such there has always been; at times timid, at times outraged, but never effective. It was there even at the outset. For example, in an otherwise hard-headed manual about industrial enterprise, Edward Jones (1918) could still say this about the “art” of business administration:

Administration is chiefly a task of handling men. Its methods must conform to human nature. It should educate and interest men, and so conserve the delicate tissues of mind and body from which all human energy proceeds, that disease, premature invalidism, apathy, antagonism, and all other negative and destructive factors shall be reduced to the lowest possible sum . . . Modern industry is often too prosaic and too mechanical to arouse men. . . . The new day in administration will see a way found to introduce into industry more spice and romance, and more exercise for the emotional nature—more strategic play to capture the interest, and more fine, imaginatively presented aims to awaken real devotion (pp. 147–148).³

By the mid 20th century, as scientific management colonized more and more of industrial life, concerns about its humane limits turned into alarms about its costs to the person and to society. Drawing from the cautionary sociology of Frederick Le Play and Emile Durkheim, Elton Mayo (1945) worried that the large changes in the techniques of industrial organization have not been met by commensurate improvements in techniques of harmonious collaboration. The social aspects of “progress,” Mayo

warned, were being ignored at great peril. Chris Argyris (1957) complained that industrial management turns adult workers into children, and thereby stunts their full and rightful development of personality. And, taking the view of managers, Douglas McGregor (1960) importuned for the “human side of enterprise” in hopes the dismal assumptions of rational management (what he called Theory X, which assumes that workers dislike and avoid work, want for ambition, avoid responsibility, and must be “coerced, controlled, directed, and threatened with punishment,” p. 34), could be overturned by enlightened assumptions of adaptive integration (what he called Theory Y, which assumes that workers seek work as eagerly as they seek play, direct themselves willingly toward organization ends, and exercise a “high degree of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity,” p. 48).⁴ But even in chorus, these mid-century voices could only shout into the wind of historic inevitability. Their calls for reform in human relations, humanistic management, and Theory Y integration of person and organization did not have the grip or strength to uproot an idea that had sunk so deep and reached so far.

In the ambiguous perspective of near history, the current era in management thinking seems to have begun in the last gasps of the old. In 1982, Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman sought the grounds of business excellence in a best-selling book that divides the humanism of the past from the “financialism” (see Davis 2009) of the present. The book focuses on the now quaint idea that business success comes by “productivity through people.” Peters and Waterman (1982) implored managers to remember what used to be axiomatic—that the good of a company rests with those who do the work. The key to managing people, they argued, is to give employees what they most want and need in this life: “meaning.”

In their call to meaning, Peters and Waterman (1982) drew upon the writings of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, whom they quote approvingly (and to whom we will return):

Society . . . is a vehicle for earthly heroism . . . Man transcends death by finding meaning for his life . . . It is the burning desire for the creature to count. . . . What man really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction with insignificance . . . Ritual is the technique for giving life. His sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically, his cherished

narcissism feeds on symbols, on an abstract idea of his own worth. [Man's] natural yearning can be fed limitlessly in the domain of symbols. . . . Men fashion un-freedom [a large measure of conformity] as a bribe for self-perpetuation (p. xxi).

Thus, Peters and Waterman supposed that "men willingly shackle themselves to the nine-to-five if only the cause is perceived to be in some sense great" (1982, p. xxi). Excellent companies, they concluded, provide such meaning for their people:

For example, the manager of a 100-person sales branch rented the Meadowlands Stadium (New Jersey) for the evening. After work, his salesmen ran onto the stadium's field through the players' tunnel. As each emerged, the electronic scoreboard beamed his name to the assembled crowd. Executives from corporate headquarters, employees from other offices, and family and friends were present, cheering loudly (1982, p. xxii).

Unfortunately, in their zeal to identify heroic corporate culture as the fount of meaning and the ground for financial success, Peters and Waterman failed to take the full measure of Becker's theory of earthly heroics. Becker (1971) also recognized that such heroics are self-contradicting and self-defeating. There is an obstacle to meaning that the person cannot overcome, namely, to admit what he/she is doing to earn his/her self-esteem. Becker wondered what becomes of meaning when a person realizes that his/her society's system of "earthly heroics" is culturally specific and thus arbitrary, and is historically contingent and thus ephemeral. How could such meaning be a defense against extinction? Becker did not answer this question (a question he called "the main psychoanalytic problem of life") and neither did Peters and Waterman. But it is *the question*.

