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## Poetry and the Soul in the Workplace?

An interview with David Whyte  
By Maria Seddio

For Hamlet

Having a conversation with David Whyte is like sipping milk and honey while watching lightning-bolts emblazon the sky. You know that thunder will soon follow and a storm is underway, but you are engaged in the stillness of the moment, the presence and hesitation of the light as it suddenly, somewhat expectantly, waits to speak its peace.

You wonder perhaps if nature is conspiring to tell you something. Be forewarned -- his fine-tuned sensibility to language and the reassuring cadence of his voice can lull you into an exploration of the often-invisible beliefs, myths and imageries that have guided your life choices. Because when David speaks, he has the audacity to get right to the heart of the issue – bypassing superficial pleasantries, he is prone to ask what we are doing about our most deeply held hopes and imaginings, how we are taking care of our soul. To make matters worse, he asks these questions in the workplace – an environment that challenges many of us to guard and hide those aspects of ourselves that are most precious and vulnerable.

It is in the workplace, after all, where questions of competency, self worth and belonging can change at a moment's notice and are often linked to a paycheck or a promotion or the chance to work on something that interests us or is valued by the business. It is in the workplace where success and failure get played out in the public arena and where people sometimes lose their way in a history of disappointment and frustration. It doesn't have to be that way, of course, but it often is, and David Whyte is here to remind us that we are responsible for who we are and how we live our lives and for creating the organizations in which we work. He is here to remind us to pay attention to our "spirituality," or that which he believes we should value most – our sense of connectedness or belonging – *our soul*.

Whyte, author of various volumes of poetry and prose, including the best-selling, [The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America](#), recites his poems to workers in corporations such as AT&T, Boeing and Kodak. He is recognized worldwide for his contributions to the spirituality movement that is influencing organizational development in companies large and small. When presenting his poetry and the poems of others, he often repeats key phrases in a quiet, deliberate, almost insistent invitation to his audience.

Pay attention to your inner voices, don't check your soul at the door -- he gently implores them -- have the courage to bring who you are --your whole self -- into the workplace.

Recently, I had the privilege of speaking with David and I took the opportunity to ask him some questions for our Hamlet readers. I began with a question about 675.

**Maria Seddio:** In Italy, there is a law that restricts the ways in which companies can manage information on employees. There are well-defined criteria that determine what a company can and cannot do; how they can or cannot use information. Do you think that this reflects a fundamental defect in the way in which current relationships between employees and corporations are formed?

**David Whyte:** Yes certainly, it is diagnostic of a sense of alienation, a breach between employer and employee – it indicates to me a lack of conversations of belonging. No real conversation is taking place. People feel powerless so they begin to look into controlling other people's lives. This happens when no other conversation is occurring. A law is created in response to the feeling that someone is looking over your shoulders. It is deadly to a sense of community... to a sense of productivity. Passion and courage cannot be legislated – there is no lever you can pull to turn them on and off. This need for legislative parameters is indicative of a child/parent relationship writ large. Instead, there is a need for adult/adult relationships, a need to have real, invitational conversations. The best organizations allow for and encourage real human face-to face contact. All good work comes through conversation.

**MS:** How is it different in the US...if it is different in the US?

**DW:** Oh, I think it is different in the States in a fairly significant way. In Italy, there is far less mobility for workers, it is harder for them to speak up. Here in the States, it is expected that you will change jobs --- there is no stigma attached to leaving.

**MS:** I wonder, though, do organizations have a right to our imagination and our sense of spirituality or do they have to earn it?

**DW:** You do not have to bare any aspects of your soul to other. This is a conversation of very high stakes, where there are no parameters. There is a social realism at work here that needs to be interpreted poetically. It's important to create conversations that are open to people's best powers, that introduce widened interpretations and include no language that closes off. You know, we make our work and our work starts to make us. Poetry grants language to an experience, it is the language of grand identity.

**MS:** So then, what can organizations do?

**DW:** We are turning the corner here – thirteen years ago when I first began to focus on organizational work there was still this ongoing argument – can you trust people to do good work? We've made tremendous progress , I don't think many organizations would argue that point any longer. Where do we go from here? What works? More and more, I am looking at the conversations that form our experience at work .Any conversation that brings employees, and leadership as well, into the center of what they are doing. We need to create language that is commensurate with the territory we are entering, and that is the territory of human relationship. As co-workers, as customers. We are talking about human relationships of unknown future – and that premise lies in poetry. It is a contemplative tradition. So, once you have enlarged the language, bring that to bear. What is the conversation that we are not having? We know intuitively that we have to look outside a particular stream of language that has flowed through

organizations, that we should avoid language that closes off. And we should learn to honor the courage that emerges from the language when we enlarge the linguistic field.

**MS:** Beyond access to private information about an employee, there is this huge information glut that workers are being asked to manage. Technology has brought incredible benefits but it has also invaded every aspect of our work lives -- employees are inundated with e-mail, voice mail and electronic paging devices. In some companies, employees are spending more time managing the management of information than the actual information itself. There's no down time, no breather, no way to pull it all together and make relevant applications. It can be very difficult to end or, at the very least, interrupt this kind of cycle. Any suggestions?

