

“While I had seen how small group spiritual direction helps individuals and builds a sense of community, I wondered if there were collective forms of this process that could help organizations come to know and align with the greater good.”

Listening for the Sacred Within— and at Work

By Audrey N. Seidman

In the late 1990s I was renewing my personal life and professional identity. I had discovered that Judaism, the religion I grew up with, but didn't seriously practice as an adult, offered concepts and tools that spoke to my desire for personal and spiritual development. At the same time I was following a trail of crumbs that pointed to a second career in the field of organization development. It didn't take very long for these two pursuits to intertwine.

My interest in *spirit in the workplace* crystallized in 2003 when I was struck by how messages from my reading of Jewish wisdom literature were being echoed in the reading I was doing in support of my organization development learning. As I pondered how I might best serve in this world and in my organization, two Hebrew concepts came to mind¹.

The first, *tikkun nefesh*, means “healing the soul.” Through my discovery of Jewish mysticism, or *Kabbalah* (which literally means “receiving”), and introduction to the Jewish Renewal movement, I was already highly engaged in this journey of discovery, learning and self-improvement. The second concept, *tikkun olam*, means “healing or repairing the world.” It is explained:

In Kabbalistic thought, the world consists of scattered fragments from God's original creation, a creation that shattered with the intensity of God's

divine light and desire. Within each fragment are holy sparks, pieces of that divine light that we can release from the husks of material existence that limit its reach, and return to their original state of wholeness in God. Raising holy sparks becomes an act of continuing creation, participating in God's desire for the world. In other words, we have the ability to repair the brokenness of the world and complete the task of creation. This process of *tikkun olam*, depends upon our ability to serve God's purposes, not our own. (Kline, 2004, pp.39-40)

Jews understand this to mean that every time we fulfill one of God's commandments, demonstrate loving kindness, or act in pursuit of social justice, we are revealing and raising one more spark of that divine light so to recreate the wholeness we seek. I believe that all mystical paths, indeed all religions, ultimately point us to that search for wholeness and oneness.

Healing the Workplace

In my search for meaning, I felt the need to find a niche between the personal work I was doing to “heal the soul” and the too-enormous mission to “repair the world.” Looking for a small corner where I might make a difference, I used my limited knowledge of the Hebrew language to coin the phrase *Tikkun Makom Avodah*, or “healing the workplace.” The word *makom* means “the place” and the word *avodah* means both “work” in the business sense, as

1. My language in this article reflects the tradition I know best. I use the word “God” as a well-recognized English word for which there is no clear common understanding. Feel free to substitute your own.

well as “Divine service” or worship. I was surprised to discover then, with the help of Google, that there were already numerous books, websites, and organizations devoted to the topic of “spirit in the workplace.”

More recently, as a student in the *Lev Shomea* (Hearing Heart) Jewish Spiritual Direction training program from 2008-2010, my interest in spirituality at the workplace was reignited. I noticed that my attention continually was pulled towards references in our readings to working with groups and spirit within organizations. Spiritual direction is a practice through which we, as individuals, can tune into our own understanding of God’s will. Through discernment, we discover our unique path for serving the Holy, what it is that helps us to feel centered.

While I had seen how small group spiritual direction helps individuals and builds a sense of community, I wondered if there were collective forms of this process that could help organizations come to know and align with the greater good. Might the teachings and practice of spiritual direction be used to support an organization in moving in that direction? Further, I opened myself to considering how the workplace was a locus of my own spiritual practice, and how that practice would support my efforts.

In this article I describe the fields of spiritual direction and organization development and offer a brief overview of the burgeoning literature and activity related to spirituality in the workplace. I explore some of the similarities between these practices, and touch upon the ongoing struggle to find a shared language that will help people working in organizations to address the transcendent. Finally, I reflect on how my study of and engagement in spiritual direction has influenced my day-to-day work and spiritual growth, and encourage the organization development community to continue grappling with the concept of spirit and the organization.

Spiritual Direction and Organization Development

In their introduction to *Jewish Spiritual Direction*, Rabbi Howard Avruhm Addison

and Barbara Eve Breitman (2006), a psychotherapist, describe spiritual direction as “a contemplative practice through which people companion one another over time as they reflect on their spiritual journeys and expand their awareness of the sacred dimensions that underlie the ordinary and extraordinary events of life” (p.xviii). The spiritual director or guide helps seekers to “recognize how the Source of Life might be calling them to greater meaning and growth...” and “serves as a listening, reflective presence, creating an atmosphere of trust and openness that supports an individual’s growing awareness of God’s presence...” (pp. xviii-xix). Addison and Breitman have been among the pioneers in bringing this ancient practice, much better known in the Christian community, to the American Jewish community.

