

Favorite Reads...

by Jack H. Bender

Artful Work, Dick Richards

Leading Systems, Barry Oshry

Teacher's Workplace, Susan Rosenholtz

The Human Side of School Change, Robert Evans

Let Your Life Speak, Parker J. Palmer

Title: *Artful Work. Awakening Joy, Meaning, and Commitment in the Workplace*

Author: Dick Richards

Publisher: Berkley Publishing Group, New York, NY

ISBN: 0-425-15914-0

Copyright: 1995

Pages: 128

Books that I consider “beautiful” invariably have beautiful ideas. *Artful Work* is one such book. If we took Richards’ thoughts to heart, we would redefine work. Work worth doing was something a master craftsman did long ago. The movement to mass production of goods put artisans at a disadvantage, so much so as to force them to find “jobs.” Work became something necessary for survival and the rewards for working proved to be unrelated to the work.

One of the more powerful concepts presented in *Artful Work* is sculptor Henry Moore’s answer to, “What’s the secret of life?” “The secret of life is to have a task, something you do your entire life, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is—it must be something you cannot possibly do!”

Part of what holds us back from creating great workplaces is that we may change a great deal, but rarely the bedrock of the workplace—our beliefs about what work is. Without awareness and an examination of our constricting beliefs, we will continue to experience frustration in creating better workplaces. One fundamental failure of ours is the unwillingness to match employees with the work that gives them joy.

Many leaders are so concerned with controlling workers, that they elaborately encourage the need for approval. The thinly veiled belief that management hides or denies (and workers fail to notice) is the gross lack of trust in the human spirit—without strong direction, people will be destructive.

“The artist’s perspective on work is:

- All work can be artful
- The reward for artful work is in the doing
- The ambition of artful work is joy
- All work is spiritual work

- Artful work demands that the artist owns the work process
- Artful work requires consistent and conscious use of the self
- As the artist creates the work, the work creates the artist.”

“Management involves allocating organizational energy: managers historically have decided who works on what tasks. Leadership, on the other hand, involves raising the level of available energy.”

The above only exposes the tip of the iceberg. Any reader of *Artful Work* will be rewarded.

Title: *Leading Systems: Lessons from the Power Lab*

Author: Barry Oshry

Publisher: Berrett-Koehler

ISBN: 978-1576750728

Copyright: 1999

Pages: 202

I was introduced to Barry Oshry's work when I bought *Seeing Systems*. I can't recommend *Seeing Systems* too highly.

Reading *Leading Systems* second was appropriate as it detailed what participants experience in one of Oshry's workshops (a simulation not described in detail in *Seeing Systems*). Often the book reads like a novel as Oshry describes the behaviors of key players or the behaviors of one of the groups as they struggle with issues in the community setting of the workshop.

Oshry shares how he was thinking when he had a chance to be a participant in his own workshop and in settings in which he was personally involved. He believes a leader can do much to influence outcomes and he creatively struggles to find ways to perturb the situation toward a better life for all in the setting. This is best done with a knowledge of systems.

Near the end of the book, Oshry shares an experience of being shafted by an organization and his response to it. Most of us, being members of organizations, can relate. I read an excerpt of this incident to a group of downtrodden teachers and I heard a number of them catch their breath at the power of his thoughts and words.

His creative, yet peaceful and constructive response was an example of how we can be with each other and, for me, was worth the price of the book. If we can "see" systems, we can understand behaviors of others and ourselves and be influential in the co-creation of something better for all.

Title: *Teacher's Workplace: The Social Organization of Schools*
Author: Susan Rosenholtz
Publisher: Longman
ISBN: 0-8013-0115-7
Copyright: 1989 (1991 for paperback)
Pages: 238

Research with heart. Rosenholtz shares quality research on what makes elementary schools effective. (I believe that the work can be used for other levels.) In a very readable style, Rosenholtz describes what separates ineffective and effective schools. It is the definition of teaching that is crucial, followed by what a staff does because of that definition. In a nutshell, the level of collegiality among teachers is vital to a school's success. The book balances research with explanation that has a lovely tone of caring and sincerity. I believe it to be an important, relevant book.

