Bringing the Sacred Into Work

Living Your Connection to Something Bigger at Work

Why Bring Something Bigger to Work?

Building something new is one of the great creative acts of a life. Yes, it is a lot of work. It can also be exhilarating: the idea that wakes you early, the first customer who says yes, the team that starts finishing each other's sentences. That aliveness is a taste of Something Bigger moving through you, and it is worth protecting.

Most of us run our working lives from the analytical mind, and it tends to overfunction. It plans, measures and solves around the clock, often brilliantly. What it leaves out is everything that won't fit in a spreadsheet: the gut knowing before a deal goes sideways, the heart that tells you a decision is right, the creative spark that shows up in the shower, the sense that you belong to something larger than your company. Left in charge on its own, the analytical mind grows cramped, and so do you.

We tend to split life in two: the sacred for weekends and retreats, the mundane for the office. The Taoist symbol of yin and yang offers another picture. Each half curls into the other, and each carries a dot of its opposite at its center. The sacred lives inside the spreadsheet, and the spreadsheet inside the sacred. Success that lasts, at work and at home, grows from a whole and integrated life.

Lean too hard on either side and life tips. All mundane, and work hardens into a grind that hollows you out, however well it pays. All sacred, and insight floats above the ground, with payroll unmet and promises unkept. The Buddha taught the Middle Way, a path between the extremes of indulgence and harsh self-denial. For a founder, the Middle Way might mean a sharp spreadsheet and a reverent heart at the same desk.

Connection to Something Bigger changes how the weight sits. Leading can be lonely, and the hardest calls land on you. When you feel held by something larger, you are no longer carrying it all by yourself. Hard decisions steady, and setbacks find their proper size.

It also widens what success means. Financial growth matters, and it was never meant to be the only measure. The Kingdom of Bhutan guides its policy by Gross National Happiness, weighing psychological well-being, health, time use, community vitality and the environment alongside living standards. A founder can do the same: count whether your team is thriving, whether your family sees you, whether your work leaves the world better and whether you recognize your own heart in what you have built.

What We Mean by Something Bigger

This is not about religion. It is about a sense of connection to Something Bigger. Some people call it the universe, Spirit or God. For others it lives in their ancestors, the living earth, love or a mystery they have no name for. Many of the questions that keep founders and practitioners up at night go deeper than strategy: questions of purpose, belonging, right action and what we owe the people who depend on us. Most of us were taught to leave our souls in the parking lot when we face them.

You Have Felt It Before

Think back to a moment like one of these:

- Sitting in front of the ocean, when your breathing slowed to the pace of the waves and your worries shrank to their true size.
- Standing at the rim of a canyon or the end of a long climb, feeling small in a way that came as a relief.
- Holding a newborn, or sitting with someone you loved as they died, when time itself seemed to open.
- Hearing music swell until something in your chest gave way.
- Cooking from a grandparent's recipe and sensing them in the kitchen with you.
- A meeting or a game where everyone clicked and the work seemed to flow through all of you at once.

In moments like these the body softens and the mind widens, and you know yourself as part of something larger. That expansiveness and calm belong at work too.

Bringing It to Work

The invitation is to let that ocean-sized feeling into an ordinary Tuesday.

- **Ask the larger question.** When a decision is hard, ask what would serve the whole, including people not in the room and those who come after you.
- **Check your body's yes and no.** Before you sign or launch, sense where your body opens and where it tightens.
- **Remember who came before you.** Before a hard decision, picture the people whose work made yours possible, a mentor or a parent who never had your chances, and let them steady you.
- **Honor endings.** When a project closes or a colleague leaves, pause for thanks and farewell instead of moving straight on.

Micro-Meditations for a Cramped Mind

When the analytical part of you has been gripping all day, two minutes can open the room again. Get inventive.

- **Ocean in your earbuds.** Play the sound of waves, let each exhale lengthen as a wave pulls back, and picture the horizon widening behind your eyes.
- **A lava lamp on the shelf.** Its slow rising and folding echoes the molten beginnings of the earth. A minute of watching can loosen a mind that has been holding on too hard.
- **Earth on your screen.** Astronauts describe a lasting shift in perspective, called the overview effect, after seeing the whole planet at once. Make a photo of Earth from space your background and borrow a pocket-sized version before you answer a tense email.
- **A fossil in your palm.** Hold something the earth took millions of years to make. Your deadline matters, and it can also find its proper size.
- **Hand on heart.** Breathe in for four counts and out for six, and invite Something Bigger to sit in on your next meeting.

For leaders, connection to Something Bigger is something to live and never something to require. Your team holds many beliefs, and US law protects employees from pressure to join religious practice at work. Use language everyone can enter, like purpose, gratitude and care, and let others follow at their own pace.

