The Business of Enchantment

While it takes an effort of imagination to find enchantment in politics, it may be almost impossible to conceive of business and work as enchanted. We tend to think of business as entirely pragmatic and therefore literal; fantasy, charm, and other qualities of enchantment would seem to have no place there. We know, too, that business can involve a great deal of labor and pain, and daily we are reminded that it is highly susceptible to corruption. Enchantment, in contrast, seems to require pleasure and ease, and a relatively shadowless role in life.

On the other hand, it's clear that money can cast a spell on just about anyone, and even those few ascetics who disclaim money as a primary value and live a life of voluntary poverty seem enchanted with their own posture toward it. Building a business can provide the primary thrill in a life, and finding the right work often appears to be the panacea that will finally make life worth living.

The Medici family in fifteenth-century Florence conducted business with great seriousness and success, and at the same time they were intensely interested in matters of theology, philosophy, and the arts. They did more than support the arts—Lorenzo de' Medici was a poet of considerable talent, and his grandfather Cosimo could carry on a conversation with the best of philosophers. As patrons, they knew what they were supporting and took a genuine and educated interest in the work of their protégés. As businesspeople they played a crucial role in the extraordinary phenomenon that we know as the European Renaissance. This was a
brief period when money, work, civic life, the arts, and religion came together to vivify a community, and in spite of political upheaval, widespread disease, and other problems, the culture came close to establishing an enchanted, soul-centered way of life, in many respects a good model for us as we search for a way to re-enchant society today.

Our words often tell a deeper story about the subject we're dealing with, and in this case they betray a deep spiritual element in business. As we have seen, the words "commerce" and "merchandise" contain the Latin *merx*, which can be traced directly to the Roman god Mercury, who was widely known as the divine patron of commerce, especially connected with accounts and the exchange of money, to say nothing of money's shadow—deceit, trickery, and outright thievery.

It may be difficult for a modern person to imagine a society in which business is considered a sacred endeavor, or that one could pray to a patron saint of commerce. If it is difficult to do so, then maybe the problem is not with the audacity of some other culture to find business holy but with us, who have secularized most of life, including and especially anything having to do with money and goods.

The idea that business is holy and that a polytheistic culture like that of the Romans honored a god of commerce hints that what goes on in business truly has deep roots and that what we typically consider a purely secular matter, to be taken literally and pragmatically, is a matter of far-reaching dimensions. Business reaches so far into the concerns of the heart that perhaps we should investigate the soul of commerce and the state of the soul in the workplace.

What is business about? Buying, selling, working for pay, paying for work, lending, making, marketing, saving. These are all activities of major importance to every person, and for this reason alone they affect the soul, but more than that, they are activities full of fantasy and meaning as well. Money in the bank may relieve our anxiety about security and living a meaningful life, and it may also contribute to a strong feeling of personal worth. Shopping and buying are "therapeutic," people often say, and there is no doubt: that consumerism has a strong emotional component and is directly
related to a sense of well-being or, in the other direction, an obsession that betrays some psychic disturbance. In either case, the soul is involved.

For most of us, a career is largely a matter of business, and so the thing that gives us our very identity and offers a profound sense of meaning and purpose in life is in large part business. When we meet someone, we say, "What do you do?" Or, more directly, "What's your business?" These questions suggest that what we do in life is the most important factor in expressing our individuality. Our business life and the work we do reveal our values, family vision, longings and desires, ethical sensitivity, and passions—the greater part of our soul.

Our life in community is also largely lived out through business, as when we take in the mail, hop on a bus, go to the grocery store, purchase a pair of shoes, go out to dinner, buy a newspaper, and certainly as we spend eight or more hours a day at work. Economics is the law of life, and in fact this word also has deep meaning, coming from oikos, Greek for home or temple, as we have seen, and nomos, meaning custom, management, and law. The word has misty historical origins in the pasturing of sheep and offers another hint as to how fundamental business is to getting along in life. Business involves all aspects of managing our home, whether the family house or the planet, and therefore has to do with survival, fulfillment, community, and meaning.

It's no accident that when men and women gather in monasteries to intensify the communal aspect of life, they take an economic vow, the vow of poverty, promising each other common ownership of all property, even the most commonplace and personal. They follow an exceptionally vivid "law of the house"—eco-nomics—and find a doorway to intense community through that particular law. Marriage, too, has a similar, significant economic dimension, where two people blend love and business into the most soulful of living arrangements.

