Moved by the Spirit

Contextualizing Workplace Empowerment in American Spiritual Ideals

Michael Elmes
WPI

Charles Smith
Hofstra University

The authors begin by showing the close links between the discourse of workplace empowerment and spirituality. They then identify these spiritual influences historically in Puritan and evangelical Christianity, utopianism, and New Age thinking. From Puritanism and evangelical Christianity, they locate the ideas that all work is God's work, that charismatic evangelism (with Jesus as role model) is the prototype for leadership in business, and that Christian ideals can serve as a basis for organizing the factory system. From utopianism, the authors locate the influence of ideals such as perfectibility, new order, brotherhood, and radical experimentation on empowerment discourse. In New Age thinking, they see a context that permitted the emergence of empowerment as an ideological discourse that makes reference to earlier Christian and utopian ideas. They conclude by discussing spirituality as ideology—the mystifying aspects and potential costs to workers of this approach to empowerment.

In any crowd and under any circumstances the leader stands out. By the power of his faith in himself he commands, and men instinctively obey. This blazing conviction was the first and greatest element in the success of Jesus. The second was his wonderful power to

Michael Elmes is an associate professor in the Department of Management at WPI in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Charles Smith is an associate professor in the Department of Management at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York.

pick men, and to recognize hidden capacities in them. It must have amazed Nicodemus when he learned the names of the twelve whom the young teacher had chosen to be his associates. What a list! Not a single well-known person on it. . . . A haphazard collection of fishermen and small town business men, and one tax collector—a member of the most hated element in the community.

—Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (1924)

Do What You Love, the Money Will Follow: Discovering Your Right Livelihood
—Title of a book by Marsha Sinetar (1986)

I shape my own destiny. What I believe, I become. What I believe, I can do.

—Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, CEO* (1996)

Since the early 1980s, when U.S. companies first started to adopt participative management approaches from Japan, the interest in and willingness to experiment with workplace empowerment programs has grown considerably (Appelbaum & Batt, 1994). During the 1990s, programs in workplace empowerment in the "new" organization (Ancona, Kochan, Scully, Van Maanen, & Westney, 1999) have ranged from total quality management (TQM) and autonomous workgroups to systemwide, decentralized power structures such as that at W. L. Gore & Associates (Shipper & Manz, 1999). Some have suggested that a shift to flattened, empowering, post-bureaucratic organizational forms based on consensual rather than rational-legal forms of legitimation has coincided with market forces that have placed increasing emphasis on quality, customer service, and speed (Heckscher, 1994). In this scenario, companies have simply had to empower workers, give them meaningful work assignments in teams, and provide them with timely and useful information in order to be competitive in the global economy.

To Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman (1996), workplace empowerment "means that a person believes that he or she can direct organizational events toward desired ends . . . [that] they feel they are partners with others in influencing their organizations" (p. 390). Whether companies empower their workers, however, does not necessarily mean that workers will feel empowered. Quinn and Spreitzer (1997) propose that workers will feel empowered to the degree that they experience self-determination, meaning, competence, and impact, that is, choice over, care about, the ability to do, and a belief in the importance of their work (p. 41). Organizational characteristics that facilitate employee empowerment, according to Quinn and Spreitzer, include a clear vision and challenge; an emphasis on openness and teamwork across the organization; a clear sense of boundaries, goals, and expectations; and a belief that the company will support rather than punish them as they "learn and grow" (p. 46).

Taking a historical perspective, however, we suggest in this article that workplace empowerment as an expression of purpose and commitment to some high ideal or purpose is not new. Rather, it is a phenomenon rooted deeply and historically in American spiritual ideals. The trend toward making organizations values driven and empowering workers to participate in fulfilling the mission and vision of the enterprise is not dis-

similar from the quest for purity, perfectibility, and harmony that early Puritans and various utopian communities have sought through work and work-related practices. This historical perspective enables the researcher to see that current practices in workplace empowerment are rooted in prior cultural ways of thinking and being and that they arise not as a passing fad but as cultural artifacts that re-create patterns of emotions and beliefs that have meaning for many Americans.

What led us to examine the historical links between modern empowerment practices and their spiritual overtones were the many strong associations between the language of empowerment and the language of another recent phenomena, spirituality-in-business. Spirituality-in-business has been the focus of several recent conferences (e.g., the 1998 International Conference on Business and Consciousness in Mexico; the First, Second, and Third International Symposia on Spirituality in Business in Boston in 1998, 1999, and 2000, respectively), academic presentations at the recent Academy of Management and Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference, and management training workshops ("The Heavenly Spirit," 1998). In the popular business press, many books on the subject have also been published, including Bohlman and Deal's (1995) *Leading With Soul*, Briskin's (1998) *Stirring the Soul in the Workplace*, Conger's (1994) *Spirit at Work*, and Heermann's (1997) *Building Team Spirit*, among many others.

Often in these books, strong associations are made between empowerment, spiritual growth, and individual and organizational prosperity. Although not usually considered a book on spirituality, Covey's (1989) bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, is a very good example of this phenomenon. This book outlines a set of principles that, if adopted, empowers the worker to act with energy, consistency, and focus, unfettered by the fickle demands of family, friends, or work. Covey's list of high principles includes first, building a foundation from the "inside out" based on a principled vision and proactive behavior. The second set of principles builds on the first and requires the individual to build interdependent relationships based on win-win agreements and empathic communication. As Covey emphasizes, "Empowerment comes from learning how to use this great endowment in the decisions we make every day." The truly empowered worker from this perspective brings discipline, a proactive stance, concern for others, and principled moral character to his or her leadership role. Traits such as disciplined, autonomous choice and institutionally oriented independent action are not only inherently paradoxical but also highly desirable in the so-called new organization that seeks to achieve institutional objectives via flatter structures, less direct supervision, and more team-based processes.