Today, aside from a few university academics, there are few to write about the human dimensions of work, about what work has become, about what it feels like to work, or about whether work contributes to the well-being of person or society (see, e.g., Ehrenreich 2006). The action in business thinking has moved from Main Street to Wall Street, from prosaic details of workaday labor to glamorous intrigues of finance. As journalist Michael Kinsley (2007) has observed:

Modern capitalism has two parts: there's business and there's finance. Business is renting you a car at the airport. Finance is something else. More and more of the news labeled "business" these days is actually about finance, and much of it is mystifying. Even if you understand—just barely—how it works, you still wonder what the point is and why people who do it need to get paid so much.

Today's indifference to the mundane humane has perhaps many parents; among them a growing wage disparity that divides the lives of managers and workers, a booster-ism for the ersatz humanism of corporate culture that trades hollow heroism for human being, a cultural thrall to chief executive officer celebrity that expands managerial prerogatives and selfishness, a resignation of managers to global competition that demands productive efficiency before quality of work life, but most of all, a new financialism that puts the welfare of business owners (often public stockholders) before that of business employees. As noted by Kingsley, business today is about managers making money for stockholders, not about managers making humane lives for employees. Today, a generation removed from Peters and Waterman, the worker more and more enters the business equation as an asset to be deployed like any other, with an eye to return on investment.

Thus, the history of thinking about business is one of an opportunistic and ever more thorough rationalization of the business enterprise. It is a story of putting capital, including human capital, to the utilitarian end of making a profit. And, as we are about to see, it is a story about the demise of our human person. It is a story of thinning ice; of an idea of ourselves that looks more solid than it is and that grows more treacherous by the day.

BEING AT ODDS

At risk in business thinking is our very being, our human person. What is this person? Is it to know by outer appearances, by its material presence and effects on the world? Or, is it to know by its inner being, by what it *is*? Between these ideas we are today torn—one of the person as a natural object that we can see and

talk about (this is the idea of science, the idea of *human nature*); the other of the person as an inner spirit or “soul” that we can know but cannot see and cannot talk about so easily (this is the idea of religious faith, the idea of *human being*) (see Sandelands 2007). Much as we might like to refuse the distinction between the two—to suppose simply that the person is the object in nature that science describes—we know better that the person is also a spirit or a soul beyond nature that faith describes. Our thinking about the human person, about ourselves, thus presents an antinomy; an apparent contradiction between outer and inner existences, both true.

And so we find the person—in thinking about business today—an inner being or “soul” at odds with the outer world of things and events. The trouble in business thinking begins with its scientific objectivity, and particularly, with its basic idea that business is a rational deployment of capital assets and resources. To be sure, as its boosters are quick to point out, this powerful idea has yielded a rich harvest; a work life substantially eased by machinery, a standard of living enhanced by increases in productivity, a new age of medicines and better health, and a culture enriched by new modes of expression and new means of communication. According to economists Milton and Rose Friedman (1980), these and myriad other economic wonders are the determined result of the (ideally free) play of physical and human capital: “. . . the two have reinforced one another. The physical capital enabled people to be far more productive by providing them with the tools to work with. And the capacity of people to invent new forms of physical capital, to learn how to use and get the most out of physical capital on a larger and larger scale enabled the physical capital to be more productive.” But at the same time, this powerful idea has come at the expense of the human person who is reckoned as but an economic “asset” or “resource” to be deployed like any other. According to Pope John Paul II (1991, #42), this idea of the person cannot be justified or sustained: “A business cannot be considered only as a ‘society of capital goods;’ it is also a ‘society of persons’ in which people participate in different ways and with specific responsibilities, whether they supply the necessary capital for the company’s activities or take part in such activities through their labor.” Business activity, the Pope argues, must be checked by “a strong

juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality” (#43).