Title: *The Human Side of School Change: Reform, Resistance, and the Real-Life Problems of Innovation*
Author: Robert Evans
Publisher: Jossey-Bass
ISBN: 0-7879-5611-2
Copyright: 1996
Pages: 317

This well-organized book gets more to the heart of the matter than most books on organizational change. The heart of the matter is looking at change from the intimate perspective of the human being, not from the esoteric constructs of a change theory. Too often we have ignored the human dimensions of change-- the need for meaning and the inevitable (normal) resistance associated with change. While its context stays within the school system throughout, I can't imagine why those in business would not benefit from reading *The Human Side*...

Evans encourages hope over experience when considering organizational change. Almost all of us know why. We have underestimated the amount of training required for a leader to craft a process that creates meaning and commitment among participants in a manner remote from exhortation and pressure. We have underestimated how "extensive and complex" reforms are. We have often sought first order change, improvement of the status quo, when second order change is needed-- changes in "assumptions, goals, structures, roles and norms." Change must reach deep inside to the place where fundamental practices and beliefs reside. Change will take place to the extent that practices and beliefs change. Evans points out that the "fierce paradox" involved requires the target of change (teachers) to be the change agents.

The first third of the book asks us to understand the immensity of the task before us. This is an important step. Having fully grasped that reality, we are much more likely to summon the attitudes, training, commitment and resources needed.

There are other paradoxes that Evans identifies. Thinking about meaning should lead us to consider culture, but it is culture that supports continuity, that which is to be disturbed. A change initiative has top-down beginnings, but it must also be bottom up.

Two of my favorite subjects appear in the book-- authenticity and followership. Authenticity is hard to come by because of the coercive nature of school leadership. It is hard to be your honest self when there are pressures for you to be someone else. And followership? How many books have been written on followership compared to leadership?

Chapter Six is titled "Staff: Understanding Reluctant Faculty." I would like to have seen another paradox appear in the book, an added chapter titled "Leaders: Understanding the Reluctant Leader." If faculty are to experience loss, uncertainty, confusion and conflict, so too will leaders. It has been my experience that, as gatekeepers and humans that will be subjected to the above experiences, leaders have been more reluctant to change than a subset of the faculty. While I think this book works hard at being practical, it would have been helpful to be given more tools with which to work.

I consider this a significant book. It is approachable, practical and addresses what change practitioners have often ignored.

Title: *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

Author: Parker J. Palmer

Publisher: Jossey-Bass

ISBN: 0-7879-4735-0

Copyright: 2000

Pages: 117

Books make great gifts. This is the one I give most often. I love Palmer's writing style and his message. As with his other books, *Let Your Life Speak* is well-organized and the concepts well developed.

In this era, in this culture, there are countless forces that urge us to ask the wrong question— What should I do with my life? That question and related ones are evidence of the distorting, external pressures (oughts) that surround us. A more organic approach is, in Palmer's words, "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you."

"Vocation," or calling, is a birthright gift to be received, not a goal to be achieved. Enabling its receipt requires that we listen to the voice inside each of us. True identity results from listening well, with effective service the extension of that knowledge.

The search for true self must not end with one's gifts. The journey into darkness, one's shadow, must be undertaken to complete the quest for authentic self. Those that befriend what they discover become whole and are least likely to project onto others. Finding one's vocation benefits everyone.

Palmer rightfully connects authenticity with social movements. Having found and united with other authentic individuals, those in a movement "refuse to sit at the back of the bus." The perturbed system yields to the logic of the movement, with many benefiting from the shift. The individual path toward true self not only rewards the pilgrim, its positive effects radiate in every-widening circles to even influence nation states.

I highly recommend this wisdom-filled book.

We will be offering favorite reads to consider, among them: Leadership and the New Science by Wheatley, The Guru Guide by Boyett and Boyett, The Living Company by De Geus, Diffusion of Innovations by Rogers, The Abilene Paradox by Harvey, The Power of Spirit by Owen, Overcoming Organizational Defenses by Argyris, Seeing Systems by Oshry, Future Edge by Barker, Stewardship by Block and a host of others.

*** Please check back later for more ***