As spiritual direction (SD) attends to spiritual formation for an individual or small group of individuals, the practice of organization development (OD) is devoted to working with an organization and its members to enhance performance and effectiveness. In his introduction to the classic *Transforming Work*, John Adams (1998) explained:

OD emerged from applied Social Psychology and adult education in the early 1960s as a process for helping organizations solve problems and more fully realize their potentials. Reflecting its academic roots, OD efforts have always been based on theories and the collection and analysis of data. (p. x)

But by 1984, when the first edition of *Transforming Work* was published, there was a movement within the profession for a more holistic approach. Adams described this emphasis shift as “establishing a vision of what is desired and working to create that vision from the perspective of a clearly articulated set of humanistic values” (p. x). In the introduction to the 1998 edition, Adams noted that his intention in calling for Organization Transformation was to “cause the field of OD to enlarge itself,” which he believed had occurred (p. 1).

Reading this book early in my “OD formation” was influential; it was Richard

McKnight’s chapter, *Spirituality in the Workplace*, that stimulated me to contact him and then offer a workplace program described later in this article. The call to spirit is vibrant in many other chapters as well, including those of Linda Ackerman Anderson, Harrison Owen, Peter Vaill, and Diana Whitney, all of whom have made an imprint on the OD field. My world view and approach to this field was also largely inspired by the faculty, led by John D. Carter, of the *Becoming a Better Intervener* program, where I trained in 2001-2002 then at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (and now Gestalt Center for Organization and Systems Development). Their emphasis, while inclusive of theory and tools, was heavily on “use of self.”

Spirituality at Work

My own framework provides a lens through which I am observing the edges of my SD and OD worlds overlap. There has been a growing movement to discuss and study, mostly within universal, secular terms, spirit or spirituality in the workplace. Over the past three decades popular management literature addressing topics including leadership development, employee empowerment, organizational values, ethics, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability has become nearly ubiquitous. Many authors have credited the influence of religious philosophers and writers such as Thomas Berry, Martin Buber, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Parker Palmer. As an interdisciplinary area of academic study, the Spirituality and Work movement, according to Andre L. Delbecq, in his forward to Margaret Benefiel, draws upon areas including theology, metaphysics, mysticism, psychology, sociology, and organization studies (Benefiel, 2005, p.5).

Hundreds of titles have been published in this arena since the 1990s. A few volumes that precede my involvement in this field recently made their way to my bookshelf, thanks to a professional colleague. They include Jack Hawley’s *Reawakening the Spirit in Work*, Eric Klein and John B. Izzo’s *Awakening Corporate Soul*, and Peter Vaill’s *Spirited Leading*

and Learning: Process Wisdom for a New Age, all strong calls to recognize what already exists.

An excellent summary of this movement can be found in *Workplace Spirituality: A Complete Guide for Business Leaders* by Nancy Smith (2006), a United Methodist deacon, spiritual director, and former manager in the business world. She proposed five factors leading to the spirituality at work movement:

- » a change in the implied contract between workers and employers;
- » the ethical breakdown in corporations;
- » the increasing demand on workers;
- » the mid-life introspection of the baby boomers; and
- » the “re-spiritualization of culture” described as “an integration of the secular and spiritual into a new world view that is still evolving.” (p.7)

Smith (2006) defined workplace spirituality as “the ways we express our spirituality at work. It also encompasses the support we receive in the workplace for our experience of awe, for our personal spirituality, and for making ethical, just decisions” (p. 1). She identified some of the behavioral specifics of workplace spirituality, including the traits of compassion, gratitude, hospitality, and humility (p. 64). Smith places an emphasis on the need for religious and spiritual pluralism, noting that “spirituality in the workplace is another form of diversity for all of us to value in the workplace” (p.xvii). Her book also summarized the movement’s history and offers key resources, including some of the pioneer organizations and websites, the Academy of Management’s special interest group on Management, Spirituality, and Religion, and several academic centers and journals.

