

PREFACE

FOR 1,500 YEARS monasteries all over the world have been calling men and women to a life of prayer and work according to the Rule of St. Benedict. The monastic motto *ora et labora* (“pray and work”) tells us that these twin pillars of the monastic life are of equal importance—so much so, in fact, that for a Trappist monk, work is a form of prayer and prayer is a form of work. But while many authors, like Thomas Merton, have taken us behind the cloister walls to explore monastic prayer, very little has been written about the “work” half of the monastic equation. Similarly, although much has been written about the tremendous intellectual debt that Western civilization owes monasticism for preserving Greek philosophy and drama during the Dark Ages, very few have explored the highly successful business methodologies that the monks have preserved and prospered by for centuries.

This book takes a step toward redressing this imbalance by bringing these neglected monastic business secrets to light and sharing them with a wider world. This is not a disinterested academic treatise on monastic business practices; rather, it is a highly

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personal, nuts-and-bolts account of the business lessons I have learned over seventeen years while living and working with the monks of Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner, South Carolina, as a frequent monastic guest. Further, by incorporating case studies drawn from my own career and from the example of other successful companies and organizations, I hope to show you how to apply these monastic lessons to a secular marketplace in order to run a more profitable business and have a more successful career. Perhaps what is more important, I believe that if you take these lessons to heart, you will also enjoy a more meaningful and satisfying personal life. I feel fairly safe in making these assertions because I know that these Trappist secrets don't work just for monks; they worked for me as well.

Most of my monastic research was conducted firsthand while getting my hands dirty working alongside the monks, but I'm not alone in my fascination with the business success of the Trappists. An article in *USA Today* about the beer-brewing Belgian monks of St. Sixtus Abbey provides a wonderful three-sentence summary of Trappist business success, saying: "Piety, not profit, is what these monks seek. The St. Sixtus monks break every rule in Business 101 except attention to quality. And therein may lie the secret to their success."

At first glance this analysis may seem woefully incomplete. Of course delivering a quality product is crucial to the success of a business, but what about pricing, positioning, accounting, human resources, cash management, distribution, marketing, procurement, competition, R&D, customer support, government regulations, patent protection, and access to capital? All these things (and many more) are also necessary—not only for producing a quality product in the first place but for making sure that this product can consistently find a market. However, a closer consideration of the phrase "attention to quality" should help us overcome these qualms. Quality doesn't just apply to the relative merits of what are commonly referred to as "products." Attention to quality also

implies a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to business, and it is only through this much larger lens that we can begin to see how the monks regularly break the rules of Business 101 and do it so successfully.

For more than a hundred years, the dominant trends in business have been quantitative and analytic. In 1911 Frederick Taylor published his seminal *Principles of Scientific Management*, and ever since then economists, consultants, pundits, and legions of business-school professors have been trying to wrest business from the clutches of art in the hope of turning it into a science. Unfortunately, the significant dividends that this quantitative approach has produced have often come at the expense of the more qualitative aspects of business—things like mission, purpose, values, principles, integrity, ethics, service, and people, which, the monks would argue, are even more critical to success. These qualitative aspects of business are what the monks have mastered, and the author of the *USA Today* article aptly sums up all this monastic know-how with a single word: *piety*.

Piety comes from the Latin word for “duty,” and according to Webster’s dictionary, piety in its broadest sense encompasses the duty we owe to parents, country, and our fellow man, and to any noble undertaking that transcends our purely selfish motivations. For Trappist monks, seeking “piety, not profit” means faithfully paying attention to the sacred duty they owe not only to God but to their customers, lay employees, vendors, local community, each other, the environment, and mankind in general. It is the dutiful, or “prayerful,” way in which the monks attend to these qualitative aspects of business that is the overarching secret to their success. And the paradoxical theme that runs throughout this book is that the monks are successful not *despite* the fact that they seek piety, not profits, but *because* they do.

Nothing in this book denigrates the quantitative approach to business or treats it as something superfluous. As a business executive and entrepreneur, I’ve spent countless hours poring over

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spreadsheets, flowcharts, research, and “the numbers” generally, and I know some monks who are second to none in this regard. Yet if one of the purposes of this book is to redress the imbalance between prayer and work in the world’s appraisal of monasticism, another is to redress the gross imbalance between the quantitative and qualitative approaches to business.

