

Under the Big Top

BY ED GIGANTI

Ella Bell is a ringmaster. An associate professor of business administration at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, Bell is also a busy consultant with clients such as Salomon Smith Barney and PepsiCo. In her consultations, she frequently uses a group exercise called "Circus Acts" to provoke professionals to think about their careers, their workplaces, and their lives as a whole.

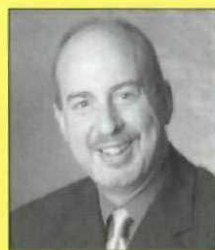
Bell asks participants to draw three rings, one each for work, personal life, and community involvement. Next, she asks them to draw the performer—clown, tightrope walker, lion tamer, etc.—that best represents their role in each of the three rings. For each performer, participants list their biggest stresses and coping mechanisms. Finally, they imagine how they would want their rings to be and build action plans to move them toward those visions.

When I read about Bell's work in the December 2001 issue of *Fast Company*, I wondered if the three rings of her metaphor might not exist within a "tent" of personal spirituality. I called her to see if she would agree.

"I never thought about it as the 'big top,'" she said. "What I often find in doing this work with people is that they put spirituality in a separate ring. They are not thinking about spirituality in work or community life. I usually have to call attention to it. It doesn't mean that they are not spiritual people, but we compartmentalize. You don't bring the church into school or work or community.

"We compartmentalize everything. 'This is the time for family, this is the time for work,' and so on. But life is not compartmentalized. God is with us all the time, and we are spiritual creatures all the time."

Bell divides her time between the Dartmouth campus in Hanover, NH, and her home in Charlotte, NC, where she is an active member of a local church. "Given all the crises of this world, given the events of September 11, given all the layoffs, we should be more aware of our spirituality. The churches in Charlotte are full. But how



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much of that gets pushed into the other parts of our day?

"Now that I think about spirituality as the circus tent, I see it as a powerful concept. In this exercise, people do start to think about their relationship to something bigger than themselves. When work like this touches a certain place in persons' souls, it becomes spiritual. People are looking, they're hungry, because we don't take the time to fill our spiritual wells."

Bell experienced this yearning firsthand working with a group of women at Salomon Smith Barney, although she was hesitant to be explicit about the spiritual dimension at first. "Sometimes we put restrictions on ourselves. I wondered, 'Is that my role? I have to be careful.' But I ended the exercise with a prayer that asks, 'Where do you want to go? Where do you want to be?'" The response was overwhelming. Weeks later I was still hearing from some of these women. They were telling me, 'I found that prayer, and I've started praying again.'

"I've been amazed at the responses to this work. It shows that we need spirituality more than ever. We need God in our lives more than ever. We need to know that the best thing is happening, that we are where we're supposed to be, and that we are loved. That knowing is so important. People are misaligned. They are not in alignment with a higher spirit."

One of the first black women to be appointed to the faculty at Tuck and the coauthor of the book *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*, Bell frequently consults with groups of black men and women working in her client organizations. "This exercise [Circus Acts] is a way to look at stress. I have used it as a way of surfacing the stress of the bicultural reality black managers face, not being able to bring their culture and ancestry into the workplace. We talk about being spiritually grounded in both worlds. I ask, 'What spiritual anchor are you carrying with you?'"

"My work is about bringing the spiritual back

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the author proposes "specific ethics-driven perspectives and responses." According to Weber, the basis for these responses is a community-based ethics; the framework for them consists of "priority principles" that make it possible to order potentially conflicting interests, values, or goods in terms of their importance.

The author proceeds to apply community-based ethics and priority principles to dilemmas that health care organizations face as caregivers, employers, and citizens. Most of his chapters contain summary guidelines, criteria, or principles pertaining to the dilemmas discussed.

The book's practical, nontheoretical approach may leave some moral philosophers unsatisfied; but then, the work of moral philosophers often leaves people "in the trenches" scratching their heads. Weber does not offer his ethical framework as a comprehensive moral theory. This reader notes, for instance, that his brief section on a justice-based ethics does not do justice to that perspective.

Weber does a good job of identifying the foundations of health care business ethics: a clear position on the nature and purpose of health and health care, which provides a moral framework; a strong ethical culture; organizational systems that support and reward appropriate behavior; and a serious management commitment to reflection and discussion in an effort to achieve organizational integrity. Weber insists that ethics is every manager's job.

The author's appreciation of the common good is evident in his selection and treatment of specific issues. For instance, he dares to raise the moral relevance of cost and appropriate use of resources in the moral assessment of individual clinical cases. He believes that health care providers need to shift their thinking to accommodate both cost and quality considerations. His community-based ethics, grounded in a notion of justice, recognizes cost control as an ethical value that recommends a standard of using not the best, but the least expensive, intervention that works well. This

reviewer appreciates his selection of the important but sensitive issues of just compensation and unions.

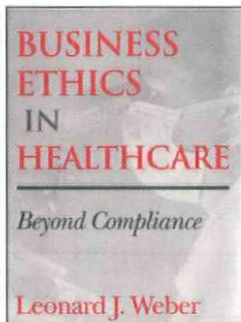
The reader may be frustrated at times by the fact that Weber's management focus results in less than complete consideration of an issue. Weber states, for example, that because his chapter on unions and strikes is written for management about management's responsibility, it will not address "important ethical issues that should be considered by union organizers and employees." The "organization as citizen" chapters on socially responsi-

ble investing and environmental responsibility provide helpful analysis of issues not uppermost on many managers' radar screens. This reviewer was seriously disappointed not to find a chapter in that section on management's responsibility for advocacy and public policy. Health care managers, who are quick to understand the importance of lobbying for better reimbursement, seem less inclined to engage in sustained efforts on behalf of a more rational, just health system.

Two chapters in the last section, on institutionalizing business and management ethics, address the components of a business ethics program and the organizational ethics committee, a likely component of many such programs.

This book will be very helpful for those attempting to "get a handle" on organizational ethics. It is clearly written, well organized, and, very importantly, addresses many of the tough issues in a way that managers and others on the front lines can understand and appreciate. This reviewer, having perused much of the recent literature in business and health care management ethics, selected it for the graduate course she teaches in health care management ethics. The students rated it very highly.

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MINISTRY LEADERSHIP

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out. We try to bring back, to 'dust off' our ancestry, our history. For black people, we're so caught up trying to show that we are super-competent in our work and champions in our communities that we don't have the energy or time left to honor our spiritual sides. We often get caught in places that don't deeply feed our souls. As you move up higher in many corporations, you get sent around the country and the world. You can find yourself away from your family, your church, your support community. I tell people you have to develop a 'pocket spirituality.'"

Bell found the Internet a useful tool in her own spiritual life. Her Charlotte church broadcasts services over the web, so she can sit at the computer in her Dartmouth office any day of the week and listen to Sunday services complete with preaching and Gospel choir. "One day, I was really having a bad day. I called some people into my office, sat them down, and we had church right there."

Bell's goal of helping people bring more of themselves into the workplace reminded me of poet David Whyte's diagnosis that most people leave 30 percent of themselves in their cars in the parking lot at work and another 10 percent at home in bed, too afraid to face the world. In his work with Fortune 500 companies, Whyte uses poetry to help managers find deeper, life-giving meaning in their work. In his new book *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, he turns to his own experiences—as a naturalist in the Galapagos Islands, an executive directing a non-profit organization, a poet, and a corporate consultant—to describe the journey of discovery that is available to all of us through our work. In good work, "done well for the right reasons and with an end in mind," Whyte says our very identity is at stake. "Perhaps it is because we know, in the end, we are our gift to others and the world."¹ □

NOTES

1. David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2001.