

The Ecology of the Soul: Stewardship at Home and at Work.

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In Chaim Potok's insightful and moving novel, *The Chosen*, Rabbi Reb Saunders laments his older brother's brilliance, describing his mind as "cold" and "almost cruel, untouched by his soul." When Saunders observes the same type of brilliance in his own son, at age four, he grieves that "there was no soul in my four-year-old Daniel, there was only his mind. He was a mind in a body without a soul. . . . A mind like this I need for a son?" Saunders mourns. "A heart I need for a son, a soul I need for a son, compassion I want from my son . . . not a mind without a soul."

"A mind without a soul." One could profitably meditate for weeks on such a phrase. And, though figurative, it identifies a reality that is both literal and universal. For what is most needed today, both in our homes and in our offices, is not more intellect but more . . . well, soul. Whenever stupidity seems to run rampant, intellect itself is usually in full flower. Imagine a manager, for example, who consistently fails to inform her people of important developments in the company so that they are constantly in the dark. How carefully such a manager must orchestrate her every move, her every word, to marginalize her people so completely! It is not that such a manager is not thinking carefully, it is that she is thinking carefully about the wrong things. The difficulty is not with her mind, but with her "soul."

Two Ways of Being

Philosopher C. Terry Warner identifies two ways of being in the world, or two states of "soul." One is

the state in which I see other people primarily as things, as objects that either help me or hinder me in obtaining what I want. I see myself as real - with hopes, dreams, fears, and wants - but I see others as mere objects for my use. The other way of being is the state in which I fully recognize others to be just as real as I am. I acknowledge their personhood - I embrace the reality that they have their own hopes, dreams, fears, wants, and needs. Others are as real to me as I am to myself.

Others have noted the difference between these two ways of being and have given them names, perhaps the most memorable of which comes from the work of Martin Buber. He called the one in which I am closed to others' inwardness "I-It," and the other, in which I am open to it, "I-Thou" or "I-You." Warner often uses that terminology, and so will I.

To illustrate the difference between these two ways of being, picture me hard at work in my study when suddenly I am interrupted by the sound of my young children quarreling in the next room. Now, how do I see my children in this situation? What meaning do they have for me? Do I see them as problem children who have disturbed and disrupted me in my important work? Or do I see them instead as children with a problem who can use my help? Do I see them as disturbers of my peace or as in need of my aid?

To see them the first way (all too common for me) is to be "I-It." It is to see them at that moment primarily as objects - as little obstacles to my peace and concentration. To see them the second way (this happens

too) is to be "I-You." It is to see them empathetically, in terms of their own needs instead of just my own. Far from being obstacles, they are simply what they are - people who seem to need my help.

The same analysis applies to any situation, including work. Which happens more frequently - seeing my co-workers as objects who either help or hinder me in achieving the aims of my life, or seeing them as real people with deeply felt aims of their own?

It is common to switch back and forth between being I-It and I-You (everyone's experience confirms this), yet these are fundamental categories, for in any given moment I am either one or the other. I am either alive to other people's reality or I am not, and everything else, including how I use my intellect, will depend on this pivotal issue.

The Connection Between Home and Work

This distinction between two ways of being helps us see the connection between our lives at home and our lives at work. That connection is typically identified as one of balance. We are told "be both a good worker and a good spouse and parent." But the link between home and work actually reaches much deeper because the fundamental variable for success is identical for each of them. It is simply whether we are being I-It or I-You in our relationships.

In other words, when we go wrong at work it is for the same reasons that we go wrong at home, and vice versa. Whether we go right or wrong,

either at home or at work, depends on who we are - on the type of character we have, on our way of being with others. It depends, in short, on our "souls." Let me illustrate.

Early in our marriage we had three daughters: Kelly, Kimberly, and Rachel. One day, when Rachel was about eight months old, I watched as Kelly and Kimberly both tried to carry her. Kelly had Rachel awkwardly by the head. At the same time Kimberly had her by the feet. Then these two little girls (they were young, too) began to carry their little sister . . . in different directions. Kelly went north, and Kimberly went south. Rachel - twisted, stretched, and gasping for air - was stuck in the middle. She began registering complaints as loudly as her eight-month-old lungs would permit. I quickly came to the rescue, my disentangling efforts punctuated with sober remarks on the inadvisability of such group activities in the future.

After this incident I reflected for a moment: this kind of thing must happen all the time, even when we don't see it. Poor Rachel must feel constantly mistreated and abused. She must deeply resent her two older sisters, I thought.

The next morning I saw Kelly and Kimberly eagerly sneak down the hall to Rachel's room. They were trying to be quiet but were failing. Giggling and chattering, in what to them were the softest of whispered tones, they tip-toed up to Rachel's door. They began to call out Rachel's name, softly at first, then more loudly until Rachel was fully awake and rattling her crib frantically in response.

Kelly and Kimberly then burst noisily into the room, giggling and squealing and still calling her name. Rachel, too, was giggling and shrieking with

delight. Then, in their usual uncoordinated and incompetent way, Kelly and Kimberly dragged Rachel over the top rail, out of the crib, down to the floor. By the time she reached the floor she had been twisted, stretched, scraped, yanked, poked, pummelled . . . and hugged, and kissed. I looked closely at Rachel as she lay momentarily on the floor in her sisters' arms. She was all smiles.

I wondered about this experience for days. Rachel loved the very people who seemed constantly to mistreat her. How could that be?