I use the phrase *service and selflessness* to describe the monastic business model throughout this book, and the key to successfully applying this Trappist model to our secular business challenges is authenticity. *Authenticity* is the latest business buzzword: we hear of authentic businesses, authentic leadership, authentic products, and authentic brands. But while often positioned as the “next big thing” in business, authenticity is nothing new to the monks: Trappist monks have been building authentic businesses, leaders, brands, and products for more than a thousand years. Trappist authenticity shows up in three distinct areas of the monastic way of life and business, and throughout this book, we will be returning again and again to these crucial areas. The first is mission, the second is personal transformation, and the third is community.

Mission

A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO business means articulating a high, overarching mission worthy of being piously served. To be authentic, this mission must genuinely drive the decision making that in turn determines even the tiniest activities of the enterprise. Trappist monks don’t *have* a mission, something to be kept safely tucked in a drawer until the annual meeting rolls around or someone innocently asks about it. Instead the monks *live* their mission every single day. It is this critical distinction that is so often missing in our secular organizations—and in our personal lives as well.

Personal Transformation

AUTHENTICITY IS NOT a technique that can be mastered and then manipulated for our own ends. It is not something we can turn on and off at a moment's notice as the situation requires. Authentic businesses, leaders, brands, and products can only be created by authentic people, and that is exactly why the monks are so good at it. In the *USA Today* article, the St. Sixtus brewmaster, Brother Joris, is quoted as saying, "You do not become a saint just by entering a monastery." *Saintliness* is just a religious term for authenticity, and the monastic way of life is designed to take ordinary people and transform them into authentic individuals. One of the secrets to the monks' success is that they value personal authenticity above everything else. The authentic brands, products, and leaders that the Trappists produce are merely the by-products of this continual movement toward authenticity. If we want the business benefits that only authenticity can bestow, we must first become authentic individuals. Just how to make this happen in a secular world and in a secular way is a large part of what this book offers.

Community

TRAPPIST BUSINESS SUCCESS RELIES on the cooperative lubrication that only an authentic community can provide. The Trappist mission and individual drive toward authenticity would amount to little were it not for the monks' unwavering commitment to community. It is the constant mutual reinforcement and beneficial peer pressure of community that keeps the monastic mission front and center and does most of the heavy lifting involved in personal transformation.

But the communal commitment that drives the Trappist way of life is not circumscribed by the cloister walls that enclose the

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monastery. The Trappists' communal embrace encompasses customers, retreatants, government regulators, their neighbors in the local community, and—through ceaseless prayer—all of us. All these constituencies are authentically treated as “brothers and sisters,” and this is a critical component of Trappist business success.

The Trappist commitment to mission, individual transformation, and community are all intertwined; these three elements feed back on each other in a virtuous cycle that produces what we often describe in business as “culture.” Once again, it is the critical distinction between an authentic culture and an inauthentic culture that makes all the difference to success. Creating and maintaining an authentic business culture is fraught with difficulty, but how to do it is perhaps the most important thing you will learn from the monks you meet in this book.

The Greek philosopher Archimedes famously said, “Give me a long enough lever and a place to stand, and I will move the world.” The same might be said of the business, professional, and personal “leverage” the Trappists have to offer us all if we take their secrets to heart.



THE PROBLEM WITH LIFE is that it must be lived forward and only understood backward. When I first drove through the gates of Mepkin Abbey back in 1996, the last thing on my mind was writing a book on Trappist business acumen. I was the CEO of a software start-up undergoing the most severe personal crisis of my life, and I was turning to the monks for the psychological and spiritual help that I so sorely needed and which they so graciously provided. I owe so much more than just this book to the monks of Mepkin Abbey.

It was only eight years later and entirely by accident that I began writing about the monks of Mepkin. In 1987 I started an organization called the Self Knowledge Symposium (SKS) to help college students at local universities answer the perennial ques-

tion, What is the life worth living? In 2004 a former student got in touch to suggest that I write an essay for the John Templeton Foundation's Power of Purpose essay contest, but when I clicked on the link embedded in his e-mail, I was dismayed. In 3,500 words or less, I had to answer the question, What is the purpose of life? I'd never written anything for publication before, and the contest was open to professional writers and previously published material. Worse, the deadline for submissions for the yearlong contest was barely a week away.

