

## Nevitt Sanford Symposium Keynote Speech

Catherine Hartshorn, Ph.D.  
Sandplay for Life

Tonight we are embarking together on a field trip. We are meeting in the name of Nevitt Sanford whose values and thinking will provide the compass for our exploration together.

To me, Nevitt was about love, courage and clear thinking. That provides the backbone of Meridian Group's work and for our work together the next few days.

Love in the workplace. My partner, Royal Foote, dared to use the word "love" at Anheuser-Busch in the early 80's, and the business culture in the U.S. was not yet ready for such a word. Love: the forbidden "four-letter" word in an analytic culture. There are still very few clients where we can use the word today. Royal and I have been experimenting at one client site; we risk using the word "love" every 5-6 months...and I am happy to report that we have not yet been thrown out.

Love is what makes the world run. Love is not sappy or touchy-feely. It is hard work. It is rigorous, and it demands individual maturity. Love demands patience. It means daring to care about another human being and her experience, to be open, to listen, to be demanding the best from that person. It means being vulnerable, because if we are open enough to care, we might get hurt.

And that leads to courage. It takes courage to love someone. At one client, we had managed to get them to have open conversations with each other in a systematic way. The first meeting after starting that process, one fellow said, "This is dangerous. You start caring about the person."

What we ask people to do, and what Nevitt asked of people, *is* dangerous. It is dangerous not only because you start caring, but it is dangerous because often the culture asks us *not* to care. The culture demands that we stereotype and distance people. It is often safer to hold the view that "Those hourly people don't understand finance," than it is to say, "Let's see what the hourly people think about it." A union boss demonstrates courage by talking openly with management because he then risks accusations of "getting into bed with management." Our cultures ask us not to use our humanity at work. It is often safer to see groups as adversaries rather than as friends.

Love, courage and clear thinking.

There is no point in courageous battles over the wrong issues or at the wrong times. Nevitt was on my dissertation committee and taught me a lot about clear thinking. I can easily picture him, the vision of the wise old man with his pipe and sitting his rocking chair. ("I keep loaning my books out to students and faculty, and then end up losing them. ...Of course, there is little evidence they have been read.")

Nevitt was a systems thinker who expected to us to look at the environment first to understand behavior, and then to look at ourselves and to be responsible for our thoughts, actions and projections. He asked a great deal of mental sophistication, discipline, and action in the world.

Mentally, he asked that we hold contradictory ideas together and see the relationships between them. That we not reach conclusions even if we want to — and even when the conclusions seem self-evident. He asked that we discipline ourselves not to act on our impulses which inevitably carry the "old" culture, simply because we're human and it was our upbringing. It is our responsibility to change our culture, to demonstrate good values — to carry the best and to pull for the best from others. Nevitt did not stop with understanding or self-awareness; he demanded action. Nevitt was a proponent for "action research" — create a working hypothesis, find a relatively safe place to pilot it, see what you learn. And then try again.

Nevitt focused on the in-between, the relationships, rather than fragments. It made his career movements harder because he could not easily be classified as either a psychologist or a sociologist. Schools, like corporations,

prefer to have functions and divisions clear-cut rather than fuzzy. I am glad that we have representatives of both the educational and the corporate worlds here for this Symposium, and it is our plan always to do so.

Nevitt was an academic, but spent time in industry and saw corporations as mighty engines for social change. In fact, we now think that *only* profit-making corporations have the leverage to take a leadership role in improving the human face of capitalism. More than any other institution, the profit-making corporation brings people face-to-face with responsibility for their behavior. But that is another talk.

Nevitt insisted that the person be the center of any academic discipline. The person, as a purposeful human being, with passions and fears, is left out of most business literature today, and is even left out of sociology and psychology. If we keep the person in our thinking, it requires us to deal with the complexity of human beings.

Nevitt wrote The Authoritarian Personality in 1952, and it continues to provide a foundation today for thinking about a person's relationship to authority, a major issue in all corporations. A later book, Sanctions for Evil (1971) helps me understand some of what I run up against in corporate cultures where we consult. The "sanction for evil" of which Nevitt speaks is the alliance of the superego and the id — acting out punishing impulses in the name of the higher good. "I don't want to fire you, but rules are rules, you know."

