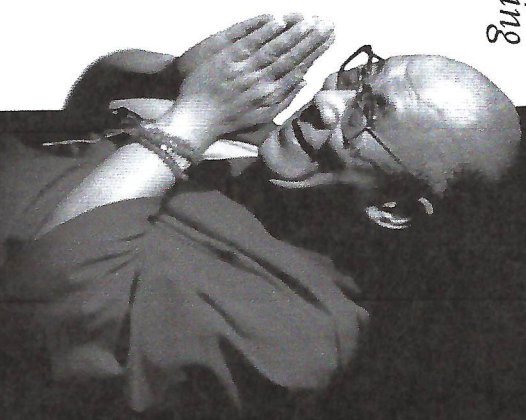


The
New York Times
Bestseller

*The Conversation Continues
About Job, Career, and Calling*

THE
ART OF
HAPPINESS
AT WORK

HIS HOLINESS
THE DALAI LAMA
AND
HOWARD C.
CUTLER, M.D.



who don't get along, and then a new employee shows up, one who is warm and friendly, and after a while the mood and attitude of the whole group changes for the better. In the same way, sometimes you will see the opposite occur, where people at work are getting along and are friends, but then someone new will start work there, someone who is a troublemaker, and then that one can affect the whole group and cause conflicts and problems. So, each of us can have an effect on others, and even change the atmosphere at work. And in that respect, a low-level worker might have more impact on one's immediate surroundings at work, at least in one's department, than the boss.

"For example, I know some Tibetans who moved to Switzerland and went to work in factories there. And even without knowing the language, they managed to make friendships, just by smiling and doing their work sincerely, and in mainly nonverbal ways showing that they were just trying to be helpful. There was this one Tibetan who would eat in the cafeteria, where normally people would keep to themselves or sit in small groups. And one day he decided to buy lunch for a group of his co-workers. Before that, people would not ordinarily buy someone lunch unless they knew that person very well, but even though he did not know them well he bought them lunch. Then the next day, another person bought lunch for the group, to reciprocate. Then, others started doing that, and soon each day a different person would buy lunch, and through that they became closer friends."

I once heard the Dalai Lama remark that we can use our own lives as a kind of laboratory, where we can experiment with the

implementation of the principles he speaks about, and investigate for ourselves the truth of his assertions. In thinking over his ideas about work and happiness during a recent trip to my local supermarket, I amused myself by viewing the shopping trip as if it was a controlled experiment designed by some clever researcher. The controlled experimental conditions: Take a half-dozen identical check-out stations, identical aisles with identical copies of the *National Enquirer*, identical cash registers, and identical racks of chewing gum and razor blades. The experimental variable: add the human factor—insert a different human being behind each cash register.

At this supermarket, there are two checkout clerks who have been working here for some years. I've ended up in each of their lines countless times. Jane is a woman in her mid-thirties. She goes about her job efficiently and quickly, yet she rarely says a word other than calling out for a price check. No matter when I've shopped there, she always seems to have a slightly sullen expression, almost on the verge of a scowl. Dorothy, on the other hand, a jolly lady in her late fifties, couldn't be more different. She always engages in friendly banter with the customers, is always smiling and helpful. She asks them about their lives and remembers what they say—she even remembers what they bought last time. It is a delight to listen to her. You can wait in her aisle, standing in line while the person in front of you unloads 137 items, pulls out a two-inch stack of coupons, and wants to pay with a third-party check, yet you don't seem to mind. Well, at least you mind less. Dorothy has a sincere interest in food as well as the customers, and often engages in a running commentary about the person's food choices, swap-

ping recipes as she rings up purchases, "Oh, I haven't tried that brand of frozen pizza. Is it good?" "I see you bought Twinkies again—let me give you a tip—buy some of the Betty Crocker yellow cake mix, the kind with pudding in the mix, and slice up the pieces thin, then layer it with fresh whipped cream—it's like a homemade Twinkie, at least if your home happens to be in heaven!" (She was right!) She has always struck me as one who genuinely enjoys her work.

