

WORK AS SPIRITUAL SERVICE



I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; I will not refuse to do the something I can do.

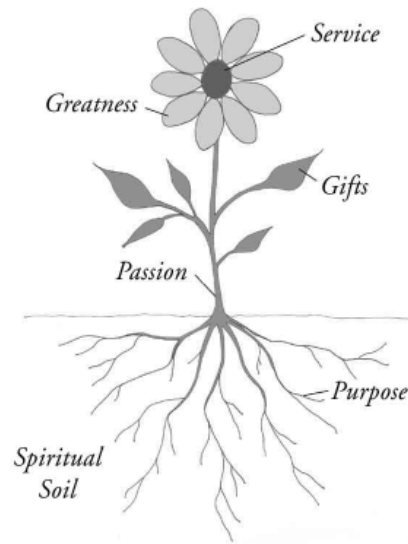
–Helen Keller

Our path to greatness comes when we see our life as an opportunity to serve. Since we spend most of our waking hours at work, it is important to see how we can spiritually serve others in our work. Appreciating the efforts of a co-worker or providing her encouragement may be just what she needs to handle the stress in her life. The ripple effect of a kind deed extends beyond what we realize. When work is seen as a way to serve others with love, we help ourselves and others grow towards spiritual greatness. We nourish the soul. This book is about growing spiritually at work. It is about offering loving service at work through the daily, seemingly insignificant interactions with others. When we look for the limitless opportunities we have to serve others,

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we see how each day brings more chances to follow our path of spiritual greatness and help others grow towards their greatness.

The metaphor of a flower may be used to illustrate spiritual greatness.



We all need spiritually fertile soil from which to grow. Our spiritual values and principles provide us with the essential elements we need to thrive. Our purpose is the roots that firmly ground us in the world and provide sustenance for our work. Our passion stems from our purpose. Our passion holds us up, as the stem of a flower, and extends us to new heights. A person lacking passion shows no vigor for life, has no energy to carry their load, just as a flower lays limp and wilted without a strong stem.

Our gifts allow us to offer our service to others. Just as a leaf draws in light to make new energy for the plant, our gifts bring life to our work as service. Our authentic self and our

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unique attributes support our essence as a spiritual being to be of spiritual service to others. The center of the flower is service; our offering to the world is the sweet nectar contained in that flower. Others draw food and sustenance from the service we provide. Finally, to complete the metaphor, the petals of the flower are the brilliance we bring forth in our lives. Our greatness shines in the beauty of who we are as unique spiritual people.

Thus, personal spiritual greatness comes from having fertile soil (spiritual inspiration, values, and principles), firm roots (purpose), strong stem (passion), developed leaves (gifts), and sweet nectar (service). Your greatness of character, your authenticity, and your integrity blossom out in the magnificence of your being.

CULTIVATING YOUR SPIRITUAL VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

We must be intentional about cultivating our spiritual soil. Rich fertile soil provides us the nourishment to blossom rather than to wither and never reach our fullest potential. At times the complexity of life seems to overwhelm us and our spiritual groundedness seems shaky. It is tempting to take the path of least resistance, become apathetic and give up, or to look out only for ourselves. However, life's reward comes in being a part of the greater dance. The path for greatness starts by answering the challenges before us with courage and conviction. The path for greatness beckons us to choose to live authentically, morally, true to our divine spirit.

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Our actions are grounded in our spiritual values and sustained by continual spiritual inspiration. We must keep our spiritual soil nourished by finding sources of inspiration. Because the soil is porous, be open to the multitude of ways you can replenish your spiritual nutrients. It is important to take time to cultivate your spiritual soil, for it is what will sustain you throughout your life and nourish you in difficult times.

A necessary first step in cultivating your spiritual values and principles is to be clear on those lessons that instruct you and guide you to greater spiritual growth. There are several ways to do this. Review books that were instrumental in teaching you how to live spiritually or have been sources of inspiration. Several of the books referenced in the bibliography can help you with this.

Identify those personal qualities that you want to cultivate and renew in your life. Throughout this book, I will refer to spiritual values and principles that seem universal such as compassion, forgiveness, integrity, interdependence, and authenticity. Compile a list of what spirituality means to you. Brainstorm words that describe what a spiritual life is like. Look through a book on values clarification.

