

CHAPTER ONE

*The Funeral*

The secret of success in life is for a man to be ready for his opportunity when it comes.

—Benjamin Disraeli

One autumn evening in 1994, on the eve of his company's one hundredth birthday, Bob Catell got up from his desk on the twenty-third floor of the company's gleaming new headquarters in downtown Brooklyn and headed to the elevators. As he punched the button for the second floor, Catell felt a twist of anticipation and trepidation. His destination was the corporate auditorium, where he would help preside over the company's funeral.

Brooklyn Union Gas Company had died, at least symbolically. In his three years as president and CEO, Catell had come to understand that a new era was beginning in the energy industry, and in order to compete, Brooklyn Union had to reinvent itself. It had to wade into the rising tide of deregulation, into new, competitive marketplaces, and find a strategic path to growth and profitability. The old comfort zone that characterized this cozy, monopolistic entity was being torn apart, brick by brick, and a century's worth of business identity, capability, and culture was being confronted with a dramatic challenge: Change quickly or become irrelevant.

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In his three years at the helm, Catell had enjoyed the last vestiges of a long period of sustained growth at Brooklyn Union. Starting in the late 1950s, the natural gas business had blossomed into a sweet spot in the energy market, a clean, plentiful alternative to oil, and Brooklyn Union had taken full advantage in selling to its densely populated marketplace. By the early 1990s, it had saturated its existing territories in Brooklyn, Staten Island, and Queens. With more than one million customers, Brooklyn Union Gas owned 80 percent of the residential market and 50 percent of the commercial market. Sure, it owned the pipes in the ground, and as long as the winter winds and frigid temperatures chilled New York, customers would need to heat their homes and offices. But this annuity had no room for growth and expansion. Catell understood an age-old business tenet: Stagnation generally leads to extinction.

And there was more. The New York Public Service Commission, the watchdog government agency that controlled rates and regulated the state's energy industry, had followed the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's call for deregulation. In the mid-1980s, interstate gas pipelines, heretofore run as tightly protected monopolies, now had to open up their systems to other transporters. Local distribution companies like Brooklyn Union had always been a captive market, forced to buy from the pipeline company that controlled its territory. Now, they would have a choice. Like deregulation efforts in other industries such as airlines and telecommunications, the notion was that an open market would foster competition, reduce prices, increase service quality, and be good for the consumer.

The distribution companies themselves became the next targets. They, too, would have to open up their pipes so that other sellers could offer gas to local customers. Much like the telephone companies in the late 1990s, the energy distributors were being thrown, like it or not, into a new and chaotic business environment. The rules were being changed almost overnight, and in pure Darwinian fashion, those who adapted best would survive.

Catell, in his short tenure as chief executive, had done a reasonable job as steward of the Brooklyn Union legacy. In his 36 years at

the company, he had risen up the ranks, admirably impressing his bosses at every stop with his business instincts and his people skills. He was a quick study, and he had that intangible but alluring characteristic that the company's executives couldn't ignore: He simply loved the gas business. He read every periodical, joined every relevant association, attended seminars, and established relationships in every corner of the global gas network, from South America to Calgary, relationships that would give him not only knowledge but access.

In 1991, he was the natural choice to succeed Elwin Larson as CEO, and in early 1994 he'd been handed the chairmanship of Brooklyn Union as well. It should have been—and was in many ways—the perfect endgame of a textbook business career.

But Catell was discontented. He had never been much interested in being a steward and then sliding nicely into retirement with a fat pension and a stately condo in Florida. About 15 minutes after becoming CEO, he had been asked to describe his vision for Brooklyn Union. "I'd like us to become the premier energy company in the Northeast," he had replied.

With tough competitors like Con Edison and Enron, that had been a bold prognostication. But Catell believed that Brooklyn Union had the kind of solid foundation and strong management force to make that vision real. Now, three years later, he was not so sure. He felt a malaise settling in on the company as the realities of deregulation began to seep into the halls and out in the field. Brooklyn Union was in the early stages of a metamorphosis, and people were dragging their feet, procrastinating, even ignoring the new realities. They had grown to love the Brooklyn Union culture, as had their mothers, fathers, and uncles before them. Change might be flying through the air at them, but they would prefer to duck out of the way rather than reach out to grab it.