Business, then, clearly touches on many matters of genuine importance to the soul, but how is it involved with enchantment, and can there be such a thing as enchanted work and enchanted commercialism? One way to imagine enchanted business is to
examine several aspects of business life and determine how they might have soul, how they might stir fantasy and increase the interchange between the life of things and the life of humans.

**Family Business**

Home, as we have seen several times, is one of the primary needs of the soul—not mere physical shelter but a deeply felt sense of being at home. Business, of course, allows us to have a home: to be able to afford a house, furnish it, and buy food. This is the absolutely fundamental role of business: to allow each of us to satisfy our primary needs, not only of the body, but of the soul too.

But business can provide home in other ways. The workplace, where most of us spend a third of our lives at least, is, for good or ill, a kind of home. Business could recognize its role of providing the soul with a home and not make a sharp division between home and work. A home provides shelter, safety, family, food, and basic bodily needs. If a business overlooks any one of these things, then it isn't even providing the fundamentals of enchantment.

More than physical safety and comfort, the workplace can provide a felt sense of home. When possible, we need the freedom to make our workspace our own, with pictures, colors, furnishings, and clothing. Go into a workplace where workers can make a home for their eight hours of labor, and you may sense the enchantment of the place, especially in expressions of individuality and family. Workers don't have to be taught to put a flower on their desk or keep photographs of the family in sight; they automatically do these things from the heart, provided they aren't hindered by rules and regulations.

Related to home is the soul's need for family wherever and whenever it can find it. Employers may treat workers as if they didn't have families, demanding, for example, that they move from place to place, or they may not include the families in other decisions that affect them. This blindness to family betrays a serious neglect of soul and at the same time offers a relatively simple way to deepen and humanize the activity of a company. When employers do see their workers as members of families, the workplace itself can find
soul and even enchantment through a genuine and concrete honoring of family life.

One of my current jobs is to travel from city to city, speaking in bookstores, churches, and universities. I have found that when I travel with my wife and children, I'm treated differently from when I'm alone. People pay attention to my children and are aware that they require time and tending. I think they see me as a rooted, ordinary, entangled person rather than as some angelic figure flying from city to city as if I had no place on earth. They observe my own efforts to deal with the irrational emotions and needs of the children, and they know firsthand that I live all the complexities of marriage. There is an infinite difference between enchantment and idealism, the former keeping us charmed as we live our ordinary earthly lives, the latter focusing our attention away from the ordinary and the human.

Family has its own brand of enchantment. A publisher calls me on a weekend afternoon, and my wife tells him I'm giving my three-year-old daughter a bath. When I talk to him, he is full of fantasy about the charms of fatherhood and imagines his own enchanted life as the father of a little girl. This is not mere sentimentality, or if it is, it's the kind that borders enchantment. Of course, this publisher may have an unrealistic view of what it means to have a child, but those enchanting moments of deep love and meaning give soul to parenthood.

I can imagine businesspeople sitting around a conference table discussing the impact on everyone's family, including the managers' and CEO's, of their decision to move their offices or operations to a new locale. It's clear how far we as a society have moved away from soul values when it seems radical to include the family in all our business and social decisions. Those who speak so freely about "family values" might deepen their agenda by offering concrete ways we can care for the family as we move ahead socially and technologically.

Why not find ways to help families know the workplace where a father, mother, or in some cases a child spends so many hours of the day? Why not acknowledge the fact that no person is alone, and include the family in every aspect of business life—at least giving it a modicum of consideration. The fantasy of the unattached worker
who has no family ties and no community context may be a useful one for employers, who want to be able to make quick and clean business decisions, but it is unrealistic and slices away the soul that could profoundly help the business in the long run.

Some employers and workers, extending the idea of family, proudly proclaim that their business is one big, happy family. Since the family the soul needs is not a literal entity, the family spirit one occasionally finds on the job is of great importance. Soul is fed by this spirit, which enchants the workday and helps heal the breach between work and home.

These days, many of the metaphors we use for business organization are structural and abstract—the pyramid, for example. Family and home would be more soulful images for business, more organic and intimate, and might help us imagine work and commerce in more enchanting ways.

Many of us lament the passing of the "mom and pop" corner grocery store. When I was a child, on the east side of Detroit, we lived on a block with such a store at the corner, and the family nature of that business helped the neighborhood hold together. The woman who owned the store knew me, knew my parents, and gave us the precious soul gifts of safety and understanding.