The difference between Dorothy and Jane not only illustrates the impact of attitude on job satisfaction, but also how one person can make a difference on those around her. Recently I was restocking a lot of food items at home, so my purchases filled two shopping carts. The bagboy offered to help push one of the carts out to my car, and we spoke as I was loading the groceries into my car. I've always noticed how Dorothy treats her baggers with respect, and some of the younger high-school students relate to her as a mother. As we were loading the groceries, the bagboy was telling me about how much more he enjoys his work on the days that Dorothy works, adding, "... and it's not just me. When Dorothy is working, everybody seems to be in a better mood, even the manager. I'm not sure why, but things just seem to go better on the days that she's working."

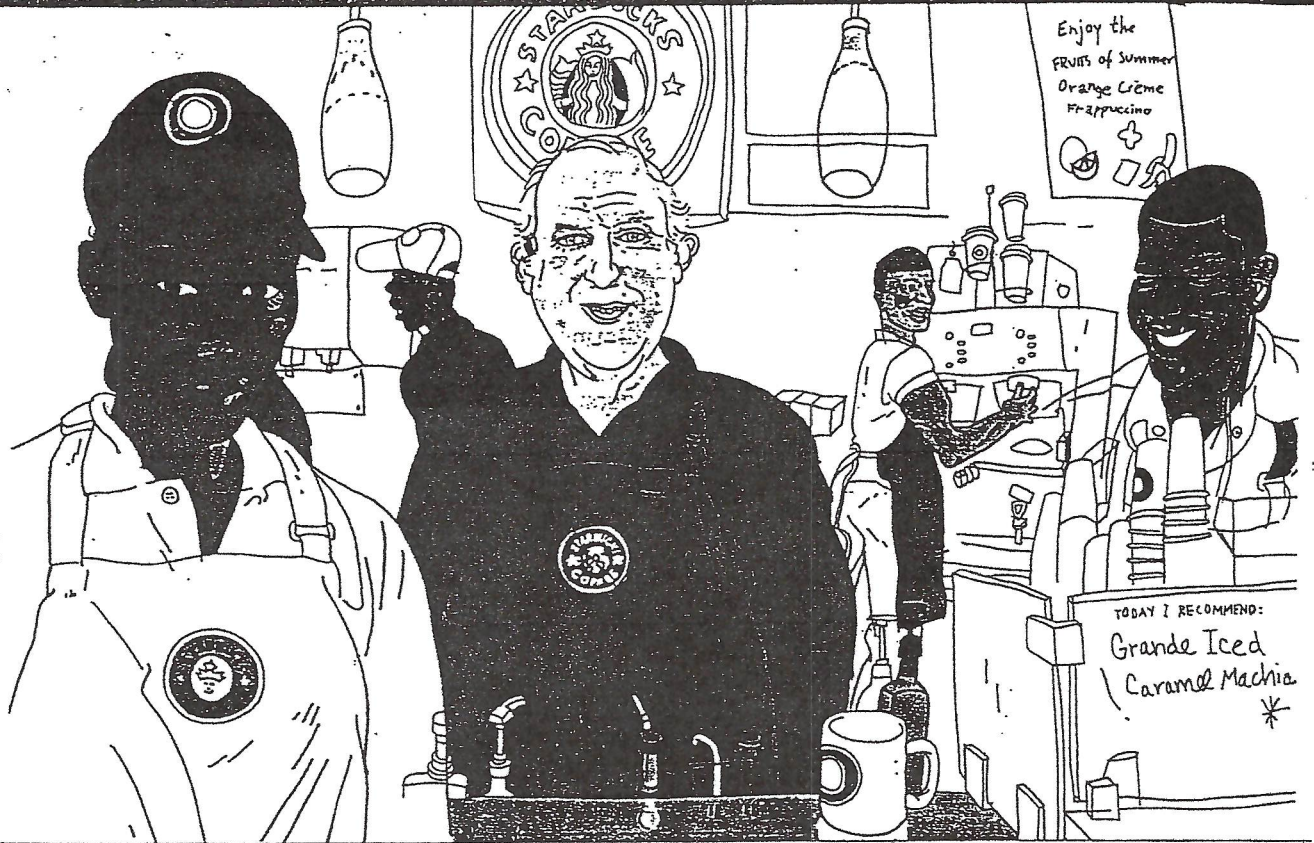
The prime importance of the human factor at work applies equally to any setting, a supermarket or the stock market, in a boardroom or in a boiler room. As the character played by Nicolas Cage in *The Family Man* exclaimed, "Whether it's on Main Street or on Wall Street, it's all just people!" So, no matter

where we work, we've got to find a way to get along well with the people around us.