Catell understood that he was entering the toughest, most daunting era in Brooklyn Union's long history, and as its ninth CEO he didn't want to be the one to drop the ball. Decisions made on his watch would determine not only the company's future success or failure, but whether it would continue to exist as an independent entity at all.

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So as he stepped out of the elevator, Catell felt a clear twinge of that business cliché: It is indeed lonely at the top. Kenny Moore, the former monk who had become something of corporate confessor, facilitator, and psychologist rolled into one, awaited Catell outside the conference room. The funeral had been Moore's idea. His reasoning was simple and pious: In order to begin something new, something else must come to an end. One could not embrace the future until the past had been properly and ceremoniously left behind. People held funerals when loved ones died. Why not a similar service when a beloved company passes on?

Though it might have struck most executives as outlandish, Catell was intrigued. He was beginning to believe that *outlandish* was what he needed to shake things up around here. Catell had called on Kenny Moore more often in recent months. In his work setting up corporate performance reviews and a high-level management by objective program, Moore had brought a unique perspective and insight to Brooklyn Union. There he had been, sitting with senior-level executives, helping them set annual goals on which their performance would be measured and their compensation levels set. Yet he had no business background at all.

Feeling terrified and inadequate, Moore nonetheless had plowed ahead and begun to realize that it wasn't business knowledge that mattered. A good deal of his value lay in the very experiences he had left behind in the ministry. When it became clear to those with whom he was consulting that Moore had no personal agenda, no political aspirations, no particular interest in self-aggrandizement, something amazing happened: They opened up to him as they would a priest in a confessional.

He heard their complaints, their anxieties, their biases, their laments. His years in the service of the Divine and his visceral understanding of the human condition gave him a natural filter for their pain. After working for 15 years with the poor and the hopeless, these issues did not daunt him. If anything, he was energized and recognized that he had something invaluable to bring to his job. Corporate

America, it turned out, was a haven for lost souls, and his resume suddenly seemed more relevant than ever.

Moore sensed Catell's anxiety and smiled, offering words of encouragement. He handed Catell a few pages of remarks that the chairman would give to open the proceedings. The gathering had been set up under the auspices of Catell's monthly leadership meetings, regular 90-minute forums in which Catell met with managers and staffers to update them on the company's business issues. The 400 employees waiting inside were chatting and schmoozing, but they all had some sense that this leadership meeting would be unlike previous ones.

As Catell and Moore stepped inside, the room quieted. Catell was still getting used to the effect he had on the corporate population, but he was poised to move ahead. He already knew that there would be plenty of skeptics in the audience that day. He had been mildly skeptical himself when Moore had presented him with the idea, but he had also begun to believe that the path to the future was going to steer well outside the white lines, the comfort zone, of the past three decades. If a funeral could help separate the past and point the way toward the future for his employees, he would gladly deliver the eulogy.

The CEO



How hard was it to effect change in a 100-year-old utility? Well, early in my tenure as CEO, it took three board meetings for me to convince our directors to change the name of the company from Brooklyn Union Gas to Brooklyn Union. Obviously, there was a deep comfort in holding on to the past.

In the early 1990s, I knew we were going to have to become an energy company, not just a gas company. We had to start thinking about new, competitive markets and expanding our products and service offerings. And in order to help the marketplace understand our new mission, I felt we had to change our image, even if it was a subtle change. So I went to the board of directors at our monthly meeting and said, “We’re evolving into an energy company, so I think it would be appropriate to change the name from Brooklyn Union Gas to Brooklyn Union.” I didn’t even suggest Brooklyn Union *Energy*, just Brooklyn Union. There was dead silence in the room. I said, “Okay. Why don’t you just think about it for a little bit, and we’ll revisit it later.”