As individuals might select different words to define their experience of spirit, many writers have offered varied definitions of spirituality at work. Corporate coach Ellen Hayakawa (2009) sees it as “the process of connecting and aligning the energy of the individual, team, and organization while respecting our life sustaining ecosystem, the earth” (p. 69). And human resources consultant Linda Ferguson (2009) boiled down spirituality

at work to three words: “wholeness, meaning, and connection” (p.24). The challenge of finding a common definition of spirit at work has been the focus of many academic publications as well as considerable informal discussion among those in OD. As I explore some commonalities and differences between SD and OD, I will again return to the question of language.

Two Fields, Common Themes

I believe that SD and OD share many features. My synthesis for this judgment draws upon many sources, particularly Nevis (1987). One might say that SD and OD both offer “interventions” in the process of companioning individuals or groups as they strive to become more of who they are and want to be. Both practitioners use their presence, but minimize their interference, to support a process of unfolding. They are skilled in asking graceful and perceptive questions to encourage others to dig deeper into their own wisdom. I’d propose that both strive to create a metaphorical container known as “safe space,” and develop expertise in listening for more than is actually said and that each may draw upon a “toolkit” for cultivating attunement. Finally, I believe that both practitioners seek to foster the capacity of the directee or organization to sustain the work of transformation and that both are expected to engage in their own process of ongoing development.

There is much more to unpack in these commonalities than can be addressed in this article. I will focus more closely on two key elements: “safe space” and “attunement” and the tools that support them.

I believe that a critical role of both the spiritual director and organization facilitator is to create a *Mishkan*. This is Hebrew for the portable sanctuary in which God’s Presence dwelled as the Israelite community journeyed through the desert, and is now sometimes used to denote “safe or sacred space.” Breitman (2006) used the story of the Exodus to remind us what it takes to build this kind of container for the soul:

Moses knows that a sanctuary for God on earth can only be built by a people

who both work together intelligently and stand in direct relationship to the Holy, without an intermediary. The sanctuary is built by willing hearts, people employing their skills and giving freely of themselves (Exodus 25:2). (p. 191)

A spiritual companion, according to Rabbi Zari Weiss (in a spiritual direction training program handout) “spreads out a Canopy of Peace, creating a safe, non-judgmental, loving space where the seeker’s soul can emerge from hiding.” Might this happen at the office? In *Letting the Heart Fall Open*, Birute Regine, a psychologist and executive coach, provided an example of an executive who makes herself vulnerable to her employees. “Doing this, she engaged their highest selves by creating space, a crucible, where they could improve themselves, believe in themselves as she did, and maintain their integrity” (Regine, 2009, p. 15).

And OD consultant Shem Cohen wrote about creating space for “a new way of being together” through his work as a facilitator of Future Search Conferences:

And then, usually on day two, it happens. . . a new ‘space’ is created. The group has somehow altered its collective field to a place of learning, acceptance, and responsibility. Everyone can feel it. The messages are deeper, from the heart. The listening is more focused as people lean forward with attentive ears, eyes and minds, honoring each story as a deep truth. . . Though the issues are still complex and no solutions are on the table yet, a new way of being together has emerged. (Cohen, 2005, p. 2)

Entering into this place of receptiveness helps us to express ourselves and be responsive and attuned to one another. The practice of SD, according to Breitman (2009), combines “contemplative interiority and interpersonal attunement” (p. 374). “In the practice of spiritual direction, we know that a *mashpia’s* (literally “conduit,” used for spiritual guide) capacity to attune to others is crucial to the intuition that enables her to recognize and then invite a seeker to linger over experiences of sacred

presence” (p. 383). Breitman described some of the “tools” used in spiritual direction to “cultivate people’s capacity for greater attunement with self, with others and with creation” (p. 383). These include silence, prayer, movement, art, and experiential exercises, as well as the use of scripture and journaling.

In the OD world, consultant Roger Harrison (1998), also writing in *Transforming Work*, advocated that new ways of thinking were needed to “heal and nurture our organizations and to facilitate their evolution” (p.114). He proposed that the “concept of *attunement*, meaning a resonance or harmony among the parts of the system, and between the parts and the whole” was missing or understated from the OD literature and maintained that it “summons up the mysterious operations of *love* in organizations: the sense of empathy, understanding, caring, nurturance, and mutual support” (p. 116).