Some people work in a really tense environment, and may not be getting along with their co-workers. In those situations, do you have any thoughts on how to improve things?" I asked the Dalai Lama.

"This depends on the person, and their capacity and willingness to try to control their own emotions, like anger, jealousy, and so on. We should try our best to accept responsibility for our own emotions, practice tolerance, and try to reduce jealousy, although of course it isn't always easy and people will have varying degrees of success.

"But generally speaking, one could start by recognizing that we are all interdependent, we all depend on one another for our livelihood. That is the place we could start. The deeper our appreciation of that fact, that reality, the greater our willingness to work cooperatively with others will be. Sometimes we have a sort of feeling that we are separate from others, independent, the kind of feeling that *I earn my own money, I support myself, so who needs others?* Especially when we are young and healthy, there's that tendency to think *I can manage alone, I do not need to care about others.* But no matter what kind of job we have, there are many other co-workers who contribute in their own way to the running of the company that we depend on for our livelihood. Without them, the company simply would not exist, and we would not be able to earn our living, not to mention our cus-



Wake Up and Sell the Coffee

A son of privilege takes a job as a counterman and finds his soul



"Would you like a job?"

The speaker sat at the table next to mine, shuffling papers with professional dispatch. She was an attractive young African American woman wearing a Starbucks uniform.

For the past few months I had been frequenting Starbucks stores around New York City, not as places to relax or chat, but as "offices" where I could call prospective clients—although none were now answering my calls. My little consulting company was rapidly going downhill. Advertising is a young person's business, and at

63, I had found that my efforts were met with a deafening silence.

On this morning I had been languishing in a cocoon of self-pity and nostalgia and had not noticed the sign in front reading: **HIRING OPEN HOUSE.**

"A job," the woman repeated, smiling. "Would you like one?"

For one of the few times in my life, I could not think of a polite lie or any answer but the truth.

"Yes," I said, "I *would* like a job."

The young woman appeared incredulous, her smile vanished, and it struck me that her invitation had been a joke.

"But would you be willing to work for me?" she asked skeptically.

Suddenly thoughts of my nana, the only black woman I had ever had an honest and close relationship with in my life, came to mind. And though the two women had nothing in common other than being African American, an irrational feeling of instant trust hit me.

"I would *love* to work for you," I answered.

"Good," she said. "Now we will start a formal interview."

She reached out her hand.

"My name is Crystal."

This was the remarkable truth: in my 35-year working career, I never had to seek a job. After commencement at Yale in 1963, I got a call from James Henry Brewster IV, a friend at Yale's secret society Skull and Bones.

"Gates," he said assertively, "I'm setting you up at J. Walter Thompson."

He did, and I became a copywriter at one of the largest advertising companies in the world. They paid me amazingly well, and I received promotions early and often, moving up to creative director and, later, executive vice president on a host of major accounts. I was willing to go anywhere to help our clients and had no hesitation uprooting my growing family—a wife and, in due course, four children. I looked at work as a big part of my role of being a good provider. Yet, in a terrible irony, my clients became my children, and my real children grew up without me.

Then one day, just as the kids were moving on to college, I got a call from a young senior executive at the company, a woman whom I had helped get hired but who had quickly passed me in the corporate hierarchy. We met for break-

fast, and though she did not say it directly, at 53 I knew: I had become an embarrassment to the kind of lean, mean, hard-charging young company the new owner wanted to run. She offered a severance package and the promise of great recommendations for a consulting company I'd "probably" want to create.

Ten years later not only had my consulting business tanked; so had my personal life. Shortly after my firing, I let my waning ego get the best of me and had an affair with a woman with whom I had a son. My wife and I divorced, and soon the new woman in my life, disenchanted with the house dad I had become, said "enough."

Now, looking at this glamorous 28-year-old Starbucks employee with the silver bracelet and fancy watch, I felt sorry for myself. She seemed so care-free, so confident, so full of options. Later, I would learn she had seen more hardship in her life than I could conceive of having seen in three lifetimes. But, with the finesse of a woman years her senior, she helped me see my way to the job I desperately needed—and, over the next years, to a world I never knew and to a life I never imagined I could happily live.