This marriage between empowerment and spirituality in service to workplace objectives is unmistakable in Covey's and others' work. Indeed, much of the current literature on empowerment and spirituality-in-business suggests that a spiritual basis for working enables workers to feel whole and complete and their organizations to prosper. By finding and expressing love toward coworkers and customers in order to build deeper and more fruitful relationships (Marcic, 1997), serving the "developmental needs of individuals, communities and the biosphere" (Rosenfeld, 1998, p. 1; Greenleaf, 1977), and deriving meaning from seemingly random but synchronous

events in everyday encounters (Jaworski, 1996), workers can discover new energy and a deeper sense of purpose in their work. With increased self-discipline, motivation, commitment to the job, and concern for the customer, organizations can presumably benefit as well. In this way, empowerment, like spirituality-in-business, has become a commodity rooted in spiritual ideology that consultants, academics, and businesses alike can sell to improve performance.

In this article, we begin by discussing the spiritual nature of much of the current discourse on workplace empowerment and then look to earlier historical beliefs and practices from which it partially emerged. From Puritanism, we discuss the notion that all work is God's work and that material success is both predestined and a measure of individual goodness and purity. From utopianism, we discuss how historically Americans have tried to create and organize themselves into perfect communities whose beliefs and practices encouraged spiritual growth and communal harmony in consort with the glorification of God or some guiding set of principles. Both of these influences have emphasized the importance of perfectibility, self-discipline, and Christian values, both individually and as collectives. In this regard, we discuss the social experiment of the Lowell Girls from the early 1800s in Lowell, Massachusetts, in which an emphasis on the "health, character, and well-being of its operatives"—single, young women from the surrounding area who rotated through the Lowell factory system—was driven by both commercial and ideological motives. We also discuss a popular religious book of the 1920s, Bruce Barton's (1924) *The Man Nobody Knows*, which, from an evangelical perspective, emphasized the concept that all work was God's work and that Jesus himself was the founder of the modern business enterprise.

Although repackaged under labels like *human relations training*, *quality-of-work-life*, and more recently, *empowerment*, we believe that the appeal of spiritual ideals in modern American organizations has remained a powerful one, particularly in a New Age context. During the 1960s and 1970s, as the Vietnam War intensified, as the legitimacy of authority in organizations and society declined (Heller, 1985), and as skepticism about the role of big business in society grew, the disciplinary influence of Christian and utopian ideals began to wane in the workplace. The emergence of empowerment programs in the 1980s and 1990s occurred, in part, because of the resurgence of conservative economic policies under Reagan and Thatcher and because they beckoned to Puritan and utopian ideals of the past, repackaged in New Age thinking. New Age thinking offers a somewhat less dogmatic view of the links between spirituality, prosperity, and organizational success and draws from many different religious traditions. In a New Age business context, empowerment is less a function of predestination or righteous living (as in the Puritan perspective) than of consciousness and self-awareness. Becoming empowered, in this context, is within anyone's control.

From this perspective, empowerment in a New Age context has fostered a new kind of workplace discipline, one based on organizationally oriented self-management guided by an entrepreneurial ethic, in contrast to an earlier morality-based self-discipline based on a Puritan ethic. Both have promised prosperity and freedom from wont. A major concern of this article is that by embracing this new form of disciplinary self-management to achieve organizational ends, workers have become participants in the corporate colonization of yet another aspect of the affective domain (Deetz,

1992)—in this case, of their souls. We discuss this further in the conclusion of the article.

LOCATING EMPOWERMENT IN SPIRITUAL IDEALS

As we have suggested earlier, the current discourse of workplace empowerment has a distinctly spiritual and idealized tone to it. For example, in an advertisement for a resource guide on spirituality in the workplace, author Martin Rutte (1998) wrote that the emergence of spirituality at work

> points to the desire that there be more to work than survival. . . . [A spiritual workplace] would mean that work would move from being merely a place to get enough money to survive to being a place of "livelihood," a place where we both survive and are fully alive. We are fully alive when our spirit fully expresses itself. What's more, that expression nourishes other peoples' spirit. We all flourish.

In a different advertisement for a workshop on servant leadership, Margaret Benefiel and Virginia Swain (1998) wrote,

> What would it mean for a leader to cultivate the inner life, to take time apart for reflection, to step off the treadmill, to have leadership arise out of a core of spiritual groundedness and compassion for oneself and the other?

Both of these advertisements suggest that work is a calling, a place in which to find greater spirit, energy, and purpose. From the Latin, *spiritus*, or breath, the original meaning of *spirit* was an "animating vapor infused by the breath, or as bestowed by a deity" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1966, p. 1405). Today, someone who is spiritual is said to be "of the spirit or the soul as distinguished from the body" (p. 1406). Although a spiritual person might also be religious, in a New Age context this is not necessarily the case; there is in *spirituality* a sense that the individual brings to the workplace vigor, vitality, and enthusiasm that are rooted in various spiritual beliefs and practices. Given the absence of any single set of guiding principles, beliefs, or values, the spiritual person in the modern, empowered workplace could as likely be a born-again Christian or Zen Buddhist as a follower of Covey's seven habits or a practitioner of the "power of positive thinking" (Peale, 1996).