Scientific thinking about business errs in seeing human persons as objects—for example, as “capital” or as “workers” or as “factors of production.” This is an error of perception that psychologist Owen Barfield (1965) found to be typical of the human sciences and which he identified as “failing to save the appearances.” According to Barfield, the human sciences too often fail to remember that what they objectively observe (what philosopher Immanuel Kant called “phenomena”) is but an appearance of what is actually true (what Kant called “noumena”). Asking whether the sciences do justice to human life, bio-ethicist Leon Kass (2002) finds a disjunction between the vibrant living world we inhabit and enjoy as human beings, and the limited, artificial, lifeless, objectified re-presentation of that world we learn from science. Scientific abstraction, he notes, is morbid. It *homogenizes* human life by overlooking its particulars of form and activity, *shreds* human life by mistaking its parts for the whole, *diminishes* human life by turning its essences (of language, passion, wakefulness, imagination, and suffering) into matter in motion, and *falsifies* human life by denying its freedom in non-teleological causal explanations. Such are the dangers that led existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard to complain of science that its method “. . . becomes especially dangerous and pernicious when it encroaches on the realm of the spirit. Let science deal with plants, and animals and stars; but to deal in that way with the human spirit is blasphemy” (cited in Stern 1965, pp. 56–57). Lost in the objectifications of scientific thinking about business is the human person.

Darkening the shadow cast on business thinking by scientific objectivity is the shadow cast by the utilitarian precept that business is an instrumentality; that is, a means to an end. Again, to be sure, there is no denying the value in business of using resources wisely to pursue worthwhile ends (Novak 1996). And indeed, the benefits of business planning, logistics, statistical process control, and management by objectives are too obvious and well known to need recounting here. But at the same time, as in the case of scientific objectivity, an emphasis on ends or purposes becomes a danger when these are pursued at the expense of human life and spirit. “That which we call purpose,” observed Catholic theologian Romano Guardini (1998):

... is the distributive, organizing principle which subordinates actions or objects to other actions or objects, so that the one is directed towards the other, and one exists for the sake of the other. That which is subordinate, the means, is only significant in so far as it is capable of serving that which is superior, the end. The purpose does not infuse a spiritual value into its medium; it uses it as a passage to something else, a thoroughfare merely; aim and fulcrum alike reside in the former (p. 62).

Thus, when seen only from the standpoint of purpose, the human person in business does not have intrinsic value (he or she does not exist *in* him or herself), but only extrinsic value (he or she exists *for* something else). Indeed, this logical property of purpose points to a paradox of economic science; namely, that its supposition of an all-encompassing purpose of “self-interest” denies the inner being of the self to which it refers. By the logic of economics, a person exists not *in* him or herself, but *for* his or her self-interest. Thus, while economics presents itself as the human science *par excellence* (see Heilbronner 1961), its humanism is empty and contradicted. Its “self-interest” refers to no recognizable human self—its economic actor has no unique personality, no individual tendencies, and no scruples written upon the heart; in a word, no inner being. And its “self-interest” refers no recognizable human interest—its economic actor’s choices are not freely elected but are dictated by the rational imperative to maximize utility (or, in psychological variations of the theory, “expected utility”). The “person” of economic science is not human, but a conduit or instrument of objective circumstances; he or she is a cipher.⁵

By now the reader might well ask why these two aspects of business thinking—scientific objectivity and purpose—that have been a focus for so long (since the industrial revolution at least) should bulk large today. Why should inner being—human being—be especially at risk now? The answer is found in the sort of catastrophe that is occasioned by small changes that accumulate and ramify over long periods of time. All of a sudden, the world is changed. The catastrophe of business thinking—the thin spot on which we skate today—is a consequence of two tendencies that have, unfortunately, reinforced one another. As today’s emphases upon objectivity and purpose in business have waxed, the original

religious emphases in business have waned.⁶ The one has come at the expense of the other. As sociologist Max Weber (1958) showed, business thinking in the new world of America got its start and its early license in a Protestant Christianity that saw gainful work and saving as signs of election by God; ideas Weber identified with the spirit of capitalist enterprise. If this Christian heritage seems an improbability to us today, perhaps it is because it is so layered-over by the objectivity and purpose of modern business thinking. The old Protestant work ethic—which saw business as being for the spiritual dignity of the person and community—has given way to a “success ethic”—which sees business as being for the wealth of its owners (Jackall 1988).

