



Thoughts from Linda:

The Heart Aroused Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America

David Whyte
1994

Almost 30 years old, this book still holds the wisdom and message for all people who work and are seeking a balanced life—specifically, it is aimed at American workers, but it has universal applicability. I still remember discovering David Whyte in the early '90s and appreciating his message and the beauty of his poetry and prose. These were the pre-Brene Browne days or the days of inspirational TED Talks. David filled that space with his insights and the music of his message.

The poet David Whyte wrote *The Heart Aroused* as he says, “dedicated to...workers everywhere...struggling with the increasing complexity of the modern workplace. Work is a struggle. It has mostly been a struggle; it will mostly be a struggle. If we are to talk about soul life and work life, we are not speaking of some Elysian field where we can lie down and rest. There is in work, in the ancient sense, a dustless place, a place to find rest and repose, but the soul’s attempts to find home and rest in work can only be done by accounting for and living through the chaotic battleground of everyday existence.”

The book is not only about the soul at work, but also the story of this particular poet, David Whyte, as he came to grips with his mission in life—to jump into the fray and bring his voice to an area that before this writing had seen very little of the lyric or poetry of life infused into its lexicon. Now, after three decades, it is more common to find the concepts of vulnerability, mindfulness, purpose-filled missions, and strategies for engaging people’s entire being in the work they do every day. He was a pioneer back in 1994 when he wrote this book and contributed significantly to Boeing, NASA, and Toyota, among other early adopters of a holistic view of work.

Today, David Whyte is a poet and an associate fellow at Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford. In addition to this work, he is the author of many works,

including *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, *Everything is Waiting for You*, and *The Bell and the Blackbird*. His latest collection is *David Whyte: Essentials*.

Whyte's mother was from Ireland, and his father was English, coming from Yorkshire. He attributes his poetic interest to both the songs and the poetry of his mother's Irish heritage and the landscape he enjoyed in West Yorkshire. He has a degree in marine zoology from Bangor University. During his twenties, he worked as a naturalist and lived in the Galapagos, where he experienced a near-drowning on the southern shore of Hood Island. He led anthropological and natural history expeditions in the Amazon, the Himalayas, and the Andes.

This is such a beautifully conceived and written book that it is challenging to find the proper and most beautiful quotations to illustrate his ideas. First off, he does describe his imagination of the soul. He notes that it has a very precise meaning from his point of view. "Soul has to do with the way a human being belongs to their world, their work, or their human community. Where there is little sense of belonging, there is little sense of soul. The soulful qualities of life depend on these qualities of belonging." He continues, "human beings are always desperate to belong to something larger than themselves. When they do not feel this belonging, they not only feel as if they are running in place, but they also quite often feel as if they are dying in place. Without belonging, no attempt to coerce enthusiasm or imagination from us can be sustained for long." He wrote the book, as he says, to "explore the journey and experience of the human spirit and its repressed but unflagging desire to find a home in the world."

This book can be read over time as each chapter has unique attributes. Begin with his first of eight chapters, *The Path Begins*, and as in every section, you'll discover (re-discover) poets from your past, such as William Blake and Dante. Quoting Dante from *Commedia*, which he wrote when he was around 35 years of age, he notes the famous lines expressing the emotions that so many have felt as we evaluate our paths in life: "*In the middle of the road of my life, I awoke in a dark wood, where the true way was wholly lost.*" He then describes the most familiar paths of unknowing and doubts about the mid-life realizations and/or other experiences that take us to the familiar reckoning of the 'what are we doing?' set of questions.

In subsequent chapters, you will travel with Whyte through the works of the still mysterious author of the 1500-year-old English poem, *Beowulf*, as he addresses power and vulnerability at work. Whyte uses the story to illustrate many of his interpretations of the human call for vulnerability and the difficulties we all face entering this domain. He

retells the story of descent into the waters of the unconscious through the characters of Beowulf, Grendel, and of course, the mother of Grendel. He beautifully uses the ancient poem as a metaphor to reflect on the challenges of authenticity and stepping figuratively into the 'deep water' despite our fears. This story becomes the entry point for his entreaties to embrace the soul at work and in living fully.

He follows this with chapters entitled *Fire in the Earth, Toward a Grounded Creativity; Fire in the Voice, Speaking Out at Work; Fionn and the Salmon of Knowledge, Innocence, and Experience in Corporate America; Taking the Homeward Road, The Soul at Midlife; Coleridge and Complexity, Facing What is Sweet and What is Terrible; and The Soul of the World, Toward an Ecological Imagination.*

David Whyte takes us on a magnificent journey, using his poetry and that of so many greats of the past, as he focuses on how to preserve the soul in corporate America. While we have made much progress over these past three decades, there is much work for us to do.

Reflecting on our current times, the 'age of resignation,' and the other challenges facing corporate entities today, his voice seems quite relevant as he advises that "preserving the soul in corporate America means reclaiming all of those human soul qualities sacrificed on the altar of organizational survival. In the very act of reclaiming them, the personal interior struggle becomes an outer political action. There is nothing more transforming to the workplace than the thousands of daily decisions now being made that put soul-life above the abstracts of corporate life. Many now refuse the wrenching transfers that were necessary to advancement. Many ignore the constant demands for more and more of their time that robs their families of their presence. Those corporations riding the wave of this change are the ones that understand that this birthright reclamation on the part of their employees as being just as necessary for the corporation as it is for the individuals who make it up."

We have much to learn and re-learn from this original work, and I hope you accept the invitation to read this one and join him and so many others now on this journey of bringing our full selves to the work we do and of creating the cultures that allow everyone to do just this.