There are several specific ways in which the discourse of empowerment is linked closely to spiritual ideals. First, individual and collective *visions* are essential to becoming empowered. According to Block (1987) in his book *The Empowered Manager*, a worker's personal vision is "an expression of optimism" that denotes their "greatness" (p. 113). Reluctance to adopt a vision of greatness, according to Block, is a "measure of [workers'] despair and a reluctance to take responsibility for [their] own lives" (p. 113). Covey's (1989) notion of vision, similar to Block's, emphasizes the importance of workers' taking responsibility for their lives—of using their self-awareness, imagination, conscience, and independent will to be proactive and break the "stimulus-response cycle" characteristic of reactivity and determinism. Proactive people have "character" and a "moral compass," according to Covey, by which they take

full responsibility for themselves and act (rather than react) on the basis of principles. They also avoid using language that absolves them of responsibility for their actions (p. 78). Similarly, an organizational vision helps to motivate workers in the absence of bureaucratic directives and narrow job descriptions; it enables workers "to act autonomously in their work rather than wait for permission and direction from top management" (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997, p. 45). In short, vision in the discourse of empowerment offers a sense of purpose and direction by aligning worker goals and objectives, rooted in individualized expressions of meaning and purpose, to the goals and objectives of the enterprise.

In an era of team-based organizing, doing *service* is another aspect of becoming empowered. Service means focusing on doing what is good for others—other team members, suppliers, and particularly, the customer. One of the earliest proponents of a leadership-as-service orientation was Robert Greenleaf (1977), who stated that a "great leader is seen as a servant first" (p. 7). According to Greenleaf, workers who strive to serve others become empowered because of the respect and trust that others provide them as a result. He stated,

> The only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. They (the led) will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants. (p. 10)

According to Senge (1996),

> Greenleaf invites people to consider a domain of leadership grounded in a state of being, not doing. He says that the first and most important choice a leader makes is the choice to serve, without which one's capacity to lead is profoundly limited. (p. 1)

Through service to others, workers and the workplace become empowered because relationships are transformed and a larger portion of the workforce is allowed to participate in "shaping the future" (p. 3).

Synergy, the quality in which the whole is more than the sum of its parts, is another strong theme in the discourse of empowerment. According to this ideal, through openness and connectivity to others in the relationships that workers nurture in service to the organization, goals can be reached more easily, conflicts can be reduced in number and intensity, and a shared vision can become manifest. Like orchestral performers whose modest, individual contributions together create a rich, symphonic sound, the empowered organization is synergistic, characterized by worker commitment, confidence, and collaboration forging a unique, synchronous whole (Wheatley, 1992). The concept of the synergistic organization mirrors Kanter's (1972) description of a typical utopian vision where workers' "deepest yearnings, noblest dreams, and highest aspirations come to fulfillment, where all physical, social and spiritual forces work together, in harmony, to permit the attainment of everything people find necessary and desirable" (p. 1).

The discourse of empowerment also emphasizes the importance of *learning* and *continuous improvement* of performance. Empowered workers learn about themselves

and others through feedback from both successes and failures in order that they can become more effective in future situations. They pay close attention to their most basic assumptions, especially those that govern their "theories-in-use" (Argyris & Schon, 1978) and acquire skills that enable them to be more closely aligned to their espoused theory, how ideally they would like to or should behave. From an empowerment perspective, learning is very much an exercise in soul searching, at striving to identify one's faults and improve both individually and collectively as a learning organization (Senge, 1990).

This approach to learning to achieve collective purposes is not unlike how members of the utopian Oneida community in the mid-1800s would try to purge themselves of sinful attitudes through the practice of mutual criticism. In this practice, members would decide that they were lacking in specific ways and would put themselves before a special committee to be chastised for faults ranging from "insincerity, egotism, obstinacy . . . [to] failing to open their hearts up to God" (Klaw, 1993, pp. 113-114). In the modern empowered organization, however, workers are in service not to God but to the economic interests of the firm, manifested in industrial ideals like workplace stability, employee satisfaction, organizational effectiveness, and most recently, organizational learning—characteristics rooted deeply in a human relations view of the workplace (O'Connor, 1999). From an empowerment perspective, workers strive to continuously learn and improve so that they can avoid becoming complacent or self-satisfied, qualities that are anathema to the "indefinite perfectibility of men and women" that is rooted deeply in American idealism (Kraushaar, 1980a, p. 17).

By emphasizing the importance of vision, service to others, synergism, and continuous learning, the discourse of workplace empowerment reflects much more than just the flattening of organizational structures or the shifting of resources to workers who interact most closely with the customer. It has made empowerment into a spiritual endeavor, one that presumably offers a pathway for workers to connect to a deeper meaning and greater vitality in their workplace activities, thereby helping their institutions prosper. In the sections below, we extend our inquiry to identify the roots of workplace empowerment in some specific American spiritual beliefs and practices.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF
WORKPLACE EMPOWERMENT

Locating Workplace Empowerment
in the Application of Christian Values

According to Tawney's (1926), *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, the "capitalist spirit" found in Puritanism "a tonic which braced its energies and fortified its already vigorous temper" (p. 226). Puritanism was an approach to God based on individualism, "moderation, sobriety and thrift . . . the very qualities most conducive to commercial success" (p. 245). In Puritan theology, an individual's relationship to God was "not only the center, but the whole circumference and substance [of his or her religion], dismissing as dross and vanity all else but this secret and solitary communion" (p. 227).