Kathryn Kaplan (2010), through a series of interviews for her research about women in OD, discovered that some women in the field, feeling constrained by linear models of practice, have expanded the tool set available that might support attunement. “They experimented and legitimized the use of art, play, and other forms of whole brain learning to engage leaders and teams” (p. 11). Organizational approaches that support attunement, according to Harrison, can only flourish in climates that reduce fear (p.110).

Aligning with the Transcendent

The creation of safe space and attention to attunement can help move an individual or a community towards recognizing and aligning with the transcendent. However, this is where the parallels between SD and OD become more tenuous, with a key difference in the compass used.

In spiritual direction we use a discernment process in our search for alignment with God, or however we define the sacred. Addison (2006) used the work of 18th century Italian Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Chayyim Luzzatto to place discernment in a Jewish context that includes a three-phase process of prayerful purity of intention,

analysis of the potential effects on our behavior, and the affective markers that let us know if our actions are pleasing to God. In organizations we talk about decision-making based on data analysis and within timeframes that usually do not allow for the gradual “repeating cycle of prayer and intentionality” (p. 105) required for discernment. The magnetic north of justice, compassion, or humility may or may not be articulated as desired outcomes in our organizational purposes.

Still, there are some in the OD world who have offered frameworks that support alignment, not just to a set of organizational goals, but to the greater good. Richard Barrett (2009), a consultant and founder of the Barrett Values Centre, proposed the Seven Levels of Organizational Consciousness model as a framework to examine organizational culture as an evolutionary process. According to Barrett, “The fundamental change that occurs during cultural transformation is a shift from ‘What’s in it for me?’ to ‘What’s best for the common good?’” (p. 149). At Barrett’s Level 5, Values and Vision Alignment, the critical issue is “to increase cultural resilience by aligning the personal motivations of employees with the purpose and vision of the company, so that every person feels a sense of purpose in coming to work each day” (p. 153). And at Level 7: Social Responsibility, the organization deepens both internal and external connectedness “in order to more fully live the organization’s purpose and implement its vision.... This is the level of selfless service, displayed through a profound commitment to the common good and to the well-being of future generations” (pp. 154-155).

Two Questions

Considering these commonalities between SD and OD, our need for meaning and quest for the common good, two questions arise. First, does an organization have a spirit? And, second, if so, can spiritual direction be practiced at the organization level? Some religious and management writers have found agreement that organizations not only have a spirit, but, like

individuals, they may reach common milestones in the spiritual journey.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, a scholar and prolific writer on Jewish spirituality, wrote that according to Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah, organizations, like individuals, are made up of forms of energy “connected to one another by a network of channels” (Kushner, 1983, p. 88) and that their effectiveness depends upon these energies relating in balance to one another. Christian theologian and Minister Walter Wink (1992) cautioned, “Institutions have an actual spiritual ethos, and we neglect this aspect of institutional life to our peril” (p.6).

Many who have written in the field of management have taken a stab at this question, as well. In *The Power of Full Engagement*, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz (2004) proposed that, “In order for an organization to optimize its potential, four separate but related forms of energy must be recruited in the service of the corporate mission: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual” (p.203). Acknowledging that many doubt the existence of organizational soul or spirit, Bolman and Deal (1995) take on the challenge to search for “new ways to infuse secular organizations with soul and spirit” (p. 9). Spirit, they believe, is “necessary for today’s managers to become tomorrow’s leaders, for today’s sterile bureaucracies to become tomorrow’s communities of meaning, and for our society to rediscover its ethical and spiritual center” (p. 12). In his chapter, *What Makes an Organization Spiritual*, Biberman (2009) argued that an organization can be described as spiritual by describing its “structure and design, its processes and procedures, and its stages of spiritual growth or change” (p. 112). According to Biberman, “spiritual organizations encourage creative thinking and the cooperation of organization units to establish and accomplish mutually agreed-upon mission statements and objectives. . .” (p. 113). Further, he outlined the qualities of spiritual organizations and suggested ways we can help an organization to become more spiritual.

Margaret Benefiel, a Christian spiritual director, professor of spirituality

and organizational leadership at Andover Newton Theological School in Boston, and former Program Chair of the Academy of Management's Management, Spirituality, and Religion Group, most certainly agrees that an organization has a spirit. First a theologian who sought to learn how to bring spiritual resources to bear on organizational life, Benefiel's discovery seems to mirror my own regarding this convergence. "I found," she wrote in *Soul at Work*, "that the listening spiritual traditions in which I had been trained resonated with the organizational thinking which had started to emerge in business and management circles" (Benefiel, 2005, p.11).

