Heavenly inspiration works wonders

Spirituality can have a role in the workplace, plus the Office Therapy advice column

As we head towards the seasonal break, I’ve been to several carol services and concerts, including the FT’s own event at St Bride’s, the journalists’ church on Fleet Street. Our impressive staff choir performed alongside St Bride’s resident professional singers (listen to the latter here.)
Workplaces have their own rhythms and quirks, and sometimes it’s good to step back and celebrate them. I’d love to hear about what traditions you value — email me at isabel.berwick@ft.com.

Read on for more about higher powers at work, and in Office Therapy, I advise someone struggling with a relentlessly upbeat colleague 😟.

What can we learn from those who work, rest — and pray?

We don’t normally “do” religion and spirituality on Working It. There are good reasons for this. British readers may remember that in 2003, then-prime minister Tony Blair was prevented from talking about his faith by spin-doctor Alastair Campbell, who reminded him that: “We don’t do God.”

The phrase became famous. Two decades later, religion is talked about more often in British politics — but is almost always off-limits in the office. It’s probably easier to talk to colleagues about money and politics — maybe even sex 😳 — than about religious beliefs. (Do tell me if your workplace differs.)

At the very least, we should reassess how and where religion and spirituality fit into modern workplaces. All of this should be a part of diversity, equity and inclusion strategies but it has too often been overlooked. Almost no one pitches me “good news” DEI stories that focus on an employer/client being inclusive of staff of different faiths as well as none.
Why this silence? Are we all . . . just embarrassed? I speak for myself here: I do sometimes go to Anglican services. FT HQ is next to St Paul’s Cathedral, the most awe-inspiring church interior in the UK. But I don’t talk about it, except with close colleagues 🤫.

I asked David Miller, director of the Princeton University Faith and Work Initiative, why faith and spirituality is such a non-topic at work. David says: “These are either non-topics or known-but-avoided topics. And, understandably, sometimes for good reasons. For those who are not spiritually or religiously oriented, it is often not on their radar screen that these may be very important topics to others who are.”

And there is certainly a discomfort/embarrassment factor. David confirms that religion is still taboo. “Gradually, each of the three public taboos [politics, sex and religion] are being dismantled. My research and others demonstrate that the third taboo, religion, is the final one to fall.” But it can and does fall — and that’s largely driven by employees. As David says: “Companies who have embraced faith and work have found higher levels of employee attraction and retention.”

And if you are asking your staff to “bring your whole self to work” — then part of that self may include a religious commitment. Some employers do already make positive attempts to be inclusive about religion. At Deloitte, the Big Four consultancy, there are multifaith rooms across the UK, and five diversity networks for Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh staff. Staff can also choose to “flex” Christmas so they can take the break at a more meaningful time for their own traditions.

David is a member of the Faith and Media Initiative Coalition, a US non-profit group that collaborated on a big recent report with Gallup, *Faith and Wellness: The Worldwide Connection Between Spirituality and Wellbeing*. He says the standout finding was that “a growing body of medical and psychological research demonstrates that people with a stronger spiritual or faith commitment often have better health and wellbeing outcomes than those without such a devotion”.

Some of the reasons for this are highlighted in my colleague Camilla Cavendish’s recent FT article, headlined: “The restorative power of observance should not be underestimated.” As Camilla says, you don’t have to believe in the afterlife to benefit from faith rituals, and “unlike the wellness bloggers and the style gurus, they’re not selling a utopia that is bound to disappoint”.

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Camilla’s thoughts resonated with a lot of readers. We may not talk openly about faith, religion, higher powers — call them what you will. But we certainly do think about our need for connection and transcendence, and crave it. Faith, though, is just one route into this. As reader *European American* writes in the comments under the article: “Join a choir. That is all you need to do if you want to find community and spiritual wellbeing. It doesn’t even matter if you can’t sing.” 🎶

*Has your workplace found a way to support faith and spiritual belief as part of its DEI strategy? Or should faith be kept away from the office? All thoughts welcome: isabel.berwick@ft.com*

**This week on the Working It podcast**

I often recommend the work of *Arthur C Brooks*, whose writing explores the subject of later-life careers, purpose and happiness. So I was delighted to talk to Arthur about his ideas on *this week’s Working It podcast*, alongside the extremely wise Michael Skapinker.

It is clearly time to retire the concept of “retirement” 🙋🏻‍♂️ — few people want to stop work completely at 60 or 65. But when should we (by we, I mean the many FT readers who are in big jobs) shift gears away from the successful corporate career? And how do you even start to think about such a scary thing? Listen — and find out why being busy is not all it’s cracked up to be.

**Office Therapy**

**The problem:** Someone new on my team is driving me into a hole. Not through being unpleasant. Far from it. They are unflaggingly enthusiastic. Everything is ‘brilliant’. Every Slack message gets an affirming emoji. I want to reply with 😫. I feel SO childish. Any advice?

**Isabel’s advice:** It’s Christmas, so let’s be charitable. We’ve previously discussed here the scourge of (as my kids say) “Debbie Downer” colleagues and how their misery spreads as easily as melted butter. An upbeat person does not have the same cumulative effect.

Having said that, I understand your feelings. While journalism isn’t known for attracting sunny characters 😄, I’ve come across a few people over the years who have overwhelmed with their positivity. They make me 😫, too.