It was not an easy journey.

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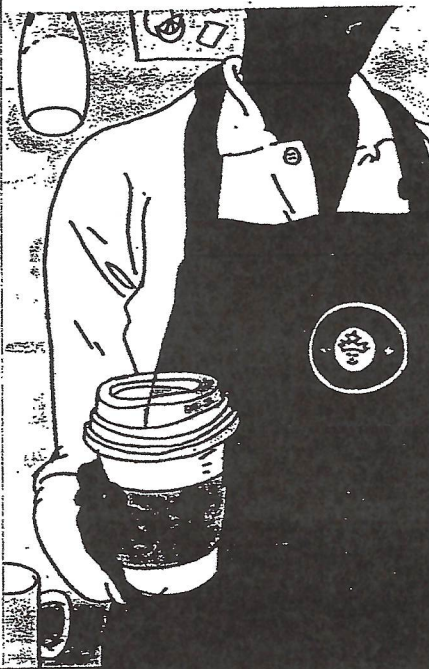
Emerging from the subway at 93rd and Broadway that first day of work, the reality of my situation hit me with a sickening impact. It already was enough that the store was, by my lights,

a totally different background, education, age, and race.

I'd also be working extremely hard. Watching the rapid-fire way the partners punched the cash registers, called out drink names, and juggled jugs of milk and pulled shots of espresso, I became scared and withdrawn. Then Crystal appeared in a swirl of positive energy, snapped me out of my funk, and began what would become nothing short of my social reeducation.

She spent a few days acquainting me with the coffees—"Now, this is in the mild category..."—until one morning she asked brightly: "How do you feel about cleaning today?"

"I would like nothing better," I said. I had never cleaned anything in my



My mother and father would have been puzzled and upset that I was actually finding pleasure with people they would hardly have noticed.

in the "wrong" part of town, and a 90-minute subway ride from my home. But when I walked inside and saw that virtually all the Starbucks "partners" were young African Americans, I realized I would be a very visible member of a real minority for the first time in my life. I would be working with people of

life, and when Crystal led me to the bathroom, my ignorance quickly became evident.

"This is grout," she patiently explained, pointing to the dirty lines between the tiles. "We have a grout problem. Or maybe I should say a grout 'opportunity.'"

She gave me a special grout brush. Then she showed me how to fill up the mop bucket with hot water and a cleaning solution. I would sweep, then mop, then dig out the dirt in the grout, then mop again. I attacked my cleaning with a kind of manic energy, but that wasn't enough. Soon Crystal announced I would learn to "detail" the bathroom—to make it really sparkle. She gave me gloves, got powerful detergent, and showed me how to get in and under the toilet bowl to dig out everything that wasn't supposed to be there.

When I finished, the toilet sparkled, indeed. And I didn't want anybody messing it up. So when a homeless African American man came into the store to use it, I told him it was closed.

And that quickly led to my next lesson—about compassion.

"Mike, never refuse the bathroom to anyone," Crystal told me in a low, angry voice. "Have you noticed there are no public bathrooms in New York City? In our store we are welcoming."

Ten years earlier I couldn't have imagined being so frightened, so desperate for this young woman's approval. But there I was, remorseful, embarrassed, and determined to show I had the right stuff. I continued to clean with zeal, smiled at all who came in, and before long Crystal promoted me to cleaning supervisor. Later, despite my fears about mishandling money, she sent me to the cash registers, then charged me with opening the store. Soon I became a coffee master, holding in-store seminars before working my way to the bar to make drinks.

None of this was a breeze. My feet hurt often, I couldn't hear in one ear, I miscounted the cash, I had a hard time taking garbage up the steep stairs, and one night an out-of-control customer pulled a knife on me, only to be calmly sent packing by my "training coach," Kester, a muscular, goateed young man I'd embarrassingly thought might be a gang member the first time I saw him.

I later asked Kester how he knew I needed help. "I always got a feeling for when things go bad," he said, adding, with a smile of *(continued on page 111)*

Sell the Coffee

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encouragement: "Okay, get mopping."