Benefiel (2005) also affirmed that spiritual direction can be practiced at an organization level, holding that discernment is a corporate as well as individual process. While traditional organizational decision-making processes focused on problem solving and timely responses are failure prone, spiritual discernment can help leaders "make decisions that will stand the test of time" (p.51). According to Benefiel, individual discernment involves "sifting through interior and exterior experiences to know which ones help one stay centered and which pull one away from centeredness" (p. 51). Corporate discernment, she pointed out, requires "a foundation of mutual respect and trust" and sets a tone of openness toward one another and the transcendent (p. 116).

Benefiel (2005) provided several examples of corporate discernment. In one, she described a process by which the founders of Reell Precision Manufacturing avoided employee layoffs during an economic downturn, instead recommending reductions in time for all staff and taking the greatest salary cuts themselves. "By incorporating corporate discernment into their decision-making toolkits these organizations have tried to slow themselves down, take into account more than just financial considerations, and, as a result, make better decisions" (p. 129). Innovation can be one of the benefits of corporate discernment, in that "one of the fruits of spiritual grounding is the patience to listen for unexpected solutions" (p. 115).

Benefiel (2005) further suggested that

leaders who understand the process of spiritual growth in organizations can best help guide their organizations. Similar to the individual spiritual journey, she outlined five stages of the organizational spiritual journey, or transformation: Awakening, Transition, Recovery, Dark Night, and Dawn. Leaders aware of such stages can "help normalize what an organization is experiencing and....draw on the collective wisdom of others' experience and compassionately walk with organizations through their transformation" (p. 145).

Shawn Zevit (2009), a rabbi and organization consultant, also provided examples of spiritual direction in communal or organizational life. "A group *mashpia* (spiritual guide) can help the leadership tune into where God, or Truth, or Mission and Vision are clear and accessible," he said (p. 358). When group participants are helped to express their questions or concerns he found:

What often emerges...is a soul response that is more expansive, flexible, and capable of holding polarities...than is produced by opinion sharing or conceptual discussion. The suspension of judgment and deep listening to the words beneath the words are very important...just as they are in group spiritual direction. (Zevit, 2009, p. 362)

The Language We Use

Expression itself is both a cause and result. Language creates our reality, and the mystics believed that language created our world. The power of speech is redemptive, according to Estelle Frankel (2005), a psychotherapist and spiritual guide. "It is through the act of articulation that we break through the walls that separate us from ourselves and each other" (p. 122).

While we learn from Benefiel and Zevit that there is a collective or organizational model for spiritual direction, it is rarely realized. Most workplaces do not portray themselves as spiritual communities. Fear of "God language" in the organization and in OD remains a barrier to bringing spirituality and the discernment process to the workplace. In a 1999 article for the

HBS Bulletin, Margaret Rigoglioso quoted Vaill, a pioneer in the Organizational Excellence movement and an early proponent of spirituality in the workplace:

Talking about spirituality in the business context feels risky and awkward and people tend to question the motivation behind it. Still, companies around the country are managing to pick their way through such uncomfortable territory in an effort to respond to their employees' deeper yearnings. (Rigoglioso, 1999, The "S" Word, para. 2)

One example of this sensitivity around language was found in a March 16, 2010 *OD Network Briefs* email message to OD Network members. Former executive director Peter Norlin began with a poem about love, and then wrote that love "plays a critical role in our work, and. . . if I'm serious about helping people learn and change, I'd better know how to evoke it when I'm on-the-job." But, after suggesting the relationship between love, interdependence, and transformation, Norlin concluded: "So do I tell my customers that, like Cupid, I'm looking for the love? I certainly, emphatically, don't. But I'm secretly pleased to know that's what I'm up to."

That same year, many members of the OD Network *LinkedIn* discussion group engaged in active dialogue on spirituality at work, debating definitions and whether to be open or to be discreet in the language used with clients. One participant wondered if organizations have ever actually asked for help with spirituality, implying that a spiritual approach may be more the agenda of the facilitator than the client.

