we can see from the comments above, the search for meaning is often voiced in a negative manner, which reinforces the feeling of powerlessness and can easily drain collective energy. If we find ways to attend to meaningfulness consciously we can be fully human: energy is released, and engagement becomes a naturally constructive way to respond. As Frankl (1969) notes, each person is questioned by life and each person answers for his or her life. When we take conscious responsibility for creating meaning, we achieve coherence between our inner and outer lives through acts of commitment. When we do not take responsibility we are condemned to a state of boredom, discontent, and impotence.

The domain of workplace spirituality (WPS) has from its very outset defined itself in relation to meaningful work. For example, Biberman and Tischler write that the domain is defined by the question of “what it is to be human, to search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and moral guidance for relating with self, others, and ultimate reality” (Biberman and Tischler, 2008, p. 74). Similarly, Neck and Milliman (1994) define the domain as being concerned with the process of finding meaning and purpose in our lives, and Vaill (1991) notes that spirituality is the feeling individuals have about the fundamental meaning of who they are, what they are doing, and what contributions they are making. At present it is assumed that once we get some misunderstandings about the role of spirituality-versus-religion in organizations out of the way, it will somehow become magically possible to discuss meaningfulness at work. However, as we can see from the quotes above, speaking about what is deeply meaningful to us – while it might be the most important thing we do to honor our humanity – is very hard to do, and to do well, in current organizational life.

Voicing what matters in current organizational life

Spirituality is a new term that is gaining acceptance, and with that, power. It offers a way to signal the importance of profound issues that have been suppressed under the discourse of efficiency and effectiveness. “Spirituality” provides a flag around which people can gather and begin to articulate alternative worldviews. In doing so, it provides a place from which a movement can be created that influences social, political, economic, and working life.

When we speak we draw the attention of others to issues and ideas of concern to us. Yet, as can be seen from the examples above, this is not always easily done, and when it is done it is not always done in ways that actually make a difference. Discourse, as Foucault says, is a
power to be seized, and what is “permissible” to speak about changes, and reflects shifts in power when it does. A powerful discourse has the ability to influence our individual lives and our institutions. It has the power to shape the future. Much is at stake. Therefore it is important to think deeply and rigorously about how a new discourse is framed and voiced. In the emerging discourse on spirituality in the workplace it is important to work clearly through and articulate the underpinning philosophy and worldviews and to think about the possible impact on others – both positive and destructive – as well as the organizational and social implications.

Spirituality versus religion in organizations

The domain of WPS has made substantial attempts to distance itself from the term “religion” in order to gain acceptance in academic and applied management discourse. This distancing is usually done in a manner that elevates spirituality above religion and that saddles religion with everything that is harmful. For example, religion has been referred to as partisan and negative (Biberman and Whittey, 1997), dogmatic (Mitroff, 2003), and divisive (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003). Spirituality on the other hand is seen as free from the past, and therefore from any stigma that attaches to “religion” as a term. It is seen as inclusive in that it seeks to identify common ground and principles, democratic in that it leaves individuals free to choose their own beliefs and practices, and free from the corruption revealed in some of the practices of those involved in religion. It is a new term in cultures passionately committed to the new and very ready to discard the old.

There are however several concerns with this split. First, it does not accurately represent the experience of many human beings who do not view religion and spirituality as separate entities. Nor does the distinction pay any attention to those who have no spiritual belief at all. Thus, while WPS insists on recognizing the whole person, it dismisses the possibility for religious or agnostic expression and hence seems to dismiss the possibility for wholeness for many (Hicks, 2002). Second, the creation of a split between inclusive spirituality and exclusive religion ignores the role of power in organizations. Spirituality and religion can both (intentionally or unintentionally) be imposed on others by those in positions of power towards purposes that do not benefit all (Lips-Wiersma, Lund Dean, and Fornaciari, 2009). Just as we have had experience with religious bullies, we can similarly encounter spiritual bullies. Third, while it is argued that spirituality is “an inclusive term, covering all pathways that lead to meaning and purpose” (Tacey, 2003) in relation to day-to-day living, we do not speak in abstract terms but in terms that, whether religious or spiritual, specify distinct worldviews which may not agree with each other (Hicks, 2002). We speak, for example, in terms such as “God,” “keeping the Sabbath,” “in the next world,” “what is meant to be,” “all life is sacred.” These are terms that all reveal different worldviews. In the splitting of “spirituality” from “religion,” the worldviews of the authors are also often ignored. Many who are part of the emergent discourse of spirituality are strongly committed to specific religions, yet do not make their own assumptions and dogmas visible in their theory building, teaching, or consulting practices (Lips-Wiersma, 2003). The problem that goes to the heart of this paper is that the spirituality-versus-religion debate does not identify how we can speak about what deeply matters to us in ways that are respectful of every human being within the organization and in ways that enable us to collectively reclaim our humanity in organizational life.