Our society has suffered from the disappearance of family businesses and the spread of impersonal, massive, anonymously owned and operated supermarkets and other kinds of stores. These changes in social patterns suck the soul from everyday life, ounce by ounce, and we're not aware of the impact of the change until we see crime increase or the neighborhood become lifeless or decayed. Think back on any family business in your past, then think of the same service or shop that is now a chain operation. Somewhere in the differences you can detect a loss of enchantment.

I'm not saying that we have to turn back progress entirely, or that large companies can't sustain a soulful business, but it is clear that one immediate way to keep enchantment in our business lives would be to run and patronize businesses that are family owned and managed. Large corporations could find ways to keep an authentic family spirit and support values connected to that spirit at all levels of their operations.

I once had an enlightening conversation with a man who owns
an office supply store in my town. He has a small storefront on the main street, in an old building that gives much to the spirit of the town, and I go out of my way to buy from him almost all the supplies I need. He and his family take turns minding the shop. Across the street is a chain drugstore, staffed with college students who are putting in their time for a small salary.

"Every time I put a sale price on some small item," he told me, "the chain lowers their price on that very item. They have tons of business, and I don't understand why they have to compete so nervously and aggressively with my little store."

One day I noticed that a national office supply chain was opening yet another store at the edge of our town. That store shows absolutely no sign of New England in its architecture, and it stands there narcissistic and anxious in bold, unnatural red and absolute white against beautiful green forest land. Whoever decided on the shape and color of these molded stores had no idea of the importance of keeping friendship with nature as we go about our business, or of becoming part of a tradition and a community. The town, of course, for financial reasons welcomes the business and seems to be unaware that loss of soul brings crime, family breakdown, school chaos, and political malaise—all problems this little town discusses without solution month after month, even as it continues thoughtlessly to license disenchanting businesses and fails to support the few family enterprises that remain.

There are thousands of ways to bring the spirit and values of family into business. We can each do it in our own way, whether as proprietors or as employees and customers. No human activity should lack the family spirit, because without including family we automatically exclude one of the cornerstones of our humanity. Most of us know, too, that for all its imperfections, family can be profoundly enchanting, and that family brings to any activity a magic that can't be explained by any social theory. It's that magic and enchantment that business needs and can find, if it could only imagine family intelligently, deeply, and poetically.
Friendship

Next to family, perhaps the most important value of the soul is friendship, and so, in search of the soul of business, we can examine the condition of friendship in the marketplace and the workplace. “The only reason I come to work every morning,” a radio producer told me, “is because of my friends there.” But the owner of a large furniture business confessed, “We’re afraid that if we encourage friendship among our employees, productivity will go down. In management it’s all right, but not among the workers.”

It’s true that values of the soul sometimes stand at odds with other values: speed versus a slow pace, efficiency versus quality, function versus imagination, and productivity versus creativity. We will have to change our ways as a society if we want a soulful life and if we really want solutions to our so-called social problems. We may have to slow down, live a somewhat less efficient and less convenient style of life, shake loose the dominant philosophy of functionality, and not give productivity such a high place in our priorities. Once, at the end of a flight the pilot said goodbye to us passengers and wished us a “productive” day. I thought to myself, I hope my day isn’t too productive; I’d rather see some moments of surprise, rest, and creativity.

I can’t promise that if a company supports friendship among its employees it will be more productive. It might well become less productive, but I can confidently predict that the company will have better morale with the increase in soul and may well find fewer problems that come from its neglect. If in business we keep an anxious eye only on the profit margin and productivity curve, we may succeed in the eyes of our fellow neurotic associates, but we may have missed the opportunity to satisfy our soul during the workday.

One of the problems one faces in dealing with business is its own brand of fundamentalism: certain values are absolute and unquestioned, like productivity and profit. The soul has its own, different rewards, which are deeply satisfying but are not necessarily compatible with typical business absolutes. Employees may love their work, enjoy each other’s company, and feel loyal to the company, but the price for these happy outcomes may be a shift in priorities.
that represents a radical reorientation of business wisdom. It seems obvious to me that a small company with good morale, a beautiful environment, just and altruistic practices, a positive place in the community, and products that contribute to a full life is more valuable and more worth developing than a company without those qualities whose profits are always growing. Small can be beautiful even in the business world.

I wonder how much longer anyone will be willing to be a cog in the business machine. As I speak to people in every part of the world about soul, they talk ecstatically about their gardening, writing poetry, traveling, making a home, caring for children, and looking for a modest occupation that will feed their souls if not their wallets. I imagine the whole edifice of inhumane business collapsing from lack of interest among the “work force” — a telling phrase in itself. Some people will always want to be makers, doers, and achievers, but many are now looking for more intimate values like friendship and beauty, family and ethical satisfaction.

