

The Business of Seeking by Shawn Nevins

Good to Great by Jim Collins is one of hundreds of business books published each year, probably as many as self-help/psychology titles. Most of them fade away, a few become best sellers, and even fewer become classics. I think *Good to Great* is a solid, fact-finding book with broad implications. Collins and his team researched all the Fortune 500 companies in existence from 1965 to 1995 to answer this: why some companies make the leap [from good to great]... and others don't. The leap from good to great is also what distinguishes the majority of spiritual seekers from those that find lasting success.

Without delving into his criteria, it suffices to say he found 11 out of 1,435 companies that went from good to great. That's rare air, less than one percent. Collins' conclusions as to why these 11 companies went from good to great make intriguing parallels with the spiritual path. Not all of the conclusions apply to a spiritual life, but most do. As my intent is not to review Collins' work, I will only present those traits I find pertinent to a spiritual search.

1. Level 5 Leadership: "Level 5 leaders embody a paradoxical mix of personal humility and professional will." This is the same concept as Richard Rose's humble ego-less vector – the determined person who no longer works for hope of personal gain. In fact, Rose used the analogy of a successful executive nearly twenty years before Collins' book:

An executive of a giant corporation succeeds, when he has risen above the desire for success and the fear of failure.... He grows into a creature that can move without desire, and make decisions without fear...while caring little about the whole operation. And while caring little he continues his task, knowing that everything will go the right way.

– *The Direct-Mind Experience*

Collins makes another key discovery regarding leadership: "Level 5 leaders look out the window to apportion credit to factors outside themselves when things go well. At the same time, they look in the mirror to apportion responsibility, never blaming bad luck when things go poorly." This is an example of Rose's concept of between-ness. It can be expressed as the power of thankfulness as well. Taking responsibility keeps us working, while giving away the credit keeps our ego from destroying the magic.

Level 5 leaders lead the way in developing the next four traits.

2. Confront the brutal facts: "When you start with an honest and diligent effort to determine the truth of your situation, the right decisions often become self-evident." If a person would truly admit their present circumstance, their search would be over in that moment. A lot of fence-straddling would end if we would admit our complete ignorance about our selves and life. What would make more sense than to dedicate our lives to finding our true nature? Confronting the brutal facts is equivalent to developing self-honesty. "Become the truth," as Rose advised. Self-honesty and persistence are, I believe, the two fundamental traits for spiritual success.

3. The Hedgehog: “The good-to-great companies are more like hedgehogs – simple, dowdy creatures that know ‘one big thing’ and stick to it. The comparison companies are more like foxes – crafty, cunning creatures that know many things yet lack consistency.” Again, I quote Richard Rose: “Even as we study the man who was unable to finish [building] a shed, we may discover that some of his frustration may have resulted from his having too many irons in the fire.”

4. Discipline: “The single most important form of discipline for sustained results is fanatical adherence to the Hedgehog Concept and the willingness to shun opportunities that fall outside the three circles.” Discipline is a further elaboration of the Hedgehog in my mind and can also be called persistence. The idea of ignoring opportunities (distractions) is critical. Rose once said, “It’s not so much what I did as what I didn’t do,” when speaking of his success on the spiritual path. He didn’t fall prey to lesser amazements.

5. The Flywheel: “Good to great comes about by a cumulative process – step by step, action by action, decision by decision, turn by turn of the flywheel – that adds up to sustained and spectacular results.” The flywheel is seen in retrospect. It is the way we use the moments of our day that determines our direction in life. No single muscular effort, no hard-sought technique, no one guru will flash the pan and bring us an answer. The daily prayer we make with our actions is what brings us luck.

Collins paints an unglamorous yet powerful portrait of the qualities that lead a business from good to great. These qualities apply to an individual, as well. An honest, persistent, focused, thankful person, moving step-by-step, and following a single goal is perhaps a daunting vision, yet Collins believes many people have the ability to develop into Level 5 leaders.

Whether or not we make it all the way to Level 5, it is worth the effort. For like all basic truths about what is best in human beings, when we catch a glimpse of that truth, we know that our own lives and all that we touch will be the better for the effort.

How true. I leave you with a final parallel thought from Richard Rose:

What good is it to lead a life or follow a system if you’re not sure of making the whole trip and finding out the secret of everything?

Now the answer to that is that there is common sense in Zen. And the longer that you follow the self-confrontation, the self-analysis, the better off you are to just live with yourself, and for other people to live with you.... And you take a new, broader view of things because your egos are not in the way, destroying your friendships, and destroying your family, your financial possibilities even.

– “Zen and Common Sense”