For our next meeting, I decided to pull out all the stops and do it right. I had my people make up a slick audiovisual presentation of what the new logo might look like, the signage, the trucks, everything. We would get rid of the gas flame in the logo and use a snazzy new modern logo, blue on a white background. I went back to the board and made my presentation. At the end of my talk, one of the directors said, “You mean, you want to take ‘gas’ out of the name?”

I thought to myself, “You’re going to have the shortest CEO tenure on record. You can’t even get a simple name change approved.” To the board, I said, “Okay, well, why don’t you think about it a little

bit longer.” At the third meeting, I said, “We’ve talked about the name change at two meetings. I really believe it’s the right thing to do, so unless you have any objections, we’re going to get it done.” No one objected. The name was changed. But it took three board meetings to do it.

That is a graphic example of how traumatic change can be for a company, especially one with a century’s worth of tradition. And that was what I was thinking about as Kenny and I entered the company conference room for the “funeral.”

I greeted my senior officers who were milling near the door. I was aware of a palpable skepticism about the event. We’d had discussions about it beforehand, and I had heard the objections. “Isn’t this kind of foolish? Won’t people think this is a hokey thing to do? And worse, could we risk losing a lot of what was good about the old Brooklyn Union?”

I’ve always been a voracious reader, and I had read enough to know that the most successful leaders tend to heed their gut instincts. I generally seek input from a variety of people—trusted advisers, colleagues, consultants, and friends. I’m a strong believer in building consensus because it not only gets people on board but it provides me with a set of ideas, thoughts, and opinions that I can process to make my call. In the case of the funeral, I decided to follow Kenny’s lead. There was something about his approach that intrigued me. He had a way of thinking about things that I had not encountered either inside or outside the company. He could somehow verbalize what I sensed intuitively about the things that people care about, what makes them feel good about themselves, and how they respond to each other and to their managers and executives.

Kenny’s insights weren’t drawn simply from years in a monastery. In his role in human resources (HR), he was out among the people, from the very senior-level executives to hourly union workers. He wasn’t a missionary or prophet. He was simply making up for lost time. He worried constantly about his lack of business training and understanding of the gas business. If he was going to learn quickly, he had to talk to everyone, suck up knowledge like a

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sponge, and apply his education to his role within human resources. Along the way, he would share with me what he saw and heard—good, bad, and indifferent.

Much of what he does is accomplished by the way he does it. He is thoughtful, provocative, gentle, and good-natured. He presents things in a useful way that promotes positive action rather than anger and retribution. He doesn't say, "Catell, you've got a problem out there. The troops in Greenpoint are going to revolt." Instead, he offers honesty and insight. And that doesn't mean he sugarcoats things or holds back bad news. He has come and told me many things I wasn't happy to hear about, and he has had the courage to tell it like it is. But he doesn't cross the line from a standpoint of trust and confidence.

And in doing all this, he helped me understand the role that I play as a CEO in a corporation like this: how people look at me, watch me, see me, and how I should interpret and respond to their perceptions rather than just my own. He has pushed hard all along the way for me to get out with people and not sit up in an ivory tower, isolated and out of touch.

When we met to talk about this funeral, we were in the early stages of this relationship. We had never talked explicitly about Kenny's background, though I knew he had been in the priesthood before coming to work here. Being a practicing Catholic, I felt that connection resonating within me. It wasn't something I verbalized to Kenny or anyone else. But it was as if Kenny had arrived at the company with a mission, a mission he couldn't visualize when he first started working but one that formulated itself over the years.

In my 36 years at the company, I had never considered a formal integration of the business and spiritual life. There was always a clear separation of church and state, and my religious life, while strong, was outside the office walls. Or so I thought.

I always believed in people, in treating people with respect and dignity, in doing the right thing. For me, this was as natural as breathing. It was a philosophy that I had lived with as a child and that had been stamped deep within my being. It never occurred to

me that there was anything spiritual about my working life. You just did what felt right, and more times than not there would be a positive result.

