

**Integrating the Active and the
Contemplative in the Marketplace:
a glimpse of the weaving of a seamless garment.**

by

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“My familiar world is disappearing but there's a beautiful garment forming - a seamless garment, no doubt, spread out before me [in my dream] by a representative each of contemplation and workplace.”
Extract from my personal journal.

[Markings is] ... an account of the attempt by a professional man of action to unite in one life the via activa and the via contemplativa”
W.H. Auden introducing his co-translation of Markings by Dag Hammarskjold.

“... he [Dag Hammarskjold] experienced devotion and work as a seamless garment.”
Foster, p.259

Being contemplative in the marketplace may be one of those roads less travelled. In the midst of the multi-tasking and power-based structures and pragmatic systems and fragmented relationships and pressured productivity of the secular workplace, the following of a contemplative way has rarely been articulated, though no doubt explored by thousands.

This reflection considers the questions: How can we accompany those who work full-time in a secular workplace? What questions, and practices might guide us as directors? What distinctive issues are likely to emerge? And what particular outcomes can we expect? I do not assume that spiritual direction of a “professional man of action” need be vastly different from usual, but my hunch is that there are some distinctive issues and critical questions which we can better attend to if we are alert and informed.

For me, the exploration has been over twenty years in a 'secular' profession that followed on from fifteen family years as a mother, and partner to one who has always been in “full time Christian work” in church, para-church and overseas mission. My more recent spiritual journey has cried out for integration – for the way of Jesus and life with God to permeate and to infuse all I am and do – especially the weekly 45 hours of paid work. An extract from my journal describes the origin of this current reflection:

“What I really wanted to talk / write about was a small but telling epiphany on the weekend. I had been pondering the via contemplativa and via activa – the contemplative in the workplace topic – and was reading about Dag Hammarskjold in Foster's “Streams of Living Water”... and he used the

phrase “seamless garment” to describe the continuity and integration of the two in the incarnational stream. It immediately rang a bell – a dream in Aug/Sept 04 where JM and N together showed me a beautiful fabric which I was to use / wear; a seamless garment, no doubt, displayed by a representative each of contemplation and workplace – a revelation and confirmation so timely for me about to embrace a new work role, and set out on exploring this topic in my SD [spiritual direction] assignment.”

Personal Journal extract

This brief study of how we can support people finding God at work is based on my own experience as a directee over some years; and personal statements by two other directees. All three of us are women in education or health services and are aged from early 30s to early 50s; two are single, one married. Grounded in this modest degree of triangulation and original source material, I will identify issues to be cognisant of, practices that have been helpful, questions that have engaged the directee positively, and some outcomes experienced - for understanding secular full time work as a unique form of “sacramental living of the deepest sort.” (Foster, p253). There are clearly limitations as to the generalisibility of our cases (e.g. only three, only women, only in 'service' workplaces) and so it is important to hold the analysis lightly and accept the pilot nature of the approach taken.

There are three parts to this: a presentation and analysis of the source material; relevant commentary and insights from a selection of the literature; and finally some tentative pointers – an embryonic list of issues, some questions to pose, and a glimpse of the seamless garment that might emerge.

PART 1 Analysis of source material

Reflecting on seven years of middle to senior management in a large secular workplace, I identified fourteen critical incidents that have been challenging and formative for me in the workplace, and asked: What were the underlying themes? And what external resources did I draw on?

I answered my two questions in a retreat setting with this analysis in mind, recalling each incident and naming the contextual issues and the resources I drew on. Firstly, what issues was I engaging with in these times of growth? I found:

- understanding my own capabilities, vocation, and sense of identity;
- my values vis-a-vis the organisation's;
- a search for good policy and processes;
- level of participation in the organisation's vision and the related public good;
- discerning my role in the wider scheme of things

What extra resources (beyond my own inner processing) did I access at the time to engage with these critical incidents? The primary ones were:

- spiritual director;
- wise work colleagues;
- the writings of a person “who had been there”.

(It is important to note that behind this is a backdrop of spiritual disciplines, a network of family and friends, and regular physical exercise; what I have listed are the additional distinctive resources in my engagement with the incidents.)

