

THE FUTURE OF WORK >>

>> INSPIRING  
WORKPLACE  
SPIRITUALITY

Judi Neal

# INSPIRING WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY

# The Future of Work

The future of work is a vital contemporary area of debate both in business and management research, and in wider social, political and economic discourse. Globally relevant issues, including the aging workforce, rise of the gig economy, workplace automation, and changing forms of business ownership, are all regularly the subject of discussion in both academic research and the mainstream media, having wider professional and public policy implications.

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# INSPIRING WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY

BY

**JUDI NEAL**

*Edgewalkers International, USA*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
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Emerald Publishing Limited  
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street,  
Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2024

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83753-615-3 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83753-612-2 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83753-614-6 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*This book is dedicated to all my teachers, especially Jack Gibb, Mel Toomey, Daryl Conner, Barry Heermann, Michele Austin, and Monica Ross. You have each made a transformational difference in my life, supported me in playing a bigger game, and guided me toward greater wholeness and authenticity.*

*I also dedicate this book to all my students. I have taught thousands of students over the years, from my time as a university management Professor to the workshops and programs I have taught in person and online. I have been greatly inspired by so many of them, especially those who ask questions I can't answer and thus turn me into a student again.*

*The Fetzer Scholars at the Management, Spirituality and Religion Division of the Academy of Management deserve special mention because their work and their leadership are making a significant impact on inspiring the field of workplace spirituality.*

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\*Asterisked chapters originally published in some form as a Faith Matters column in *Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Judi Neal** is an author, scholar, speaker, and consultant. Her primary focus has been on workplace spirituality, transformation, and global consciousness. After receiving her PhD in organizational behavior from Yale University, she served as an internal consultant to Honeywell for eight years. Judi then taught management at the University of New Haven for 17 years. Her research was on business leaders who have a strong commitment to their spirituality, and she researched the ways in which they bridged the invisible world of spirituality and the material world of business.

Judi was founding Director of the Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace at the University of Arkansas. She serves on the boards of OCTAVE Institute, INDICA Academy, and [MCCG.org](http://MCCG.org), and is the Executive Director of the Global Consciousness Institute. She was a cofounder of the Management, Spirituality and Religion (MSR) division at the Academy of Management.

Judi is the author of 10 books on workplace spirituality and transformation. She is the President of Edgewalkers International, a workplace spirituality community.

In her spare time, she writes songs and plays guitar and electric bass in an all-woman band called She's Us, and in a duo called Good Medicine with her husband Ellis Ralph.

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# PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

This book is about workplace spirituality. Most of the books on workplace spirituality are research based, including my previous nine books, such as *Edgewalkers* (2006), *Creating Enlightened Organizations* (2012), and the *Handbook of Personal and Organizational Transformation* (2018). However, *Inspiring Workplace Spirituality* is a different sort of book because it invites deeper reflections on the actual experience of trying to live one's faith or spirituality at work. It is a useful supplement to the research and practice in the field of workplace spirituality because it explores the profound questions and issues that can't be covered in a research book or a how-to practitioner book. *Inspiring Workplace Spirituality* is meant to be contemplative and thought provoking in addition to being educational. At the same time is also meant to be practical as specific practices, tools, and applications are offered.

It is my hope that this book brings wisdom to the mainstream ways of knowing what we know about workplace spirituality.

“Mainstream ways of knowing” are usually based on quantitative and qualitative research and tend to be fairly granular. That kind of traditional research tends to focus on how a small number of variables are related to each other. A mainstream research question might be something like “How

are organizational commitment and job satisfaction related to workplace spirituality?" Each of these variables is measured, correlations calculated, and results interpreted. Progress in mainstream ways of knowing occurs in small and incremental ways, and this kind of research tends to not to have much impact except on small problems (Storberg-Walker, 2022).