**DW:** I have to refer back to what I wrote in Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul – there, I wrote about the “via negativa” – our need to say no to everything that is not a real yes. We are besieged and there is an art to managing it all. Where are you in this deluge of information? We have got to make it a conversation, take privileged time and step back. Space creates an island of sanity, so how do you make a place for yourself? You, as end point for this vast delivery system. You know, part of the marriage pact is to protect each other's solitude – our sense of privacy and our right to privacy. We need an equivalent pact in the workplace.

**MS:** So then, a few words for business leaders?

**DW:** There is a phenomenology at work here. When you invite creativity – you open up the conversation that causes trouble – the conversation of the system's demise. Of course a new system emerges and it is more life-like and relevant – it is more dynamic after. We all make Houses of Belonging and then we leave them and become nomads until we find new Houses of Belonging. But in order to do that we need to recognize ourselves and cultivate compassion – and we do that esoterically through self-forgiveness. This is the task for business leaders.

**MS:** What about employees, what can they do?

**DW:** This isn't only about the workplace, we are talking here about our own growth, our pilgrim path. This connects to our legacy of work – our families and the honorable part of our individual dignity. It's important that you don't lose yourself in the workplace, that somehow you are able to safeguard the intimate, poetic life of the individual. You need to keep a part of you that doesn't give a damn – that part that has humor as well as the courage to take steps out of familiar territory. You can introduce these conversations in the workplace and invite others into them. Create conversations and then let others enter in their own way. Always, you are creating a conversation of equals and this gives one more power, simply because it is different. There is a fine line, these conversations cannot be forced – you need a sense of humor – create conversations and then let others enter in their own way.

**MS:** Italy has a rather fine poetic tradition, I imagine that there might be a poet or two hiding in some office or other – any suggestions as to how they might introduce their work into their organizations?

**DW:** They should speak out courageously – begin to become verbally visible. I would encourage them to go slowly at first, maybe start with a line or two and let their words begin to cut a path, create a conversation.

We chat for a moment or two about David’s latest work and upcoming engagements – he tells me about a conference at the University of Massachusetts on “Taking Spirituality Public in the Workplace,” and his involvement in the State of the World Conference -- a new book that he is working on – Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity. Whyte was not born a corporate poet-- he has a degree in marine biology and, in earlier career expressions, has worked as a naturalist guide in the Galapagos Islands and has led anthropological and natural history expeditions in Peru, Bolivia and Chile. I am reminded that while he grew up in England, he was influenced, perhaps even formed, in his Irish heritage.

We are just about to close our conversation when he becomes silent.

--“All ancient cultures , native cultures – I am thinking here also of the west of Ireland -- place tremendous emphasis on personal privacy. They have an intuitive understanding of the importance of privacy. We must safeguard the intimate life of the individual where creativity and imagination are found. As a poet, I can say to you that this is the essence of poetry.”--

Milk and honey in a thunderstorm. This gentle revolutionary brings his impeccable language and messages of belonging into organizations everywhere. They are messages of generosity and courage, they connect us to that which is most nourishing within us-- the milk and honey of our own conversations and the thunder of the storms that rage within and around us. They are the poems that dwell in our hearts and and the words that speak to our soul.

#### Loaves and Fishes

**This is not  
the age of information.**

**Questo non è  
l'età dell' infomazione**

**This is *not*  
The age of information.**

**Questo *non* è  
l'età dell' informazione**

**Forget the news,  
And the radio,  
And the blurred screen.**

**Scordate il telegiornale  
e la radio,  
E lo schermo annebbiato**

**This is the time  
Of loaves  
and fishes.**

**questo è il tempo  
Di pani  
e di pesci**

**People are hungry,  
And one good word is bread  
For a thousand.**

**la gente è affamata  
E una parola buona è cibo  
per mille**

**1995 David Whyte  
Many Rivers Press**

Opere di David Whyte:

- Songs For Coming Home -
- Where Many Rivers Meet -
- Fire In the Earth -
- The House of Belonging -
- Poem Cards: Series I
- Poem Cards: Series II
- The Heart Aroused

*Per un ampia bibliografia in inglese vedi il sito ufficiale dedicato a D. Whyte..*

*In italiano:*

- *Il risveglio del cuore in azienda.*

*Guerini e Associati 1997*

*Hamlet n°13 Marzo 1999 "Al confine tra ordine e caos" di Cristina Galgano e D. White.*

*Sul Web*

- <http://www.davidwhyte.com/>
- [http://www.moment-ministries.peak.org/book\\_reviews/Heart\\_Aroused.htm](http://www.moment-ministries.peak.org/book_reviews/Heart_Aroused.htm)
- <http://mgeneral.com/3-now/98-now/010198dw.htm>

*\*Traduzione di Paolo Pianigiani*