Reflecting on what has emerged from this personal analysis, I am surprised at two things: the significance of the 'wise work colleagues' resource, and the absence of family or church as key players. I expected the spiritual director to be there – I knew her role was a feature - and I knew deeply the significance of the writings of Dag Hammarskjold, but no mention of a family member or a church connection?

For me the wise work colleagues were two groups: a team of leaders where I found an appreciation of the business decisions, the organisational values and ethical action we aspired to, and a collaborative team approach, and secondly a handful of followers of Jesus in the workplace, a loose faith community, where I found an appreciation of the spiritual journey, counter-cultural values and an understanding of how we might align with the mystery of God active in the workplace.

Considering the absence of family or church in the mix, I realise that there is a qualitative difference between the two - the family was a positive presence throughout this period, but the church largely featured as neutral tending to negative.¹ Its understanding of where God is active was limited, and any sense of the workplace as a sacramental vocation was sporadic. The contemplative was viewed as slightly suspect and the active reduced to running church programmes. My experience here is in line with the observation by Mackenzie and Kirkland: “The truth is that the average Christian spends less than 2 per cent of his or her waking time at church and most of their time working. Yet the church puts most of its energy and resources into that 2 percent and very little into the world of daily work.” (Mackenzie & Kirkland, 2002, p7)

To further illuminate the role of the spiritual direction for someone involved full time in the working world, I delved into some detail in my journal of recent years, to find any reference to direction sessions and the content. Over seven years of around ten sessions per year, I mention my spiritual director in my journal on 15 occasions: ten of these were in the context of a work or career matter, and only three had no explicit connection to my workplace. (There were many, many significant spiritual direction sessions which may or may not have been reflected on in my journal; the references are thus a fairly random sample and two of them record my thoughts *before* a session, as I considered what to bring to direction.)

What I actually wrote about when referring to my spiritual director falls into five general categories:

- a particular incident / relationship with a colleague
- career direction
- integration of all aspects of life
- relationship to God
- being and doing

I would be loath to attribute any particular significance to the frequency of any of these; they are just examples of workplace topics that came to the table.

¹ Over this period I have become associated more with another faith community of the same denomination which is a positive presence.

To gain other perspectives on my exploration of spiritual direction and the workplace, I asked two women – a primary teacher and a general practitioner/community worker – a question by email, requesting a spontaneous response of around 50 -100 words. The question was: In your experience of intentionally engaging a contemplative approach to your working life, what part does or doesn't a spiritual director play? Their full replies are in the appendix.

For Jenny (not her real name), an over-riding issue was her need for community. Her spiritual director provided this: “I don't have a contemplative community that I am sharing with – in a way he is my community at the moment” and “at times it feels like a lonely journey”. In relation to her work, his support and encouragement were critical “when I have doubts about what I am trying to do and how I am trying to live it out” and “to be honest, without him I wouldn't be able to continue”. Another issue for Jenny was being part of several teams or communities to which she is necessarily committed: “I often think that I should try and find some sort of contemplative order here ... but feeling already involved in so many communities ... and being the introvert that I am, I can't face developing getting involved with yet another community at the moment.”

Awhina (not her real name), on the other hand, chooses to talk about the issue of identity. How does she respond in the workplace “as [Awhina] a follower of Jesus”? And exploring faith, work and the 'authentic me' are the focus of her interaction with her director. For Awhina, the spiritual director's part was to prompt, to question, and especially to listen. Her last comment suggests issues around personality and time management.

So bringing all these findings together, the issues we identified were -

- Meeting the demands of the people from different parts of life
- Finding companionship and support for one's contemplative journey
- Staying on in a difficult context
- Taking business risks
- Relationships with colleagues
- Integrating the contemplative into work – being one person in all aspects of life
- Discerning and applying the way of Jesus in organisational behaviour and decision-making

- Knowing self, needs, strengths, limitations, boundaries
- Recognising and aligning with divine activity in the workplace
- Finding time and space in the work day for God, contemplation, nurturing one's spirit

The external resources we tapped into were -

- a faith community of some sort
- being mentored by the writings of one who had been there
- support of a spiritual director

PART 2 The Literature

The separation of work life from faith community and home life is strongly embedded in the everyday life and culture of Aotearoa New Zealand, this in spite of the influence of a pervasive wairua (spirituality) as understood by the indigenous people, the Maori. This dualism is underlined every Sunday in many Christian worshipping communities around the country as preachers and pray-ers equate 'the Lord's work' with what the church organisation does and overseas missionaries do.