Finally the answer came, too simple for my over-educated adult eyes to have noticed immediately. Rachel loved Kelly and Kimberly simply because they loved her. I had watched Kelly and Kimberly try to carry Rachel. I had watched them yank and dump her out of her crib. I had seen incompetence and failure in their awkward efforts. But what I had completely overlooked was the consummate affection and glee that motivated every one of their clumsy acts.

And Rachel knew - even when Kelly and Kimberly were clumsy, even when they hurt her - that it was not deliberate. She felt no malice from them. She felt from them instead a profound (though inept) kind of love, and that's what she responded to. More important to Rachel than their bungling was their unbounded and obvious affection. In Warner's terms, they were I-You toward Rachel, and Rachel knew it.

This general principle, of life is widely overlooked, but true. People respond primarily to the way we feel toward them. More important than our knowledge, our skills, or our education, is simply our goodness - the quality of our hearts and our

souls. That is why the best parents can make mistakes every day and still accomplish much of what they want. It is not their clumsiness that their children notice so much; it is their goodness, their devotion, their affection, their honest effort, and their love. That is the most important variable, and it is what children primarily respond to.

Work

The same is true at work. When it comes to our relationships, what we are is more important than what we know, or even than what we do. Even here matters of the heart transcend matters of the mind.

In a unit with about two hundred others, I once was supervised by a man who seemed to have all the skills of effective management. The structure was clear and well-organized (this type of work required that); he communicated to us frequently; and he was kind in his manner. But despite all this, it was obvious that he just did not like us. There was always the sense that he was being nice by sheer grit, that it was something required of him, but unnatural. The forced smiles, the soft-toned but sarcastic and impatient corrections, the labored sighs that accompanied his calls for improvement all suggested a manager who felt forced to put up with people who were fundamentally unworthy of him.

Despite this manager's strenuous efforts, his genuine feelings about us could not be hidden. We felt devalued by him because he devalued us. What he knew, and even what he implemented in the way of sound management principles, were both less important to us than what he was, how he fundamentally regarded us. Whereas Kelly and Kimberly's genuine attitude

showed through even though they were clumsy, this manager's genuine attitude showed through even though he was skilled.

The Ecology of the Soul

It is important to see how we responded to this manager. Did we do our level best? Even rise to new heights of record-breaking performance? Of course not. The most widespread response was to search for a way out of the unit, and many succeeded. Of those who remained, most settled into a mode of nonchalant performance in achieving results and of minimal compliance in following directions.

This manager, in the face of such deteriorating performance, could easily put his finger on the problem . . . us. He had been sure that we were deficient workers, and by dragging our feet and barely complying with his directives we demonstrated to him that he was absolutely right. Our behavior confirmed what he had always known. He felt vindicated. What this manager couldn't see was how his attitude toward us invited the very behavior he was trying so desperately to avoid. He undermined on one level all that he was trying to accomplish on another and felt vindicated all the while.

Despite this manager's strenuous efforts to achieve success, the dismal consequences of his I-It way of being with us were practically inescapable. We did not start out as the uncaring, lackadaisical complainers that we eventually became, but his attitude provoked (although it did not cause) precisely that response. And it did not end there. As a unit we became more

disenchanted with each other. Although we united in pointing our fingers at him, we gradually came to blame each other more frequently as well. In the face of his I-It way of being toward us, we responded in a similar I-It way toward him and toward each other.

The consequences of this manager's attitude were thus innumerable and widespread; furthermore, they were hidden from his view. As Warner's work shows, this manager could not see the effect he had on others because he was fundamentally self-deceived. The same became true of us as well, and that was part of the ensuing misfortune. Once we began blaming him and justifying ourselves, we no longer could see the truth any better than he could. We saw it all as his problem, not ours. All of us were stuck, with no way out, like fish strangling to death in a polluted pond. The only difference is that we were the creators of our own pollution.

This process goes the other way, too, of course. A manager whose way of being is I-You - who genuinely values fellow workers and delights in helping them succeed - has an influence that is just as contagious as that of the I-It manager. Such a leader brings out the best in us; we want to follow that lead and do all that we can to succeed. And this is true even if this leader is less "skillful" than another. What we respond to in managers has far less to do with their skill as managers than with their simple goodness as people. The ecological effects of a good soul are just as widespread as those of a bad. And the same, I might add, is true of us in subordinate positions as well.

Stewardship

We are entrusted with many things, both at home and at work. Little that we work with is genuinely our own. Our spouses, our children, our co-workers, our corporate resources - all are more like a trust, something given to us to protect and enhance, and for whose protection and enhancement we are held accountable. In the deepest sense of the word, and especially in the most important areas of life, we are stewards.

There are many ways to analyze the notion of stewardship and to apply it to work and home life. But the deepest truth about stewardship I have tried to point out: all the dimensions of stewardship ultimately center in our very way of being, our souls. Try as we might, we cannot transcend who we are by merely applying information, skills, or techniques - even in the service of a stewardship. The effect of our souls on others is inescapable, and it is our primary influence. Regardless of my intellect and training, and despite my hard work, my stewardship over others will never yield what it might if it springs from an outlook on the world that is fundamentally self-preoccupied and blaming. And this means that whatever my obligations may be, my most significant stewardship, especially in its effect on others, is the stewardship of my own soul. Reb Saunders was right.

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