In order to move beyond the spirituality-versus-religion debate, the task is not to promote a single spiritual framework but to create a structure and culture in which leaders and followers can respectfully negotiate religious and spiritual diversity (Hicks, 2002). In the next section we identify one such structure that enables respectful negotiation of differences while also identifying our common concern with meaning.

The Holistic Development Model

Appreciative Inquiry says that language is fateful, and that our speaking creates our future. Therefore a first step is to become conscious about the words we use, the questions we pose, the stories we tell, and the models we use to frame the discourse we are in the process of creating. A strong model has real value in an emerging discourse. Good models bring structure and order to new ideas. They are part of the way a new discourse is framed. They express the relationship that the parts have with each other and therefore how things connect, and they put things in right relation to each other. Good models simplify while retaining profound content and unique individual expression. They make that which lies below the surface visible in a way that it can become part of everyday conversation and decision-making. They endure over time and provide consistent value in myriad contexts. We have enjoyed working with one such model over the past ten years (Figure 39.1).

The Holistic Development Model, and the way we work with it, address some important underlying concerns in the religion-versus-spirituality
debate and put in place some important conditions that help us to have inclusive and respectful conversations about deeper work meanings.

Resonating with profound knowing and the need for participative process

Before we start working with the model in any context, we ask individuals about what they already believe or know about each of its elements and invite them to add additional beliefs that are important to them but do not fit anywhere specifically in the model. Each time we do this, we are struck by the depth of participants’ existing knowledge (see top left box in the figure) and their eloquence in expressing this knowledge. Similarly, when participants move around the room and read each other’s contributions, they are moved when they recognize their own truth in what others have written as well as the rich diversity of being human. The process encourages a different level of relationship because participants see each other as fellow searchers for meaning.

Experiencing meaningfulness, according to Frankl, is a vital necessity for human well-being but it must be discovered by the individual, not received from superiors. Finding meaning requires effort. Frankl (1959) writes, “At present, instincts do not tell man what he has to do, nor do traditions direct him towards what he ought to do; soon he will not even know what he really wants to do and will be led by what other people want him to do, thus completely succumbing to conformism.” The mark of true meaningfulness, therefore, is that it is based on personal discovery and free choice rather than prescription and domination.

The model, and the way we work with it, clearly shows that human beings are already fully engaged with meaningfulness. We consistently find that all participants seek to live meaningfully and are distressed when meaning is lost or absent. It can therefore not be assumed that someone in a position of power knows more about meaningful living than, for example, someone in the warehouse with strong faith and culture who has fostered four children. We argue that it is therefore not the job of the leader, the boss, or anyone else to prescribe meaningfulness, but rather to work with processes that allow for such profound meaning to be articulated by the whole organization/group. The model and the process we use is respectful of the profound knowing of everyone within the organization and makes worldviews visible in a manner that each person can stand side by side in equal humanity.
Addressing universal purposes as well as the diverse worldviews

The model emerged from asking individuals to tell the stories of their working lives and to identify when their deeper work-meanings and their work were and were not aligned. The initial findings were tested through action research on a further diverse sample of 240 participants. Four purposes emerged in all the stories. These are “developing and becoming self,” “unity with others,” “expressing full potential,” and “service to others” (see Holistic Development Model in the middle of the figure). Identifying common purposes has proved to be very helpful in a conversation that can be nebulous or incoherent. It provides the basis for shared meaning and hence purposeful collective action (because it is intimately linked to personal meaning and language) also engages the hearts of each individual. On the basis of these deep meanings, which have now been made visible, the group decides what to do and stop doing to create more meaningful work. Thus a beautiful balance between inquiry (not dogma) and action is achieved that can naturally go through many cycles of learning.

While common purposes are identified, the model and the way we work with it make it immediately obvious that when we move from the abstract to the concrete, people’s underlying worldviews (see left bottom box) and use of language (left top box) are very diverse. Making worldviews visible assists participants in not assuming that all people have the same worldviews that they have, but it also allows them to see that every human being does draw her or his inspiration from somewhere. This makes it easier to have conversations about the differences and similarities of sources of inspiration without making others wrong. This assists us in learning to be skillful in holding peacefully to our views, remaining open to the possibility of change, staying constructive in the midst of clashing worldviews and creating space for those who do not wish to participate in conversations involving spirituality or religion.