When a business shows signs of failing, the worst response might be to intensify those very things that wound the souls of workers, consumers, neighboring community, and the business leaders themselves. Increasing productivity, raising the anxiety level about profit, cutting programs that serve the soul, instigating less humane organization and authority patterns — each of these common practices places a business deeper in trouble, because it eats away at the human elements that ground and fortify the workplace. It might be better to refresh the imagination of business radically, placing enchantment high on the list of priorities.

The soul hungers for friendship just as ardently as the body hungers for nutritious food, and something as simple as friendship can make a workplace enchanting. A factory or an office can hum with the thoughts of good conversation and empathetic fellowship, with fantasy about fellow workers and longing for their company. When people stand next to each other at work and have no fantasy about each other, no stories on which to dwell, and no history of interaction, then they are inanimate — not animated, not ensouled — as frigid as the machines that labor metallically around them.

Annoying and sometimes debilitating office romances may be a sign that eros is not woven into the fabric of the business and so
floats autonomously and dangerously like a virus in search of a victim. I doubt that business leaders recognize how effectively and deeply friendship can satisfy, humanize, and contextualize the need for love and thereby keep eros relatively contained.

**Material**

Enchanted business requires another kind of intimacy, too: closeness with the matter at hand, the materials and objects that are made, sold, shipped, and tallied. Things can enchant. I once went in search of a harpsichord in Manhattan, walking down the noisy streets full of people and taxis. Eventually I found the door I was looking for, a simple door on an old, unimpressive building, and walked into the plain room filled with the fine, delicate instruments. It was like coming across an oasis in the Sahara, a respite from the busy streets, but more than that, a house of animated things, things of beauty that made wonderful sounds and had such presence as to take your breath away.

I'll always remember my father, when I was a child, showing me pictures of buildings under construction. He would look at a certain arrangement of pipes and fall into an aesthetic reverie that no art expert could match. Most people involved in the manufacture and sale of products appreciate the beauty of good materials and construction, but it seems that to a large extent we have lost this important source of enchantment. We think that our abstract goals and objectives are more important than the satisfying materials at hand.

If we ship all our plans and materials to other places for assembly and manufacture, we will be denuded of real things just as we risk becoming denuded of trees and wilderness, and yet things are as much a source of soul as waterfalls and shady groves. Or, if we discover through chemistry that all natural things can be duplicated in synthetics, we will have preserved the shell of things and lost their matter; then, without a genuine interior, they will have no capacity for enchantment. Perhaps the threat to health in synthetic foods is the fact, lost on contemporary chemists, that whole food has a soul that can't be put into a chemically processed substitute.

Today we can remain in close contact with real things simply by making and buying cotton, wool, linen, and silk; by refusing "oak
finishes" made of petroleum on our furniture and polyurethane varnishes that shield us from sensual contact with real material; by listening to live music and by going out of our way to buy fish freshly caught; by reading a poem instead of watching a television program, and by reading a story to the family and playing the piano and going for a walk together. Some businesses support these choices, and in so doing they contribute to the re-enchantment of everyday life, but for the most part business remains, perhaps with politics, one of the greatest obstacles we have toward a soulful social life.

The workplace, too, could be less artificial, providing workers with fresh air, natural light, a human schedule and pace, signs of nature, and things of beauty. As with all things, enchantment usually asks for only a small libation poured in its honor: a lovely antique, a well-crafted chair, an artist's painting, a colored wall, a remarkable door, a lamp with personality, some hand-worked clay, intimate lighting, a view of a landscape, a pleasing pot, a wondrous plant, a vase of fresh flowers, access to a park, flowing water, a few inches of wood. We may need to pry ourselves loose from the clutches of function, profit, authority, and productivity, which keep soul and work, enchantment and the commercial life, at odds.

The new romantic basis of cultural life that I am describing as enchantment may seem soft and effete compared to the hard realities we usually associate with business and other parameters of society, but for all its softness, it is a radical proposal, asking for nothing less than an inversion of many of our social values. But I see no other way to bring soul to a soulless world, sacredness to a secularistic enterprise, or enchantment to a disenchanted situation than to summon the courage to do things differently. It's clear to me that it is the romantics in our history who have sustained a vision of the humane life, who have nurtured the deep virtues of natural religion and piety, and who have cared for our souls when others have tried to convince us we have no soul to care for.