I took a crack at it anyway, but after several days of head scratching, I had nothing to show for my efforts but a mountain of crumpled paper and false starts. I was venting my frustration over the phone with another former student when he suggested, "Hell, Auggie, why don't you just write up that story about Brother John and Mepkin Abbey that you love telling so much?"

After a couple days of frantic writing, I submitted my essay a few hours before the deadline and then forgot about it, only to get a phone call six months later: my essay, "Brother John," had won the grand prize and \$100,000 besides. I was so shell-shocked that it took the caller a full five minutes to convince me I had actually won.

Several years later and almost on a whim, I decided to write what amounted to a white paper on the business lessons I'd learned from the monks over the years. Although not intended for publication, it found its way to Fred Allen, the leadership editor for Forbes.com, and he asked for permission to publish it as a four-part article. The article, "Business Secrets of the Trappists," was very successful, and it was Fred Allen who urged me to turn the article into a book. And it was another happy accident—a chance meeting between a friend and my wonderful publisher, Myles Thompson—that led me to Columbia University Press and all the amazing people there who made this book possible.

It was a long series of largely serendipitous events that turned me into a writer, and herein lies another important secret that the monks have to teach. In the manner of the monks of St. Sixtus, I

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have broken every rule of *How to Become a Writer 101*, and throughout this book I argue that authentic success—whether personal, professional, or organizational—is usually only the by-product, the trailing indicator, of serving a mission that is bigger than yourself. The Trappist lesson here is that you cannot “game the system” that the monks have to offer. If your goal in reading this book is to find a shortcut to success by merely imitating the monks and their business strategies, you will find little of value. Above all else the secret to duplicating Trappist success lies in sincerity—or at least a sincere desire to become a more sincere person in every aspect of your life.

I have worked very hard throughout this book to apply Trappist principles in a nondogmatic, nonsectarian, and nonreligious way. I sincerely believe that that these Trappist secrets will work for you whether you are a believer or not—as long as your heart is in “the right place.” I would be less than candid, however, if I did not reveal that I believe there is something to the Trappist business model that transcends any “formula,” no matter how well that formula may be articulated. We golfers like to say that the secret to a great round is “just let the hole get in the way of the ball,” and this is just a golfer’s version of the religious admonition to “let go and let God.” Trappist monks don’t just make success happen; they also let success happen, and this may be the deepest and most profound secret they have to share. You can call it grace if you are so inclined, or luck if you’re not, but there is something almost magical about the Trappist Way that seems to attract success whether you are a monk or not. Looking back over all the happy accidents that led to this book and so much of my own business success, I can clearly see this Trappist grace (or luck) at work. As a result I must confess that I have become a “true believer,” and that perhaps my most important goal in writing this book is my hope that you may learn how to invite this Trappist magic into your own life and business ventures as well.

BUSINESS SECRETS
of the
TRAPPIST MONKS



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THE ECONOMIC MIRACLE OF MEPKIN ABBEY

LOCATED JUST OUTSIDE Charleston, South Carolina, the 3,132 oak-studded acres that make up Our Lady of Mepkin Abbey roll gently toward the Atlantic Ocean. Early each morning except Sunday, right after the fourth daily monastic service, Terce, I'd borrow a bicycle from the monastery's pool and, surrounded by four or five Trappist monks and their wind-whipped habits, I'd pedal off for Mepkin Abbey's "eggery," or grading house. With the rising sun shimmering off the Cooper River, my mile-long bike ride through fragrant gardens, moss-strewn live oaks, and cool salt air would just about lift the last vestige of drowsiness left over from rising for Vigils at three o'clock in the morning. At the grading house, I would join Father Malachy at the end of the line just in time to watch Brother Nick flip the switch that brought the clattering conveyor to life. Soon the recently harvested eggs from 40,000 of Brother Joseph's pampered poultry would be snaking their way around the cavernous concrete-block building. At stations along the slowly moving conveyor, the eggs were cleaned, checked for imperfections, graded from small to jumbo, put into cartons, and

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