

Business Secrets of the Trappist Monks: One CEO's Quest for Meaning and Authenticity

August Turak (2013) New York: Columbia University Press.

Review by Jonathan Reams¹

Why I Wrote this Review

I do not tend to bother reviewing books that I am not inspired by. When I am inspired, I want to offer others the opportunity to be inspired as well, so sharing my impressions becomes a way of offering this opportunity. Twelve years ago I had the opportunity to meet August Turak (or Augie) at a conference called Inward Bound. It was hosted by the Self Knowledge Symposium (SKS) a group of students in the Raleigh North Carolina area committed to self-knowledge and development. Turak had inspired the group's formation, and was a keynote speaker at the conference. Subsequent opportunities to connect with Turak came shortly afterwards, and I recall listening to him tell the story of Brother John, which later won him the Templeton Foundation's Power of Purpose essay contest. The story was inspiring and touched on core values that I have always held dear.

Then this past summer Turak's long awaited book project was finally released. I found the book to be a great combination of principles and stories, both from the monks at Mepkin Abbey, and from Turak's extensive business life. While not of the genre of leadership books that I normally read, my personal experience with Turak made it an easy choice. *Business Secret of the Trappist Monks* is not a how-to book nor a research based book. It is not really a case study, although there are many stories and we do get to follow parts of Turak's own company's story. It is certainly not an academic treatise. Instead I see it as Turak's attempt to transmit to the reader the ineffable qualities of leadership and success he has seen and gained from being able to learn from masters of the art.

In what follows, my aim is to provide a Readers Digest version of the book. Just enough to pique your interest and give a feel for the message it contains, but not so much you feel you have gotten your fill. Turak is a great storyteller, and you would miss much limiting yourself to my short overview. I go chapter by chapter, weaving description with commentary, hoping to hint at the sense of the deeper purpose and meaning behind both Turak and the monks' way of engaging in the world of business.

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Chapter 1

Any good book needs to grab the reader with its opening, to somehow convey the essence of its message immediately. Turak does this by telling a story of Father Malachy and his death. After the funeral, walking with another monk and reflecting on how he died comforting others, he hears that “Everyone wants to die like a Trappist. No one wants to live like one” (p. 4). We are met with this image of the core principle of selfless service sustaining itself even in the face of death. What must it be like to live with this kind of grace at the core of our being? How can this way of being apply to our business life?

It is this very point that Turak sets out to prove: that the perceived dichotomy between success in capitalism and selfless service are not at odds, but are actually fundamentally inseparable. He notes examples of other Trappist monasteries renowned for their beer or preserves. Part of this comes from the view of human nature that Turak puts forward; that we all aim to transcend the selfishness of our early experiences of being human, that we all long for a transformation of being to enable us to go beyond ourselves. Why are people like Gandhi and Mandela so often used as models of great leaders? Their lives were examples of this journey of self-transcendence, to a life of surrender to service to others and to something greater than themselves. So how can we mere mortals live such a life?

Chapter 2

So then what is this transcendence we wish to have and experience? We can read, talk and imagine all we want as the means available to us for approaching it. Yet as Turak describes in one of his visits to his spiritual advisor, the 90 year old Father Christian, the gulf between all of the worldly learning and the experience of transcendence itself is “infinite.” Turak confronts the hard questions of the impact that the “success” of capitalism has had on our society; high depression rates, lack of happiness etc. as signs of a lack of this transformation. If we are treating the goals of capitalistic business as ends in themselves rather than simply means, we get lost in mistaking the nature of the transformation we are longing for.

This mistaken pursuit is shown in terms of three types of transformation; that of our condition, our circumstances and our being. He goes into how we “vote” to show what we really want by our behaviors, i.e. how we spend our money – dollar votes. What we spend a lot of money on is stories, whether books or movies or other forms, we spend billions on stories, and the ones that touch us most are the ones that exemplify the hero’s journey. The stages of this journey are briefly laid out and linked not only to examples from well-known movies, but also to business examples. What all of this points to is that our search for transformation cannot be done by proxy – we must undertake it for ourselves. As well, we see countless examples of the most common mistake or shortcut people try to take. For example, believing that we will be transformed by using power to make people treat us differently. Or worse yet, that by transforming others’ opinions about us, we will somehow be transformed. The energy that people expend on these illusory shortcuts are also illustrated in classic themes in storytelling, of turning to the dark side of trying to make ourselves bigger through others. Transformation is an inside job in the end, a renunciation or letting go of self rather than an abuse of self to change others.