Indeed, at the heart of Puritan theology was the notion that commerce could be carried out "for the greater glory of God." It was the first duty for the individual to believe in God; the second duty was to "labor in the affairs of practical life" (p. 240). Labor was considered a "discipline imposed by the will of God . . . a spiritual end, for in it alone can the soul find health, and it must be continued as an ethical duty long after it has ceased to be a material necessity" (pp. 241-242). According to Tawney,

> So far from poverty being meritorious, it is a duty to choose a more profitable occupation. "If God shows you a way in which you may lawfully get more than in another way (without wrong to your soul or to any other), if you refuse this, and choose the less gainful way, you cross one of the ends of your Calling, and you refuse to be God's steward." (p. 243)

Likewise, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber (1958) made a strong case for the role of Puritanism in fostering self-discipline and "the impulse to accumulation with a positively frugal life-style" (Giddens, 1958, p. 4). Puritanism also embraced the notion of predestination, that is, that God chose only some individuals to be saved from damnation. One's economic success and personal prosperity was a sign that one had been chosen by God. But with that selection came responsibility and the need to avoid idle or self-indulgent behavior.

Some of the earliest and most famous examples of organizations built upon the idea that Christian values could be applied to achieve organizational and social prosperity were the New England textile mills of the early 1800s built by the Boston Associates. The most famous of these, in Lowell, Massachusetts, was built on the principle that "given the proper institutional environment, a factory town need not be a byword for vice and poverty, but might stand as a model of enlightened republican community in a restless and dynamic nation" (Kasson, 1976, p. 65). The founder of the mill, Francis Cabot Lowell, believed that, unlike his European counterparts, factories need not be degrading to workers but could actually be used to build character and a better society. His plan was to hire young women from the surrounding farms on a relatively short-term basis, thus eliminating the possibility that factory work would become a "mark of caste" (p. 70). The factory experience would enable these young women to support their nearby families and would also serve as a training ground for their future responsibilities "in a domestic capacity" (p. 70). Under strict supervision guided by high moral standards, these young women could be imbued with " 'habits of order, regularity, and industry' " (p. 70) and become "an intelligent, honorable, and exemplary republican work force" (p. 70) that would "stand not as a blight but as a beacon of republican prosperity and purity upon the American landscape" (p. 70).

According to Kasson (1976) and consistent with Puritanical notions, the plant operatives worked the women long and hard because they believed that "leisure meant mischief; idleness at best; at worst, vicious amusements, drink, gambling, and riot" (p. 75). In most of the mills, the women worked 6 days and 72 hours per week. From wakeup to curfew to bedtime, their schedule was tightly controlled. One set of regulations stipulated that employees "must devote themselves assiduously to their duty during working hours . . . and on all occasions, both in their words and in their actions, show they

are penetrated by a laudable love of temperance and virtue, and animated by a sense of their moral and social obligations" (p. 75). Any worker accused of "impropriety" or "profanity" could be discharged and blacklisted from working at any other factory in New England. The young women were also encouraged to report on one another for breach of character.

Despite this seemingly harsh environment, many young women saw Lowell as an opportunity to earn money, live in a community of like-minded women, and, for some, gain an education. Leaders from the United States and from abroad were attracted to its success and its sense of high moral purpose. As Kasson (1976) concludes, the message of Lowell for many Americans was that "an oasis of harmony and joy was attainable only through the maintenance of rigid moral standards and the fulfillment of hard work . . . which reconfirmed America's self image as a natural yet disciplined republic and a land of abundance and opportunity" (p. 86).

Indeed, well into the 1920s, many of these same associations between moral purpose, economic prosperity, and social good were still very strong in American culture and became the basis for a somewhat more evangelical approach to spirituality and business. For example, the most popular religious book of the 1920s was Barton's (1924) *The Man Nobody Knows*, in which Jesus was portrayed as the founder of modern business and was the prototypical American businessman. The book contained chapters titled "The Executive," "The Founder of Modern Business," "The Sociable Man," and "His Advertisements." According to Prothro (1954), in the 1920s the career of Jesus offered an undeniable moral for 20th-century Americans. "Great progress," said Barton (1924),

> will be made in the world when we rid ourselves of the idea that there is a difference between *work* and *religious work*. . . . All work is worship; all useful service prayer. And whoever works whole-heartedly at any worthy calling is a co-worker with the Almighty in the great enterprise which He has initiated but which He can never finish without the help of men. (pp. 179-180)

As Barton emphasized,

> He [Jesus] picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world. . . . Nowhere is there such a startling example of executive success as the way in which that organization was brought together. (pp. 112, 129)

In Barton's scenario, Jesus was the first and most profound example of the empowered worker, and if only more workers would follow his example, workers and institutions alike would profit. Similar intimations have been made in several recent books on Jesus, leadership, and the business enterprise (Jones, 1996; Mantz, 1998). They suggest that the empowered worker, the inspired and righteous worker, can bring energy, vitality, high moral purpose, and persuasive skill to the enterprise. Although in Puritanism only a few were predestined to succeed, this evangelical perspective suggested that workers who could emulate and propagate the honesty, integrity, and persuasive talents of Jesus could be more successful, have a better quality of work life, and ultimately benefit the enterprise.