When a Part of You Says No

If something in you bristled, welcome it. Protective parts have good reasons.

- **“This isn’t scientific.”** A science-trained part keeps you honest, and it deserves thanks. It may also be leaving out a kind of knowing that science is only beginning to measure: the gut sense before a bad hire, the felt rightness of a decision, the way a room changes when someone tells the truth. Wise leaders use both.
- **“I’ve been hurt by religion.”** If faith was used to shame, control or frighten you, a part of you may slam the door on anything that smells of it. That part is protecting you. Connection to Something Bigger asks for no doctrine, no authority and no one standing between you and what you hold dear.
- **“This will make me look soft.”** Many leaders fear that meaning and reverence read as weakness. In practice, people follow leaders who know what they stand for.

What the Research Shows

- **Awe.** In an eight-week study at UC San Francisco, older adults took a weekly 15-minute walk with the simple intention of feeling awe. Compared with people who simply walked, they grew in compassion and gratitude and felt less distress. In the selfies they took along the way, they placed themselves smaller against the view, and their smiles grew bigger.
- **Connection.** A spiritual life goes with better mental health. In a review of research through 2010, psychiatrist Dr. Harold Koenig found greater well-being in 79% of 326 studies and less depression in 61% of 444 studies.
- **Meaningful work.** A meta-analysis of 44 studies and more than 23,000 workers found that people who experience their work as meaningful are more engaged and committed, and report better health and greater satisfaction with life.
- **Imagination.** You already rehearse a pitch in your head or picture a hard conversation going well. In a small Cleveland Clinic study, people who only imagined pressing a finger outward, 15 minutes a day for 12 weeks, grew about 35% stronger. Doing it consciously is the practice.
- **Belief and care.** Belief measurably changes how people feel, especially pain and mood. In one study of 262 people, 44% reported relief from a sham treatment, and 62% did when the same sham treatment came with warmth, attention and confidence. Ritual, relationship and meaning make healing larger, and those are what sacred practice tends.

Much of this research studied faith communities, since they are easy to count. What it points to is open to anyone: belonging, meaning and a relationship with Something Bigger that feels loving rather than punishing.

Questions for Reflection

- Where have I felt connected to Something Bigger, and how could I bring that feeling into my workweek?
- When did my work last feel like an offering?
- Which decision in front of me needs a larger question?
- How would I measure success if money were only one of the measures?
- What would the people who come after me thank me for?

Calling on Support

Belonging is a large part of why connection to the sacred helps. A Harvard study followed more than 100,000 nurses and other health professionals; women who gathered weekly

with a faith community were 68% less likely, and men 33% less likely, to die of suicide or drug or alcohol use than those who never did.

You can widen that circle beyond people. Watch geese pass overhead, trading the lead so no single bird tires. Rest your palm on the pale bark of an aspen and remember that a whole grove can rise from one shared root. Cup a warm mug in the first light and let the steam carry a word of thanks. Call on an ancestor who prayed as they worked, a weaver at her loom or a farmer blessing the field before planting, and ask them to stand behind you at your desk. Picture the future you who looks back on this season of work with pride. Then hand the outcome to the Great Mystery, which was holding your work long before you began it.

When We Work Together

Bringing a felt connection to Something Bigger into work life is at the heart of how I work with founders, executives and practitioners. Together we tend the parts of you that learned to leave your soul in the parking lot, so your deepest purpose can lead the way you work.

Free Resources

- *UCSF, "'Awe Walks' Boost Emotional Well-Being" (2020): ucsf.edu/news/2020/09/418551/awe-walks-boost-emotional-well-being*
- *Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies, "Gross National Happiness": bhutanstudies.org.bt/gross-national-happiness*
- *Harold Koenig, "Religion, Spirituality, and Health: The Research and Clinical Implications" (2012): pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3671693/*
- *Ted Kaptchuk and colleagues, "Components of placebo effect," BMJ (2008): pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2364862/*
- *Related handouts: Visualization Research and The Art of Accomplishment.*

Influences and Credits

- *Research: Virginia Sturm and colleagues (2020) on awe walks; Harold Koenig (2012); Blake Allan and colleagues (2019) on meaningful work; Vinoth Ranganathan and colleagues (2004) on mental training; Ted Kaptchuk and colleagues (2008) on the placebo response; Gene Ano and Erin Vasconcelles (2005) on religious coping; Ying Chen, Tyler VanderWeele and colleagues (2020) on belonging.*
- *Gross National Happiness comes from the Kingdom of Bhutan.*
- *Parts and Self come from Internal Family Systems, developed by Dr. Richard Schwartz. Calling on the support of the living world and the unseen comes from Neoshamanic IFS (NIFS), the approach I practice and teach.*