Although it must remain for another day to catalogue the events that brought this epochal change in business thinking, two bear brief mention. One is that capitalism’s success in generating wealth not only encourages, but demands for its continued success, indulgence in worldly goods at the expense of humane goods. As described long ago by writer and critic Marya Mannes (1964), the result has been a loss of inner being to a marketplace that asks of nearly everything, “*But, will it sell?*”

There is just so much inner space in each man, and what fills it is the measure of the man; the extent to which, beyond the daily concerns, he can address himself to the grand questions of life and death, of love and creation. If this miraculous inner space becomes—through cumulative and incessant exposure to what is trivial, superfluous, and irrelevant—as cluttered as the aisles of the supermarket, it ends by losing its primary function as the sanctuary of conscience and the seat of thought. The man who is a victim of things is neither free nor excellent. Living more and more by the priorities of possessions, position, and purse, he does not see beyond them (p. 17).

Today, this event is cast less sensitively as a totalitarian consumerism that corrupts children, infantilizes adults, and destroys citizenship (Barber 2007). According to economist Thomas Frank (2000), what has happened is worse than a distortion of inner being; it is an inversion of the truth. For today’s “market populists,” the market is not an impersonal mechanism of exchange, but its opposite—a loving mother who takes care of her children’s every need:

The market, if we would only let it into our hearts and our workplaces, would look after us; would see that we were paid what we deserved; would give us kind-hearted bosses who listened, who recycled, who cared; would bring a democratic revolution to industry that we could only begin to imagine (p. 219).

To this way of thinking, the market can only be good; indeed, it is the arbiter of all that is good. To this way of thinking, there is no place for a person's inner being; no place for an inner truth apart from the outer truth of the market.

A second event behind our condition today, one that predates and is in many ways responsible for the first, has been the business-abetting philosophy of pragmatism promulgated in the 19th century by the same William James that has given this essay its metaphor of thinning ice. According to pragmatism, the truth of an idea or practice lies not in any rational ideal or religious absolute, but in the practical difference it makes to act as if it is true (James 1963, p. 23). It is a philosophy James identified with business. The truth of an idea or practice, he wrote, is its "cash value"; its value for the purpose or program at hand (p. 26). Despite its modesty about truth and its even-handed concern for "differences that make a difference," pragmatism has proven to be a dangerous idea. To judge a thing by our purposes is to set aside its inner virtue for the virtue we find in it. In a word, it is to make ourselves gods of the good. To twist a phrase of Hollywood movie, it is to make our greed good. One can only wonder what James would think to see how far this idea has been taken—to see that it is nearly an axiom today that the truth and good of a business idea or practice is the profit in it. One hopes that he'd be chagrined, that he did not intend to set this bonfire upon the ice we today skate.

A BEING NOT OUR OWN

As we've seen, business thinking today skates upon a thin spot of its own making; namely that of our inner being—of our human being. It is a bargain of outer plenty for inner poverty. As we've also seen, in connection with Ernest Becker, the problem of inner

being is rooted in the problem of meaning. To exist in and of oneself is not to be an object of science or an instrument of purpose, but to have meaning unto oneself. Only a self which exists beyond objectivity and purpose, in the strictest senses of these words, has its own meaning. The inner poverty of business thinking today is just that of its lack of personal meaning. It gives no place to the human person.

Recognizing this alliance between meaning and being, writer Walker Percy (1983) sought understanding of the latter in studies of the former, particularly in the writings of philosopher Charles Peirce on semiotics. According to Percy (and Peirce), meaning is created in the social act of *naming* by which people join their common experiences under a shared symbol. Naming gives meaning to an experience by establishing that it is *about* something. This *something* is its meaning. The act of naming is truly a wonder; by its power we not only bring meaning into being, we also bring ourselves into being, both in a godlike *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing). As Percy (1983) points out, unlike all other animals, which live as “organisms” in an objective “environment,” we live as “beings” in a meaningful “world” that we ourselves create.

The act of naming is as ordinary as a father who pairs the sound “ball” with the round object he puts in his son’s hands. As the round object is named, it comes into being as a meaning—it becomes an abstract idea or concept of “ball” in the human “world.” And at the same time, as the round object is named, the father and son themselves gain a measure of meaning and being—they come to be in a “world” that includes such things as “balls.” But for its ordinariness, the act of naming is not the less mysterious. Hidden within it is a cataclysm that separates the father and child from every other kind of creature on earth. The father may pair the same sound with the same ball for his golden retriever, but to a dramatically different effect. For the dog, the sound “ball” is never more or less than a command to find and return a particular thing, which invariably the dog bolts off to do, tail wagging. For the dog, “ball” is a physical stimulus that evokes a physical response. But for the child, there comes early a realization that the sound “ball” refers not only to a particular round thing, but as well to an abstract class of round things, which by further acts of naming he will understand in detail—for example,

that the round things in the box of sporting equipment in the garage are “balls,” but that the big round thing on dad’s desk is a “globe” (and not to be tossed), and that the little round thing on mom’s dresser is a “bottle of perfume” (again, not to be tossed). All of this, so familiar to human experience, is lost entirely on the dog.⁷