In very subtle and insidious ways many corporations give permission to humiliate people. People are allowed to behave in ways that are hurtful to others, simply to satisfy a need to dominate or control. When I joined Meridian Group, I was lucky that my first introduction to a client system was a meeting at the end of a calendar year, and where my partners, Terry, Barry and Royal had already been consulting for over a year. The management team was looking back over the past year and assessing it, and looking forward to the next year and planning for it.

They all agreed that, prior to Meridian Group coming in to help them open up the culture, the purpose of meetings was (quoting them) "to knife each other in the back" or "to throw dirt on each other." They said, "We wouldn't dream of doing that now!" The only reason they had tolerated the old way was because they didn't know how to get out of it, and because no one person could have done it on her own. Changing a work culture needs a critical mass at the top, and it needs courageous leadership from the chief. For a lonely period at the start, the leader must seed the ideas, structure, and behavior, and give time and energy to water the seedlings...those who emerge as candidates for the critical mass. (The elements to change a work culture are theory, structure and process. Behavior *is* the process.)

At another client where no one had plowed the ground prior to my arrival, the experience was different. In one meeting when I was writing at the board and out of earshot, a man who was dissatisfied with the women his sales team had just been assigned, nodded at me and whispered to Terry, "If she weren't here, I'd call them Bitch One, Bitch Two and Bitch Three." Terry, bless his heart was quick-witted enough to say, "You can't call them that when *I'm* here either." We have seen immaturity in leaders who humiliate their own staff in presentations in the name of using them efficiently. In that company, people down below say, "If I have to behave like that, I don't want to get promoted," and the corporation is robbing itself of the creativity and energy of talented young people.

It takes love, courage and clear-thinking to stand up against cultures that want to dehumanize people and turn them into objects, parts of a production machine. Terry and I recently talked to a human resource professional who thought he was doing best for the corporation but who saw people as objects — "I don't want them going down the street to McDonald's for lunch. I want them to get food at the cafeteria and then eat at their desk while they're working."

Nevitt's mission and our mission is to humanize the workplace. As you know, George Weston is awarded the Nevitt Sanford Industry Award for 1996. The award is to recognize courageous managers who "hold indivisible caring for people and productivity." He once said about his experience as a young manager: "I felt like I was walking on a precipice, a ridge. If I'm too harsh, I fall off; if I'm too easy, I fall off. We have to broaden the walking area." We have to open up our work cultures; we have to humanize them.

We are lucky enough to have people with us here at the Symposium who have had the courage to stand up in their own workplaces and make them more humane organizations. And lucky enough, too, that they've been willing to come spend their time talking about how they did it. I would like to introduce and thank George Weston from Anheuser-Busch, Bob Craig from Lucky Stores, Mike Holmes from Chevron, Joe Silva from Teamsters, Local 70, and Dan Currie from Lucky Stores. I would also like to thank our lone academic for participating, Joe Tussman, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy from University of California, Berkeley. I would like to give special thanks to my partner, Richard Burg, whose name does not appear in the brochure, but without whom the brochure and other parts of the Symposium would not have been completed.

Both research and experience show that a more humane workplace is more productive. It is just very hard to do. The choices are hard and seldom are clear cut. As Mike Homes said, "It always comes down to a personal choice." Royal and I recently spoke with a senior human resource person who said his company is exploring the question, "Is it possible to run a values-based company in China?" Many consequences flow from the answer to that question — from their economic health to their marketing future. The theory can be pretty straightforward, but doing it is hard.

Simone de Beauvoir once said, "It is so clear in the library, and so messy in the streets." Our field trip is going to explore the streets with our generous staff who have agreed to talk about their experiences. And then we'll repair to the library to sort out some theoretical points of the experiences. And we hope you'll talk about your streets, and let all of us use our libraries and streets to sort out how you think about your roles and your organizations.

I will end with a quote that provides me guidance for living. It is by William James, the father of American psychology. "Ultimately, the only thing we are responsible for is where we put our attention."

In Nevitt Sanford's honor, for the next three days we are going to put our attention on love, courage and clear-thinking, and figure out ways to make our own workplaces both more productive and more humane.