Bruce Logan critiquing the election in New Zealand in 2005, commented:

“[New Zealanders] are overwhelmed by a practical dualism. They tend to restrict their faith to the religious sphere while adopting the prevailing view within their working, professional or social circles . . . and Christian businessmen absorb uncritically the latest management theories.”

(Logan, p. 9)²

Mackenzie and Kirkland devote a chapter of *Where's God on Monday?* to understanding where this split has come from, and conclude: “If we are to see the true significance of all work we do we simply must deal with the dualism that dominates our view of the Christian life. It simply is not biblical . . . It is only as we learn to work with God, learning to see that

² Shortly after writing this, Bruce was himself overwhelmed by a dualism that took him out of public life when he indulged in plagiarism in his published writings.

what we do is connected with what he is doing, that we will close the gap between secular and spiritual.” (p77)

Other writers and theologians from other continents and contexts underline the undivided life, drawing with insight on the biblical material.

Paul Stevens concludes his chapter on “Prophets Priests and Kings” in *The Other Six Days* with:

“What do prophets do? Their work is discerning, communicating, exposing, seeing that justice is done, revealing outcomes – the very thing God’s people can do in corporations and homes. What do priests do? Their work is bridge building, mediating, expressing meaning, evoking faith, blessing, bringing grace – again what the whole of God’s people is able to do in the world. What do kings do? King work is ruling, organizing, planning, providing, nurturing, integrating, settling arguments, solving problems, coordinating, expediting, consummating – again ways that God’s people serve in so-called secular occupations, in church and in the home.” (Stevens, p189)

And from Jesus' life, Thomas Green comments:

“The incident in Mary and Martha’s house in Bethany is, to the natural eye, a trivial one with little lasting importance to Martha or to us. . . small, apparently unimportant incidents can be fraught with great significance when viewed from divine perspective. Moreover, what happens in the marketplace, even on ordinary days can have great interior significance. . . Frequently the demands and frustrations of . . . raising a family or earning a living, seem to be mere obstacles to a genuine and deep prayer life . . . they become for us the very sandpaper of our sanctification . . . This means that, as our prayer life matures, the distinction between formal prayer and active service becomes blurred if not actually erased . . . It has given a whole new meaning to the Ignatian ideal of the “contemplative in action” . . . even in the marketplace it will be more and more the Lord at work rather than ourselves.”

(Green, p 120-122)

But what about the interface of spiritual direction and the “contemplative in action”? The topic has surfaced several times in recent issues of *Presence: the Journal of Spiritual Directors International* and these accounts provide helpful guidelines. An interview with Farrington and Driskill (*Presence*, January 1999) is a very accessible overview of what these two have experienced and reflected on, focussing particularly on how they help directees explore the spiritual in their working lives. Ellmann (*Presence*, June 2001) describes an innovative application of group spiritual direction in the workplace. “We yearn for safe places to ask Big Questions and to listen collectively for Big Answers,” she says. “We want to share 'what's really going on'” and Ellman proceeds to present an approach to this finely-balanced task of 'tending to spirituality in the workplace'. A third article, “Drinking from the waterfall – God was my companion” (*Presence*, February 2004) comes straight from the lived experience of John Steward in his role as a manager of reconciliation processes for an international nongovernmental organisation in Rwanda, three years after the 1994 genocide. His story is a poignant and honest account of his journey in a situation where spiritual direction was not available but where, with his partner, he found the resources needed to listen, to work with the willing and in the process to discover insights for spiritual direction generally.