Yet when I became CEO, I started to think about what made our company different from others in our industry as well as in other industries. Sometimes, when you are too close to something you can't really see it clearly. One could argue that more than 30 years with one company certainly made me very close to my surroundings. And it did. But through diligence or cleverness or just pure luck, I had always been able to see and feel Brooklyn Union from a step back, from enough distance to witness the differences, to understand that our people felt just a bit more connected to their jobs and the company than other workers felt about their companies.

I owe that appreciation to the fact that I had worked in nearly every part of the company at one time or another. I'd been out in blizzards in the streets of Brooklyn with crews uncovering broken pipes in the ground. I'd been to disastrous fires where lives had been lost and our crews had worked for days without rest fixing resulting gas leaks. I'd been involved in seeking out new, competitive arenas for the company and traveled around the world to find sources of natural gas to feed our customers' needs. I'd climbed the corporate ladder, but I'd taken time to get off the ladder at each level and wander around, getting a feel for the place.

The conclusion I had reached before I became CEO, and which was strengthened when I took that office, was that we had something indefinable but special, intangible but very real. This company did have a soul, if "soul" is defined as management guru and scholar Charles Handy puts it: "The sense of contained capacity, a sense of going places, of leaving something of themselves behind for others to feed from, of a whole that is greater than its parts, of an essence which infects and inspires. It is the necessary ingredient in great teams and, increasingly, in all organizations." And it was perhaps not just an ingredient but *the* ingredient that triggered the company's long-term success. Needless to say, it was something I wasn't about to take lightly.

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These intangible feelings are hard to quantify and even harder to control. It is like the cliché about herding cats—a good idea but difficult to execute. When I entered the room, I had the hope that Kenny’s idea would be a major step for me as CEO to reach out and connect with the soul of this company.

The room was darkened and the setting somber. I stepped up to the podium. Behind me, Kenny had set up a mock headstone that read “Brooklyn Union Gas—R.I.P.” There were flowers and candles, and as I spoke, Kenny donned his old priestly stole and waited off to the side.

I leaned toward the microphone and looked out at the group. We had all been to many of my monthly leadership meetings before, but there had been nothing like this. This meeting was all-inclusive. Employees from all levels of management as well as from the union bargaining units had been invited. Many had been invited because they were known to be key influencers within the company, people who would take the message back out to their colleagues and spread the word. The faces looking back at me were expectant and alert. What, they must have been thinking, is he going to say about all this?

“Good evening and welcome,” I said somberly. “For almost 100 years, we have been a gas utility serving Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island, regulated by the Public Service Commission and restricted from certain lines of business by government mandate.

“With the arrival of deregulation, all this is changing. Our business model is moving away from a traditional utility company and toward that of an energy company, a company that is no longer functioning as a monopoly but will be competing with other energy providers for a growing share of the marketplace.

“Where we used to be a monopoly, we will now face competition. Where we used to be guaranteed a reasonable profit, we will now be vulnerable to greater swings in our revenues. Where we used to be severely restricted on the lines of business into which we could venture, we will now have greater freedom to compete.

“The coming of deregulation will be very new to many of us who have spent our entire careers in this company. While some of what

will be happening will be unsettling, much of it will be exciting. Where there are some vulnerabilities here for us, there are many more opportunities for our business and our industry. But all this will demand change for us. While some utilities may be caught off guard by these changes, we will not. I am excited and optimistic about these new opportunities for all of us.

“But it’s helpful to remind ourselves that change is less a singular event and more a journey. And Kenny Moore’s program today will give us a sense of how we can embark on this journey and what we might find along the way: the losses, the gains, the hopes and possibilities.

“In order to begin the journey, we must consider that some of the changes we are going to experience have their origins not with a beginning but with an ending. There will be some sorrow and loss that we all will feel in abandoning our old ways of doing business, as well as when we take up the new skills required to successfully compete in a deregulated environment. In the process, we will experience an in-between time—when the old rules no longer apply and the new rules have yet to be defined. This will make many of us feel anxious and unsure.