Post the set of values and principles you believe are worth living by; be sure they are somewhere visible so you can refer to them regularly. Engage in activities that help you reflect on and examine them. Bring these values and principles to your awareness through daily meditation or prayer. Put those principles on paper and keep them in your wallet, review them periodically, and ask yourself how you are living them at that moment. Make them a real part of your life.

One short affirmation you can say in the morning over breakfast or in the shower is “Today I will offer more _____ (state the value) than I did yesterday.” Then in the evening take stock of your day to see how you lived out that value or

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principle. Daily reflection on how we live our lives in accordance with our values is an important part of cultivating our spiritual soil.

STORIES OF GREATNESS

Stories shed light on difficult problems and offer hopeful solutions and inspiration for meeting our challenges. The success of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book series speaks to the yearning we have for stories to sustain our lives. Throughout this book, examples are presented of people and organizations that exemplify characteristics of greatness. Here are some examples of people who show the breadth of ways greatness comes by serving others.

SHARING HER GIFTS

Growing up in a poor working class family, Melissa Bradley's dream was to make a million dollars by the time she was 30. When she accomplished that dream by age 26 she realized there was more to life than money. Life for Melissa involved improving others' lives. Indeed, her personal mission statement is about changing the paradigms of capitalism so that people of color are not oppressed.

Though she was a bright student, as an African American in a predominately white high school, Melissa's guidance counselors didn't encourage her to attend college. Many of her friends were either taking local minimum wage jobs, joining the military, or not finishing school. She wanted to attend college because she felt that it was her ticket to becoming a millionaire.

Melissa graduated from Georgetown University in 1989 with a degree in finance and worked for a year with Sallie Mae, a student loan agency, as a Marketing and Finance Specialist. Though her first year performance review was positive, she was told that she wouldn't be promoted unless someone died or retired. Shortly afterwards she started plans for her own business as a financial investment advisor. She did her homework, developed a business plan, and went to the Small Business Administration to get a small loan to start her company. The loan officer liked the plan but said Melissa had three strikes against her. She was young (23 years old), black, and female, all attributes that (according to conventional wisdom) worked against being a financial investment advisor.

Although frustrated that her expensive college degree didn't get her where she wanted to be, she wasn't discouraged. Melissa Bradley is a woman who isn't stopped by walls. She knew there wasn't anything that could be done about who she was, so she used the severance pay from her previous job, borrowed a few hundred dollars from her mother, and hustled. Working out of an office in her apartment, Melissa provided the financial advising she knew best, getting students through college. She networked with PTA members and neighborhood parents to build up her business. She formed a business partnership with another woman to provide out-placement services to companies that were downsizing. Melissa offered financial advising for how to invest severance pay, while her business partner offered the psychological services necessary for finding other work. Three years later, at age 26, she sold the company for over a million dollars.

Her path for greatness didn't end with being a millionaire by age 30. She was born to do more than that. During both the time she attended college and the time she built her first company, Melissa performed volunteer work with juvenile delinquents. She quickly discovered that these kids were not likely to ever get a job that paid more than minimum wage due

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to their criminal records. She knew about being an entrepreneur; the youth with whom she worked wanted to be business owners. She started a program with some friends that taught these teens business skills. Most of these kids already had the qualities of entrepreneurs; they just didn't know how to use their gifts and passion constructively.

Melissa founded The Entrepreneurial Development Institute (TEDI), which seeks to empower disadvantaged youth to develop small businesses, avoid drugs and crime, and sharpen academic skills. She worked with the youth from 8:00 am to 1:00 am – before school, after school, or during midnight basketball.

After Melissa sold her first company, she set up a loan program using her personal funds for several youth who went through her training to start their own business. Since no bank would give teenagers the start-up capital they needed, Melissa became the banker. She offered \$1,500 loans to teens who had their business plans in place so they could get their businesses off the ground. The program was so successful it received recognition from the mayor of Washington D.C. and several foundations. Two of the youth developed and later sold a board game to Parker Brothers for a sizable amount of money, and another youth started a catering business.

This program not only helped troubled teens develop important business skills and taught them how to start and run a business, but the youth were so excited about it they started getting their lives in order. The dropout rates, truancy rates, and recidivism rates of the teens who completed the program fell significantly. After three years of working for TEDI, she saw another need for these youth, and so resigned her position.