Much of the literature of the contemplative way is relevant to our theme of finding God at work. For example, Tom Cashman’s chapter in *Still Listening: New Horizons in Spiritual Direction* lists the following major issues that surface with “corporate directees” (p7-12), most of which are ones noted by the three individual cases above:

- preference for doing rather than being
- exploring one's prayer life
- discernment
- challenge of discovering God in all aspects of life
- the effects of corporate life on self-image
- changing identities, changing priorities
- the problem of making time

Cashman helpfully comments on how his understanding and companioning of each of these is evolving.

Two writings I have personally drawn on over time are comprised of reflections by those who have themselves sought to live and work fully in the public arena in the light of God. Kriegbaum's *Leadership Prayers* is compiled from his own journey as a leader for “those people who care enough about great leading and following to think rigorously about it and to open their spirits to do something about it.” (p.vii) He provides a prayer and a personal example for topics such as identity, delegation, loss, courage, blessing, weariness, marketing, failure, budget: a significant, and relevant resource for slowing down and gaining a God perspective.

Hammar skjold's *Markings* was written “as a record of my negotiations with myself – and with God.” (p.7) I first attempted to read *Markings* ten or so years ago, but at the time I couldn't connect with it. However, on noting Foster's (1998) choice of Hammar skjold as an example of a 20th century Christian in the incarnational tradition, I was intrigued and then delighted to find a copy again. Surprisingly, Dag makes no direct reference to his career as an international leader, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, but this private public person generously shares his changing understandings of God's ways, and his embrace of joy and suffering.

“To exist in the fleet joy of becoming, to be a channel for life as it flashes by in its gaiety and courage, cool water glittering in the sunlight – in a world of sloth, anxiety and aggression. To exist for the future of others without being suffocated by their present.”

(Hammar skjold, p73)

“Maturity: among other things - ...not to hide one's strength out of fear and consequently live below one's best; ... a new lack of self consciousness...when you become entirely indifferent to yourself through an absolute assent to your fate.”

(Hammar skjold, p87)

PART 3 Issues / Questions / Outcomes

This section gathers into one place some issues, questions and outcomes that may illuminate our companionship of others in the future. My commentary here is scant in order to focus the reader on the wisdom implicit in the quotations.

Issues

Spirituality hijacked to gain more productivity

It's really important to recognise that in some cases spirituality in the workplace becomes another tool for corporations or managers to get more productivity from their workers . . . Some people use the notion of vocation and the notion that one can find God in one's work to avoid a critique of work situations which are actually inhumane. (Driskill, p 17)

The language of spirituality and spiritual direction

“One difficult thing is knowing when you can explicitly use religious language . . . were you to move to some sort of religious interpretation, you'd be quickly written off as “on the fringe” .” (Driskill, p 18)

“I am very cautious about using God language in the workplace. Instead we encourage group participants to name mystery in what ever way they choose. We devote a whole session to exploring ways to name That Which Lives Beyond Names.” (Ellman, p.47)

Burnout and despair

“Unless work is united with prayer (in which false gods are often discovered) and leisure, it can lead to burnout, despair, and certainly little if any gratitude. Thus prayer, meditation, contemplation and leisure have a place, not at the sidelines of life, but at its centre and heart, whether one works in corporate life or pastoral ministry.” (Sellner, p 1051)

Questions for spiritual direction that have surfaced from this study

(but by no means comprehensive or limited to this application)

- How might you allow God in [to this situation]? ³
- How do you understand the Spirit to be at work in this? ⁴
- In what ways might /your job be your ministry/ your presence in the marketplace be your calling/?
- How else have you experienced the Spirit moving among your work colleagues or through the agenda of the workplace?
- What do you mean by “doing the right thing”? or ..” doing your job properly”?
- What nurtures your spirit? (not 'what nurtures your spiritual life')
- Looking back over your day / week / month / year/ where has God been at work?
- In what ways might it make a difference who the president / CEO / mayor / head of department / senior partner / is?
- Do you think it matters who's in senate / parliament in regard to your concerns?
- What might you be doing or noticing that is related to what God is about? ⁵
- How might love and justice be connected?
- How might action and prayer be part of the same thing?
- Given that God loves everyone in your workplace unconditionally, how do you respond?
- What is going on in your body? What might what you are noticing physically tell you?
- So when you go to work what happens to the image or understanding you have of God?⁶
- Where would you see God's hand in the juggling around that? What would his presence bring?
- Well if integration of faith and work is not trying to convert everyone you come across, what are some of the things it is?
- Where in your working day do you find rest or peace or beauty?