“However, this in-between time, this transition period, while ambiguous and unsettling, is necessary before any progress can be made. We are required to first mourn the loss of the known and spend time wandering around feeling lost and alone, the way we would feel if we lost a loved one. Only then are we ready for a true beginning.

“There are many examples of companies that have tried to change, yet failed, largely because they didn’t understand that employees’ first reaction to any change is to experience a loss. This ending of the old, with its requisite confusion, anger, and depression, needs to be acknowledged and incorporated into any corporate change effort.

“I need your continued support and passion to bring this company into this new era. We need to remember that we are not abandoning everything that is dear to us. Quite the contrary. We have created something very unique and special over the past century at Brooklyn

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Union and we intend to retain that uniqueness as we move into the future. We are a company that cares about its people, its customers, its stakeholders. That is not just talk; it is evident in the actions of our people every day, every week, every month, every year.

“Today is a time to honor and recollect what we were, a memorial to an era that is now concluding, an act of remembering, embracing, mourning, and moving on. And perhaps most important, it is an occasion to affirm that you are not going forward alone. We are in this together and we share all the anxieties and fears of the unknown. We may grieve individually, but we will move forward collectively and I am confident that the best is out there ahead of us.”

I stopped speaking for a moment before turning things over to Kenny. There was a long pause, that moment when it isn't clear if applause is warranted. I was glad for that moment because I really wanted this to have time to sink in, for people to know this wasn't some program du jour. By being here and putting my stamp of approval on the event, I was hoping to send a strong message.

The funeral, in the long run, had a strong impact. I admit that I was surprised at how effective it actually was. People still remember it, nearly 10 years later, as a turning point for the company. It spawned a company-wide initiative that we called Back to the Future in which, over the course of 18 months, we brought all the employees together, both management and union workers, for daylong meetings and workshops. Meeting in the morning with senior officers, the employees were asked to think about their past and their place in the company as well as the present and the future. In afternoon breakout sessions, they were encouraged to voice their fears, concerns, and feelings about where the company was heading. It provided a forum that the funeral had begun and a chance for employees to get comfortable with the coming changes.

The funeral was a turning point for Kenny and me. It cemented our relationship and gave me confidence that these kinds of efforts were well worth trying, no matter how nontraditional or off-the-wall. I began to believe that Kenny had something special in his ability to see ways to move the company forward. And I was smart enough to start to use that ability more and more.

The Monk



*A*s a man steeped in religious traditions, I know something about funerals. When I was a priest in the monastery I presided over many of them. All had taken place in the confines of a church and involved bestowing divine blessing upon the faithfully departed.

This one would be a bit different. It was held in a corporate auditorium, memorializing the demise of an old way of doing business. While some questioned the value of hosting a company funeral, to me it seemed like the natural thing to do. Rituals and ceremonies are part of the human experience and predate organized religion by thousands of years. You didn't need to be a monk to pull it off, but it probably couldn't hurt.

When life comes to an end, whether personal or corporate, we naturally want to mourn that loss, acknowledge our grief, and seek support from those around us. All this is healthy, for it heals the soul and helps us move forward productively. If I was able to assist my former parishioners with this task, I figured I was competent enough to do it for my present ones as well. Some habits die hard. In many regards, it was the same skill with just a different venue.

After Bob's introduction, I solemnly stepped to the podium dressed in my dark blue suit, the corporate equivalent of a Roman collar. For dramatic effect, I placed my priestly stole around my neck and switched on a tape of Gregorian chants to properly set the mood. I thought of burning some incense as well, but feared setting off the smoke alarm.

"Dearly beloved," I intoned. "We are gathered here today to bid farewell to our company's past. This century-old tradition has served us well; but alas, we must pay our respects and say good-bye." I looked

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around the audience and saw confused as well as bemused faces. Many employees wondered whether our life as a monopoly had truly come to an end. Senior management saw the writing on the wall, but many of the employees didn't. They wondered, why embark upon a change if everything seems to be going well? Death sometimes has a way of sneaking up on you like that. One day you're fine and feeling comfortable. The next day, rigor mortis sets in.