Bank regulations are intentionally rigid about making loans that are too risky in order to protect investors in banks. Thus, most of the teens in the TEDI program wouldn't be eligible for capital funds to grow their company. Melissa started a

venture capital firm at age 31 to provide financial resources to those people usually left out of the bank lending system, namely minorities and women. These populations typically don't have the credit and/or have too large a debt load to get funding from banks.

Melissa wants to prove to large investment firms that they can be profitable by supporting these minority or "risky" enterprises. She is a woman not only of high energy and passion, but enormous integrity and soul. Her purpose is clear, her gifts are polished, and her greatness is evident to anyone privileged to meet her.

TROUBADOUR OF GREATNESS

One of my personal heroes is Bill Breeden. I had the privilege of getting to know Bill when I was a graduate student in Bloomington, Indiana in the 1980s. Bill was living with his family on a farm outside of town. Several years before I met Bill, I read in our local paper that he had served for one season as Director of Migrant Ministry for the Indiana Council of Churches. In this role he helped migrant farm workers get adequate water and sewer systems in the camps where they lived on Indiana farms. I would never have known there were such farms in Indiana had Bill not been a witness to the inhospitable conditions.

At first glance, Bill is not someone who would strike you as being remarkable. To see him in his worn jeans and work shirt, you might think he is a typical blue-collar worker living a simple life. He has worked most of his life earning little money. But money is clearly not his motivation for working on the projects he does.

Bill is one of the finest examples of spiritual groundedness for personal greatness I know. He grew up in the Nazarene Church and went to seminary to become a minister. After six years of serving Disciples of Christ churches, he realized that

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being a parish minister was not the way for him to fully live his faith. He wanted to be a full-time parent to his two children. Eventually he moved his family to Spencer, Indiana where he took various jobs, from truck driving to teaching criminal justice at Indiana University. Bill also has preached at various Unitarian Universalist churches in the area.

Bill is a troubadour for justice, and his deep faith and conviction have led him to some remarkable experiences. He has been arrested on several occasions for acting on his faith. I met Bill when I was working on efforts to stop the civil war in El Salvador. I was doing my small part to educate people about the US foreign policy that fed the death and destruction in Central America. During the time I got to

We must have the courage to enter the belly of the beast and look squarely at the problems of our day.

– Bill Breeden

know Bill, he was working to make a direct impact and improve the human condition. One remarkable story about Bill's unwavering faith came when he agreed to lead a caravan to bring medical and humanitarian aid to the people in Polsetega, Nicaragua (a sister city of Bloomington). The year was 1989, the illegal U.S.-funded Contra war was in its final stages, and civil wars raged in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

In a talk Bill gave to our church on his return from that trip, he spoke of the courage needed to “enter the belly of the beast.” Bill's courage and conviction is a light that has guided my work on many occasions. Bill challenged us to look squarely at the problems of the day and seek to remedy them.

Bill told how he talked his way past a border patrol (they thought the truck he was driving would be used for military purposes). When he was later stopped by a Honduran military patrol, his courage and conviction were tested. He was about to be searched by military men when he remembered he had a letter in his pocket to his wife describing the events on the

trip. He feared the letter would be used against him if turned over to hostile military personnel. In the urgency of the moment, he knew the only way to get rid of the evidence while the men were searching his truck was to eat it! Bill and two friends were handcuffed, blindfolded, and hauled in the back of a truck to a military prison in the mountains. There were detained and interrogated for three and a half days before being released.

In 1998, Bill agreed to return to Nicaragua with a truckload of aid for victims of Hurricane Mitch. Within three weeks of the storm, the Pastors for Peace caravan, of which his truck was a part, rolled into Nicaragua.

He stands tall among those who walk the talk. By his example, he spreads the message that our lives are meant to serve others. He has the courage, spiritual guidance, and faith to do his work in the face of enormous adversity. His passion and gifts help him serve others. His gifts of oration and song are particularly moving. I look forward to hearing about Bill's next project because I know I will be inspired to do better in my corner of the world. Bill helps me see that we all have a larger role to play as change agents for a better world.