In the world of SD, guides are taught to be sensitive to language and speak in terms used by the directee. "The word God is not always explicitly used. Sometimes the director invites the directee to pay attention to where she feels more energy, called to life, to wholeness" (Weiss, 2006, p. 70). Zevit (2009) noted as well, "Each group will have a comfort level and language of its own to describe God-experience; the *mashpia* [spiritual guide] must be careful not to assume anything, nor impose one's own" (p. 358).

Still, it is hard to imagine someone choosing to work with a spiritual companion, instead of a coach or a therapist for example, and not wanting to engage with holiness and awe. In spiritual direction there can be no veil over the role of the sacred. Finding a common language to use in each organization may help create doorways to “organization spiritual development” or “organization direction,” which I see as companionship an organization on its journey towards its highest and most effective self.

Peter Senge, a pioneer in organizational learning, and Otto Scharmer, author of *Theory U*, searched with their co-authors in *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* to develop a common language of the spirit in organizational life. They described the concepts of Theory U and Presencing, as a process of “letting go” and “letting come,” to “help people think and talk together about how the whole can shift” (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworsky, & Flowers, 2004, p. 224). Language like this, which feels evocative of the individual spiritual direction experience, may be helpful to those interested in unveiling the sacred within those ordinary and extraordinary events of workplace life.

Building a Listening Community

I’d like to describe two instances in which my engagement in spiritual direction has influenced how I do my work and pursue my mission for *Tikkun Makom Avodah* (healing the workplace). I have been fortunate to work in a government agency, the Office of the New York State Comptroller (OSC), which continues to demonstrate its commitment to employee development, engagement, and wellness. I see my job, based in human resources, as helping to build employee performance, engagement, and community, with duties including a mix of program management, employee communications, with some coaching and consulting.

In 2004, stimulated by McKnight’s article, I proposed to offer what now continues as a monthly lunch-time brown bag discussion program called Building

Community at OSC: Spirit at the Workplace. It is described in our flyers as an informal group that gathers to feed both our bodies and spirits by exploring questions and sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences. We are interested in how inspirational energy and sense of purpose manifests itself at the workplace, knowing that it all begins within.

What is most striking about this activity is that it has brought together employees from varied corners of the organization both vertically—executives and file clerks—and horizontally across divisions who might not otherwise ever sit at the same table. Over sandwich or salad, we have talked about our organization’s values, learning and change, and stress and self care. Over time, these gatherings have surfaced information that led to ideas for new program initiatives, such as an improved employee orientation program. They have also promoted collegial relationships in an atmosphere that builds trust.

In 2009, during the period I was studying SD, I initiated a series of these lunch-time discussions focusing on diversity. Over several months the ever-changing group of participants explored our differences, including race, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and physical ability. Knowing that these conversations could open doors to sharing highly personal experiences and feelings, I suggested a set of guidelines designed to foster a more contemplative atmosphere and deepen the sense of “safe space.” These guidelines encouraged participants to “listen deeply, without judgment; express your own view,” and to “make sure each speaker is complete, pause for a few seconds before the next speaker begins.” They also assured participants that “silence is okay.” Attendees continue to welcome these “ground rules,” which help make room for the more introverted and offer some spaciousness in a usually quick-paced environment.

I expect it has been my role as manager of our agency’s formal employee recognition program that has most produced my efforts to discern the holy in my

work. For the past four years I have led a team that has strived repeatedly to produce recognition programs with award nominations, selections, and celebrations that were accessible, transparent, fair, and would appropriately honor recipients. Each year, however, our team heard an undercurrent of employee dissatisfaction, and some team members had experienced discomfort around disappointing those not selected for awards.

My readings for my spiritual direction training and meetings with my own spiritual director provoked questioning and self-examination around issues of justice, honor, and the competitive essence of our recognition program. In *The Active Life*, Parker Palmer (1990) writes that the holy life “evokes...the power of corporate abundance that lies behind the illusion of scarcity” (p. 136). I became determined to pursue some organizational “holy listening” and in June 2010 proposed to management that we put our formal recognition program on “pause” to engage employees in a discussion to consider a program redesign. In creating the Refreshing Recognition Team without a planned outcome, I prepared to take up Palmer’s challenge to lead in a way that risks failure, “willing to trust the abundance that people have and can generate together” so that true community may emerge (p. 138).