"Bob was right when he said things are changing," I continued, "and it starts not with a beginning but with an ending. Our former way of conducting business is dead, and attending a funeral is one timeless way of acknowledging that loss. As a company, if we can't say good-bye to the past, we won't be able to embrace the present. And we'll miss out on the future."

Having never hosted a *corporate* funeral before, I felt a bit ill at ease. But I was no worse off than the 400 employees before me who had never attended one either. "We embark upon this ceremony with a sense of reverence for all that has come before us. We must lay it to rest with dignity and respect."

Employees' reluctance to see the consequences of deregulation was the compelling reason I had used in convincing Bob to host this funeral in the first place. "Until we start publicly confronting their denial, we're not going to transform the culture," I had told him. Our workers would continue doing business as usual, believing that nothing had really changed. From a corporate perspective, we needed to make our executive business conversations more public. Only then could we hope to effect dramatic change. Involving large numbers of employees in these discussions creates momentum. Ultimately, workers will support only what they help create. So bringing them together to include them in the conversation is powerful. I had been able to convince Bob of this. I was hoping that today's ritual might be enough to sway the skeptical crowd before me as well.

"Grieving friends, it would be most appropriate at this time of our mourning to identify those things that are over for us as we bury our beloved past. I invite you to solemnly share with me those qualities,

behaviors, and business practices that must be buried—here and now—for us to successfully move into deregulation.”

On a table near the back of the stage, I had placed a small funeral urn and some blank index cards. I was ready to move into action. “What I’d like to do is write down on the cards some things that have ended for us as a company.” More empty stares from the crowd. “So, group. What’s over for us as a business?”

After what seemed like an eternity, one accountant spoke up: “You mean, like the loss of job security?” “Exactly,” I said and wrote it on the card and dropped it reverently into the funeral urn. “What else?” Slowly these reluctant mourners got into the swing of things, calling out other aspects of the business that were quickly becoming a thing of the past: guaranteed profits; lifetime employment; secure growth. One embittered supervisor even said that the future career of the “white male” was likewise a thing of the past. I wrote it all down and placed it in the urn without comment.

“Let us now pause for a prayerful moment of respectful silence for what has gone before us.” I scanned the auditorium and saw a sea of smiling faces, smirking yet engaged. Taking some “holy” water, I blessed the urn and explained that while our past needed to be interred with respect, deregulation was inviting us into an unknown future. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Bob smiling. I hoped he was feeling a bit more comfortable that he had opted to support this event.

As I turned off the Gregorian chants, the crowd grew silent. “Funerals not only acknowledge an ending, they also prepare us to move forward.” To represent the next phase of our corporate journey, the in-between time, I rolled onto the stage a replica of the *Santa Maria* from the art department’s Columbus Day display.

The boat signified the feeling of being disconnected, out there between ports, in this corporate transition. I reminded everyone that we could expect to feel very much like explorers on the high seas: nervous, scared, and insecure. Pulling a deflated life vest from beneath the podium, I grabbed a young engineer from the front row and placed

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it around his neck. “In uncharted waters, we’ll need to find ways to stay afloat. What might we as a company need to do to keep buoyant during our transition, as the business rules get rewritten?”

The audience began to get engaged in this drama of our corporate journey. They shouted out their answers. “Teamwork,” declared one employee, quickly followed by “Better use of technology.” I wrote them on the cards and now pasted them on the life vest to “inflate” it. The group got the idea. “Listening to customers can’t be overlooked,” offered a third. Soon the vest was covered with the future needs of the company.

We were now ready to move to the third and final part of our drama-journey: the new beginning. Since we didn’t yet know how deregulation was going to affect us, I wanted to use this last segment as a chance to do some visioning work. Pushing the *Santa Maria* aside, I brought out a large replica of a stork with a newborn babe in tow, borrowed from the company’s Valentine’s Day display. Sure, it was cheesy, but I had no budget for props.