Chapter 3

The seeking of this transformation is often latent in us at an early age, misplaced in various ways. Turak tells of a front row seat at a Rolling Stones concert in 1972 which left him feeling disappointed for weeks after. He looks back and sees that he was expecting some transformation of being to occur there, and when the transitory transformation of his condition that the concert provided was over, he did not know how much he linked it to a desire for the deeper, more stable transformation of being, thus his disappointment. This is also linked to noting that we experience self-consciousness as a painful thing, yet long to lose ourselves in a task, forget ourselves in moments of service, revealing our longing for selflessness.

Part of the early training Turak had was spending a year as an apprentice to Louis Mobley, one of the creators of IBM's executive leadership school in the 1950's. There he learned about the importance of mission and purpose, and to "aim past the target." This led to a teleocratic management or leadership model, where service and selflessness are the mission.

One of the joys of reading this book comes from the personal stories Turak tells to show how he has learned many of these principles. As a consultant to a startup, working to help scale a rapidly growing business with a young sales force, he encountered an arrogant young man who resisted all attempts to coach him. A mistake by Turak in cutting off a young woman during a training session led to unease in himself and an inability to make it right. He finally found himself asking this resistant young salesman for help, which led to an opening to coach him and a transformation of his character. He learned many lessons from this, especially the need to go first and be vulnerable.

Chapter 4

In this chapter we learn about "goat rodeos." Stories of the early days of Microsoft were not about the millionaires made through stock options, but about being part of a team that would pull off an impossible task with an impossible deadline. This leads into a description of transformational organizations, both conscious and unconscious. Many startups take off and attract people willing to put themselves into full engagement mode to be able to experience the kind of transformation of being that comes from doing something greater than you ever thought you were possible of, over and over again. Yet if this culture remains unconscious, it often fades.

Turak uses three organizations as examples of how a conscious orientation to transformation of being can enable sustainable commitment and engagement. AA, monasteries, and the US Marine Corps, as different as their domains of activity are, all use methods aligned with consciously creating this transformation of being. They also all aim past the target. For example, AA does not aim to simply get people to stop drinking. This is a byproduct of the transformation of being essential to sobriety. These organizations also all depend on service, whether to God, country or helping someone else stay sober.

Turak talks about the challenge of going through the desert of transformation, or the dark nights of the soul as part of the necessary journey. Shortcuts to avoid this desert fuel sales in the self-help industry, exemplified by the instant, microwave, have it all now, weekend

enlightenment seminars. He returns to the story of the movie *The Devil Wears Prada* to show how dedication to the process and perseverance get you through the desert, and enable the transformation necessary to move forward on the other side. Turak's own version of this is told in his early adventures as a carpet layer. Later, he describes how his own software company got a chance to have their own goat rodeos when Microsoft would call with an impossible request that needed to be done the same day.

Chapter 5

After laying the groundwork about why a mission of transformation of being through service and selflessness is essential to business success, Turak now turns to the how. How can we enact these lofty ideals in our everyday lives? The first example is a regional credit union that has as its mission to enhance the quality of life of its members. Turak takes what could be perceived as a touchy feely business philosophy and shows how it has enabled this financial institution to guide its decisions and grow even in the recent economic crisis.

He then describes some of the story of how the Trappist movement began with Gethsemani in Kentucky, how Thomas Merton was involved, and those who left to found Mepkin Abbey. This brings him to Father Francis Kline, the abbot during the time of his visits. He uses the word holy as the only way he could describe Father Francis, and my own brief opportunity to meet him allows me to have had a taste of the quality of presence Turak alludes to.

Turak goes on to tell of the founding of SKS, the Self Knowledge Symposium at three Raleigh North Carolina universities and how his commitment to meet once a week with these kids led him to turn down a dream job opportunity. This principle of keeping his word ended up paying off far more handsomely than the potential dream job (the company ended up bankrupt). Through this he learned what his Zen master said about it being more what he didn't do than what he did that made a difference on his journey – he never sold out.