Recently scholars and practitioners are exploring "other ways of knowing" that can lead to deeper wisdom and have the potential to be more transformative (Mayer, 2007; Neal, 2018; Tsao, 2023). One of the best ways of transferring wisdom is through contemplation, stories, and reflections. John Milton is an ecologist who says that political, legal, and economic approaches to progress simply do not go deep enough. He says, "By themselves they won't bring about the penetrating changes in human culture that we need for people to live in true harmony and balance with one another and the earth. The next great opening of an ecological worldview will have to be an internal one" (Zajonc, 2009, p. 15).

The topic of this book is the practice of workplace spirituality. Some of the essays are specifically on workplace spirituality, such as the idea of seeing work as sacred and an exploration of the importance of the spiritual value of forgiveness at work. Other essays cover topics that are broader, such as the importance of spiritual values in the workplace like compassion and gratitude.

These essays take every day real life situations and explore them from a spiritual perspective.

Spirituality in the workplace is about people seeing their work as a spiritual path, as an opportunity to grow personally, and to contribute to the society in a meaningful way. It is about learning to be more caring and compassionate with fellow employees, with bosses, with subordinates, and customers. It is about integrity, being true to oneself, and telling the truth to others. It means attempting to live your values

more fully in your work. It can refer to the ways in which organizations structure themselves to support the spiritual development of employees (Neal, 1998).

This book is a resource for those students and leaders who want to take the internal journey in their own leadership in order to have the presence and self-awareness to make a positive difference wherever they are.

Practitioners, MBAs, and those in Executive Education, all have significant work experience. They have had to deal with the challenges of leadership, ethical dilemmas, and questions around calling and vocation. Seldom, except perhaps in the case of workplace chaplains and spiritual directors, are there any spiritual resources that can provide guidance to these current and future leaders. It is rare that workplace challenges are seen from a spiritual perspective, but research and experience have shown that this spiritual perspective can provide real breakthroughs and transformation for people who might otherwise feel stuck and who suffer in silence.

This book can be used as supplementary reading for graduate courses that focus on leadership and organizational change. It can be used as a companion for the workplace spirituality textbook I wrote; *Creating Enlightened Organizations*. Currently, there are only a handful of courses on Workplace Spirituality, but the number of courses is growing and this is a trend that is not going away. Supplementary readings can be assigned to be in alignment with the course syllabus, or students can be assigned to read and journal about a certain number of essays that call to them. It could also be used in a “lunch and learn” book discussion group in the corporate, nonprofit, and religious organization worlds, much the way *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work* has been used.

After 40 years of teaching, researching, and writing academically about workplace spirituality, it feels very

fulfilling at this stage of life to be able to delve more deeply into the spiritual, theological, and philosophical underpinnings of this field, and to offer inspiration to those who strive to be authentically whole in their work. My prayer is that this book inspires you to see the interconnections between your own spirituality, the spirituality of others, and the work you do in the world.

Judi Neal  
Fayetteville, Arkansas  
February 2023

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Twenty years ago, Tom Brown encouraged me to write essays on topics that were on the leading edge for me and to post them on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Those original essays led to many of the ideas in my first book, *Edgewalkers: People Who Take Risks, Build Bridges, and Break New Ground*. Thank you, Tom, for encouraging me to write and publish short pieces. This has become a lifelong practice.

Around the same time, I was editing the *Spirit at Work* newsletter, published by the Center for Spirit at Work that I founded. I would write an editorial about some workplace spirituality topic each month, such as the value of a moment of silence in groups, or the power of forgiveness in the workplace. Bill Staines, one of my oldest friends from the music world, told me that he kept a bookcase in his home of all his creative work – his many albums, CDs, music books, and other books. It inspired him to have it all in one place. That got me thinking that maybe someday I would pull all these essays and editorials into a single book. Bill passed away last year, but I'd like to think he would be happy that I have finally created this collection of essays.

I want to acknowledge Becca Martin, Features Editor at the Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette. When I first moved to Arkansas and became the founding Director of the Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace at the

University of Arkansas, the previous Features Editor, Bettina Lehovic, asked me to write a column for the Faith at Work series in the newspaper. I have now been doing that one every other month for about 15 years. When Becca took over as Features Editor, she became a real cheerleader for my columns, and her appreciation and support have kept me going. Many of those columns have been adapted for inclusion in this book.