“Even though our journey started with an ending, it inevitably brings us back to a beginning. Similar to the birth of a baby, there is still much uncertainty about how this new life will all play out.” I wanted to spend some time focusing on the future. Directing them to blank posters on the walls, I invited them to use their artistic skills and draw pictures of what they wanted Brooklyn Union’s future to look like.

“Use images and symbols to represent your thoughts.” Now eager to participate, people flocked to the posters and drew. Some executives even joined in with crude art and ready suggestions. One group drew a battle scene, with victorious employees taking the field. Another drew dollar bills floating down from the heavens with union workers getting their fair share of corporate profits. As I observed all this from the stage, Bob took the opportunity to walk around the auditorium to offer encouragement. We spent a few minutes hearing employees explain what their artistic renderings meant and then brought the meeting to a close.

“Similar to the birth of a baby, your drawings reflect our collective hope for Brooklyn Union’s future,” I concluded. “While there’s no guarantee that all this will transpire, it demonstrates our collective commitment to making it happen.” I raised my hand in final benediction and turned the meeting back to Bob, who gave his closing comments and invited the group for refreshments in an adjacent conference room.

As I left the auditorium, the chief financial officer pulled me aside: “I have two things to say to you,” he said. “One: You have some set of balls! And two: I’m not sure anyone else but you could have pulled this off.” I took it as a compliment, of sorts.

Bob was pleased with the funeral. It was unorthodox, but it had sparked the kind of discussion we would need to move forward. It was indeed just a beginning.

Three years earlier, when I first started working with him, the focus was on helping his leadership team embrace change. Working on the executive floor was a bit different than working in a monastery. When I was behind the cloistered walls 50 percent of the people thought they were divinely inspirited. In business, the number was up to 80 percent. Nonetheless, my job was to help these executives develop business goals to drive the company into the future. They were tied to an incentive compensation plan. Meet the goals and there was a payout; miss the mark and money would be lost.

In sitting with the senior officers to set their goals, I regularly witnessed discussions of Bob’s performance. Often their remarks focused on his shortcomings. Much of what was said I chalked up to corporate sibling rivalry and petty carping. Yet a few of their gripes seemed to strike at the heart of effective leadership. “He wants our opinions, but spends little time listening to our replies,” someone said. Another moaned: “If he doesn’t agree with your alternate plan, there’s no room for discussion.” Several lamented: “He sometimes gets preachy; when that happens the group turns him off.” I realized that I had been a bit naive to think that sermonizing affected only the clergy.

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Believing that Bob would benefit from hearing these comments, I brought it up at our next update meeting. “What I’m about to say falls into a ‘take it for what it’s worth’ category. I’d recommend that you take no immediate action. Simply listen. If anything strikes you as worthwhile, do with it what you want.

“Your executive team thinks that some of the things you do get in the way.” He looked quizzical. I summarized their frustrations and continued on. “You ask a lot of questions, but don’t have time to listen to the answers. Some see you as aggressive when dealing with those you disagree with.”

“Aggressive? How so?” he asked me.

“I’ve been told that if you can add the words ‘You jerk!’ to the end of a sentence, you’re being aggressive. Sometimes your staff experiences you that way.” I spoke of other traits that I felt compromised his management style, all with the religious compassion that my spiritual guides of old had used on me.

“Anything else on your mind?” Bob inquired.

I was already in deep, so I continued. I knew that many employees remained ignorant of the challenges facing the company as well as Bob’s plan of response. There was a need to get him out of his executive office, to spend more time among the workers. The way I saw it, Bob’s business agenda had many of the same characteristics as organized religion. If he wanted to change the company and get employees to believe, he’d be required to spend more time with them. The early church fathers used to say that religion is caught, not taught. To garnish employee passion and commitment, direct contact with the “faithful” would be required.

In medieval times, the followers of Saint Francis of Assisi wanted to know what to do when they took to the streets. “Tell everybody about the love of God,” Saint Francis advised. “If necessary, use words.” The business world calls this “walking the talk.” But for me, it had its origin several centuries ago. I believed Bob would be well served by following Saint Francis’ advice.