TABLE FOR 6 BILLION PLEASE

Judy Wicks is the founder and proprietor of the White Dog Cafe in Philadelphia. She says she “uses good food to lure people in for social activism.” Her food is quite a lure. What started as a simple cafe, literally in her apartment living room with a grill in the backyard, has now grown into a cafe that takes up four buildings, with a staff of 100 people. In 1998, gross receipts for the White Dog Cafe were over \$4 million. In an adjacent building, she has opened a shop for purchasing goods made by indigenous people around the globe.

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Judy believes in buying products directly from places that need U.S. support for their local economy. She travels to countries to speak to the food growers to set up special purchasing agreements. She makes a point to get to know the people who will be supplying the food for her customers. Judy set up an international sister restaurant program called “Table for 6 Billion Please” as her way to help feed the world. She started her business with an interest in not just feeding those of us in the land of plenty.

Judy looks for ways to establish business contacts with people regardless of whether our country sees them as friends. Judy refers to this as “eating with the enemy.” She wants to “bake bread together to create world peace.” She firmly believes that if we are to build a more just society and attain world peace, we must establish direct connections with people and find ways to work with them so that they can benefit directly.

Judy is a leader in two important business associations (Business for Social Responsibility and the Social Venture Network) that encourage businesses to incorporate social responsibility into their business culture and operations. Judy has a strong sense of social justice that is integral to her business. This includes a steadfast belief that businesses are capable of operating in a way that leaves the world enriched and not scarred. Her unique approach to entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility has been highlighted in a Harvard Business School case and video.

In her work with the Social Venture Network, she sees the integration of entrepreneurship, social activism, and spirituality leading to a more just world, with greater personal development also taking place.

BOULDERS ALONG THE SPIRITUAL PATH

My husband and I had been struggling over where to live to accommodate the distance between his work and mine for well over a year. We finally found a situation that seemed to work perfectly for us. One evening, as we negotiated a contract on a house, we got into a major fight. We were so close to resolution on the house, yet we couldn't seem to reach closure on it. I reluctantly agreed to the price he wanted to offer, but I didn't feel good about the way that we handled ourselves in getting to the decision.

I didn't sleep well that night and was still fuming the next day. I felt he didn't understand the underlying issues that I was raising (having little to do with the house at that point). I also knew I had not been very caring or respectful, let alone compassionate or understanding, in dealing with him. I let his fears trigger my own baggage about power and control in our relationship. I couldn't get the fight off my mind; I kept going over what we said and what didn't get said. It just kept nagging at me.

While I had done a little better during the fight than normal (I took a time out to breathe and meditate on what was going on), I still didn't handle the situation in a loving, compassionate way. This was particularly disturbing since the crux of the fight (at least my side of the fight) was how we were going to be more supportive of each other. The fight was dripping with irony.

As I was driving to pick up the contract at the realtor's office, I had a flash of insight. I realized this fight was just the experience I needed to practice being more compassionate and understanding when I was angry. I had obviously failed this exercise. Then it dawned on me that I would continue to feel

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lousy about arguments with him or others until I got the lesson right. I about lost my breath at this point. The thought of going through too many more fights like that one scared me.

After a minute of stunned silence at the enormity of this insight, I began to laugh. It felt so good to laugh too. I needed to stretch my face muscles, which had been tight the past fifteen hours. I needed a good belly laugh to relax my abdomen that also was feeling twisted and tight. I laughed from deep within because I could see so clearly how that fight was just what I needed. It was a gift from God. I needed to see how I fought in stressful times and how to adjust during them. I needed to see the lessons involved and to know that I could change course to be more compassionate even in my anger.

*At funerals people don't
talk about growth rates.
They talk about love,
generosity, and trust.*

– Tom Chappell,
CEO Tom's of Maine

The argument we had was merely a drama being acted out. Unfortunately, in this situation I didn't see the drama for the offering that it was – to be spiritually grounded and open to greater understanding. The key for us to live spiritually with others, especially in conflict situations, is to see the drama for what it is *while being in the middle of it*. Once that awareness becomes clear, we can choose to shift gears, to change the script to one of greater loving kindness.

The path for greatness rarely is an easy path to follow. It will take many steps, and many more missteps, to get it right. But the point of this book, indeed I believe the point of life, is to see the path we are on more clearly, to learn along the way, and to do better on each new hill we climb.

We each touch the lives of so many. All of us have a choice to make in how we write the story of our lives. The path for greatness means making the choice to fulfill a higher purpose with our lives and to embody our highest ideals.