Chapter 6

This chapter looks at how selflessness is tied to community. We will do for others what we will not do for ourselves. We can build culture and community through this by inviting a kind of infectious feeling of the delight in doing good for others. Stories of some of the monks at Mepkin illustrate this. Turak notes his own early experience there effortlessly turning his attitude and actions from selfish to selfless. This results in seeing that the peer pressure a communal team working towards a common mission generates can make it easy to have a culture of selflessness that is infectious.

Chapter 7

This chapter is about excellence for the sake of excellence. Turak links this to the experience of sacrifice and suffering. What motivates this drive to excel is a sense of calling or vocation. While many people think that this is reserved for the few, one of the monks at Mepkin told Turak that “everyone is called to something bigger than themselves. Those who say they're not just never learned to listen” (p. 92). The notion of sacrifice is illustrated in this chapter by various

stories. What stood out for me is how the SKS students took on inviting Father Francis to do an organ recital at Duke University's chapel (he had left Julliard and turned down a lucrative recording contract to become a Trappist monk). The faculty sponsor of the SKS group at Duke and also dean of the chapel told the students not to get their hopes up, that free admission to an organ recital might draw 50 people. Instead, the students charged \$20 a ticket and created their own "goat rodeo" with a fierceness and passion to make the event excellent.

The event brought in around 2000 attendees, had television film crews present and it became a scene you might expect at a rock concert rather than an organ recital. The money went to charity, and the kids got much more than the experience of the event itself, which was amazing enough. They came away with having accomplished the impossible by learning how to engage their passion and holding themselves accountable for everything they committed to.

This creation of a culture of excellence for the sake of excellence is described as being behind the turnaround Jack Welch accomplished at GE. A case study from Turak's own experience as a vice-president for sales in a company describes how he got the sales team to want to succeed and be excellent. When he asked one of the sales team why the sudden change (this person had gone from having the worst results in sales to the best) he was told "Once you know what it feels like to be your best, you never, *ever* want to go back" (p. 108). This leads to a list of the ways to enact the principles of service and selflessness in a culture of excellence that gives the abstract principles a method.

Chapter 8

This is a chapter about ethics. Questions concerning ethical behavior are not especially concerned with "bad people doing bad things," but with situations that lead to "good people doing bad things from fear and anxiety" (p. 118). In this business model of service and selflessness, the source of ethical behavior is seen to be rooted in three things: having a long term attitude, detachment, and aiming past the target. The long term attitude is not simply something that we can choose. It comes from a sense of timelessness that pervades one's consciousness. Stories of the monk's way of life and view of time illustrate this. It is also seen that an ability to delay gratification comes along with this sense of timelessness.

Detachment was mentioned before, as being the opposite of identification. It is about being rooted in something bigger than one's self that enables a person to change the things in their lives without feeling they are changing their identity. Aiming past the target again comes up. Then all this is illustrated with the story of how Turak's company, Raleigh Group International, was sold to an Israeli company that had been a large client. The process of creating stock options for employees almost delayed the deal past the deadline, (which would have led to calling it off), but was a commitment the owners would not let go of.

Chapter 9

This chapter is on faith, which is viewed as "trusting the process" in a dynamic model of faithfulness rather than a static faith in a belief about some doctrine or dogma. This is then drawn out into the business realm, with the story of how PETA made a protest about the monk's

chicken farming and raised a lot of media attention. Despite tremendous support the monks received from their community of customers and others, they decided to shut down the chicken business, eventually going into exotic mushrooms. They were able to do this because their “business” was not eggs, but service and selflessness, and thus the outer form of this could change because they were detached, or non-identified with the form of their enterprise.

Throughout this story, the phrase trust the process was used, and Turak illustrates this further with the story of how his company was finally doing well financially, then the success of the companies they were selling products for led to them being sold, and RGI appeared to be about to lose all their business. This led to a personal time in the desert, of wanting to give up. The story of how Turak kept faith with his commitment to his partners and friends, and the ultimate greater success this brought, generated a feeling of being inspired to be connected with something so worth doing that it would inspire the same commitment and faith in me.