More recently, at "quasi-religious corporations" (Bromley, 1998) such as Amway, Mary Kay Cosmetics, Herbalife, and Shaklee, an evangelical Christian religious ideology has been employed to form workers into a "tightly knit social network" that is "legitimated symbolically by appeals to transcendent purposes" (p. 350) and that serves as a "vehicle for reintegrating important spheres of life that have become disintegrated" (p. 359). The guiding, biblical narrative for employees at these companies offers them the opportunity to make a deep commitment to the products and services of the company as a means to repair their own, and society's, "fall from grace." According to Bromley,

> Amway and other quasi-religious corporations begin with the premise that there are ordering principles in the universe that naturally yield abundance and fulfillment for humanity. The important elements of life should be congruent with one another, and individuality and group life should be mutually sustaining. The root problem of modern existence is that this natural order has been disrupted, which individuals experience as disintegration and contradictory behavioral imperatives. The ideology thus interprets contemporary dis-ease as a fall from a natural state of "grace." The concurrent announcement of the discovery of Amway as a means of restoring wholeness to life creates the possibility of a "new beginning." . . . By heightening expectations for imminent salvation, the ideology creates an energy structuring symbolic system for directing and intensifying activity and for accepting a period of sacrifice that is a prelude to ultimate salvation." (pp. 359-360)

Even at companies not usually considered quasi-religious, the discourse of empowerment tries to offer a similar kind of transcendent ideology, one that its proponents believe can be instrumental in overcoming the inefficiencies of bureaucracy, restore an entrepreneurial spirit form, and foster greater individual and organizational energy and achievement.

Locating Workplace Empowerment in
Utopian Ideals and the Quest for Perfectibility

In addition to the influences of early and evangelical Christian ideals, the current discourse on workplace empowerment has a strongly utopian flavor to it, a reference to the many historical experiments in America in establishing ideal communal societies. According to Kanter (1972), the desire to found ideal societies has been a recurrent theme in American history and has occurred at three different stages for three different sets of reasons. The earliest societies, the Amish, Quakers, and Moravians, for example, drew their inspiration from Christianity and from the desire to escape persecution in Europe. A second wave of communities, based on political-economic concerns, arose in late 1800s and early 1900s and sought a more just and humane social and economic order (Kraushaar, 1980b, p. 6). These communities were inspired by "the intellectual and ethical ferment created by Rousseau's essays on the natural goodness of people and by the writings of anarchists, socialists, and syndicalists" (p. 6), including Fourier and Marx. The third wave, which extends to the present, was psychosocial in nature and developed in reaction to the alienation and depersonalization of modern society. As Kraushaar notes, "Contemporary communes undertake to start afresh by creating a new physical and social environment, one that attempts to eradicate the barriers to untrammeled human development and fosters a life of greater social intimacy

and individual fulfillment" (p. 6). We suggest that workplace empowerment as a discourse rooted in utopian ideals has elements of all three waves.

In her study of communes, Kanter (1972) identified a variety of social ideals that have formed the basis for American utopian movements. We have identified four of these ideals—perfectibility, new order, brotherhood and harmony, and radical experimentation—as being prominent in the discourse on workplace empowerment.

The first is the *perfectibility* of the human condition. From this perspective, people are fundamentally good; by creating the right social structures, be they economic, social, or political, a true natural order—free from inequity, tyranny, or disharmony—can be created. The notion of perfectibility places a strong emphasis on education and self-improvement as a means to a perfect society. Fundamentally, utopian communities have been places to learn and improve, ideals manifested in workplace empowerment discourse by the importance placed on people, service to others, and continuous learning.

The *new order* that is emphasized in utopian thinking is often viewed in "contradistinction to the larger society, which is seen as chaotic, uncoordinated and allowing accidentally, random, or purposeless events to give rise to conflict, waste, or needless duplication" (Kanter, 1972, p. 39). In theory, a utopian community offers an order that is more closely aligned with community ideals, be they selflessness or cosmic consciousness, and that enables members and institutions as a whole to realize their goals. Sometimes, this new order manifests itself as prescriptions for everyday interactions and routines as, for example, the Shakers' prescribing daily routines in "minute to minute detail" (p. 41). In many empowered organizations today, the almost divine-like attributes made for the prescriptions of, for example, TQM, reengineering, visioning, and customer service have a similar idealized quality of new order to them. In the discourse of workplace empowerment, proponents talk about the empowered workforce helping the organization to gain a market niche and competitive advantage in an uncertain, customer-driven, global marketplace.

Brotherhood and *harmony* among members of a new order is another utopian ideal. As Kanter (1972) notes, "In order to bring about such harmony, utopians believe it is necessary to remove the 'artificial' barriers between people that cause competition, jealousy, conflict, and tension, and prevent 'natural' relationships" (p. 43). The promise of a natural, more harmonious order that eliminates barriers between participants and groups is very much alive in current notions of workplace empowerment. According to Jaworski (1996), it is only through being rather than doing, and openness and surrender—rather than competition and effort—that a new, more harmonious (and presumably more prosperous) organizational order can emerge. When participants are able to attune themselves to the possibilities for harmony, they become attracted to one another and the organizational system as a whole functions more naturally around a common purpose; it becomes more synchronous. Jaworski uses the metaphor of water and gravity to explain how this harmonious order naturally evolves:

> Even though no one knows exactly how gravity works, we can observe the result: water flows downhill. We don't argue about the result because it is observable. That's the way synchronicity seems to operate in this field of deep commitment. (p. 14)

Indeed, the popularity of the discourse of the "boundaryless organization" (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 1995) first discussed in reference to General Electric's "workout" sessions in the early 1990s was based on a similar theme: effectiveness and profitability increase when organizations design structures and processes that minimize differences across organizational, professional, and racial boundaries. From a utopian perspective, empowerment fostered by and concomitant with a reduction in interpersonal and organizational barriers enables an organization to become more internally congruent and potentially more responsive to a turbulent environment.