The partners moved like that—always respectful, easy to smile or give a compliment. They used a lot of Starbucks-speak, too. If you wanted something done, you didn't order; you asked, "Could you do me a favor?"

It was all a far cry from the corporate culture I knew, where to survive you watched your back and looked skeptically at people who were not, like you, motivated by fear. Suddenly the cues that had guided me and brought me "success" meant nothing.

Then an odd thing happened: I found myself becoming happier and happier.

No doubt my parents would have been puzzled and upset at this, that I was actually satisfied to be serving coffee, that I was finding pleasure and friendship with people they would hardly have noticed. They had raised me, after all, in an environment where little seemed off-limits. When he was alive, my father, Brendan Gill, a celebrated writer for *The New Yorker* magazine, had access and power, and he made sure I had it as well. Over the years I met the likes of Andy Warhol, E.B. White, Ernest Hemingway, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Ezra Pound. I spent fanciful summers at our idyllic vacation home in rural Connecticut. Once, when movers couldn't get a Steinway grand piano up the stairs of our brownstone, my father hired a crane and had the piano hoisted through the French doors on the second floor.

Neither he nor my mother would have been able to fathom the world I now relished. They would have wanted me to rejoin a life of "worth"—a life lived at the highest reaches of the arts and society. But I no longer had the will for it. I had been freed to be me—ironically by people who had been testing freedom's limits virtually all their lives.

Hardly any of them was older than 20, but already each had a dramatic life story to tell. When Crystal was just 12 her mother, unmarried and addicted to drugs, died from an overdose, forcing Crystal to be sent to live an almost unbearable life with an aunt, herself single and in despair. Others were struggling to put

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Sell the Coffee

(continued from page 111)

themselves through school. Two had never seen a dentist or an eye doctor before working at Starbucks, which offers health benefits even to part-timers. Another was working to start a music company, though the chances for breaking in often seemed elusive.

Yet they kept moving, one foot in front of the other, reveling in one another's experiences, and even in my own. They wanted to hear every detail of the

time I met Muhammad Ali. They got excited when they found out my daughter was making a film with renowned rap artist 50 Cent, who until then had been nowhere on my radar. ("Hey, Mike knows 50 Cent!" came the shout across the room.) We ribbed one another, shared concerns, gave advice.

This egalitarian way of being forced me to turn a mirror on myself, and that's when I confronted an ugly truth: that all my life people had deferred to me. As a boss, I had proudly called myself a benevolent dictator and had

loved ordering people to work overtime or bring me coffee. I had been a classic hypocritical member of an old boys' club, congratulating myself for my belief in minority advancement in the abstract, while doing everything possible in the practical world of the workplace—which I controlled—to make such opportunity impossible.

I knew Crystal and my partners could easily have dismissed me as a symbol of a repressive society, but they gave me a chance to work and live and see things a new way. And I saw a lot—that there are people who are smarter, better, and, yes, kinder than me; that the superficial clues of race and class tell you mighty little about people; that camaraderie, humility, and honesty can give fuel and meaning to a life.

Arriving at this new place, I felt enormous gratitude and began to freely, even sappy, express how I felt. I wrote notes, poems. I slapped five, gave hugs. They were little things, but they helped me open the door to my heart—and there, for the first time in years, I found a person with whom I could peacefully live, a person I actually began to like.

So it was that almost a year later, after I had reluctantly agreed to be transferred to a store in my own neighborhood—a kind of Starbucks reward for "legendary service"—many of the partners came in to fete me and offer a special prayer they wrote for my last day. It was a moving tribute, and at the end I told them the truth as I knew it.

"You have saved my life," I said.

And they had. Through them I had regained my confidence, my sense of value, and had become determined to move more humanely in the world.

Now, two years later, still happily perched behind the counter of my neighborhood store serving coffee, I can't say I've morphed into a saint. I'm a work in progress yet. But I'm living fully. Eyes wide open.

Soul intact. ■

Michael Gates Gill is a barista at Starbucks in Bronxville, New York. This essay is adapted from How Starbucks Saved My Life by Michael Gates Gill. Copyright © 2007 by Michael Gates Gill. Published by arrangement with Gotham Books, a member of Penguin Group (USA).



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