“You have thousands of employees out there who need to be di-

rectly tied to your vision. Focusing executives on the right goals is only part of the solution.” I knew that there were many cynics who required conversion in order for this venture to succeed.

“Consider yourself like Moses. You’re freeing the people from a perilous past and trying to bring them to a future promised land. And that probably will include some time wandering around in the desert.” When Moses led the Jews out of Egypt, he walked with them, talked to them, and listened to them. “It seems to me that’s the kind of thing you should be doing if you want to move the company into the future.”

Aware of Bob’s silence during my monologue, I looked up. He remained quiet for a while. A long while. I wondered if I had overstepped my bounds. “You know, Kenny,” he finally said, “there’s some truth to what you say. I’m not opposed to changing some of my behaviors. Unlike you, I don’t spend a lot of time examining my conscience. So maybe it’s a good idea for you to keep me informed. But don’t expect me to always be a model penitent. I still have a business to run and a corporate culture to change.” I was surprised at his candor.

“And while I’m no Moses, I get your point about the need to stay in touch with the ordinary workers. Sometimes I feel removed from their day-to-day experiences and need to reconnect. I’m also concerned that some negative things are being kept from me. You know, the fear employees have in being the bearer of bad news. Maybe you can also help me here?” Obviously, I wasn’t shy about sharing bad news.

“I might be inclined to help,” I told him, but I was also concerned. “I don’t want to position myself as a spy. As you know, some people speak to me almost under the seal of confession and I’m not interested in violating those confidences. But I do see a lot—both good and bad—and I’d be willing to share my counsel with you.”

I offered my services as his intermediary. I also offered him my candor and directness. “Please understand, whatever I say is more my perception than any dogmatic truth. The last time I looked, only God

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had cornered the market on that.” But I believed that we were sitting on a world of great possibilities, with employees who were talented and committed. If we could tap into the wealth of their passion, I felt the company’s future would be brighter. “I’m willing to work with you on this.”

Bob was pleased. “I like your unique perspectives and refreshing insights,” he said. “Besides, I get the feeling that people trust you and your opinions. It might be worthwhile for us to continue these ‘take it for what it’s worth’ conversations on a regular basis.”

He asked that I schedule regular meetings to keep these conversations going. A part of me was wondering what exactly I had gotten myself into. As I got up to leave, I offered him one final bit of advice: “Just a reminder, Bob. It took Moses 40 years to lead the Jews to the promised land. I don’t think you have that much time. You’d better start praying now.”

At dinner that night, my wife Cyndi asked: “So, how did your day go?” “Just fine,” I said, feeling pretty good about the course of events. “I had a chance to meet with Bob and tell him about some of his management flaws. I also shared with him how he’s contributing to the problems on the executive floor and what’s ticking off some of the employees. All in all, I thought the meeting went well.”

With the insight of a seasoned businesswoman and the affection of a beloved spouse, she warmly replied: “You said *what?* To *whom?* Are you crazy? You don’t do things like that in business! Need I remind you that we have bills to pay and a big mortgage hanging over our heads? Please stop experimenting with stupid ideas—you’ll get yourself fired. Just keep your mouth shut and do what they tell you.”

I tried to interpret her comments favorably. But it was difficult. My 15 years of celibacy had not adequately prepared me for the wrath of a woman with an MBA in finance.

In some regards, business is a lot like the Church. Change creates unmet needs, and those who can address them have a greater chance of getting their talents used. In institutions undergoing change, when unfounded rumors fly furiously, there is a select market niche for

someone who can be trusted by all sides to help sift the wheat from the chaff. A person who has the corporate common good at heart and is not disposed to sell his soul for monetary gains could be a useful catalyst. This was a niche I was willing to fill.

Thus began this unique relationship between Bob and myself, which has lasted for over a decade. It was an odd union—a hard-driving CEO and a slightly damaged but enthusiastic former monk. It was not a marriage made in heaven, but rather one forged in the marketplace. It was not a typical business relationship. But it was salutary.