Finally, a willingness to engage in *radical experimentation* is a key element of utopian thinking. As Kanter (1972) notes, "Since the utopian style of life involves a radical departure from the conditions and assumptions about life prevailing on the outside, the utopian community feels free to vary any aspect of life it might choose" (p. 51). Experiments in utopian communities have ranged from new forms of dress, work roles, and eating habits to communal sexual behavior. In the Oneida community of upstate New York, for example, members believed that "it was a duty to God to get all the pleasure they could from the world in which God had placed them" (Klaw, 1993, p. 92). Workers were strongly encouraged to break monotonous or hard work into periods of games and recreation. In the practice of complex marriage, men and women were encouraged to have multiple partners, provided that they did not sleep together after having sexual intercourse: "Over-familiarity dulls the edge of sexual passion," said their founder, John Noyes (Klaw, 1993, p. 180). Partners were expected to "subordinate the love of pleasure to God" (p. 181).

Today, workplace empowerment programs are often portrayed as exercises in radical experimentation. While empowerment programs do introduce processes that are different from business as usual—by, for example, offering workers more direct customer contact, more control over decision making, and more access to information—the degree of experimentation is actually quite modest when compared to the far-reaching practices that utopian communities have often pursued. We suggest that, compared to other experiments with utopian origins, workplace empowerment programs actually differ very little from even traditional bureaucratic designs, yet the language of empowerment implies otherwise. What matters most to us is the appeal of empowerment at the level of discourse and emotion and its reference to utopian notions of continuous learning and personal growth as a means to achieving prosperity.

THE RESURRECTION OF SPIRITUALITY
IN THE NEW AGE WORKPLACE

We are suggesting in this article that New Age thinking in the 1980s and 1990s helped to create a context in which the resurrection of spiritual idealism in the form of empowerment discourse became possible. With concepts like attunement to self and others, synchronicity, and holographic design, empowerment discourse appeals to Americans' desires to not only have control over their lives but also to identify themselves with something more perfect, prosperous, and good. In an article about New

Age spiritual practices, titled "God With a Million Faces: The New Mix-and-Match Approach to Faith May Be the Truest Quest," Creedon (1998) discussed the rise, during the 1990s, in American culture of "private belief systems, each tailored to fit the believer's individual needs." As theologian George Barna suggests,

> America is transitioning from a Christian nation to a syncretistic, spiritually diverse society. . . . [There is a] new perception of religion: a personalized, customized form of faith views which meet personal needs, minimize rules and absolutes, and bear little resemblance to the "pure" form of any of the world's major religions. (cited in Creedon, 1998, p. 3)

Barna notes further that this so-called pastiche spirituality can be characterized by "faith as a private matter, religious principles from a variety of sources, no centralized religious authority, deity intermingled with self, and more focus on religious consciousness than religious practice" (cited in Creedon, 1998, p. 4).

This view of spirituality is consistent with the emphasis in New Age thinking on the "all-pervasive nature of consciousness as a primary force in the universe and the ability of human beings to tap into this consciousness" (Brown, 1992, p. 87). Given the number of primarily baby boomers who have adopted New Age approaches to spirituality and the increasing importance of work, especially among this generation (Hochschild, 1997), it is not surprising that the workplace has become an important venue in which to express one's spirituality within a framework of empowerment and personal growth. Many workers spend more time and emotional energy in the workplace than at any other place or in any other segment of their lives. For many as well, the workplace has become a substitute for family and friends as a source of emotional connectivity and meaning. Given that New Age spirituality has become a matter of consciousness over practice, of being over doing (Brown, 1992), it is not surprising that everyday living and experiences at work have replaced the church or temple as the place where workers find spiritual meaning. As Kabat-Zinn (1995) titled his book on meditation and spirituality, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, so in the modern empowered workplace, where you go is often likely to be work.

We are suggesting that a New Age context has enabled a less dogmatic yet more commodified form of spiritual idealism to emerge. From a New Age perspective, the empowered workplace has helped to transform spirituality as a personal endeavor into a business practice, where raising worker consciousness forms the basis for trying to improve the quality of work life for employees, give greater attention to customers, and improve social conditions for all. We read of New Age companies like the Body Shop, where CEO Anita Roddick was known to travel the world in search of beauty products that would do no harm to the environment or require animal testing during the manufacturing process. Or from their recent book *Ben and Jerry's Double-Dip Capitalism: Lead With Your Values and Make Money Too*, we learn of Ben and Jerry's belief in using the business as a vehicle for community service, committing 7.5% of annual pretax profits to programs and causes such as free movie festivals, voter registration drives, hiring the homeless, and giving to community causes in lieu of advertising,

among others (Cohen & Greenfield, 1997). These companies and others like them have consciously decided to do good in part because, like the Lowell mill experiment, they believe it is the right thing to do and they can make money in the end. In fact, spiritual idealism is very much a part of how they market themselves and their products. As with Sinetar's (1986) book, *Do What You Love, the Money Will Follow*, in New Age thinking, notions of work, consciousness, and prosperity have become almost inseparable. Empowered workers in these organizations find spiritual meaning and significance in their work, use spiritual ideals as a basis for explaining their practices, and like the evangelical Christians of the 1920s, fully anticipate that they and their organizations will prosper and profit accordingly.