I want to express my gratitude to Paul Kwiecinski. Paul has been my writing buddy for about as long as I have been writing these essays. Every Friday morning, I call Paul up at 9 a.m. and we talk about what we are going to work on that morning. We offer each other encouragement, ask questions, and share ideas for about 10 minutes. Then we hang up and go to work. I call him back at 11 a.m. and we report in on what we accomplished and what we are going to do next. This book is my 10th book, and I think I have acknowledged Paul in every one of them, since he has been a regular support system for all of these projects.

I also acknowledge my sister, Marie Wolny, who is my best friend and spiritual companion on this journey called life. She has been by my side through all the ups and downs of this spiritual graduate school, as I have been by hers. We're still here, so we haven't graduated yet!

My husband, Ellis Ralph, deserves my greatest gratitude for all his loving support, from offering ideas on the essays, to editing, to celebrating with Japanese food and sake at the end of a project and all the little things in between that make my life so much easier.

*My fiftieth year had come and gone,  
I sat, a solitary man,  
In a crowded London shop,  
An open book and empty cup  
On the marble table-top.  
While on the shop and street I gazed  
My body of a sudden blazed;  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed, so great my happiness,  
That I was blessed and could bless.*

—William Butler Yeats

## Part 1

# IN THE WORKPLACE

The essays in this section explore spiritual practices and how they are useful in the workplace. These essays are intended to be both practical and inspirational. For example, the first essay, “Blessings at Work,” is meant to inspire a transformation in mindset for leaders who are in the process of bringing about change. Our tendency in the face of change is to be judgmental about what needs changing and about those who resist change. Alternatively, a spiritual perspective on change is to bless that which we would change.

Other essays offer ways to think about integrating spiritual values like forgiveness or integrity into the organizations

where we work. In each case you are invited to reflect personally on ways you currently live a particular practice in your work, as well as to consider how it might be incorporated more broadly into your work team or your overall culture. For example, what are ways you personally practice silence in your work, such as when you are stuck for a creative idea? And how might you incorporate silence into team meetings, such as at the beginning of a team meeting, or when a tense moment arises?

Some essays are very broad, such as the essay *Spiritual Evolution at Work* that is based on my research on successful leaders who have a very strong spiritual life, looking at how their careers and their spirituality coevolve over time. Other essays are very specific to a particular field, such as the essay on *Spirituality in Project Teams*, which offers concrete applications to project management teamwork.

The purpose of this section is to offer concepts and practices you can implement in your workplace to bring a greater sense of creativity, connection, and purpose.

# 1

## BLESSINGS AT WORK

Andrew Harvey, author of *The Hidden Journey* (1991), had a mystical experience in the early stages of his spiritual journey. He felt his body fill with soft light, and then began to hear a voice. He knew it to be the voice of Mother Meera, his teacher. She said:

*You cannot transform what you have not blessed.  
You can never transform what first you have not  
accepted and blessed.*

How many of us are trying to transform our lives, our work, and our organizations without first blessing them? What does it mean to bless something or someone?

One definition of blessing is to “make holy.” In your work, do you see yourself as holy, as connected to the Divine? Do you see God in others? Do you see some kind of higher purpose or transcendent energy working through the organization?

One of my spiritual practices is to try to see everyone, including myself, as a child of God. In my better moments, I can see that each person is on his or her own journey of faith, and that they are doing the best they can.

To bless someone, we must first suspend our negative thinking about them. This is not to condone unethical or

inappropriate behavior; it is simply to avoid labeling and name-calling, even if only in our minds. The workplace can offer real challenges and opportunities to practice this kind of non-judgment. “Judge not lest ye be judged” (Matthew 7:1). When someone does something that upsets or frustrates you, the knee-jerk response is often to judge and label that person. But what if we could take a breath and remember that this person is also a child of God. I try to remember to say to myself, “Just like me, this person has known suffering.” “Just like me, this person wants to be happy.”

When people in the Hindu tradition greet each other, they say “Namaste.” The literal meaning is “I bow to you,” and is frequently interpreted as “I honor the Divine within you.” This is a form of blessing, of recognizing the holiness of the other.