Would that our human story was one of naming alone; that in this ordinary act, we had answers to all questions about the meaning of our lives and about our human being. But in what has to be humankind’s great comeuppance, the blessings of naming come with a monstrous curse. Our fate is to be able to name every thing in creation (biblically, all of creation, “the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle and all the wild animals of the earth, and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth”) except one—the most important one—our own self. As Percy (1983) describes so humorously and so well, each of us looks outward from the center of our own personal cosmos and, together with others who look outward from the center of their personal cosmos, name and bring into being all that comprises our “human world.” But from this position, looking out at the world with others, the one thing we cannot name and cannot bring into being is our self, and this is for the simple reason that it is not outside for all to see but is inside at the center of our cosmos. In search of self we look out onto the world to seek meaning and being in the things we can see and name, not least the things of business, science, art, liturgy, sport, and whatever. It is, however, a futile and despairing search. To look for self in outside things is to not find it. It is to be, in Percy’s words, “lost in the cosmos.” Thus, our self—our inner being—is an unsolvable a mystery—indeed, *the mystery*. Somehow, and with philosopher Rene Descartes, we know *that* we are (in his formulation, “I think therefore I am”), but not *who* we are.

What then is this inner being that we cannot name and that business thinking keeps from view by its unforthcoming occupations with objectivity and purpose? What is the meaning of self? And what is it to be a person? We come to a perhaps surprising answer if we hold to the semiotic principle that meaning and being consist in a social act of naming. If, as we have seen, we cannot name the self with others because we and they are marooned at the center of different cosmos, then we can name the

self only with one who shares our inner being, with one who knows us at least as well as we know ourselves. And here, at last, we come to the possibility suggested earlier by the antinomy between our nature and spirit, between what we can know of self by science (human nature) and what we can know of self by faith (human being). Here we come to reason joined by faith. By the light of most faiths, and certainly of the author's own Roman Catholic faith, we are named and brought into being by God, the Father, who pairs the word "I" with the life He puts in our hands. We come to be and come to know who we are in relation to the God who knows everything about us and who has made a place for us in His kingdom. In God, and only in God, we have a true name, a true meaning, and a true being. In God, we are someone, a self.

Given this truth of faith, that our human being lies not in the "world" that we have made but in God, we can better appreciate the thin ice on which business thinking today skates. In particular, we can better see the dangers that come of thinking about ourselves in its remote and alienating terms of worldly objects and purposes. An obvious danger is the empty consolation of consumerism noted above; of taking comfort in the prosperity of business and the beneficence of the market. A second danger, less obvious perhaps, is the false hope of diversion; that the alienation of business thinking can be allayed or placated in ordinary ways, such as by taking a vacation, or going fishing, or having the grandkids over for cake and ice cream. But, and precisely because such diversions can be joyful, such escapes take us further from self, as philosopher Blaise Pascal saw long ago:

The only thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our miseries. For it is this which principally hinders us from reflecting upon ourselves, and which makes us insensibly ruin ourselves. Without this we should be in a state of weariness, and this weariness would spur us to seek a more solid means of escaping from it. But diversion amuses us, and leads us unconsciously to death (1931, p. 24, #171).

A third and most serious danger is the supposition that we can create our own meaning and being. This last is the reckless mistake we make today in thinking about business. Again, we

have been given the great power of language to name and thus bring into being everything in the world, except ourselves. But we abuse this power to think of ourselves not in the terms God has set for us (He who made us in His image and who revealed Himself to us in scripture and sacred tradition), but in the suicidal terms of objectivity and purpose we set for ourselves. Instead of looking for the meaning and being of our lives where we must—to God—we look where we can—to the objects and purposes of business or to other aspects of the world we have made for ourselves. In making this mistake—a mistake first made by Adam and Eve in the story of Genesis, and a mistake we repeat endlessly in legacy of their “original sin”—we are reminded of the wisdom of Saint Paul who in *Romans (12:2)* advises, “. . . be not conformed to this world: but be you transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

HE WILL BE SERVED

In recounting how business thinking has come to a harder, more determined, and less sympathetic idea of the human person, we noted the antinomy between our nature (as an object in the world) and our being (as a spirit or soul). We saw how, by denying the food of faith that acknowledges inner being in God, business thinking gobbles a poisoned reason focused on outer objects and purposes. This would be a grim and sad story indeed if this were its end.