³ This question derives from Jenny (directee)

⁴ This and the following questions are derived from Driskill in Presence, vol 5, no.1,

⁵ This and the following questions are derived from Farrington, in Presence, vol 5, no 1.

⁶ This and the remainder are questions from the writer's experience

- Given [a situation], what will the journey with God through it be like? (instead of 'what is God wanting to teach me?')

Practices identified in the literature and / or by the three directees

- help people discover those at work who share their interest in the activity of the Spirit
- engage in group spiritual direction in the workplace
- stop 3 – 4 times a day for five minutes of silent listening
- bring lectio divina into work i.e. deeply read a problematic situation like you would a scriptural text.
- develop a “rule of life” - a harmony in prayer and praise and work, with the physical, the cognitive, the social and hospitality, action and contemplative mutually supportive.
- enjoy activities that nurture the spirit (telescoping, playing an instrument. . . .)
- appreciate the quiet and solitude found in commuting
- review the day and identify where God has been at work
- find ways to 'frame the day' – pray for cleansing while in the shower, be thankful for provisions when cooking evening meal, etc.

Outcomes

I present here from the writers I have discussed a series of quotations that provide a glimpse of the outcomes of weaving the contemplative and the active in the workplace – a 'sampler' only, for sure.

Listening and discerning and compassion:

“To my amazement I discovered that [in] Rwanda, when I was not doing the management work of planning, budgeting, and fundraising, I was either listening to God in order to discern what to do, or I was listening to hurting Rwandese and acting as a compassionate director to my staff on their journey.”

(Steward, 2004, p.5)

The Spirit just blew in and things changed

“I've been amazed at the change that's happened in several work environments that I can't explain other than the Holy Spirit working through us. . . It wasn't organisational change; it wasn't top-down change; it wasn't anybody saying things are going to be different. Somehow the Holy Spirit just blew in and things changed. I think that sort of thing happens all the time if we are open to it. . . A lot of things which appear mundane start to acquire a deeper significance as if one sees them as the leading of God's Spirit . . . one can move to a deeper level of God's movement in an organic way in an organisation.”

(Driskill & Farrington, p 17 & 18)

Mystery

“What happened to me this morning as I read Ezekiel 37 was quite a surprise. As I read aloud the passage all I could think of was my [work] context ... and then somehow inspiration fired and 'the story' of [the changes happening at work] was bursting forth from within me. The parable ranged around and settled and I knew it was from the Mystery, the Source, the One. I wrote it up mostly before lunch – and wondered if I would have the courage to use it.”

(personal journal)

When one person starts to change

“Healed people invite others towards healing ... They first ... faced their own pain, and began their journey towards healing and wholeness. Then they became facilitators . . . And they found and affirmed other people who had begun their own journey towards forgiveness and reconciliation. I think on reflection they knew what to look for because they were also on that journey”

(Steward, p 4-5)

The undivided life

“And the desires of my heart? [among other things] an undivided life: the seamless garment of an incarnational life... but there's a trap if I limit “undivided life” to mean only the seamlessness of working and private life, because the seamlessness can be a take over of all my energies; my spiritual walk, relationships, priorities, community can all be cast in the 'work' frame: the road I walk defaults to the 'work' road; the community of faith defaults to the work community and so on. I exercise, eat, read, talk only 'work' stuff – with God fully there of course. So does work equal life? NO way. So what does a 'seamless garment' mean? How do I recognise my workplace as my main arena of ministry, of outworking of faith, and also guard my other arenas of home, extended family, followers of Jesus. In other words ... do I have the pattern, stitching, colours and design weighted and beautiful? Perhaps its a garment I can wear different ways at different times, but of itself is the one seamless undivided, overarching, undergirding way to be.”

(personal journal)

“... its so easy to compartmentalise ourselves – family, work, self, spiritual development – we cut off one to jar into the other. You have shown me the extraordinary possibility of de-compartmentalising, integrating all facets of life. It's a profound model for living and I thank you for it.”