EMPOWERMENT DISCOURSE:
A NARRATIVE FOR NEW AGE DISCIPLINE

We are suggesting in this article that empowerment as a normative discourse has a strong spiritual idealism that can be located historically in Christian and utopian thinking. The Puritanical facet of this relationship equates individual prosperity with hard work and right living. The Lowell experiment demonstrated to many that these ideas, which had previously been centered on an individual's personal relationship to God, could be applied to the work system as well; through hard work and right living in a manufacturing context, everyone—even society as a whole—could benefit and prosper. From a Christian evangelical perspective, Barton (and others more recently) suggested that Jesus himself was the perfect role model for the businessman of the 1920s because of his capacity for selling ideas, organizing others, and behaving properly. Similarly, in many modern quasi-religious corporations, owners and workers believe that making work a spiritual endeavor can help to restore wholeness and virtue to a fragmented workforce and society. Utopian experiments like the Oneida community and even the Lowell mills suggested that communities could prosper and be made more perfect if participants did not stray from the disciplinary policies and practices created for them. Institutional founders and leaders served as role models and enforcers of disciplinary practices.

Within a New Age context, empowerment has become a way to express one's higher self, guided by an eclectic blend of religious beliefs and practices and with an emphasis on consciousness and self-awareness. In a less dogmatic way than earlier prescriptions, the discourse of empowerment has encouraged workers to be more autonomous and to take on greater responsibility while simultaneously appealing to the spirit of perfectibility, new order, prosperity, and experimentation inherent in earlier Christian and utopian ideals. Like earlier experiments in applying spiritual ideals to workplace programs such as the Lowell mills, empowerment too requires discipline, but of a kind that emanates from within and is marked by an emphasis on self-monitoring, self-awareness, and ultimately self-management in doing the organization's work. Where the self-discipline of an earlier era was based on conformity to the moral code of the Puritan ethic, self-management is based on conformity to an

entrepreneurial ethic in service to organizational goals. The self-managed worker is internally motivated and knows how to use positive self-talk to stay upbeat, to turn obstacles into opportunities, and to use imagery to rehearse desired outcomes—he or she can even become a "Superleader," teaching others to lead themselves (Sims & Lorenzi, 1992). Likewise, through the manipulation of cultural artifacts such as slogans and reward systems, organizations can reinforce worker self-management and help to align worker mind-sets to institutional goals.

In this context, the discourse of empowerment provides an ideal disciplinary structure for a New Age workforce. It appeals to the desire for unlimited autonomy and handsome rewards and offers a sense of community and place in a workplace increasingly fragmented by continuous downsizing, redesign, reengineering, and the impact of the information technology revolution. Through appeals to such heady ideas as continuous learning, visioning, and synchronicity, empowerment suggests a kind of Promised Land to which workers can commit their energies and passions. It has also become a commodity that managers and consultants can buy and sell to improve productivity (though often framed as an effort to improve workplace energy and purpose). To many American men and women in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s who have grown up believing in work not just as a job but as a calling, empowerment discourse enables them to locate their work in something important and ideal and to engage in a process of self-management that is consistent with New Age beliefs and that meets institutional objectives.

SPIRITUALITY AS IDEOLOGY

In conclusion, we submit that the utopian flavor of much of the empowerment rhetoric might well reflect a deep yearning to ameliorate the alienation, disillusionment, and isolation that many workers and managers feel in the modern workplace. Historically, utopian thinking has arisen as a way to respond to and correct these social ills. As Clegg and Hardy (1996) have suggested as well, an empowered workforce could be committed to social justice, to "how the wealth created through empowerment should be distributed . . . [to] how empowerment affects lower level managers who stand to lose power; [or to] how employees can be protected from the use of empowerment as an excuse for layoffs" (p. 684). On a more skeptical note, however, empowerment programs could also be part of a neo-Fordist system of covert control (e.g., Barker, 1993; Prechel, 1994), in which workers work harder under the misguided belief that they are doing it for themselves—for their own personal growth or for the betterment of society.

Just as some have doubted the altruistic motives that underlay Lowell's system in the 19th-century New England mills, so there are questions whether modern empowerment programs serve as anything more than efforts to reduce costs and cycle time under the guise and emotional appeal of New Age rhetoric and utopian ideology. If workers can be made to believe that added autonomy and responsibility are part of something enlightened and good, perhaps they can be made to ignore the impact of greatly

increased working hours and stress on their health and personal lives. Like Lowell of the 1820s and evangelical Christianity of the 1920s, workplace empowerment programs may simply be the most recent means through which American commitments to and blessings from the promise of prosperity, abundance, and perfectibility—what many Americans have called their rightful heritage—are brokered and achieved. That said, perhaps it is time to unpack the ideological aspects of the discourse of empowerment in terms of their real human costs. Pursuing the opportunities created by workplace empowerment programs may not only be detrimental to one's health and spirit; it may also be far more earthly and materialistic than many imagine.

REFERENCES

Ancona, D., Kochan, T., Scully, M., Van Maanen, J., & Westney, F. (1999). *Organizational behavior and processes*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Publishing.

Appelbaum, E., & Batt, R. (1994). *The new American workplace: Transforming work systems in the United States*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.

Argyris, C., & Schon, D. (1978). *Organizational learning: Theory of action perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Ashkenas, R. N, Ulrich, D., Jick, T., & Kerr, S. (1995). *The boundarylesss organization: Breaking the chains of organizational structure*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Barker, J. R. (1993). Tightening the iron cage: Concertive control in self-managing work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *38*, 408-437.