But it is not. There is always saving grace. We cannot misunderstand and mistreat ourselves for long. However we may stifle and deny our human being, it demands to be served as God demands to be served—and this because it is God in us. Business thinking need not be a soulless exploitation of human capital at the expense of the human person. It can and must be a celebration of the human person in all of his or her spiritual dimension, even while it pursues a necessary and healthy profit (Bakke 2005, Sandelands 2009). That we cannot deny God in our lives is a truth written on the human heart, a truth that however we may try to hedge or refuse we cannot help but know (Budziszewski

2004). On the broad scale of whole societies, this is seen in the inevitable failures of communist or fascist tyrannies that try to keep people from God by putting the state in His place. This is seen no less in the inevitable failures of capitalist economies that try to keep people from God by diverting them in consumerism (see John Paul II 1981). On the narrow scale of our individual person, this is seen in the inevitable pangs of conscience that we feel when we try in myriad ways to put our own idea of self before God. The grace that funds our resilience is our sure sense and constant hope of human being which comes as a gift from God. In our freedom, we may leave the gift unopened or forgotten, but we cannot destroy it, not even by sin. The God who created us in His image wants us to live in His image.

At this article's end, we return to its beginning, to the wisdom in words. We asked what has been gained and lost in our historical transit from personnel administration to human resources management. We see that gains in productivity and wealth have come at the cost of impoverished being. Whereas we think of ourselves as *human resources*, as corporate assets put to profit, in God we can think of ourselves as *persons* of intrinsic dignity and worth. And in this latter divine word, at the root of the word personnel, we have a being to hold onto and to cherish. And whereas we see business as *management*, as a manipulation of means for ends (the image is of trainer and horse, or more darkly of master and slave), in God we can see business as *administration*, as a ministry by those who lead to provide for the whole person of those who follow (the image is of a servant king, or of a good shepherd). While it may be hard to imagine taking these words back in business today, it is harder still to imagine embracing a life that is not ours, a life without being, a life without God. With these few words at least, let us edge away from the thin ice of a human being worn down by the objectivity and purposes of business and instead skate with confidence upon thicker sturdier ice of a human being in God.

NOTES

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful comments of Jane Dutton, Monica Worline, editor Robert Frederick, and two anonymous reviewers on an earlier draft of this article.

2. About this, Taylor (1911) was certain and relentless:

The writer asserts as a general principle . . . that in almost all of the mechanic arts the science which underlies each act of each workman is so great and amounts to so much that the workman who is best suited to actually doing the work is incapable of fully understanding this science, without the guidance and help of those who are working with him or over him, either through lack of education or through insufficient mental capacity. In order that the work may be done in accordance with scientific laws, it is necessary that there shall be a far more equal division of the responsibility between the management and the workmen than exists under any of the ordinary types of management (p. 26).

3. It was not long, however, before even the “artful” elements of handling men were claimed by scientific management. According to L. Urwick (1943, p. 10): “Scientific management was an affirmation that the methods of thought, the respect for natural law, which inspired the work of chemists and engineers, could and should be applied to the human arrangements underlying the use of the new and powerful tools they had evolved.”

4. McGregor’s Theory X illustrates the self-fulfilling aspect of scientific management. Theory X describes how workers act when managers treat them as factors of production, conceive them as motions to control in time and space, and divide them in body and mind.

5. Today such thinking is showcased in schools of business administration which raise economic theory to the status of a religion and which present business as being almost entirely a problem of maximizing value for shareholders (Sandelands 2008). Having lost its feel for the human, business education cedes inner being to outer circumstances. Perhaps this is why more than a few business students today feel that their education lacks soul.