Our team conducted 40 individual interviews in the fall of 2010 and held a World Café that December. We decorated the walls with posters representing the polarities we heard in our interviews, such as “recognize everyone,” and “offer fewer awards,” demonstrating our ability to absorb all views and hold the dilemmas that they posed. In March 2011, the team issued a series of recommendations for altering our enterprise recognition program that included more strongly emphasizing informal recognition, honoring all nominees on our Intranet, and selecting award recipients at the “local” division, rather than enterprise, level. I believe that the team’s discernment process was more significant than the still-to-be tested outcome in this instance.

Glossary

Avodah: Literally “work,” or “service”; the sacrificial rites performed in the First and Second Holy Temples in ancient Jerusalem; also used to connote “prayer.” In modern times, can also refer to one’s occupation or “business.”

Jewish Renewal Movement: A worldwide, trans-denominational movement grounded in Judaism’s prophetic and mystical traditions. Inspired by the vision of its founding teacher, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Jewish Renewal acts to fully include all Jews and respect all people, as it works to promote justice, freedom, and caring for all life and the earth. See <https://www.aleph.org/renewal.htm>

Kabbalah: Literally “the received tradition,” it is the generic term applied to the mystical aspects of Judaism.

Lev Shomea: Hearing (shomea) heart (lev); also the name of the Jewish Spiritual Direction Training Institute; see www.jewishspiritualdirection.com

Makom: Literally, “the place,” and also used as a name for God, the Omnipresent.

Mashpia: “Prompter, “conduit,” or “open channels of insight”; originally used to denote a spiritual guide who assists the rebbe in Hasidic communities. Hebrew title adopted by many contemporary spiritual guides.

Mishkan: The Tabernacle, or portable dwelling place for the divine presence. Used here to denote “safe space.”

Tikkun Makom Avodah: Phrase coined by author to connote “repairing or healing the workplace.”

Tikkun Nefesh: Nefesh is “soul”; in Kabbalistic psychology it connotes the intellectual, reflective, and meditative functions of the psyche. Tikkun Nefesh is “repairing the soul.”

Tikkun Olam: “Repairing the world”; used to denote social action and awareness; in Kabbalah it connotes redemptive acts aimed at spiritually repairing the fissures in our broken world and in God, Godself.

Yisra-el: Literally “He has striven with God.” The name given to Jacob after wrestling with a mysterious being; often used to connote “Godwrestler.”

Conclusion

Perhaps another commonality between spiritual direction and organization development is that often there are not clear answers. There are only good questions that help us to see new vistas on the journey, including in the arena of spirit and organization development. I am reminded of the biblical story of Jacob who, as he was returning to his native land, struggled alone overnight with a mysterious being. Jacob will not let go until he is given a blessing, so the being gives Jacob a new name, “*Yisra-el*, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed” (Genesis 32:29). The name *Yisra-el*, or Israel, may be interpreted to mean “Godwrestler.” Our task, as individuals and as members of organizations, is to engage in the wrestling, that listening and discernment process. And let us, as an OD community, continue grappling with these concepts of spirit and organization effectiveness.

As *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) begins with *tikkun nefesh* (healing the

individual soul), so *tikkun makom avodah*, or repairing the workplace, must begin with recognizing that the workplace can be a locus of our self work and individual spiritual practice. My study of spiritual direction and the associated development of my spiritual practice have helped me to be more centered, patient, and receptive, a good thing whether at home or at the office! I have learned, and am often reminded, that my ongoing work is to balance my strong drive to get things done with attention to empathy and humility. And I’ve come to recognize that it is not just the successful accomplishment of a task that brings me moments of gratitude, but the flashes of interpersonal connection where I feel received, or when another lets me know he or she feels fully received by me.

Helping people create safe spaces and listening opportunities to develop such interpersonal connections within organizations creates a stronger community of colleagues. Leading OD consultant Peter Block agrees:

The key to creating or transforming

community, then, is to see the power in the small but important elements of being with others. The shift we seek needs to be embodied in each invitation we make, each relationship we encounter, and each meeting we attend. For at the most operational and practical level, after all the thinking about policy, strategy, mission, and milestones, it gets down to this: How are we going to be when we gather together? (Block, 2008, p.10)

In the end, our ability to discern and act upon our understanding and experience of the sacred at the workplace depends largely on our openness and intention. God is always at work, and whenever employees—or we as OD practitioners—can experience the Presence, those “holy sparks” of creation will rise.

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