Often in the workplace, as in other parts of our lives, we wish we could change the people who appear to be preventing us from meeting our goals. If we are in a leadership role, we are expected to bring about change and transformation in individuals and in our organizational sphere of influence. The first transformation must begin within ourselves. This inner transformation requires moving from a mindset of judgment to a mindset of blessing.

As an experiment, think of one person in your workplace who is mildly annoying. Don't begin this experiment with someone in mind who makes you really angry. Start with someone easy. See them as a child of God. Picture them as holy, as having a Divine spark within. Have compassion for whatever may be going on in his or her life that might make this person act in a way that annoys or upsets you. Then bless them. Perhaps you can say a prayer, or simply wish that person well. See what happens. That individual may or may not change, but if you change your mindset, your feelings

about that person may get gentler, and that could have some surprising effects on your relationship.

Not only can we bless individuals in our workplace, we can bless the organization itself. The mood in many organizations is pretty dismal. This negativity can be contagious, and this lack of engagement can have a negative impact on customer satisfaction, employee turnover, and other factors that can affect the bottom line.

Notice what happens the next time you hear a coworker complain about something in the workplace. Others readily jump on the bandwagon and add their complaints, and there is a real drain in energy as people commiserate with one another. And then notice what happens if you ask a group of people to tell stories about a moment when they felt proud of working for this organization. You can sense a real shift in the energy in a very positive way. Looking for what is good about your organization or what makes you feel proud to work there are ways to bless the organization. To ask positive questions – known as “Appreciative Inquiry” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) – is to look for the divine and the holy in your workplace. The more you do this, the more you bless that which you wish to transform, the more you will feel yourself transform, and the more you will feel blessed.

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## 2

# FORGIVENESS IN THE WORKPLACE

There are many books on enlightened leadership and enlightened organizations, and the one thing they all have in common is a focus on values or virtues. Values are principles that we say we want to live by; virtues are the actual actions we take to live a values-centered life (Manz et al., 2001). For most of us, we learn these virtues in our religious upbringing, through church, temple, scripture, or religious education. Some of the more common virtues talked about in the workplace are compassion, faith, courage, justice, humility, respect, wisdom, and forgiveness. I have seen quite a bit written in the leadership literature about most of these topics, but I never see anything about forgiveness as a virtue in the workplace. So, I would like to explore some thoughts about this in this essay.

I try to imagine what a workplace would look and feel like if forgiveness were practiced as a virtue. My experience, and those reported by most of my clients and students, is that most organizations are quite unforgiving. Organizations have strong values around accountability, as they should, but it seems like leaders use this as an excuse to be judgmental, controlling, and sometimes downright mean. Matthew 7: 1-2 says, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the

measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Yet judgment is an inherent part of organization life, particularly in the performance review process. So is criticism.

A friend of mine said that his father used to have this phrase on the wall of his office in the family business, “Never criticize your neighbor until you’ve walked a mile in his moccasins.” That made a big impression on my friend who works very hard to be empathetic toward others. It is not possible to be judgmental and empathetic at the same time.

Years ago, W. Edwards Deming (1993) proposed doing away with performance reviews because they create fear and distrust. One of his 14 principles of quality management was “drive out fear,” and he believed that performance reviews created much more harm than good. Research has born this out over time, and it is a real challenge for organizations because having a performance management system is seen as a valuable defense in Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) claims. However, these systems are the opposite of the virtue of forgiveness at work.

Forgiveness is an inside job; it takes place inside of you. All work is based on relationships, even if you are a solo entrepreneur. We have relationships with customers, vendors, regulators, accountants, bankers, coworkers, bosses, and subordinates. It is inevitable that someone eventually will do something that causes you a problem. It may or may not have been intentional, but their actions keep you from achieving some desired outcome. Worse yet, their actions may have damaged your reputation, humiliated you, or caused you financial or other harm.

These are opportunities to practice the virtue of forgiveness. What is forgiveness? The Mayo Clinic believes that learning to forgive is necessary for good health and defines forgiveness as “a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. The act that hurt or offended you might always