6. Indeed, this is the catastrophe well and presciently described by Christian apologist and literary scholar C. S. Lewis (2001) as the “abolition of man:”

We reduce things to mere Nature in order that we may “conquer” them. We are always conquering Nature, because “Nature” is the name for what we have, to some extent, conquered. The price of conquest is to treat a thing as mere Nature. . . . As long as this process stops short of the final stage we may well hold that the gain

outweighs the loss. But as soon as we take the final step of reducing our own species to the level of mere Nature, the whole process is stultified, for this time the being who stood to gain and the being who has been sacrificed are one and the same. (p. 71)

7. The cataclysm of naming is illuminated by the story of Helen Keller. Denied the vision and hearing that might have connected her to others, Helen spent her early childhood as an isolated and “difficult” child. Despite this, she was taught by her loving teacher, Miss Sullivan, a number of hand signs by which she could indicate her desires for food and water and such. To this point, Miss Sullivan communicated with her as we might with a dog, not by ideas or concepts, but by signs of things. But then came the magical day and moment when her life was changed—completely, irrevocably, and joyfully. Helen signaled to Miss Sullivan that she wanted a drink of water. Bringing her to the fountain, Miss Sullivan put one of Helen’s hands under the running water while making the sign for water in the other hand. In that moment, for reasons that remain a mystery, Helen made the discovery of a lifetime; namely, that the finger tapping in her one hand was not only a sign of the water in her other hand, but much, much more than that; it was a name for water itself. In that moment, Helen came to her first idea, her first draught of meaning. She spent the rest of that day and, indeed, every day after, eagerly and joyfully learning the names everything around her. At last her isolation ended, she joined the human world of meaning. In that moment—it seems shocking and even hyperbolic to say—Helen herself came into being.

REFERENCES

- Argyris, C. 1957. *Personality and Organization*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Bakke, D. 2005. *Joy at Work*. Seattle, WA: PVG.
- Barber, B. 2007. *Consumed*. New York: Norton.
- Barfield, O. 1965. *Saving the Appearances*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Becker, E. 1971. *The Birth and Death of Meaning*. New York: Free Press.
- Budziszewski, J. 2004. *What We Can't Not Know*. Dallas, TX: Spence.
- Davis, G. F. 2009. *Managed by the Markets*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ehrenreich, B. 2006. *Bait and Switch*. New York: Owl Books.
- Frank, T. 2000. *One Market under God*. New York: Doubleday.
- Friedman, M., and Friedman, R. 1980. *Free to Choose*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich.

- Guardini, R. 1998. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Heilbronner, R. L. 1961. *The Worldly Philosophers*. New York: Time Inc.
- Jackall, R. 1988. *Moral Mazes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- James, W. 1902. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Longmans, Greene & Company.
- James, W. 1963. *Pragmatism and Other Essays*. New York: Washington Square Books.
- John Paul II 1981. *Laborem Exercens*. http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0217/_INDEX.HTM, accessed October 16, 2009.
- John Paul II 1991. *Centesimus Annus*. http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0214/_INDEX.HTM, accessed October 16, 2009.
- Jones, E. D. 1918. *The Administration of Industrial Enterprises*. New York: Longmans, Greene & Company.
- Kass, L. 2002. *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*. San Francisco: Encounter Books.
- Kinsley, M. 2007. "We try harder (but what's the point?)," *The New York Times*, May 16, 2007, p. 25.
- Lewis, C. S. 2001. *The Abolition of Man*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Mannes, M. 1964. *But Will It Sell?* Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- Mayo, E. 1945. *Problems of Industrial Civilization*. Boston: Harvard.
- McGregor, D. 1960. *The Human Side of Enterprise*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Novak, M. 1996. *Business as a Calling*. New York: Free Press.
- Pascal, B. 1931. *Thoughts* (selections). London: J.M. Dent & Sons.
- Percy, W. 1983. *Lost in the Cosmos*. New York: Picador.
- Peters, T., and Waterman, R. 1982. *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies*. New York: Warner Books.
- Sandelands, L. E. 2007. *An Anthropological Defense of God*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Sandelands, L. E. 2008. "Christmas thoughts about business education." *Logos* 11(1): 126-155.
- Sandelands, L. E. 2009. "The business of business is the human person: Lessons from the Catholic Social Tradition." *Journal of Business Ethics* 85: 93-101.
- Stern, K. 1965. *The Flight from Woman*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux.
- Taylor, F. 1911. *The Principles of Scientific Management*. New York: Norton.
- Urwick, L. 1943. *The Elements of Administration*. New York: Harper Brothers.
- Weber, M. 1958. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Scribner's Sons.