Barton, B. (1924). *The man nobody knows*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.

Benefiel, M., & Swain, V. M. (1998). From an advertisement for a workshop titled "Servant Leadership: Spiritually Grounded Presence in Organizations."

Block, P. (1987). *The empowered manager: Positive political skills at work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bohlman, L., & Deal, T. (1995). *Leading with soul*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Briskin, A. (1998). *Stirring the soul in the workplace*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Bromley, D. G. (1998). Transformative movements and quasi-religious corporations. In N. J. Demerath, P. D. Hall, T. Schmitt, & R. H. Williams (Eds.), *Sacred companies: Organizational aspects of religion and religious aspects of organizations* (pp. 349-363). New York: Oxford University Press.

Brown, S. L. (1992). Baby boomers, American character, and the new age: A synthesis. In J. R. Lewis & J. G. Melton (Eds.), *Perspectives on the new age* (pp. 87-96). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Clegg, S. R., & Hardy, C. (1996). Conclusion: Representations. In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of organization studies* (pp. 676-708). London: Sage.

Cohen, B., & Greenfield, J. (1997). *Ben and Jerry's double-dip capitalism: Lead with your values and make money too*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Conger, J. (1994). *Spirit at work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly effective people: Powerful lessons in personal change*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Creedon, J. (1998). God with a million faces: The new mix-and-match approach to faith may be the truest quest. *Utne Reader Online*. Available: www.utne.com/lens98/spirit/designergod.html (accessed September 4, 1998).

Deetz, S. (1992). *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life*. Albany: State university of New York Press.

Giddens, A. (1958). Introduction. In *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (pp. 1-12). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership*. New York: Paulist Press.

The heavenly spirit arrives in corporate America, guided by consultants. (1998, August 13). *Wall Street Journal*, p. A1.

Heckscher, C. (1994). Defining the post-bureaucratic type. In C. Heckscher & A. Donnellon (Eds.), *The post-bureaucratic organization: New perspectives on organizational change* (pp. 14-62). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Heermann, B. (1997). *Building team spirit: Activities for inspiring and energizing teams*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Heller, T. (1985). Changing authority patterns: A cultural perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, *10*(3), 488-496.

Hochschild, A. (1997). *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Jaworski, J. (1996). *Sychronicity: The inner path of leadership*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Jones, L. B. (1996). *Jesus, CEO: Using ancient wisdom for visionary leadership*. New York: Hyperion.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1995). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion.

Kanter, R. M. (1972). *Commitment and community: Communes and utopias in sociological perspective*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kasson, J. F. (1976). *Civilizing the machine: Technology and republican values in America, 1776-1900*. New York: Penguin.

Klaw, S. (1993). *Without sin: The life and death of the Oneida community*. New York: Penguin.

Kraushaar, O. (1980a). America: Symbol of a fresh start. In G. Moment & O. Kraushaar (Eds.), *Utopias: The American experience* (pp. 11-29). Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.

Kraushaar, O. (1980b). Introduction. In G. Moment & O. Kraushaar (Eds.), *Utopias: The American experience* (pp. 1-10). Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.

Mantz, C. (1998). *The leadership wisdom of Jesus: Practical lessons for today*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Marcic, D. (1997). *Managing with the wisdom of love*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

O'Connor, E. (1999). The politics of management thought: A case study of the Harvard Business School and the human relations school. *Academy of Management Review*, *24*(1), 117-131.

Peale, N. V. (1996). *The power of positive thinking*. New York: Ballantine.

Prechel, H. (1994). Economic crisis and the centralization of control. *American Sociological Review*, *59*, 723-745.

Prothro, J. W. (1954). *The dollar decade: Business ideas in the 1920's*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Putnam, L. L., Phillips, N., & Chapman, P. (1996). Metaphors of communication and organization. In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of organization studies* (pp. 375-408). London: Sage.

Quinn, R. E., & Spreitzer, G. M. (1997, Autumn). The road to empowerment: Seven questions every leader should consider. *Organizational Dynamics*, pp. 37-49.

Rosenfeld, E. (1998). Is an inner path of leadership taking root in American companies? *High Tor Forum*, *1*(3), 1, 4.

Rutte, M. (1998). The case for spirituality in the workplace. In an advertisement for *Work and spirituality: A comprehensive directory of resources to help managers improve performance by addressing workers' spiritual concerns*, Richmond, CA.

Senge, P. (1990). The leader's new work: Building learning organizations. *Sloan Management Review*, *32*(1), 7-48.

Senge, P. (1996). Introduction. *Sychronicity: The inner path of leadership* (pp. 1-14). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Shipper, F., & Manz, C. C. (1999). W. L. Gore & Associates, Inc. 1998. In A. A. Thompson, Jr., & A. J. Strickland III (Eds.), *Strategic management: Concepts and cases* (11th ed., pp. C491-C513). Boston: Irwin McGraw-Hill.

Sims, H. P., & Lorenzi, P. (1992). *The new leadership paradigm: Social learning and cognition in organizations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Sinetar, M. (1986). *Do what you love, the money will follow: Discovering your right livelihood*. New York: Paulist Press.

Tawney, R. H. (1926). *Religion and the rise of capitalism: A historical study*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith.

Weber, M. (1958). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Webster's New World Dictionary, College Edition. (1966). New York: World Publishing.

Wheatley, M. (1992). *Leadership and the new science: Learning about organization from an orderly universe*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.