(Extract from email of work colleague M, 2005)

Continuing the journey:

“My spiritual director plays a very vital role in my pursuing a contemplative approach to life ...and it is he that helps me maintain the disciplines and work through some of the issues associated with it. I never feel condemned. I never feel as though I'm not doing enough - all I ever get is encouragement from him to continue on the journey and to simply allow God in.” (Jenny's email.)

Where the fruit is growing...

“When you're not thinking about yourself all the time you begin to notice how God exists in other people and you begin to care deeply about what's going on in other people, and communities, and the world around you. Also you begin to be less thrown by what happens on a daily basis . . . For me, that's the experience of God in the world. I have this centre which holds me and I can move outward from that. And it's not me who moves out, it's God who moves out through me.”

(Presence Interview: Farrington, p26)

“It's ultimately how we act and what we do that demonstrates whether the spiritual encounter has been with the God of love or whether it's been an encounter with our own imagination or other aspects of our inner life.”

(Presence Interview: Driskill, p 26)

Failure

“It was not easy to admit that I was guilty of such a highly visible and costly failure . . . I admitted my failure to my staff . . . and requested forgiveness and support to keep on leading. . . If I fail too often or make a fatal mistake I shouldn't be leading. But if I never fail I am not really leading.”

(Kriegbaum, p 72)

Courage

“To be free, to be able to stand up and leave everything behind – without looking back. To say Yes -”

(Hammarskjold p 88)

Humility

“He who has surrendered himself to it knows that the Way ends on the Cross - even when it is leading him through the jubilation of Genneseret or the triumphal entry into Jerusalem”

(Hammarskjold p 88)

To conclude then, we have explored here in rudimentary way, the weaving of the contemplative and active life in the marketplace of recent decades. We have identified some of the threads we can hold, noted some of the tangles to work through, and have caught glimpses of the richly patterned, seamless garment that may emerge. Hammarskjold's inspiration, mediated through the English words of poet W.H.Auden, encourages us on in our creativity:

“How humble the tool when praised for what the hand has done.

Somebody placed the shuttle in your hand:

Somebody who had already arranged the threads. “ (Hammarskjold, p.122)

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APPENDIX Directees' Answers

Question:

In your experience of intentionally engaging a contemplative approach to your working life what part does or doesn't a spiritual director play?

Jenny:

My spiritual director, [R], plays a very vital role in my pursuing a contemplative approach to life. It was he that introduced me to this expression of spirituality and it is he that helps me maintain the disciplines and work through some of the issues associated with it. To be honest without him I wouldn't be able to continue. The main reason for this is because I don't have a contemplative community that I am sharing with – in a way he is my community at the moment. I've been on this journey for several years with R – we know each other fairly well and he has become someone that I feel I can share myself and my spirituality deeply with. I never feel condemned, I never feel as though I not doing enough – all I ever get is encouragement from him to continue on the journey and to simply allow God in. I need that especially when I have doubts about what I am trying to do and how I am trying to live it out. I am part of a mission community in [M -] – spirituality is a focus and we all have our different expressions of it. Fortunately the members of the group are aware that no one style is more valid than the others so I am free to pursue a more contemplative approach though at times it feels like a lonely journey. I often think that I should try and find some sort of contemplative order here – of which I am sure there are many – but feeling already involved in so many communities – the community where I live, the community I work closely with and then the mission community of ex-pats – and being the introvert I am I can't face getting involved with yet another community at the moment. I communicate with R every two or three months via email or more often if I need it. When I am in NZ we try to spend some time together. Without his encouragement and wisdom, I am sure that I would have given up long ago.

Awhina:

I found a spiritual director helpful in asking prompting questions based on what I have shared. These questions help to clarify and focus my thinking to my responses to situations that arise in the workplace and how I respond to them as [Awhina], a follower of Jesus. I have also found a spiritual director useful in suggesting a variety of contemplative approaches and activities that help to explore the inseparable links between faith, work, and the 'authentic me'. Further areas for thought and exploration often arise as a result of these activities. And...when your in a busy 'people orientated' job and you are doing a lot of listening and engaging with other people...it's refreshing to be actively listened to for an hour!