Chapter 10

This one is about trust, where the ever present mantra “trust the process” appears yet again. The first example to illustrate this comes from Turak fracturing his ankle while skydiving and a subsequent deep sense of depression that came over him. This led to his first visit to Mepkin Abbey, where he learned to trust the monastic process, even when at first it did not appear clear how the outer forms of prayer and work would take him through the necessary personal transformation, or “great trial” process. After the long journey through this personal desert, all that was left was a sense of immense gratitude to the monks for them modeling and supporting the process.

The theme of trust in business can be found almost everywhere. Turak talks about this in terms of becoming trustworthy and how the road to this is actually detachment. In more tangible terms, this means letting go of a pride and self-centered identification with a role or territory. He illustrates this with a story of becoming the head of a sales department in a company needing help due to intense infighting and low performance. Seizing up the situation, Turak described how he went around to all the other department heads and asked how his sales department could make their lives better. He then implemented these to demonstrate trustworthiness to the other departments, leading to a turnaround and increase in morale and performance.

The degree that trust is a personal brand is nicely illustrated when Turak received a speeding ticket about 100 miles away from Mepkin Abbey. The judge, upon hearing where Turak was going, said that if he said he wasn’t speeding, then he trusted his word, simply because of the trusted reputation the monks had and how far it spread its influence.

Chapter 11

Authenticity and self-knowledge are the core of what it takes to become trustworthy. The process of gaining these is part of the processes described throughout this book. Here, how one monk’s self-disclosure of his personal journey of facing himself in the desert made a deep impact on Turak. This is then brought out in describing how Louis Mobley created the IBM executive leadership program. After hiring ETS (Education Testing Services) to find the skills and

knowledge of great executives, Mobley found that such people were always outliers on the bell curve of any trait, skill or knowledge. What was in common to them was that they had certain values and attitudes, and that these were not the product of training but a certain kind of journey of self-discovery.

From this insight, the IBM program was set up to give executives opportunities to strip away facades about morality, intelligence and so on, to arrive at a greater place of understanding of themselves. This led to executive's ability to help group and team processes of refining a common sense of mission and purpose in terms of the deeper notions described earlier. The personal business narrative from Turak follows the acquisition of RGI and how their core product, which Turak received personal benefit from, was marginalized in favor of the new CEO's business plan. A meeting between them, the new CEO was confounded by why Turak would not fight for his plan and his personal interest, which allowed Turak to say "It's a product, and I have no plans to put the logo on my tombstone" (p. 165).

Chapter 12

Reading the last chapter, on living the life, explicitly named all the things I have also come to know in my own life as essential. One has to commit to the process, and each and every day, in each situation life brings to test us, maintain that commitment. No matter how inspirational reading this or any other book is, Turak is clear that "It is only through the long, slow process of living the life that the living waters of spirit permeate our rock-hard heads, until they finally reach our hearts" (p. 174).

The example here in this chapter touches my own heart, as I came close to part of the narrative. Turak described how Father Francis faced an incurable form of lymphoma that required chemo at a certain point to delay the inevitable. During the period before his chemo he spoke at an event hosted by the SKS group, Inward Bound, and told of his condition and how he was facing it to a group of 220 college students. That evening after his talk, I recall standing with him and Turak watching evening celebrations of ice cream, drumming and dancing in a tent on the lawn outside the campus buildings where the event was held. The simple presence and witnessing the joy of the students was permeated with an aura that lasted long after the event was over and we flew home.

Concluding Reflections

The thing that is hardest to describe writing this over/review is the feeling that reading through the stories of this book evoke in me. Something inside me is touched, and I see my own struggles to come to terms with my life, what I have created and the challenge to take full responsibility for it. At the same time, this feeling opens up a sense of freedom that is both anxious and exhilarating. There is something of this ineffable essence of life that transmits itself between the lines in the book, calling one to follow the path revealing itself before you.

The business secrets of the Trappist monks are not to be found in the usual formulas, even the principles Turak uses to convey these secrets. Nor are they found in the stories of heroic leaders. These secrets are to be discovered in the process of understanding business as a forum for our

own and others' hero's journey, the passages of life that we encounter to give us the gift of knowing ourselves, and through this being able to transcend ourselves and serve others. The depth of this realization came through in the words of Father Francis, when telling Turak about his cancer. "“What I could've never imaged' he finished softly, 'is that my cancer is the answer to a lifetime of prayer’” (p. 172).