At the same time, when individuals can use their own language under “inspiration” it enables those who believe in the transcendent to keep the sacred and mystical visible. This is in contrast to the “inclusive spirituality” paradigm, which has a tendency to ignore the transcendent precisely because this is where differences occur, and hence its application to the workplace has become quite secularized. In such cases, the question arises as to how this in fact differs from other human-centered management techniques (Driscoll and Wiebe, 2007).

Next to worldviews there are also clear examples of differences in language used to describe the subthemes of each purpose. These words range from the deeply personal to language that is more acceptable in the public arena. It therefore allows individuals to consider how much they want to reveal of themselves in public situations that are not always safe. It also allows certain “allergies” to words to be put aside. For example, “I have an intense dislike for the word ‘sacrifice’; I think [I’ll] use ‘helpfulness’ instead.”

Making meaningfulness as well as meaninglessness visible

As previously discussed, spirituality has been defined as everything that is superior to religion, and this does not properly address diversity. This way of juxtaposing spirituality with religion has also framed spirituality positively, in terms of what might be possible. However our search for meaning also expresses what we long for and currently do not experience (as could be seen from the quotes at the beginning of this paper). It is therefore important to work with a model that makes visible what is meaningless (for examples, see left bottom box). When, as has often happened with culture-management activities, those factors that cause meaninglessness in the first place cannot be articulated, everything that is positive and inspiring is perceived as unreal. When an employee is asked to pretend because she cannot express how her reality is different from the vision statement, for example, it breeds cynicism, which is alienating. Thus, while the individual is by nature deeply concerned about living by values, he has also learned to expect disappointments. As mentioned before, consciously living meaningful lives is hard to do. And hence we become quite skillful at identifying reasons not to have to engage with the harder questions. For employees it is very hard to take responsibility for meaningful living when the organization (or some individuals within it, or the self) silences conversations that identify where the ideal is not lived up to (which is of course a regular and natural occurrence). The model allows us to be present to the reality of our human experience while taking responsibility for the de-energizing, negative, or complaining conversations that often become a default in discussion about meaningfulness. Making reality present through the Holistic Development Model normalizes the fact that we often fall short of our ideals but keep going anyway, and we can do so more meaningfully when we are real.

The experience of meaninglessness can also come from not addressing the relationships among the different purposes. Conversations
about what purpose one currently spends the most time in can again highlight diversity in an organization. One person might be at a stage of her career where she has a need to give service to others; another person might be at a stage of his career where he wants to discover and express his full potential. Neither is right nor wrong, but in making these differences clear we can identify that even when there is a common purpose (e.g., to serve the customer/others in the organization), employees might want to acquire different skills and have different roles. Our experience has also shown how one person can stop another from becoming more whole by, for example, having so much need to express the self that the other is forced into doing all the work that “service to others” or “unity with others” requires. Further, it highlights that, at times, whole groups in organizations lose the balance between self and other, or doing and being. For example, this occurs when whole groups of teachers or customer service representatives are close to burnout because they spend too much time on the other and too little time on the needs of the self, or when groups become fragmented when too much time is spent doing things for the customer and not enough on being together. In such cases, even though the nature of the work itself is deeply meaningful, the loss of balance causes meaninglessness. The model therefore supports internal wholeness as well as offering a way of protecting individuals and creating fairness and unity within the larger community.

Conclusion

We have presented the Holistic Development Model as a way to have a grounded discussion about spirituality in the workplace. The structure of this model creates a space that is safe enough for differences to be held and expressed without coercing anyone. At the same time it identifies common purposes and hence a method of uncovering existing connection and agreement while acknowledging the individual journey. While it meets many of the needs and requirements of those involved in the discourse on spirituality, it does not use the term. Instead of saying what “spirit”/“spirituality” is — or is not — it simply focuses on the human need for meaningful living. Meaning is what makes life worth living. It is vital and precious. The rise of “spirituality” as a term gaining acceptance and power in the workplace is a heartwarming and exciting possibility. For those of us passionately concerned about making the most of this opportunity to influence the workplace constructively, we need to ensure that the discourse and all that it means to us is created with thought as well as passion, concern for others as well as ourselves, with practical understanding as well as inspiration, with humor and intelligence as well as faith. We offer the Holistic Development Model as a robust and practical means to furthering this end.

Literature